Chapter 8

Underground Networks, Prisons and the Circulation of Counter-Reformation Books in Elizabethan England

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This chapter represents a microhistory of a single-page manuscript book inventory, dated 2 December 1587, among the Lansdowne manuscripts at the British Library: Lansdowne MS 33/62, fol.152r–v (Figs 8.1–8.3), which has long been accessible, but unstudied and improperly documented. The inventory delineates the receipt and distribution of over 600 illicit Catholic imprints, the overwhelming majority apparently produced by a Catholic printing enterprise set up at Rouen by the Jesuit Robert Persons in the early years of the Jesuit mission to England. Several of them count among the first translations to appear in the English vernacular of Tridentine devotional texts written by Spanish and Italian authors. The Lansdowne inventory is an apparent record of the attempts of secondary Catholic distributors to deliver these illicit imprints to prominent English Catholics after the books had been successfully smuggled into England from France. The variety of texts, and substantial bulk numbers of specific titles, attest to the general success of these early vernacular devotional and polemical missionary printing efforts on the continent throughout the period 1580–86. The story that emerges is, therefore, not simply an ‘English’ one. The circumstances delineated within the inventory are connected, rather, to the larger, cosmopolitan and polyglot culture of the Catholic Reformation in later sixteenth-century France, the Spanish Netherlands and, more broadly, Spain and Rome.

Seven of the English distributors of these Catholic books were named in the manuscript, alongside eleven others identified either as intended or confirmed recipients of these books. Nine of the latter number were women of the middle or upper English Catholic gentry, one of whom, Agnes Alford, doubled as a recipient and as one of the most active distributors of these freshly produced Catholic books. To add to this dynamic picture, it also emerges that a large number of the books in question were circulated through the hands both of a Catholic priest and by several lay prisoners in London who are known to have shared contemporary, overlapping terms of incarceration within two prisons.
frequently associated at the time with Catholics: the Newgate and the Marshalsea. In each of these respects, a picture emerges of a complex and composite confessional culture, a community linked together through the material circumstances of the distribution and consumption of Catholic imprints made accessible to the widest possible English vernacular domestic readership.