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Puritan Tribulation and the Protestant History Play

Stephen Longstaffe

There is a strong contemporary consensus that in early modern England there was not a widespread and intentionally repressive censorship or regulatory regime; rather, analysis of specific cases shows that interventions were often quite exceptional responses to particular crises. To use a military metaphor, this was 'smart' censorship, suppression precisely targeted in order to minimize collateral damage. One of the advantages of the 'suppression' model, Cyndia Clegg argues, is that it avoids the assumption that 'imaginative writer', 'Catholic apologist', and 'religious reformer' all wrote under the same constraints.¹ All the same, such a model is not always useful when the 'imaginative writer' does not steer clear of the material of the 'religious reformer'. The Protestant history play of the late Elizabethan and early Jacobean era is, I will argue, an example of 'smart' suppression of religious writings (and, indeed, the larger campaigns against non-conformists of which they were part) inflicting a largely underestimated amount of collateral damage upon the stage. In turn, I will argue that one particular late-Elizabethan satirical project – the stage representation of the puritan – was itself enabled by this collateral damage.

Critics tend to see the history of the early modern London theatre through Globe-tinted spectacles. I should, therefore, like to make clear that although the opening of this essay is concerned with Sir John Oldcastle, and what a mysterious change of name might tell us about the representation of the stage 'puritan' in the 1590s and beyond, it will only touch peripherally upon Shakespeare's plays. The name change is in *1 Sir John Oldcastle*, written for the Admiral's Men at the Rose by Munday, Drayton, Wilson and Hathaway, which announces itself as a reply to Shakespeare's Falstaff plays, claiming to present 'fair truth' in contrast to Shakespeare's 'forged invention'. *Oldcastle*, however, introduces one

significant 'invention' of its own to its 'fair truth'. Oldcastle's chief persecutor was Thomas Arundel, Archbishop of Canterbury, aided by the Bishop of London. The play substitutes the Bishop of Rochester for the Archbishop, and omits London's Bishop entirely. This seemingly trivial change was first pointed out by R. B. Sharpe, who concluded, reasonably enough, that the writers did not want to upset either Whitgift, the present Archbishop, or Bancroft, Bishop of London since 1597, possibly because of Anthony Munday's work as a pursuivant.² What Sharpe did not make clear, however, was that such an identification between past and present clerics would have cast the play as a libellous contribution to a bloody, bitter and one-sided struggle between the church authorities, including Whitgift and Bancroft, and those desiring either further reformation of the church or separation from it, a struggle which the underdogs insisted was a persecution of the godly to parallel those of the pre-Reformation years.³

Whitgift became Archbishop in 1583 with a commitment to the ecclesiastical status quo. In one of his early sermons, significantly on Paul's letter to Titus ('Put them in remembrance, to be subject unto principalities and powers, to obey magistrates . . .'), he divided 'such as are disobedient' into three 'sorts of persons': 'papists, anabaptists, and our wayward and conceited persons'.⁴ He quickly moved against the 'wayward and conceited' who 'will obey, but it is what they list, whom they list, and wherein they list themselves', defining conformity in a set of articles, and requiring the clergy, through the High Commission, to comply with these.⁵

The methods of the Commission were controversial from the start, for it was inquisitorial in structure, questioning only after the respondent had sworn an *ex officio* oath that they would answer truthfully. Because it was not a court of law, no charges need be made, witnesses produced, nor counsel allowed. Sooner or later, the 'accused' would incriminate themselves, and would have to abjure their 'errors'. Refusal to take the oath was contempt, and punishable with imprisonment. Opposition was vocal from the start. Burghley himself wrote to Whitgift in 1584 to protest that 'I am now daily charged by councillors and public persons to neglect my duty in not staying these your Grace's proceedings so vehement and so general against ministers and preachers, as the Papists are thereby generally encouraged, all ill-disposed subjects animated, and thereby the Queen's Majesty's safety endangered.' The articles themselves were 'in a Romish style . . . so curiously penned, so full of branches and circumstances, as I think the inquisitors of Spain use not so many questions to comprehend and to trap their preys'.⁶ Whitgift slackened off, but soon, assured of the Queen's support, continued where he had left off.

Following the Marprelate affair of the later 1580s, Whitgift uncovered evidence of organized networks of reformers, and used the High Commission and then the Star Chamber to pursue some of the leading lights in the movement. Nine prominent ministers were selected for exemplary punishment; all refused the oath and were imprisoned, though not always too onerously. Though none of them were actually formally punished, it was two and a half years before they were all released, 'worn down and all but defeated' in the words of Patrick Collinson.⁷ Many other preachers were harassed by the ecclesiastical authorities, banned from preaching, ejected from universities, imprisoned and deprived of livings. John Udall, one of the most prolific and learned reformist pamphleteers, was arrested in 1590 for the felony of writing *The Demonstration of Discipline*. He was sentenced to death in 1591, and died a year later just after he had been pardoned, after spending a year and a half in prison.

The more radical separatists were more severely dealt with. Fifty-odd were arrested in the winter of 1589/90. The two separatist leaders, Barrow and Greenwood, both arrested in 1587, were eventually sentenced to death for their writings, and executed in spring 1593, after a grim cat-and-mouse procedure involving two last-minute pardons from the Queen, the second of which arrived as the two, with halters already round their necks, had nearly finished their last words.⁸ Two others involved with the publishing of these tracts died in prison; a third was deported. John Penry, who had fled to Scotland after printing some of the Marprelate tracts, and converted to separatism in 1592, was arrested in London in March 1593, and executed in May.⁹ In addition, some 25 separatist men and women died in London prisons between 1589 and 1596.¹⁰ In comparison, for the whole of Elizabeth's reign, 63 lay-Catholics are recognized as martyrs; more to the point, despite the range of treason legislation employed against them, and the resources put into their pursuit and capture, only 133 missionary priests were executed.¹¹

Whitgift's *coup de grâce* came in 1593, when an Act to 'Retain the Queen's Subjects in Obedience' was passed 'for the preventing and voiding of such great inconveniences and perils as might happen and grow by the wicked and dangerous practices of seditious sectaries and disloyal persons'.¹² Though the Act was modified in its passage through parliament, it remained a powerful anti-separatist (and, to a lesser extent, anti-reformist) weapon.¹³ Amongst other things the Act made non-attendance at service, attendance at conventicles – puritan scripture meetings – and writing against 'her Majesty's power and authority in cases ecclesiastical united and annexed to the imperial crown of this realm' punishable with imprisonment until conformity (and imprisonment was

no soft option, as the casualty figures above indicate), and deportation on a second offence.¹⁴ In effect it treated non-conforming Protestants as severely as Catholics, and banned expression of Protestant dissent concerning the royal prerogative.

