

A “True Chronicle Historie” of Britain: *King Lear* and its early Catholic audiences

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It has been known since the 1930s that one of the two documented performances of *King Lear* within Shakespeare’s lifetime was by a touring group of Catholic recusant actors in Yorkshire during the winter of 1609-10. Their performances (mainly at the houses of Catholic gentry) were not simply “entertainment” but were an attempt to sustain and celebrate a collective Catholic identity in the face of continual persecution. Despite all that has been written about the religious and philosophical meaning of *King Lear*, there has been relatively little attempt to understand what the play might have meant to an English Catholic audience in 1609-10. Needless to say, they would have understood the play very differently from modern critics who often see in it a vision of a godless universe. Why did this group of travelling players think *King Lear* was an appropriate play to perform before their mainly Catholic audiences? In fact, its picture of a British kingdom divided into clearly marked groups of good and evil characters, in which the good are brutally persecuted by the evil and sometimes denounced as “traitors”, offers a surprisingly close “fit” with the perspective of English Catholics both before and after the Gunpowder Plot. Those few critics who have tried to explore the critical implications of these Yorkshire Catholic performances have had their work almost completely ignored. Irrespective of what Shakespeare himself might or might not have intended, it seems time for modern critical discussion of *King Lear*’s religious and political meaning to take proper account of how some of Shakespeare’s contemporaries would have understood the play. Since their “misreading” of it has considerable support from the text, possible explanations for this also need to be considered. The simplest is that Shakespeare, who was personally close to a number of Catholics, was capable of empathising with their predicament. To argue further than that, one would need to go beyond the text of the 1608 Quarto and look again at other pieces of literary and biographical evidence.

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If those recusants in Yorkshire were off-message about King Lear, the text gave them good reason to be. (Richard Dutton)

In *Shakespeare and Religion* Alison Shell has an interesting chapter on possible responses to Shakespeare’s writings from within the contemporary Catholic community. One of her

examples concerns some prefatory verses to *The Life and Death of Mr. Edmund Geninges Priest*, published in 1614 by the Jesuit College at Saint-Omer. Gennings had been martyred in 1591 and his tragic biography is contrasted sharply with the rhetorically heightened “feigned passions” created by poets.

Affected wordes, or Courtly complement,
Do not expect, who ever reades this story;
Vertu’s my ground, it needs no ornament,
And to deceyve you so, I should be sorry.
If any such there be, post to King Liere,
He hath applause, seeke not contentment heere.

...

My authour’s playne, nor is his grieve a fiction. (*Life* 4)

In other words, if you are looking for a high style and an entertaining piece of fiction rather than plain moral and emotional truth, then don’t bother reading this book but go and read or see the popular play *King Lear*. It seems odd that such a famously bleak drama as *King Lear*, a play which, as Stanley Wells has said, “makes fewer concessions to the need to entertain, in any easy sense of the word, than anything [Shakespeare] wrote before or after” (Wells 30), should be dismissed by this Catholic writer as lightweight in comparison with the story of Edmund Gennings. Perhaps any well-known tragedy could have been selected to stand for the inadequacies of fictional representations of suffering in comparison with the literal truth about Catholic martyrdoms and *Lear* was easier to accommodate to the demands of rhyme and metre than the more definitely popular *Hamlet* or *Othello*. However, as will become clear, there might be good reasons why this particular play was singled out. It was capable of doing very similar cultural work for those many Catholics who were more favourably disposed towards the theatre, by seeming to offer them immediately recognizable images of

their own situation, which they believed was still no better than in the decades of tortures and executions under Elizabeth. It could be seen as a powerful competitor within the same cultural space.¹

As Shell herself goes on to mention briefly, it has been known since the 1930s, and widely known since the publication in 1942 of an essay by Charles J. Sisson, that a group of recusant Catholic actors, known as the Simpsons or Sir Richard Cholmeley's players, travelling round North Yorkshire in the early seventeenth century, had *King Lear* and *Pericles* in their repertory during the Christmas season of 1609-10 and were using the recently printed Quartos (respectively those of 1608 and 1609) as prompt books. Since then, there has been some extremely valuable work done on the Simpsons and the context of their performances by G. W. Boddy, Phebe Jensen, Paul Whitfield White, and Siobhan Keenan.² These scholars have generally been reluctant to draw firm critical conclusions about how Shakespeare's plays might have been understood by Yorkshire Catholic audiences within Shakespeare's own lifetime and what bearing this might have on our own understanding of the plays, particularly *King Lear*. This reluctance is probably because they don't wish to be drawn into heated but inconclusive debates about Shakespeare's possible Catholic sympathies.

The relatively few critics who have tried to situate *King Lear* in the context of these performances, such as John L. Murphy, Peter Milward, Richard Wilson, and (most recently) Alfred Thomas,³ have had the important critical implications of their work largely ignored, as any glance at modern scholarly editions of *King Lear*, recent critical essays on the play, or the programme notes for any recent productions of it will confirm.⁴ There may be various reasons for this (Murphy's book, for instance, though highly original and suggestive, is also oddly written, eccentrically organised, confusing and repetitive in places) but the main ones are surely to do with a lack of sympathy for any version of the "Catholic Shakespeare"

hypothesis and a reluctance to depart from the standard modern religious and philosophical interpretation of *King Lear* which, since the appearance of influential books by Jan Kott and William R. Elton in the 1960s, has most frequently been described as a daring attempt to imagine a Godless and meaningless universe. Yet one can try to answer the really important questions – why did the Simpsons think *King Lear* would be suitable Christmas holiday entertainment⁵ for their mainly Catholic audiences and how did those audiences interpret the play? – without necessarily being committed to a strong claim about Shakespeare’s own beliefs and intentions (such as those made by Milward and Wilson), though the answers to these questions might support other evidence, whether biographical or literary, for such a claim.

Given that since the 1960s *King Lear* has commonly been regarded as Shakespeare’s most important play, largely because it “became Shakespeare’s bleakest and most despairing vision of suffering, all hints of consolation undermined or denied” (Foakes 3-4), the critical implications of recontextualising it as providing suitable Christmas holiday entertainment for some Catholic contemporaries of Shakespeare are potentially seismic. But it is not a matter of simply replacing the preferred modern interpretation of the play with a more historically grounded one. A play like *King Lear* is capable of yielding many kinds of meaning, meanings which develop continuously along with the changing “horizon of expectations” of audiences and readers. Our current sense of the meaning and value of *King Lear* is built on a continuing dialogue with all previous responses to it when we know of them or can plausibly reconstruct them, with a special interest attaching to those early responses which might have shared the same historical horizon of expectations as the author. As Hans Robert Jauss puts it:

The “verdict of the ages” on a literary work is more than merely “the accumulated judgement of other readers, critics, viewers, and even professors”, it is the successive unfolding of the potential for meaning that is embedded in a work and actualized in

the stages of its historical reception as it discloses itself to understanding judgement, so long as this faculty achieves in a controlled fashion the “fusion of horizons” in the encounter with tradition. (1561)⁶

Our own “horizon of expectations” for *King Lear* (that it is perhaps Shakespeare’s greatest play and “his bleakest and most despairing vision of suffering”) needs to enter into a productive dialogue (a “fusion of horizons”) with the expectations of some of its first audiences in order to unfold more of “the potential for meaning” which is embedded in the text.

