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The king, the book and the painting: the emergence of anti-Catholicism, as depicted in *Beware the Cat* by William Baldwin, published 1570 and *King Edward VI and the Pope* by unknown artist, circa 1575

Edward VI's dying thoughts were of the looming threat to his kingdom of 'papistrie'. Others at the same time shared this concern: William Baldwin's *Beware the Cat* alludes to the threat of Catholicism obliquely in terms of a potential political significance, whereas the painting *King Edward VI and the Pope* painted during Elizabeth's reign, takes anti-Catholic rhetoric further, by emphasising the threat from a clearly defined and individual political figure – the Pope. This shift reflects Elizabethan concerns of the time and the need, through reference to Edward, to legitimise Elizabeth's own position as the head of the Church of England.

On 6 July 1553, three hours before his death, the fifteen-year-old Edward VI with closed eyes, made his final prayer to God. Having asked for deliverance out of 'this miserable and wretched lyfe' he then remembered his Christian teaching, tempering that request by humbly asking 'howbeit not my wyll, but thy will be done.'¹ Calling on God's blessing for the people of England, he then bequeathed to those very same people a future of religious uncertainty and turbulence with the words, 'Oh my Lorde God defende this Realme from papistrie...'

There were five witnesses to this private prayer, including the staunchly protestant Sir Thomas Wroth and Sir Henry Sidney, and whether of course this is a strictly accurate account of what was said, particularly since one of the attending doctors is reported to have told the king that 'we hearde you speake to your selfe, but what ye sayde, we knowe not', we cannot know with any certainty. What is of interest however is that Edward's final concern was at least understood by his subjects to be the spectre of Catholicism. Perhaps it is no surprise then that William Baldwin's *Beware the Cat* was written at about the time of Edward's death, and the unknown artist of *King Edward VI and the Pope*, working twenty-two years after the death of the king, nevertheless chose as the focus of his work the reign of Edward VI. This article will examine the messages that the author and artist were attempting to convey in their respective works in relation to the position occupied by Catholicism during the reign of Edward

¹ Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethesmene, the night before his death – Mtt 26:39

VI, and with regards of *King Edward VI and the Pope*, why an Edwardian setting was so essential to the artist.

Beware the Cat by William Baldwin is considered the first English novel, and is an odd and often unsettling satirical read, with in places a distinctly anti-Catholic bias. It dates from 1553, the final year of Edward VI's reign, although it remained unpublished until 1570, when anti-Catholic propaganda began to flourish following the northern rebellion of 1569 and the failure by northern Catholic nobles to depose Elizabeth in favour of Mary, Queen of Scots. The structure of the book is three interlocking stories or *Orations*, recounted by a fictional narrator Gregory Streamer, 'a divine'. Streamer's first Oration is an account of a strange tale concerning a Staffordshire man who is accosted one day by a talking cat that wants to pass on the baffling message that 'Grimalikin is dead.' Reaching home, the man recounts the story of the talking cat to his wife and household, but 'when he had told them all the cats message, his cat, which had hearkened unto the tale, looked upon him sadly, and at last said, "And is Gramalkin dead? then farewell dame!" and therewith went her way and was never seen after.' This story, although on its face perhaps nothing more than a simple story of nonsense, and indeed this is how some of the fictional listeners in the story view it, does on another level pose the question, how did the domestic cat know of Grimalkin in the first place, and what hold did Grimalkin have over that cat to make it want to leave the comfort of its Staffordshire home? Baldwin intimates by this tale and the allegorical use of cats that there exists a whole network of secret communication and affiliation amongst certain sectors of society, of which the rest of society is unaware.

