Ovid in the West Country

The Ancient Origins of Folk Custom

Kelsey Jackson Williams

DOI:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198784296.003.0006

Abstract and Keywords

In the *Remaines of Gentilisme* Aubrey attempted to find the origins of early modern English folklore and folkways in the rituals and customs of ancient Rome, Greece, and beyond. This chapter places these attempts within his larger project to identify links between modern England and the ancient world and discusses his different treatments of folk customs, magic, and natural religion within the work. Heavily influenced by Thomas Hobbes, Aubrey tended to see all forms of ritual, religious and otherwise, as socially constructed and, as such, the *Remaines* could at times stray into heterodoxy. At the same time, however, it is suffused with an almost mystical belief in the lingering presence of the ancient world within the modern and has its origins as much in Aubrey’s memories of the trauma of the Civil Wars as in more abstract scholarly investigations.

*Keywords:* Civil Wars, folk customs, folklore, folkways, memory, natural religion, Thomas Hobbes
Even before the spectacular combustion of their joint work during the 1692 Clarendon trial, Aubrey and Anthony Wood were acutely aware of the unpleasant results of private papers becoming public. Writing to Wood in a low mood during the autumn of 1688 Aubrey worried that you are lookt upon as a Papist and in these tumultuous Turns your papers will be searcht ... and you know, that in my Memorandum of Lives, there are some things that may make me obnoxious to Scandalum Magnatum: and I have heretofore writt a letter or 2, which I wish were turnd to ashes. New troubles arise upon me, like Hydra’s heads ... [w]hen I was comeing one time out of All-soules, the Gape-abouts, at the gate pointed at me, & one sayd Romano-catholicus.¹

The combination of potentially inflammatory papers with real or suspected Catholicism was a dangerous one for any scholar in the 1680s.² The one bright spot in Aubrey’s letter was a new project, (p.118) I am perusing Ovids Works, and I have halfe gonne it over, and have pickt up a sheet or more for my Gentilisme, even in his Epistles, and Amoris. Where one would not expect it ... You see what strange distracted way of study my Fates give me.³

Ironically, given Aubrey’s concerns at the time, this new work, the Remaines of Gentilisme, would become another text which was not fit to fly abroad.⁴
Begun in February 1687, the *Remaines* was a collection of quotations from Catullus, Homer, Horace, Juvenal, Ovid, Persius, Pliny, Propertius, Tibullus, and Virgil concerning the customs and rituals of the ancient world. Aubrey grouped these under relevant headings—everything from the immuring of nuns to the uses of beans—and compared them with modern English folk traditions. He was concerned with customs and practices rather than folklore in the sense of stories or myths, and the material he cited usually consisted of factual accounts of folkways which existed at the time he wrote or which had existed in the recent past. Religious traditions featured largely, with examples including churches, masses for the dead, praying towards the east, and washing hands before prayer, as well as a cluster of entries on important days in the liturgical year. Other broad categories included occupations, objects, foods, and actions. In his other works he had made numerous comparisons between the pastoral world of Greek and Roman poetry and the rural economy of his native Wiltshire, a parallel which also emerged in his entries on occupations such as shepherds, bond servants, rhymers, and goodmen. The objects and foods he mentioned were timeless ones such as garlands, shields, musical instruments, staves, ale, bridal cakes, beans, and the like, while actions varied between traditions associated with the quotidian, such as sneezing or drawing lots, and more ritualized situations, including cockfighting at Shrovetide, the making of offerings at funerals, and trial by fire. Occasionally he mentioned customs associated with a specific form of landscape—examples include high places and springs—or the uses of a mythical figure such as the green man.
It was probably no accident that one part of the *Remaines* was headed by an epigraph taken from the works of the Church Father Lactantius—‘primus sapientiae gradus, est falsa intelligere’ (‘the first step towards wisdom is to perceive falsehood’)—which had also famously been used as an epigraph by John Selden for his 1617 *De diis Syris*; Aubrey was writing a work not unlike Selden’s massive comparative theology of the ancient Near East. The difference was that, rather than relating Greco-Roman customs and religion to those of the Incas or the Chinese or the Zoroastrians, as had so many of his contemporaries, Aubrey was using them as a tool with which to understand contemporary English folk traditions. The systematic study of other belief systems was one of the core disciplines of early modern scholarship. Aubrey, however, performed the unusual act of othering his own culture and attempted to make sense of the beliefs and rituals which had existed around him since his youth through a model of cultural comparatism which saw those same beliefs and rituals stemming from a common tradition of ancient religious practice.

