Chapter 6

Reformed folklore? Cautionary tales and oral tradition in early modern England

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PROTESTANTISM AND PRINT have often been presented as inherently hostile to oral tradition. Historians have credited both with a leading role in marginalizing, fossilizing, and ultimately suffocating the vernacular culture of late medieval England. Still widely regarded as a movement whose success depended upon the spread of literacy and the advent of the press, the Reformation is commonly associated with attempts to eradicate the 'heathenish superstitions', 'popish fables' and 'old wives tales' which the populace had inherited orally from its 'benighted' Catholic ancestors.

This chapter reinforces recent suggestions that both aspects of this paradigm are in need of refinement. Important work by Keith Thomas, Daniel Woolf, Adam Fox and others has taught us that literacy and orality coexisted in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century society in a mutually enriching equilibrium. For all their 'imperialistic potential' print and writing never entirely displaced speech: on the contrary, their increasing diffusion served in the short term to enhance and rejuvenate oral culture and communication.¹ Here I want to argue that Protestantism's part in the eclipse and demise of the authority of the spoken word was similarly equivocal. Although it aligned itself powerfully with the authority of writing and print and developed a pronounced polemical bias against verbal transmission, in many respects the Reformation did more to sustain and stimulate the latter than it did to erode and extinguish it. As a study of the many pious anecdotes of providential punishment circulating in this period will reveal, Protestantism effectively forged an oral tradition of its own – albeit one deeply infected by literature and learning. Recycling older materials and incorporating new ingredients, it created a distinctive body of tales and stories which might legitimately be described as a corpus of Protestant legend and folklore.

I

Long before the Reformation, ecclesiastical leaders heralded literacy as a potent instrument of civilization and enlightenment and an efficient remedy for the evils of heresy and disbelief: 'W'ithout lytterature', wrote a Benedictine monk around 1513, the 'comyn people ... Ben lyke to Brute beestes'.² Echoed and elaborated after the invention of the mechanical press, this was a theme which the Protestant reformers commandeered as their own. Loudly condemning the Roman Catholic hierarchy for tyrannically withholding the vernacular Bible from the laity, they liked to depict themselves as liberators democratically dispersing the holy text of Scripture to a populace whose religion had hitherto consisted of the mindless performance of empty rituals.³ In his *Acts and Monuments* John Foxe declared triumphantly that unless the Pope abolished printing it would 'at length ... root him out'.⁴ Many an Elizabethan and Stuart preacher spoke of literacy as nothing less than an agent of salvation: 'how many for want of reading have lost their precious souls?' lamented George Swinnock in 1663.⁵ Protestant confidence in the power of the written word to dispel the dark mists of popish idolatry and semi-pagan superstition persisted throughout the seventeenth century and can be detected in John Aubrey's 'Remaines of Gentilisme and Judaisme' (c. 1686–88) beneath a thin veneer of nostalgia: 'the many good Bookes, and variety of Turnes of Affaires, have put all the old Fables out of dores: and the divine art of Printing and Gunpowder have frightened away Robin-good-fellow and the Fayries'.⁶

The corollary of Protestantism's attempt to affiliate itself with the forces of rationality and knowledge was its characterization of Catholicism as a faith rooted in rural ignorance and unthinking traditionalism. Illiteracy came to be seen as a chief cause of the residual popery which plagued Puritan evangelists in the dark corners of the land.⁷ Ministers repeatedly attributed the ungodliness of their congregations to the defects of their education and the incorrigible pelagianism of the figures who inhabit George Gifford's *Countrie Divinitie* (1581) and Arthur Dent's *Plaine Mans Path-way to Heaven* (1601) is in large part a function of their inability to read.⁸ Over time the two became synonymous, the stigma of the one reinforcing the slur and taint of the other. As Alison Shell observes in a forthcoming monograph, Catholicism was thus inexorably conflated with orality.⁹

This tendency was closely linked with the reformers' assault on the blind devotion of popish lay-people to 'humane traditions' passed down to them by their forefathers.¹⁰ Protestant propagandists launched a vehement attack upon the extra-biblical foundations of the old religion, denouncing the Church of Rome for elevating papal decretals, conciliar decrees and a miscellaneous collection of verbally transmitted doctrines to equal standing with Scripture,

and for insisting that belief in them was necessary to ensure eternal life. To accord such importance to tenets which could not be found in the canonical books of the Bible was, in the eyes of the godly, to cast an outrageous slight on Scripture, to insinuate that it was both imperfect and incomplete. This theme was graphically embodied in an illustration in Foxe's *Acts and Monuments*: 'A lively picture describyng the weight and substaunce of Gods most blessed word, agaynst the doctrines and vanities of mans traditions' (Plate 1). In it, the single volume of *Verbum Dei* easily outweighs the messy jumble of flimsy authorities piled on by the pope and his minions, despite the desperate efforts of a friar and the devil to drag the scales of justice down on Antichrist's side. The opposition between Scripture and tradition was a constant refrain in anti-Catholic controversial works from the 1530s onwards, reflecting the issue's status as a crucial point of differentiation between the two faiths. For their part, committed Romanists continued to defend the Church's role as a faithful custodian of teachings derived from Christ and his disciples but never inscribed in holy writ.¹¹

Protestant polemicists like William Perkins compared this body of precepts with the Hebrew *Cabbala* – a supplementary code delivered to Moses, which had also remained unrecorded for several generations. Giving expression to a tacit anti-semitism, they dismissed it as 'no better than a Jewish dotage'.¹² They scoffed at suggestions that the 'great chest of traditions which Saint Peter did not put in writing' was in any way an infallible guide to God's will. While they had to concede that the Old and New Testaments themselves had been preserved orally by the patriarchs, prophets and apostles for decades and centuries before being immortalized on paper, they were insistent that, once fixed in written form by the Lord's appointment, it alone became the fount and foundation of Christian faith and truth.¹³ The Bible should be 'the sole anker of our hope', said the future Archbishop of Canterbury George Abbot; the very word Scripture itself expressed 'the manner of delivering' divine truths, declared the Yorkshire preacher Francis Bunny, 'namely by writing'.¹⁴ In short, they came close to claiming that textuality was intrinsic to the sanctity of holy writ, that God's meaning resided in the actual letters arranged on the page. It was no wonder that their Catholic opponents accused them of 'inkie divinitie'.¹⁵

In tract after tract Protestant divines denigrated Catholicism's dependence on a set of tenets enshrined in the unstable spoken word. Unwritten verities, remarked Abbot, were the 'sandy foundation' on which 'all your rotten building doth rest'. The mere credit of men, maintained William Middleton, was 'a poor stay for a Christian conscience'. Meditating on the unreliability of information conveyed by the ephemeral mechanism of speech, Antony Wootton wondered how traditions could ever be kept 'without adding and altering, if they have no better guide then the memories of men ... which may often faile them'.¹⁶ '[I]f entrance once be given to laws that pass by the

A lively picture describyng the weight and substaunce of
Gods most blessed word, agaynst the doctrines and
vanities of mans traditions.

AT LONDON
Printed by Iohn Daye, dwellyng ouer
Alderfgate beneath Saint Martins.

