PART TWO

THE LOYAL ENGLISHMAN
Figure 2. Frontispiece to Thomas Middleton (1624) *A Game at Chesse*, London. Reproduced with the kind permission of the British Library.
CHAPTER FOUR

THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN ANTI-CATHOLIC NARRATIVE

It is the contention of one recent historian on the subject that nations, nationalism and religion are so ‘intimately linked’ that it is impossible to write the history of the one without considering the others.¹ Certainly, religious culture has informed the development of a sense of English national consciousness, particularly since the Reformation. The story of the main legislative acts of reformation from the Act of Supremacy in 1534 to the Elizabethan settlement of 1559 is easily told; of greater complexity is the question of shifting mentalités from then onwards. The abrupt termination of the relationship with Rome presented England with the opportunity, at times an alarming one, of re-imagining its identity in terms of both past and present. It makes intuitive sense to say that when people no longer identified themselves with a visible supranational entity, new primacy would be accorded to national bonds. The immediate authority replaced one laying claim to geographical and spiritual transcendence. Whereas before, England was, to a greater or lesser extent, bound up in the webs of connection traversing Catholic Christendom, now a virtue would be made out of the fact of not appealing to external authority but rather of looking within for answers. Constructing a new identity was, however, a very precarious endeavour in the early decades of rupture partly because of the relatively conservative nature of much of the change and partly also because a change higher up could mean reconverting again, as Mary’s short-lived experiment had intimated. But from 1559 onwards, the mould was more securely Protestant and Erastian, and so the task began in earnest of an intellectual ‘stripping of the altars’, to correspond to the actual one as described by Eamon Duffy.²

What form did this take? Protestantism was too divided to generate any but a negative unity of sentiment that lay in the alienation of the Catholic other. The idea evolved that there was an out-and-out incompatibility between being English and being Catholic, not merely in theological ways but in political, social, and cultural ways too. Essentially, the threefold loyalty proper to an Englishman was problematic – or missing – in their

regard. This threefold loyalty involved their relationship to the monarch, to the country and to their own national nature, to themselves. This last point has been least considered and yet it is just as important as the sources will reveal. In many ways, it is the most basic of all. One monarch would succeed another: integrity to self was a constant. In this triple bond of loyalty, the Roman Catholic population, about 1–2% of the total, were seriously compromised. As regards the person of the monarch, the allegiance proper to a subject was complicated in their case by allegiance to the See of Rome, an allegiance not merely ultramontane, but also beyond the sea. The ambiguity of their position was not aided by the flurry of theory about the nature and extent of the Pope's temporal power, especially his power to depose princes, which the Reformation had made so sensitive a matter and which the 1570 Bull of Excommunication brought home with alarming immediacy.

As regards the country itself, there were doubts about Catholics’ commitment to the integrity of the land, given their concourse with powerful co-religionists on the continent, doubts which leapt into conviction with every mention of plot or invasion. In a society where having a stake in the land mattered beyond anything, their ‘stake’ was abroad, and thus deeply problematic. Lastly, they were going to be depicted as untrue to their nature, to their heart. The affective and what we may call an ‘organic’ reflection on identity will be particularly prominent here. They were thought not to value freedom, to be leaky vessels of national integrity, to be ‘players’ of villainous roles, to lack plain-dealing, to have, in short, defective identities. There is a fabulously tortured idiom that is constructed around this, involving (and often inventing) such ‘deformed’ and twisted words as Jesuited, Hispaniolated, Spaniolised, ubiquitary, Romaniste, and popeling: in short, a vocabulary which made English Catholics out to be very ambiguous creatures indeed, even when texts sought to address them and win them back.

As this discourse was particularly extreme and very often, pointedly venomous, it is altogether unsurprising that there was a measure of protestation and contestation. That said, it took Catholics a while to muster their polemical forces and fight back on similar grounds but in the early 1600s, there are some strong statements from both lay Catholics and clerics which insist on the compatibility between their religion and their nationality. Their attempt to reclaim lost ground may well have been doomed to failure, which is why they are not often seriously considered in this light by historians, but it is nonetheless important, I would argue, in fracturing the straight-line of the dominant narrative. It is, in effect,
a deliberate counterpoint to the prevalent rhetoric. Apart from prevalent Protestant attitudes, the other main problem for Catholics eager to reassert their national credentials was that not all of them thought it necessary to do so. This means that the narrative does not just take in Protestant anti-Catholic discourse, but Catholic anti-Jesuit discourse too. Amongst Jesuit polemicists, the issues at stake remained primarily theological: not only did they not become involved in arguing a ‘national’ case, but in the case of Robert Persons, there is a deliberate refutation of its logic, a refusal to see how it can have anything to do with genuine post-Reformation intellectual engagements. A clash was inevitable.

