

Polemic as Piety: Thomas Stapleton's Tres Thomae and Catholic Controversy in the 1580s

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This article examines the triple biography of Thomas the Apostle, Thomas Becket and Thomas More, published by Thomas Stapleton in 1588 and generally regarded as a work of pious hagiography. By focusing on the circumstances in which the book was written and published, the article demonstrates its polemical significance at a time of rapid political change in Catholic/Protestant relations in both England and Europe. Conceived as a Catholic alternative to the history of the Christian past produced by Foxe, Stapleton's book also addressed contested issues within Catholicism: how to deal with the Elizabethan regime, and the status to be accorded to recent martyrs. In answering these questions, Stapleton's views reflect the complexity of Catholic thought at this time, and its fluidity in response to the shifting political circumstances of the late 1580s.

For one who has been described as ‘the most learned Roman Catholic of all his time’, whose published writings, in both English and Latin, were thought worthy of a four-volume Latin *Opera omnia* (Paris 1620), running to almost 4,000 pages, and whose devotional works were among the favoured evening reading of Pope Clement VIII, Thomas Stapleton has attracted relatively little attention from scholars. This is at odds with the towering reputation that he had among his contemporaries, opponents as well as coreligionists. Born in July 1535, the month of Thomas More's execution, Stapleton went to Winchester College before entering New College, Oxford, where he was elected Fellow in 1553. After a glittering career at Oxford in the reign of Mary, he left England for Louvain late in 1559 from where, in association with Nicholas Sanders and William Allen, he

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published widely in defence of the Catholic Church against the first generation of defenders of the religious settlement.¹ In this campaign Stapleton did not embark initially upon directly controversial writing, but translated into English both the works of contemporary European theologians, such as Stanislaus, Cardinal Hosius, and, in 1565, Bede's *Ecclesiastical history*. This translation, based on the Latin Basle edition produced by the reformers, was used by Stapleton to support the Roman origins of the English Church. Appended to the *History* Stapleton published a defence of purgatory, *A fortress of the faith*, in which he directly addressed the criticisms of that doctrine made by Edmund Grindal in a published sermon of the previous year.² This marked the beginning of Stapleton's explicit writing 'against the heretics' and was followed a year later by a contribution to the polemical debate between Jewel and Harding and, in 1567, his most directly controversial work, an attack on the royal supremacy in answer to Robert Horne, bishop of Winchester.³

The book against Horne marked the end of this stage of Stapleton's career as a controversialist writing in English for an English audience. Thereafter his audience was theological and devotional; he removed to Douai in 1569 where he worked within the ambit of the university rather than the English College recently established there by William Allen, and he remained at some distance from the political activities of the college and its founder.⁴ Stapleton focused his writings on the wider divisions within Europe rather than on their specifically English manifestation, and while at Douai he produced a series of lengthy treatises addressing the central issues that divided Protestant and Catholic, concentrating especially on the doctrine of

¹ Anthony à Wood, *Athenae oxonienses*, London 1820, i. 669; Thomas Stapleton, *Opera quae extant omnia*, Paris 1620. There is a short biography written by Henry Holland in volume i of the *Opera*. Holland had been a student of Stapleton's at Douai and was probably the editor of the *Opera* where the *Tres Thomae* was placed in volume iv (p. 931 to the end) together with Stapleton's other devotional works. The only substantial modern treatment of Stapleton is M. R. O'Connell, *Thomas Stapleton and the Counter Reformation*, New Haven–London 1964, at p. 23 for the story about Pope Clement. O'Connell is also the author of the entry on Stapleton in the *ODNB*. Some indication of Stapleton's contemporary reputation in England can be discerned from the fact that his collected works were purchased by the leading Puritan layman Ferdinando, Lord Fairfax (York Minster Library, B XIII. 1–4), and in Europe by the comment of a Franciscan visiting the Abbey of St Victoire in Paris in 1585: 'nul a mieux escrit contres les modernes heresies que Stapleton anglois en un livre gros' (Bibliothèque nationale, Paris, MS fonds français 20309, fo. 356). I am grateful to my colleague Dr Katy Gibbons for this latter reference.

² Peter Milward, *Religious controversies of the Elizabethan age*, London 1977, 9. Grindal's sermon is in *The remains of Edmund Grindal*, ed. W. Nicholson (Parker Society ix, 1843), 1–33.

³ O'Connell, *Stapleton*, 142–210; Milward, *Controversies*, 8–11.

⁴ Stapleton did not move to Rheims with the English College in 1576, *pace* O'Connell, *Stapleton*, 40, but he did dedicate his tract against William Whitaker's *Auoritatatis ecclesiasticae ... defensio*, Antwerp 1592, to Allen: *Opera omnia*, i. 839.

justification. In these works he attacked the reformers in the harshest of language, entitling one of his works *Speculum pravitatis hereticae* (1580).⁵ The fierceness of his language was matched by the erudition of his arguments; Stapleton had mastered the languages needed to uncover the history of the Church and it was upon that, and its decrees and the texts of its Fathers and theologians, that he built his case. By the mid-1580s Stapleton had two decades of theological controversy behind him and, in his fiftieth year, had grown 'weary of studies spoiled by contention' and sought to withdraw from public disputation. 'Longing for a life in which things of this world count for nothing', he joined the Jesuits, but found that his temperament did not suit the Society and returned to secular life after two years, although continuing to support the Society. This crisis in his life has been identified with the writing of the *Tres Thomae*: no longer a professor, and having failed to sustain his desired Jesuit vocation, Stapleton is said to have sought refreshment in literary diversion. It is as a diversion that the text has most usually been considered, earning the frequently used adjective 'charming'.⁶ However its form, as a Latin text of over 400 duodecimo pages, owing its origins to a sermon on Thomas the Apostle preached by Stapleton at Douai on the saint's feast day in 1586, and the circumstances of its publication in 1588, the year in which a resurgent Roman Church resumed the process of canonisation after Trent and in the months leading up to the Armada, suggest a more public purpose.

In the late 1580s an increasingly confident papacy, witnessing a halt to if not yet a retreat from the advance of Protestantism in Europe, sought to extend its control over its own reformation through more vigorous curial control over local and national Churches. This clerically-inspired resurgence encouraged a more aggressive attitude towards England, where these years were marked by sudden shifts in relations between English Catholics and the Elizabethan regime. This was reflected in increasingly aggressive legislation against Catholics by a parliament faced internally by Catholic plots and conspiracies, and uncertainty over the succession and the fate of Mary, Queen of Scots, and externally by the international retreat of Protestantism and the growth of Spanish power.⁷ In such a volatile political climate the inherent tensions within English Catholic political thought were exposed. Recent scholarship has identified these years as a 'Puritan moment' within English Catholicism when arguments in favour of resistance replaced the

⁵ O'Connell, *Stapleton*, 82–93. These works are printed in *Opera omnia*, i. 1–505; ii. 1475.

⁶ Holland, 'Life', *Opera omnia*, i, sig e iij. The adjective is O'Connell's: *ODNB*. Milward, *Controversies*, 152, notes that the book had 'an essentially controversial aim' but does not develop the point.