I will begin by summarizing some of the most important information about the Simpsons, their performances, and their repertory before briefly noting and, I hope, rebutting the argument that it was not in fact Shakespeare’s *King Lear* which they performed. I will then offer what I believe to be a plausible description, derived partly from the work of earlier critics such as Peter Milward, Frank Brownlow, Richard Wilson, and Alfred Thomas of those features of the play which would have particularly resonated with the Yorkshire Catholic audiences in 1609-10, supplemented by some more speculative suggestions of my own about the staging. I will then try to demonstrate that, given the situation of Catholics in early-seventeenth-century England, there is nothing obviously perverse or wrong-headed about this reading of the play. Since the text of the 1608 Quarto offers considerable support for it, some possible explanations need to be considered. I will note that Shakespeare, irrespective of his own personal beliefs, was close enough to a number of Catholics to be perfectly capable of empathising with their predicament and channelling some of their feelings into *King Lear*. The case for making a stronger argument about Shakespeare’s own beliefs and intentions is left open but this does not diminish the importance of taking much more seriously this very early response to *King Lear*.

The Simpsons were a well-established acting company, based in Egton near Whitby, who were demonstrably active from 1595-1616 and probably both before and after these dates. They played in a number of different venues but most commonly in the houses of Catholic gentry, before predominantly Catholic audiences. We know much more about them than other similar groups of provincial actors because they got into serious trouble in the winter of 1609-10. It was alleged that during the Christmas holiday season they performed a play based on the medieval legend of St. Christopher at Gowthwaite Hall in Nidderdale, the home of Sir John Yorke, a “church papist” who attended Church-of-England services frequently enough to avoid the fines for recusancy but whose family were openly Catholic. The play represented the conversion to Christianity of the giant Raphabus (represented in the play as a “wild man” dressed all in green) by a hermit, who showed him a large cross and convinced him that its power, which derived from “the Adored Jew thereupon executed”, was greater than that of the devil, the giant’s previous master (National Archives STAC 8/19/10: 6). The play either concluded when the hermit administered the sacrament of penance to Raphabus or went on to show the “miracle” in which the giant carries the infant Christ over a dangerous river and acquires his new name of Christopher (Christ-bearer).

Despite the obviously Catholic nature of this play, it did not in itself get the players or Sir John Yorke into trouble. The real problem arose from a “seditious” interlude tacked on to the end of the play in which a Catholic priest carrying a cross debated with a Church-of-England minister carrying a Bible and defeated him decisively. The minister was then carried off to hell by the Devil, at which point, according to the testimony of Sir Stephen Proctor (based on what others had told him), there were “great rejoicings” from the spectators (STAC 8/19/10: 12).⁷ After one person present at the performance reported it to a local clergyman, who in turn reported it to a Justice of the Peace, a Star Chamber investigation took place, in the course of which Sir John Yorke was accused of involvement in the Gunpowder Plot and

harbouring Catholic priests (including John Gerard). The more serious charges were never proved but in July 1614, more than four years later, the case was concluded with massive fines for Sir John and his family for allowing the interlude to be staged in their house (Jensen, “Recusancy” 104).

Although there were attempts to arrest them shortly afterwards, the Simpsons seem to have escaped without any serious punishment and carried on with their theatrical activities. The detailed descriptions in court records of the *St. Christopher* play and the provocative interlude (which they included whenever they thought it was safe to do so) give a very good idea of the nature of their performances and their contribution to Yorkshire Catholic culture. Paul Whitfield White has written eloquently about this in *Drama and Religion in English Provincial Society, 1485-1660*:

The Simpsons were more than a mere acting company providing occasional recreation for the mostly recusant inhabitants of northern Yorkshire. At their performances, the Catholic community of the North Riding celebrated their collective identity as Catholics. This sense of shared histories, values, beliefs, etc. was enhanced during holiday gatherings such as those at Gowthwaite Hall when Protestants were mostly shut out. The plays they staged, notably religious ones such as *St. Christopher*, projected their Catholic faith in imaginative, representational form; it reaffirmed that faith via its stories of saints’ lives, it evoked a response of shared approval and identification that reinforced their solidarity and sense of oneness. (156)

In the course of the voluminous and often contradictory testimony from numerous witnesses during the Star Chamber investigation, the players claimed (not wholly truthfully) at several points in their defence that they always used printed (and therefore already licensed) texts as their prompt books. It also emerged that they had in their repertory for that Christmas season three recently printed London professional plays. One of these, according

to the testimony of the actor Thomas Pant, was “the three Shirleyes” (STAC 8/19/10: 6), which had been offered to Sir John Yorke as an alternative to the *St. Christopher* play, and is generally accepted as being *The Travels of the Three English Brothers* by John Day, William Rowley, and George Wilkins, first performed by Queen Anne’s Men at the Curtain in 1607. The other two, according to the testimony of the actor William Harrison, were “Perocles prince of Tire” and “Kinge Lere” (STAC 8/19/10: 30). The question naturally arises as to what made these professional plays seem suitable for performance by mainly Catholic actors before mainly (though not exclusively) Catholic audiences. Did they, like the *St. Christopher* play and the seditious interlude, help Yorkshire Catholics celebrate their collective identity as Catholics? One could argue that the main factors governing selection were simply that the plays should be recent, popular, and in print⁸ but such broad criteria would not exclude works like Dekker’s virulently anti-Catholic *The Whore of Babylon* (performed and printed in 1607), which one could not imagine ever being staged by the Simpsons, and it is highly probable that ideological considerations played some part in their choice of material.

In the case of *The Travels of the Three English Brothers* the potential appeal to Catholic audiences is extremely obvious. The play concerns three contemporary adventurer-diplomats, Sir Thomas, Sir Anthony, and Robert Sherley, who were travelling round Europe and the Middle East trying to build alliances against the Ottoman Turks. The historical Sir Anthony and Robert appear to have converted to Catholicism and there is a scene set in the Vatican where, most extraordinarily for a London commercial play, the Pope is treated very respectfully by Sir Anthony and addressed as follows:

Peace to the father of our Mother Church,
The stair of men’s salvations and the key
That binds or looseth our transgressions. (sc.5.38-40)

In another scene Sir Thomas conceals his true identity from his Turkish captors and refuses to forsake his faith, despite enduring torture through being hoisted up vertically on a form of the rack, in the same way that John Gerard had been tortured in the Tower of London. The play ends with the Sophy of Persia using his absolute powers (“We’ll ask no council to confirm that grant” (sc.13.192)) to allow Robert full freedom of religion, so that his children can be baptized and educated as Christians and worship in a Christian church. This hopeful fantasy of religious toleration by royal decree would certainly have appealed to English Catholics.