Whilst one strand of opposition to Whitgift's campaigns was focused in parliament, and challenged the legality of his proceedings, the reformers and separatists themselves responded by petitioning and publishing. This latter activity should not be understood solely as an attempt to influence public opinion – most separatist writings were printed abroad illegally, and were not generally available in the market-place. None the less, they did convert individuals. Francis Johnson was converted, ironically enough, through his activities as a confiscator and burner in the Netherlands of the entire first edition of *A Plain Refutation*, written by Barrow in prison and smuggled out. Johnson read one of the two remaining copies of the book, travelled to London to meet Barrow and Greenwood, and himself became a separatist.¹⁵

It is perhaps more productive to suppose that the persecuted considered publicising their tribulations to be an end in itself, rather than a means to halt persecution via mobilizing 'opinion'. The influence of Foxe here is paramount, as 'separatist leaders embraced the tradition of the suffering church popularized by Foxe, including themselves in the company of faithful witnesses extending back to Hus that he had celebrated'.¹⁶ It was crucial to both separatists and reformers to interpret their own situation as analogous to that of the pre-Reformation church. John Field, a former assistant of Foxe, had compiled by the time of his death in 1589 a register of some 250 documents covering 'puritan' tribulations since 1565.¹⁷ Accounts of persecution had the dual effect of showing the sufferings of the righteous and reproducing their arguments against their persecutors.¹⁸

Indeed, Foxe's work had such cultural capital, Damian Nussbaum has recently argued, that Timothy Bright's 1589 abridgement of the *Acts and Monuments* was sponsored by Whitgift himself, to promote a conformist line on episcopacy, the *ex officio* oath, and the use of vestments.¹⁹ But even Bright's text, published in the middle of Marprelate, is not completely monological. The title page has two epigraphs – from Psalm 44, 'All day long are we counted as sheepe for the slaughter', and from Apocalypse 6:10, 'How long Lord, holy and true?'²⁰ Foxe's title page of 1583 has neither. Both of these quotations refer to persecution. The full quotation from the Psalm is 'Yea, for thy sake are we killed all the day long; we are counted as sheep for the slaughter. Awake, why sleepest thou, O Lord? arise, cast us not off for ever.' It is itself quoted in the context of persecution in Romans, 8:35–6: 'Who shall separate us from the love of

Christ? shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, For thy sake we are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter.'

The quotation from the Apocalypse, whose 'how long?' echoes many of the Psalms, directly refers to martyrdom: 'And when he had opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of them that were slain for the word of God, and for the testimony which they held: And they cried with a loud voice, saying, How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?'²¹ At the very least, the referent of these two quotations does not have to be a wholly confident 'elect nation', and their presence on the title page goes some way towards confirming the importance of persecution to what might justly be considered an official production of the church of England.

One of the key precursors of the reformed church was, of course, Sir John Oldcastle, and both separatists and reformers explicitly compared themselves to him.²² The leading reformer Thomas Cartwright, imprisoned by the High Commission in the Fleet for refusing the oath, wrote that even Oldcastle was not required to so swear.²³ Francis Johnson cited Oldcastle's opinions in support of his own, which were 'accounted Lollardye and heresy in the holy servants and martirs of Christ in former ages'.²⁴ In a letter to Cecil, Johnson states that his aims 'are that the false offices, callings, and works of the prelacy and other clergie of this land might be quite abolished owt of it, and their lordships and possessions, which ... were fittly of olde, by the Lord Cobham, that blessed martir, sayd to be the venime of Judas shed into the church, might also be converted to Her Majestie's civill uses.'²⁵ Foxe's 1583 *Acts* itself had pointed to Oldcastle's continuing relevance, Foxe commenting on the Archbishop's insistence on due course when examining Oldcastle that 'al this dissimulation was but to colour their mischiefes, before the ignoraunt multitude. Consider herein (gentle reader) what this wicked generation is and how far wide from the just fear of God for as they were then, so are they yet to this day.'²⁶

Oldcastle's persecution as a proto-Protestant martyr was thus claimed by both separatists and reformers as a type of their own predicament. The procedure is reversed in *1 Sir John Oldcastle*, in which the historical figure appears as a late-Elizabethan 'puritan', in a late-Elizabethan setting. Some examples of this have been listed in Mary Grace Muse Adkins' article on the play: references to complaints about ceremony, Oldcastle's refusal to come to mass, the identification of those meeting in fields and solitary groves as 'Protestants', the Bishop's intent to examine Oldcastle 'of Articles', Oldcastle's insistence on the Bible as guiding his faith, and the

finding of 'books in English' at his house (on which Adkins comments that they might well be from the library of a contemporary puritan).²⁷ Adkins' listing is not complete. There are also references to Protestants meeting in 'conventicles' (1:107)²⁸; Rochester intends to summon Oldcastle 'unto the Arches' (the ecclesiastical court for the Canterbury province) (2:113); King Henry protests to Oldcastle that 'the bishops find themselves much injured' (6:3), and Rochester characterizes Oldcastle's servant Harpoole as a heretic 'in contempt of our church discipline' for his attacking a sumner (13:124). Harpoole protests he is 'neither heretic nor puritan, but of the old church' (13:129-30).²⁹ The stock comic device of disguising oneself in another's clothes to make an escape is given a 'puritan' twist, as the proto-Protestant Oldcastle escapes from the Tower dressed in the bishop's robes (scene 14).

