

Nicholas Oldisworth and the Complex, Multilayered Cultures of Seventeenth-Century Gloucestershire

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Nicholas Oldisworth's career serves as a reminder that the literary culture of seventeenth-century England was not monolithically metropolitan, nor solely subjected to the centripetal forces of the Court, the city of London, the Inns of Court or the two Universities. Many poets worked outside the confines of the centralising institutions (Herbert, Marvell and Herrick, for example), but because their works necessarily entered the wider public domain via the printing houses of London, and occasionally Oxford and Cambridge, and because we, their belated readership, encounter them only in print, there is a tendency to regard them as participants in a single, homogeneous literary culture. We have to remind ourselves, first, that there was a thriving literary culture sustained by manuscript transmission, in the form of poetic miscellanies.¹ John Donne, that quintessentially urban poet, for example, circulated his poems in manuscript and allowed them to be dispersed through involuntarily complex networks of commonplace-book compilers. In consequence he was read in ways very different from the apparent homogeneity established by the posthumously printed collections, which largely erase the immediate context of social engagement in the interest of a general readership—print stifles, if not kills, the author, so that it might not be Barthes or Foucault who are responsible for the death of the author. Second, we need to remember that reading and thought must have taken place beyond the confines of London. After all, what happened to all those University-trained clergy dispersed through the parishes of the Kingdom, all those younger sons trained in serious litigation and frivolous enjoyment at the Inns of Court and theatres of the Capital? One has only to recall the circle gathered round Lucius Cary, Viscount Falkland, at Great Tew, to be reminded of

the numerous great houses which functioned as foci of literary activity in one way or another (see David L. Smith). But all these diverse and scattered activities are nullified by the cultural dominance of London, which requires that an alternative narrative focus hold it in abeyance. A 'mute, inglorious Milton', such as Oldisworth, whose poetic career was in many ways marginal to the dominant culture, helps us refresh and recreate our understanding of literary cultures of seventeenth century England.

He was born in July 1611 at Bourton-on-Hill in Gloucestershire, at the home of his grandfather, Sir Nicholas Overbury, the father of Sir Thomas. We know very little about his father, apart from the fact that he came from the village of Coln Rogers in Gloucestershire, which lies some distance south-west of Bourton-on-the Hill along the Fosse Way. Whether or not Robert Oldisworth was himself a member of the gentry is unclear, but it is safe to assume that he was not regarded as an unsuitable match for a knight's daughter. There was certainly sufficient money to send both sons, Nicholas and Giles, to Westminster School.

As well as receiving a sound classical education at one of the kingdom's leading educational establishments, Oldisworth encountered the cultural practice of vernacular verse. Elsewhere, I have given an account of a series of headmasters who initiated and sustained a tradition which counts amongst its proponents some of the leading of poets of the seventeenth century (Ben Jonson, George Herbert, Abraham Cowley and John Dryden) and a great many others (Alabaster, Strode, Corbett, Cartwright, Henry King, George Fletcher, and lesser and unknown lights such as Martin Lluellen, Jasper Mayne, George Morely, Brian Duppa, Cardell Goodman and Nicholas Oldisworth). Because of the close ties between Westminster School and Christ Church, Oxford, the extended poetic community flourished at the University (see Gouws 57–70).

The Christ Church poetic community was largely responsible for the vernacular poems in the University's numerous volumes to commemorate royal occasions, but the majority of Oldisworth's poems are not in this tradition of panegyric. Most of the poems are to be found in an autograph fair copy prepared for this wife shortly before his death from the plague. The title-page reads: 'A Recollection of Certain Scattered Poems. Written long since by an Undergraduate, being one of the students of Christchurch in Oxford. And now in the year 1644 transcribed by the author, and dedicated to his wife. When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things. 1 Cor. XIII. 11' (Bodleian MS Don. c. 24). There are indeed some poems emanating from the enclosed academic community of Christ

Church between 1628 and 1634: part of one of the first translations of Aristophanes' *Ecclesiazusae*,² an epitaph on a fellow student, and two poems of intimate friendship written on behalf of another member of the College. But the bulk of the poems provide evidence of a more complex, non-academic way of life.

There are client poems to two patrons: his cousin, Michael Oldisworth, secretary to William Herbert, Earl of Pembroke, and Member of Parliament for Old Sarum; and James Hay, Earl of Doncaster, one of James I's Scots favourites, who helped negotiate the marriage of Henrietta Maria to the future Charles I. After 1628, however, Hay no longer enjoyed the confidence of the King, and with the death of the Earl of Pembroke in 1630, Michael Oldisworth no longer held office. Oldisworth's attempts to advance his career within the culture of court patronage therefore came to nothing. Perhaps he chose to attach himself to the wrong people, but it is more likely that he not only had a distaste for Court culture, but lacked the temperament and talents to flourish in that milieu.