The fact that George Wilkins was a co-author of both *The Travels of the Three English Brothers* and *Pericles* raises some interesting questions about his religious affiliation. In his essay on “The Life of George Wilkins”, George Prior raised the possibility that Wilkins was to be identified with the “George Wilkinson” who was cited for recusancy in 1608 (142-43). Wilkins does sometimes appear as “Wilkinson” in court records but Prior was inclined to reject this identification, partly on the grounds that “Wilkins’ writings give us no reason to think that he was a Catholic” (143). However, there is considerable consensus among modern authorship scholars about which parts of *The Travels of the Three English Brothers* were written by Wilkins and they include the scene in the Vatican, the scene where Sir Thomas is tortured, and the scene in which Robert is promised religious toleration.⁹ Whether or not Wilkins was the recusant named in 1608, these are strong pointers towards Catholic sympathies.¹⁰

Pericles, the play Wilkins co-authored with Shakespeare, has often struck critics as having close connections to the medieval Catholic saint’s play,¹¹ a once-flourishing tradition in England which is easy to overlook because of the almost complete disappearance of texts after the Reformation. Like some medieval saints, the protagonist has numerous adventures in many different locations and suffers terribly, but his patience and endurance are rewarded with a divine vision and a miraculous happy ending.¹² This was a play which had recently

been seen by foreign Catholic ambassadors at the Globe and was to be performed at Court for the entertainment of the French ambassador in 1619. Most significantly of all, as revealed by Willem Schrickx in 1976, *Pericles* was the only non-religious title to appear on a list of books held by the Jesuit College at Saint-Omer in 1619, most of which were “concerned with attacking the considerable body of anti-Catholic legislation passed by Parliament in the wake of the Gunpowder Plot of November 1605, as well as arguing against the defenders of the Oath of Allegiance” (21).¹³

If the Catholic appeal of *Pericles* and *The Travels of the Three English Brothers* seems reasonably obvious, then what about *King Lear* which, on the face of it, seems much more problematic? Why did the Simpsons think *this* was an appropriate play to perform before their Catholic audiences in the Christmas holiday season? As mentioned earlier, relatively few critics have engaged at all with this fascinating question. The three who have addressed it most directly are Peter Milward, Richard Wilson, and Alfred Thomas. Milward asks “what special meaning or message might [*King Lear*] have had for those Catholic audiences in Yorkshire in 1609-10?” (54) and supplies answers which confirm his not-very-nuanced argument for a strongly Catholic Shakespeare who repeatedly invests his plays with hidden Catholic meanings.¹⁴ Wilson, as part of his very different, massively detailed, sometimes brilliant but sometimes over-argued case for a Shakespeare engaged in a lifelong concealment of Catholic sympathies and retreat from Jesuit ones, asks even more pointedly: “What message did Shakespeare’s drama carry to this household in the Dales, which, far from being a rustic outpost, turns out to have been the epicentre of papist revolt?” (*Secret* 283).¹⁵ Alfred Thomas structures his suggestive analysis of the play in relation to continuing elements of medieval Catholic culture by asking repeatedly “how would the Catholics of Nidderdale have responded to it?” (150). However, modern critical editions of *King Lear* usually make only perfunctory mention of the performance at Gowthwaite Hall, one of only

two recorded performances in Shakespeare's own lifetime, and make no use at all of it critically.

One way of dodging the problem is of course to question if it was Shakespeare's play which was performed, since the old *King Leir* play (one of Shakespeare's sources) had been printed in 1605 and was therefore available to the players as a prompt book. For Stanley Wells "it is not certain" (56) that it was Shakespeare's play which was performed. For Martin Wiggins, in his recent *British Drama 1533-1642: A Catalogue*, it was only "possibly" Shakespeare's play (vol.5, 258) and one of the most recent essays on the Gowthwaite Hall episode, by Douglas H. Arrell, devotes all its energies to trying to prove that it was the old *King Leir* play which was performed.¹⁶ Yet there are a number of strong arguments to indicate that it almost certainly was Shakespeare's *Lear* which was acted in Yorkshire.

Given that the Simpsons had two other recent popular London plays in their repertoire, including another one by Shakespeare, why would they go back to an old and rather mediocre play, written about 1589, whose last recorded performance was in 1594? The claim on the 1605 *Leir* title page that the text is "as it hath bene divers and sundry times lately acted", without giving any details of where and by whom, looks like a crude attempt to cash in on the success of Shakespeare's *Lear* as does the description of it in the Stationers' Register as a "Tragicall history" when the old play was not a tragedy.¹⁷ *King Leir* was probably first performed by the Queen's Men who, as has been demonstrated by Scott McMillin and Sally-Beth MacLean, were formed as a touring company "to spread Protestant and royalist propaganda through a divided realm" (166). The religious and political orientation of *King Leir* is not entirely straightforward to identify but its provenance makes it an unlikely choice for the Simpsons on ideological grounds.

Finally, and most conclusively, the actor William Harrison who testified that *Pericles* and *Lear* were in the company's repertory, said he had played the clown's part in both plays

(STAC 8/19/10: 30). There is a Fool in *Lear* but no obvious clown or fool part in *King Lear*.

It seems to me overwhelmingly probable that it was Shakespeare's play which the Simpsons performed which brings us back to the questions which so few critics seem to want to try to answer. Why did it seem a suitable choice for these recusant actors and how did their Catholic audiences read the play?

In *Puzzling Shakespeare: Local Reading and its Discontents* Leah Marcus has an excellent discussion of the only other recorded contemporary performance of *King Lear*, before King James at Whitehall on St. Stephen's Night (Boxing Day) in 1606 (Marcus 148-159). James probably saw the play's disastrous division of the kingdom as implicitly supportive of his project to recreate "Great Britain" by unifying the crowns of England and Scotland. He would also, she says, probably not have reacted negatively to Lear's admission that he has taken "too little care" of the "Poor naked wretches" in his kingdom, since "On the Feast of St. Stephen, as in the more recent carol of King Wenceslaus, the high were to look out in pity upon the tribulations of the low" (154). This was liturgically the right moment to remind James of his responsibilities towards the poorest of his subjects. She concludes her discussion as follows:

My purpose in focusing on the royal *Lear* as opposed to others is not to declare a preference for it but to stress, yet once more, the importance of localization for defining parameters of meaning. A play which was orthodox in one setting could have been unorthodox in another. Shakespeare's "double writing" of key scenes gave the theatre the "high prerogative" of subtly altering a play's meaning in performance.

(158-59)

Her argument for "the importance of localization for defining parameters of meaning" would have been even stronger if she had paused to reflect on what *King Lear* might have

meant to Yorkshire Catholics in the Christmas season of 1609-10. Did they find pleasure and reassurance in its audacious imagining of a Godless and meaningless universe? Did they warm to the spectacle of Catholic rituals and beliefs involving possession and exorcism being “emptied out”, stripped of their religious meaning, which is how Stephen Greenblatt famously interpreted *King Lear* in “Shakespeare and the Exorcists”?¹⁸ Did they see in the play’s apparently arbitrary and indifferent God or gods perhaps “the greatest work of Calvinist literature”, as Graham Holderness has recently argued (201)? It seems unlikely, to say the least. So what did they see?

Presumably individual spectators, as is always the case, would have had highly individual reactions to different parts of the play, depending on their own personal experience of family conflict, old age, and death, and their previous knowledge of drama and other forms of literature. However, as a group of Catholics gathered together in a Catholic household for a performance by a troupe of recusant actors, it seems highly probable that certain features of the play “lit up” for all of them, that they had a collective “horizon of expectations”. It is not a matter of claiming to uncover a hidden and consistent intentional allegory (how could it be consistent when Lear himself is both tyrant and victim?) but more of realising how the literal events of the play might have carried a particular resonance for these Catholic spectators. What I am presenting (drawing particularly on work by John L. Murphy, Peter Milward, Frank W. Brownlow, Richard Wilson, and Alfred Thomas, though without endorsing all of their conclusions) is not so much a complete “reading” of the play, taking into full account all of its many layers, as an aggregated list of those many features which might have resonated strongly with these particular spectators.