Plate 1. A lively picture describyng the weight and substaunce of Gods most blessed word, agaynst the doctrines and vanities of mans traditions. John Foxe, *Acts and Monuments* (London, 1576 edn), II. 771.
(By permission of the British Library, c.15, c.8.)

word of mouth', feared Edwin Sandys, anarchy and heresy would reign: 'the undoubted articles of our belief cannot choose but at the length become doubtful and uncertain, like a tale that passeth from man to man, and is told as many ways as there are men to tell it'. The primitive Christians, he added, 'never inquired what had been whispered in men's ears; that which they believed and taught, they read it out of the book'. Richard Hooker likewise observed in his *Lawes of Ecclesiastical Politie* (1595): 'What hazard the truth is in when it passes through the hands of report ... how maimed and deformed it becomes'. Writing thirty years later Bishop Joseph Hall of Exeter closely echoed these rhetorical complaints: 'As for orall Traditions, what certaintie can there be in them? What foundation of truth can be layd upon

the breath of man? How doe wee see the reports varie, of those things, which our eyes have seene done? How doe they multiply in their passage, and either growe, or dye upon hazards?’¹⁷

An integral part of this sustained Protestant critique of unwritten traditions was the claim that many of them had been fabricated by the corrupt medieval priesthood to magnify their position and keep the laity in passive submission. In a tract which branded ‘the pretensed religion of the Sea of Rome ... a false, bastard, new, upstart, hereticall and variable superstitious devise of man’, Josias Nicholls accused the Catholic clergy of manufacturing ‘verie fables’ to legitimize their innovations and give themselves an air of ‘antiquitie’.¹⁸ Carrying forward the early reformers’ contempt for miracle tales and the legends of the saints, the Jacobean minister Richard Sheldon was equally scathing about ‘old Monkes fictions’ and Romish ‘legerdermaine’: such false and lying wonders were ‘always in hugger mugger, brought from farre off, and beleevved by hearesay’. Incorporated in the Golden Legend, they amounted to nothing less than a dunghill of lies. According to the Norfolk physician John Harvey, counterfeit prophecies and foolish tales of hobgoblin, Guy of Warwick, Robin Hood and Maid Marian were also the ‘trim worke’ of ‘idle Cloistermen, mad merry Friers, and lustie Abbey-lubbers’. Designed ‘to busie the minds of the vulgar sort’ and deflect them from meddling with ‘mysticall privities’, they were a kind of popish opium of the people.¹⁹ For Reginald Scot, the whole myth of witchcraft was also part of this Catholic conspiracy: silly nonsense dreamt up by ‘masse preests’, passed down by ‘old doting women’ and ‘mothers maids’, and eventually ‘swallowed up through tract of time, or through their own timerous nature or ignorant conceipt’. In his *Perambulation of Kent* (1576) William Lambarde likewise devoted much space to exposing historical forgeries perpetrated by the ‘Popes parasites’, which had been absorbed into oral culture and ‘common opinion’. Among the many examples of the ‘grosse jugling that these slowe bellyed Syres used to delude the world’ which he cited, were the legends about the miraculous moving eyes of the Holy Rood of Boxley, the wonders worked by Our Lady of Chatham, and the ‘unwritten vanities’ connected with St Thomas à Becket at Canterbury.²⁰ Curiously anticipating the insights of Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, such writers declared Roman Catholicism guilty of inventing ‘traditions’.²¹

By this insidious, two-way process of association, then, popery came to be inextricably linked with verbal transmission. The equation of ‘oral tradition’ with ‘superstition’ was already a trope centuries old: in the twelfth century Guibert of Nogent was contrasting unimpeachable written evidence with inauthentic spoken report and using it to discredit facets of popular Breton belief about saints and relics of which he fiercely disapproved.²² No doubt this polemical dichotomy has even earlier antecedents: it was a perennial product of moments of cultural contest, displacement and rupture rather than an exclusive legacy of the Lutheran and Calvinist religious revolutions.

In the context of the Reformation, however, it took on explicitly anti-Catholic overtones. Confessional prejudice converged with learned contempt of the illiterate to create an enduring nexus between the medium of the spoken word and the dissemination of ridiculous and improbable 'popish' fictions. In turn, it might be observed, this interconnection acquired a gender dimension: as preachers began to trace the causes of vestigial Catholicism to female credulity, so 'old wives' tales' became a form of shorthand for the 'lying vanities' which underpinned the 'Romish' religion. Thus Edwin Sandys deplored the way in which the 'dotages of silly women' were mingled with the 'divine scriptures' and Nicholas Udall complained about Catholic preachers who filled their sermons with apocryphal fables recounted by foolish dames instead of expounding the Gospel and Law.²³

Protestant suspicion of 'uncertain tradition' was but one strand in a wider body of contemporary discourse contributing to the devaluation of oral testimony and remembered information. In the sphere of the law, the shift from memory to written record gathered momentum as local custom and judicial precedent were fixed in printed texts.²⁴ Growing emphasis on the need for documentary evidence likewise led heralds, antiquaries and historians to disparage common report and hearsay as untrustworthy sources for understanding events in the past.²⁵ At the village level this manifested itself in the declining prestige of the elderly as the caretakers of ancestral wisdom.²⁶ Although in practice the marginalization of speech was more protracted and incomplete, by 1700 the unreliability of oral tradition was almost axiomatic in educated circles. Indeed, a year earlier it had been the subject of precise mathematical analysis by a member of the Royal Society. Such trends were also an index of the extent to which experimental discovery had begun to dislodge inherited learning as the basis of 'knowledge'.²⁷

Daniel Woolf has seen these developments as symptomatic of an emerging cultural gulf between ordinary people and educated elites. He detects behind such trends the beginnings of 'a *social* – as distinct from a merely *intellectual* – bias' against verbally conveyed information, the result of which was to erect a permanent 'barrier between "proper" history and mere legend – what we would now call folklore'.²⁸ However, to interpret this split as an index of incipient class alienation is arguably to ignore the extent to which denigration of the oral had an ideological tincture. For, as the preceding paragraphs have shown, the whole concept of 'oral tradition' had its taproot in anti-Catholic propaganda, and before that in the conflicts between the late medieval papacy and the heretics and councils who challenged its authority. It was the controversialists who effectively forged the notion of 'folklore', though the term itself – a conscious Anglo-Saxon revival – was only coined in 1846, by the antiquary William Thoms in a letter printed in the weekly magazine *The Athenaeum*.²⁹ And whereas the origins of the movement to collect and classify 'popular antiquities' have often been located in the sense of estrangement

eighteenth- and nineteenth-century intellectuals felt from the culture of the 'vulgar',³⁰ this was surely in part a consequence of the very processes we have been exploring. Two hundred years earlier reforming zeal was a powerful stimulus to quasi-anthropological investigation and analysis of the 'profane' customs and 'idle' traditions practised and believed by the semi-popish multitude. Both were depicted as residual categories brought about by resistance to the transformative forces of Protestantism and print, and in works like Thomas Becon's *The Reliques of Rome* (1563) and Philip Stubbes's *The Anatomie of Abuses* (1583) they were denounced as remnants of the heathen idolatry of pre-Christian England.³¹ The same assumptions underlay Thomas Browne's celebrated *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* (1646), in which the errors of the common people were attributed to 'the Priests of Elder time [who] have put upon them many incredible conceits', while in 1725 the Newcastle vicar Henry Bourne would declare in his *Antiquitates Vulgares* that the opinions of the ignorant were 'generally either the produce of Heathenism; or the Inventions of indolent Monks' who carefully handed them down to posterity.³² But it was John Brand, in a revised and expanded version of Bourne's tract dated 1777, who expressed the presumed link between superstition and verbal diffusion most lucidly: popular beliefs, 'consecrated to the fancies of the multitude by a usage from time immemorial, though erased by public authority from the written word, were committed as a venerable deposit to the keeping of oral tradition ... after having been snatched out of the smoking ruins of Popery'.³³ Forced out of the official mainstream, Catholicism, together with its precursor, paganism, persisted precisely because it remained impervious to the transfiguring influence of literacy and printing. Embedded within these statements was a religious theory of survivalism which social Darwinism and Victorian romanticism would transform into a scientific one – a scholarly quest to recover remaining traces of an intriguing primitive religion, remnants of a Celtic and Saxon rather than a Roman twilight. While earlier works were increasingly read less as diatribes against vulgar misconceptions than entertaining anthologies of customs and fables, the boundary between antiquarianism and polemic remained very blurred until well into the nineteenth century, and even beyond. In the mid-1820s, we can still find a reader congratulating the editor of one such collection for exposing 'with a masterly hand the superstitions and monkery of the olden time'.³⁴

