

## Thomas Stapleton's First Polemic: An Impact Case Study

Peering down from above the Catholic theology section of Bishop Cosin's library in Durham are three early modern theologians. The presence of two of the 'papist' figures, painted in 1668-69, is entirely conventional: the Jesuits Francesco Suárez (1548-1617) and Robert Bellarmine (1542-1621) played an important part in shaping the intellectual culture of the Counter-Reformation. The presence of the third, Thomas Stapleton (1535-1598), is more of a puzzle. Quite plausibly the inclusion of the English Catholic exile (and one-time fellow of New College) reflected patriotic sentiment – the belief that even one's fiercest adversary was on some basic level part of (or at least, educated by) the home team must have had some sort of appeal. At least, Anthony Wood (1632-1695) in his history of famous Oxford men felt compelled to call Stapleton 'the most learned R. Catholick of all his time.' The English Catholic editors of Stapleton's 1620 four-volume *Opera omnia*, while mindful of the proverb that 'a popular wine needs no ivy' [i.e., no advertisement], similarly pressed some words of praise for Stapleton out of the mouths of his Protestant Oxbridge opponents. William Whitaker's Cambridge colleagues had indeed lamented his bad luck, having fallen upon 'such an antagonist; ... so stern, so invincible, so superior, to whom I would be as ill-suited a match as Troilus was for Achilles.' Stapleton's editors cut off Whitaker's words right before he could resolve 'that it was altogether necessary, unless I wished to be a deserter to the most excellent cause, to leave nothing intact of this [Stapleton's] book in which our enemies so greatly exult.' The world of early modern religious polemic was not for the faint-hearted.

To my knowledge, New College has not yet indulged in this sort of parochial sentimentality, no doubt in part because the College has produced greater – or at least, better-known – Catholic scholars. Stapleton (a fellow from 18 January 1552 to 1559) was part of a generation of Catholic fellows in the 1540s and 1550s, which also included Nicholas Harpsfield (1519-1575), Thomas More's biographer, and Nicholas Sanders (1530-1581), the author of the *History of the Anglican Schism*, quite possibly the most famous of exile compositions. When in 1566-1567 the bishop of Winchester, Robert Horne (1513-1579), visited the College and explicitly banned fellows from reading the works of the English Catholics now massing together in the Belgian town of Leuven/Louvain, Stapleton was not even mentioned by name, but other former fellows were. Horne, himself a religious exile under Mary, had good cause to worry: New College lost about half its fellowship because of Catholic sympathies in the first decade of Elizabeth's reign.

In fact, Horne's visitation proved to be the backdrop to Stapleton's first foray into polemic. Ostensibly, Stapleton, who had thus far only published English translations (including the first English edition of Bede's *Ecclesiastical Histories*), was responding to Horne's defence of the Elizabethan Oath of Allegiance. In reality, Stapleton's 1567 *Counterblast to M. Hornes Vayne Blaste against M. Fekenham* (printed in Leuven by another former New College man, John Fowler) shows himself well-aware of the recent events in Oxford. In a preface which cast doubt on Horne's knowledge of grammar, rhetoric, and logic (the three disciplines which made up the *trivium* that laid the foundation for a university education), Stapleton already mocked the Latinity of some of the injunctions imposed. The injunction that fellows should recognize the queen, not as the 'suprema gubernatrix' but as the (*masculine*) 'supremus Gubernator' of the English Church meant that 'if it were nothing but for false Latin a scholer might honestly refuse to subscribe to such an Article.' Then as now, a penchant for pedantry is the essential attribute of the Oxford don.

In the body of the text, Stapleton took aim at another the articles. He objected to the claim that Scripture alone might settle all theological controversy: 'I wish here, if I speake not to[o] late to that godly foundation [i.e., New College], to the which being (though unworthy) a member sometime thereof, I ought of duty to wish the best, rather to forsake (as many, God be praised, have done) the comfortable benefit of that societie, then by absolute subscribing to such a dangerouse Article, a snare in dede against many Articles of our Faith, to fall to the approving of your heresies and so to forsake the Catholique societie of all Christendome, and of that Church wherein our Godlye founder (Bishope

Wicame of famous memorie) lived and died.’ Later Stapleton attempted to turn the same article to his advantage: ‘Againe you M[aster] Horne, that doe force the Scholers of Oxforde to sweare by booke Othe, that Scripture onelye is sufficiente to convince euerye trueth, and to destroye all heresies, you that will beleve nothing, but that as plaine Scripture avoucheth unto you, tell vs, I praye you, where finde you in all Scripture, that the Supreame Authoritie to governe the Church of God, is by the power of the swoorde?’ Horne’s visitorship, Stapleton noted many pages later, was similarly never mentioned in Scripture: ‘And yf we may not find it there, then by your own rule, when ye come next in visitation to Oxford, the schollers may fynd some prety exception against you.’ Stapleton sounded hopeful, but he would never see the walls of New College again. Perhaps it is some consolation to note that long after his departure, events at New College continued to make such an impact on Stapleton’s personal development. HEFCE, at least, would have been pleased.

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