

***English Catholicism: A Trage-Comedy: An Anonymous Work of Catholic Controversy.*¹**

The genre of religious controversy is rarely commended for producing a rousing effect on the modern reader, and in 1968 Victor M. Hamm piquantly observed that ‘many Roman Catholic books and pamphlets appeared in England during Dryden’s lifetime’ but ‘the names of the men who wrote them are little known, and their works little read today, even by scholars’.²

BL Additional Manuscript 64124 is seemingly unknown today, but it is by no means a typical example of religious controversy and consequently its neglect is wholly undeserved. The MS consists of a familiar, domestic dialogue between Doxastes and Eidemon: brothers-in-law ‘neere allied by the femall side’ (EC 1). Of the pair it is the asinine Protestant Doxastes who plays the foil, whilst his opponent the Catholic Ediemon dominates proceedings as both protagonist and authorial mouthpiece. The text’s chief purpose (appearing as it did in the twilight of a century of controversy, and the shadow of a brutal civil war) was undoubtedly to revive and secure a Catholic community in ‘the nadir’³ of its fortunes.

English Catholicism goes about its task in two ways. Firstly it kicks against the perceived monotony of the tradition of controversy by adopting a refreshingly anti-scholastic method; mocking over-complicated religious proofs grounded in theology, philosophy and scripture. Such ‘Schoole Arguments’, Doxastes bewails, ‘turne my braine, and make my head more giddie then a gallon of sack’ (EC 249).

The alternative proposed by Eidemon in the dialogue is an egalitarian rule of faith derived from rationality and common sense, bolstered by recourse to literature or anecdote and featuring animals, country clowns, knights, and giants. He hopes to prove that ‘wise men hastily object difficulties, which every simpleton can as hastily answere’ (EC 160), to liberate such discourse from the studious wrangling of the few, and to open it to an ‘unlearned Reader’ in the hope that ‘one or two speculative points mixt with my mirth may perhaps amuse [...] and seeme a riddle to him’ (EC 5).

The second approach to reviving the Catholic community in the wake of the Civil War is a political manoeuvre which necessitates the disregarding of religious difference between the parties and the recognition instead of a more current political alliance: royalism. Both Eidemon and Doxastes were ‘once in the field together against the common Enemy of

¹ All future MS references will be integrated into the text and followed by the authorial pagination i.e. (EC 5). For notes on the dating, the hand, and the MS as a material object please see the descriptive bibliography. I would like to express my thanks to the staff of the British Library, David Colclough and the academics at CELL, who have all offered consistently invaluable help during this study

² Victor M. Hamm, ‘Dryden’s “The Hind and the Panther” and the Roman Catholic Apologetics’, *PMLA*, 83:2, (May, 1968), pp. 400-415, at p. 400.

³ John Bossy, *The English Catholic Community 1570-1850* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1975), p. 283.

Royalty' (*EC* 186) and this bond in the wake of the Restoration allows Eidemon to beg a favour, that Doxastes 'speak a good word for us in due time and place: unbeguile the vulgar, when you heare lyes put upon us and our Religion' (*EC* 186).

Such rare characteristics make the MS an intriguing find. While contemporary texts that attempt to identify a rule of faith exempt from 'skill or Science acquir'd by Study'⁴ do exist, none I have come across similarly endeavour to match their prose style so vividly to their precepts. The manuscript is also unusual for allowing religion to be usurped by political events, rather than working to an inverse schema and reinterpreting political events as indicators of wider religious significance. As such it becomes a significant text for any study of the troubled patriotism and allegiance between king, country and faith in the 1670s.

A note on dating

For the most part the author takes pains to extricate the action from references to contemporary figures and events, however, towards the conclusion some reference is made to moments of historical significance. The latest convincingly datable reference within the text is to the restoration of the King (*EC* 224), putting the MS *a quo* 1660. Internally, the use of the term 'peculation' (*EC* 57) also dates the manuscript to 1658 or later – the year the *OED* finds its first usage in Edward Philips' *New World of English Words*.⁵ This neat cluster sits comfortably with the MS catalogue's account of the watermarks, which it describes as 'the same general type as Heawood nos. 3675-3695 (dated to between 1657 and *circa* 1680)'.⁶

Providing an accurate *ad quem* date is less straightforward. Chapter eighteen deals with the claim that the 'English Catholic' subject is a paradoxical antithesis, due to Jesuits, the powder plot, and the ambivalent attitude harboured by many Catholics towards swearing the oath of allegiance. However, the text makes no mention of the Test Acts imposed in 1673 and 1678. It seems likely that in the chapter referring to subjecthood, the author would have discussed and criticised such an act, had it been implemented at the time. This suggests that the MS precedes the new oath. There is also a brief mention of the Fifth Monarchy Men⁷ in the manuscript, anxiously referred to in the present tense ('who *are* the deadly Enemies of kings and princes, yea of all Magistracy' (*EC* 171)) suggesting their threat is still considered a viable and potent one. Based on this fact it would seem logical to date the MS to before 1666, the year when the millenarian prophesy claiming the rule of man would be

⁴ John Sergeant, *Sure-footing in Christianity, or Rational discourses on the rule of faith* (London, 1665), sig. B3r-v, would be just one example.

⁵ Edward Philips, *New World of English Words: Or, a general dictionary* (London, 1658).

⁶ The watermark is a typical pot containing the initials 'O' and 'I', and with at least one arm. It is surmounted by five lobes, and topped with a fleur-de-lys. I have checked this against Heawood and it is indeed of the same general type.

⁷ A term first used in 1657. *OED*.

supplanted by the returning Christ and his Kingdom failed to transpire. It was also in this year that the faction began to decline. Rogers notes that 1666 marked 'dissentions within the sect about policy' as well as 'the increasing weakness and disarray of the Fifth Monarchy Men'.⁸ The final clue that suggests the text is unlikely to be datable to later than 1666 is its irenic tone. Thomas H. Clancy explains that 'many such [irenic] pleas from Catholic [...] sources were published in the 1640s, 50s, and early 60s'.⁹

I would, therefore, certainly place *English Catholicism a quo* 1660, and tentatively suggest an *ad quem* of 1666. This sets the manuscript in a period when England was still astonished by the Civil War and living in fear of 'a new sounding of trumpetts, beating of Drums and shedding of civill bloud' (*EC* 165-6). An exclusion crisis, or bloodless revolution, were clearly not prospects the author had yet considered.¹⁰

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⁸ P. G. Rogers, *The Fifth Monarchy Men* (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 130.

⁹ Thomas H. Clancy, 'Ecumenism and Irenics in 17th-Century English Catholic Apologetics', *Theological Studies*, vol. 58, (1997), pp. 85-89, at p. 86.

¹⁰ Despite the relative certainty with dating the MS, the text holds some mysteries my investigation has been unable to cast light upon. Internal evidence confirms the author to be a well-read Catholic gentleman, with some Latin and a little Greek. He appears to have travelled within Europe, and to have fought (with considerable pride) on the side of the King during the Civil War. However the MS retains its anonymity, and lacks any clues that could point to a geographical location. The greatest chance for discovering further information lies in the three young girls' names inscribed on the first leaf of the text.