Remains of Gentilism: Old Wives’ Tales and the Laugh of a Faun

There was an inherent tension in studying knowledge systems which existed in direct competition with an orthodox Christian worldview. Unless accommodation could be reached through designating such a system a civil religion—as in the case of the Jesuits and Chinese religion—there was a very real risk that the only theologically coherent choice was to reject the foreign structure in its entirety, labelling it heretical, atheistic, or simply vulgar and wrong. This approach could be extended to local folk cultures and the clergyman Henry Bourne, whose 1725 *Antiquitates Vulgares* was the next major collection of English folklore after Aubrey’s, castigated his subject as ‘the Produce of Heathenism; or the Inventions of indolent Monks’, seeing it as his duty to reform, cull, and control what he perceived to be the traditions of the devil.
Aubrey took a different approach. He admitted that ‘Old Customes, & old wives-fables are grosse things’, but argued that ‘there may some trueth and usefulnesse be picked elicited/ out of them: besides ‘tis a pleasure to consider the Errours that enveloped former ages: as also the present’, a sentiment evidently related to his quotation of Lactantius discussed earlier in this chapter. For Aubrey, moreover, old wives’ tales might be gross (i.e., coarse and rather obvious) in the present of the 1680s, but ‘Before Printing’ they ‘were ingenioues’. In a culture which existed before print, or at least before cheap print was widely accessible, and where ‘the ordinary sort of People were not taught to reade’, oral culture was a valid system for preserving and transmitting knowledge. Recalling Bacon’s list of inventions by which the moderns surpassed the ancients, Aubrey concluded his reflections on this topic by writing wistfully that ‘the divine art of Printing and Gunpowder have frighted (p.121) away Robin-good-fellow and the Fayries’. This Baconian allusion, combined with his earlier description of pre-print folk culture as ‘ingeniose’—a term which Aubrey elsewhere used specifically to refer to inventions, experiments, or other developments in natural philosophy—suggests that Aubrey had a very specific aspect of folk culture in mind when writing this riposte in its favour. The recipes, magical spells, and traditions associated with custom and ritual were, he believed, ultimately analogous to the philosophical studies of his contemporaries in the Royal Society.
Why did Aubrey believe that credence, or at least respect, should be given to the knowledge system he referred to metonymically as ‘Robin-good-fellow and the Fayries’? In part, it was because he was convinced that English folk culture contained visible relics of the religions and cultures of the ancient world—in other words, ‘remains of gentilism’.

But Aubrey’s conviction of the existence of this cultural continuity could, at times, reach a quasi-mystical level which amounted to something more than antiquarian hypothesis. Glossing a couplet from Virgil’s *Georgics*, he noted that ‘the Fauns are accounted the Countrey Gods, and are thought alwaies to inhabit the woods’. He then described the traditions surrounding ‘the first of them’, Faunus, grandson of Saturn, from whom ‘(tis likely) comes our Robin-goodfellow’. A few pages before, under the rubric ‘Ho, ho, ho (p.122) of Robin-goodfellow’, he had written a recollection which provided the final link in this increasingly idiosyncratic chain of associations. Virgil, he recalled, had written somewhere, perhaps in the *Georgics*, ‘of Voyces heard, louder than a Man’s’. But Aubrey’s friend Lancelot Morehouse ‘did averre to me super verbum sacerdotis [on his word as a priest], that he did once heare such a loud Laugh on the other side of a hedge; and was sure that no Human voice could afford such Laugh’. Whether, following the logic of these passages to their conclusion, Aubrey genuinely believed the ‘solid and profound mathematician’ and Wiltshire curate Morehouse had heard the laugh of a faun is not known. What these passages suggest, however, is Aubrey’s belief in the numinous vitality—even in the recent past and amongst the hedgerows of Wiltshire—of what he understood to be an ancient, classical world.
This ancient world was primarily Roman, unsurprisingly given the Roman poets and prose writers upon whom he relied for the majority of his comparisons. The cultural continuity he saw between the Roman world and seventeenth-century England was of a piece with the links he drew between the two in other contexts. Just as a toponym could hint at a Roman settlement or the shape of an ancient fortification could testify to its place in the history of the Roman conquest of Britain, so could a folk tradition form another link in the chain which connected the Romano-British world to Aubrey’s present day. The origins Aubrey found for what he had observed in rural England were not exclusively Roman, however. Paralleling his philological writings, Aubrey noted that ‘the many Greeke words that remain in the British Language (more than Latin) … doe sufficiently evidence that the Greekes had here Colonies’ and both Homer and Theocritus regularly appear as ancient sources in the *Remaines*, as they were in the *Monumenta*.

Further afield, he linked the Christmastime tradition of the lord of misrule with the feast of the goddess ‘Dorcetha’ in Babylon, while mazes were derived from the Egyptians via the Greeks and the Danes, and the Welsh tradition of *plygain* singing came from a similar ‘Asiatick Custome’.