They would have seen a British kingdom divided between groups of characters more clearly marked as good or evil than is usual in Shakespeare, in which the good characters “are all suffering from exile, banishment, disinheritance and persecution” (Milward 56-57). The

evil characters brutally persecute the good characters, one of whom (Gloucester) is repeatedly called a “traitor” (14.21, 14.26, 14.30, 14.35,) and accused of “confederacy . . . with the traitors / Late footed in the kingdom” (14.43-44).¹⁹ Torture without any legal warrant or “form of justice” (14.24) is applied and the play’s many images of the suffering human body are sometimes explicitly associated with the specific tortures employed on Catholic priests. “He hates him / That would upon the rack of this tough world / Stretch him out longer” (24.308-10). If Elizabeth or James had been challenged about their use of torture, which had no legal basis except that of royal prerogative, they could have responded like Goneril: “the laws are mine, not thine. / Who shall arraign me for’t?” (24.154-55).

Families are painfully divided between those loyal to the old regime and those loyal to the new (“the bond cracked between son and father” (2.108-9)). Edmund’s “loyalty” (12.22) is to Cornwall rather than to his father Gloucester. People are even prepared to become informers against members of their own family for material gain (“True or false, it hath made thee Earl of Gloucester” (12.17-18)). Frank Brownlow has drawn attention to the notorious case of Thomas Fitzherbert who outdid Edmund by seeking the death not only of his Catholic father but of two other Catholic relatives, in order to gain an inheritance (“Richard Topcliffe” 168-70). Such murderous greed and opportunism on the part of informers against Catholics was frequent enough for Jonson (at this point a Catholic) to allude to it more than once in *Sejanus* (Thomas 166-67).

There is a gross betrayal of the normal traditions of hospitality, since Gloucester is imprisoned and tortured by guests in his own house. Brownlow mentions the case of Edward Rookwood, a Norfolk Catholic gentleman who entertained Elizabeth and her retinue in his house, only to be ordered by the Lord Chamberlain to leave the court (i.e. his own house), summoned to appear before the Privy Council and the Bishop of Norwich to answer for his recusancy, and imprisoned until he agreed to conform (“Richard Topcliffe” 171; Dovey 54).

Marmaduke Darnebrook, the person who reported Sir John Yorke to the authorities, was arguably guilty of a similar betrayal since the staging of plays at Gowthwaite Hall was one of the ways in which traditional hospitality was offered to friends and neighbours at holidays and festivals.

The sensible and prudent thing to do in this kingdom is to be “as the time is” (24.31) and take the Fool’s advice not to cling on to a lost cause: “Let go thy hold when a great wheel runs down a hill, lest it break thy neck with following it” (7.238-9). However, none of the good characters is “sensible”, in this modern sense of the word, and nor were the Simpsons or Sir John Yorke and his relatives, though they might have comforted themselves by recalling St. Paul’s contempt for the wisdom of this world (Corinthians 3.1.18-20). It might be “wise” to obey the King but it will not save your soul, as the mad Lear himself points out: “To say ‘ay’ and ‘no’ to everything I said ‘ay’ and ‘no’ to was no good divinity” (20.97-8). This is precisely the point which the religiously troubled Donne makes in “Satyre III” when he says that obedience to a “Harry” (i.e. Henry VIII) or any other earthly authority will not save you: “wilt thou let thy Soule be tyed / To mans lawes, by which she shall not be tryed / At the last day?” (ll.93-95).

One character, whose disposition is saintly and whose tears are likened to “holy water” (17.31), is hanged. Her initial “crime” was simply to refuse to say what the King wanted her to say. Catholics frequently resisted taking the Oath of Supremacy or, after 1606, the Oath of Allegiance²⁰ and could find in some circumstances that their refusal to say what they knew about fugitive priests meant death. The most recent Catholic female martyr was Anne Line, hanged in 1601 for the “crime” of assisting a priest prepare for Mass. Her death shocked more than just openly committed Catholics. An essay by John Finnis and Patrick Martin has argued very persuasively that Anne and her husband Roger were the couple commemorated in Shakespeare’s mysterious verses, normally titled “The Phoenix and

Turtle”, written shortly after her martyrdom.²¹ Cordelia’s uncooperative silence at the beginning of the play might also have reminded the Yorkshire audience of Margaret Clitherow, pressed to death in York in 1586 for refusing to plead (“What can you say . . .?” “Nothing”). One of the priests Margaret Clitherow had been hiding, and who was himself executed, was Francis Ingleby, a maternal uncle of Sir John Yorke. In 1598 Jane Wiseman was also sentenced to be pressed to death for refusing to plead but the sentence was never carried out. More generally, Alfred Thomas argues that the Catholic audiences in Yorkshire would have little difficulty in aligning Cordelia with the medieval legends of virgin Christian martyrs, whose horrific deaths were often preceded by a resolute defiance of their fathers or other figures of authority (151-65). As Cordelia says, “We are not the first / Who with best meaning have incurred the worst” (24.3-4).

Protestants as well as Catholics, of course, aligned their recent sufferings with the martyrdoms of the early church. Only a handful of extreme Protestants were martyred in England during Shakespeare’s lifetime, compared with nearly two hundred Catholics, but the Henrician and Marian persecutions were kept fully alive in cultural memory by Foxe’s *Acts and Monuments*. David K. Andersen in *Martyrs and Players in Early Modern England* is very responsive to the martyrological connotations of *King Lear* but his primary frame of reference is Foxe and Protestant ideas about “the persecuted church”. For him, *King Lear* is “a play that shows very little confidence in Christianity’s metaphysical claims and promises but which in its understanding of suffering and violence is strongly marked by the doctrine of the persecuted church” (21-22). Like nearly all modern critics, he makes no mention of the Simpsons or how their Catholic audiences, who at this point in time were far more obviously members of a “persecuted church”, would have understood the play. Even if a typical member of the Globe audience would more likely have associated Cordelia with Anne Askew than Anne Line, one feels that Shakespeare (if he had wanted to make that sort of connection)

could have tried rather harder. Cordelia is hanged as a traitor (one of “the traitors / Late footed in the kingdom” (14.43-44)) not burned as a heretic and there are no allusions in the 1608 Quarto to the Henrician or Marian burnings. The one such allusion which occurs in the Folio text as part of the Fool’s prophecy – “No heretics burned, but wenches’ suitors” (3.2.84) – is actually very open to a Catholic interpretation, since burnings for heresy will cease “When priests are more in word than matter” and when “the realm of Albion” shall “Come to great confusion” (3.2.81, 85-86).

Another good character (Edgar) is forced to go on the run in disguise. The ports are watched for him and his picture is circulated throughout the country (6.80-3). To harbour him means death (6.63). Several critics have drawn attention to the parallels between Edgar’s situation and that of the hunted missionary priests and Peter Milward quotes from Edmund Campion’s 1580 letter to the Father General of the Jesuits: “I am in apparel to myself very ridiculous. I often change it and my name also” (Milward 59).²² The parallel is perhaps not quite as exact as Milward claims, since the missionary priests disguised themselves as soldiers and gentlemen rather than mad beggars and peasants. However, John L. Murphy drew attention to the fact that Samuel Harsnett, one of Shakespeare’s undoubted sources, had himself made a link between the variously named devils who possess Poor Tom and “our wandering Jesuits” (Murphy 180). Moreover, the audience at Gowthwaite Hall might have recalled how Sir John Yorke’s cousin, the Gunpowder conspirator Robert Winter, like his predecessor Anthony Babington, had slept rough in barns during his two months on the run following the failure of the Plot.