Certainly, family history would have encouraged him to pursue alternative modes of making his way through life. His brilliant uncle, Sir Thomas Overbury, looked set to advance the family's fortunes when he hitched himself to the rising star of Robert Carr, eventually the Earl of Somerset, another of James I's Scots favourites. Overbury is said to have nurtured the rough Scot in courtly ways, to the extent that Queen Anne called him Carr's 'governor' or tutor. The two parted company over Carr's infatuation with Frances Howard, Countess of Essex. Overbury initially connived at Carr's intrigue with Frances Howard, but after her divorce from her husband on the grounds of his supposed impotence, Overbury actively discouraged their plans for marriage. To forestall any interference, Overbury was committed to the Tower, where, three months and eighteen days later (14 September 1613), he died after prolonged poisoning instigated, it would seem, by Frances Howard, who was by then married to Robert Carr, Earl of Somerset.

The bitterness of an epigram, 'On Compliments', therefore comes as no surprise.

And why to mee doe You stand bare,
Who so farre my superiour are?
Why doe you cringe, and duck? You knowe,
These duties I to You doe owe:
'Tis to usurpe, 'tis to doe Wrong,

5

To say, these acts to You belong.
 But now the World is growne so base,
 Wee cannot keepe our meanest Place;
 Rich men become so niggardly,
 They robbe the Poore of Poverty: 10
 And great ones grudge that Wee possesse
 Ev'n so much, as our Litlenesse. (MS Don. c. 24, fol. 10^v)

Oldisworth adds a marginal comment: ‘These verses were given to a Courtyer, 1630’, which sharpens our sense of the poem’s implications.

In ‘On Heraldry’, Oldisworth reveals the attitudes of older, established families to the jumped-up aristocracy of the Jacobean and Caroline courts.

A viscount,³ proude of his late-purchas'd Coate,
 Compar'd it with a Lord's of ancient note:
 Mine are the better Armes (sayes hee) 'Tis true,
 Answer'd the Lord, for why? yours are more newe. 5
 Says hee, Your coat is plaine, and not so stor'd
 With trimmings, as is mine: to which the Lord,
 Had I beene present, when my Coate was made,
 As you, when yours, a finer I had hadd.
 Saies hee, yours? what ist worth? The lord replies,
 'Tis worth just nothing, I can sett noe price, 10
 Noe man will buy my Coate, it is so old:
 But yours for thirty pounds the Herald sold.⁴
 My armes (saies hee) are perfect and complete:
 Noe (quoth the Lord) you are not well-arm'd yet:
 For, since a Coat like *Archy's* coat,⁵ you beare, 15
 You should a Cappe of the same making weare.
 (Bodleian MS Don.c.24, fol. 20^v)

Oldisworth’s commitment to a culture of non-metropolitan values becomes clearer in a poem addressed to the wife of Michael Oldisworth, ‘To the worshipfull, his honoured Cosin, Mistris Susan Oldisworth: upon her Re-movall from London to Thisselworth’.

Cosin, whilst You were one of London-people,
To whom *Paul*⁶ stands bare, and holds off his steeple,
Whilst you kept Court at that luxurious Lane,⁷
Where most, besides Saint *Martin*,⁸ are profane;
My country Penne would alwaies shun the City,
For feare to make the Aldermen too witty:
But now, since you beginne to take your Rest,
And (like the Sunne) to settle in the West,
Since you have taught the Lords to carry forth
London, and beare it downe to *Thisselworth*,⁹ 10
My feather'd Quill shall flie at your Command,
And tire his wings, to lett you understand
How much I joy to hear you grown so wise,
As thus to chandge *Hell* for a *Paradise*.

[...]

Yet (Cosin) if you meane to see indeed
The true and reall Country; you had neede
Come to Colnrogers; where a meadow Brooke
Runnes glasse, in which the dapper Willows looke
Whilst they adorn their locks: the Earth above
Is neither Cliff, nor Close, nor Heath, nor Grove,
Or rather 'tis all foure; and so it bendes
That eying the proportion of both endes,
You think on some great Bow, to which the Brooke
Is fitted, like a string, from nooke to nooke, 120
Or on some Eie-brow, at one end made bare,
Whose naked grasse seemes Skin, whose trees seeme Hair.

(Bodleian MS Don.c.24, fols. 26–27)

Oldisworth employs a rhetoric stemming from Horace's Epode II ('Beatus ille...') in celebration of the retired life, but the particularities of both the addressee and the countryside take the poem beyond the conventions in which he engages.