Though Oldcastle is clearly the victim of a personal campaign by an 'envious priest', critics have commented very little on the resemblances between this campaign and Whitgift's methods. The examination 'of articles', for example, is identified by Adkins as referring to the 39 articles; a much more topical set of articles were the three articles Whitgift required the clergy to subscribe to from 1583-4 onwards.³⁰ The machinery of ecclesiastical justice is realized with some care. A sumner (an ecclesiastical court officer) visits Oldcastle's estate to serve a process on him, and is forced by Harpoole to literally eat his words. On Oldcastle's arrest by Rochester, the sumner searches his rooms for books, finding 'not a Latin book, no, not so much as Our Lady's Psalter. Here's the Bible, the Testaments, the Psalms in metre, *The Sickman's Salve*, *The Treasure of Gladness*, and all in English, not so much but the almanac's English', to which Rochester replies, 'Away with them; to th' fire with them' (13:145-9).

Metrical psalms are, of course, vernacular translations from the Latin (hence, Protestant). The two 'heretical' books named both were very popular works, first published in the 1560s. *The Sick Man's Salve* was 'a treatise containing the nature, differences and kindes of death; as also the right maner of dying well'.³¹ *The Treasure of Gladnesse*, more interestingly, was a purported proto-Protestant collection of prayers and paraphrases (the latter predominantly from the New Testament), as its title page stated:

This Booke is called the Treasure of Gladnesse, and seemeth by the Copie, being a very little Manuell, and written in Velam, to be made above. cc. yeares past at the leaste. whereby apeareth how God in olde time, and not of late only hath bene truly confessed and honored. The Copie hereof, is for the antiquitie of it, preserved and to be seene in the Printers Hall.³²

One of Oldcastle's heretical books, though first published in the mid-sixteenth century, claimed on its title page to have existed in manuscript in Oldcastle's time. Sixteenth-century orthodoxy is presented as fifteenth-century 'heresy'. The relationship is, in fact, reversed in the case of one of the other books referred to, for when *Oldcastle* was written a new *Our Lady's Psalter*, written by Thomas Worthington, 'president of Douai College', and printed secretly in England, was circulating under a false Antwerp imprint.³³ The fifteenth-century orthodoxy the sumner seeks is here topical as sixteenth-century 'heresy'.

The search for heretical books is, of course, anachronistic; but it was a feature of Whitgift's campaigns. The presence of seditious books was the ostensible reason for the pursuivants' searches of separatist homes, as the supplication delivered to the Privy Council in February 1592/3 suggests:

Their manner of pursuing and apprehending us is no lesse violence and outrage. Their pursevants with assistants break into our houses at all howers of the night (for such times to these exploits they for the most part chuse to hide their unchristian and cruel dealing with us from the world). There they breake up, ransake, rifle and make havock at their pleasures, under pretence of serching for seditious and unlawfull books.³⁴

Nor is Rochester's book-burning out of character for Whitgift, for in the June of 1599 - a few months before *Oldcastle* was first performed - he (with Bancroft) ordered the public burning of satires. This was not an isolated instance: Whitgift ordered burnings of religious works on at least two other occasions, in 1587 and 1595.³⁵

A few other references can be placed within the context of Whitgift's campaigns. 'Unlawful assemblies, conventicles or meetings under pretence of any exercise of religion', were forbidden under the 1593 Act. Oldcastle is persecuted for refusing to attend mass; non-attendance at divine service had similarly been named in the 1593 Act (and, of course, many of those the act was aimed at considered the unreformed service to be as good as a mass anyway). The court of the Arches still existed under Elizabeth, and in the 1580s and early 1590s its dean was Richard Cosin, an assiduous participant in Whitgift's campaigns, who went into print several times in the early 1590s to defend them.

What are we to make of the change of Oldcastle's persecutor from the Archbishop of Canterbury to the Bishop of Rochester in the light of these details?³⁶ All it tells us is that somebody involved in the production of the text - one or more of the writers, or of the actors, or the Master of the

Revels – thought that somebody watching the play might otherwise be able to identify the villainous prelate with the *current* Archbishop of Canterbury.³⁷ From this it is possible to say that if anybody had wished to use the theatre to directly link Whitgift's campaigns against reformist and separatist Protestants with Catholic persecutions of proto-Protestants, they could not have done so without risk, even six years after Whitgift had routed his opponents. One of the main rhetorical strategies employed by reformers and separatists themselves was thus unavailable to the stage.³⁸

No such restrictions appear to apply to satirical representations of such Protestants. In fact, the person responsible for introducing the stock satirical 'puritan' to the London stage, 'already equipped with the elements of an essentially simple and stable repertory: outward piety (indicated by the white of an upturned eye), inner corruption, consisting of avarice, lust and sedition – in a word, hypocrisy incarnate', was quite possibly Richard Bancroft himself.³⁹ During the Martin Marprelate affair, Whitgift employed anti-Martinist writers to answer satire with satire, on Bancroft's advice.⁴⁰ These anti-Martinist writers may also have written for the stage.⁴¹ But whether or not the response to Marprelate actually staged the satirical portrait of the 'puritan' it constructed, it undoubtedly circulated it more widely than it had been hitherto, and was important in producing the dramatic satire of 'puritans' which burgeoned post-Marprelate.⁴²

In addition, Marprelate seems to have led to Whitgift asserting some control over the professional stage. In November 1589 the Privy Council seems to have set up a commission (comprising Edmund Tilney, the Master of the Revels, and a nominee each from Whitgift and the Bishop of London) to vet all professional playbooks 'that they may consider of the matters of their comedyes and tragedyes, and thereupon to stryke out or reforme suche partes and matters as they shall fynde unfytt and undecent to be handled in playes, bothe for Divinitie and State'.⁴³ Though there is no evidence that the commission was anything other than a one-off purge, letters subsequently addressed to Whitgift by the Lord Mayor of London indicate that he was seen to maintain an interest in (at least) regulating the stage more tightly.