There is a terrible but impotent desire for revenge upon the evil people, an expression of the kind of feelings which led to the Gunpowder Plot. “I will have such revenges on you both / That all the world shall – I will do such things – / What they are, yet I know not; but they shall be / The terrors of the earth (7.437-40) . . . kill, kill, kill, kill, kill, kill” (20.175). A

maternal aunt of Sir John Yorke, Jane Ingleby, was the mother of two of the Gunpowder Plotters, Thomas and Robert Winter, and Sir John was suspected of having offered support to his relatives in 1605. If the performance of *King Lear* at Gowthwaite Hall took place before the same audience which attended the *St. Christopher* play and the “seditious” interlude, then the spectators might well have included the orphaned children of the executed Robert Winter.²³

A foreign invasion seems to represent the best chance of alleviating the situation of the good people and allowing them to take their revenge. It seems significant that, although the “historical” Lear was believed to be the founder of Leicester and the chief city of ancient Britain was believed to be Lud’s Town, the only English town definitely referred to in the play (eleven times) is Dover (references to “Gloucester” may simply indicate the Earl). Long familiarity with Shakespeare’s play has caused many critics to overlook the oddity of this but there is a recognizably Shakespearean technique involved. In his other play about ancient Britain, *Cymbeline*, there is a similar surprisingly disproportionate number of references to Milford Haven (ten to Milford-Haven, seven to Milford). As Emrys Jones pointed out, these numerous references carry a significant symbolic weight, since Milford-Haven was where Henry Tudor landed before defeating Richard III and establishing the Tudor dynasty. What symbolic associations might Dover have? Why is Gloucester repeatedly asked “Wherefore to Dover?” (14.50-53).

In legendary British history, Brute the Trojan founded Britain by defeating a race of giants, with the last one, Gogmagog, being thrown off a cliff “not farre from Dover” (Holinshed 1: 443), and perhaps this is why Dover features so prominently in the play. However, Dover also had a particular resonance for Catholics as it had been the entry point for a number of Jesuits and seminary priests, including Edmund Campion and Thomas Cottam, the brother of Shakespeare’s last Stratford schoolmaster. It remained one of the

potential landing places for foreign armies, armies which would help to restore England to Catholicism. When the invading army does arrive, it is joined (as feared by both Elizabeth and James) by those “whom the rigour of our state / Forced to cry out” (22.24-5) and generates, as it did in *King John*, an ambivalent response from some of the nobility (Albany: “Where I could not be honest / I never yet was valiant” (22.25-6)). This is the most obviously politically dangerous element in the whole play (particularly given the positive representation of the King of France) and the removal of many of the references to this invasion in the Folio text might well be, as Richard Wilson argues, a nervous response by Shakespeare to the scandal surrounding the Gowthwaite Hall performance (Wilson 284-90). The commonly accepted date of around 1610 for the Folio revisions lends support to this argument.

The main alternative to acts of violent revenge or rescue by foreign invasion is obviously a patient endurance of suffering, something which both Lear and Gloucester struggle intermittently to achieve and which points clearly to the Book of Job as one of the play’s key sources.²⁴ The more educated members of the audience might have heard in Lear’s great speech “Come, let’s away to prison. / We two alone will sing like birds i’ th’ cage . . .” (24.8-19) echoes of the martyred priest Robert Southwell’s *An Epistle of Comfort*, written in 1587 and reprinted in 1605 to comfort those “*restrayned in durance for the Catholike Faith*” (t.p.). Southwell argued that to those who are God’s friends, “the prison is a Schoole of Divine and hidden misteries” (209) in which prisoners can perfect themselves in the same way that caged birds learn to sing more sweetly and variously: “in the Cage they not only sing their naturall note, both sweetlier and oftener then abroad, but learne also divers other, more pleasant, and delightsome” (197); meanwhile, those beyond the prison walls remain in captivity to the vain pursuit of wealth and power (212-13).²⁵ Gary Kuchar asks “But what effects would such allusions have for those with ears to hear?” (144) and correctly suggests that these might vary depending on the spectator’s pre-existing attitude towards the

traitor/martyr Southwell. He goes on to say that “For auditors who saw Southwell as a martyr of the true faith” it would be “astonishing” to hear his words in the mouth of the King of Britain (144). Whether or not this might be the reaction of Catholic spectators at the Globe, it would hardly be astonishing for the Simpsons’ audiences. It would simply be one more confirmation of their understanding of the play.

Many of these points have been made by previous critics in different critical contexts. Assembled together, they make a compelling argument for how the Simpsons and their audiences understood *King Lear*. For these Yorkshire Catholics, the 1608 Quarto of *King Lear* was not a fictional “Tragedy” but was what it declares itself to be on its title page, a “True Chronicle Historie” of Britain, a Britain they knew all too well. *King Lear*, no less than the other plays performed by the Simpsons, would have “evoked a response of shared approval and identification” in their audiences “that reinforced their solidarity and sense of oneness” (White 156).

If one asks how *King Lear* might have been staged by the Simpsons in order to make this Catholic interpretation more apparent, the simple answer would be that no modifications were required. Simply playing the text of the 1608 Quarto in a Catholic country house before a Catholic audience would be enough to release this powerful oppositional reading. If one wishes to speculate further, then perhaps the large cross, used in both the *St. Christopher* play and the interlude which accompanied it, might have been left visible throughout the action, linking these pagan characters to a commemoration of Christian (Catholic) martyrs (“And these same crosses spoil me” (24.274)). According to the actor Thomas Pant, the hermit in the *St. Christopher* play wore “a green cornered cap” (STAC 8/19/10:6), perhaps because (as Paul Whitfield White points out) green was the colour of Truth in medieval iconography (152n). Did Cordelia wear a green dress? The final scene, with Cordelia dead in Lear’s arms,

might have been deliberately staged to suggest the *Pietà* of the Virgin Mary with the dead Christ, a favourite piece of Catholic iconography.²⁶

Some particularly interesting questions about staging arise from the date on which the actor William Harrison said that *King Lear* and *Pericles* had been performed at Gowthwaite Hall. This was Candlemas (February 2), the Feast of the Purification of the Virgin Mary. Because the *St. Christopher* play and the seditious interlude were alleged to have been performed during the Christmas holiday season (the exact date being unclear), some scholars have assumed that this must have been during the twelve days of Christmas and that therefore the performances of *King Lear* and *Pericles* must have been on a second visit to Gowthwaite Hall (we know that the Simpsons performed for Sir John Yorke on several different holiday occasions over the years). However, in his testimony (as reported by William Symonds), the actor Thomas Pant glosses “Christmas 1609” as “in the season between Christmas and Candlemas, all this time being accounted Christmas in the Country” (STAC 8/19/10:1), so it is probable that there was only one visit to Gowthwaite Hall during this winter tour and that several plays were performed around Candlemas.²⁷

A performance of *King Lear* at Candlemas would have a special resonance. Not only would the customary procession with lighted candles serve as a further commemoration of the English Catholic martyrs but it was on the Feast of Candlemas that Anne Line had been arrested nine years earlier when she had been helping the priest to prepare the additional candles for the Mass. One should not make too much of this, because one should imagine *King Lear* being played on a number of different dates in many different locations on this winter tour in Yorkshire but perhaps this performance was “special” in a number of ways. If it was followed, either on the same day or the next day, by a performance of *Pericles*, then the familiar liturgical rhythm of death followed by resurrection, despair followed by hope,

would have been maintained. The “promised end” is converted from an image of desolate horror to “this great miracle”. “The worst returns to laughter” (15.6).

