CHAPTER FIVE

THE ESTRANGEMENT OF ENGLISH CATHOLICS

CONSTRUCTING A PLAIN, PROTESTANT AND UN-FRENCH UTOPIA

The year that we take up the threads of the story, 1559, saw the publication of one of the defining political works of the Elizabethan reign, John Aylmer’s *An harborovve for faithfull and trevve subiectes against the late blowne blaste*. Aylmer, a Marian exile newly returned from Zürich where he had helped John Foxe prepare the Latin version of the *Acts and Monuments*, threw himself into defending Elizabeth’s God-given right to rule against the celebrated objections to feminine rule as raised by John Knox.¹ This is the way *An harborovve* has been conventionally studied, but it also worth investigating what it has to say about post-Reformation identity. Commentators have often noted the importance of his statement to the effect that God Himself was English: it was the first explicit appropriation of the divinity to national ends and as such, the beginning of a more widespread complacency. Yet, that comment apart, it has not been realised just how deeply infused this treatise is with considerations of a national nature, and how important these are to the case he wants to make.²

Aylmer does helpfully give a definition of nature as ‘a general disposition ingraft of God in all creatures, for the preservation of the whole’.³ It is a conscious recall of Seneca. His musings on ‘howe farre you stretche this vworde nature’ have been seen correctly in the light of what he has to say about feminine rule. Yet there is no reason why it cannot also apply to his endorsement of a natural English disposition which was manly, anti-Catholic, and anti-French.⁴ Aylmer’s vision of Englishness is that of a promised (but endangered) land of plain, Protestant men immune to the attacks of ‘our aduerseries’ and ‘sworn enemies’ the Papists and, in particular, the blandishments of the papist French.⁵ Catholics are foreign by

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¹ Knox 1558 had actually targeted his work at Mary I, Mary of Guise and Mary of Hungary. Yet this was not how it came to be read. Elizabeth, who succeeded shortly after, took it as a personal affront.
² [Aylmer] 1559, sig. P4v. This statement is actually to be found on the margins.
⁴ [Aylmer] 1559, sig. D1r.
⁵ [Aylmer] 1559, sigs. K2r, A3r.
his own definition: a ‘man in his own country at home, if he be not of the household of faith is a stranger’ – an alien.\footnote{[Aylmer] 1559, sig. L4v.} The emphasis on France is understandable given the context of 1559. Mary Queen of Scots’ marriage to the Dauphin in 1558 constituted the culmination of the Auld Alliance between Scotland and France. Her husband’s sudden access to the French throne in 1559 as François II gave the English cause to fear for the future of the Reformation in Scotland, and by extension in England. Aylmer published \textit{An harborovve} months before this accession. His anti-Popery is thus inseparable from a robust anti-Gallicism. Moreover, as we shall see, the possibility of a Papist royal marriage for the new Queen is something that makes him profoundly anxious. Accordingly, one of the main things that he is seeking to do is establish in his readers a national sense of themselves: a sense of distinctiveness and indeed superiority. He wants them to consider themselves in a position apart: in the consciousness of aloofness will rest their security from danger. He does this, first of all, by emphasising the providential blessedness of a state and people so constituted as they are. In a highly lyrical passage, he starts off by lamenting popular ignorance: ‘Oh England, England, thou knowest not thine own welth’ and he ends with the exhortation to bless God for having being ‘born an English man, and not a french pesant, nor an Italyan, nor Almanac’.\footnote{[Aylmer] 1559, sigs. P3r, P4r.}

The blessedness consists in the enjoyment of a \textit{via media}, which is composed of practical goods like the protection of a wise government, plentiful plainness, wholesome food and adequate clothing. Although it sounds a little anachronistic to say it, it does seem as if he is suggesting that being English means to live in a country which guarantees even the least of its members a decent standard of living. In contrast to the body of sources which set Italy up as a model of civilisation, he maintains emphatically that ‘England is the paradise and not Italy, as they commonly call it.’ Once again, he sighs over popular ignorance: ‘Oh if thou knewest thou Englishe man in what welth thou liuest, and in how plentifull a Countrye’. He proceeds to highlight the national blessedness by contrast and mentions food (meat rather than vegetables), drink (beer and ale rather than water), and taxation (occasional rather than constant). His conclusion is that ‘the Englishman’ lives ‘like a Lorde’ whilst ‘other countrymen’, live pretty much ‘like dogges’, creatures rather than masters.\footnote{[Aylmer] 1559, sig. P3v.} Once again, questions of