

A History of Seventeenth-Century English Literature

Thomas N. Corns

A History of Seventeenth-Century
English Literature

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To Pat, for even more patience

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Preface

This is a history of English literature in the seventeenth century. It covers writing in English in England and Wales. Writing in English in Scotland and Ireland, like new composition in Latin, figures only marginally, where it relates to or illuminates the principal subject. Literatures produced in the other languages of Britain and Ireland are not considered, because they are both beyond my remit and outside my competence.

Other decisions in the selection or omission of texts are less clear-cut. Those authors who currently are most read and studied receive most attention. I have added some non-canonical works to throw light on the mainstream, together with some which, in my view, have literary merit that has been overlooked. Writers who were once influential or were otherwise perceived as important in their own day are generally included, even though they have substantially fallen from the canon. Translation, particularly from the classical languages, was a significant component of the seventeenth-century experience of literature. Here my treatment is selective and perhaps somewhat arbitrary, though works which proved influential, like Sylvester's rendition of Du Bartas, are included. Dryden's late, glorious translations seemed too good and too important a component of his oeuvre to omit. Populist genres such as ballads or works of popular piety for the most part are drawn on only as part of the larger cultural context. Writers in other genres outside those that are typically considered literary appear intermittently. Francis Bacon and Thomas Sprat, who have often figured in critical histories of non-fictional prose, are engaged with in literary terms; Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, despite their higher status as thinkers, are not considered, except as influences on or analogues to other writers. Though both write with persuasive power, their

principal genius rests in their contribution to the tradition of western philosophy, and a proper appreciation of their work would have carried me beyond the concerns of literary history.

This study owes much to the kindness of others. Neville Davies, Paul Hammond, Neil Keeble, Robert Wilcher and David Womersley read and commented on large sections. Alastair Fowler read it in its entirety, and with extraordinary generosity met with me over two days to talk through matters of detail and some of the larger issues. More casual conversations with Gordon Campbell, David Loewenstein and Nigel Smith, particularly at the early stages, shaped the project more profoundly than they can have realized. The early modernists among my Bangor colleagues, Tony Claydon, Bruce Wood, Andrew Hiscock and Ceri Sullivan, have been a recurrent source of advice and assistance. The English department, by the sweat of its collective brow, made possible a semester of study leave at a critical point, and I am grateful, too, to Densil Morgan, who deputized for me as head of the School of Arts and Humanities over that period. Several people at Blackwell Publishing also deserve my thanks: Andrew McNeillie for encouraging me to take the commission on and Emma Bennett for encouraging me to finish it; and Karen Wilson and Sarah Dancy for seeing it through the final stages. The dedication acknowledges a more pervasive kind of debt.

Thomas N. Corns
Bangor, Gwynedd



The Last Years of Elizabeth I: Before March 1603

This chapter deals with the literary history of the concluding years of the Tudor era. In terms of the material circumstances of literary production and consumption, much that is described remained substantially unchanged from the 1590s, nor were there major discontinuities with literary life in the Jacobean decades. There were some highly significant shifts of emphasis, particularly in the structures of patronage, as the fall of Robert Devereux, second Earl of Essex, disrupted the complex web of protection and praise that had developed around his circle. The arrival of the Stuart court, with radically different cultural aspirations and a diverse and polycentric organization, would open new opportunities. Few of the writers who shaped the literary culture of the Elizabethan golden age lived into the new century. Sir Philip Sidney died in 1586, Edmund Spenser in 1599, Robert Greene in 1592, Christopher Marlowe in 1593, Thomas Kyd in 1594. The figures who dominate Jacobean literary culture, Francis Bacon (b. 1561), John Donne (b. ?1572), Ben Jonson (b. 1572), and William Shakespeare (b. 1564), were all writing, but only the last had achieved an eminence to match his Jacobean status. Sidney and Spenser, both available in print before 1600, offered a subtle and pervasive influence deep into the new century, and many earlier Elizabethan plays remained in the repertoire of London drama companies, but inevitably those deaths closed off some aspects of Elizabethan culture, despite the continuities, as surely as others with different aesthetic assumption and different strengths moved the tradition on. Yet late Elizabethan and Jacobean literary cultures shared much common ground.