Such works and their successors explain why oral transmission was for so long an indispensable element of the definition of folklore. However, since the 1970s this set of presuppositions and polarities has been assaulted from all sides. Recent folklorists have not only thoroughly discredited the idea of archaic survivals, but rejected the misguided persuasion of their predecessors that folklore was a pure distillation of the untainted spring waters of continuous oral tradition. Concurring with a number of studies stressing the extent to which literacy penetrated pre-industrial popular culture,³⁵ they

are becoming more alive to the role which print and writing played in the dissemination of all folk genres and to the frequency with which tales and stories handed down by word of mouth were contaminated by contact with literary sources, if not originally initiated by them. Often, as Stith Thompson has observed, 'the problem of priority is quite unsolvable'.³⁶ Few, moreover, have escaped the distorting effects of 'bourgeois filtering' by Georgian, Victorian and Edwardian editors.³⁷ Historians, on the other hand, are now less confident that Protestantism and print should be seen as inseparable twins. There is growing recognition that, in the guise of preaching, catechizing, psalm-singing and godly discussion of sermons and Scripture, the Reformation actually catalysed orality.³⁸ These insights provide an important backdrop for the second part of this chapter, which contends that English Calvinism also, rather ironically, generated a form of folklore of its own – a cluster of traditions no less vulnerable to the vagaries of oral transmission than those which had crystallized around medieval Catholicism.

II

Cautionary tales of the judgements God visited upon flagrant and incorrigible sinners circulated widely in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England: stories of sabbath-breakers, swearers, drunkards, adulterers and other ungodly livers struck down suddenly by the avenging arm of the Almighty. A few examples must suffice to convey the flavour of this perennially popular genre: the case of Anne Averies, a London artisan who perjured herself after stealing a ball of twine in 1576 and died a ghastly death vomiting up her own excrements; the Lincolnshire youth who constantly swore by God's wounds and God's blood only to perish with his own pouring forth unstoppably from his ear, nose and throat in 1581; the impious nobleman who went out hunting on Sundays instead of attending divine service and was punished when his wife gave birth to a baby with a head resembling one of his beloved hounds; Dorothy Mattley, the Derbyshire washerwoman who dramatically sank into the earth in 1650 after denying that she had cheated a young lad of twopence; and John Duncalf, the Bible-stealer from Staffordshire whose hands and legs fell off after being attacked by gangrene in 1677.³⁹

Gory stories of this kind were powerful vehicles for conventional Christian morality and for a peculiarly literal brand of providentialism. The notion that God actively intervened in human affairs to reward the good and discipline the wicked was by no means an innovation of the post-Reformation period, but such beliefs were bolstered by Calvinist theology. Part of the common outlook of Protestants of all persuasions, they belie Max Weber's influential thesis that the Reformation was an agent of the 'disenchantment of the world': on the contrary it appears to have strongly reinforced the idea of a

'moralised universe'.⁴⁰ Indeed, the collection of anecdotes of divine vengeance was nothing less than an industry in the Elizabethan and Stuart periods. Ministers like John Foxe, Henry Burton, Samuel Clarke, Thomas Taylor and William Turner published increasingly bulky anthologies of 'remarkable providences'. These fed off and into the private compilations of lay people such as Nehemiah Wallington and engendered inexpensive commercial imitations by Nathaniel Crouch and other entrepreneurial publishers. The Huntingdon schoolmaster Thomas Beard's *The Theatre of Gods Judgments* (1597) is the most famous of these pious encyclopedias: expanded and reissued three times before 1648, it became an indispensable work of reference for all future collectors.⁴¹

Directly or indirectly, these judgement books were heavily indebted to medieval compendia of sermon exempla – works which themselves bear the tell-tale marks of verbal transmission. In such texts as Caesarius of Heisterbach's *Dialogue on Miracles*, Johannes Herolt's *Promptuarium Exemplorum*, and the anonymous *Speculum Exemplorum*, Protestant preachers discovered many stories which underlined the lesson that sinners could not escape the searing wrath of God: stories of lecherers whose genitals are burnt to cinder, of girls who turn to stone after dancing on a holy day, and of usurers eaten by adders and toads. In appropriating them for their own purposes, they were carrying on a process of ecclesiastical colonisation of vernacular narratives that had its origins in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. Didactic tales of this type represented a fusion between written doctrine and oral tradition.⁴² Characterized by a telescoped time-frame between evil deed and heavenly revenge, by the systematic excision of superfluous circumstantial detail, and by a suspicious degree of correspondence between punishment and crime, such exempla continued to find a niche in Protestant collections and to be adapted to survive in the new theological environment. The canine-faced infant and Lincolnshire swearer are cases in point: a version of the latter story can be found in Richard Whitford's *Werke for Householdiers* (1531) and, like the monstrous child, almost certainly has even earlier antecedents.⁴³

Post-Reformation anthologies of providences grew in the same way as their Catholic precursors, by being constantly augmented by topical examples. Many of these came from blackletter broadside ballads and pamphlets which functioned as forerunners of the newspaper, and from the popular chronicles and plays which were parasitic upon them. Edmund Bicknoll, author of *A Swoord against Swearers and Blasphemers* (1579) drew the tale of Anne Averies from a tract printed by John Alde in 1576, while Beard's source for the story was John Stow's *The Chronicles of England*.⁴⁴ Thomas Taylor's *Second Part of the Theatre of Gods Judgments* gave 'but a meere nomination' of some instances of divine ire against sexual lust 'because most of them have been Stag'd, Book'd, and Balleted, and disperst abroad through the Kingdome'.⁴⁵ The sad fates of Dorothy Mattley and John Duncalf had similarly been

reported in cheap print before being immortalized in Samuel Clarke's *Mirror* and William Turner's *Compleat History*.⁴⁶ Combining factual accuracy with moralistic commentary, this ephemeral journalism was itself often based on gossip and rumour gleaned from travellers and carriers by the hack writers of the capital.⁴⁷

Other examples were derived from direct eyewitness testimony: from letters describing divine judgements sent in by colleagues, friends and even complete strangers, and from accounts conveyed to the compilers of such encyclopedias by word of mouth. The collection of punishments visited upon Catholic persecutors which John Foxe appended to his *Acts and Monuments* contained many graphic tales of the gruesome deaths that had befallen the enemies and betrayers of the Marian Protestants which were communicated to him by people who claimed to have seen them with their own eyes. Thus the Bishop of Chester who slandered the recent martyr George Marsh in a sermon in the cathedral in 1555 soon afterwards 'turned up his heels and died', according to 'a report [which] went in all men's mouths', of a particularly ghastly form of venereal disease; thus the dire penalty dealt out to a Kentish priest by the name of Nightingale who preached 'the Popes blasphemous doctrine' and dropped dead in the pulpit was testified by Robert Austen of Chartham 'who both heard and saw the same, and it is witnessed also by the whole country round about'.⁴⁸ Samuel Ward similarly derived many of his cases of drunkards who came to untimely ends from verbal report. The case of three neighbours from Barnwell near Cambridge who drank a barrel of beer and expired within twenty-four hours had been substantiated by a local justice of the peace 'besides the common fame'.⁴⁹ Thomas Beard even included 'a common and vulgar storie which is almost in every childe's mouth' of a convicted criminal who bit off his own mother's ear, blaming her for bringing him up so badly.⁵⁰ One prodigious occurrence which the Cheshire schoolmaster Edward Burghall included in a manuscript entitled 'Providence Improved' had been related to him by Mrs Crewe of Utkinton, who herself had it 'from a known and approved witness'.⁵¹ Nehemiah Wallington's notebooks are also full of stories of sabbath-breakers overtaken by the hand of God which he had heard 'very creadably' or which were 'attested by severall parsons of Credit'. Nor did such collectors disdain tales which had entered into oral tradition. Wallington solemnly recorded the case of four alcoholics from Eyam in Derbyshire who read the service for the churching of women over a cow and were 'strangely and fearfully punished' for this 'wicked and horrible fact', noting that 'this was don neere thirtie yeeres agoe, but yet it is still fresh in memorie theire'.⁵² More famously, the story of the bull which broke loose in Chipping Sodbury, headed straight for the chancellor of the diocese who had just presided over the burning of a Gloucestershire heretic, and gored him to death, had been passed down faithfully from father to son before being relayed to John Foxe half-a-century later.⁵³