For a long time, the particularity of the stage's hostile construction of the 'puritan' was traced to 'the puritan attack on the stage' which preceded it, and which ultimately led to the closure of the London theatres in 1642. It would, however, be a mistake to see all anti-theatrical writing as texts in which the precisians rehearse the downsizing of the London theatre. The anti-theatrical writings preceding the theatre's satirical construction of the puritan can only be lumped together by a

tremendous and warping critical effort. As Tracey Hill has recently shown, Rankins and Munday, two 'anti-theatrical playwrights', were paid to attack their own profession; Gosson, another playwright against the stage, opposed puritanism.⁴⁴ Some reformers were undoubtedly opposed to the stage, as can be seen by their polemical uses of the 'theatricality' of popish church services, but they had far more important things to concern themselves with than the way in which a small percentage of Londoners amused themselves. Given the energy, diligence and bravery with which reformers continued to take on the church hierarchy, if they had seriously worried about the stage we should certainly have heard.

The 'puritan attack on the stage' has, however, functioned effectively to mask the origins of the stage's antipathy towards puritans, which lie in the efforts of Bancroft, Whitgift and others to brand critics of the established church – many of whom they had imprisoned without trial, and some of whom they were soon to execute – as hypocrites and seditious. Censorship and satire are often seen as opposed. The satirical portrayal of historical or actual figures was, after all, one of the main causes of intervention into the affairs of the London theatre in the 1590s.⁴⁵ But here the satirists are engaged in the same project as the ecclesiastical censors. And the 1590s play most obviously replying to the satirized stage 'puritan' (both in the sense of the 'hypocrite' character and, more locally, Shakespeare's 'Oldcastle') was unable to show its 'historical' Oldcastle pursued, as the chronicles indicated, by the Archbishop of Canterbury, because this would have involved too strong a parallel between Arundel and Whitgift, a parallel insisted upon by some of Whitgift's victims.

Whether because of the above restriction or not, the play does not primarily seek to 'libel' Whitgift or other prominent Elizabethan churchmen. Rather, its focus is on the similarities between Oldcastle and the separatists and reformers pursued by the church authorities. Most of the parallels noted above function to establish continuities between the two persecutions.⁴⁶ Oldcastle is condemned for his links with treasons he knows nothing about or actively opposes. He cannot control which disreputable elements will claim him as a friend, or what a malicious prelate will say to the monarch. The play shows just how persecutions of the godly, despite a righteous monarch, can succeed. It is in anatomizing of the dynamics of persecution that the play most strongly replies to Shakespeare's, and the Queen's Men's, 'Oldcastle': the primary fact about Oldcastle is that he 'died a martyr'. The play's avoidance of the *ad hominem* approach of Marprelate and the separatists, signified by its focus on the martyr rather than the persecutor, is clearly deliberate; it signifies the return of the discourse of reform to its pre-Marprelate boundaries.

What the name change has undoubtedly contributed towards, however, is the effacement of the topicality of persecution from modern critical accounts of the play, for its omission allows critics to discuss *Oldcastle* as a play relatively disengaged from English Protestantism's recent internal struggles. The result is a topicality in which there is nothing outside texts, with Marprelate, Hooker, the publications of assorted separatists and bishops, and of course Shakespeare, marking the boundaries of discourse.⁴⁷ For example, David Bevington's discussion of the play places Oldcastle as 'yet another in the imposing list of victimized intermediaries [that is, characters in plays] urging a moderate and lawful course of popular reform'.⁴⁸ Bevington mentions Whitgift several times. The play's presentation of the monarch as the supreme authority in the land 'reflects the decline of the Puritan "classical" movement and the effectiveness of Whitgift's no-nonsense discipline'. This 'discipline' remains only in the margins of what might be called 'thin description'. For example, though Bevington points out that 'the Catholic menace' in the play is 'comparable also to that of Whitgift's conservative Anglicanism in the 1590s', this is through both 'repression of all moderate reform and individual conscience'.⁴⁹ Conservative Anglicanism here is a system of thought rather than a breaker of bodies.⁵⁰ Bevington does note the Archbishop's name change, but justifies it by asserting (without evidence) that the Bishop of Rochester was 'a familiar and hated name to Oldcastle's Puritan audience'.⁵¹ Such an elision of the constraints upon the writers of *Oldcastle*, and of the topicality of 'no-nonsense discipline', allows the play to be configured as a work of generalized political philosophy, teaching that reformers 'must learn from their past ... that moderates can win a more lasting triumph for truth than those who flout their duty to the state'.⁵² Oldcastle's persecution in Bevington's account, like the crucifixion, metonymically refers to a greater whole: salvation, or the triumph of the 'elect nation'. Indeed, an influential article on the English history play places *Oldcastle* amongst a number of 'elect nation plays' in which 'the good character or his cause triumphs, not a victim of fate but its instrument, in an action not tragic but tragicomic, as is the action of the Christian drama itself'.⁵³ However, Foxe himself, as has been noted, was less than sanguine that the cause had triumphed, and his doubts were often quoted by Whitgift's opponents.⁵⁴

Reading the history play as focused on the reprobate and persecuting nation of the staged action, rather than the implied elect nation to come many years later, may, oddly enough, provide a new vantage point on one of the most worked-over examples of Elizabethan censorship, *Sir Thomas More*, the first version of which was probably, like *Oldcastle*, written for the

Rose. The recent 'public order' focus on Tilney's censorship of the early parts of the play is consonant with a theory of censorship which sees interventions as often quite exceptional responses to particular crises, rather than issuing from a widespread and intentionally repressive censorship or regulatory regime. This theory, however, does little to explain Tilney's crossing out a line which can have had no conceivable impact upon public order: More's Latin line 'Ubi turpis est medicina, sanari piget' (IV.ii.83). This line, which comes in the context of Roper asking More to be the King's 'patient' and submit, means 'when the medicine is disgusting one is loath to be healed'. It is a quotation from Seneca's *Oedipus*, and in context refers obliquely to Oedipus's own death (it is Creon's response to Oedipus asking him whose life must be sacrificed to appease the gods).