In many ways, Oldisworth can be seen as participating in literary practices which constitute the culture, or way of life, of the country gentry at the time. He appears, for example, to have spent Christmas 1632 at the home of Sir Edward

Hungerford in Corsham, Wiltshire. (Hungerford was deputy lieutenant of Wiltshire in 1624, and sheriff in 1632. He was elected MP for Chippenham in January 1620, and sat in both the Short and Long Parliaments in 1640. He was made a Knight of the Bath in 1625.) Oldisworth wrote the following epigram on him, and records: 'For these Verses I was largely rewarded with gold'.

To Sir Edward Hungerford
of Cosham

When I behold how numberlesse, how holy,
How wise, how constant, how submisse and lowly
They are, who serve you, Sir: mee thinks, your Traine
Is the Church militant. Yet straight againe
When I behold their Happynesse, and blisse,
Mee thinks, your Traine the Church triumphant is.

(Bodleian MS Don. c. 24, fol. 19^v)

During the same visit he produced, amongst other poems, 'An epitaph on *Thomas Hulbert*, Cloathyer of *Cosham*'.

Stand still, who-ere thou art, and lett thine Eies
First reade, then weepe: Here Thomas Hulbert lies,
One, whom the best of men did respect and love,
As this same monument may partly prove. 5
Nature endow'd him with such matchlesse partes,
Hee noe way needed to bee taught the Artes,
And though hee hadd a Trade, and dealt in Cloath,
Hee was a Scholar and a Courtyer both,
A father strict, yet tender ore his Childe, 10
A loving neighbour, and a Master milde,
Who never did the needy Poore contemme,
And god enricht him by the handes of them:
Nor did he Care in his owne Houshold ende;
But did to Towne, and Country too, extend.
In serving God, in honouring the King, 15
In wayting on his Sh'riff, in every thing,

So well hee spent this mortal life's short span,
Hee seem'd a Wonder, rather then a Man.

(Bodleian MS Don. c. 24, fol. 28)

Oldisworth's note to the poem reveals not only how poems of this kind constitute and sustain social relationships in a community, but also how the poet is a participant in such transactions: 'These verses I wrote at the Request of Sir *Edward Hungerford*, who prescribed the matter of them to mee, intending to sett upp this Epitaph at his owne Cost, because *Thomas Hulbert* had diligently waited on him, when hee was high Sheriffe of *Wiltshire*'.

Many of Oldisworth's poems reveal how poetic activity features significantly in his own self-understanding, and also in the conduct of social relationships. Thus, for example, at the 'command' of his father, he composed an *ex tempore* epigram on Sir Giles Fetiplace, High Sheriff of Gloucestershire, in 1631 (Sir Giles Fetiplace of Poulton, d. 1641).

Sir, all the Wishes, which an humble Friend
May send to the high Sh'riff, I to You send.
The joyes of Harvest-men, when they have reapt
Their long expected Croppe, bee on You heapt;
The joyes of *Christmas*, which is to the Yeare 5
As to a Ring a pearle, and breedes good Cheare,
The joyes of brides and Bride-groomes the first night,
When they at once doe trouble and delight,
The joyes of such a rich man, as despaires
Of having sonnes, and yet at last getts heires, 10
The joyes, which Conquerours conceive, when they
Are told the Newes, how they have wonne the day,
The joyes of Princes, when they are made Kings,
A martyr's joyes, when in the fire hee sings,
The joyes, which you deserve, to you bee given, 15
The joyes of a cleare Conscience, and of heaven.

(Bodleian MS Don. c. 24, fol. 48^v)

The poem celebrates a local dignitary, and simultaneously reaffirms a complex of social relationships and values, not the least of them being the complaisant filial deference with which Oldisworth undertook his task.

Central to the self-enacting values of county gentry celebrated by Oldisworth are the social virtues of generosity and hospitality. This can be seen, for example, in the valorisation of charitable deeds in ‘An epitaph on Master Little of Abingdon’.

Behold him here to dust and ashes turn'd
 Who in his life with zeale and Charity burn'd:
 Witnessse the Church, the Crosse, the Hospitall
 Repaired at most of his Charge: witnessse all
 Those later Rites, which beautifie the towne, 5
 Such are, the Mace before the Mayor, the gowne
 For aldermen, and Privilieges many
 Which hee ('tis strange!) gott without loosing any.
 Witnessse himselfe, who foure years was a Mayor,
 A burgesse forty two; who dealt so faire 10
 That hee was once made of the Parliament:
 Who, where hee gayn'd, was just; free, where hee spent.
 Reader, if none of all these Witnesses
 Will serve thy Turne, take one more; witnessse Blisse.
 (MS Don. c. 24, fol. 47^v)

Here the spirit of geniality exemplified in the figure of Sir Edward Hungerford can be seen as not merely personal good-naturedness, but as an instance of the commitment to Epicurean, as opposed to Stoic, notions of the Good Life celebrated in so much of seventeenth century English literature (Shakespeare's *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*, and Ben Jonson's 'To Penshurst' being among the earliest instances):¹⁰

On the Christmas at Cosham
 in Wiltshire. 1632.

