

*Lyngo yw or'nys dhodho: Does Gwreans an Bys Reflect Post-Reformation Belief in Cornwall?*<sup>1</sup>

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Cornwall's rich history of medieval religious drama is almost unrivalled in Britain, although perhaps less well-known than the contemporary York and Wakefield mystery play cycles. The Cornish mystery and miracle plays were used, as with other dramas written prior to the Reformation, to illustrate Biblical, legendary, and apocryphal teachings to an illiterate population and thus were written in the vernacular language, in this case, Cornish. I shall be using the term mystery play to refer to the three-part *Ordinalia: Origo Mundi, Passio Christi, and Resurrexio Domini*, which tells the Creation story and events of Christ's Passion, and the term miracle play to refer to the plays *Bewnans Meriasek* and *Bewnans Ke*, which tell the stories of the lives of the Cornish saints Meriadoc and Kea interspersed with other stories.<sup>2</sup> There is a scholarly consensus that these plays and a Passion poem (*Pascon agan Arluth*), also written to entertain and teach an illiterate audience about the events of Holy Week, were written at Glasney College in Penryn.<sup>3</sup> Glasney was the key centre of learning in Cornwall during the medieval period. Rather than being a monastery, it was a collegiate church and housed secular canons instead of monks. *Pascon agan Arluth* would appear to predate the *Ordinalia* cycle, with both works most likely written in the fourteenth century.<sup>4</sup> However, the earliest extant manuscripts date from the fifteenth century.<sup>5</sup> Scholarship in the field of medieval drama agrees that the length of the extant plays suggests that they were staged over several days, and that as well as forming the intended audience, the local population would also perform the drama.<sup>6</sup>

*Gwreans an Bys* ('The Creation of the World') is a further mystery play written in Cornish. Its only source is a manuscript in the Bodleian Library with the following colophon: 'Here endeth the creacion of the world with Noyes flood written by William Jordan: the xiith of August 1611.'<sup>7</sup> Although there are questions

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<sup>1</sup> *Gwreans an Bys*, ed. by Ray Edwards (Sutton Coldfield: Cornish Language Board, 2000), hereafter *Gwreans an Bys*, p. 56, l. 2062, 'Limbo is ordained for him'. All translations are my own unless otherwise noted. I would like to thank my peer reviewers and the editors for their comments and assistance with the previous drafts of this paper which is an exploration of part of my PhD thesis.

<sup>2</sup> *Cornish Ordinalia*, Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Bodley 219; *Beunans Ke*, Aberystwyth, National Library of Wales, NLW MS 23849D; *Beunans Meriasek*, Aberystwyth, National Library of Wales, Peniarth MS 105B.

<sup>3</sup> *Pascon agan Arluth*, London, British Library, Harley MS 1782. Brian Murdoch, *Cornish Literature* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1993), p. 41. See also Jane A. Bakere, *The Cornish Ordinalia, A Critical Study* (Cardiff: UWP, 1980), pp. 12–49.

<sup>4</sup> Murdoch, *Cornish Literature*, p. 19.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>7</sup> Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Bodley 219, fol. 27<sup>r</sup>.

regarding both the date of its composition and its author, it is regarded by Neuss as the last surviving example of a mystery play written in Britain.<sup>8</sup> Previous studies of the play have concentrated on its language, its possible date of composition, and its relationship to the earlier play *Origo Mundi*. However, these leave many questions still to be answered, not least of which are: does the play reflect post-Reformation belief in Cornwall? Why was the play written in Cornish? Why was a mystery play written at such a late date? Was this an attempt to preserve a mystery play for posterity or to slip a play with unpalatable ideas past censorship from London? Was Jordan himself a recusant?

Neuss has written the key studies analysing the play. Her examination of the relationship between *Gwreans an Bys* and *Origo Mundi* has been instrumental in understanding the composition of the play. Bruch and George, continuing the earlier work by Neuss, have shown through careful comparison of the texts that only seven percent of *Gwreans an Bys* is actually taken from the earlier play.<sup>9</sup> Neuss previously noted that ‘identical lines occur in only three episodes in the plays: the Creation and Fall, the Cursing of Cain, and the Noah sequence. More significantly, of the 178 lines, 127 are among the speeches of one character, God the Father’.<sup>10</sup> Neuss concluded that the author of *Gwreans an Bys* had access to the actor’s part of the earlier *Origo Mundi*, and thus had included these lines within their own play.