⁷ See Penry Williams, *The Later Tudors: England, 1547–1603*, Oxford 1995, 299–324 (plots), 474–6 (divisions among Catholics), and J. Bossy, *The English Catholic community, 1570–1850*, London 1975, 36–8, 42–4.

protestations of loyalty which had characterised much of the earlier debate. It was to this increasingly politicised and polarised audience that Stapleton addressed his book. In many respects the *Tres Thomae* represented a return to his controversial writing of the 1560s, but at a time when martyrdom had become central to the polemic; in English terms, following the publication of Foxe's *Actes and monumentes* and governmental execution of missionary priests, and in Roman terms stimulated by the rediscovery and exploration of the Roman catacombs in the years after 1578.⁸ By focusing on these three martyrs Stapleton was clearly addressing Foxe's Protestant account of the Christian past on his opponents' terms, but he was also entering a topic of controversy among his coreligionists. Within post-Tridentine Catholicism the issue of sanctity, or more properly control over the making of saints, had become a main preoccupation of the Curia in response to the promotion of the cult of recently deceased holy men and women, many of them martyrs, by various interest groups. The tension between local cult and official recognition was especially relevant in the case of More, whose European reputation gave him significance beyond the merely local. Stapleton's linking of his life to those of two recognised saints, one of them an Apostle, suggests that he recognised the importance of the cult which had emerged around More's memory, and sought formal recognition of it from Rome. His biography could be interpreted as an attempt to promote More's cause at a time when those of recent martyrs, and especially lay ones, found little official support.⁹ Not surprisingly therefore, although martyrdom was the fate common to all three subjects of the book, within it there was much more.

The sermon on the Apostle with which the book began took the form of a *Vita* rather than a discussion of martyrdom. Delivered at Douai in December 1586, it addressed the situation of English Catholics by extolling the missionary endeavours of the saint, noting that, just as in the days of the Apostles, the Church was once again embarked on a world-wide missionary endeavour. Stapleton traced the Apostle's journeys through the east, to India and Ethiopia, likening his success to the achievements of contemporary missionaries in the New Worlds and reminding his hearers that mission and missionary success, as much as martyrdom, was a sign of the true Church.¹⁰

⁸ Peter Lake and Michael Questier, *The Anti-Christ's lewd hat: Protestants, papists and players in post-Reformation England*, New Haven–London 2002, 231–9, 244–80, 285–6; B. Gregory, *Salvation at stake: Christian martyrdom in early modern Europe*, Cambridge, MA 1999, 295–6; A. Dillon, *The construction of martyrdom in the English Catholic community, 1535–1603*, Aldershot 2002, 38–46; Simon Ditchfield, *Liturgy, sanctity, and history in Tridentine Italy*, Cambridge 1995, 86–91.

⁹ Simon Ditchfield, 'Tridentine worship and the cult of saints', in R. Po-chia Hsia (ed.), *Cambridge history of Christianity*, VI: *Reform and expansion, 1500–1660*, Cambridge 2007, 207–10. I am grateful to Dr Ditchfield for allowing me to see this prior to publication.

¹⁰ 'Nunc ergo signa Apostolatus eius videamur': *Tres Thomae*, 11–24. The example of Thomas was of particular importance to Counter-Reformation theologians as the account of

In this stress on mission Stapleton was returning to a theme that he had developed in his translation of Bede and *A fortress of the faith*: Augustine and his fellow missionaries were identified as the founders of the English Church, and the missionary successes of the Jesuits and the religious orders in Latin America were contrasted with the apparent lack of success of Calvinist missionaries in Brazil and the Caribbean. As with martyrdom, missionary success in the non-Christian world linked the contemporary Church with the Apostolic Church, and whilst Protestants might lay claim, however falsely, to the former, it was the Catholic Church alone which could lay claim to both.¹¹

If the life of the Apostle was deployed to add mission to martyrdom as a sign of the true Church, Stapleton's decision to write about one of the major iconoclastic targets of the early English reformers, Thomas Becket, introduced another contested polemical space, that of exile. Many of Stapleton's audience were themselves exiles and, in providing a full discussion of Becket's experience of exile, Stapleton offered them the opportunity to reflect upon their own experience. Like many Elizabethans, Becket had found succour and support in northern France and on the borders with Flanders, where his name was venerated and his cult continued to flourish, providing a devotional focus for English Catholics abroad.¹² Among the supporting documents which Stapleton printed alongside the *Life* was a letter sent by Peter of Blois in 1170 to Becket's friend and fellow exile John of Salisbury which incorporated a 'Consolatio in exilio', in which he likened the archbishop's circumstances to those of the Israelites in Egypt, thus appropriating for his Catholic readers that Exodus trope which had been so successfully deployed by English Protestants under Mary and subsequently by Foxe.¹³

Becket himself had been a much contested figure in the early English Reformation and Stapleton's treatment of his martyrdom reflects in part the success of the reformers' onslaught on his reputation, for Catholics themselves were uncertain how to interpret the saint's life and death. Becket had been defended by other recent Catholic writers, including Nicholas Harpsfield, and his martyrdom had been depicted on the walls of the English College in Rome by Circignani, and in an engraving published in

his confrontation with the risen Christ was used to defend the doctrine of transubstantiation. In his *Promptuarium Catholicum* for the mass readings on the saint's feast day Stapleton likened the Protestants who denied the Real Presence to those who refused to believe unless they could see: *Opera omnia*, iv. 821.

¹¹ Thomas Stapleton, *A fortress of the faith*, Antwerp 1565 (RSTC 23232), fos 72v–79r.

¹² Anne Duggan, *Thomas Becket*, London 2004, 318–19. For the shrine at Hesdin see pp. 79–80 below. See also C. M. Gibbons, 'English Catholic exiles in Paris in the 1580s', unpubl. PhD diss. York 2006, 138–9.

¹³ *Tres Thomae*, 94–9. The text of the original is printed in *PL* ccvii.77B–82A. See J Foxe, *Actes and monuments*, London 1570, and the entry for Foxe in *ODNB*.

1584 among the *Ecclesiae anglicanae trophaea*, but John Bale's charge that Becket had died for 'manifest treason' both anticipated the Elizabethan government's interpretation of the activities of missionary priests and complicated Catholic understandings of his death. In the martyr/pseudo-martyr debate Becket's murder was one of the prime contested cases. Even as aggressive a defender of the Church as Harpsfield placed Becket's martyrdom beneath that of others such as More, as being in defence of the essentially jurisdictional claims of the papacy, and not for the faith itself.¹⁴ This was a view which Stapleton set out to correct, by claiming Becket as a martyr not only of the Church, but of the faith. In support of this Stapleton appended to his account of the archbishop's life extensive transcriptions of Becket materials found in monastic libraries and in Rome, which included references to his life and to his cult. Among the former were the archbishop's letters to his episcopal colleagues in which he castigated those who had opposed him at his trial, accusing them of placing secular concerns above true loyalty.¹⁵ As part of the political game Becket blamed Gilbert Foliot and his accomplices rather than the king, and Stapleton, by printing this letter shortly after the publication of *Leycester's commonwealthe*, in which exiled Catholics sought to destabilise the regime by blaming England's current difficulties on faction and bad counsel at court, reminded his readers of those issues which Persons and his associates had highlighted in their widely circulated manifesto.¹⁶ On this reading it was the Catholics who, like Becket and his circle in the 1160s, had the best interests of crown and country at heart in the 1580s. To underline that point Stapleton also printed the correspondence between Henry II and Pope Alexander III following Becket's death, in which the king finally accepted some responsibility for the murder and acknowledged the pope's authority.¹⁷

Through Stapleton's account Becket's martyrdom spoke to the contemporary concerns of English Catholics in a number of ways, but it was through the miracles associated with the cult that the saint's importance for the universal Church was recognised; they made him a martyr for the faith. Stapleton completed his account of the saint with notes on the miracles associated with the shrines, and especially those linked to his exile. Whilst in exile Becket had stayed for a time at the Premonstratensian monastery at

¹⁴ *Tres Thomae*, 27. The title of the section on Becket begins 'de vera causa martyrium'. See Helen Parish, *Monks, miracles and magic: Reformation representations of the medieval Church*, London 2005, 92–105; Dillon, *Construction of martyrdom*, 197–9; Duggan, *Becket*, 236–42; and Harpsfield's *Life of More*, ed. E. V. Hitchcock and R. W. Chambers (Early English Text Society, 1932), 215–17.