The very fact that so much of this providential material was verbally transmitted led to growing concern about its authenticity. Private letter writers and diarists like Joseph Mede and Walter Yonge carefully discriminated 'false' and 'flying rumours' from trustworthy relations, remarking that 'vulgar report' was 'commonly corrupted in the telling'.⁵⁴ It became necessary for the authors, editors and publishers of cases of divine justice to pre-empt and deflect allegations that they were mere 'fables'. News pamphlets self-consciously entitled themselves 'true reports' and concluded with the names and addresses of eyewitnesses ready to ratify the truth to sceptical readers.⁵⁵ Henry Burton insisted that there were 'no fained miracles, nor fabulous stories, nor ould wives tales, for prophane scoffers to jeare at' in his *Divine Tragedie Lately Acted* (1636), but only examples confirmed by diligent enquiry and 'such, as will abide the triall and search of this present age'.⁵⁶ Both a symptom and a cause of the devaluation of oral testimony discussed above, earnest protestations of this kind did nothing to dispel the suspicions of one Puritan who wrote to John Winthrop, Governor of Massachusetts, in Boston: 'it is feared that there is a great fayling in many and chiefe circumstances in the Instances alleaged, if some few of them alsoe were not taken too suddenly on trust and heare-say without well looking after the truth'.⁵⁷

These concerns were closely linked with the way in which supernatural news had become a highly lucrative sector of the seventeenth-century publishing industry. Unscrupulous stationers like John Trundle were not above updating cautionary tales which had lost their topical interest and reprinting them embellished with spurious details to deceive unwary buyers.⁵⁸ Doubts about the veracity of stories of sinners requited were also a response to their increasing exploitation for the ends of sectarian propaganda. Burton's *Divine Tragedie* was compiled in the wake of Charles I's re-proclamation in 1633 of the Book of Sports, to provide proof of the Lord's seething rage at this anti-sabbatarian legislation: Laudians quickly dismissed these cases as pieces of malicious gossip started by the self-styled godly. Some of the accounts of punished Catholic persecutors Foxe had incorporated in his *Acts and Monuments* can similarly be shown to have been ingenious tools of faction, and when the Welsh magistrate William Vaughan's wife was slain in her bed by a flash of lightning in 1611 his 'popish' enemies apparently 'made a taunting table talke of this heavenly visitation', claiming it was evidence of God's anger at his excessive moral severity.⁵⁹ After the outbreak of the Civil War these tendencies intensified and crudely partisan accounts of judgements upon Roundheads and Royalists proliferated in large numbers, further corroding the credibility of the genre.⁶⁰

By the middle of the seventeenth century there were consequently calls for more rigorous, quasi-scientific methods of verification to be employed by those who compiled providential judgements for posterity. In the 1650s the Presbyterian minister Matthew Poole laid down detailed guidelines for

the registration of 'illustrious providences'. These were designed to undo the damage done by the 'great mixture of false and foolish and unwitnessed fictions' published alongside properly documented accounts. It was not merely 'foule impostures' which fostered atheistical scoffing and undermined the majesty of God; as one commentator upon the project remarked, 'I have often observed that assone as the first wonder rebateth those that at first overspoke the truth, doe in the end by multiplications of falls surmisalls and devised causes eclipse and affront the truth'. Poole's elaborate plans for the setting up of a network of clerical investigators in each county never came to fruition, though they were revived twenty-five years later on an even more ambitious scale by Increase Mather in New England.⁶¹

Even in blueprint, these schemes bear a remarkable resemblance to the coordinated activities of the amateurs who lay behind the foundation of the Folklore Society in 1878. Inspired partly by anxiety about the intrinsic unreliability of the spoken word, they also anticipated the problems that would be faced by modern theorists and practitioners of oral history.⁶² As comments of the kind already quoted suggest, at least some contemporaries were beginning to find the highly stereotyped nature of stories of divine judgement somewhat unsettling. They were beginning to be conscious of the distortion created by recollecting events with the benefit of hindsight, of the errors introduced by faulty memory, and of the selective omissions typical of tales afflicted by 'structural amnesia'. They were already hazily aware of the manner in which chronology tended to become compressed, familiar formulae were interpolated in untidy reminiscences, and local history was gradually remodelled into edifying legends and myths. They also displayed an embryonic recognition of the way in which print and writing themselves served to fix but also to fundamentally transfigure oral tradition.⁶³ Indeed, cautionary tales are examples *par excellence* of the impulses to allegorize and moralize reality which postmodernists like Hayden White have argued lie at the heart of narrativity.⁶⁴ The satisfying poetic justice which is characteristic of such anecdotes may make them imperfect guides to what 'actually' occurred, but what it does highlight are the providential assumptions which were part of the mental furniture of early modern minds, together with the conventions and stereotypes which shaped verbal and written testimony in this period.⁶⁵

Oral tradition, then, filtered into printed collections of God's judgements in a variety of ways. But cultural traffic did not travel in a single direction: just as rumour, gossip and remembrance infiltrated literature, so in turn did stories from cheap print and pious encyclopedias return to the realm of the spoken word. Sung at street corners and read aloud in private homes and alehouses, ballads and pamphlets could become part of the culture and experience of the unlettered. Recounted by preachers from their pulpits, rehearsed in conversation with one's neighbours and peers, stories of divine

retribution sometimes achieved the status of notorious commonplaces. In 1635, for instance, the case of the 'lamenting lady', a barren thirteenth-century countess who gave birth to 365 mouse-sized babies after slandering a beggar woman blessed with twins, was said to be on the lips of every inhabitant of a small Devon village.⁶⁶ Assisted by their circulation in the press, some tales eventually entered into collective social memory. Registered in the copyright stock of specialist seventeenth-century booksellers, reprinted in small octavo formats, and revived in popular anthologies like Nathaniel Crouch's *Wonderful Prodigies* (1682), accounts of the providential deaths of many Elizabethan and Stuart evildoers were gradually transmuted into folklore. Shedding the journalistic detail which had originally recommended them to sensation-seeking readers, the stories of Anne Averages, John Duncalf, the Lincolnshire swearer and the sabbath-breaking nobleman became Protestant exempla, reappearing time and again in devotional tracts and didactic broadsides.⁶⁷ As for Dorothy Mattley, swallowed up by a gaping hole which opened beneath her, she achieved the ultimate apotheosis of novelization. Her sorry fate was the subject of a colourful vignette in John Bunyan's *Life and Death of Mr Badman* (1680).⁶⁸ Just as this tale contained echoes of the punishment which befell the biblical rebels Korah, Dathan and Abiram, so too did early modern judgement stories supply the template for subsequent narratives. For instance, Francis Spiera, the sixteenth-century Italian lawyer who suffered torment on his deathbed after denying and dissembling his faith, became the prototype for a whole dynasty of Stuart apostates.⁶⁹ Moreover, many works which followed in the footsteps of Beard's *Theatre of Gods Judgments* were the product of a process of uncritical accretion. Successive compilers simply lifted material from previous treatises and inserted it in their own volumes almost verbatim, giving off the misleading impression that they were recording direct oral testimony or an active tradition – in a manner all too reminiscent of the writings of the earliest folklorists.⁷⁰