The next story recounts the death of Grimalkin in Ireland. It begins with two men, a kern (a Gaelic soldier) and his horse keeper, stealing cattle and hiding in a church. They cook a sheep, at which point the she-cat Grimalkin enters and demands to be fed, going on to eat an entire sheep and cow. The kern kills Grimalkin but during an ensuing fight with a group of cats which come to Grimalkin's aid, the other man is killed, leaving the kern to return home to his wife and tell the tale. Upon hearing of his adventure however, '... a kitten which his wife kept, scarce half a yere old, had heard, up she starts and said, "Hast thou killed Grimallykin?" and therewith plunged in his face, and with her teeth took him by the throat, and ere that she could be plucked away, she had strangled him'. Again we see the secret network at play, and the kitten responding to a higher authority than that of its mistress, but this time prepared to kill in response to it.

The fictional narrator Streamer and his companions then discuss the plausibility of the story just recounted, and it is here that the anti-Catholic bias becomes apparent. Grimalkin is said to wield the same power over cats 'as the Pope hath had ere this over all Christendom, in whose cause all his clergy would not only scratch and bite, but kill and burn to powder though they know not why, whom so ever they thought to think against him'. Here Baldwin equates the unthinking obedience of cats towards

Grimalkin, to that of Catholics' loyalty to the Pope. Baldwin then goes further: one of Streamer's companions doubts the ability of Grimalkin to eat so much in one sitting, to which another companion replies that the Pope, 'all things considered, devoureth more at every meal than Grimalkin did at her last supper' with Streamer responding that 'although the Pope ... have spoiled all people of mighty spoils, yet, as touching his own parts, he eateth and wareth as little as any other man...'. This short exchange is rich in anti-Catholic rhetoric: first is the explicit point that the Pope has by deceit deprived 'all' people of their wealth; secondly, the reference to 'last supper' is reminiscent of Christ's last supper, at which the priesthood was instituted, and the comment that the Pope 'devoureth more at every meal' than this second 'last supper' is suggestive that the Pope has usurped or abused his position; and thirdly, that despite his own wrongful enrichment, the Pope is still the same as any other man, and subject to the same physical restrictions as any other human. As we shall see, these points are recurring observations in sixteenth-century anti-Catholic rhetoric.

According to Maslen, Baldwin's cats 'exhibit a number of characteristics which Protestant propagandists attributed to the Catholic clergy: they are sexually promiscuous, inordinately greedy [...] and given to meddling with magic'.² But given that some of Baldwin's cats live in Catholic households, and so we are presented with scenes wherein cats and Catholics co-exist, we cannot simply insert 'Catholic' for 'cat' - as tempting as it might be to do so. Little is known of William Baldwin other than that he studied logic and philosophy at Oxford before going on to write and publish various works between 1547 and 1569, the most famous of these being *Mirror for Magistrates* in 1559, an anthology of poems on the lives of historical figures seemingly as an example of how *not* to behave and for which Baldwin contributed four poems. We do not know Baldwin's motives for writing *Beware the Cat*, but whatever they were, an all-out attack on Catholicism does not appear to have been one of them.

Whereas the anti-Catholic message in *Beware the Cat* is often veiled and coded, in *King Edward VI and the Pope* it is about as explicit as it is possible to be. This picture is a 622mm x 908mm oil on panel group portrait, painted by an unknown artist circa 1575. The dating has proved somewhat controversial however: originally dated by Roy Strong at circa 1548 because of the presence in the painting of the Duke of Somerset as Lord Protector and inset scene of image-smashing, the dating was subsequently challenged by Margaret Ashton who posited that the painting is in fact Elizabethan, a suggestion which was later supported by dendrochronological analysis; the accepted dating by the National Portrait Gallery is now 1575.³ This issue over the dating has thrown up an interesting question: given that the picture was painted

² Maslan, RW 'Fictions and their Commentaries before 1570' from *Elizabethan Fictions: Espionage, Counterespionage, and the Duplicity of Fiction in Early Elizabethan Prose Narratives* Oxford Scholarship Online: October 2011

³ Strong, RC 'Edward VI and the Pope' *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* Vol 23, No. 3 / 4 (Jul - Dec 1960) p.311; Aston, Margaret *The King's Bedpost: Reformation and Iconography in a Tudor Group Portrait* (New York: Cambridge University Press 1994); www.npg.org.uk/collections

during the reign of Elizabeth, and that under Elizabeth there had been passed the Act of Supremacy which confirmed her as Supreme Governor of the Church of England as well as the revival of earlier Acts of Henry VIII that had been repealed by Mary, why has the artist chosen Edward VI as the focal point for his painting, and not Elizabeth? The answer lies in the composition of the work itself.