As those, which for a While in Heav'n have been,
 Relate not what things they have heard and seene,
 But onely in a silent joy admire:
 So wonder I, and so I reach noe higher.
 Sir *Edward Hungerford*, that more than Knight, 5

To all at once imparts both Heat and light;
Throughout his Palace, wee can hardly see
Or brighter Lampes, or warmer Fires, than Hee:
And though in ev'ry roome hee keepes good Cheare,
Yet hee himselfe is still the best Dish there. 10
Hee rules us so, as yong Kings rule their Courts:
Hee lengthens our Delights, extends our sports,
Stoppes the Approach of Night, and will not lett
Our mirth for eighteen houres together sett;
As hee were some newe Sun: whose wondrous raies 15
In midst of Winter made long Summer-Daies.
It holds not thus for two weekes, but for ay:
Here are noe bounds of Feasting, or of Play.
Guests doe not come and goe, but tarry ever.
Their year may sometimes end, their Christmas never. 20
December is but one month other-where:
December is noe lesse then twelve months here.
I scarce know what the Innes of court yee call,
But sure this single House excells them all:
And if it had its right, each novice Heire 25
To Cosham, not to London, would repaire;
Foolles, as they are! which fare ill, and pay deare,
When they might fare well, and pay nothing here.

(MS Don. c. 24, fol. 61)

Complementary to generosity and hospitality as essential to the Good Life, are a sense of well-being derived from the experience of country life, and one might therefore expect a Cotswold poet like Oldisworth to write pastoral poems. But for him the realities of sheep are perhaps incapable of transmutation by literary practices. He does indeed write a single 'Eglogue between a Carter and a shepard, made on Master *Michaël Oldisworth's* Comming into the Country' (MS Don. c. 24, fols. 41^v–42), but his preference is to write about gardening, which is more centrally Epicurean, in that it is a celebration not simply of the contemplative life but also of a simultaneously individual and social commitment to reciprocal engagement and interaction with the uncontaminated resources of the natural world—in other words, Oldisworth does not simply rework the *locus amoenus*

topos. In a visit to Recusant friends in Arborfield in Berkshire he describes the garden:

The neighbring Garden was a place so wrought,
As Skill and Nature both had thither brought
Their chiefe endowments, and stood there to trie 55
Which should bee judg'd to have prioritie.
Colours, as many as the dazeled Eies
Or frantick Braines of Painters can devise;
Sents new and strange: some of the weeders sweare
The rootes of all the Flowrs perfumed were. 60
On this side Arbors, hedges, Plotts of greene,
On that side Mounts and Walks were to bee seene;
But wee did most admire the curious Order:
There was a Commonwealth in every border.
('Iter Ausatrale', Bodleian MS Don. c.24, fol. 45v)

Through the emblematic presentation of the garden, the poet makes us aware of an alternative site of personal, social and even spiritual value (and since the gardeners are Recusants, this is particularly significant).¹¹

Another poem ('To Mistris Thorold of Arborvill'), emphasises the extent to which gardening aligns humans with the generative forces of nature.

Blest creature, laugh at my Mistake. When I
Behold your childrens Faces, and there spie
Lillies and Roses, I beginne to feare
You have noe Flowrs, but those which doe grow here:
Yet straight againe (ô foolish!) when I see 5
Your garden, and the Beauties which there bee,
I feare, you have noe issue; all your Blisse,
All your Delight, I feare, consists in this.
For why? can you at once doe two things well?
Can you in this Bedd, in that Bedd, excell? 10
To breed faire slippes, is nothing; to breed faire
Daughters, is common: to breed both, is rare.
Wonder of fruitfulnesse, who ever knewe

Any thus doubly happy, besides You?

(Bodleian MS Don. c. 24, fol. 50)¹²

The extent to which self-enacting poetic practices permeated the social fabric further than we ordinarily admit, can be seen in a poem to a female cousin, ‘To the worshipfull, Mistris Strange of Summerford, a Poëtesse’.