¹⁵ *Tres Thomae*, 69–93.

¹⁶ Michael Questier, 'Elizabeth and the Catholics', and Peter Lake, 'From *Leicester his commonwealthe* to *Sejanus his fall*: Ben Johnson and the politics of Roman (Catholic) virtue', in Ethan Shagan (ed.), *Catholics and the Protestant nation: religious politics and identity in early modern England*, Manchester 2005, 80–7, 138–43.

¹⁷ Duggan, *Becket*, 220–1, 254; *Tres Thomae*, 108–12.

Hesdin, some sixty kilometres from Douai, and a cult had developed there associated with a reliquary. Stapleton listed sixty-seven miracles noted in the monastic archive, and quoted from verses left by pilgrims at the shrine's altar.¹⁸ In addressing miracles in this way he recalled More's argument that these were the particular signs by which the martyrs were known as true martyrs. It was a theme which also recalled Stapleton's earlier work of the 1560s in which the cult of the saints had been identified as one of the major differences between primitive English Christianity and what he termed 'the false religion of these present dayes'. In both *A fortresse of the faith* and his translation of Bede, Stapleton had made miracles the first mark of the apostolic Church and stressed the central role which they had played in the growth and maintenance of the faith among the early English. This restatement of the argument in 1588 took up his earlier challenge to both Bale and Foxe:

If then protestants be our Apostles, Ubi signa Apostolatus, where be the markes of their Apostelship? Whiche we reade in S. Paule, in the Actes of the Apostles, and in the History of our first apostles S. Augustin and his vertuous companie. Where is Domino cooperante et sermonem confirmante sequentibus signis? ... Let then this be the first difference gathered out of this history. That in the planting of the papists faith and religion God hath wrought miracles. In the planting of the protestants doctrine no miracles appeare ... For as for the miracles of Fox in his Actes and Monuments, his owne felowes esteem them but as civill thinges.¹⁹

In addressing the question of miracles, and especially those associated with Becket, Stapleton was challenging Protestant historiography directly, for the archbishop's career and his shrine at Canterbury had been singled out for attack, most notably by John Bale.

Stapleton's discussion of both the Apostle and the archbishop had been directed at two audiences, each of them learned. In meeting the challenge of Foxe and the martyrologists he used the example of the Apostle to establish continuity with the early Church, not through the traditional stress on institutional structures but on the terms set by his opponents, that is to say by reference to behaviour and practice. Not only could the visible Church lay claim to the early martyrs, as did the Protestant historians, but it also expressed its continuity through its missionary endeavour, which had first brought the Church to the Gentiles and was now bringing it to the non-Christian world in ways which the Protestant Churches could not match.²⁰ In scoring that point over his opponents Stapleton was also addressing his

¹⁸ *Tres Thomae*, 114–15.

¹⁹ Stapleton, *Fortresse*, fo. 99v, and *The history of the Church of Englande compiled by Venerable Bede, Englishman*, Antwerp 1565 (RSTC 1778), sig. 3v. Stapleton lists miracles as the first sign of authenticity in a list of forty-four differences between Catholics and Protestants. See also Thomas More, *A dialogue concerning heresies*, ed. T. M. C. Lawler, G. Marc'hadour and R. C. Marius, New Haven 1981, 288–91, 346, 421–2.

²⁰ Stapleton, *Fortresse*, fos 76v–78.

coreligionists, and especially those training for the English mission, before whom the original sermon was preached. In the case of Becket Stapleton had to confront his opponents more directly, by contesting their version of events. To do so he supported his account with extended transcripts of manuscript sources drawn from the papal and monastic archives, which occupied almost half the space devoted to the *Life*. This was no 'literary diversion', but a challenge to the historical scholarship of Bale and Foxe²¹ in the course of which he also addressed the contemporary situation of the exiled English community, providing it with a historical and spiritual precedent which culminated in a restoration of relations between the monarchy and the papacy.

More's execution had taken place on 6 July, the vigil of the feast day of Becket's translation, and this connection had already been seized upon by Catholic writers such as Nicholas Harpsfield to link the lives of the two martyrs.²² Stapleton was, therefore, pursuing a theme already familiar to English Catholic scholars. However, although manuscript *Lives* of More by Roper and Harpsfield had been in circulation within the community for some time, there was as yet no published *Life* of the martyr. Stapleton's *Life*, which occupied almost two-thirds of his text, drew heavily on both of these sources in addition to other manuscript materials surviving among the members and descendants of the More household living in exile, especially those of More's former secretary John Harris. In addition to these Stapleton referred to the personal reminiscences of those of his acquaintance who had known More, the manuscript and published references to him in the letters of contemporaries such as Erasmus, and the papers of the Spanish Dominican, Luis Paccus, who had been preparing a Spanish *Life* of More.²³ Despite this range of material Stapleton was at pains to stress the incompleteness of the work and to invite his readers to add to the *Life* as presented, or to write a new, fuller account. In this respect Stapleton identified his work as a memorial composed collectively by those members of the English Catholic

²¹ For Bale and Foxe see Thomas Betteridge, *Tudor histories of the English Reformation, 1530–1583*, Aldershot 1999, 40–79, 161–207. It is worth noting that Stapleton is not mentioned in John Vidmar, *English Catholic historians and the English Reformation, 1585–1954*, Brighton 2005, but see A. C. Southern, *Elizabethan recusant prose, 1559–1582*, London [c. 1950], 132–5.

²² Thomas Freeman, entry on Harpsfield in *ODNB*; *Harpsfield's Life*, 214–17.