Anonymous, *King Edward VI and the Pope*, circa 1575, oil on panel, 24 ½ in x 35 ¾ in,
National Portrait Gallery, London © National Portrait Gallery, London

King Edward VI and the Pope is not so much a depiction as a narrative. The painting can be read from both left to right and top to bottom, its cruciform construction thus underscoring the religious nature of the work. On the left side of the picture is Henry VIII in bed and at the point of death; his serene features, white bedclothes and raised left hand – appearing to be something between a pointing and a blessing – give Henry an almost Christ-like appearance. The pointing from Henry to Edward signifies the succession of Edward as head of the Church of England: in the same way that Christ appointed Peter to be his successor on earth and thus the first in an unbroken chain of popes, so the Christ-like Henry is instituting a new, Protestant succession to rival – and indeed surpass – that of the Catholic apostolic succession.⁴ Both Henry and Edward look face-on at the viewer, the only characters in the group portrait to fully do so and thereby setting them apart from the other characters, which of course both spiritually and ecclesiastically they are. Edward's legs and feet however do not follow the line of his body and face on to the viewer, but instead point to the right, away from his father on the left, signifying that the path he is to take is a continuation

⁴ 'And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.' Mtt. 16:18

of that started by Henry VIII. In the top right hand corner of the painting is what appears to be a window through which can be seen a Marian statue being pulled down from its pedestal by two men, and another statue behind it being smashed by a third; by having this image at the far-right hand of the painting, these events are being portrayed as part of that continuous path that the new Protestant succession is ordained to follow, the succession from Henry to Edward being the starting point of a train of proceedings which would in due course and as a natural progression, take Elizabeth as the next Protestant successor.

Following the painting vertically, at the top of the axis is the Tudor coat of arms of lions quartered with French fleur-de-lis, directly below which sits Edward, and in turn below him, the Pope, possibly a reminder to the viewer of the Great Chain of Being and the Pope's true place in the world. The Pope's head has been knocked to one side by a book which is inscribed THE WORDE OF THE LORDE ENDVRETH FOR EVER – the opening words to 1 Peter 1:25 which goes on to say 'And that word is the Good News that was preached to you.' The reference to 'Good News' is important for it is the definition of *The Gospel*. So what the Pope is being struck down by is the bible itself, and not only that, but a bible written in English: the Protestant bible. The message that the Pope, here representing Catholicism, is wrong and Protestantism is right, cannot be more clearly conveyed. Both the Pope's triple crown and the two monks at his side, effectively his 'right-hand men', point to the left in the direction of death (here Henry's) and the past. On one flowing infula, one of the two ribbons on the Pope's crown, is the word IDOLATRY and on the other, SUPERSTICION, both anathema to any religion calling itself True. The Pope wears a rose coloured alb, a colour even today associated with *Gaudete* and *Laetare* Sundays in the Catholic liturgical calendar, and days upon which fasting requirements were relaxed – by having the Pope in a rose coloured alb, golden cloak and tiara with flowing infulae, he is portrayed in robes of office which are entirely ecclesiastical in origin and removed from any divine law consideration; from a Protestant viewpoint, these garbs would represent the epitome of excess.