Just what the medicine is, and why More should loathe it, is made clear in the preceding scene, which also caused Tilney concern. Sir Thomas Palmer arrives at a meeting of the Privy Council with 'articles ... first to be viewed / And then to be subscribed to' (IV.i.70-1). More refuses to immediately subscribe: 'Subscribe these articles? Stay, let us pause: / Our conscience first shall parley with our laws' (ll. 73-4), and is joined, ironically enough in the light of his namesake in *Oldcastle*, by the Bishop of Rochester, John Fisher. Rochester is then accused of 'capital contempt'; More, who again asks for more time, is told not to leave his house in Chelsea and sets off for it; other lords instantly subscribe to the articles; and Rochester is escorted off by Palmer 'to answer this contempt'. Tilney marked the scene 'all altr' from the point where Rochester directly refuses to subscribe to his exit with Palmer. The Revels editors of the play comment that 'Tilney seems more disturbed by the sympathetic presentation of More's and Fisher's acceptance of Royal displeasure than by historical inaccuracy'.⁵⁵ William B. Long points out that this disturbance did not extend to a command to cut material, as Tilney 'neither cut nor altered More's refusal to sign which is crucial to the whole play'.⁵⁶ If the substance of the scene was acceptable, what in its details did Tilney find objectionable?

Given the consensus that Tilney's objections to the play's riot scenes can be topically located to 1593, it is worth thinking a little more about the topical inflections of the interventions noted above. As well as being a year of public order worries in London, 1593 saw Whitgift's decisive triumph over both reformers and separatists, in the executions of Barrow and Greenwood and the passing of the 1593 Act to Retain the Queen's Subjects in Obedience. Three key points relating to Tilney's markings discussed above can be placed in the context of Whitgift's campaigns: the

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words 'articles' and 'contempt', and the vehemence of More's Latin tag. One of Whitgift's key tactics was, of course, the use of 'articles', particularly against clerics, who could be deprived of their livings for refusal to subscribe. Refusal to take the *ex officio* oath was 'contempt'; it was for this contempt that non-conformists could be imprisoned. It is worth noting that Rochester's refusal to subscribe to articles is twice identified as 'contempt' in the passage Tilney marks for alteration. Assuming Tilney was led to intervene in IV.i by the topical conjunction of 'articles' and 'contempt' enables a similarly topical explanation of his objection to the vehemence of More's Latin tag, for the combination of 'disgust' and learning was a hallmark of Barrow's face-to-face dealings with Whitgift, whom he at one point identified with Antichrist.⁵⁷

Assuming the play's 1593 topicality may also help to explain its inclusion of a story from Foxe concerning an encounter between Thomas Cromwell and a long-haired man. In Munday's original manuscript, More encounters the long-haired Falkner, who has gone three years without a haircut 'upon a vow'. More retorts that, though he will not ask him to break the vow, he will imprison him in Newgate 'except meantime your conscience give you leave / To dispense with the long vow that you have made'.⁵⁸ Falkner is dragged off, but returns soon afterwards, having cut his own hair. He also 'doth conform himself / To honest decency in his attire.' Falkner, all humility, re-enters and is discharged. There are several topical resonances in this scene, including the conscientious refusal to conform and the vow, but the most important visual point made is Falkner's demeanour after his haircut, for short hair was particularly associated with puritans (hence, later, 'roundheads'). Munday's original draft thus provides a stage image of a prison 'conversion', after which Falkner reforms his manners, and looks like a puritan.

However, in Dekker's revision of the scene, it is made plain that Falkner, far from reforming, resents having cut his hair precisely because it makes him resemble a godly separatist: 'S heart, if my hair stand not an-end when I look for my face in a glass, I am a polecat. Here's a lousy jest. But if I notch not that rogue Tom barber that makes me look thus like a Brownist, hang me. I'll be worst to the nittical knave than ten tooth drawings. Here's a head with a pox' (III.i.244-9). One of the effects of this alteration – perhaps even its point – clearly is to make it difficult to see Falkner as a type of reformed puritan, though its topicality then depends on arguments about the dating of the additions.⁵⁹

William Long has speculated that the play was commissioned, '(or at least suggested or approved) by some government official(s)' in the light of 'steadily increasing anti-alien sentiment' so that players could

'demonstrate publicly the consequences of such socially disruptive actions'. Such a 'commission' is plausible for Long in the light of Anthony Munday's status as 'good and faithful servant' of the government, both as pursuivant and polemicist. Both the anti-alien action, and More's own refusal to subscribe, are simply examples of 'the unfortunate consequences of disobedience to the rule of the sovereign'.⁶⁰ In Long's account, the anti-alien point is the reason for the play's existence (he refers elsewhere to its 'pre-eminent topicality'); More's later downfall and death is simply a historically fortuitous repetition of the same basic 'lesson'. The play's orthodox didacticism, in turn, means that Tilney's interventions are an attempt to enable the production of the play, even though it had been overtaken by a drastic increase in anti-alien tensions.