[23]

[24]
At times, this dizzying plurality of ancient origins almost merged into a single universal ancient culture, whose shared symbolic language could be located in texts and objects across the known world. A line from Persius’s first satire—‘paint up a couple of snakes, my lads, and clear out; the ground is holy’—led Aubrey to recall in succession Swedish inscriptions ‘entertoilees with Snakes’, serpents’ heads in the initial letters of Saint Chad’s Gospel at Lichfield Cathedral, serpents in Gothic ecclesiastical architecture, ‘Serpents that were fed with the bloud of the Sacrifices’ by the Basilidian Gnostics, and the veneration of serpents by Brahmins. By jumping from his own experiences to published works by writers as diverse as the Swedish antiquary Olof Verelius, the German theologian Friedrich Spanheim, and the French traveller Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, Aubrey was following the same associative processes which appear in works such as his history of ancient architecture in ‘Of Mausolea’. By implication, the postdiluvian repopulation of the world which allowed for such associations in an architectural context also allowed them in the context of ritual and tradition; if the earth had been entirely repopulated in the relatively recent past, it stood to reason that a variety of cultural continuities could be distinguished even in the present day and in far-flung corners of the world. Aubrey’s focus was on one chain of cultural transmission from Rome to England, but he remained aware of a larger ancient world whose culture could be traced back to an origin point on the Ark.

\[p.124\] Within the broad remit of ‘gentilism’ Aubrey included material which can be divided into three recognizably distinct categories: folkways, magic, and religious custom. He treated each category differently. Folkways, the most numerous, were also the least problematic. In recording, for example, a tradition that the sun shining on Candlemas portended a cold winter, Aubrey would simply note it down, albeit with the occasional whiff of scepticism, in this particular case provided by a citation to Thomas Browne’s debunking of such traditions in the *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*. By and large, however, traditions required no special explanation beyond the link made between them and whichever classical text they served to gloss.
Magic and religion were altogether different matters. In some instances Aubrey would note down a magical receipt, such as one for invisibility which required the powdered skin of a serpent killed at midnight, without commenting on it beyond noting its source, in this case ‘a booke in octavo in high Dutch. Dr Ridgeley the Physitian hath it, who told me of this.’ In other cases, however, his interrogation of what might seem to be ‘an old filthy Rhyme used by base people’ or ‘meer Wantonesse of Youth’ revealed something more. Noting the rhyme ‘When I was a young Maid, and wash’t my mothers Dishes | I putt my finger in my Cunt and pluck’t out little Fishes’, Aubrey related it back to a passage in the eleventh-century confessor’s guidebook contained within the Decretals of Burchard of Worms, ‘where there is an interrogation, if she did ever putt a little fish into her Pudenda, and let it die there, and then fry it, and give it to her Lover to eate’. Reflecting on this, he congratulated himself that ‘out of these simple Rhythmes I have pricked out the profoundest natural Magick that ever I met with in all my life’.

The presence of the interrogation in Bishop Burchard’s text situated what would otherwise simply have been an ‘old filthy Rhyme’ within a theological framework that guaranteed its role as ‘natural Magick’; further proof that the neglected oral culture of Aubrey’s day had once been ingenious.

Magic, for Aubrey, was very close to natural philosophy and the testing of a magical spell could easily be conceived of as an experiment. While he seems not to have found anyone willing to test the fish spell, Aubrey did carefully record a bathetically unsuccessful attempt at verifying another magical receipt which he believed had originated in Jewish culture. ‘The Jewes’, he wrote, ‘have strange fancies concerning the Invisible beane’, which when properly prepared rendered its bearer invisible. Aubrey distanced himself from any actual belief in this legend, quoting the traditional anti-Semitic tag ‘the Jew Apella may believe it, but not I’, yet carefully recorded an account of its testing which he had received from his correspondent Wylde Clarke. Clarke had allegedly been approached by two or three Jewish merchants who had desired to make the experiment in his garden at Mile End:
'twas much after this manner: They took a Black Catt, and cutt off it’s head, at a certaine aspect of the Planets, and buryed it in his garden by night with some Ceremonies, what I have forgot, and put a Beane in the braine of the Catt: but about a day or two after, a Cock came and scratch’t it all up. Mr Clarke told me that they did believe it: and yet they were crafty, subtle merchants.32

Despite his disbelief, Aubrey thought it worth recording the attempted test and did so in a fashion reminiscent of his records of what now seem to be more orthodox scientific experiments; magic could reveal itself as natural philosophy, which meant that recording even absurd magical processes could bear fruit in surprising ways. Reminding himself of this, Aubrey approvingly misquoted Francis Bacon ‘that the fables of the Poets are the Mysteries of the Philosophers’.33 For him, the study of folk customs could be both an antiquarian project and a philosophical one.
Aubrey’s treatment of religion in the *Remaines*, exemplified by his determination to locate the origins of Christian ritual in Greco-Roman religious practice, derived in part from the ideas of his friend and fellow Wiltshire native Thomas Hobbes. Explaining his approach, Aubrey observed that ‘in the Infancy of Christian Religion it was expedient to (p.126) plough (as they say) with the heifer of the Gentiles ... had they donne otherwise, they could not have gain’d so many Proselytes or established their Doctrine so well, and in so short a time’.34 The new converts, he continued, were unwilling to relinquish their idols, so that the early Christian priests ‘were persuaded to turne the Image of Jupiter with his thunderbolt to Christus crucifixus, and Venus and Cupid into the Madonna and her Babe, which Mr. Th. Hobbes sayth was prudently donne. See his Leviathan.’35 Aubrey was referring to chapter 45 of *Leviathan*, ‘Of Daemonology, and other Reliques of the Religion of the Gentiles’, a title which may have provided the inspiration for the title of the *Remaines*.36 There Hobbes argued that the worship of images was a ‘relic of Gentilism’, authority for which could not be found in the Bible, and that this idolatry led to the making of many costly images which, upon their conversion to Christianity, were retained by the pagans, ‘[t]he cause whereof, was the immoderate esteem, and prices set upon the workmanship of them’. This was aided and abetted by the priests, who permitted their worship under the names of Christ, the Virgin, and the Apostles, to please their converts and in the hope that they themselves might be similarly honoured upon their decease.37 Aubrey followed Hobbes in recognizing that Christian practices had been, of necessity, adapted from earlier pagan tradition.