There is evidence that actors in medieval plays would have their own lines written out for them separately. It is possible then that the author had either seen the written lines or remembered them from a performance of *Origo Mundi*. Neuss argued that Jordan was merely a scribe and that those lines in *Gwreans an Bys* which are from the earlier play but are spoken by other characters come either from the cues to speeches by God or occur elsewhere in scenes in which he was present.<sup>11</sup> However, it is interesting to note that all except one of God’s speeches in the manuscript are marked by a manicule (the speech missing a manicule starts at line 962).<sup>12</sup> Two other speeches are also marked in this way: that by the Angel of God of the third degree beginning at line 206, and that of Michael beginning at line 307.<sup>13</sup> Was Jordan an actor who performed as God the Father in *Gwreans an Bys*? Perhaps he also felt it necessary to mark lines from two other characters for dramatic reasons?

Neuss concludes there are similarities between *Origo Mundi* and *Gwreans an Bys*:

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<sup>8</sup> Paula Neuss, ‘Memorial Reconstruction in a Cornish Miracle Play’, *Comparative Drama*, 5.2 (1971), 129–137; Paula Neuss, *The Creacion of the World: A Critical Edition and Translation* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1983), p. xvii.

<sup>9</sup> Ken George, *Tybyansow Nowydh a-dro dhe ‘Gwrians an Bys’: New Ideas About ‘The Creation of the World’*, unpublished paper given at the Cornish Language Weekend, 10 April 2021. See Benjamin Frederick Bruch, ‘Cornish Verse Forms and the Evolution of Cornish Prosody, c. 1350–1611’ (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Harvard University, 2005), pp. 349–80.

<sup>10</sup> Neuss, ‘Memorial Reconstruction’, p. 131.

<sup>11</sup> Neuss, ‘Memorial Reconstruction’, p. 131.

<sup>12</sup> Manicules can be found in the following locations: MS Bodley 219, fols 1<sup>r</sup>, 3<sup>r</sup>, 4<sup>r</sup>, 5<sup>r</sup>, 5<sup>v</sup>, 10<sup>r</sup>, 10<sup>v</sup>, 11<sup>r</sup>, 12<sup>v</sup>, 13<sup>r</sup>, 14<sup>v</sup>, 15<sup>v</sup>, 22<sup>v</sup>, 23<sup>v</sup>, 24<sup>r</sup>, 26<sup>r</sup>, and 26<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>13</sup> MS Bodley 219, fols 3<sup>r</sup> and 4<sup>r</sup>.

Some [of these] differences in treatment, however, may be conscious alterations by the dramatist, in accordance with his intention in the play, and need not necessarily militate against *Origo Mundi* as a source for the episodes the plays have in common, even if the relationship is not as intimate as that for the three scenes where lines are duplicated.<sup>14</sup>

The antiquarians who studied Cornish in the nineteenth century and produced editions and translations of the plays also conclude that Jordan was not the author of the play, although this is because they believed the play was an altered copy of *Origo Mundi*. Davies Gilbert, in his 1827 edition, does not consider Jordan the author but does suggest that he translated another European mystery play into Cornish:

I presume, he translated it, more or less freely from some other language; since there seems very little probability of the work being original, as it nearly coincides in plan, in personifications, and in sentiment, with others, which for centuries before had delighted all the European nations, enclosed within the pale of the Church of Rome.<sup>15</sup>

Gilbert notes that the proportion of English words in *Gwreans an Bys* is greater than in the medieval plays and the Passion Poem, thus making its composition more recent than these other works.<sup>16</sup> Following Gilbert, Whitley Stokes, in his 1864 edition, suggested that Jordan was the transcriber and dates the play as being written in the period before the Reformation:

We may remark that the author imitates and often copies the ordiale called 'Origo Mundi', [...] Some parts, however, are his own; for example the fall of Lucifer and his angels, Cain's death, Enoch's translation, Seth's prophecy and erection of the pillars. Who the author was remains uncertain. The William Jordan mentioned at the end may well have been only the transcriber, and the occurrence in stage-directions of such forms as *sortis*, *beastis*, *garmentis*, *every ch-on* 'every one' and *carieth* 'they carry' seems to indicate a date prior to 1611, when Jordan completed his manuscript. The author's mention of limbo, too, may tend to shew that the play was composed before the Reformation.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Neuss, *The Creacion of the World*, p. xlvi.

<sup>15</sup> William Jordan, *The Creation of the World with Noah's Flood, Written in Cornish in the Year 1611 by William Jordan; with an English Translation by John Keigwin*, ed. by Davies Gilbert (London: J.B. Nichols, 1827), p. vi.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. vi.