Long's implication that the intention to write about Ill May Day entailed a full-length play centring on More is questionable. *Jack Straw*, a play dealing entirely with commons political action, and entered in the Stationers' Register in the year that *More* is assumed to have been written, is only slightly longer than the 'riot' scenes in *More*. It is also possible to argue with Long's sense that putting on a play would be one of the methods of choice to defuse anti-alien sentiment. Simpler methods of control were used. When the now-famous libel against strangers appeared in 1593, the authorities' response was immediate and forceful: the setting up of a 'strong watch', and a special commission authorized to enter any premises in search of the author, with the liberty to torture suspects (one of their victims, of course, being the writer Thomas Kyd).⁶¹ Most importantly, however, Long's conflation of More's and the London crowd's 'disobedience' risks simplifying the issues involved (and doing so by adopting the same strategy as the church authorities). Whilst it was undoubtedly a common representational tactic to point to the bad ends of 'rebels' as indicating the illegitimacy of their cause, the same cannot be said of religious dissidents, such as More.⁶² The Church of England itself was founded on religious dissidence and martyrdom. Martyrs do not 'fail' because they die; 'rebels' do. Long's point requires an audience ignorant of (or uninterested in) the specifically religious grounds of More's 'disobedience', and his status as martyr.

More's Revels editors do support Long to some extent, commenting that one of the play's main sources, the 1587 Holinshed's Chronicles, 'shows a remarkable change of attitude towards More', presenting him in a much more positive light than the first edition, partly by quoting the words of John Aylmer, Bishop of London when *More* was written.⁶³ That More's Catholicism (and persecution of proto-Protestants) was no longer the most important thing about him is also argued by Ernst Honigsmann, who

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places the play with *Dr Faustus*, *Friar Bacon*, *John of Bordeaux* and *John A Kent* as a 'wise man play'. For Honigmann, More's death is not a martyrdom but a 'fall' which allows him to display his 'special gifts': 'his quiet dignity, his independence of mind, courage, wit, and his impressive classlessness, equally at ease with earls and artisans'.⁶⁴ Munday's involvement in the play, given his well-known antipathy to Catholicism and employment as a pursuivant, thus presents less of a puzzle, because More's Catholicism no longer disqualified him from sympathetic public portrayal, and indeed was not a necessary component of such a portrayal.

To 'de-Catholicize' More's concern with freedom of conscience is not necessarily to secularize him, however. In fact, the non-specificity of the 'articles' More refuses not only plays down the Catholic grounds of his disobedience to Henry VIII, but also enables an interpretation of his situation as paralleling that of those Protestants subject to Whitgift's much more topical 'articles'.⁶⁵ In other words, paradoxically, the play's refusal to explore the Catholic nature of More's conscientious disobedience, as well as enabling it to be read by modern critics as a proto-liberal exploration of the individual's general right to freedom of conscience, also makes a topical and specific interpretation more possible.

This interpretation might be approached as follows. The Act to Retain the Queen's Subjects in Obedience was passed in the spring of 1593, at the same time as anti-alien feeling was at its height. It bracketed non-conforming Protestants with Catholic recusants, and in doing so redefined political dissidence to include the private, conscientious inaction of the subject. This 'Catholicizing' of Protestant dissent was particularly ironic given that anti-Catholicism was a distinguishing feature of both reformers and separatists, whose objections to the established church were precisely to its unreformed papist elements. Records of the proceedings in parliament, and the books and petitions of reformers and separatists, remain, but though there is little evidence of how Whitgift's campaigns, culminating in the 1593 Act, impacted upon the nation at large, it is clear that it affected many more lives than anti-alien feeling in some parts of London. How might the stage have refracted such a vital issue?

Given Whitgift's hard-line approach to censorship, his recent interest in the theatres, and Munday's dependence upon him, producing, say, *Sir John Oldcastle* in this year would have been impossible. But if now more Protestants were effectively recusants, then the two categories themselves blurred. The anti-Catholic Munday produced a play focused on the prominent recusant Sir Thomas More, because after the 1593 Act his situation was analogous to that of those Protestant reformers who, though

they insisted that church government was not a matter for royal prerogative, found themselves redefined as the enemy within. The play can be seen, in this context, to present the consequences for a man of high degree of the redefinition of the political to include the private conscience's dissent from 'articles'. The *Ill May Day* scenes, on this interpretation, not only refract the topicality of anti-alien murmurings, but present, at length, More's articulate and wise loyal governance. The play seeks to make an absolute separation of loyalty from conscience, public from private life. More is willing to retire from office, but not to abjure his principles. Tilney's interventions into the later as well as the earlier parts of the play can thus be traced to topical pressures, albeit differing ones, pressures which perhaps also help to explain the differences between the Falkner scenes.

My account of *More* has assumed a deliberate attempt to stage a religious persecution at a time when this was very topical. Though attributing intentional oppositional stances to writers risks revisiting some of the relatively unsophisticated historicist interpretations of the last century, it is worth noting that both these plays were written by syndicates containing a writer with radical Protestant associations (Dekker and Wilson). More to the point, Anthony Munday, the writer employed by Whitgift to hunt out Marprelate and papists, a man consequently familiar with the leading Protestants of his day, worked on both (and indeed, may have acquired one of the sources for *More* from the confiscated papers of a recusant).⁶⁶ Whatever his personal morality, Munday was extremely well placed to understand how far a play could go, though this in itself still begs questions. But even if it were possible to provide a definite origin for the two plays I have discussed, it would still be clear that writers and censors understood that there were contingent limitations to the staging of religious history. The influence of the observance, rather than the breach, of these limitations is often overlooked because the contingent is mistaken for the necessary. Polemical orthodoxy looks like common sense once the limits on heterodox expression are forgotten. Censorship, and the power behind it, removes the satire of puritans from its dialogue with Foxean counter-justification evidenced through persecution, and reversibly, deprives Foxean plays of their own polemical topicality. The result is an early modern theatre in which, if the great Globe itself should disappear, not a wrack would be left behind.

Notes

1. Cyndia Susan Clegg, *Press Censorship in Elizabethan England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 222-3.