While Aubrey was not a deist, much less an atheist, his historicization of religious ritual was part of a larger sceptical approach to Christian theology. While he described Jesus as ‘Our Saviour’ elsewhere in his manuscripts and proposed vaguely Trinitarian prayers for his model school in the *Idea of Education of Young Gentlemen*, he also remained sceptical of the Trinity as doctrine, a stance apparent from the relevant passage in the *Remaines*.38 Aubrey commenced with a quotation from John Selden’s *Table-Talk*: 
The 2nd person is made of a piece of Bread by the Papist.
The Third Person is made of his owne Frenzy, Malice,
Ignorance & Folly by the Roundhead (p.127) (to all
these the Spirit is intituled) One the Baker makes, the
other the Cobler; and between these Two, I think the
first Person is sufficiently abused.39

Aubrey did not comment directly on this passage, but moved
into an investigation of visual representations of the Trinity,
discussing iconoclasm and the argument from Daniel against
it. More significant, however, was his quotation of 1 John 5:7–8
(the Johannine Comma) in the Greek of the textus receptus.40
'The last clause of this verse', he noted, 'is not found in
ancient MSS copies. e.g. that in the Vatican Library, and the
Tecla MS in St James Library and others: as it is not in an old
MS in Magdalen Coll: Library in Oxford.'41 In the margin
against this passage is a reminder to 'peruse these MSS again,
and see if the whole verse be there'.42