My censure, and my Verdict, which you crave
On all your Poëms (Cosin) here you have.
Two faults I find, and but two faults in troth,
They are too sacred, and too witty both.
So witty they are, that I sometimes feare 5
They border on prophane Conceipts too neare.
That are so sacred, that I think sometimes
They doubtlesse are some Sermons, and noe Rymes.
Such verses sure, as yours, the Angels sing
When they extoll the everlasting King. 10
One while for Hymnes and psalmes I them mistook,
Yet by and by, when I did better looke,
Jeasts, epigrams, and fancies I them deemed.
So grave together, and so light they seemed.
More then a Poët you are in each line: 15
In each line you are more than a Divine.
If I might have my Wish, a Woman should
Bee that, which never any man yet could:
If I might have my Wish, great *Charles* should take you
And both a Bishop and a Laureat make you. 20
'Twere but what You deserve, though 'twere a Wonder
Above to see Baies, and a Rotchet under.

(MS Don. c. 24, fol. 36^v)

We normally assume that women poets are a rarity in the first decades of the seventeenth century, but this complimentary epigram presupposes that both Oldisworth and his cousin found themselves in a cultural community which enabled female poets. (Oldisworth’s description of Mistress Strange’s work invites us to think of Donne or Corbett, who really did become a bishop, and we

may well wonder what has become of the poems.)¹³

As some earlier examples show, Oldisworth's representation of women and of his relationship with them is different from those normally associated with the largely metropolitan-focussed poetry of the period. We find much more of the domestic, private life, a sense of the poet engaged in conversation with, and interested in the affairs of, the women around him. Oldisworth acknowledges women not simply as part of his readership, but as a constituent of the social, interpersonal complex which enables his poetic identity. In this he is unlike many of his contemporaries whose poems presuppose that the primary audience of their virtuosity is a male readership of manuscript miscellanies or singleton copies. He has numerous poems addressed to women in addition to those already cited, but one in particular reveals not only his concern with the predicament of a specific woman, but also his use of a poem itself as a form of interpersonal engagement.

To a yong Lady, that

hadd the greene Sicknesse.

Nay, Madam, you may very well bee seene;
 Hide not your face: what though your Cheeks shew green,
 They shew the better; greene is such an hue
 As pleaseth (I think) every one, but You.
 How foule and monstrous would the Earth appeare, 5
 If grasse were redd, were white, and not greene were?
 Why should that colour, which our mother's face
 So well becomes, so deeply yours disgrace?
 Suppose that You were sett in *Nature's* stead,
 What would you doe? how would you have things bredd? 10
 Would you make Plants grow motly, or the Corne
 With rosy fingers imitate the Morne?
 Oh! it were dainty Sport, to see a Leeke
 Ruddy and blushing, like some guilty cheeke.
 Yet you are not so greene, but that in You 15
 Much other Beauty shines: your veines are blue,
 Your lippes are damask, and your handes are white,
 Grey are your Eies, your gold-like Haire is bright.

Or though you were as greene, as garden-peas,
Our optick sense you would the better please, 20
And seeme the fairer; else men are not wise,
If they dislike what most preserves their Eies:
Aske physick-doctors which is the best way
To keepe our Sights entire, and they will say
Looke on greene gemmes, green cloaths, and when you use 25
Glasse spectacles, the green Glasse alwaies chuse.
Greene is a fertile colour, and doth suite
With such Maides, as are likely to beare Fruit;
Take the most part, they are but wither'd Plants
Which goe in other hues: and sure there wants 30
Much sappe and wholsom Moisture there, where Ladies
Shew sleeke and gawdy, like dead painted babies.
But you frett chiefly 'cause a Sicknesse 'tis;
As though there were noe worse Disease, than this:
Think on the Pocks, the Plague; think on some ach, 35
Or on a naughty Husband; think on Age.
Yours is a Queene's disease, and fitt for such
As live in idleness; the toilsome *Dutch*
N'er feele it; and the *Switzers* sooner have
A king amongst them, than a Griefe so brave. 40
Enjoy your Cheekes; and laugh to think how silly
They are, who triumph that the Rose and Lilly
Joyne in their muzzels: tell them how their **WHITE**
Betrayes their Feare, and backwardnesse to fight;
Their **REDD** betrayes their bloody minde, and shoves 45
They faine would kill, though they dare strike noe blowes.

Greensickness, defined in *OED* as 'an anæmic disease which mostly affects young women about the age of puberty and gives a pale or greenish tinge to the complexion; chlorosis' was generally regarded as the occasion for scurrilous verse, the cure for the condition being, as one acrostic poem puts it, A PRICK. By contrast, Oldisworth reveals genuine empathy and does his humorous best to cajole the young woman out of the psychosomatic manifestations of her condition.¹⁴

We are inclined to think that religious affiliation was a clear-cut matter in the seventeenth century, but Oldisworth's *Iter Australe*, an account of a journey made from London to Southampton in 1632—no doubt prompted by Richard Corbett's *Iter Boreale*—provides a far more nuanced view.