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2. R. B. Sharpe, *The Real War of the Theaters* (Boston: D.C. Heath & Co, 1935), p. 145.
3. Annabel Patterson recognizes, but does not pursue, the point with her passing comment that 'the play's sympathies seem to be decisively against the ecclesiastical authorities, with the bishop of Rochester standing in all too easily for Whitgift'; in 'Sir John Oldcastle as a Symbol of Reformation Historiography', in Donna B. Hamilton and Richard Strier, eds, *Religion, Literature, and Politics in Post-Reformation England, 1540-1688* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 6-26, at p. 23.
4. *Works of John Whitgift*, vol. III, ed. Reverend John Ayre (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1853), p. 591.
5. *Works of John Whitgift*, p. 593.
6. *Select Statutes and Other Constitutional Documents*, ed. G. W. Prothero (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 4th edn, 1913), p. 213.
7. Patrick Collinson, *The Elizabethan Puritan Movement* (London: Methuen, 1967), p. 431.
8. John Knott, *Discourses of Martyrdom in English Literature, 1563-1694* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 132.
9. Michael Watts, *The Dissenters: From the Reformation to the French Revolution* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), p. 39.
10. *The Writings of John Greenwood and Henry Barrow 1591-1593*, ed. Leland Carlson (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1970), p. 410.
11. A. Pritchard, *Catholic Loyalty in Elizabethan England* (London: Scolar Press, 1979), pp. 7-8.
12. G. R. Elton, *The Tudor Constitution: Documents and Commentary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2nd edn, 1978), p. 458.
13. T. E. Hartley, *Elizabeth's Parliaments: Queen, Lords and Commons 1559-1601* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), pp. 98-9.
14. Watts, *Dissenters*, p. 39.
15. *The Writings of Henry Barrow 1587-1590*, ed. Leland Carlson (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1962), p. 87.
16. Knott, *Discourses of Martyrdom*, p. 120.
17. Patrick Collinson, *Godly People: Essays in English Protestantism and Puritanism* (London: Hambledon Press, 1983), p. 354.
18. So a posthumous 1595 Continental publication of Barrow's first examination before the High Commission in the mid-1580s states, 'now al posterites shal see their practises; and though they have spilt the blood of those men, which vexed them so sore, yet can they not bereave the world of their testimonie, which by word and writing they have left behinde them' (*Writings of Henry Barrow*, p. 90).
19. 'Whitgift's "Book of Martyrs": Archbishop Whitgift, Timothy Bright and the Elizabethan Struggle over John Foxe's Legacy', in David Loades, ed., *John Foxe: an Historical Perspective* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), pp. 135-53.
20. Coincidentally, in one of Greenwood's supplications to the high court of parliament, he uses the same verse: 'Well, heere our brethren lye (how long Lord, holy and true, thou knowest) in dungeons, in hunger, in cold, in nakednes and all outward distresse' (*The Writings of John Greenwood and Henry Barrow 1591-1593*, ed. Leland Carlson, London: George Allen & Unwin, 1970, p. 409).
21. These quotations are from the Authorized Version.
22. Patterson, 'Sir John Oldcastle as a Symbol of Reformation Historiography', p. 6.
23. *Cartwrightiana*, eds Albert Peel and Leland Carlson (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1951), p. 42.
24. *Writings of John Greenwood and Henry Barrow*, p. 463.
25. *Ibid.* p. 455.
26. John Foxe, *Acts and Monuments of the Christian Church* (1583), p. 561.
27. Mary Grace Muse Adkins, 'Sixteenth-century Religious and Political Implications in *Sir John Oldcastle*', *UTSE* 21 (1942), 97-9.
28. Quotations are from the edition of the play in *The Oldcastle Controversy*, eds Peter Corbin and Douglas Sedge (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991).
29. Harpoole's refusal of the name 'puritan' should be read in the light of its currency as an insult. According to Patrick Collinson, 'the character of a puritan, both in the literary-generic sense and more generally, originated as an attributed character, charged with intensely polemical resonances' ('Ecclesiastical Vitriol: Religious Satire in the 1590s and the Invention of Puritanism', in John Guy, ed., *The Reign of Elizabeth: Court and Culture in the Last Decade*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995, pp. 150-70, at p. 155).
30. Other critics also miss the topical possibilities here. Judith Doolin Spikes presents the play as bringing to the 'early seventeenth-century stage the religious controversies of the 1560s, the issues and polemics of which had become once again alarmingly pertinent' (Judith Doolin Spikes, 'The Jacobean History Play and the Myth of the Elect Nation', *RD* 8 (1977), p. 125). Another example might be G. K. Hunter's comment that Rochester 'is a malignant heresy hunter in a mode we can recognize from later portrayals of the sixteenth-century bishops Bonner and Gardner, memorably presented in Foxe as scapegoats for the religious traumas of the mid-sixteenth century'. See G. K. Hunter, *English Drama 1586-1642: the Age of Shakespeare* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), pp. 243-4.
31. 1595 edition, title page.
32. *The Treasure of Gladnesse*, 1579 edition, title page.
33. The British Library Catalogue records editions dated 1598 and 1600, with the latter ascribed to Worthington.
34. *Writings of John Greenwood and Henry Barrow*, p. 400.
35. See Clegg, *Press Censorship*, p. 60.
36. There is the further complication that at 20:4 Rochester is referred to as 'envious Winchester'.
37. I am assuming that the Rochester was part of the play-as-performed rather than added to the play-as-printed, because Rochester is often referred to as 'bishop' in metrically regular lines.
38. Cyndia Clegg argues that 1599 was an atypical year for censorship, with Whitgift and Bancroft being unusually ready to censor non-religious texts in order to deflect criticism of the government during Essex's Irish campaigns (Clegg, *Press Censorship*, p. 202).
39. Patrick Collinson, 'The Theatre Constructs Puritanism', in David L. Smith, Richard Strier and David Bevington, eds, *The Theatrical City: Culture, Theatre and Politics in London, 1576-1649* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,