Literary Consumption and Production

Literacy in the early modern period reflected gender, class (and more particularly profession) and geography. In all social groups, men were more likely to be more literate than women, reflecting, no doubt, assumptions about gender roles, though literacy rates among the upper classes were so high and among the very poorest so low that this factor lost its significance. Some professions required good literacy skills, though for others in the same social echelon the issue was less pressing. Once those factors are allowed for, it emerges that literacy rates in London were generally higher than elsewhere. Rates improve over the century, although, based on a simple test of whether people made a mark or signed their name, literacy levels were low. By 1640, 20 per cent of women and 40 per cent of men were signing official documents, rather than using a mark.

The test of literacy in this account, which rests entirely on David Cressy's classic study (1980), is undemanding, though social historians have often argued that the ability to read may have been enjoyed by some who were not able to write (see, for example, Spufford 1979 and Thomas 1986: 103, both discussed by Watt 1991: 7). This may well be the case; I can read modern Greek with facility, but find it exceptionally difficult to write. The skills needed to write one's name or indeed to make out the words in a simple text belong to a different order from those required to read, let alone write, literary English. Indeed, only tentatively may we surmise the literary experience of the poor and often unlettered majority of Elizabethan England. Certainly, we may identify a folk culture, resting in an oral tradition, of popular song, of dance and of tale-telling, most fully realized in seasonal festivals – pre-eminently Christmas, May Day, harvest-home – and the annual celebration of church-wakes, holidays commemorating the patron saints of parish churches. By the late Elizabethan period, some kinds of popular culture were to be found in print: ballads and chapbooks, sold by itinerants, have a place here, and the illiterate could still share some aspects of that print-mediated culture by learning songs from those who could read printed ballads, or listening to chapbooks read aloud. Arguably, popular ballads constituted one of the few points of cultural connection that transcended social division. As Tessa Watt puts it: 'Ballads were hawked in the alehouses and markets, but in the same period they were sung by minstrels in the households of the nobility

and gentry, who copied them carefully into manuscripts' (1991: 1). The ballad tradition resonates widely across high-culture genres and throughout the century. Ballad sellers and their songs figure in plays by Shakespeare and Jonson; the political and social satires of Rochester and his imitators were sometimes sung to their tunes. Indeed, estimates for the number of ballads printed in London in the half century to 1600 range from 600,000 to more than 3 million.

The very poorest were substantially excluded from written literary culture by indigence as well as illiteracy. A ploughman, a semi-skilled agricultural day labourer, earned five or six old pence a day (5d or 6d: about 2.5p) (Palliser 1983: 118). A penny would have got him into a public theatre or bought him a couple of single printed sheets (Gurr 1980: 197; Bennett 1965: 299); both expenditures seem improbable indulgences for a poor cottager, though the latter could have come to him as a hand-me-down, and there is ample evidence of ballads being posted decoratively in alehouses (Watt 1995: 253). Moreover, through the 1590s the gap between rich and poor increased and the conditions of the latter, through rural overpopulation and bad harvests, deteriorated very significantly (Sharpe 1995).

Yet among the middling sort, as they were contemporaneously termed, there emerged a general readership and elements of a theatre audience. In the rural context, the yeoman class and the lower gentry and, in towns and cities, the tradesman class below the ranks of the higher professions and prosperous burgesses bought and reflected on printed matter and sometimes had access to plays in performance. These consumer groups became more substantial over the Elizabethan period, in part because their disposable income grew (Palliser 1983: ch. 4), and in part because of growing literacy rates among them (Cressy 1980). Tessa Watt, considering the role of itinerant booksellers in disseminating print culture outside towns large enough to support their own booksellers, has analysed disposable income and assessed how this may have produced a market. Whereas a labouring man lived close to subsistence level, a small farmer working 30 acres could average 14d–18d surplus a week, sufficient to meet a taste for two-penny pamphlets, though probably more substantial works would have remained an infrequently purchased luxury (Watt 1995: 256).

The demand was reflected in publishing trends. The number of extant titles recorded per annum averaged 125 between 1558 and 1560, rising to 202 per annum between 1580 and 1589, although the figure slipped back a little thereafter (Bennett 1965: 271). Practical

and devotional works predominated, and recreational literary genres constituted a small but growing minority; among those, high literature was, quantitatively, slight. H. S. Bennett somewhat disdainfully observes:

The increase in the number of books published . . . fails to reflect the degree to which all classes of the public were being catered for, or that for one work such as the *Arcadia* there were a dozen ballads, or news pamphlets available for those whose ability to read and to reach any serious intellectual level was limited. (1965: 248)

Scarcely ‘all classes’, for the illiterate and penniless cottager had little stake in this culture. Nor should understanding and class be so readily equated. As we shall see, by the mid-seventeenth century, readers of modest attainment devoured texts aimed at a wide readership with a discerning and evident intelligence that alarmed their social superiors.