²³ *Tres Thomae*, (M), 6–8 [R, pp. xvi–xviii]. The *Life* of More starts a fresh pagination in the volume. Whether this indicates that Stapleton intended it to be published separately is not clear, but it subsequently was and became the standard printed *Life* of More. However, the text remained untranslated until 1928 when it was translated by Philip Hallett and published as Thomas Stapleton, *The life and illustrious martyrdom of Sir Thomas More*, London 1928. A later edition, with an introduction by E. E. Reynolds, was published in 1966. Hereinafter page references to the Reynolds [R] edition are given in brackets after the references to the original (M). A Spanish *Life* was published by the poet and historian Fernando de Herrera: *Tomas Moro*, Seville 1592. This focused almost exclusively on his loyalty to Katherine of Aragon and on his trial and execution.

community who had had some association with the martyred chancellor and, as such, it represented a particular tradition within post-Reformation English Catholicism which stressed loyalty to both papacy and crown.²⁴ The mid-1580s had witnessed increasingly severe government action against priests and those who harboured them, identifying them as traitors. International as well as national political tensions sharpened in these years with the increasingly precarious position of fellow Protestants in Europe, the apparent growth of Spanish power, the religious wars in France and the uncertainty which surrounded the position of Mary Stuart.²⁵ Against this background, Catholic plots and conspiracies like those of Babington and Throckmorton compromised the position of those Catholics who sought to make some sort of accommodation with the regime, and provided the government with reasons further to strengthen anti-Catholic legislation. In the face of such legislation Catholics abroad attacked those councillors most closely associated with government policy, in particular Robert Dudley, and sought to construct for themselves, however casuistically, an identity as the natural advisors and truly faithful servants of the crown. This was the thrust of the argument which lay behind *Leycester's commonwealth*, and was a situation in which the career of More became important, not only in the context of Catholic-Protestant polemic, but also among English Catholics themselves, at a time when resistance increasingly came to dominate their response to government policy.²⁶ In these circumstances accounts of More's life and death could be deployed to support both those who sought accommodation with the regime and those who advocated resistance to it.

To Catholics the question of More's spiritual status was paramount, and Stapleton opened his life with an engraving of More, possibly from one in the family's possession, which showed him wearing the fur collar, but also with the insignia of the chancellorship carefully depicted, thereby stressing both his loyalty to the crown and Henry VIII's trust in him.²⁷ On the page facing this portrait Stapleton traced More's career in a series of ten epigrams, ending with one which acknowledged his martyrdom and its heavenly reward. The marginal comment on the final lines, 'martyr, sanctus', left the reader in no doubt of More's status, and, alongside his portrait, confronted

²⁴ See Michael Questier, 'Catholicism, kinship and the public memory of Sir Thomas More', this JOURNAL liii (2002), 476–509, esp. pp. 487–9, and James McConica, 'The recusant reputation of Sir Thomas More', in Germain Marc'hadour (ed.), *Essential articles for the study of St Thomas More*, Hamden, CT 1977, 134–60.

²⁵ Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Reformation: Europe's house divided, 1490–1700*, London 2003, 384–7, 417–27, 442–73.

²⁶ Questier, 'Elizabeth and the Catholics', 81–4; Peter Holmes, *Resistance and compromise: the political thought of Elizabethan Catholics*, Cambridge 1982, 136–75.

²⁷ Stanley Morison, *The likeness of Thomas More: an iconographical survey of three centuries*, London 1963, discusses this and other likenesses. See especially pp. 42–3, 51, and fig. 31. See also *Tres Thomae*, (M), 1–2, not printed in [R].

the reader with the juxtaposition of sanctity and loyalty, an incompatible conjunction in the minds of English Protestants. Stapleton addressed this contradiction directly in his preface, in which he noted the present 'deep afflictions and distress' of England, and made explicit reference to the two audiences to which the *Life* was addressed, hoping that it would afford 'consolation to the righteous and justified confusion to the wicked'. There was another audience concerned about the juxtaposition of martyrdom and sanctity at this time, and that was in Rome where the Curia was cautious about the rapid growth of cults around the recent martyrs and was slow to give them formal recognition as saints.²⁸

The *Life* itself was divided into twenty-one chapters, ten of which were biographical, and another ten which, in the tradition of contemporary humanist hagiography, comprised discussion of the virtues of the subject.²⁹ Although More's martyrdom witnessed to his steadfastness, it was his life which demonstrated his sanctity and provided the model for others to follow.³⁰ The account was completed by a chapter composed of reflections on More's death 'by famous men of learning beyond England'.

Three biographical chapters opened the account, dealing with his family and education in the household of Cardinal Morton, his early career in which his contacts with English humanists like Colet and Tunstall were highlighted, and his public career from 1510, when he was appointed under-sheriff of London, through to his time as royal secretary and eventually to his succession as Lord Chancellor in 1529. These short sections were organised around aspects of More's personality and reputation rather than chronologically, so that in the section on his public career much of the text was devoted to More's honesty and integrity in fulfilling those offices, often refracted through the correspondence of Erasmus or supported by lengthy quotation from the speeches by Norfolk and by More on the occasion of his appointment as chancellor.³¹ In essence these chapters were character

²⁸ *Tres Thomae*, (M), 4 [R, p. xv]. See Gregory, *Salvation*, 301–3, on the ready acceptance of the sanctity of recent martyrs among Catholics at this time. See also Ditchfield, 'Tridentine worship', 209. In More's case his canonisation did not take place until 1935, the four-hundredth anniversary of his death.

²⁹ The structure of Stapleton's *Life* owes much to the manuscript *Life* of Nicholas Harpsfield, although Harpsfield spends more time discussing More's writings: *Harpsfield's Life*, 100–35.

³⁰ Ditchfield, 'Tridentine worship', 217–18. For another English example of this genre of hagiography at this time, and in an entirely different social milieu, see the manuscript on Margaret Clitherow written by John Mush, a version of which was printed as 'A true report of the life and martyrdom of Mrs Margaret Clitherow', in John Morris (ed.), *The troubles of our Catholic forefathers related by themselves*, London 1877, iii. 360–440. Stapleton made much of the fact that More was a layman, a point which may also have had significance within Catholic polemical circles where numerous accounts of specifically priestly martyrdoms were being produced by the Jesuits in these and following years: Dillon, *Construction of martyrdom*, 106–10.

³¹ *Tres Thomae*, (M), 23, 32–5 [R, 16, 19–21].

sketches loosely arranged around the *Life*, and, as such, they led naturally to ten chapters, comprising about half the text, devoted to those qualities exhibited by the martyr which commended him to the Christian reader. The ordering of these chapters repays some attention.

They first two chapters established More's learning, initially through his own literary work and then by locating him within the wider community of European scholars. The first chapter began with a discussion of *Utopia*, in which the education of the wise magistrate rather than the enactment of laws themselves is seen as the key to true government. After a brief mention of the unfinished and unpublished versions of *Richard III*, Stapleton turned to More's controversial and devotional works, which were dealt with at greater length. Among the controversial works the lengthiest treatment is given to *The answer to Luther*, in which the violence of the language used is acknowledged and defended by reference to Luther's own text against the king. Another text treated at some length is *The supplication of souls*, More's reply to Simon Fish in 1529, but the writings against Frith and Tyndale get only the briefest of mentions at this point, though Stapleton acknowledged that they 'did a great deal of good at the time and were read and reread three or four times by many serious scholars'.³² The implication here is that these debates had already, by the time Stapleton was writing, acquired something of a historic rather than contemporary significance, and their importance was no longer polemical but confessional in that they had provided the arguments which had sustained earlier generations of Catholics in their beliefs. This was acknowledged in discussion of the Marian publication of the *Complete English works*, than which 'nothing more powerfully strengthened and promoted the Catholic cause', and which Stapleton was at pains to locate firmly within the scholastic tradition of Aquinas.³³ More's devotional writings were treated at greater length than his controversial ones, and especially *The four last things*, 'a treatise of remarkable learning and piety', and *The dialogue of comfort*, 'a work of great beauty, full of piety and learning, which hardly has an equal among works of that kind'. Piety and learning, however, were uncomfortable bedfellows and, in the context of the post-Tridentine Church, the figure of Erasmus provided a problematic literary backdrop throughout

³² Ibid. (M), 42–57, quote at p. 53 [R, 27–38 at p. 35]. McConica, 'Recusant reputation', 139, argues that focus on the English works reflects More the defender of the faith rather than More the humanist. Certainly this was the main thrust of Stapleton's text but, according to McConica, this was not inconsistent with More the humanist, and Stapleton, as indicated at pp. 85–6, 91 below, was at pains to record More's humanist reputation, and across confessional lines. He did not, however, refer to More's later correspondence with Erasmus in the 1530s.