- 1995), p. 167. But the image of the puritan thus promoted was not Bancroft's invention. Whitgift, in his sermon at St Paul's on 17 November 1583, characterizes the hypocrisy and self-love of 'these wayward and conceited fellows' using, amongst other references, St Paul's second letter to Timothy and the book of Jude (*Works of John Whitgift*, vol. III, p. 593). Most of the characteristics of the satirized 'puritan' appear in St Paul's invectives.
40. Though Kristen Poole has convincingly argued that anti-Martinist writings made use of the Bakhtinian grotesque, her assertion that therefore 'stage puritans were widely expected to be comically grotesque figures', and indeed that this was a 'more pervasive' representation of the puritan than the austere hypocrite, is unsupported by reference to anything other than Marprelate ('Saints Alive! Falstaff, Martin Marprelate, and the Staging of Puritanism', *SQ* 46 (1995), pp. 63–4).
41. Collinson, 'Theatre Constructs Puritanism', follows C. J. Sissons in stating that 'the evidence is skimpy, but just sufficient'.
42. Collinson, 'Theatre Constructs Puritanism', p. 166. Theatrical gibes can be found soon after Marprelate. A *Knack to Know a Knave* (entered in the Stationers' Register on 7 Jan. 1593/4) contains the lines 'The next knave is a Priest, calde John the precise, / That with counterfeit holinesse blinds the peoples eyes, / This is one of them that wil say it is a shame, / For men to swear and blaspheme Gods holie name: / Yet if a make a good Sermon but once in a yeare, / A wil be fourtie tymes in a Taverne making good cheere, / Yet in the Church he will read with such sobrietie, / That you would thinke him verie precise, and of great honesty' (lines 1759–66).
43. Quoted in Richard Dutton, *Mastering the Revels: the Regulation and Censorship of English Renaissance Drama* (London: Macmillan, 1991), p. 77.
44. See Tracey Hill, "'He Hath Changed his Coppy": Anti-Theatrical Writing and the Turncoat Player', *Critical Survey* 9 (1997), 59–77.
45. See Janet Clare, *'Art Made Tongue-tied by Authority': Elizabethan and Jacobean Dramatic Censorship* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), pp. 94–114.
46. G. K. Hunter notes that the play conveys 'the Establishment message that true Christian conscience is innocent of any political threat; but when the ecclesiastical arrangements are corrupt, even conscientious loyalty cannot guarantee to save the Christian's life, though it can preserve the soul'. However, he does not see any topical resonance in this point ('Religious Nationalism in Later History Plays', in Vincent Newey and Ann Thompson, eds, *Literature and Nationalism* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1991), pp. 88–97, at p. 93).
47. One recent example is Douglas Brooks' assertion that *Oldcastle* 'takes most of its cues not from an identification with a community, but from an individual playwright named Shakespeare' ('Sir John Oldcastle and the Construction of Shakespeare's Authorship', *SEL* 38 (1998), 347).
48. David Bevington, *Tudor Drama and Politics: a Critical Approach to Topical Meaning* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968), p. 257.
49. *Ibid.* pp. 259, 257.
50. Similarly, there is no hint in David Scott Kastan's work on *Oldcastle* that what he calls 'Whitgift's vigorous promotion of uniformity', after which 'radical Protestantism ... was in retreat, at least as a political movement', had anything to do with imprisonment without trial or executions (David Scott Kastan, *Shakespeare after Theory*, London: Routledge, 1999, p. 101).
51. Though Bevington supports this statement only with a reference to Sharpe's *The Real War of the Theaters*, the latter makes no such claim.
52. Bevington, *Tudor Drama and Politics*, p. 259.
53. Judith Doolin Spikes, 'The Jacobean History Play and the Myth of the Elect Nation', *RD* 8 (1977), 119.
54. G. K. Hunter makes the point that 'Foxe's conception of England as an "elect nation" is thus by no means untroubled, and, in political terms, it is remarkably limited and circumspect'; see 'Religious Nationalism', p. 89.
55. Anthony Munday and others, *Sir Thomas More*, eds Vittorio Gabrieli and Giorgio Melchiori (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), p. 166.
56. William B. Long, 'The Occasion of *The Book of Sir Thomas More*', in T. H. Howard-Hill, ed., *Shakespeare and Sir Thomas More: Essays on the Play and its Shakespearean Interest* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 45–56, at p. 46.
57. *Writings of Henry Barrow 1587–1590*, p. 188.
58. Munday and others, *Sir Thomas More*, p. 217.
59. The Revels editors place them around 1593, but Gary Taylor and Scott McMillin both favour a much later date (see their chapters in Howard-Hill, ed., *Shakespeare and Sir Thomas More*).
60. Long, 'The Occasion of *The Book of Sir Thomas More*', p. 50.
61. Giorgio Melchiori, 'The Master of the Revels and the Date of the Additions to *The Book of Sir Thomas More*', in Bernhard Fabian and Kurt Tetzeli von Rosador, eds, *Shakespeare: Text, Language, Criticism* (Olms-Weidmann: Hildesheim and New York, 1987), pp. 164–78, at p. 167.
62. Though Whitgift himself argued on 17 Nov. 1583, in one of his first major sermons as Archbishop, that 'Long life is a promise to obedience. Therefore short life [is the reward] to disobedience' (*Works of John Whitgift*, vol. III, p. 588).
63. Anthony Munday and others, *Sir Thomas More*, p. 7.
64. Ernst Honigmann, 'The Play of *Sir Thomas More* and Some Contemporary Events', *Sh.S.* 42 (1990), 78.
65. Though the Revels edition points out the potential appeal of the play to Protestants, it stops short of suggesting a directly topical resonance: 'Freedom of conscience was a question that interested the Puritan and non-conformist London middle class even more than the Roman Catholic dissidents. It is exactly this sort of audience – the puritanically inclined City middle class – that Munday seems to have had in mind in the later extant plays in which he had a hand ... [which] denounce the prevarications of Church and State against the rights of the individual' (Munday and others, *Sir Thomas More*, p. 16).
66. *Ibid.* p. 8.