Indeed, among the most striking features of early modern literary culture is how profoundly fragmented it is. Apart from a pervasive interest in ballad ephemera, the only texts that all English men and women would have been exposed to were the instruments of institutionalized religion. The Elizabethan church settlement had returned England to Protestantism, and attendance at Sunday worship was legally required, under sanctions that sought to eliminate residual Catholicism and discourage the development of Puritanism. Such attendance brought even the illiterate into repeated contact with three texts: the Book of Common Prayer, the Bible readings it prescribed throughout the liturgical year, and the Book of Homilies. Here, and only here, may we identify a substantial and unified English literary culture in the early modern period.

Sunday worship was driven by the Book of Common Prayer, the ‘sombrely magnificent prose’ of which, in Eamon Duffy’s eloquent summary, ‘read week by week, entered and possessed [the] minds [of worshippers], and became the fabric of their prayer, the utterance of their most solemn and vulnerable moments’ (Duffy 1992: 593; cited and discussed in Maltby 2000: 5). The concern for religious uniformity ensured that the child of a cottager and the heir to an earldom may have entered the Christian community hearing the same prayer. When marrying, they would have made the same pledge. They would have descended to their graves as the priest read the same office for the dead. By 1600 Protestant uniformity was something of an objective

and aspiration of the Anglican hierarchy, threatened variously by adherents to the displaced Catholic faith and by Puritans for whom the prayer book itself was an obnoxious remnant of England's Catholic past. Yet the Book of Common Prayer, revised in 1559, permeated the collective consciousness of all English people. Its strengths were enormous. Founded, albeit somewhat covertly, on its Catholic predecessors, it drew on the psychological benefits of comforting ritual. As David Cressy and Lori Anne Ferrell shrewdly observe, it offered English worshippers 'an idiosyncratic form of Protestantism that was reformed in doctrine but traditional in liturgy' (1996: 40). It was endlessly reiterated. Cranmer and the team that produced the 1549 version from which, with significant changes of emphasis, subsequent editions derived, absorbed much of the vocabulary of the English Bible and recast that language into a balanced, sonorous style perfectly suited to ceremonious, ritualized delivery, producing a grave, eloquent and decorous prose. Moreover, the ceremonies it supported, requiring antiphonal exchange between minister and congregation, drew the laity into the act of corporate worship. The same service was conducted on the same day, at approximately the same time, in every English parish throughout the liturgical year. Many participants must have possessed their own text, both as an aid to participation and as a source of private solace and pious meditation. Judith Maltby estimates that 290 editions of the Book of Common Prayer were produced between 1549 and 1642, and more than half a million individual copies were in circulation by the end of that period, many in small print appropriate for personal use (Maltby 2000: 25). The Book of Common Prayer, though criticized by Puritans, in the phrase John Milton honed much later in the century, as 'the *Skeleton* of a *Masse-booke*' (Milton 1953–82: I, 597), assiduously asserted its Protestant faith, in its studied silences about the role of saints, in its explicitly Reformed eschatology (for example, in the Order for the Burial of the Dead), and in the symbolic, rather than mystical, interpretation of Holy Communion, though here the 1559 liturgy returned to some of the ambiguities of the 1549 which the more challengingly Protestant formulation of the 1552 version had excluded (Cressy and Ferrell 1996: 45). Moreover, its loyalty to the Crown is repeated explicitly: for example, the Order for the Administration of the Lord's Supper, or Holy Communion, includes prayers for the monarch.

The Church of England, like all Protestant churches of the early modern period, promoted the vernacular translation of the Bible. In

periods when Catholicism was the state religion, translators and promoters of English Bibles faced considerable difficulty. William Tyndale produced his translation of the New Testament in a cautiously self-imposed exile in Lutheran Germany, while the Geneva Bible, first published in 1560, was initiated by exiles from Marian persecution working in Switzerland, where the first edition was produced. The Elizabethan church settlement which returned England to Protestantism at first confirmed the official status of the so-called ‘Great Bible’ (second edition, 1540, and subsequently reprinted), but a new translation, the ‘Bishops’ Bible’ was shortly commissioned, and published in 1568. At the start of our period, this was the version appointed for use in churches. This version sought, in part, to oppose the Calvinist theology inscribed in the translation and more explicitly in the head-notes and marginal commentaries of the Geneva Bible, viewed by Matthew Parker, then Archbishop of Canterbury, as ‘bitter’ (quoted in Berry 1969: 12).