The questions of staging are inevitably speculative but the textual evidence that would support a Catholic reading of the play is clear enough. As Richard Dutton wrote, when commenting sardonically on Stephen Greenblatt’s apparent surprise that someone in Stuart Yorkshire saw the play as “strangely sympathetic . . . to the situation of persecuted Catholics” (Greenblatt 122): “If those recusants in Yorkshire were off-message about *King Lear*, the text gave them good reason to be” (Dutton 19). Is this a “strong misreading”, a good example of “the importance of localization for defining parameters of meaning” (Marcus 158), with no more privilege than the many different readings put forward by modern critics? Or does its proximity to the time of the play’s composition give it extra authority, increasing the possibility of a genuine “fusion of horizons”? It is unlikely that Shakespeare imagined *King Lear* would end up being performed by this particular group of Catholic players but, at the very least, he must have been aware that his play *could* be interpreted in this way. No doubt his primary concern, as always, would be to fashion a play which would be commercially successful when played before a (mainly Protestant) public-theatre audience, whilst keeping an eye open to the possibility of court performance or the intervention of the censor. However, his “horizon of expectations” would include an awareness that a substantial minority of the Globe audience would have been Catholics or “church papists” and there would have been Catholic nobility, such as the Earl of Worcester, present at any Court performance.²⁸ They might have seen additional significance in a performance of the play on the feast of St. Stephen, the first martyr. If Finnis and Martin are correct in their decoding of “The Phoenix and Turtle” as a commemoration of the recently hanged Anne Line and her husband (see note 20), then one would want to argue further that the Catholic meaning of *King Lear* was an important one for Shakespeare himself.

Is the bleakness and cruelty of the *Lear* world too extreme to be easily recognisable as a picture of the sufferings of English Catholics at a particular moment in history? After all, it was not actually illegal to be a Catholic, provided one attended Church-of-England services, took Communion occasionally, and had no contact with Catholic priests. And what particular historical moment are we talking about? Is it 1605 (before the Gunpowder Plot), 1606 (after the Gunpowder Plot), 1608 (when the Quarto was printed), or 1609-10 (when the play was performed in Yorkshire)? Or are we really talking about the previous three or four decades of persecution, since the tortures and executions of Catholics were much more frequent under Elizabeth than under James (“We that are young / Shall never see so much” (24.320-21))?²⁹ If, as I believe, the play was written in 1605 before the Gunpowder Plot and the Quarto does not contain subsequent revisions, then the appropriate response would be Edgar’s “The worst is not / As long as we can say ‘This is the worst.’ ” (15.25-6). If things were grim before November 1605, they soon became a lot grimmer.

We have plenty of contemporary testimony from Catholics which would endorse the picture of the British kingdom found in *King Lear*. In March 1605 Father Richard Blount wrote that “Catholics are in most miserable state: the persecution by many degrees passing all former times” (quoted in Morris 196). In December 1605 Luisa de Carvajal, the Spanish woman who came to London as a kind of missionary after the conclusion of the peace with Spain, described England in language reminiscent of *Lear* as “a dense wilderness full of savage beasts” (1: 106). In another letter in early 1606 she wrote:

Things are critical. What these Catholics are having to go through in terms of loss of life, blood, happiness and wealth, is too much to bear, being incessant calamities no less than the theft of their possessions with death at every turn, be it at noon or dinnertime. They fear that the present hostility and threats will end in death or exile for them all. (1: 139)

Whatever Shakespeare's personal beliefs might have been at this point in his life, he was able to channel feelings like this because he was intimately connected with a number of Catholics and knew what they were experiencing. His friend Ben Jonson, who had been a Catholic since 1598, had been called before the Privy Council and accused by the Earl of Northampton of "popperie [sic] and treason" (Jonson 141). Hamnet and Judith Sadler, the godparents of his twin children and lifelong friends, were to appear on a Stratford list of those not taking Communion on Easter Sunday 1606, a census point designed to flush out Catholics in the aftermath of the Gunpowder Plot. Since Hamnet Sadler pleaded for more time to "cleanse his conscience" (Honan 30), there is not the slightest doubt that their failure to take Communion was a form of religious resistance. Shakespeare's eldest daughter Susanna also appears on the same list and it would be natural to infer that this is for similar reasons. Margaret Reynolds, whose son William, like Hamnet Sadler, was remembered in Shakespeare's will and who may have been Shakespeare's godson, also appears on the 1606 list. She and her husband Thomas had previously appeared on the 1592 list of those not attending church, the list on which Shakespeare's father is also named.³⁰

For many of Shakespeare's contemporaries, including some personally close to Shakespeare himself, *King Lear* would be easily readable not as a vision of a Godless, meaningless universe but as a powerful expression of the agony of England's beleaguered Catholic community. The play's brutal shock ending, particularly shocking for those familiar with other versions of the story in which Lear's kingdom is restored to him and Cordelia lives, perhaps required a less radical revision of expectations for Catholic audiences. Alfred Thomas drew attention to the mass hangings which followed the suppression of the Northern Rising in 1569 and concluded:

In witnessing Cordelia's lifeless body on stage with a noose around her neck and her dead father holding her in his arms, the recusants of Nidderdale might have been

mindful of the similar fate of their family members and coreligionists in the ruthless world of Tudor absolutism, not a world from which God had absconded, but rather one from which all human pity had been eradicated. (178)

This ending is certainly a challenge to narrow notions of what might provide suitable entertainment during the extended Christmas holiday season but Christians of all denominations (drawing on Jewish precedent) have repeatedly, and in intensely emotional ways, commemorated and lamented the suffering and deaths of innocents (whether of the many martyrs or of Jesus himself) as a means of strengthening their communal religious identity, because “in the Christian world-view, festivity is inseparable from suffering” (Shell 91). If Shakespeare’s normal Globe audiences “would not have found profound suffering and pervasive evil to be proof of a Godless world” (Young 255), this would have been doubly true for the Simpsons’ mainly Catholic audiences. There is, on reflection, nothing at all odd in *King Lear* being selected by a group of Yorkshire Catholic actors for performance in Catholic country houses during the Christmas season, creating, as Phebe Jensen puts it, “the kind of communal recusant experience difficult to attain in Jacobean England” (“Recusancy” 111).

The religious interpretation of *King Lear* dominant since the 1960s sees the most significant lines in the play as: “As flies to wanton boys are we to th’ gods; / They kill us for their sport” (15.35-6). For these Yorkshire Catholics, and the Catholics in Shakespeare’s Globe audiences and at Court, the most resonant lines would probably have been: “Nothing almost sees miracles / But misery” (7.159-60). Only in the depths of misery and despair does one normally have any chance of seeing a miracle. However, a characteristic Shakespearean ambiguity – does “almost” modify “Nothing” or “sees”? – means that even then one might only “almost” see a miracle, as Lear in the revised Folio text “almost” sees the miracle of

Cordelia's revival: "Do you see this? Look on her. Look, her lips. / Look there, look there" (5.3.286-7).

There are many essays or even whole books, such as those by William R. Elton and Judy Kronenfeld, which discuss the religious meaning of *King Lear* but make no mention whatsoever of the performance at Gowthwaite Hall. A typical recent example is David Loewenstein's "Agnostic Shakespeare?: the godless world of *King Lear*" which offers a polished restatement of some of the arguments put forward by Elton and concludes that *King Lear* depicts "a meaningless and hostile universe" (156), yet sees no need to mention the performances by the Simpsons and what these might imply. In the 1960s Jan Kott and Elton displaced the "redemption through suffering" narrative, favoured by A. C. Bradley and Wilson Knight, with their versions of the "meaningless and hostile universe" argument. More than fifty years later, it is time to approach the religious, political, and philosophical significance of *King Lear* in a way which takes proper account of how at least some of Shakespeare's contemporaries would have read the play, allowing it to unfold more of the continuously evolving history of its "potential for meaning".