³³ *Tres Thomae*, (M), 51–2 [R, 35]. For the revival of the scholastic tradition in English Catholicism from the 1570s see Lucy Wooding, *Rethinking Catholicism in Reformation England*, Oxford 2000, 235–68, though as I suggest below, I find Stapleton more sympathetic to humanism than Wooding allows in her account (p. 257).

the chapter. Stapleton continued the tradition, started by Harpsfield, that More's relationship with his old friend had cooled over the years following Luther's appearance, going as far as to claim that More had asked Erasmus to compile a retraction of some of his more contentious views, and accusing Erasmus of destroying More's letter in order to conceal the rift.³⁴ It was More's learning, rather than his piety, which was the focus of the chapter, which closed with a lengthy quotation from his letter of c. 1519 to Oxford University in defence of humanist learning, Hebrew and the classical languages, giving him the title, which in Stapleton's view he shared with Richard Pace, of 'patron of letters in England'.³⁵

That learning was the basis of More's reputation, and the chapter which follows traced his reputation through his correspondence with his contemporaries, both English and European, and their comments, often to each other, about More and his works. This chapter provided readers with quotations from a litany of names representing orthodox humanist scholarship: among the English were Pole, Tunstall and Fisher, and others such as Edward Lee, later archbishop of York, Thomas Elyot and William Latimer, Pole's tutor at Oxford, whom Stapleton, mindful of his readers, was at pains to point out should not be confused with his Protestant namesake Hugh.³⁶ Many of these men had studied at the great European universities as well as at home, and most of them had corresponded with Erasmus, whom More 'in the deep sincerity of his soul, loved more than he deserved'. Erasmus was mentioned first among the Europeans but quickly passed over in favour of less contentious figures such as Guillaume Budé, Martin Dorp, Johannes Cochlaeus and Antonio Bonvisi.³⁷ Many of these humanists had studied or taught at Stapleton's own university at Louvain, but they were chosen by him to demonstrate a network which stretched throughout Europe, from Constantinople to Paris. The ordering of the list was created to make a telling polemical point to which Stapleton was to return later. The last named scholars were Germanus Brixius and Simon Grynaeus. Both of these had publicly disagreed with More; Brixius on a matter of scholarship over More's Latin epigrams and Grynaeus, more significantly, over matters of faith. A Zwinglian in doctrine, Grynaeus was a considerable Greek scholar and editor of Plato, who was attached to More's household during his stay in England in 1529 and was sufficiently impressed by his reception to

³⁴ *Harpsfield's Life*, 109; *Tres Thomae*, (M), 51, 53–4 [R, 36–7].

³⁵ *Tres Thomae*, (M), 54 [R, 37]. This is printed in D. Kinney, *In defense of humanism* (Complete Works of Sir Thomas More, xv, 1986), 129–50; for its date see pp. xviii–xxi. For Pace see J. Wegg, *Richard Pace, a Tudor diplomatist*, London 1932, and on More, A. E. Surtz, 'Richard Pace's sketch of Thomas More', *Journal of English and German Philology* lvii (1958), 36–50.

³⁶ *Tres Thomae*, (M), 58–9 [R, 40].

³⁷ *Ibid.* (M), 67–80 [R, 39–56]. For the problematic treatment of More's relationship with Erasmus among English Catholics see McConica, 'Recusant reputation', 141–6.

dedicate his edition of Plato to More's son John. The problematic nature of this relationship was addressed by Stapleton through reference to More's attempts to win his guest back from heresy, and the friendship was deployed as evidence of More's courtesy to scholars, esteem for learning and keen interest in the cause of letters, qualities which could transcend, if not excuse, differences over belief where these remained private.³⁸ It was these qualities to which Stapleton returned at the end of the chapter, with a lengthy quotation commending More in a letter from the problematic figure of Erasmus to the even more problematic figure, in orthodox eyes, of the Lutheran knight, Ulrich von Hutten.³⁹ The point was made that More's scholarship, unambiguously orthodox as it was, nevertheless commended itself to serious scholars who did not share his view of the Church.

In constructing these testimonials to More's reputation among the learned, Stapleton was both recreating that community of letters which he claimed had been destroyed by the Reformation, suggesting in his final reference that More had transcended those divisions, and also placing the local, or national, reputation of his subject alongside his international and universal appeal. In making these claims Stapleton was not only scoring points against his Protestant opponents but also addressing that uneasy dialogue between the local and the universal Church which was later to exercise the Congregation of Rites, also founded in 1588, when it came to compile its calendar of saints. By establishing More's universal appeal, both theological and geographical, among the learned and devout scholars of Christendom, Stapleton may have had in mind his Roman audience as much as his English readers, and it is in the context of the former that the ordering of the chapters makes most sense.⁴⁰ These chapters were merely a preamble to those that followed, as Stapleton made clear in his opening to chapter vi:

So far we have described Thomas More as a good citizen and a good man. But a Cato or a Cicero might be thus described. In order, then, that the reader may realise that More was a great man in every respect, that he was no less remarkable for his solid piety than for his learning and professional abilities, we will speak now of his virtues, his religion, his charity, his humility, his simplicity of life, and other qualities proper to a Christian.⁴¹

For Stapleton it was his subject's spiritual virtues, his piety and holiness, and his contempt for worldly honour and wealth which truly singled out the saint. These formed the subject of the next three chapters.

³⁸ *Tres Thomae*, (M), 80–3 [R, 57–60]. G. Brixius, *Antimorus*, Basle 1519, sig Eiii, has a list of More's 'inexcusable' lapses in his Latin epigrams. See S. Grynæus, *Platonis opera*, Basle 1534, preface, printed in *St Thomas More: selected letters*, ed. E. F. Rogers, New Haven 1981, 470–80.

³⁹ *Tres Thomae*, (M), 82–3 [R, 59–60]. For Hutten see Hajo Holborn, *Ulrich von Hutten and the German Reformation*, New Haven 1937, esp. pp. 120–1.

⁴⁰ Ditchfield, 'Tridentine worship', 209–13.

⁴¹ *Tres Thomae*, (M), 83 [R, 61].