Whatever the aspirations of Parker and his episcopal colleagues, the Bishops’ Bible proved to be only a limited success in competition with the Geneva. Certainly, in the services of the Church of England its adoption was uniform. However, just as many worshippers had their own prayer books, so too did they have their own Bibles as an aid to personal devotion and study. While the Elizabethan settlement could legislate for uniformity of belief and promote it in corporate worship, the emphasis of the Protestant Reformation on believers’ obligations to their own piety empowered individuals outside the clergy to seek their own interpretation of the primary text and understand his or her own salvation. Here, in part because of its extreme utility in private study by theological amateurs, the Geneva version routed the official alternative (Corns 2000: 103). Each book has an abstract, as does each chapter. Each page has a header. The margins are crammed with glosses, interpretation, cross-references, and further pointers to context. Its evident concerns with personal salvation carry through to its final motto, appended to its penultimate page:

IOSHUA CHAP. 1 VERS. 8. Let not this boke of the Law departe out of thy mouth, but meditate therein daye and night, that thou mayest obserue and do according to all that is written therein: so shalt thou make thy way prosperous, and then shalt thou haue good successe. (Berry 1969: sig. LL13v)

Note the singular form: ‘*thou* make *thy* way’. This was a version tailored to the needs of single and private readers, not the corporate congregation, but those needs were met in ways that simultaneously drew them to a distinctively and polemically Calvinist interpretation, especially of the issue of salvation.

In statistical terms, the victory of the Geneva version is striking. Between 1560 and 1611, there were 7 editions of the Great Bible, 22 of the Bishops’ Bible and more than 120 of the Geneva version. While statutory requirements sought to secure exposure to the state religion in acts of corporate worship, in the homes of the literate and godly another interpretation, unsupported by the Church, guided them through personal and private reflection.

The Church of England brought two other texts into nationwide familiarity: the books of homilies, the first instalment of which had been published in 1547 as *Certayne Sermones or Homelies, Appoynted by the Kyniges Majestie to Be Declared and Redde by All Persones, Vicars, or Curates, Every Sondaye in Their Churches Where They Have Cure*, and John Foxe’s *Actes and Monuments of these Latter and Perillous Dayes*, first published in 1563 and generally know as the ‘Book of Martyrs’.

The homilies originated in the recognition in the earliest days of the English Reformation that the clergy required a preaching resource to carry the Protestant theology to newly converted or compliant congregations. At the restoration of Protestantism on the accession of Elizabeth, the first collection was reissued and a second collection was published in 1563, to which a final piece, *A Homily against Disobedience and Wilful Rebellion*, was added in 1570, against the background of the abortive Catholic uprising known as the Northern Rebellion. Elizabeth herself was the most enthusiastic promoter of the homilies as an instrument towards the confirmation of religious uniformity, and oversaw the second collection herself (Bond 1987: 11). Every church was charged with keeping a copy, and each minister, unless specially licensed to preach (as only a minority were), delivered by way of a sermon each Sunday the homily appointed for that day. Homilies dealt in Protestant fashion with the events of the liturgical year, with matters of popular morality and with the obligations of the congregation to the Church and state. The message was simple and usually uncompromising. The latest of them, against rebellion, solemnly traces oppositionalism to Lucifer, ‘the first aucthour and founder of rebellion’, and counsels the most passive obedience:

What shall subjectes do then? Shall they obey valiaunt, stoute, wyse and good princes, and contemne, disobey and rebell against children beyng [being] their princes, or against undiscrete and evyll governours? God forbid. For first what a perilous thing were it to commit unto the subjectes the judgement which prince is wyse and godly and his government good, and whiche is otherwise, as though the foote must judge of the head – an enterprise very heynous, and must needes breede rebellion. (Bond 1987: 210, 213)

Such sentiments, proclaimed from the pulpit of most English churches on the appointed day each year, achieved a signal resonance after the Essex uprising of 1601 and set the official position against which contemporary discussions and depictions of sedition and rebellion should be placed.