At Arborvill¹⁵ neare Reding,

Brave lanes, brave roomes, brave Meat, brave Drink, brave Bedding,
 Nay, and brave people also here wee finde,
 Brave people both in Bodie, and in Minde. 40
 Their old ones are most wise, most kind; their yong
 Most beautifull, most nimble, and most strong:
 Noe fault they have, but this; they doe belive
 Bellarmin's doctrine. O how much wee grieve
 To thinke that 'tis such worthy persons doome 45
 To bee deluded (if noe worse) by Rome!
 How-ere their Faith, their Diet pleas'd us well
 Not onely with its Tast, but with its Smell;
 The neighbring Garden, by a secret arte,
 Sweet savours to our Dishes did impart: 50
 And wee could scarce tell, if wee should have chose,
 Whether to bee all Palate, or all Nose.

(MS Don. c. 24, fol. 45–45^v)

Before reaching Southampton, Oldisworth and his companion(s) visited the home of his absent friend Richard Bacon.

Our selves, wee must confesse, tooke much Delight
 Spying *New-forrest*, and the *ile of Wight*:
 But heav'nly *Chillings*,¹⁶ and the Dwellers there, 125
 And their sweet manners (though they Papists were)
 So wanne us, that Wee counted all houres vaine,
 Wherin wee did not something from them gaine.
 Their servants and their slaves they us'd like frends,
 Their friends like Princes; not for their owne endes 130
 But 'cause they honour'd these, and they lov'd those:
 In maters of Dispute, they alwaies chose

Rather then wrangle, to chaine upp their Tongue,
And so gott Praise, although they held the Wrong.
They never sware. for why? they still spake troth, 135
Their naked Word was taken for an Oath;
And with the Poore they did so kindly deale,
Noe neighbour ere had any Need to steale.

(MS Don. c. 24, fol. 46–46^v)

Richard Bacon was at school with Oldisworth, and like him was elected a King's Scholar. Bacon went to Trinity College, Cambridge, but left after his first year. In Oldisworth's collection there are ten poems to Richard Bacon (most of them verse epistles); not one of which mentions his Recusancy, or the reason for his departure: Bacon had travelled to France in order to be trained at the Seminary at Douay, where he subsequently taught rhetoric. The poems indicate that the two friends corresponded regularly until Bacon's death of the plague in 1636. Although Oldisworth's reticence about his friend's Recusancy suggests an unwillingness to be explicit about his association with Roman Catholics, it is clear that amongst the rural gentry, especially those who shared the formative experiences of school and university, religious differences were of secondary importance in interpersonal conduct.

The last poem to Bacon is a poignantly blank page entitled 'On the death of his deare friend Master Richard Bacon'. Other poems indicate that the relationship between the two men was intimate, if not erotic. For example, 'On the picture of Beauty', which is entitled 'On the picture of yong Master Bacon, as it is sett upp beyond sea, and enti[t]led The Picture of Beauty' in Folger MS V. a. 170 (p. 313), a manuscript miscellany associated with Christ Church, and containing a collection of poems by Oldisworth (some of them not in the autograph collection).

Here joyn'd you see white Snow, and purple Fire;
The one doth move, the other quench Desire:
Feare not or Freezing, or excessive heate,
The worst that can fall out, is but Cold sweat.
O who of such a mixture can complaine, 5
Where still the Cure is equall to the Paine?

Without the evidence of a manuscript which predates the autograph fair copy, one would be hard pressed to assume that the conventional language of eroticism is directed at a male, and it might well be that discretion prompted Oldisworth to suppress the identity of the subject. Elsewhere, however, the poet cannot be accused of being embarrassed: in one of several poems entitled 'To his Friend beyond sea', for example, his friend's physical beauty is frankly acknowledged:

Bacon, thou hardly wilt believe that Wee
Which are so zealous in commending thee,
Should scarce endure to heare thy publick Praise:
Yet so it is.

[...]

Beauty is the pride
Not of a Gentleman, but of a Bride. 10
Truly wee hope that though thou wentst from hence
Sweet, prety, and delightfull to the sense,
Time will impaire thee so, that wee may finde
Noe gifts at thy Returne, but in thy Minde....
(MS Don. c. 24, fol. 28^v)

This is hardly erotic, and one is forced to return to 'On the picture of Beauty' and read it with an acceptance that the culture of male friendship is more complex and nuanced than many readers are prepared to admit, especially as we need to take account of the fact that these poems are placed, without demur, in a collection dedicated to Oldisworth's wife, the mother of his two daughters. Friendship, like religion, is one of the established accommodations engaged in by conscious beings: 'But insomuch as things human are frail and fleeting, we must be ever on the search for some persons whom we shall love and who will love us in return; for if goodwill and affection are taken away, every joy is taken from life' (Cicero, *De Amicitia* xxvii.102).¹⁷

The collection of poems Oldisworth dedicated to his wife has few poems that are explicitly religious, which is what one would expect from the epigraph from 1 Corinthians 13: 1. One of the last poems in the collection is 'An hymne to God', whose form represents a cross:

O thou All, conforme my Minde
So thy goodnesse to embrace,
That it may noe Pleasure finde
But in wondring at thy grace.
Things below 5
Lett mee knowe:
Lett mee love
Things above.