<sup>17</sup> Whitley Stokes, *Gwreans an Bys. The Creation of the World. A Cornish Mystery Edited with a Translation and Notes* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1864), p. 4.

One area for further study with regards to the dating of the play might be a comparison between changes in the English language and the language of *Gwreans an Bys*.<sup>18</sup>

The nineteenth century antiquarians who studied Cornish raised questions as to both the authorship and date of composition of *Gwreans an Bys*, but without offering a definitive resolution to either issue. Later figures from the Cornish revival continued to conclude Jordan was merely the transcriber of the play, including Henry Jenner in his *Handbook of the Cornish Language*.<sup>19</sup>

Murdoch analysed all of the Cornish plays in the wider context of late medieval drama. He concludes *Gwreans an Bys* was written in the mid-sixteenth century, ‘a judgement reached by comparing it with other dramatisations of Genesis from that period in different countries’.<sup>20</sup> Murdoch’s work mainly focuses on the similarities and differences between *Gwreans an Bys* and *Origo Mundi*.<sup>21</sup> Bruch and George’s recent work analyses the rhyme schemes of all the Cornish medieval plays.<sup>22</sup> They discovered that whereas the miracle plays *Bewnans Ke* and *Bewnans Meriasek* follow the rhyme schemes found in the earlier *Ordinalia* trilogy, only approximately a quarter of the rhyme scheme in *Gwreans an Bys* follows that used in the earlier plays. Bruch posits that the author of *Gwreans an Bys* cannot have seen the manuscripts of these earlier plays, possibly because it was written after the final dissolution of Glasney College in 1548:

The text is a work by a writer who was acquainted with the system of versification associated with Glasney, but who knew it more through oral sources—performances of dramas like the *Ordinalia*—rather than through close study of Middle Cornish manuscripts or even information obtained directly from the men who had written or copied those manuscripts.<sup>23</sup>

George’s conclusions regarding date aligns with Bruch’s, based on analysis of the language of the play. George argues that it was written after the mergers in the Cornish sound change of around 1525.<sup>24</sup> He also notes that the play contains far more spellings in late Cornish.<sup>25</sup> These changes display some features associated

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<sup>18</sup> For a discussion of concurrent changes in English see Roger Lass, ‘Phonology and Morphology’, in *The Cambridge History of the English Language*, ed. by Roger Lass, 6 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), III, pp. 56–186.

<sup>19</sup> Henry Jenner, *A Handbook of the Cornish Language* (London: David Nutt, 1904), p. 27.

<sup>20</sup> Murdoch, *Cornish Literature*, p. 75.

<sup>21</sup> Brian Murdoch, ‘The Cornish Medieval Drama’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*, ed. by Richard Beadle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 211–39.

<sup>22</sup> George, *Tybyansow Nowydh*; Bruch.

<sup>23</sup> Bruch, p. 353.

<sup>24</sup> George, *Tybyansow Nowydh*.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

with the decline of the Cornish language. George's conclusion is that the play was written during the reign of Mary I.<sup>26</sup>

Words which can appear to be English are not necessarily so on further examination. Examining the point at which every word from English entered the Cornish language, either in its English form, or used in a Cornish manner is beyond the scope of this paper. However, it is necessary to discuss some examples to assist in an assessment of when the play might have been written. The play does contain many loan words from English. 518 of the 2549 lines of the play contain at least one word that has either been assimilated from English or borrow an unassimilated English word and use it in a Cornish way, such as the mutation of *commandement* to *gommandement* in line 659. This is also just one example of an English word being used where a Cornish word, *arghadow*, exists. In most instances Jordan's use of English is confined to single words. However, just under one hundred lines of the play either contain more than one English word, or the entire line is written in English. Lines 274–77 are written entirely in English:

For well nor wo  
I will not go  
I say yowe so  
This will not be.<sup>27</sup>

Fudge highlights that these words are spoken by God, a difference from the *Ordinalia*, where the character of the Devil can be found speaking in English, perhaps as a device to compare him with the 'good' Cornish-speaking characters.<sup>28</sup> However, Bakere, in analysing the earlier work of Fowler on the use of Middle English in the *Ordinalia* cycle, points out that:

While it is perfectly true that the first English phrase is spoken by the devil during the temptation of Eve, infernal personages have a not inconsiderable part in the cycle, being between the four of them responsible for 20 speeches in *Origo Mundi*, 24 in *Passio Christi* and 19 in *Resurrexio Domini*, yet they only manage 2 English phrases in the whole cycle. Whether or not Cornish is the language of the playwright's Heaven, English is not the language of his Hell.<sup>29</sup>

Sections written in entirely in English can also be seen in *Bewnans Ke*, for example lines 86–90. Nicholas Williams and Graham Thomas consider this play dates from the middle of the fifteenth century thanks to a reference to John of Gaunt which

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> *Gwreans an Bys*, ll. 274–77.