This particular crux, one of the principal biblical authorities
for the doctrine of the Trinity, had attracted considerable
attention in previous decades with the publication of the New
Testaments of John Fell and John Mill and would later be
publicly noted as a late addition by Richard Bentley during his
inaugural lecture as Regius Professor of Divinity at Cambridge
in 1717.43 It was also considered by Aubrey’s fellow Royal
Society member Isaac Newton, who composed a detailed
disproof of the Comma in his Historical Account of Two
Notable Corruptions of Scripture.44 Aubrey, by contrast, did
not go so far as to indict the Trinity as false doctrine, but
contented himself merely with noting the absence of one of its
proof-texts from the manuscripts available to him. As such, he
was by no means making a novel claim, but only stating what
had been common knowledge since Erasmus first observed the
absence of the Comma from (p.128) the Greek manuscript
tradition in 1516.45 What is surprising is Aubrey’s interest
here in biblical philology (not seen elsewhere in his surviving
manuscripts), his active consultation of several significant
exemplars of the Greek New Testament in England, and his
willingness to discount what Anglican orthodoxy saw as a
keystone of Trinitarian theology. He stood in a theological
middle ground, willing to question concepts as basic as the
Trinity but still invested in the essentials of a biblical
worldview, crucially including a chronology which took the
Flood to be modern civilization’s starting point.
The Trauma of the Civil Wars
This theological flexibility allowed Aubrey to analyse his own culture with a more critical eye than might otherwise have been possible. Just as with magic or folkways, he could locate the origin point of contemporary religious practice in the ancient world and so make an ever-stronger case for the systematic and widespread survival of an entire ancient belief system almost into the present day. This ‘almost’, however, represented a crucial and traumatic discontinuity. When drawing up the title page for the first section of the *Remaines*, Aubrey had headed it with a charged epigraph from the Roman historian Quintus Curtius: ‘nothing is so efficacious for ruling the multitude as superstition’. At some later point, however, he scored out this Hobbesian interpretation of ritual, replacing it with a very different, albeit equally powerful couplet from Ovid’s *Fasti*: ‘the rest of the tale I had learned long since in my boyish years, yet not on that account may I pass it over in silence’. At the heart of the *Remaines* was an older man remembering the world of his childhood. Throughout the text there are passages which begin ‘when I was a little boy (before the Civill warres)’, ‘when I was a Boy in North Wilts (before the late Civill-warres)’, ‘even to my remembrance when I was a youth’, and similar expressions of personal distance and recollection. These childhood memories could also expand to include older, familial ones. In the *Remaines* and elsewhere Aubrey often recalled things he had evidently heard from his grandfather Isaac Lyte, noting in one place that ‘the Shop-keepers in my Grandfathers time used to reckon with Counters’ or that ‘when my grandfather went to schoole at Yatton-Keynell (neer Easton-Piers) Mr. Camden came to see the church, and particularly tooke notice of a little painted-glasse-windowe in the chancell’. Aubrey’s childhood and the stories of older family members anchored him in the recent past.
But that past was lost forever. It is no accident that Aubrey’s recollections beginning ‘when I was a Boy’ were almost always paired with the heavy parenthesis ‘before the Civill warres’. Again and again he pressed gingerly at the open wound left by the conflict, sometimes tiptoeing around the moment of loss, as when he wrote of carved representations of the Trinity, ‘I have seen many of these before the rage & zeale of the Civil wars’, or facing it head on as when he wrote of one location-specific tradition ‘in the late warres this Howse was burned downe by the Soldiers: and the Custome of Supping is yet discontinued’. The Civil Wars were a moment of stark discontinuity, in which houses were burned, traditions abandoned, and the whole mental and physical landscape of England profoundly disturbed. The only equivalent period of disruption in his larger narratives of European history was the ‘comeing in of the Gothes’, but even that is more often presented as a moment of transformation than of unremitting, bleak loss. With this in mind, Aubrey’s otherwise metaphorical statement that ‘Printing and Gunpowder have frightened away Robin-good-fellow’ acquires a darker, more literal meaning. What on one level was a statement about the displacement of an older knowledge tradition by a newer one, becomes, on another level, a recognition of violent cultural loss.
The Remaines, then, was a work rooted in memory and trauma, especially the memory and trauma of childhood and youth. Aubrey believed he was capturing a vanishing tradition, and that if he did not record it the same fate would befall it as had befallen other ‘matters of Antiquitie’: ‘as with the light after sun-sett—at which time, clear; by and by, comes the crepusculum; then, totall darknes’. At the same time, however, he remained alert to the survival of these traditions, especially amongst marginal figures: women, children, and the poor. Aubrey noted that ‘the Schoolboies in the West: still religiously observe St Nicholas day’ and that ‘little Children have a custome, when it raines to Sing, or charme away the Raine’. His own childhood memories of tradition became associated with the traditions of children across time. Closely tied to this was a female oral tradition, exemplified for Aubrey by the songs and ballads, often historical in content, sung to him as a child by his nurse, Katherine Bushell. Elsewhere in the Remaines he made the point more explicitly that female oral culture was an ancient repository of memory and tradition:

in the old ignorant times, before woomen were Readers, the history was handed downe from mother to daughter, &c: and W. Malmesburiensis picks up his history from the time of Ven: Bede to his time out of old Songs ... so my Nurse had the History from the Conquest downe to Carl. I. in Ballad.

Old wives’ tales might no longer be as ‘ingeniose’ as once they were, but they and the oral culture from which they derived had a long and by no means undistinguished history, reaching back to William of Malmesbury and, ultimately, to the ancient world. ‘The old time’ could be both a fragile memory and a living recollection.

Heterodox Antiquities
Aubrey’s manuscripts were read, added to, and copied by a wide circle of friends including John Evelyn, Anthony Wood, Thomas Gale, Edward Lhuyd, and others. The *Remaines* was exceptional even in this context, however, for two significant overlays of further material inserted into the manuscript in accordance with Aubrey’s original design.\(^{58}\) Leaving aside a series of undated and largely undecipherable pencil notes by John Evelyn, the first evidence of any study of the manuscript is probably that by John Ray, the naturalist, who may have seen it in late 1691 or early 1692. Ray passed it on to Balthasar Gottfried Cramer, a German scholar who was proposed to the Royal Society in 1690 and subsequently transcribed Aubrey’s *Naturall Historie of Wiltshire* for the Society.\(^{59}\) Cramer added a series of notes comparing the customs described by Aubrey with those in and around his native Anhalt-Zerbst in north-central Germany.\(^{60}\) Cramer’s annotations are informative but pedestrian and chiefly consist of ‘so do we’ sorts of comments. A characteristic example is his expansion upon Aubrey’s gloss of two lines from Catullus: ‘we have a Custome that when One sneezes every one els putts off his hatt, and bowes, and cries God bless ye Sir’.\(^{61}\) Cramer added that, ‘in Germanie ‘tis counted to be very uncivilly done not to say at one’s sneezing, God help thee, or salutem’.\(^{62}\) However, Cramer lacked Aubrey’s determination to record unprintable detail, which at times led him into elaborate dances around the point, as when he noted that

\[\text{(p.132)}\] in Germany ... about 50 or 60 yeares since, or not so long ... in the wintertime all the mayds of the Village met together, and brough[t] with them along their spinning wheel, or distaff, and spun very late in the night, where then the young men, were not far off, which now is quite abolished by reason of the great exorbitances they committed.\(^{63}\)