Elizabeth's own commitment to the pulpit dissemination of her version of orthodoxy did not command the unanimous support even of her own church leaders, some of whom recognized that it inhibited the development of a preaching ministry and felt uneasy about its doctrinal crudeness, while those of more Puritan leanings regarded the homilies as obstacles to further reformation. Nor do we find much evidence of the laity's enthusiasm for them as aids to private devotion; only in 1687, as they were falling out of use in church services, does an edition appear apparently intended for the private use of families (Bond 1987: 9–13).

Foxe's *Actes and Monuments* was not appointed to be read aloud as part of church services, but the Elizabethan state certainly promoted its success, recommending, but not requiring, that each parish acquire a copy to be kept available for the godly. For a large and expensive book costing over £6, its circulation was evidently considerable and it went through numerous editions: 10,000 copies may have sold by 1603 (Palliser 1983: 355). It was the only extensively illustrated book to which all English people could have claimed access. Numerous woodcuts in the early editions depict graphically those sufferings of the godly under Catholicism which its text narrates. The enthusiasm of the Crown for its promotion no doubt reflected anxiety about Catholic insurrection and, as the reign continued, the war with Catholic Spain. Its legacy in terms of popular anti-Catholic sentiment was protracted and profound. But Foxe commemorated for the most part martyrs of faith who opposed their ruler's right to determine their religious belief. Implicitly, the rights claimed for Elizabeth by the homily of 1570 are irreconcilable with celebration of that heroism. When Anne Askew, a young provincial gentlewoman racked and burnt under Henry VIII for her plainly

Protestant critique of the Catholic faith, retorts to her interrogator, 'I had rather to reade five lines in the bible, than to heare five masses in the temple' (Beilin 1996: 166), she expounds Reformed values, but she also asserts the rights of the individual believer to defy the requirements of Church and state in ways that are ultimately subversive of the programme which was to develop under Elizabeth. Unsurprisingly, Foxe retained his influence longest on suffering and defiant Puritan writers like John Lilburne and John Bunyan, for whom the experiences of the early Protestant martyrs provided paradigms for their own conduct and the representation of their personal defiance.

Books of popular piety appeared in increasing numbers through the later sixteenth century to meet the demand from the godly and literate for supplementary study materials to aid devotion, to improve their prospects for salvation, to solace them with recognition of their justification (Bennett 1965: 156). Probably about 40 per cent of all publications in the late Tudor and early Stuart periods were religious, and the proportion remained large among those cheaper items available to the literate among the poorer sort. Ballads on moral or religious themes constituted a very sizeable minority of that genre (Watt 1991: 333–53). Foxe profoundly influenced popular piety, and undemanding derivatives of his martyrology appear in the broadsheet ballad tradition. Indeed, a ballad purportedly written by Askew while in Newgate awaiting immolation appeared in a brief allusion in Thomas Nashe's prose work *Have With You to Saffron Walden* (1596), though the first extant printed version dates from 1624 (Beilin 1996: xxxix). The gap between first mention and first extant printing may suggest some evidence of the relationship between oral performance and print culture, though earlier editions may simply not have survived. Though clumsily phrased, the ballad assiduously rehearsed the dangers to individual consciences and salvation that would have been posed by a national return to Catholicism within a framework of pious reflection on the speaker's own frailty and the mercy and salvation extended to those who turn from sin, here, of course, represented by her own earlier subscription to the Catholic faith:

Strength me good Lord in thy truth to stand
for the bloody Butchers have me at their wil
With there slaughter knives ready drawn in ther hand
my simple carkas to devour and kill.

(Beilin 1996: 197)

Opposition to Catholicism was profound and commonplace among English Protestants of all classes.

Pious dross like the Askew ballad is far removed from the achievements of high literary culture of the late Elizabethan period, although of course probably much better known to most English people alive in 1600. The uniform devotional culture inculcated by the state church touched everyone, even those who resisted it. In comparison the market for those texts that are now most valued was tiny and fragmented.