<sup>28</sup> Crysten Fudge, *The Life of Cornish* (Redruth: Truran Publications, 1982), p. 16.

<sup>29</sup> Bakere, pp. 8–9.

implies Modred is associated with the House of Lancaster.<sup>30</sup> If *Bewnans Ke* was also written at Glasney College, this inclusion of English throughout the play does not rule out a pre-Reformation date of composition for *Gwreans an Bys*. Can further examples of the use of English in *Gwreans an Bys* assist in dating the composition of the play? Lines 1525 and 1529 of *Gwreans an Bys* both contain the same word, *owne* — however, in line 1525 it is used as the Cornish word meaning fear or afraid, ‘owne yma thym a bub dean | ganso tha vonas lethys’;<sup>31</sup> and in line 1529 it is used as the English word ‘own’: ‘poran gans y owne dewla’.<sup>32</sup> In line 1971 the Cornish word *gew*, meaning ‘spear’, is used, however in line 1995 the English word *spera* ‘spear’ appears. These few examples suggest that the use of English in the play is not a simple case of Jordan not knowing the Cornish word. We cannot know for sure when certain words in English entered common usage either in Cornwall as a whole, or in particular areas of Cornwall. Another possibility is that, in comparison with the audience of the *Ordinalia*, by 1611 Jordan, and his potential audience, had moved from being monolingual Cornish speakers to bilingual Cornish and English speakers who were, in fact, beginning to speak, or understand, a hybrid language as the use of Cornish began its decline. Padel believes that by ‘1400, west Cornwall had been a bilingual community for about half a millennium’.<sup>33</sup> Jordan was from Helston, which places the transcription of the play in a part of Cornwall known to still speak mainly Cornish at the time it was written.<sup>34</sup> Whiting, in his analysis of popular religion after the Reformation reminds us that:

In Cornwall, and particularly in its western parishes, a further barrier was presented by the linguistic factor. To the Cornish-speaking population, literature written in English was certainly alien and possibly—as the Cornish rebels maintained in 1549—incomprehensible. But probably the most fundamental reason for the limited effectiveness of the written word as a medium of religious propaganda, either Catholic or Protestant, was the persistence of widespread illiteracy.<sup>35</sup>

The use of English within the play is not a clear indicator of its date of composition. It is clear that the play was written after the *Ordinalia* cycle from the similarities in three of the sequences. However, the difference in rhyme scheme as analysed by Bruch and George implies the author was unable to access full copies of the earlier plays, perhaps as a result of the final dissolution of Glasney College. What does

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<sup>30</sup> *Bewnans Ke: The Life of St Kea. A Critical Edition with Translation*, ed. by Nicholas Williams and Graham Thomas (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2007), pp. xlv–xlvi.

<sup>31</sup> *Gwreans an Bys*, ll. 1525–26, ‘I am afraid of every man | by him of being killed’.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, l. 1529, ‘just with his own pair of hands’.

<sup>33</sup> Oliver Padel, ‘Where Was Middle Cornish Spoken?’, *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies*, 74 (Winter 2017), pp. 1–31 (p.27).

<sup>34</sup> Ken George, ‘Cornish’, in *The Celtic Languages*, ed. by Martin Ball and Nicole Muller, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Abingdon: Taylor and Francis, 2010), pp. 488–535 (p. 490).

<sup>35</sup> Robert Whiting, *The Blind Devotion of the People: Popular Religion and the English Reformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 197.

appear to be clear is that *Gwreans an Bys* was written in for an audience which still mainly spoke Cornish.