A few stories of divine chastisement even found their way into the collections of pioneering scholars in this field – figures like Thomas Percy and F. J. Child who supposed them to be 'reliques of ancient English poetry' and prose communally composed and uncontaminated by contact with writing.⁷¹ In fact, R. S. Thomson has shown that the origins of some 80 per cent of ballads in such anthologies can be traced to printed broadsides dating from before 1700, and Margaret Spufford's analysis of Katherine Briggs's *Dictionary of British Folktales* (1970) reveals a smaller but still significant degree of overlap between stories told by word of mouth in the second half of the twentieth century and the ephemeral literature of early modern England.⁷² *Young Bateman, or the Fair Maid of Clifton*, together with its variant *The Suffolk Miracle*, is one such cautionary tale which seems to have slipped into oral tradition. The story of a faithless maiden borne away by the ghost of the dead lover she had betrayed, a ballad on this theme was entered in

the Stationers' Register at least as early as 1603. More than two centuries later it was dictated by a schoolmistress and printed in *Walks around Nottingham* (1835).⁷³ The Babes in the Wood is another familiar fairytale which can be traced back to a blackletter broadside. Entitled *The Norfolk Gentleman, his Last Will and Testament* and first published in 1595, this is the saga of a cruel uncle who contrives to kill his orphaned niece and nephew in order to inherit their wealth and then suffers a succession of disasters inflicted by the heavy hand of God. Left in the forest by one of the ruffians hired to murder them, the children die in each other's arms and are buried in leaves by sorrowful robins. The subject of a late Elizabethan play by Robert Yarrington and recycled in a slightly different guise in a chapbook of 1706, this story also appears to have passed into common currency before being captured once more in print and celebrated as a specimen of popular balladry.⁷⁴

In both these cases the basic tale may well have predated the advent of Protestantism and the press. However, not so the legend of the supernatural curse associated with the execution of the Marian martyr George Marsh, which Christina Hole recorded in her *Traditions and Customs of Cheshire* in 1937. According to her source, his ghost had haunted the house in 1732 and his bloodstained footprint remained on the stones of Smithills Hall, oozing occasionally.⁷⁵ Examples such as this underline the difficulty and the futility of trying to disentangle oral and written tradition and reinforce recent suggestions that what should be stressed instead is their interdependence – their 'mutual infusion' and 'the constant process of osmosis' between the two media.⁷⁶ They also provide intriguing evidence of a curious syncretism between older cultural patterns and distinctively post-Reformation concerns and preoccupations.

How, then, should we interpret the stories of God's judgements which we have been exploring? Should we follow Ronald Hutton's lead and, in a candid re-application of the theory of survivals, see the traces of late medieval Catholic belief which can be detected in these tales as evidence of the adaptability with which English society responded to the challenges presented by the Protestant Reformation? Together with liturgical rituals which reproduced themselves as festive customs and pastimes after they had been driven out of formal religion, might they not provide us with insight into processes which helped to ease the ideological upheavals of the era – processes to which the clergy, displaying 'a canny sense of priorities', turned a blind eye? Hutton interprets the very existence of such stories and practices not as an index of rejection of and resistance to the religious revolution, but as a testament to its ultimate acceptance. But he may perhaps take too little account of the complex processes by which the folklore collections which are his quarry came about.⁷⁷

Here the work of Bob Scribner provides a valuable corrective. For Scribner, such stories were all too often 'forms of downward mediation by educational

and literate elites' – like German legends of incombustible Luther, the work of zealous pastors desperate to make an impression on a populace which had so far proved rather unreceptive to the Protestant Gospel. According to his analysis, these folktales were not Catholic survivals rooted in the ignorance of rural mentalities, but part of an ecclesiastical programme for the 'reform of popular culture'. Creatively assimilated to pre-existing narrative types, they represented a highly imaginative attempt to hijack pre-Reformation culture as a vehicle for confessional and evangelical propaganda, an ingenious weapon in the politics of religious confessionalization – but one which may only have had minimal impact. They were, in short, invented traditions.⁷⁸

In the case of cautionary tales, it may be most fruitful to combine aspects of both these models – to recognize the element of conscious clerical appropriation and composition at work, but also to acknowledge the effects of a more organic process of 'recontextualization' by which central components of medieval culture were spontaneously rehabilitated in a reformed guise.⁷⁹ From whichever angle they are analysed, these anecdotes of providential justice shed light on the continuities which both mitigated and facilitated the cultural disjunctures which followed in the wake of the English Reformation. They also underline the role which oral communication, in conjunction with writing and print, played in the creation and consolidation of a collective Protestant outlook.

III

In conclusion, it is time that historians set aside the lingering assumption that the Reformation dealt a death blow to oral tradition and gave due credit to the ways in which, at least in the short term, it served to revitalize it, though not in an entirely pure or autonomous form. As we have seen, despite its polemical denigration of the 'unwritten verities' which underpinned the ramshackle edifice that was Roman Catholicism, Protestantism ended up begetting a kind of folklore of its own – a collection of edifying legends whose structure and character owed almost as much to verbal as they did to literary transmission, and whose circulation attests, directly and indirectly, to the vigour and vitality of oral culture in early modern England.

It might be added, by way of a coda, that the Reformation acted as a stimulus to orality in a second and somewhat paradoxical sense. Reduced to the status of a proscribed religious minority and deprived of access to the mainstream press, Catholicism made ingenious use of ephemeral speech as 'a supple and evasive means of popularising dissident ideas'. It proved, as Alison Shell compellingly argues, 'exceptionally willing to exploit orally transmissible media'.⁸⁰ Just as stories of the supernatural judgements visited upon popish persecutors had assisted in sustaining the morale of secret Protestant

congregations in the mid-1550s, so did tales of the terrible punishments which overtook heretics help to strengthen the solidarity of the Elizabethan recusant community and foster a cohesive sense of confessional identity. Disseminated orally along the Catholic underground and subtly remoulded each time they were told, accounts of hangmen driven stark staring mad, of Protestant ministers consumed by disgusting diseases, and of presiding judges who suffered fatal heart attacks were eventually recorded in writing by secular and Jesuit priests and incorporated, sometimes only after several generations, in printed martyrologies.⁸¹ But their initial diffusion by word of mouth surely only served to cement the paradigm with which we began. Denounced as 'godly frauds' and 'meere Canterburie tales' by Protestant propagandists, they too contributed to forging a damning and enduring link between the spoken word and 'popish superstition'.⁸²

NOTES

I am grateful to Jonathan Barry, Patrick Collinson, Julia Crick, Alison Shell and the members of the Early Modern Research Seminar at the University of Leicester for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this essay.