In part the problem was one of scale. In 1600 the total population of England stood at about four million. Of these, about 30 per cent were under 15 years of age (Palliser 1983: 45), and probably 70 per cent of adults were illiterate or had only very rudimentary reading skills. Effectively, the maximum adult reading public was about 900,000, though only a small fraction had the learning or opportunity to participate in high literary culture. Many of the writers to be considered in detail in the early Stuart period had matriculated at Oxford or Cambridge, and much of their writing assumes some familiarity with classical culture; typically, the combined annual cohort for both universities numbered about 750 (*ibid.*: 363). Metropolitan London, that is the City and immediately adjacent conurbations, had about 200,000 inhabitants, and, as Cressy has demonstrated, literacy rates among these were higher than in the rest of England. No other city had more than 15,000 inhabitants, and probably only three (Norwich, Bristol and York) had more than 10,000 (*ibid.*: 203). The demography has far-reaching implications for literary consumption.

Only London was sufficiently large to sustain a developed system of booksellers and printers, although printing was allowed in Oxford and Cambridge, provincial cities and towns supported occasional booksellers, and itinerant chapmen served the rest of the country after a fashion. There is evidence from the mid-seventeenth century of a developing system of mail-order trading. However, for non-academic writers to get into print, their manuscripts, from whatever source, had to be available to the London book trade because there were no appropriate presses elsewhere. Moreover, a print culture, with habitual readers seeking out literary publications from a range of suppliers, only developed in the metropolis.

Only London could sustain professional theatres on a permanent basis. Amateur dramatics played some role in the recreational life of schoolboys and Oxford and Cambridge students. The performance of

Latin plays combined both recreational and educational purposes. London companies and less formal bands of actors toured provincial towns and cities. Even quite modest houses sometimes provided performing spaces. Aristocratic households sometimes supported companies of actors, though the evidence comes from the sixteenth, rather than the seventeenth, century. Overwhelmingly, however, theatrical performance was a metropolitan phenomenon, and in 1600 there were almost certainly no purpose-built or dedicated performing spaces outside London.

But, again, that London market was fragmented by class, by profession, by generation, by gender and by geography. We may identify several cultural communities, though each in turn was subdivided.

Until her declining years Elizabeth frequently made summer ‘progresses’ through the shires (though never north of Stafford). But the royal court resided for most of the year in palaces around the Thames Valley, and predominately in the large complex of buildings in Whitehall, to the west of the City (Palliser 1983: 10). Here dwelt the queen and her household, and those closest to her in the administration of government had accommodation too. By the 1630s the royal household had grown to between 1,800 and 2,600, and with their dependents Whitehall probably had a population little short of that of Exeter or Norwich (Carlton 1995: 124). The population of Elizabeth’s court, though certainly smaller, would still have been considerable. Aristocrats also kept substantial London households, with a hierarchy of retainers, from senior agents, ‘secretaries’ (in effect personal assistants), chaplains and advisers, down to domestic servants, again many with their dependents. Many, though not all, of these great houses lined the north bank of the Thames from the City to Whitehall. This social cluster of monarch and aristocrats supported a court culture, of which literature was a fairly important component, made up a highly literate and prosperous readership and acted as the principal source of patronage and protection. Court entertainments involved actors and musicians drawn from the professional companies, and court performances of plays from the repertoire of the companies were lucrative if infrequent.

All but one parish of the City was within the medieval walls in an area a little more than a mile from west to east, and less than that northward from the Thames. It had a complex system of local government, with a corporation dominated by prominent members of the more prosperous guilds, and a Lord Mayor, who was chosen annually.

Its principal businesses were organized through a series of guilds, 'the livery companies', each with a guildhall and its own system of governance. Among these, the Stationers' Company controlled and regulated the manufacture and sale of printed matter, and is given closer attention below. But guilds also commissioned writing, particularly texts for their corporate ceremonies, pre-eminently the pageant associated with the annual inauguration of the Lord Mayor. The corporation of the City exercised fairly strict control over all public activities, and towards the end of the Elizabethan period drama companies tended to establish themselves outside their jurisdiction.

Around the City, and particularly in Southwark, on the opposite bank of the Thames, and to the north and east of the City walls in a series of parishes extending along the north bank with its docks and quays and inland towards Hackney and Stepney, there rapidly developed a sprawling conurbation collectively known as the 'suburbs'. Indeed, as the metropolis more than quadrupled its population over the early modern period, nearly all the growth took place outside the City wall (Beier and Finlay 1986b: 8). Here, local government control was slacker, providing a more straightforward area of operation for London's theatres. Certainly, the suburbs contained some of the poorest areas, and plague lingered longer and took more victims than in the City itself. But here, too, manufacturing industry flourished outside the control of the guilds, and the enterprising, aspirational and literate, with some disposable income, lived here in their thousands (Beier 1986: 155), making, with similarly affluent citizens of the City, a large market for printed matter and a potential component of theatre audiences.