The basis of these virtues was prayer, and this section of the *Life* devotes much space to More's devotional life, in private prayer, at mass and in the support of the liturgy. Stapleton continually linked More's devotions to the 'prayers of the church', whether by serving at mass or saying the daily office or Psalms, and used episodes from Roper's *Life* to demonstrate their efficacy, in reclaiming his son-in-law for the Catholic religion, in enabling the recovery of his daughter Margaret from the sweating sickness and in interceding for his daughter Elizabeth after his own death.⁴² Stapleton is the sole authority for another, non-familial, story of More's intercession when, on his way to martyrdom, his prayers were requested by and granted to a citizen of Winchester whom he had previously helped, with the result that the man was subsequently relieved of those earlier temptations which had returned to afflict him. By this account prayer, intercession and the ritual year provided More with the opportunity to display those gifts of charity which he was pleased to bestow on others, friend and foe alike, and More's inclusive attitude to humanity was demonstrated by quoting in full from the *Complete English works* of 1557 More's 'Godly instructions' written while he was in prison.⁴³ His charitable actions were augmented by the traditional disciplines of fasting and self-mortification, denoted by reference to his hair shirt which Stapleton had seen at Antwerp, where it was kept as a relic by members of the family. Such actions displayed a contempt for earthly riches, and More's attitude framed the discussion of the following two chapters, one relating to power and another, shorter section, devoted to riches. The first section concentrated on his career at court, where Stapleton immediately identified, without reference, the esteem in which he was held by Katharine of Aragon, whilst his perceived dislike of the court, and the reasons for his ultimate resignation, are supported by lengthy quotations from the correspondence of More and others, which included the epitaph he composed for himself following his departure from office.⁴⁴ These quotations were strengthened by anecdotes drawn from family tradition within the More household, and from the Roper manuscript. A common charge made against More by his opponents both at the time and subsequently was that of inconsistency, and Stapleton was aware of this. In case the unsympathetic reader might have concluded that More's general attitude to power altered as a consequence of the changes of policy following the emergence of Anne Boleyn, Stapleton quoted at length from an otherwise unknown manuscript letter written in 1517 by More to William Warham, in which he used Warham's resignation as Lord Chancellor as the context for a discussion of

⁴² Ibid. (M), 89–91 [R, 63–6].

⁴³ Ibid. (M), 93–4 [R, 68], printed in Thomas More, *Treatise on the passion*, ed. G. E. Haupt (Complete Works of Sir Thomas More, xiii, 1976), 207–11.

⁴⁴ *Tres Thomae*, (M), 95–216 [sic] [R, 71–86]. The pagination of M jumps from p. 99 to p. 200. This has been corrected in subsequent footnotes.

the ephemeral value of worldly power.⁴⁵ With that letter More had enclosed a copy of *Utopia* as a gift for the archbishop. Mention of this led to the final section of the chapter in which More's own words were used to illustrate the modest manner in which he bore his learning. The short section on riches reiterated the well-established tradition that More did not seek to profit from the offices he held, and also quoted from a family letter to Mistress Alice, comforting her on the family's loss of goods following a fire in Chelsea and asking her to have a care of their poor neighbours.⁴⁶

This domestic anecdote provided an introduction to the next three sections, dealing with More as head of household and as father to his family. The inclusion of such sections was unusual, and probably owed much to the circumstances of composition and the extent to which Stapleton was dependent on tradition within the More circle in exile. They discussed the round of prayer which punctuated the life of the household, and the care with which More supervised the education of his children, expressed in a lengthy letter to the children's tutor, William Gunnell, otherwise unknown but no doubt preserved within the family, and further letters from More to his children whilst they were at school in the household.⁴⁷ The final chapter in this section focused on the relationship between More and his scholarly daughter Margaret, quoting from letters he wrote to her commending her learning and reporting the high opinion in which it was held by others.⁴⁸ In these sections on More's household management, Stapleton was drawing on a vigorous family tradition and deploying it to provide a model of piety for the devout recusant gentry households back in England, in which women played a prominent devotional role. This was a model which his clerical readers could carry back with them to the mission.⁴⁹ This section was completed by an account of More's piety, learning and wit. The first two were demonstrated by lengthy quotations from the martyr's devotional writings in English as they appeared in the *Complete English works*, especially from the *Dialogue of comfort*, and by shorter quotations from the books against Tyndale, in which the sourer side of More's wit was also displayed.⁵⁰ His wit was also illustrated more positively by a series of tales circulating in the family

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* (M), 105–6 [R, 77–8]. This is printed in translation in *Selected letters*, 88–90. For the circumstances of Warham's resignation see J. J. Scarisbrick, *Henry VIII*, London 1968, 41–2.

⁴⁶ *Tres Thomae*, (M), 115–16 [R, 85–6]; *Selected letters*, 170–1.

⁴⁷ *Tres Thomae*, (M), 124–8, 131–5 [R, 94–101]; *Selected letters*, 103–7, 145–7, 149–51. For Gunnell see *ODNB*.

⁴⁸ *Tres Thomae*, (M), 137–46 [R, 103–9]; *Selected letters*, 109, 151–2, 154–5.

⁴⁹ For liturgy and household religion among recusants see Bossy, *English Catholic community*, 110–21, 127–32. Bossy identifies the years up to 1625 as the 'matriarchal period' of English recusancy. For women more directly see Marie Rowlands, 'Recusant women, 1558–1640', in Mary Prior (ed.), *Women in English society, 1500–1800*, London 1985, 149–80.

⁵⁰ *Tres Thomae*, (M), 149–56 [R, 110–20]. Stapleton's own language was equally fierce: see, for example, *Fortresse*, fos 66v–70.

circle, many of which found their way into subsequent accounts. In concluding these chapters on More's qualities Stapleton turned to the classics, and to Livy's depiction of Cato.⁵¹ In this discussion of More's qualities Stapleton framed his subject's spiritual virtues firmly within the world of learning, starting with the public and international reputation and moving from that, by means of More's devotional life, to a domestic and homely environment in which the same qualities were displayed. In this way Stapleton reached several audiences at once: a European scholarly readership, the English exile community and learned recusant households at home.

The *Life* then returned to the events surrounding More's death, the part which 'chiefly induced me [Stapleton] to undertake the whole narrative' and to portray his subject not 'as a man of letters, but above all as a glorious martyr for truth and light'.⁵² As it was the cause and not the death which made the martyr, Stapleton began his account with the divorce proceedings, noting the fact that, in its early stages, and while More was Lord Chancellor, Henry did not press his conscience in the matter. In Stapleton's account it was the promotion of Thomas Cranmer to Canterbury which initiated the attack on More, a narrative which followed the openly controversial account of Stapleton's former colleague at Louvain, Nicholas Sander, whose own history, *De origine ac progressu schismatis anglicani*, had been published posthumously in 1585.⁵³ The events leading up to More's imprisonment were chiefly recounted through extensive quotations from his letters to his family, as were the accounts of his several examinations. These were quoted at length with, in one case, an important omission by Stapleton who, when quoting More on papal authority, excised his claim that he had never put the authority of the pope above that of a general council.⁵⁴ In his account of the trial Stapleton could not rely on family recollection or letters, and instead used the *Expositio fidelis*, the manuscript newsletter which circulated in Paris in the months following More's execution and was printed by Froben later that year; he supplements this source with Harpsfield's manuscript *Life*.⁵⁵ For the account of his final days Stapleton was able to return to More's correspondence and the memory of the family circle. The account followed the trope of the road to Calvary; the women of the family circle were given a prominent role in the events, the guards escorting More from his trial were likened to those soldiers who recognised the innocence of Jesus, and Henry, on hearing of More's death, 'retired to another room and shed bitter tears'. In his account of the events Stapleton returned to the miraculous as evidence of More's sanctity by recalling the circumstances in which his daughter

⁵¹ *Tres Thomae*, (M), 171 [R, 130-1].