- 1 See, among others, Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: the Technologizing of the Word* (London and New York: Methuen, 1982); Keith Thomas, 'The Meaning of Literacy in Early Modern England', in Gerd Baumann (ed.), *The Written Word: Literacy in Transition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 97–131 (quotation at p. 113); D. R. Woolf, 'Speech, Text, and Time: the Sense of Hearing and the Sense of the Past in Renaissance England', *Albion*, 18: 2 (1986), 159–93; Tessa Watt, *Cheap Print and Popular Piety, 1550–1640* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Adam Fox, *Oral and Literate Culture in England 1500–1700* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).
- 2 Henry Bradshaw, *The Life of Saint Werburge of Chester*, ed. Carl Horstmann, Early English Text Society, OS, 88 (London: Trübner, 1887), 131.
- 3 For example, on the title page of the Great Bible (1539 and subsequent editions), and in an illustration contrasting 'The night of Popish superstition' with 'The returne of the Gospells light' included in Michael Sparke's *The crums of comfort* (London, 1628 edn), facing sig. A7r.
- 4 John Foxe, *Acts and Monuments*, ed. S. R. Cattley, 8 vols (London: Seeley, Burnside & Seeley, 1853–59), III. 720.
- 5 George Swinnoke, *The Christian mans calling ... the second part* (London, 1663), 22.
- 6 John Aubrey, 'Remaines of Gentilisme and Judaisme', in *Three Prose Works*, ed. John Buchanan-Brown (Fontwell, Sussex: Centaur Press, 1972), 290.
- 7 See Christopher Hill, 'Puritans and "The Dark Corners of the Land"', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th series, 13 (1963), 77–102; Christopher Haigh, 'Puritan Evangelism in the Reign of Elizabeth I', *English Historical Review*, 92: 362 (1977), 30–58.
- 8 George Gifford, *A brieve discourse of certaine pointes of the religion, which is among*

- the common sort of Christians, which may be termed the countrie divinitie (London, 1581); Arthur Dent, *The plaine mans path-way to heaven* (London, 1601).
- 9 I am grateful to Alison Shell for permitting me to read and cite parts of her forthcoming monograph for Cambridge University Press, which explores the interconnections between post-Reformation English Catholicism, anti-Catholicism and orality. This section is greatly indebted to her insights.
 - 10 William Perkins, *A reformed Catholike: or, a declaration shewing how neere we may come to the present Church of Rome in sundrie points of religion* (Cambridge, 1604), 142.
 - 11 See George H. Tavard, *Holy Writ or Holy Church: the Crisis of the Protestant Reformation* (London: Burns & Oates, 1959); Alister McGrath, *The Intellectual Origins of the European Reformation* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), ch. 5; Peter Marshall, 'The Debate over "Unwritten Verities" in Early Reformation England', in Bruce Gordon (ed.), *Protestant History and Identity in Sixteenth-century Europe* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1996), I. 60–77. For key discussions, see Perkins, *Reformed Catholike*, 122–43; Antony Wootton, *A defence of M. Perkins booke, called A reformed Catholike* (London, 1606), 399–404; Francis Bunny, *Truth and falshood: or, a comparison betweene the truth now taught in England, and the doctrine of the Romish church* (London, 1595), fos 11–3v. On the Catholic side, a notable contribution was the Jesuit James Gordon Huntley's *A treatise of the unwritten word of God, commonly called traditions* ([St Omer] 1614), which drew on Cardinal Robert Bellarmine's *Disputationum ... de controversis Christianae fidei* (Ingolstadt, 1601).
 - 12 Perkins, *Reformed Catholike*, 140.
 - 13 George Gifford, *A dialogue between a papist and a protestant, applied to the capacitie of the unlearned* (London, 1582), 13.
 - 14 George Abbot, *The reasons which doctour Hill hath brought, for the upholding of papistry ... unmasked* (Oxford, 1604), 303; Bunny, *Truth and falshood*, fo. 2r.
 - 15 As noted by Richard Bernard, *Rhemes against Rome* (London, 1626), 34.
 - 16 Abbot, *Reasons*, 304; William Middleton, *Papisto-mastix, or the Protestants religion defended* (London, 1606), 40; Wootton, *Defence*, 428–9.
 - 17 *The Sermons of Edwin Sandys*, ed. John Ayre, Parker Society (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1842), 14–15 and 13 respectively; Richard Hooker, *The lawes of ecclesiastical politie* (London [1594]), bk I. ch. 13; Joseph Hall, *The olde religion: a treatise, wherein is laid downe the true state of the difference betwixt the reformed, and Roman church* (London, 1628), 167.
 - 18 Josias Nicholls, *Abrahams faith: that is, the olde religion* (London, 1602), 208.
 - 19 Richard Sheldon, *A survey of the miracles of the church of Rome, proving them to be antichristian* (London, 1616), 34, 316, and passim; [John] H[arvey], *A discursive probleme concerning propheties* (London, 1588), 68–9.
 - 20 Reginald Scot, *The discoverie of witchcraft* (London, 1584), bk IVI. ch. II; William Lambarde, *A perambulation of Kent* (Chatham, W. Burrill, 1826 edn; [1576]), quotations and citations at 276, 221, 281, 204–5, 324–6, 276 respectively.
 - 21 Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).
 - 22 For earlier manifestations of this theme, see Julia M. H. Smith, 'Oral and Written: Saints, Miracles and Relics in Brittany, c. 850–1250', *Speculum*, 65 (1990), 309 and 309–43, passim. I owe this reference to my colleague Julia Crick. In addition to the forthcoming work of Alison Shell (see n. 9), see also David Vincent, 'The Decline of the Oral Tradition in Popular Culture', in Robert D. Storch (ed.),

- Popular Culture and Custom in Nineteenth-century England* (London-Canberra, Croom Helm, 1982), 21–4; and idem, *Literacy and Popular Culture: England 1750–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 5–6.
- 23 Sandys, *Sermons*, 18; Udall quoted in Fox, *Oral and Literate Culture*, 175.
 - 24 For subtle discussions of the complex nature and effects of these shifts, see Adam Fox, ‘Custom, Memory and the Authority of Writing’, in Paul Griffiths, Adam Fox and Steve Hindle (eds), *The Experience of Authority in Early Modern England* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996), 89–116; Richard J. Ross, ‘The Memorial Culture of Early Modern English Lawyers: Memory as Keyword, Shelter, and Identity, 1560–1640’, *Yale Journal of Law and the Humanities*, 10 (1998), 229–326; Andy Wood, ‘Custom and the Social Organisation of Writing in Early Modern England’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6th series, 9 (1999), 257–69; idem, *The Politics of Social Conflict: the Peak Country, 1520–1770* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 150–62.
 - 25 See Barbara Shapiro, *Probability and Certainty in Seventeenth-century England* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), ch. 5; D. R. Woolf, ‘The “Common Voice”: History, Folklore and Oral Tradition in Early Modern England’, *Past and Present*, 120 (1988), 26–52; Adam Fox, ‘Remembering the Past in Early Modern England’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6th series, 9 (1999), 233–56.
 - 26 See Keith Thomas, ‘Age and Authority in Early Modern England’, *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 62 (1976), 233–6, 246–8.
 - 27 ‘The Credibility of Humane Testimony’, in *The Philosophical Transactions and Collections [of the Royal Society] to the End of the Year MDCC. Abridged and Disposed under General Heads*, 4th edn (London, 1731), III. 662–5. For the displacement of ‘traditional’ by ‘experimental knowledge’, see Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), 509–14, 771–2, 793–4, and Jonathan Barry, ‘Introduction: Keith Thomas and the Problem of Witchcraft’, in Jonathan Barry, Marianne Hester and Gareth Roberts (eds), *Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe: Studies in Culture and Belief* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 28.
 - 28 Woolf, “Common Voice”, 47, 48.
 - 29 W. J. Thoms in *The Athenaeum* (22 August 1846), 862–3.
 - 30 For instance, Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern England* (London: Wildwood House, 1978), esp. 281–3; Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, 797–8.
 - 31 Thomas Becon, *The reliques of Rome* (London, 1563); Phillip Stubbes, *The anatomie of abuses* (London, 1583).
 - 32 Thomas Browne, *Pseudodoxia epidemica: or, enquiries into very many received tenets, and commonly presumed truths* (1646), in *The Major Works*, ed. C. A. Patrides (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), 178; Henry Bourne, *Antiquitates Vulgares or the Antiquities of the Common People* (Newcastle, 1725), xii.
 - 33 John Brand, *Observations on the Popular Antiquities of Great Britain*, ed. and enlarged by Henry Ellis, 3 vols (London: Bell, 1890 edn), I. xi.
 - 34 For a useful survey, see Richard M. Dorson, *The British Folklorists: A History* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968), quotation at p. 39.
 - 35 See, for instance, Thomas Laqueur, ‘The Cultural Origins of Popular Literacy in England 1500–1850’, *Oxford Review of Education*, 2: 3 (1976), 255–75; Vincent, ‘The Decline of the Oral Tradition’; Jonathan Barry, ‘Literacy and Literature in