These exorbitances are not described. Nonetheless, Cramer’s contributions are noteworthy as evidence not only of another scholar taking (or being told to take) an interest in Aubrey’s project, but also of that scholar attempting to insert another modern European folk tradition into Aubrey’s narrative. England was no longer the sole end point of the ancient tradition; Germany also had a place in its evolution.
At some stage subsequent to Cramer’s annotations, the manuscript of the *Remaines* went astray and, on 27 March 1694, Aubrey wrote to Edward Lhuyd asking, plaintively, ‘have you my MS of Remaines of Gentilisme? I feare it is too light for the University.’ It was probably at about this time that Aubrey scribbled on a letter from Lhuyd dated 9 January 1694 that ‘my Gentilisme would not befitt to leave to the Critiques of the University. I thinke it is in Mr Tanners custodie.’

Lhuyd attempted to set Aubrey’s mind to rest, confirming that the manuscript was safe in his possession, and assuring him that it was ‘very curious’ and that while ‘we have not many at present in the University that prosecute that study very far … [we] may well hope that such collections will make more’. Aubrey’s worries over what might happen should the ‘Critiques of the University’ obtain his manuscript may have stemmed from an awareness of its heterodox religious views; criticisms of subjects such as the Trinity or Christian ritual were hardly fit material to leave in unknown hands. Equally, however, he may have believed its folk content made the *Remaines* unfit to be deposited at Oxford, as he was undoubtedly aware of the larger distaste for folk tradition within the Anglican scholarly establishment (where it was labelled papist superstition better abolished than studied).

Another hint that Aubrey saw something potentially subversive in the *Remaines* comes from his lending of the manuscript to John Toland, who had it in his possession in October 1694. Although not yet sent packing from Oxford on account of his ‘little religion’, Toland was already developing a reputation as a learned and dangerous freethinker, fresh from the pedagogical benches of Friedrich Spanheim and Jean Le Clerc and eager to make his mark on British erudition. If Aubrey had been looking for someone who would not cavil at, and might indeed sympathize with, his Hobbesian interpretation of religious custom, the young Toland was his man. Unfortunately, no evidence of Toland’s engagement with the *Remaines* survives, although he did make use of the *Monumenta Britannica*—he and Aubrey also shared a fascination with Druids—and praised Aubrey in his subsequent writings on ancient Britain. However, Aubrey’s association with Toland seems to highlight an awareness—and perhaps acceptance—of the heterodoxy of his own endeavours.
Regardless of whether Aubrey believed the *Remaines* was heterodox or otherwise theologically unsafe, he appears to have wished it to be organized and published from an early date. Thomas Tanner, writing on 16 May 1693, had assured Aubrey that ‘if we get [the *Remaines*] among us, we will quickly put it into a Method’.\(^{70}\) The ‘us’ mentioned here were perhaps the circle surrounding men like Edmund Gibson, editor of the 1695 *Britannia*, and George Hickes, the Anglo-Saxonist, a possibility which is strengthened by the manuscript’s subsequent deposition with White Kennett, a young clergyman in the circle of Gibson, Hickes, Tanner, and other nonjuring Oxford antiquaries and philologists.\(^{71}\) As well as this connection, Kennett had probably also been recommended to Aubrey’s notice as another assistant of Anthony Wood in the research for the *Athenae Oxonienses*.\(^{72}\) In either case, Kennett was sitting on the *Remaines* by the winter of 1695–6, having seemingly promised to ‘methodize’ it in the wake of publishing his *Parochial Antiquities Attempted in the History of Ambrosden, Burchester, and Other Adjacent Parts of Oxford and Bucks*.\(^{73}\) Aubrey wrote on 26 January and again on 12 November (p.134) 1696 to Lhuyd, asking the latter to enquire of Kennett whether ‘he haz donne anything as to my Remains of Gentilisme, or whether he will’ and requesting that, if not, it be returned and the project turned over to his old friend Walter Charleton.\(^{74}\) Charleton was in many ways a likelier Aristarchus for Aubrey than Kennett. He had long been a close friend and ‘high admirer’ of Hobbes and his own *Darknes of Atheism* (1652) owed much of its natural theology to the works of Hobbes, among others.\(^{75}\) That Aubrey considered him at all suggests that he thought the Hobbesian cast of the *Remaines* was one of its key characteristics and wished to see it completed by someone of the same philosophical bent.
At Aubrey’s death, however, the Remaines was still in Kennett’s hands. At some time around 1695–7 Kennett had begun, not just to ‘methodize’ the Remaines, but to incorporate it in its entirety into a projected History of Custom upon which he had commenced research. This project was never completed, however, and survives only as a few folios of notes. Fragments from the Remaines did make their way into a manuscript revision of the Parochial Antiquities and Kennett’s unpublished Etymological Collections, showing that it continued to be a part of the younger antiquary’s working library, but it was not until the nineteenth century that substantial portions of the manuscript were published for the first time.76

