

The Dutch Church: The Dissolution and its Tragic Aftermath

by Mathew Lyons

It is convenient for historians to conceive of history in neat discrete categories, but all too often that approach both obscures continuities and suggests that events are less brutally random than they are. There are, for instance, many ways of writing about the influence of the English Reformation and the dissolution of the monasteries on Elizabethan drama, from the survival of catholic ritual culture to the routes and routines of the traveling players. But some connections are more direct.

For all that Tudor London was dominated by the solidity, tradition and history that churches represented, it was also a city in transition. Henry VIII's Reformation had ruined the great religious houses of England, and London suffered no less than the rest of the country. In 1536, there had been 12 monasteries in and around London, including the Benedictine order at St Helens in Bishopsgate and the Augustinians outside the walls to the north, at Holywell Priory in Shoreditch. There were twelve principal houses of friars in London, too, among them the Carmelites at Whitefriars and Dominicans at Blackfriars – and many smaller houses, together with 25 major hospitals under the auspices of the old religious orders and again innumerable minor ones.

That was, of course, not in Shakespeare's lifetime and barely in that of his father, John, who was probably born in 1530. Fifty-odd years on from the dissolution, the institutions and social structures that they supported – including care for the poor and the sick – were indeed long gone: they had disappeared with such speed that the Lord Mayor in 1537-8, Sir Richard Gresham, who lived in the aforementioned Milk Street, had pleaded for some hospital buildings and churches to be spared, because without them Londoners simply didn't have enough of either. The shock waves through the social order that the dissolution unleashed were still being felt at the end of the century: more explicit social controls, such as the 1572 Act for the Punishment of Vagabonds, were required to deal with the fallout, using the judicial system to deal with problems such as poverty, incapacity and mental illness that had hitherto been accommodated, if not wholly addressed, by the old religious orders.

The buildings themselves proved less tractable. Certainly some were destroyed; but it is far from clear how clean or complete the destruction was. The reality was most likely somewhat messier, with the impact of the Reformation painfully and plentifully visible across the city in broken walls and ruined cloisters, newly open spaces, building sites and smart new houses abutting the boundaries of the old and unhoused orders. In practice, too, adaptation went hand in hand with the demolition. So at Elsing Spital, for instance – the priory hospital of St Mary the Virgin, close to where Wood Street crosses London Wall – the hospital itself, together with the prior and canons' house and other lodgings, were turned into a substantial residence. The main aisle of the church itself was pulled down and four further houses erected in its place. What remained



William Paulet, c1560s, by an unknown artist.

of the church became the new parish church for St Alphage, which had hitherto been on London Wall. The latter's previous church was pulled down, its site becoming a carpenter's yard complete with sawpits. The churchyard of the priory became a garden, with the cloisters, resiled from contemplation, were reborn as a walking gallery. Last and no doubt least, the priory's poorhouses became stabling – presumably for the horses of the its wealthy new residents.

Similar stories were unfolding across the city. A few hundred yards east of Elsing Spital lay the 13th-century Augustinian monastery known as Austin Friars. A street still bears that name today; it lies towards the eastern edge of the site, which ran south from London Wall to Throgmorton Street and east/west from what is Old Broad Street to Cophall Avenue. Sir William Paulet, Henry VIII's then Lord Treasurer, took the monastery at the dissolution, knocking down the friars' house, cloister and gardens to build for himself a mansion fitting for someone of his status. That extended from London Wall down Old Broad Street as far as Austin Friars, with gardens behind of similar extent. (Stow grumbled that, whereas before there had been public access through the gardens to London Wall, Paulet blocked in the gates, thus forcing people to walk

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The Dutch Church (cont.)

around via Austin Friars.) Created First Marquess of Winchester in 1551 by Edward VI, Paulet was the survivor par excellence of Tudor court politics. Living to the extraordinary age of 92 – he died in 1572 – Paulet contrived to serve Henry VIII and each of his three children in turn at the highest level from the mid-1520s through to the late 1560s, when – in the words of Elizabeth I – ‘the decay of his memory and hearing, griefs accompanying hoary hairs and old age’ rendered him incapable of further service. He is said to have summed up his recipe for political success to a friend with the phrase ‘I am made of pliable willow, not of the stubborn oak’.

Whatever his true beliefs, Paulet certainly had no sentimental attachment to the Catholic faith of his birth. He split the church of the Austin Friars in two. The eastern half – encompassing the steeple, the choir and the aisles adjoining the choir – Paulet kept for himself, turning it into a store-room for coal and corn and other domestic supplies. Paulet’s son, the second Marquis of Winchester, later sold the funerary monuments of the many noblemen buried there, together with the flagstones from the church floor, for £100. Eventually, he sold the lead from the roof, too. He wanted the space for stables. In 1600, he had it pulled down.

The western end of the church survived, however. In 1550, Paulet had given it to the immigrant Dutch community in London for their church; there is still a Dutch Church on the site today, although it has been rebuilt twice in the intervening 400 years. The church that Shakespeare knew had, said Stow, ‘a most fine-spired steeple, small, high, and straight; I have not seen the like’. You can see it on the short horizon of Visscher’s 1616 View of London, drawn from the South Bank. It is nestled, as Stow says, delicate and tall, between the Exchange and St Michael’s, more or less on a line north from Winchester House.

Shakespeare and his fellow players had reason to know the Dutch Church aside from its impact on the skyline. On Saturday 5 May 1593, not long before midnight, someone evaded the nightwatch to peg a document to the wall of the churchyard. That action led directly to the deaths of both Christopher Marlowe and Thomas Kyd, the two most influential and gifted young playwrights of the late 1580s.



Visscher’s panorama, 1616. Detail, showing the Dutch Church.

The document was an attack on the new Dutch immigrants in London, one of a number over recent days, and was signed Tamberlaine, after Marlowe’s best-known character. Fearing that these libels would incite violence on the streets, the Privy Council leapt into action.

Kyd, gathered up in the sweep that followed, was a prisoner by the next day. His room had been searched and a heretical tract found. Kyd denied all knowledge of it, and blamed his association with Marlowe. Marlowe, then out of town, was brought before the Privy Council on the 18th. He was freed on bail, only to be stabbed to death in Deptford on the 30th. Kyd may have been tortured; he was certainly broken by the experience. He was dead the following summer, aged just 35.

Perhaps such continuities and connections are no more than stories – random events woven through the slow life of a building. Perhaps some events are indeed inevitable and the confluence of violent protest and its oppression, and of Thomas Kyd and Kit Marlowe would have happened, and with such fatal consequences, Dutch Church or not.

Or perhaps we might take the story to be less about the body of the church than about its metaphorical presence, about how the ideological self-righteousness and downright rapacity that marked the dissolution robbed us not only of the dazzling riches of much medieval English culture, but also of two of our greatest playwrights – as surely as puritanism slowly killed the performing culture which gave life to their art.

Or perhaps, had Paulet needed a bigger store room, say, then we would now be marveling at the late plays of Kyd and Marlowe, as we do with the redemptive and magical solace of *The Winter’s Tale* and *The Tempest*.



About Mathew Lyons

Mathew Lyons is the author of the critically acclaimed *Impossible Journeys*, described by the *Guardian* as ‘a non-fiction companion to the tall tales of Italo Calvino’s *Marco Polo*’. It was the *Folio Society*’s bestselling title through 2010. His most recent book is *The Favourite*, which was published in paperback in June. (www.mathewlyons.co.uk)