

## Two Copies of a Clandestine Manuscript in Late Seventeenth-century New College

Nicholas Harpsfield (1519-75) was a famous sixteenth-century fellow of the college, and reputed a keen Marian burner of Protestants. He was subsequently imprisoned with his brother under Elizabeth I for twelve years. As *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* states, 'The last book Harpsfield wrote during Mary's reign, his *Treatise on the Pretended Divorce*, may well have been intended, at least in part, to replace Cranmer's *Recantacyons* as an attack on the archiepiscopal martyr. ... Harpsfield's treatise remained in manuscript until 1878 (the accession of Elizabeth made a book denying her legitimacy and raking up scurrilous stories about the Boleyns too dangerous to print). Nevertheless, the *Pretended Divorce* had a considerable impact, for it supplied much of the substance of Nicholas Sander's extraordinarily influential history of the English Reformation, *De origine et progressu schismate Anglicana* (1573) [really 1584].' Sander was also a quondam New College fellow, and like many other New College scholars fled to the continent where he wrote his influential history.

Now a manuscript borrowing register survives for the college (BT 1.10.12) and was in use in the later seventeenth century. There we find that a particularly popular manuscript among the fellows was precisely Harpsfield's 'Treatise on the pretended divorce'. It was borrowed by Edward Hanbury in 1671, by Richard Rowlandson in 1674, and by Richard Traffles in 1698. All three borrowers were senior fellows in their time; Traffles would become Warden. Indeed the college owns two copies of this text (MSS 311a, 311b), both not dating from the sixteenth century, as Coxe's catalogue inexplicably claims, but the late seventeenth century. The editor of the text for the Camden Society edition of 1878 stated that the two New College MSS, despite their similar format, were textually independent, and we will need to verify this claim. But as the 'Pretended Divorce' does not appear in the college Benefactors Book, it is likely that a copy was commissioned by the college, and subsequently a second copy was acquired or again commissioned. Based on an analysis of the acquisition of adjacent manuscripts in the sequence, the earlier of these two manuscripts probably entered the college in the late 1660s. Anthony Wood, indeed, appears to have seen the first New College MS in 1670, as he wrote a note from 'towards the latter end' of Harpsfield's 'de Matrimonio' on Lord Chancellor Wriothsley on the back of his almanac for that year, and Wriothsley is mentioned there in the work.<sup>1</sup>

The work's popularity among the fellows of New College must partially stem from the fact that Nicholas Harpsfield and his brother John (1516-78) were among the more celebrated fellows of the college in the sixteenth century. Indeed, it seems that the work was widely if clandestinely circulated in late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century Oxford: after Thomas Hearne had examined the manuscript in New College in 1719 and again in 1725 he wrote that he had two friends who owned further copies, and that he himself had a series of extracts from it in a third manuscript before him. Hearne proceeded to transcribe and publish two sections from his MS, and these hint at the reason why the text was so popular: the sections celebrated the virtues of Queen Katherine; and lamented the calamity of the Dissolution. Hearne stated that he acquired his own manuscript of the work from 'a Gentleman of very eminent Virtues, who died in 1721'. Surely this was Charles Eyston (1667-1721), the Roman Catholic antiquary. With Hearne, we are dealing with not-so-covert Jacobitism; did the earlier New College borrowers harbour recusant sympathies, or was theirs an innocent if clandestine curiosity?

---

<sup>1</sup> Wood, *Life and Times*, vol. 2 = Oxford Historical Society vol. 21 (1892), p. 213; *Pretended Divorce* (Camden Society, 1878), pp. 278-79.

William Poole (Fellow Librarian, New College)