(Bodleian MS Don.c.24, fol. 74)

The concluding poems are ‘A divine Rapture’ (Bodleian MS Don.c.24, fol. 76^v) and the three-part ‘His Farewell to *Poëtrie*’ (Bodleian MS Don.c.24, fol. 77–77^v), in which he turns his back on the things of this world. For a better sense of his religious practice and beliefs, we need to turn to his sermons, seventeen of which he copied into a manuscript book and annotated carefully as to when and where he delivered them, thus ensuring that he did not repeat his material too often (Bodleian MS Eng. th.f.20). The sermons are generally unostentatious, with only the occasional pedantic indulgence of learning to bewilder or impress a rural congregation. To judge from the content of the sermons he was a dutiful pastor concerned with the inculcation of moderate doctrine and piety. Only in the very last sermons does a concern with larger political events emerge: the fall of prominent men (amongst whom he probably numbered his ecclesiastical superior, Godfrey Goodman, Bishop of Gloucester) as presaging bad times, while such troubled times are to be regarded as visitations of divine justice. Bishop Goodman’s crypto-Catholicism held no attractions for Oldisworth, despite the fact that his dearest friend, Richard Bacon was a Recusant. Even when he does write a poem on the Blessed Virgin, attention is focussed on Christ rather than his Mother:

On the picture of the Virgin
feeding her babe.
Rejoyce yee that are borne anewe.
See, Christ himselfe becomes like you,
Whilst sitting in his Mothers lappe
Hee scornes nor Swathes, nor Milke, nor Pappes
These are his Cloaths his Meate, and Drinke. 5

Dwell here a while, and yee will thinke
His infancie endures for aye,
And all the yeare is Christmas day.
If Abram, Moses, and the rest
Of holy men, were counted blest 10
Because hee saw Christ, as hee was
Farre off, in a prospective glasse,
How happy then, how blest are wee
Which face to face our Jesus see?

(Folger MS V.a.170, p. 284)¹⁸

But the third last poem in the collection, Oldisworth's translation of the *Te Deum* (to the tune of the Old Hundredth) written 'at the Command of his reverend diocesan Godfry Goodman Bishop of Glocester' (Bodleian MS Don. c. 24, fols. 75^v-76) provides evidence of the regional inflection to the complex mingling of religion and poetry as a way of life in rural England.

Nowhere is the tissue of locally nuanced cultures more evident than in the dedicatory epistle of Oldisworth's collection.

To his deare Wife, Mar-
-rie Oldisworth.
Sweet Mall

Wee two have now beene marryed five yeares: and hitherto (praised bee God) wee have wanted nothing, but Peace. For my part, I thanke God for those good dayes, which I have seene in my youth: wherin I had Leisure to please my owne fancie, and to write such Toyes, as here doe follow. And I doubt not but Thou also, in those very dayes, hadst and didst enjoy thy faire virginlike contentments; though I then was not so happy, as to know either Them, or Thee. Time was (Mall) when tabrets and pipes were more respected, then drummes and trumpets: which drummes and trumpets were seldome heard in England, but at a Masque, or at a Play. Time was, when I could ride from Borton to London, both without Companie, and without Danger, and carry my Pockets full of Monie. But now where is that Monie? My gold-scales (thou knowest) lie uselesse and unemployed: nor doe I see my Sovereigne's face in silver at

home much oftener, then I see his face in flesh and blood in Oxford. Yet have I spent as much, in Contributions and Free-quarters, as would not onely have sett mee out of debt, but have begunne competent Portions for thy two little daughters. I pray god send us Patience: for, although wee are likely to stand in Need of many things, yet are wee likely to stand most in Neede of Patience. So entreating thee to bee of good Cheare, and not to trouble or disquiet thy minde with the Feare and expectation of those Evils, which perchance may never come; I rest

Thy true Friend

Nicolas Oldisworth¹⁹

Oldisworth's primary reader is a wife who is acknowledged as the friend sharing his life in rural Gloucestershire during a time of major social and political upheaval. Though he might see the King in Oxford, and support the royal cause to his own financial detriment, his primary sphere of self-enacting conduct is domestic and rural, not public and national, a sphere he had chosen well before national conflicts began to impinge upon the quiet of his country life.