A strip of territory, about a quarter of a mile across and running from what is now High Holborn southwards to the north bank of the Thames, contained (as it still does) the four Inns of Court. These served (as they still do) the legal profession with an operational base and functioned as an educational institution for lawyers. Legal studies at Oxford and Cambridge were restricted to Civil Law, based on Roman Law, which was of limited application, being the basis of proceedings in the Chancery, the Admiralty Court, the Court of Requests and the ecclesiastical courts. Common Law operated in the rest of the judicial system. The Inns were governed by senior practitioners of the Common Law (usually termed 'benchers'), men (and only men) typically with two decades of experience, who practised law from their chambers and who regulated entry into and promotion

through a profession which could be lucrative and which carried some prestige, though also, perhaps, some lingering taint of the social stigma which adhered to anyone in early modern England who had to work for a living (Prest 1972: 22, 61). The Inns were described during the Elizabethan period as England's 'third university', since they enrolled students, provided instruction and granted a higher education qualification, but as Wilfred Prest sagely observes, they 'were at once both more and less than a university' (ibid. 115).

They were much smaller. Membership was for life (as it still is) but actual residence was irregular, and while the records indicate the numbers entering each Inn, how many were living there at any point remains more speculative. Prest suggests that by the beginning of the seventeenth century there were probably about 1,000 members in all during term time, though with some fluctuations. Oxford and Cambridge probably had more than 2,000 undergraduates each, plus other categories of residents. However, the Inns were socially more exclusive, in part because no scholarships subsidized the expenses of more needy students, there was no scope for working one's way through by acting as servants to richer students (another option at the universities) and costs were high – about £40 per annum, at a time when the most wealthy yeomen farmers were typically drawing £100 from their lands (ibid.: 16, 27). Not only were the Inns' young members the children of the wealthy, they often showed very little interest in the law. Certainly, the legal profession had its attractions, not least because it could lead to a range of appointments and careers outside the law courts, as accountants, brokers, financiers, entrepreneurs and land agents (ibid.: 22). In such a litigious age, when men of property had frequent recourse to law, some familiarity with Common Law could prove a useful accomplishment. But significant numbers, by the late Elizabethan period, were attending the Inns as a sort of finishing school, and such a cluster of young men with time and disposable income had an impact on the economy and the cultural life of the capital disproportionate to their mere numbers.

The Inns directly patronized the professional theatre companies, hiring them for private performances, particularly over the Christmas festivities, and they intermittently staged masques, sometimes presenting them at the royal court. They also supported chaplains and a preaching ministry, adding to the diversity of religious life around the City. Most obtrusively, members of the Inns attended the professional theatres. At a time when performances were usually given in

daylight in the afternoon, these men were more likely to have the leisure to attend than citizens engaged in business and trade. That leisure promoted their most significant, though less visible, literary activity: the writing, circulating and collecting of verse, particularly lyric poetry. This was predominately a manuscript culture, for which the most influential model and inspiration was John Donne, a member of Lincoln's Inn in residence in the early 1590s. But, of course, they also bought printed books.

Latin, Neo-Latin and English

The literary culture of early modern England was further fragmented along language divisions. Elite male education sought to produce people who could read, write and converse in Latin with facility. Latin was largely the medium of instruction in the grammar schools that prepared boys for the universities and learned professions, and, outside the Inns of Court, it dominated teaching and learning in higher education. It held a similar place in the private education favoured by the upper gentry and aristocracy for their children (sometimes including girls). Among the principal achievements of the pan-European humanist movement of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries had been the major overhaul of Latin education. At its foundation was the re-establishment of spoken and written Latin on classical models, achieved by purging medieval neologisms from its lexis and replacing them with classical equivalents. To support this transformation, educational reformers placed fresh emphasis on learners' assimilation of the classical idiom through extensive reading and memorizing of approved authors from the classical canon. Almost as a by-product, the classical literary tradition became a central part of the educational experience of England's educational and social elite, through familiarity with Cicero (especially his letters), with Terence and with Virgil. Neo-Latin style was conceived as perfectible through imitation of such models, and the practice of Latin composition – that is, of literary production in neo-Latin – was concomitant with educational reform, though by 1600 schools were relying more heavily on a new generation of textbooks at the expense of early exposure to primary classical texts (Jensen 1996).