Although it would seem there remained a linguistic need for a piece of literature to still have been written in Cornish rather than English at this time, the question remains as to why *Gwreans an Bys* was written, and then copied by Jordan in 1611. That the play mentions Limbo implies it was written before the Reformation, although it could also reflect post-Reformation belief in Cornwall as I shall go on to discuss. When Adam dies, Lucifer tells the devils that Adam will not be brought to hell but remain in Limbo as ordained by God. *Yn limbo barth awartha| ena ef a wra trega.*<sup>36</sup> The inclusion of Limbo could follow on logically from the use of *Origo Mundi* as source material. In addition to this, the play also includes the story of the Oil of Mercy, which is not Biblical, but is found in the *Ordinalia*.<sup>37</sup> A wide range of non-biblical source texts are likely and could imply the play was written by a Catholic. Longworth, in his analysis of *Origo Mundi* and *Gwreans an Bys*, found that:

Among these incidents which take place in the *Creation of the World* but not in the *Origo Mundi*, only one is based on biblical materials; most of the additions derive from apocryphal, legendary, or patristic sources. Even the one addition that is based on biblical evidence (the translation of Enoch) incorporates a great deal of apocryphal and legendary material.<sup>38</sup>

With the advent of the Reformation and the introduction of the Bible in English, were these sources more likely to have been destroyed during the dissolution of the monasteries? If so, this raises questions as to what messages the author was aiming to include in the narrative of the play. It is, of course, entirely possible that tales continued to circulate through an oral tradition and not all texts were destroyed. As seen in morality plays, there are sections where the audience is given advice; they are preached to. Adam tells Seth: ‘gwayte an tas a neff, gordhya | ha pub ere orta cola | yn pub othan a vesta.’<sup>39</sup> In addition to this, there is a strong emphasis on Marian doctrine, a key feature of Catholic belief. As Neuss points out:

The Virgin Mary is incorporated, apparently uniquely, into the legend of Seth’s vision of the Tree of Life, while incense is used by Abel and Noah. These elements may suggest that the Creacion was put together in its present form before the Reformation: they might otherwise have been deleted, as were for example references to the Sacraments and Transubstantiation in the

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<sup>36</sup> William Jordan, *Gwreans an Bys*, ed. by Ray Edwards (Sutton Coldfield: Kernewek dre Lyther, 2000), ll. 2017–18, ‘in limbo above | there he will stay’.

<sup>37</sup> *Origo Mundi*, ed. by Ray Chubb, Richard Jenkin and Graham Sandercock (Redruth: Agan Tavas, 2001), p. 329.

<sup>38</sup> Robert Longworth, ‘Two Medieval Cornish Versions of the Creation of the World’, *Comparative Drama*, 21.3 (1987), 249–58 (p. 250).

<sup>39</sup> *Gwreans an Bys*, ll. 1947–49, ‘See that you respect the Father in Heaven | and at all times heed him | in whatever need there is’.

Townley plays. However, they might equally well have survived from an earlier version, or, since Devon and Cornwall resisted the Reformation much longer than the rest of England, these elements might actually have been included deliberately. Thus such material cannot really provide evidence of a pre-Reformation date, as Stokes thought, in fact the defiant emphasis on Marian Doctrine may indicate the opposite. The presence of Mary in the Tree of Life, for instance, has been added by the playwright to the legend, possibly in reaction to the Reformation.<sup>40</sup>

What evidence do we have for this religious conservatism and resistance to the Reformation in Cornwall? What can events in Cornwall between the beginning of the dissolution of the monasteries in 1536 and the date of the manuscript in 1611 show us about what the Cornish believed at the time the play was likely to have been written? Due to decisions being made not only in mainland Europe but also closer to home, English, not Cornish, became the language of religion. These changes did not sit well with the common people of Cornwall. As Mark Stoye has shown, ‘during the 1530s and 1540s government attacks on the Catholic Church—a Church which had always proved itself extremely accommodating of Cornish language and culture—reawakened the spirit of defiance in West Cornwall’.<sup>41</sup>

This spirit of defiance culminated in the 1549 Prayer Book Rebellion. In January 1549, the First Act of Uniformity decreed that English would be used in all church services from Whitsunday that year (9 June). Cornish protestors, led by Humphry Arundell, gathered at Bodmin where they drew up articles of supplication to the King. These vary in number from eight to sixteen according to the sources and were ‘entirely conservative, concerned wholly with religious demands such as retention of usage with regard to baptism, confirmation, communion and so on’.<sup>42</sup> Most significant, however, is the eighth article: ‘we, the Cornish men, whereof certain of us understand no English, utterly refuse this new English.’<sup>43</sup> This was not merely a rebellion against changes to worship and liturgy, but a defence of their language too. The ordinary Cornishmen did not want another language to be imposed upon them, even if, as the Lord Protector Edward Seymour himself pointed out at the time, they would not have understood the Latin used in the old Roman Catholic masses they had experienced thus far. The Archbishop of Canterbury, Cranmer, ‘retorted that there were more people in Cornwall who understood English rather than Latin, but he was missing the point, for Latin was familiar (if not always understood) all across Cornwall, whereas English was not’.<sup>44</sup>

Other people from within the Protestant movement could see that there was still a clear need for people to use Cornish as a medium of worship. According to

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<sup>40</sup> Neuss, *The Creacion of the World*, p. lxxiii.