The Remaines is a complex text, existing across generic and topical divisions. Superficially it is part of the larger trend in early modern scholarship which used classical religion and culture as lenses through which to understand the culturally other, but in Aubrey’s case this was dramatically complicated by his choice to turn those lenses upon his own culture. His willingness to take a Hobbesian view of Christian religious practice confirmed the text’s place within the increasingly sceptical narratives of religious development which had arisen alongside comparatism, but also established it within an existing tradition of sceptical English (p.135) scholarship, exemplified not just by Hobbes but by John Selden’s Table-Talk and the anti-Trinitarian scholarship of polymaths from Richard Bentley to Isaac Newton. Finally, as well as being a work of antiquarian erudition the Remaines was a poignant testament to Aubrey’s own sense of the traumatic cultural loss brought about by the Civil Wars. Like the Brief Lives, the Remaines was a personal as well as a general act of antiquarianism, a recovery of the details of Aubrey’s own childhood and the lives of his parents and grandparents just as much as it was of older traditions and folkways.
Above all, it was a text asserting cultural continuities between the ancient past and the contemporary present. In the *Monumenta* Aubrey had tried to relate the seemingly distant and unfathomable world of Roman Britain to Restoration England by reading the landscape, literally mapping the ancient past onto the present in his map of southern Britain, and tracing the development of architecture from the even more distant Babel to the work of Inigo Jones and Christopher Wren. In the *Remaines* he followed the same practices and built analogical links between the fragmentary visions of Greek and Roman life in a dozen classical texts and the folk culture which he had seen around him since his youth to make yet another case for contemporary England’s inextricable ties to the ancient past.

Notes:

(1) Bodleian MS Tanner 456a, fol. 34r.


(3) Bodleian MS Tanner 456a, fol. 35r.


(5) BL MS Lansdowne 231, fols. 107v (praying), 108r (masses), 170r (churches), 196r–197r (washing of hands), and, for holy days, fols. 108r (May Day), 138r (Childermas), 154r (Christmas), 159r (Candlemas). The equivalent passages in Aubrey, *Remaines*, are at 17, 18, 48–50, 146, and 18, 63, 88, 93–4.

(7) BL MS Lansdowne 231, fols. 115v (cockfighting at Shrovetide), 134r (offerings at funerals), 146r (shields), 155r (lots), 167r (beans), 168r (sneezing), 171r (garlands), 180r (trial by fire), 212v–213r (musical instruments), 215r (staves), 218v (ale), 221r (bridal cakes). The equivalent passages in Aubrey, *Remaines*, are at 35, 64, 69, 90, 102–3, 103–4, 109, 126–7, 167–9, 172–3, 179, 181.

(8) BL MS Lansdowne 231, fols. 162r (high places), 177r (springs), 186r (the green man). The equivalent passages in Aubrey, *Remaines*, are at 98, 121, 134–5.


(12) Henry Bourne, *Antiquitates Vulgares; or the Antiquities of the Common People: Giving an Account of Several of Their Opinions and Ceremonies With Proper Reflections Upon Each of Them; Shewing Which May be Retain’d, and Which Ought to be Laid Aside* (Newcastle, 1725), x–xi.
Ovid in the West Country


(14) BL MS Lansdowne 231, fol. 140v (= Aubrey, *Remaines*, 67–8).


(16) Aubrey pursued the issue of systemic relativity in a passage on calendars elsewhere in the *Remaines*. How, he queried, can we make sense of claims for the auspicious or inauspicious natures of certain days when ‘the Calendars of these computers are very differing; the Greekes differing from the Latins, and the Latins from each other’ (BL MS Lansdowne 231, fol. 159r [= Aubrey, *Remaines*, 94])? He made no claims of superior accuracy for any single system.

(17) ‘Gentilism’ was simply the religion or culture of the gentiles, i.e., pagans (Colin Kidd, *British Identities before Nationalism* [Cambridge, 1999], 13–14). The term had particular currency in Restoration England, perhaps in part through the fame of Theophilus Gale’s *Court of the Gentiles*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1669–70), a work making claims to intellectual and cultural genealogies structurally similar to those made in the *Remaines*. 
(18) The lines were ‘et vos, agrestum praesentia numina, Fauni, | (ferte simul Faunique pedem Dryadesque puellae !)’ (Virgil, Georgics, I. 10–11). Although Aubrey quoted the Latin, his gloss is heavily indebted to the annotations in Thomas May’s Virgil’s Georgicks Englishe (London, 1628), 29, a copy of which is now Bodleian Ashmole 1561 and is signed at sig. A2 ‘Jack Aubrey. 1655’. He probably used this in conjunction with the 1632 Cambridge octavo of Paolo Manuzio’s edition (Virgil, Opera ... Pauli Manutii annotationes brevissimae in margine adscriptae [Cambridge, 1632]), now Bodleian Ashmole A. 35, which is signed ‘Jo: Aubrey’ on the pastedown and contains numerous underlinings and annotations. The translation by May contains no annotations except a note by Aubrey on the front pastedown that it is sometimes bound together with May’s Martial.