To return to my introductory remarks: we all too readily take for granted the existence of a monolithic print-based London literary culture. Just occasionally we acknowledge the role of the Universities, or the phenomenon of manuscript circulation, but neither of these has much influenced the way we read. The career of Nicholas Oldisworth, however, serves as a reminder that there is a complexly nuanced and varied peripheral provincial literary culture which modestly and insistently challenges the cultural centripetality of the metropolis, and which, though not dominant itself, feeds into the dominant culture, and to some extent even enables it.

NOTES

1. For some of the pioneering work in this area, see Peter Beal, *Index of English Literary Manuscripts* and *In Praise of Scribes*, Mary Hobbs, Arthur F. Marotti, and Timothy Raylor.
2. Bodleian MS Don. c. 24, fol. 32. Following the translation is a 'Censure upon Aristophanes his States-woman' (fols. 32–33v) written at the request of the Jane Duppa, the wife of the Dean of Christ Church.
3. Oldisworth might not have any particular person in mind. The most recent elevation was that of Edward Conway, who was created Viscount Conway of Conway Castle in 1627.
4. Thirty pounds would appear to be the standard fee paid to the Heralds' Office for a coat of arms. In Jonson's *Every Man out of his Humour*, III.iv, Sogliardo boasts that the patent for his flamboyant arms cost him £30.
5. Archibald Armstrong (d. 1672), the jester to both James I and Charles I, wore traditional fool's motley; see Enid Welsford 171–79.
6. St Paul's Cathedral.
7. Oldisworth's marginal note indicates that this is 'St Martin's lane, neare Charingcrosse'.
8. St Martin-in-the-Fields.
9. Isleworth, Middlesex, nine miles south-west of London, on the left bank of the Thames. Oldisworth has in mind the near proximity of Sion House, home of the Earls of Northumberland.
10. These values are also celebrated in the passage from Oldisworth's 'Iter Australe' (lines 38–52) cited below.
11. Oldisworth also writes a lengthy description of a garden made by another Recusant, 'On an Arbour made by Master Richard Bacon, on the sea-shoar opposite to the ile of Wight' (Bodleian MS Don. c. 24, fols. 55–56). Paul Hammond (36–37), quoting only the first two stanzas from the inferior manuscript (Folger V.a.170), wishes to read the poem in homosexual erotic terms. The poem as a whole and the third and fourth stanzas in particular invalidate this approach. For further discussion of Oldisworth's participation in the conventions of intimate friendship, see my 'Nicholas Oldisworth, Richard Bacon and the Practices of Caroline Friendship', *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 47 (2005): 366–401.
12. In another poem, 'To a gentle-woman that delighted too much in her garden' (Bodleian MS Don. c. 24, fol. 59v), Oldisworth chides a friend who overindulges in gardening:

Look what a litle shredd of earth it is,
Wherin you place your Joy, and fixe your blisse:
I thought that you so good had beene, and wise
The totall Globe could not your minde suffice.
Fie, come away. Think but how vile and base 5
They are, who labour alwaies in one place;
None but A Prisoner or a Mill-horse sure
To doe the same, as you doe, would endure.

13. Many days of research have not allowed me to identify the addressee of the poem, nor have I discovered any poems which might fit Oldisworth's description, but awareness of their existence might enable a serendipitous discovery.
14. Oldisworth's poem is in some ways not unlike Edward, Lord Herbert of Cherbury's two greensickness poems (both entitled 'The Green-Sickness Beauty'); see *Poems English and Latin* 67–69. Though Herbert's poems treat the woman with respect, their main concern is to celebrate her beauty. Oldisworth's poem, on the other hand, is consolatory rather than eulogistic, and his tone is avuncular and personal rather than elegantly witty and courtly.
15. Arborfield, Berkshire.
16. The Manorhouse at Chilling Farm on the coast between Warsash and Titchfield in Hampshire has long since been demolished. It was probably owned by Thomas Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton (1608–1667), who succeeded to the title in 1624.
17. From the Loeb translation: 'Sed quoniam res humanae fragiles caducaeque sunt, semper aliqui anquirendi sunt quos diligamus et a quibus diligamur; caritate enim benevolentiaque sublata omnis est e vita sublata iucunditas.'
18. It is interesting, though, that he chose not to include the poem in the autograph collection.
19. The dedicatory epistle is dated 17 February 1644, but Oldisworth's marginal annotation indicates that it was written at the time of 'the Treaty at Uxbridge betweene the king's side and the Parliament's'. Negotiations between royalist and parliamentary emissaries were conducted at Uxbridge between 30 January and 24 February 1645.

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