Since, as Richard Dutton wrote, this Catholic "misreading" finds considerable support from the text, how do we want to explain this? The blandest way would be to exclaim once again how remarkable it is that everyone can find whatever meaning they want to find in Shakespeare. This is certainly an appropriate response to many modern critical interpretations but more historically framed readings are much more constrained in their range of possibilities. A straightforward explanation is the one which has already been aired in this essay. Shakespeare was a writer of very ample sympathies. He was personally close to a number of Catholics and could empathise strongly with their predicament and channel some of their feelings into *King Lear* (while doing a lot of other things with the play at the same time), just as he could empathise with the situation of women, Jews, and foreign refugees. To

argue any further than that, one would need to go beyond the text of the 1608 Quarto and look again at other pieces of literary and biographical evidence, of which “The Phoenix and Turtle” might be one of the most significant.

Notes

¹ For an insight into arguments between seventeenth-century Catholics about whether going to the theatre was a proper activity, see I. J. Semper. Frank W. Brownlow, in a detailed examination of this allusion to *King Lear*, argues: “The *point* of the comparison is the unlikeness of the two works’ techniques: the author of ‘King Liere’ has painted a feigned passion and *taught* his pen to weep, whereas the author of *The Life* has narrated intensely moving, real events in a plain style. The *basis* of the comparison, however, is the two works’ similarity of content. Lear’s divided kingdom was a country familiar to Elizabethan Catholics” (“A Jesuit Allusion” 420). Brownlow goes on to give some very good reasons why descriptions of Gennings’ execution might have reminded the Jesuit author of *The Life* of Shakespeare’s play. The priest’s host, Swithin Wells, who was executed alongside him was an old, white-haired man, who was forced to stand shivering in his shirt while waiting to be hanged. Gennings himself, in contrast, was a very young man who had been mocked at his trial by being forced to wear a fool’s coat instead of his own clothes (421). Since, according to Stanley Wells, “There is reason to suspect that Shakespeare had been thinking about dramatizing the story of King Lear for many years before he started to write it” (15), one has to wonder if these images (witnessed at first-hand or learnt of by report) were not already beginning to influence Shakespeare’s thoughts of how he might rework the old *King Leir*, which was being performed in London around the same time.

² See also the books by Christopher Howard and Hugh Aveling. When the Records of Early English Drama volumes for the North and West Ridings of Yorkshire are eventually published, an even clearer picture of the Simpsons and their activities will emerge.

³ See also Masahiro Takenaka. Frank W. Brownlow has said little directly about the Simpsons but his research into some of the religious and political contexts within which *King Lear* was written, performed, and understood has been invaluable. See *Shakespeare, Harsnett and the Devils of Denham*, “Richard Topcliffe”, and “A Jesuit Allusion”.

⁴ See, for example, the editions by Kenneth Muir (1952; revised 1972), G. K. Hunter (1972), Jay L. Halio (1992), R. A. Foakes (1997), Stanley Wells (2000), and Grace Ioppolo (2008). A crude measure of the lack of interest of most critics in exploring the implications of the Simpsons’ performances for our understanding of *King Lear* and *Pericles* is the fact that *Shakespeare Survey: A Sixty-Year Cumulative Index* (2009) contains not a single entry relating to the Simpsons or the Gowthwaite Hall performance, despite one of the volumes indexed being primarily concerned with “*King Lear* and its Afterlife” and another with “Shakespeare and Religions”. There is likewise no mention of the Simpsons and their performances in the very substantial anthology of modern criticism on *King Lear* edited by Jeffrey Kahan. The “turn to religion” in Shakespeare studies has resulted in several recent collections of sophisticated and historically well-informed essays edited by Ewan Fernie; Ken Jackson and Arthur F. Marotti; David Loewenstein and Michael Witmore; and Hannibal Hamlin. None of these volumes has a single reference to the performances of *Pericles* and *King Lear* by Yorkshire recusants and what this might imply about the plays.

⁵ In this period the Christmas holiday season could extend as far as Candlemas (February 2), the date on which *King Lear* and *Pericles* were said to have been performed at Gowthwaite Hall. Presumably both plays were in the Simpsons’ repertory for the whole of the Christmas season.

⁶ Jauss takes the concept of a “fusion of horizons” from Hans-Georg Gadamer’s classic of hermeneutic theory, *Truth and Method* (1960).

⁷ According to Proctor, again reporting on what he had been told by someone else, there was a similar response to the defeat of the Church-of-England minister when the interlude was played a few days later at another Catholic house: “thereat all the people greatlie laughed and rejoiced a longe time together” (STAC 8/19/10: 19).

⁸ This is what Siobhan Keenan wants to argue: “the Simpsons’ choices were as likely to be based on the apparent quality of the original performing company, the currency of the plays . . . and, possibly in Shakespeare’s case, the fame of the author, especially in print” (Keenan, “The Simpson Players”, 26). She continues by saying: “The fact that not all of their fellow players were recusants and that Protestants as well as Catholics chose to play host to them tends to confirm that the Simpsons were seen by many of their peers as players or entertainers first, and as recusants and possible Catholic propagandists second” (31).

⁹ Scenes 5, 12 and 13 in Anthony Parr’s edition. As part of their endorsement of David J. Lake’s arguments for Wilkins’ co-authorship of *Pericles*, both MacDonald P. Jackson and Brian Vickers accept the allocation of sections in *The Travels* to Wilkins which Lake made in “Rhymes in *Pericles*” (142n). See Jackson (245n) and Vickers (319).

¹⁰ In his recent biographical essay on Wilkins, Duncan Salkeld makes no mention of the possibility that Wilkins might have had Catholic sympathies.

¹¹ See, for instance, the section on “*Pericles* and the Miracle Play” in Hoeniger (lxxxviii-xci); also Wasson, Womack, and Dean.

¹² After pointing out the many close formal resemblances between secular romantic dramas and saints’ plays, Peter Womack concluded: “It is easy to imagine, then, how Sir John Yorke’s Christmas guests, watching *St. Christopher* one night and *Pericles* the next, could have felt themselves to be in the same dramatic world” (184).

¹³ A recently discovered copy of the First Folio also seems to have belonged from an early date (perhaps around 1630) to the College at Saint-Omer (see Jan Graffius).

¹⁴ Milward goes on to conclude that *King Lear* “is also (to my mind) the play that comes closest to giving full expression to the dramatist’s tragic reflections on the plight of the Catholic recusants in England” (96-7).

¹⁵ Richard Wilson’s important chapter in *Secret Shakespeare* on the Gowthwaite Hall episode (“A Winter’s Tale: *King Lear* in the Pennines”, 271-93) is mainly concerned with tracing the Catholic networks which linked Yorkshire to the London theatre, the Midlands, and the Gunpowder Plot, and with discussing the significance of the Folio revisions (including the reduction of references to foreign invasion) which Wilson believes may be connected with the unwelcome publicity generated by the Gowthwaite performance. He spends comparatively little time reconstructing a likely Catholic response to the 1608 text, perhaps believing that it is self-evident that it is “a work about the ruin of Catholic England” (287). He adds some further details which would support a Catholic reading of the play in *Worldly Shakespeare* 135-8.