Historians have been generally sensitive to the construction of English identity around an anti-Catholic, anti-Jesuit axis. Usually foregrounded in this story are the events – the plots, the penal legislation, the directives from Rome, the various missions and marriages, the grand routs and notable executions. Scholars have, in particular, explored the apocalyptic nature of the discourse as exemplified classically in John Foxe’s celebrated Acts and Monuments although, as Anthony Milton has recently pointed out, an ‘apocalyptic schema’ like Foxe’s ‘tended to be focused on church rather than nation’. Remarkable though they are, these are all in the background of this story – not because I consider them of less importance but partly because the subject has been well-traversed and even more appositely, the focus for an intellectual history of anti-Catholicism and Englishness must lie rather in investigating the process by which this was internalised and the rhetoric in which it was expressed. Some scholars indeed including Carol Weiner, Peter Lake and Arthur Marotti, have probed the underlying structure of the prejudice more thoroughly although we still need to do more to uncover the nature of this in full.

It is important, however, to mark a caveat at the outset. This is only one of the stories it is possible to tell about Catholicism in the period. Recently, Milton among others, have nuanced the Manichean view and detailed

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3 Established accounts of this community in early-modern England include Bossy 1975 on the transformation from majority faith to religious minority; Holmes 1982 on the play between resistance to and compromise with the state; Pritchard 1979 on Catholic loyalism in the Elizabethan era; Havran 1962 on Catholics in the Caroline period and Shagan 2005 on their identity within the Protestant nation.
4 The story of sixteenth-century elect nationhood as propounded in Haller 1963 has become faded of late, as Milton 1995, p. 409 points out.
5 The three essays which do most to uncover the gradual identification of Roman Catholicism with foreignness are Weiner 1971, pp. 27–62 (based on Weiner 1968, unpublished PhD); Lake 1989, pp. 72–106 who probes beneath the surface hysteria to look at the structure of anti-Papist prejudice; and Marotti 1999, pp. 1–34 who gives an account of how Catholic women and Jesuits were alienated.
a story of practical and theoretical compromise: especially in the Stuart period, opposition was 'only one of the ways in which Catholicism was perceived'.\(^6\) It would be unjust to see the matter as black and white. In more reasonable moments, there was a distinction drawn between the English lay Catholics who were ‘quiet and well-minded men, peacable subjects’ and the ‘factious stirrers of sedition and perturbers of the commonwealth’: thus James I in the opening speech of his first parliament.\(^7\) Moreover, any story of prejudice must recognise the fact that, so far from shrivelling into nothing, the Catholic community in England actually increased in this period. So the increasing prevalence of a hostile discourse does not correlate with the growth of anti-Catholic persecutions.\(^8\) And yet, even with these caveats in mind, the construction of Englishness around anti-Catholicism and anti-Jesuitism remains an extremely powerful narrative for the period, and that for three reasons. First, it must of necessity be a national story rather than a parochial one because of its inevitably international dimensions. This makes it from the start a transcendent kind of discourse. It is never merely about the heartily-disliked or readily-tolerated Catholic neighbour, about the gentry family who are known to hide a priest in their home or the wife who defies her husband by going to mass. These may irk, but the matter inevitably involves vaster European-wide interests and conflicts. It is hardly an overstatement to assert that it is heady religious geopolitics, namely the confrontations with the Catholic Spaniards and the French, which determine the force and pervasiveness of this way of thinking.

The second reason for its primacy is that it proves to be a very plastic discourse which absorbs multiple resonances with extreme facility. The discourse quickly draws to itself potent ideas about freedom, manliness, and plainness so that to be Catholic is to be considered lacking in all of these things. Three things follow from this. First, there is once again an obvious effort to ‘construe’ the image of the true Englishman by reflecting upon what he is not. It is a discourse which exploits set typologies for its own deeply polemical and partisan ends. Second, it is never a purely ‘religious’ discourse if what one means by religion is something fairly narrowly restrictive. No moral, cultural and political questions are aloof from

\(^6\) Milton 1999, p. 86. See also Milton 1995 for his nuanced account of Roman and Protestant churches in English Protestant thought from 1600 to 40. Anti-popery, which was once a focus of unity, eventually became ‘a channel through which the churches’ own internal conflicts found expression’ (p. 92).

\(^7\) *Constitutional Documents of the Reign of James I*, p. 29.

its reach. Third, it proves so good at absorbing resonances that by the 1640s, the discourse itself loses some of its particularity: it becomes shorthand for any hated quality or group in society, an eminently available lingua franca.

The final reason for the potency of this strand of thinking is that it depends as much, or more on the power of the imaginary as it does on hard facts. Although it does undoubtedly feed off events that have actually happened, a substantial portion of it feeds off speculation about what might happen. In the minds of polemicists eager to show that the more Papist one was, the less true an Englishman, Spanish invasions were invariably imminent, Catholic dynasticism a constant fear, Jesuitical assassins always waiting to strike. The very possibility of degeneration, as they would have put it, exercised a powerful hold over many of the interpretations to be considered. So even if in practice there was compromise, and a greater or lesser acceptance of one’s Catholic neighbours, nothing could overcome a deep-seated fear of what was felt to be imminent threat. Babylon was ever at the gates.