<sup>41</sup> Mark Stoye, *West Britons: Cornish Identities and the Early Modern British State* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2002), p. 21.

<sup>42</sup> Peter Berresford Ellis, *The Cornish Language and its Literature* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974), p. 61.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> Philip Payton, *Cornwall A History* (Fowey: Cornwall Editions, 2004), p. 123.



Stoyle: ‘clear evidence that the advanced Protestant party in England was not opposed, in principle, to the use of the Cornish language for religious instruction emerges from a puritan petition of c. 1560.’<sup>45</sup> This asked that children who did not speak English be allowed to learn the catechism in Cornish. That the need for Cornish-speaking children to be allowed to use their own language received Puritan support is unsurprising, given the importance placed on the individual’s direct relationship with God.

There is also evidence that Cornish was being used in religious instruction and services after the beginning of the Reformation, and that its use was approved by the Church. Ellis cites the following example:

As late as 1538, John Veysey, Bishop of Exeter, specifically ordered that all or part of the Epistle or Gospel of the day, or else the Paternoster, Ave Maria, Creed and Ten Commandments, should be read in Cornish in those parishes where English was not spoken.<sup>46</sup>

This implies there were still many monoglot parishes within the county at the time of the Reformation. The longest piece of extant Middle Cornish prose dates from the middle of the sixteenth century and was written by John Tregear. He translated a series of twelve sermons by the Bishop of London, Edmund Bonner, in around 1560. The set also includes a thirteenth, longer, homily known as *Sacrament an Alter* (SA), written by another clergyman whom D.H. Frost has identified as one Thomas Stephyn:<sup>47</sup>

It may have been the work of Thomas Stephyn. This is the name appended distinctively to Homilies 11 and 12, which are also distinctive because of the marginal notes added in the hand of the author of SA. It seems at least possible that Stephyn was claiming the authorship of the annotations by signing the homilies under Tregear—not least because the text of the homilies itself is written throughout in Tregear’s hand. If so, Stephyn is the author of SA too.<sup>48</sup>

Twelve of the homilies have titles in Latin; the last has a title in Cornish. Frost identifies Tregear as the Vicar of St Allen who presumably wanted his parishioners to hear the bishop’s sermons in a language they understood.<sup>49</sup> Bonner had initially supported the Reformation under Henry VIII but was imprisoned under Edward VI for opposing the first Act of Uniformity. Under Mary I he restored Catholicism to his diocese. How significant is it, therefore, that Tregear translated sermons written by a leading Catholic who took a major role in the prosecution of religious

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<sup>45</sup> Stoyle, *West Britons*, p. 46.

<sup>46</sup> Ellis, p. 34.

<sup>47</sup> D. H. Frost, ‘Sacrament an Alter: A Tudor Cornish Patristic Catena’, *Cornish Studies* 11 (2003), 291–307 (pp. 293–94).

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> D. H. Frost, ‘Glasney’s Parish Clergy and the Tregear Manuscript’, *Cornish Studies*, 15 (2007), 27–80 (p. 68).

dissidents? Did Tregear and his parish remain faithful to Catholicism throughout the post-Reformation period? Did they wish to do so, or were they able to do so in the period after 1560, and therefore created for themselves a need for the translation of these sermons into Cornish for their own scriptural edification? Frost dates Tregear's translation of the first twelve Homilies to the late 1550s.<sup>50</sup> However, the thirteenth homily, *Sacrament an Alter*, post-dates this. Its source material, as analysed by Frost, follows arguments from the 1554 Eucharistic Disputations held in Oxford, made widely available by their publication in John Foxe's *Actes and Monuments*, also known as the 'Book of Martyrs'.<sup>51</sup> By analysing the editions of this work, Frost concludes that *Sacrament an Alter* was written after the publication of the 1576 edition.<sup>52</sup> This therefore indicates a late sixteenth century interest in the production of materials regarding elements of Roman Catholic doctrine written in Cornish. As late as the mid-seventeenth century, Cornish was being used by members of the clergy in their communications. Around 1636, Mr Drake, vicar of St Just, sent marriage banns written in Cornish to Mr Trythal, curate of Sennen.<sup>53</sup> William Jackman, vicar of Feock, was still using Cornish during Holy Communion because the older members of his parish did not understand English.<sup>54</sup> It would seem the Cornish language remained a necessity in daily and religious life throughout this period.