- Popular Culture: Reading and Writing in Historical Perspective', in Tim Harris (ed.), *Popular Culture in England, c. 1500–1850* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995), 69–94.
- 36 Stith Thompson, *The Folktale* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1977), 180.
- 37 For a helpful discussion of these trends, see Ruth B. Bottigheimer, 'Fairy Tales, Folk Narrative Research and History', *Social History*, 14: 3 (1989), 343–57.
- 38 See, in particular, R. W. Scribner, 'Oral Culture and the Diffusion of Reformation Ideas', reprinted in his *Popular Culture and Popular Movements in Reformation Germany* (London and Ronceverte: Hambledon Press, 1987), 47–69; Richard Gawthrop and Gerald Strauss, 'Protestantism and Literacy in Early Modern England', *Past and Present*, 104 (1984), 31–55; Patrick Collinson, 'Elizabethan and Jacobean Puritanism as Forms of Popular Religious Culture', in Christopher Durston and Jacqueline Eales (eds), *The Culture of English Puritanism, 1560–1700* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996), 32–57. The other half of the equation – the link between Catholicism and hostility to print – has also been questioned: see my "'Domme Preachers"? Post-Reformation English Catholicism and the Culture of Print', *Past and Present*, 168 (2000), 72–123.
- 39 These stories were recited in numerous publications in the period, as cited below.
- 40 See Bob Scribner, 'The Reformation, Popular Magic and the "Disenchantment of the World"', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 23: 3 (1993), 475–94; idem, 'Reformation and Desacralisation: From Sacramental World to Moralised Universe', in R. Po-Chia Hsia and R. W. Scribner (eds), *Problems in the Historical Anthropology of Early Modern Europe*, Wolfenbütteler Forschungen, 78 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1997), 75–92; and my *Providence in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), esp. ch. 2, which is a fuller discussion of the genre of judgement tales.
- 41 John Foxe, 'The severe punishment of God upon the persecutors of his people and enemies to his word', appended to *Acts and Monuments*, vol. VIII; [Henry Burton] *A divine tragedie lately acted, or, a collection of sundry memorable examples of Gods judgements upon sabbath breakers, and other like libertines* ([Amsterdam], 1636); Samuel Clarke, *A mirror or looking glasse both for saints and sinners* (London, 1656); William Turner, *A compleat history of the most remarkable providences, both of judgement and mercy* (London, 1697). Nehemiah Wallington's collections of judgements can be found in his notebooks: British Library, Sloane MS 1457 and Add. MS 21,935; Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington, DC, MS V.a.436. Edward Burghall, 'Providence Improved', printed in T. Worthington Barlow, *Cheshire: Its Historical and Literary Associations* (Manchester: Burge & Perrin, 1852), 150–89. Richard Burton [Nathaniel Crouch], *Admirable curiosities, rarities, and wonders, in England, Scotland, and Ireland* (London, 1682); idem, *Wonderful prodigies discovered in above three hundred memorable histories* (London, 1682). Thomas Beard, *The Theatre of Gods Judgments* (London, 1597; 1612; 1631). The 1648 edition was augmented with a *Second part* compiled by Thomas Taylor. All subsequent references are to the 1631 edition.
- 42 On exempla, see Frederic Tubach, *Index Exemplorum: a Handbook of Medieval Religious Tales* (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia Akademia Scientiarum Fennica, 1969); Jean-Claude Schmitt (ed.), *Prêcher d'exemples: récits de prédicateurs du moyen âge* (Paris, 1985); Claude Brémond, Jacques Le Goff and

- Jean-Claude Schmitt, *L'Exemplum. Typologie des sources du moyen âge occidental* (Turnhout, 1982); Aron Gurevich, *Medieval Popular Culture: Problems of Belief and Perception*, trans. J. M. Bak and P. A. Hollingsworth (Cambridge and Paris: Cambridge University Press and Editions de la Maison des Sciences de l'homme, 1988), ch. 1. For continental Protestant exempla collections, see the essays by E. H. Rehermann and H. Schade in Wolfgang Brückner (ed.), *Volkserzählung und Reformation* (Berlin: Erich Schmidt Verlag, 1974).
- 43 For the Lincolnshire swearer, see Phillip Stubbes, *Two wunderfull and rare examples* (London [1581]) and the variant in Richard Whitford, *A werke for householders* (London [1531?]), sigs C3v–C4r. For the dog-headed baby, see Beard, *Theatre of Gods Judgments*, 210, who cited it from a Lutheran exempla collection. It can also be found in Tubach, *Index Exemplorum*, no. 646.
 - 44 Edmund Bicknoll, *A swoord agaynst swearyng* (London, 1579), fo. 36r–v; Beard, *Theatre*, 178, citing John Stow, *The chronicles of England, from Brute unto this present year of Christ* (London, 1580), 1185.
 - 45 Taylor, *Second part of the Theatre*, 94. I am grateful to the Burke Library of Union Theological Seminary, New York, for permitting me to read and cite its copy of this rare tract.
 - 46 For the ballad and pamphlet versions, see *A most wonderful and sad judgement of God upon one Dorothy Mattley* (London [1661?]); J. C., *A warning for swearers. By the example of God's judgments upon a man born ... in Staffordshire, who had stolen a bible* (London [c. 1677–86?]); *Strange News from Stafford-shire; or, a dreadful example of divine justice* (London, [c. 1677]); *Strange and true news from Staffordshire* (London, 1677). The Duncalf case also generated a sermon published by the local rector, Simon Ford, *A discourse concerning God's judgments, which was published with a narrative by J. Illingworth, Concerning the man whose hands and legs lately rotted off ...* (London, 1678). These cases are cited in Clarke, *Mirror* (1671 edn), 510; Turner, *Compleat history*, pt I. ch. 104, 15–16.
 - 47 For a discussion of this genre, see Walsham, *Providence*, 33–51.
 - 48 Foxe, *Acts and Monuments*, vii. 53 and 38 respectively. Foxe's Victorian editor Cattle, replaced the original vivid description of the bishop's condition with the euphemism 'a disgraceful disease': see Warren W. Wooden, *John Foxe* (Boston, MA: Wayne Publishers, 1983), 117–19. On Foxe's sources, see also T. Freeman, 'Notes on a Source for John Foxe's Account of the Marian Persecution in Kent and Sussex', *Historical Research*, 67: 163 (1994), 203–11.
 - 49 Samuel Ward, *Woe to drunkards* (London, 1622), 21.
 - 50 Beard, *Theatre of Gods Judgment*, 208.
 - 51 Burghall, 'Providence Improved', 153.
 - 52 BL, Sloane MS 1457, fos 6r, 5v, 19v.
 - 53 Foxe, *Acts and Monuments*, iv, 127–8.
 - 54 For Mede, British Library, Harleian MS 389, fo. 239v, and cf. fos 188r, 243v, 266r. For Yonge, British Library, Add. MS 35, 331, fo. 59v, where he questions a report of a woman bitten by an adder after collecting foliage to decorate a maypole.
 - 55 See, for example, *A true and most dreadfull discourse of a woman possessed with the devil* (London [1584]), sig. A3r, and T. I., *A miracle, of miracles. As fearefull as ever was seene or heard in the memorie of man ... sent by divers credible witnesses to be published in London* (London, 1614). The witnesses are listed on sig. B3r.
 - 56 Burton, *Divine tragedie*, 3–4.