¹⁶ Arrell’s main argument is that the other plays known to have been performed by the Simpsons have an “old-fashioned” appeal (whether or not they were recent London plays), so that “In its conventional piety, providential structure, straightforward storytelling, and Catholic overlay, *Leir* is much more like the other plays in their repertoire than is *Lear*” (91). He clearly believes that Shakespeare’s *Lear* was too sophisticated for this experienced group of travelling players and their audiences, though we know of both *Hamlet* and *Richard II* being performed in 1607 by sailors on board a ship anchored off the West Coast of Africa (Thompson and Taylor 53-55).

¹⁷ These points indicate to me that Shakespeare's play was probably performed in early 1605 before *King Lear* was printed but the relative order of these events and the precise dating of *King Lear* is not relevant to my overall argument.

¹⁸ Greenblatt himself recognised, at any rate after he had seen the galley proofs of John L. Murphy's *Darkness and Devils*, that the performances of *King Lear* by the Simpsons were something of a (surprising, to him) challenge to his overall argument: "It is difficult to resist the conclusion that someone in Stuart Yorkshire believed that *King Lear*, despite its apparent staging of a fraudulent possession, was not hostile, was strangely sympathetic even, to the situation of persecuted Catholics" (122). However, he does not allow this concession to disrupt his argument about the staging of "evacuated rituals, drained of their original meaning" (127) because, despite his evident interest in early modern religious beliefs, "he does not really take religious culture seriously, but rather approaches it as a cabinet of curiosities" (Jackson and Marotti, "The Turn to Religion" 175).

¹⁹ Catholic priests were always executed as traitors rather than heretics and those who hid them were charged with the felony of misprision (concealment) of treason, which is what Gloucester is accused of.

²⁰ The importance of these formal Oaths for Shakespeare's writing is brilliantly addressed by John Kerrigan (367-418). Sir John Yorke held out until 1617 before taking the Oath of Allegiance. When Cordelia does say more than "nothing" and proclaims "I love your majesty / According to my bond, nor more nor less" (1.84-85), she is saying what a loyal Catholic would say to Elizabeth or James: I owe my sovereign a duty both of love and obedience but this duty has limits. It cannot cause me to act against my conscience or beliefs.

²¹ I have not seen a convincing rebuttal of the very detailed case made by Finnis and Martin which, if accepted, would completely reset the debate about Shakespeare's possible Catholic sympathies. In their Introduction to the Arden 3 edition of *Shakespeare's Poems*, Katherine

Duncan-Jones and H. R. Woudhuysen are very dismissive of the Finnis and Martin essay but they don't engage with the specific details which make the argument persuasive. They make the valid point that Finnis and Martin don't give sufficient consideration to the context in which "The Phoenix and Turtle" was published, in a section at the end of Robert Chester's *Love's Martyr* (1601) as one of a number of "Poeticall Essaies . . . *Done by the best and chieftest of our modern writers . . . And (now first) consecrated by them all generally, to the love and merite of the true-noble Knight, Sir John Salisburie*". They include in their edition a useful facsimile (535-45) of this section of *Love's Martyr* and give a splendid account of the political motives behind the production of the whole volume but fail to recognize that Shakespeare's motives were not necessarily aligned with these and that the poem's calculated obscurity of meaning meant that the discrepancy would not be noticed. When Duncan-Jones and Woudhuysen write "it is highly unlikely that any poem publicly dedicated to Sir John Salusbury could express Roman Catholic sympathies, since Salusbury himself was determined . . . to be recognized as a loyal and conforming subject of the queen" (93-4), they seem to forget that one of the other invited contributors, Ben Jonson, was a Catholic at this point and that Shakespeare's poem could hardly be said to be openly expressing "Roman Catholic sympathies", since, as they say, "even the most brilliant of Shakespeare's contemporaries [John Donne, who alludes to the poem in "The Canonization"], with possible access to inside knowledge, seems to have viewed these poems as cryptic" (119). Whatever the commission from Sir John Salusbury or Robert Chester originally specified, "What does seem clear is that Shakespeare wrote about what he chose to write about, in the way that he wanted to write it" (Everett 13-14). Finnis and Martin's argument would be further strengthened if the "Mistress Line" addressed jokingly to a line tree (or clothes line) by Stephano in the "trumpery" scene of *The Tempest* is indeed an allusion to Anne Line, as is argued by both Dodwell (122-6) and Wilson (*Secret* 201).

²² The whole letter is reprinted in Miola (131-35).

²³ We know from a 1615 letter by the Archbishop of Canterbury, George Abbot, to Sir Ralph Winwood (quoted in Howard p.62, n.7) that Robert Winter's children (John, Helena, and Mary) were brought up after their father's death in the household of their great uncle (and Sir John Yorke's uncle), Sir William Ingleby. When the Star Chamber investigation got fully under way in the autumn of 1611, Sir William was taken to London along with Sir John, which makes it likely that he and other members of his household were present when the "seditious interlude" was staged. His nephew, Thomas Ingleby, was listed as one of the defendants in the Star Chamber case against Sir John Yorke (STAC 8/19/10: 132).

²⁴ See Hannibal Hamlin's excellent essay "The Patience of Lear", which nevertheless ignores the possible Catholic perspective and leaves the play in an uncertain zone between Calvinist faith and religious scepticism.

²⁵ Brownlow drew attention to these echoes in Lear's speech in *Shakespeare, Harsnett* 129-31.

²⁶ See Goodland; De Grazia (148-52). In her Introduction to the Arden 3 edition of *Pericles*, Suzanne Gossett offers one or two speculations about how *Pericles* might have been modified by the Simpsons "to promote a Catholic interpretation": "A protective angel standing behind Marina during her interview with Lysimachus in the brothel is all that would be necessary to create a providential view of the contest and to point Marina's similarity to female saints and martyrs" (88).

²⁷ It is also possible that only the *St. Christopher* play and the seditious interlude were performed at Gowthwaite Hall and that Harrison's claim that *King Lear* and *Pericles* were played there was a diversionary tactic. However, there seems no reason to doubt that *King Lear* and *Pericles* formed part of the Simpsons' repertory and would have been played before mainly Catholic audiences at other households on their winter tour.

²⁸ “As a corrective to the view that the Jacobean playhouses were ostracized by Catholics, we have the testimony of Father Leke that Catholics, both laics and clerics, were among the spectators: ‘We knowe that most of the principal Catholicks about London doe goe to playes . . .’ ” (Semper 46).

²⁹ Brownlow in “Richard Topcliffe” thinks the play should be seen as looking back to the reign of Elizabeth as much as, or more than, commenting on the Jacobean present: “Even the misery of the people of Lear’s Britain, evoked in powerful speeches by both Lear and Gloucester, has its place in the play’s field of retrospective reference, since the sufferings of the English under the Elizabethan government were a constant theme of contemporary Catholic writing” (171). If Elizabethan England is the real focus, this might explain why, in a play about ancient Britain, the word “Britain” is never heard (Milward 55). For a more general argument that many “Jacobean” tragedies are really addressing the crises and discontents of the previous reign, see Wymer.

³⁰ Those who resist the idea that John Shakespeare’s non-attendance at church was religiously motivated point out that he was listed among those who “coom not to Church for feare of processe for Debtte” (Honan 39). However, the most recent analysis of John Shakespeare’s finances concludes that, despite some fluctuations, he was never badly off and that the Shakespeare family fortunes owed more to his business acumen than to his son’s theatrical activities (Fallow 26-39).

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