During a state visit by the Spanish King Philip III and his wife Margaret on 20 August 1600 to a Roman Catholic training college for English priests, the royal couple heard speeches in various languages including Cornish. Only one student at the college was registered from the diocese of Exeter at this time, Richard Pentrey, admitted to the college on 29 April 1600.<sup>55</sup> The Elizabethan period witnessed the removal of several members of senior clergy within the diocese of Exeter,

including James Turberville, the bishop, Thomas Reynolds, the dean, Thomas Nutcombe the sub-dean, John Blaxton the treasurer, 11 cathedral prebendaries (almost half the total), and around 30 incumbents, including some resignations. These departures - not least among the senior diocesan staff - suggest that the Elizabethan Settlement was far from being a smooth transition in the west.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> D. H. Frost, 'A Critical Edition of *Sacrament an Alter* (SA): A Cornish Patristic *catena* Selected and Translated from Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* Attached to the Translation of Bishop Bonner's *Homilies* in the Tregear Manuscript (BL ADD. MS 46397)' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Liverpool Hope University, 2019), p. 28.

<sup>52</sup> Frost, 'Sacrament an Alter', p. 32.

<sup>53</sup> *A Reader in Cornish Literature 900–1900: Looking at the Mermaid*, ed. by Alan M. Kent and Tim Saunders (London: Francis and Taylor, 2000), pp. 212–13.

<sup>54</sup> Martyn F. Wakelin, *Language and History in Cornwall* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1975), p. 91.

<sup>55</sup> Ellis, pp. 71–72.

<sup>56</sup> Frost, 'Glasney's Parish Clergy', p. 45.

Although this does not indicate a wholesale desire within the diocese to remain staunchly Catholic, it seems that despite the Reformation, pockets of Catholicism continued in Cornwall, and therefore there was a continuing demand for men from the area to train for the priesthood, and, presumably, be able to minister to their flock in Cornish rather than English to cover an ongoing linguistic need alongside the spiritual one. Ellis concludes:

Those Cornish who kept their language also kept their religion which gave concessions to it. The training of Cornish-speaking clerics, such as Richard Pentrey, would encourage the language. In such circumstances there was a danger of Catholicism becoming synonymous with language.<sup>57</sup>

If this conservatism continued into the seventeenth century, it implies such pre-Reformation traditions were still firmly held in 1611 when Jordan was writing his play manuscript. We witness the result of this link between the Cornish and religious conservatism during the English Civil War. At this time political and religious factors played an influential role over the language. Cornwall fell on the Royalist side. Why was this? Two of the main instruments of power within Cornwall, the Stannaries and the Duchy of Cornwall itself, were direct products of royal power and afforded Cornwall a degree of independence. These secular institutions, with their links to the Crown, might have come under threat from Parliament, and this in turn could have threatened both the economy and identity of Cornwall. The combination of the lack of Cornish translations of the Bible and the Book of Common Prayer and pockets of recusancy meant Cornwall had remained religiously conservative, and as such the ‘Cornish Anglicanism’, which had developed over the century since the Reformation, was now under threat from a Puritan Parliament. As Stoye comments:

In Scotland and Ireland attachment to non-Anglican faiths was, at least in part, an expression of national independence, of resistance to the military, political and cultural hegemony of England. When these faiths were perceived to be under threat, as in Scotland in 1637 and Ireland in 1641, religious and racial tensions combined together to form a Molotov cocktail of hate. It seems probable that in Cornwall, too, a particular brand of religious faith—in this case conservative ‘Anglicanism’—was seen as an integral part of national identity, and that, when this faith was threatened by Parliament, ethnic anxieties combined with religious ones to ensure that the bulk of the population fell in behind the King.<sup>58</sup>

Stoye has carried out extensive research on life in Cornwall during the civil war period, including the beliefs and actions of the Cornish, as well as how Cornwall was viewed from the other side of the Tamar. He found that:

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<sup>57</sup> Ellis, p. 72.

<sup>58</sup> Stoye, *West Britons*, p. 88.