- 57 *The Winthrop Papers*, ed. W. C. Ford et al., 6 vols (Boston, MA: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1929–92), III. 400.
- 58 Trundle's *A miracle, of miracles* is a case in point: it was an updated version of *A true and most dreadfull discourse of a woman possessed* (both cited n. 55).
- 59 See Thomas Freeman, 'Fate, Faction and Fiction in Foxe's Book of Martyrs', *Historical Journal*, 43: 3 (2000), 601–23. William Vaughan, *The spirit of detraction* (London, 1611), sig. *iv.
- 60 In such works as John Vicars, *A looking-glasse for malignants* (London, 1643).
- 61 Cambridge University Library, MS Dd. 3.64, fos 136r–v, 139v; Increase Mather, *An essay for the recording of illustrious providences* (Boston, 1684), Preface.
- 62 Notable discussions include Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology*, trans. H. M. Wright (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961); Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988 edn), esp. chs 4–5; David Henige, *Oral Historiography* (London: Longman, 1982); John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History: Aims, Methods and New Directions in the Study of Modern History* (London and New York: Longman, 1991), ch. 10; Gwyn Prins, 'Oral History', in Peter Burke (ed.), *New Perspectives on Historical Writing* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), 114–39.
- 63 For the role of print in fixing and transforming oral tradition, see Ruth Finnegan, *Literacy and Orality: Studies in the Technology of Communication* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988) and, on early modern England, Fox, 'Remembering the Past'.
- 64 Hayden White, 'The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality', in W. J. T. Mitchell (ed.), *On Narrative* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 13–14.
- 65 A number of scholars have recently analysed legal documents in this light: Natalie Zemon Davis, *Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tales and their Tellers in Sixteenth-century France* (Cambridge: Polity Press with Basil Blackwell, 1988); Laura Gowing, *Domestic Dangers: Women, Words and Sex in Early Modern London* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 52–8 and ch. 7; Tim Stretton, *Women Waging Law in Elizabethan England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 18–19 and ch. 8.
- 66 *The lamenting lady* (London [1620?]); T[homas] B[edford], *A true and certaine relation of a strange-birth* (London, 1635), 12.
- 67 For one pictorial broadside, which includes three of these four examples, see *The theatre of Gods judgements. Or, the vialls of wrath poured out upon obstinate and resolute sinners* (London, [1680?]). For ballads as the vehicles of post-Reformation tradition, see Watt, *Cheap Print*, 122–5.
- 68 John Bunyan, *The Life and Death of Mr Badman Presented to the World in a Familiar Dialogue between Mr Wiseman and Mr Attentive*, ed. James F. Forrest and Roger Sharrock (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 32–3.
- 69 There were two prose versions of Spira's death: Matteo Gribaldi, *A notable and marvellous epistle* (London, 1550 [and 1570?]) and Nathaniel Bacon, *A relation of the fearefull estate of Francis Spira* (London, 1638). A ballad was entered in the Stationers' Register on 15 June 1587; the story was also included in Beard, *Theatre of Gods Judgment*, 73–4, and referred to by numerous other writers. The second Spira appeared in 1693, followed by *Spira Respirans* (1695), *A true second Spira* (1697), and *The third Spira* (1724). See also Michael MacDonald, 'The Fearefull Estate of Francis Spira: Narrative, Identity, and Emotion in Early Modern England', *Journal of British Studies*, 31: 1 (1992), 32–61; idem and Terence

- Murphy, *Sleepless Souls: Suicide in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 39–40, 67–9; M. A. Overell, 'The Exploitation of Francesco Spiera', *Sixteenth Century Journal*, 26: 3 (1995), 619–37.
- 70 See, e.g., Turner, *Compleat history*, pt I. ch. 107. Elisabeth van Houts has noticed a similar process at work in medieval histories: see 'Genre Aspects of the Use of Oral Information in Medieval Historiography', in B. Frank, T. Haye and D. Tophinke (eds), *Gattungen mittelalterlicher Schriftlichkeit* (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1998), 305.
- 71 Thomas Percy, *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*, 3 vols (Edinburgh: Nichol, 1858 [1765]); F. J. Child, *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, 5 vols (New York: Cooper Square, 1965 [1882–98]).
- 72 R. S. Thomson, 'The Development of the Broadside Ballad Trade and its Influence on the Transmission of English Folk-songs', unpublished PhD dissertation (Cambridge University, 1974); Margaret Spufford, 'The Pedlar, the Historian and the Folklorist: Seventeenth Century Communications', *Folklore*, 105 (1994), 20–1. Katharine M. Briggs, *A Dictionary of British Folk-tales in the English Language*, 4 vols (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970).
- 73 The ballad, entitled *A warning for fayre maidens by the example of Jarmans wyfe of Clifton*, was entered in the Stationers' Register on 8 June 1603, and reprinted consistently throughout the seventeenth century and beyond. See Briggs, *Dictionary*, pt B, I. 449–50 and 577–8, 586–7 for variants. 'The Suffolk Miracle' was printed in Child, *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, V. 66 (no. 272).
- 74 *The Norfolk Gentleman, his last will and testament* appears to have been first published in 1595 and appeared repeatedly thereafter. Briggs, *Dictionary*, pt A, II. 390–1; and pt B, II. 162, for a Yorkshire variant based on a 1706 chapbook. Robert Yarrington, *Two Lamentable Tragedies* (London, 1601). The story appeared in Percy's *Reliques*, III. 140–7 and Joseph Jacobs, *More English Fairy Tales* (London: D. Nutt, 1894), III.
- 75 Christina Hole, *Traditions and Customs of Cheshire* (London: Williams & Norgate, 1937), 206.
- 76 Fox, 'Remembering the Past', 233; Smith, 'Oral and Written', 311. See also P. R. Coss, 'Aspects of Cultural Diffusion in Medieval England: the Early Romanes, Local Society and Robin Hood', *Past and Present*, 108 (1985), 35–79.
- 77 Ronald Hutton, 'The English Reformation and the Evidence of Folklore', *Past and Present*, 148 (1995), esp. 115–16.
- 78 Bob Scribner, 'Is a History of Popular Culture Possible?', *History of European Ideas*, 10: 2 (1989), 177, 179; idem, 'Luther Myth: A Popular Historiography of the Reformer' and 'Incombustible Luther: the Image of the Reformer in Early Modern Germany', both reprinted in idem, *Popular Culture and Popular Movements in Reformation Germany* (London and Ronceverte: Hambledon Press, 1987), esp. 320–2, 352–3.
- 79 For 'recontextualization', see James Fentress and Chris Wickham, *Social Memory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 83–4 and ch. 2, *passim*.
- 80 See n. 9 above.
- 81 One late sixteenth-century collection of judgements in manuscript can be found in John Morris, *The Troubles of Our Catholic Forefathers Related by Themselves*, 3 vols (London: Burns & Oates, 1872–77), III. 57–9. Others were transcribed by Christopher Grene in the late seventeenth century and fed into Richard Chaloner's *Memoirs of Missionary Priests* (1741–42). See Anne Dillon, *The Construction*

of Martyrdom in the English Catholic Community, 1535–1603 (Aldershot, Ashgate, 2002), ch. 2, on this process in relation to narratives of martyrdom.

- 82 Quotations from George Hakewill, *An answer to a treatise written by Dr Carier* (London, 1616), 26.