Emblazoned across the Pope's chest are the words ALL FLESHE IS GRASSE, a reference to Isaiah 40:6-8 which reads in full 'All flesh is grass, and all its loveliness is like the flower of the field ... The grass withers, the flower fades, but the Word of our God stands for ever'; the meaning in relation to the Pope is clear, he is as mortal and corruptible as any other man. This reference is reminiscent of the comment that the Pope 'eateth and weareth as little as any other man' in *Beware the Cat*, and thus would appear to be a common theme in Edwardian and post-Edwardian thinking as an argument against papal supremacy. The two monks in the bottom left of the painting have been suggested by Strong to be in the act of pulling down King Edward's dais, and to make it clear on whose behalf they are doing it, a panel with the word POPS [popes] is attached to the chains they are using. Finally, in case the viewer still has any reservations as to the meaning intended, the artist has added the legend, FEYNED

HOLYNESS. The use of these words suggests they are intended for a particular person (the Pope), rather than a group of people (Catholics in general), and thus the depiction of the Pope in the painting is utilised not just as a representation of Catholic doctrine, but also as a political individual in his own right.

King Edward VI and the Pope thus conveys two very simple but forceful messages: first that Roman Catholicism or papistry is a false and corrupt religion that has already been judged so by God; and secondly that it is the Tudor dynasty which has the duty of putting Christianity back on the right (Protestant) path. The evils of papistry as portrayed in the painting appear to fall into two camps: doctrinal, hence the bible that fells the Pope being in English rather than Latin; and, in view of the activity of the two monks, political also, with the Pope being personally singled out. In *Beware the Cat*, whilst the Pope is mentioned, it is the Catholic system – the perceived blind obedience of its devotees – which is attacked, although Baldwin does so in an almost passing way; presumably if he felt, when writing in the final year of Edward’s reign, that Catholicism was a particular *political* threat then his references would have been all the more pointed; the fact that they are not suggests that whilst Catholics on a political level might have been viewed as having the *potential* for threat, they were not at that point perceived as a real or present danger. This is a view which appears to have been shared by Edward himself, whose antipathy for Catholicism appears to have at its heart the doctrinal differences between the two faiths. At the age of just twelve Edward wrote his *A Small Treatise Against The Primacy of The Pope* wherein he argued that the papacy was unable to adduce its supremacy from scripture and as a result Protestant adherents were not bound by the Pope’s authority and so were free to follow their own faith; thus it was the doctrinal differences between the two faiths that was at the heart of the king’s objections to the Pope. Indeed, Edward’s dying prayer that ‘Oh my Lorde God defende this Realme from papistrye ...’ goes on ‘... and mayntayne thy true religion, that I and my people may prayse thy holy name’, which does not of itself suggest that he was, even on his deathbed, overly concerned with any *political* threat Catholics at home or abroad might pose. In fact Baldwin and Edward VI share an interesting analogy of the Pope: whilst Baldwin has Grimalkin the cat consume a whole sheep, Edward has in his *Treatise* this to say of the Pope, ‘he doth not feed his sheep, but devours them, like a roaring lion who walks about to seek his prey’; and like Baldwin, he complains the Pope usurps his true position; perhaps then in interpreting Baldwin’s allusions to the Pope, we need to do so in the light of Edward VI’s own writings.

Twenty years later however the position had changed and with it the focus of anti-Catholicism in the arts. England had gone through five years under the Catholic Mary, Elizabeth had re-introduced Edward’s Book of Common Prayer and had the papal bull *Regnans in Excelsis* issued against her: what we see between 1553 when Edward VI made his dying prayer and Baldwin wrote *Beware the Cat*, and 1575 when *King Edward VI and the Pope* was painted, is a shift in anti-Catholic emphasis, from

Catholicism being an oblique threat and the Pope being a denounced because of the doctrinal beliefs he espoused, to Catholicism being a particular *political* threat, in the person of the Pope. As the political menace posed by Catholics during this period was perceived to increase, so did the need to strengthen Elizabeth's own position, and this is possibly why the need to bring Edward to the fore became so important: by emphasising the Tudor Protestant succession at its very earliest stage, back to Edward, Elizabeth's subsequent place in the succession could be presented as the natural progression, and thus all the more legitimate.

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