⁵² *Ibid.* (M), 172 [R, 132].

⁵³ Milward, *Controversies*, 70-2.

⁵⁴ *Tres Thomae*, (M), 191-2 [R, 151]. For the missing phrase see More to Cromwell in *Selected letters*, 499. ⁵⁵ For discussion of the *Expositio* see *Harpsfield's Life*, appendix 2 at pp. 254-66.

Margaret and Margaret Clement purchased the winding sheet in which More's body was placed for burial in the Tower. The story, which involved the miraculous appearance of money in the purse of Margaret Roper's maid Dorothy, circulated in the More family circle and was told to Stapleton by Dorothy herself, who was still alive and living in Douai in 1588. The stress on such oral testimony was recognised by Stapleton as having parallels with the Gospel account in John xxi, which since 1582 had been available in English to the priests and laity of the mission.⁵⁶

That oral tradition framed Stapleton's account of the subsequent fortunes of the martyr's family members and of the ways in which they ensured the survival of More relics. Thus More's life and person, as well as his writings, were placed at the centre of the English Catholic tradition. It was his example that had sustained future Henrician martyrs, such as the layman Germain Gardiner, a nephew of Bishop Stephen Gardiner, and More's own parish priest, John Larke, in their fidelity.⁵⁷ Thus it was through the family circle and the testimonies of men like Gardiner that Stapleton was able to establish a link between the Church of the 1530s and that of 1588, a link to which his own life also bore witness, as in this autobiographical passage: 'I can remember quite well, and many others will bear me out, that when we were boys, More's fame and his illustrious martyrdom were constantly on our lips and fired our zeal for the catholic faith.'⁵⁸ In terms of institutional continuity Stapleton invoked More's contacts with two other humanist churchmen, Reginald Pole and Cuthbert Tunstall. In Pole's case this identified More with the international post-Tridentine Church, but the evidence was scanty as there were very few direct references by More to Pole, though several in the other direction.⁵⁹ As the only survivor of the 1530s episcopal bench to witness the accession of Elizabeth, Tunstall represented the continuing English Catholic tradition. However, whilst there was much greater evidence for his contacts with More, the case was problematic, for in 1535 Tunstall had subscribed to the very act for which More had died. In negotiating this Stapleton constructed an image of the aged bishop, now ninety, travelling to London in 1559 to remonstrate about the royal supremacy with the new queen, his god-daughter. That meeting, if any such took place, finished with the queen's rejection of his pleas, Tunstall's refusal to subscribe to the 1559 act and his subsequent confinement 'where he ended his life with a noble confession of faith, thus washing out the stain of sinful schism he had before

⁵⁶ *Tres Thomae*, (M), 118–30 [R, 180–92]. Henry Holland, Stapleton's pupil and editor, had assisted Gregory Martin in the translation of the New Testament.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* (M), 131–2 [R, 194]; Scarisbrick, *Henry VIII*, 331, 481.

⁵⁸ *Tres Thomae*, (M), 149–50.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* (M), 150–1 [R, 195–6]. In fact Stapleton is the only source quoting this solitary letter from More to Pole: *The correspondence of Reginald Pole*, I: 1517–46, ed. Thomas Mayer, Aldershot 2002, 39. Pole was instrumental in securing the publication of the *English works* in 1557.

contracted'.⁶⁰ Tunstall's actions in 1559, therefore, linked the stand taken by More against his king directly to that taken by Elizabethan Catholics against their queen. In this analysis Stapleton was pursuing a strand of Catholic political writing associated with Persons, which located the current difficulties of the regime in Elizabeth's failure, like that of her father, to listen to the advice of her true subjects, thereby leading the country into schism, faction and confusion.⁶¹

Stapleton completed More's *Life* in a similar manner to that which had rounded off his account of his literary work, with a chapter cataloguing the judgements of others outside England on the martyr's death. These began with Pole and moved through Erasmus to many of those quoted in the earlier chapter, and incorporated major figures located throughout Europe though, perhaps significantly given the date, there is no mention of any Spanish commentator although a Spanish *Life* was being written at the time.⁶² This is conventional enough but, in establishing More's execution as a true martyrdom, Stapleton sought to demonstrate his appeal across the confessional divide by noting the positive references to More in the works of Protestants such as John Carion, whose chronicle was translated and published in English under Edward VI, and the martyrologist John Sleidan.⁶³ Most important, he quoted at length from the *De conscientia bonae mentis*, published in Leipzig in 1541 by the humanist and Lutheran scholar John Rivius, in which he concluded a lengthy section on More as follows:

Oh King? Is this the price of a noble man's toil? Is this the fruit he receives of his fruitful service? But thou, More, are now happy in the possession of eternal bliss, for thou didst prefer rather to lose thy head than to give any approval thy conscience forbade, and didst esteem right and justice, virtue and religion, more highly than life itself. Thou lovest this mortal life but gainest that which is true and never ending. Thou leavest the society of men but enterest the company of the angels and saints.⁶⁴

With such a ringing endorsement of More's status as a true martyr of the Christian world from an opponent of the papacy, all that remained for

⁶⁰ *Tres Thomae*, (M), 63–7, 107 [R, 43–7, 78–9]. See C. Sturge, *Cuthbert Tunstall: churchman, scholar, statesman, administrator*, London 1938, where the interviews with Elizabeth are noted at pp. 321–3. ⁶¹ See Lake, 'From *Leicester his commonwealth*', 198–9. ⁶² See n. 23 above.

⁶³ *Tres Thomae*, (M), 257 [R, 200]; 'Thomus Morus, Britannus, henrice VIII Anglie Rex, cancellarius, homo utriusque lingue doctissimus, ac R D Episcoporum Roffensis, Theologus concionatur egregius, post longam carceris molestam ob novi matrimonii contradictionem, una cum aliquot primaries innocentibus monachis, capite truncatur': J. Carion, *Chronicorum libellus*, Venice 1548, 452–3. Sleidan repeated this extract without reference to the monks.

⁶⁴ *Tres Thomae*, (M), 257–9 [R, 200–1]; J. Rivius, *De conscientia bonae mentis*, Leipzig 1541, bk II, sigs D5üüjv–E. In the latter More is placed after a long list of classical examples of men who made a stand against despots.