Such an education, for those with an aptitude for second-language acquisition, meant access to a fairly extensive literary culture available

in print, the literary culture of ancient Rome. But widespread competence in the Latin language also supported another cultural movement of enormous importance in England as elsewhere in Europe, although one whose extent and achievement are now largely forgotten: neo-Latin writing. The cultural elite of England frequently produced in Latin not only technical or administrative or academic prose, but also a wide range of creative genres. New plays in Latin were performed in the universities, sometimes in circumstances of great celebrity and acclaim. Elizabeth attended such performances at least three times, and James I at least four (Binns 1990: 136). Continental neo-Latin poets were reprinted in England as part of a substantial print culture in this medium, foreign-printed works were extensively imported, and, as J. W. Binns has so comprehensively demonstrated, hundreds of items were printed in England as part of a rich, varied and extensive print culture (*ibid.*: 553–601).

On Binns's account, the Latin-medium material offered to its readers an experience so fulfilling as to render vernacular literature unnecessary and unsought for:

[N]eo-Latin books furnished all the material needed for the creation of self-contained, self-sufficient, rich and satisfying, literary and intellectual culture. To those who moved freely within it in the age of Elizabeth and James I, there can have seemed little need to turn to popular vernacular writing. Virtually every taste was, after all, catered for in Latin. There were novels, poems and plays in profusion, books of history and travel, letters, tracts and treatises on a wide variety of topics. Neo-Latin could provide ample material for serious study, and for leisure reading too. This, perhaps, is why vernacular writing is so rarely referred to in neo-Latin works. Vernacular writing belongs, on the whole, to a different world; and much of the English vernacular writing of the time may have seemed crude, clumsy and uncouth to the average reader and writer of neo-Latin literature, apparently offering nothing which could not more agreeably be found in Latin. It is for this reason that Latin literature dominated the high intellectual culture of Elizabethan and Jacobean England. (1990: 393–4)

Binns is a stirring advocate for a largely forgotten literary culture, and the case he makes for its range and currency is convincing. Moreover, any alternative literary tradition, in competition for a readership already narrowly circumscribed by demography and social exclusion, necessarily contracts further the demand for high-culture vernacular

literature. But the sharpness of the division may be questioned. Neo-Latin writing may not allude to vernacular literature, but among the most accomplished vernacular writers of the late Elizabethan and Stuart periods there are those whose oeuvre embraces both cultures: Donne, Bacon, Jonson, Milton and Marvell, for example, write in both languages. Neo-Latin and vernacular poems were sometimes published in the same books (see below, chapter 5). Neoclassicism develops across the seventeenth century as the most dynamic and pervasive cultural ideology in English vernacular literature. It is surely fed by an admiration for and familiarity with the classical literary tradition, both of which find parallel reflection in the production of and demand for neo-Latin writing.

Manuscript, Performance, Print

Most of the literary legacy of the late Elizabethan period began in manuscript. Songs may have had a rather different early life, as lyricist-composers may have performed new work experimentally before committing it to paper, though the lag may well have been trivial: manuscripts of lyrics with tablature are not rare. Generally and unsurprisingly, most works of literature, including play texts, were transmitted first as ink on paper.

Few working manuscripts of significance survive from this period. Perhaps the most famous – and most disputed – is the play text, *Sir Thomas More* (British Library, MS Harley 7368). The main part of the manuscript is a fair copy of a play sometimes assigned to 1600–1, into which, by way of revision, has been inserted pages in a hand that has been identified as William Shakespeare's (Schoenbaum 1975: 156–60). Yet here, though worked over with a few deletions and additions, the document appears to be a fair copy or late draft. The disappearance of first and early drafts, however, is unsurprising. Writing paper was expensive. Little was manufactured in England, where paper production was overwhelmingly directed to producing brown paper. Nearly all paper for both manuscript and print was imported from France and the Low Countries until very late in the seventeenth century. The two kinds were distinguished primarily by the finish given to them. Paper for pen and ink was sized (that is, sealed with a glutinous wash to render it less porous) more heavily than printing paper, which had a greater absorbency, a technical distinction that reflected the differing