Some pamphleteers pushed the view of the Cornish as dupes: ignorant rustics who had been ‘seduced into the quarrell against the Parliament’ by Royalist agitators. Others depicted them as quasi-Catholics: religious conservatives who were hostile to the radical Protestantism associated with the Parliamentary cause. This point was touched on in January 1643, when a commentator noted that the King ‘[finds] his partie is most ... [in Cornwall] it being a place full of ... popishly affected persons’.<sup>59</sup>

Therefore, if the Cornish were still religiously conservative a century after the Reformation, it is probable that they were so during the mid-sixteenth century when *Gwreans an Bys* was most likely written, and that Jordan might have been a recusant in 1611 when the surviving manuscript was written. Was that his motivation in transcribing the play at this late date, and if so, was this for a traditional mystery play performance by and to a group within the Helston area who still adhered to a brand of Cornish Catholicism? It is also worth remembering that Cornwall had its own traditions and particular saints associated with individual places and that although this had been encouraged by the Catholic Church, it had a far smaller place within the new Protestant theology:

Certain trees, for example, were revered on account of their supposed association with local saints. One, at St Breward, was believed to date from Breward’s death; another, at St Endellion, was linked with St Mick [...]. A hill near St Minver was honoured as the site of Minver’s encounter with the Devil himself. Veneration was accorded also to the stone chairs in the churchyards at Germoe and St Mawes and on St Michael’s Mount. These were associated with Germoe, a companion of Breage in the early medieval evangelization of Cornwall; Mawes, a bishop in Brittany; and Michael, who had allegedly visited the Mount in ‘about the year of the Lord 710’, and who appears frequently (as on an early-sixteenth-century bench-end at Altarnun) in the region’s iconography. But more numerous than such trees, hills and chairs were the celebrated holy wells. Enclosed within small granite buildings, of which a good example survives at Laneast, these were invariably connected with saints. Two at St Endellion, for instance, were thought to have been frequented by Endellion herself, while the well at St Columb Major reputedly marked the place of Columb’s martyrdom.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Mark Stoye, “‘Pagans or Paragons?’: Images of the Cornish during the English Civil War”, *English Historical Review*, 111.441 (April 1996), 299–323 (pp. 305–06).

<sup>60</sup> Whiting, p. 55.

Within a geographically remote area such as Cornwall, such adherence and belief in the power of local saints, who were not only linked to specific places but also gave their names to many of the local parishes, was not going to disappear overnight.<sup>61</sup>

One aspect which has yet to be considered in relation to *Gwreans an Bys*, in both its original composition and the production of the manuscript in 1611, is whether or not it was an attempt to evade rules on censorship and what could or could not be performed as well as teaching Cornish people about Catholic doctrine. Elliot states: ‘In 1543 Henry affirmed the right of all his subjects to stage whatever entertainments they pleased so long as they did not “meddle with interpretations of Scripture, contrary to the doctrine set forth by the King's Majesty”’.<sup>62</sup> It seems that the definition of ‘meddling’ was not made clear. By Mary’s reign,

in August 1553, for the sake of public peace, she issued a proclamation which forbade all “Interludes, books, ballads, rhymes, and other lewd treatises in the England [sic] tongue, concerning doctrine in matters now in question and controversy, touching the high points and mysteries of Christian religion”.<sup>63</sup>

By writing a mystery play in Cornish, rather than English, was the author, rather than attempting to teach the common man about matters of doctrine, choosing to avoid censorship? This is certainly one area for future research.

*Gwreans an Bys* follows at the end of a long tradition of miracle plays, both from Cornwall and written in Cornish, as well as those from elsewhere in England and further afield in Europe. The playwright, who would seem to have written it in the mid-sixteenth century, uses familiar material: recollections of earlier plays, biblical and apocryphal material as a means of both entertaining and instructing the local population in religious matters, in a language they used and understood. The play is religiously conservative, but we know that the Reformation was not an instant event, and changes in religious reform and legislation continued throughout the Tudor period from 1536, not least in the reign of Mary I. Evidence from the later sixteenth century and the popular Cornish reaction to both the Reformation and the Civil War a century later suggest the vast majority of the population of Cornwall remained religiously conservative. As Longworth concludes: ‘The Creation of the World neither explicitly nor implicitly acknowledges the issues over which the Reformation overtly occurred; but it clearly deals with theological and doctrinal matters out of which those issues arose.’<sup>64</sup> As such, the play would seem to both reflect religious belief in Cornish society of the post-Reformation period and raise interesting questions regarding the levels of tolerance and the conditions which

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<sup>61</sup> See for example Robert Hunt, ed., *Popular Romances of the West of England* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1903). This collection of folklore was collected and edited by Robert Hunt with assistance from amongst others William Bottrell. Volume II contains the legends of the Saints.

<sup>62</sup> John R. Elliott, *Playing God Seed* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989), p. 5.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> Longworth, p. 254.

allowed it to be written and, possibly, performed, both when it was written and in 1611 when it was transcribed by Jordan.