Stapleton to do was to return to the English context and remind his readers to look to More's example, and that of the other martyrs of England, ancient and more recent, asking them 'to take pity at length upon the affliction of our nation, which now for twenty-nine years has been suffering dire schism and heretical tyranny, and lead it back from its errors to the bosom of our holy mother, the Catholic Church'.⁶⁵

Consideration of the *Tres Thomae* in the light of the circumstances surrounding its publication in 1588, rather than in the context of the intellectual biography of its author, draws attention to its potential audiences and calls for reconsideration of the text. The 1580s was a critical decade in the development of Catholic polemic which, under the pressure of events, was both mutable and ambiguous, depending in part on the audiences being addressed. Beneath these sometimes discordant voices, Peter Holmes and more recently Peter Lake and Michael Questier have identified in this decade a shift in emphasis away from loyalism and non-resistance towards a more active critical stance which implied and sometimes openly encouraged political resistance to the regime. The turning point came in 1584 with the publication of Allen's *A true, sincere and modest defence of Catholics in England, and Leicester's commonwealth*. These texts contained open criticism of the government and the Protestant regime, if not of the queen herself, and depicted the Puritans, especially those in Leicester's circle, as responsible for the political and economic difficulties of the nation; each advanced the claims of Mary Stuart to the succession.⁶⁶ Resistance was implied rather than advocated, and couched in the language of loyalty to a monarch who had been led astray by evil counsellors. This was a theme picked up by Stapleton in his account of Becket and the self-serving ambition, as he saw it, of Gilbert Foliot and his friends, who had similarly misled Henry II, and it was reiterated in the *Life of More* where Wolsey was identified as the source of false advice which first set Henry VIII on his fateful path.⁶⁷ By extension, the lives of both Becket and More were examples of that true loyalty which contemporary Catholics offered to Elizabeth and was expressed in the engraving of More wearing his chancellor's insignia which Stapleton reproduced in the *Life*. It was a loyalty which the queen rejected on the advice of bad counsel. Thus the *Tres Thomae* stands at an important intersection in English Catholic political thought, in which the troubled

⁶⁵ *Tres Thomae*, (M), 262 [R, 204]. Excluded from the modern translation are a series of epigrams on More by a number of European scholars and four Englishmen. The Englishmen were John White, the Marian bishop of Winchester, and three others associated with Louvain: the priest Alan Cope, John Fowler, the printer of Stapleton's works and other Catholic controversial writings, and Henry Holland, whose text is by far the longest and finishes as follows: 'Qui minor est Moro, non novit pingere Morum:/ Hoc si quis poterit, tu Stapletone facis': (M), 262–73. See entries for the authors named above in *ODNB*.

⁶⁶ Holmes, *Resistance and compromise*, 136–65; Lake and Questier, *Anti-Christ's lewd hat*, 285–6.

⁶⁷ *Tres Thomae*, (M), 31, 161–3, 229 [R, 18, 135, 178–9].

condition of England emerged as the chief grounds for analysis rather than any theoretical papal claims to sovereignty.

Moreover, during the book's gestation political circumstances in both England and Europe were changed dramatically by the execution of Mary Queen of Scots and the defeat of the Armada, both of which tested the effectiveness of loyalty as a strategy which could offer English Catholics a space within the political nation. Doubts on this score were confirmed soon after the publication of the book by events in France where the assassination of Henri III in 1589 and the subsequent accession of the Protestant Henri of Navarre marked the eclipse of the Catholic League and briefly seemed to threaten the Catholic cause. In response to these events, particularly those in France, Stapleton appears to have modified his advocacy of patient loyalism. In 1591 he preached a sermon at Douai in uncompromisingly oppositional terms, blaming the *politique* views of Bodin for the difficulties faced by French Catholics: 'You heretics come to us with sword, spear, and shield, in pride and arrogance, and we Catholics will come against you in the name of the Lord of Hosts.' This advocated aggressive action against the Huguenots, but whether Stapleton sought to apply this approach to England is uncertain as his subsequent writings for that audience were chiefly devotional and liturgical.⁶⁸

It was, however, a dilemma which confronted Stapleton's English Catholic readers in the years immediately following 1588. For his continental readership the uncompromising nature of the Douai sermon may have been fine, but for his English readership a different register was required, for there was no agreed consensus among the clergy or laity about how to deal with the Elizabethan regime. The *Tres Thomae* reminded its readers of the loyalty of the two Englishmen; their example and the subsequent acknowledgment of his crimes by Henry II, suggested that loyalty, rather than opposition, was the strategy most likely to persuade Elizabeth, or her successor, to abandon false counsel and return the country to Catholicism. Their loyalty did not save either More or Becket from martyrdom, the final test of endurance for the saints, but there were other means by which those Christians who could not make the supreme sacrifice were able to sustain the faith. One such was exile, a test of endurance for God's people collectively and individually, and one which also advocated patience rather than political action, for it is in the nature of true exile that it is ended by a return to the Promised Land. By deploying that trope, also used by his Protestant opponents, Stapleton spoke to the present circumstances of English Catholics; not only those who were in exile abroad but also those gentry who, excluded from their customary participation in local politics, experienced a form of internal exile sustained by a domestic religious

⁶⁸ This is quoted in Holmes, *Resistance and compromise*, 146.

regime for which More's household provided a model. Many of those households were served by priests sent to England from Douai and Rome, continuing the apostolic tradition of mission represented by Thomas the Apostle, and by Augustine, who first brought the Church to England.

In the *Tres Thomae* Stapleton, whilst fierce in his theological opposition to Protestantism, provided a carefully nuanced account of the history of the Catholic Church in England which stressed its apostolic and Roman origins. Through his deployment of martyrdom, exile and mission he offered his readers models of patience, adjustment and quiet missionary endeavour rather than those of political action and intrigue as the most effective response to what he and they saw as a persecuting regime. That message was already a contested one within English Catholicism, and in the rapidly changing political scene in both England and Europe during the late 1580s was itself likely to be overtaken by events. The defeat of the Armada and the violent deaths of two Catholic crowned heads in Mary Stuart and Henri III ensured that this was so, but this should not detract from the importance of the book. Penned by a theologian of European significance, the *Tres Thomae* addressed the central conflicts about how to deal with a heretical ruler and her advisors which divided, and continued to divide, English Catholics, and also contributed to the debate within the post-Tridentine Church about the status that it should grant to its recent martyrs. In doing so it revealed the complexity and fluidity of Catholic attitudes to the Elizabethan regime and papal caution about the formal recognition of Reformation martyrs. In advocating to his coreligionists a patient if determined political loyalism and by supporting the cause of More, Stapleton reflected the resurgent Catholicism that emerged in the years after 1585, but in the febrile political circumstances of the years between 1586 and 1592 his message also fell victim to the more aggressive clericalism of his Church.

Download Citation | Polemic as Piety: Thomas Stapleton's *Tres Thomae* and Catholic Controversy in the 1580s | This article examines the triple biography of Thomas the Apostle, Thomas Becket and Thomas More, published by Thomas Stapleton in 1588 and | Find, read and cite all the research you need on ResearchGate.Â This paper reconstructs and reinterprets a sequence of monuments which was installed in the parish church at Chester-le-Street in County Durham in the 1590 s by John Lord Lumley, who is probably best known today for his status as one of the most important collectors of books and paintings in the reign of Elizabeth I. The monuments consisted of retrospective effigies. Thomas Stapleton (Henfield, Sussex, July 1535 â€“ Leuven, 12 October 1598) was an English Catholic controversialist. He was the son of William Stapleton, one of the Stapletons of Carlton, Yorkshire. He was educated at the Free School, Canterbury, at Winchester College, and at New College, Oxford, where he became a Fellow, 18 January 1553. On Elizabeth I's accession he left England rather than conform to the new religion, going first to Leuven, and afterwards to Paris, to study theology. The controversy surrounding the hesychast monks and Gregoryâ€™s defense of them quickly became entangled in the intellectual and political divisions of the day, with the Palamites eventually gaining ecclesiastical hegemony. As the late Empire began to look westward in increasing desperation for help against the growing Turkish threat, the Palamite controversy began to change into another East-West controversy. Through the mediation of Dominican missionaries, a small circle of intellectuals in governmental circles and monks who were dissatisfied with the hesychast form of monastic life began to u