(19) BL MS Lansdowne 231, fol. 150v (= Aubrey, Remaines, 84).

(20) Aubrey was perhaps half-remembering here the description of nature mourning the death of Daphnis in Virgil, Eclogues, V. 24–6.

(21) Remaines[John and J. A. Venn, Alumni Cantabrigienses, 10 vols. [Cambridge, 1922–54], Part I, iii. 211Aubrey

(22) For Morehouse as a mathematician see Hunter, Aubrey, 227, and Aubrey, Lives, ii. 1035.

(23) RemainesIdyllsRemainesthomas Creech, The Idylliums of Theocritus (Oxford, 1684)IliadOdysseyHomeri poemata duo, Ilias et Odyssea, sive Ulysses

(24) RemainesPurchas his PilgrimageAthanasius Kircher’s Oedipus Aegyptiacus, 3 vols. (Rome, 1652), i. 341.

(25) BL MS Lansdowne 231, fol. 119r (= Aubrey, Remaines, 38–9); Persius, Satires, I. 113–14.
Aubrey drew on Olof Verelius, *Manudctio compendiosa ad runographiam Scandicam antiquam, recte intelligendam* (Uppsala, 1675), passim, for snakes in runic inscriptions, Friedrich Spanheim, *Introductio ad historiam et antiquitates sacras* (Leiden, 1675), 325, for the Basilidian heresy, and Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, *The Six Voyages of John Baptista Tavernier* (London, 1677), II.i.34, for a snake in an Indian storehouse (Aubrey had misremembered this last as veneration of snakes by Brahmins).

BL MS Lansdowne 231, fol. 159r (= Aubrey, *Remaines*, 93).

BL MS Lansdowne 231, fol. 130v (= Aubrey, *Remaines*, 181).

Burchard of Worms, *Decretorum libri XX* (Cologne, 1548). Aubrey was apparently using a copy owned by Dr Francis Bernard and misdated its publication to 1549 (BL MS Lansdowne 231, fol. 131r [= Aubrey, *Remaines*, 43–4, 96]). For Bernard and his library see *ODNB*, s.n.

BL MS Lansdowne 231, fol. 123r (= Aubrey, *Remaines*, 44).

‘Credat Iudaeus Apella, non ego’ (Horace, *Satires*, I.v.100–1).

Kate Bennett, ‘John Aubrey and the Rhapsodic Book’, *Renaissance Studies* 28 [2014]: 327

BL MS Lansdowne 231, fol. 123r (= Aubrey, *Remaines*, 44). Aubrey was recalling passages such as that in the *Advancement of Learning* where Bacon had observed that anciently ‘as men founde out any observation that they thought was good for life, they would gather it and expresse it in parable or Aphorisme, or fable’ (Francis Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning*, ed. Michael Kiernan [Oxford, 2000], 162). For Bacon’s use of fable see Rhodri Lewis, ‘Francis Bacon, Allegory, and the Uses of Myth’, *Review of English Studies* 61 (2010): 360–89.

BL MS Lansdowne 231, fol. 101r (= Aubrey, *Remaines*, 6). The image was an echo of Judges 14:18, ‘if ye had not plowed with my heifer ...’

BL MS Lansdowne 231, fol. 101r (= Aubrey, *Remaines*, 6).


(38) BL MS Lansdowne 231, fols. 168v–170r (= Aubrey, *Remaines*, 105–6). For the prayers, which are doctrinally vague, see Bodleian Library MS Aubrey 10, fols. 128r–131r, and for ‘Our Saviours Sermon on the Mount’, see Bodleian Library MS Aubrey 10, fol. 45r.


(40) BL MS Lansdowne 231, fol. 168v (= Aubrey, *Remaines*, 105–6). He quotes only verse seven, ‘For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one’ (1 John 5:7, KJV).

(41) *Remaines* Codex Alexandrinus (*An Introduction to the Critical Study and Knowledge of the Holy Scriptures* [Philadelphia, 1836], ii. 13).


Ovid in the West Country


(46) ‘Nulla res efficacius multitidinem regit, quam superstition’ (BL MS Lansdowne 231, fol. 102r [= Aubrey, *Remaines*, 6]), quoting Quintus Curtius Rufus, *Historiae*, IV.x. 7. Aubrey mistakenly attributed the tag to Livy, rather than Quintus Curtius, probably due to the presence of a similar passage in the former author. Livy, describing the reign of Numa Pompilius, wrote that ‘omnium primum, rem ad multitudinem imperitam et illis saeculis rudem efficacissimam, deorum metum iniciendum ratus est’—‘he thought the very first thing to do, as being the most efficacious with a populace which was ignorant and, in those early days, uncivilized, was to imbue them with the fear of Heaven’ (Livy, *Historia*, I.xix.5). A note by Jan Gruter in Johann Friedrich Gronovius’s edition of Livy glosses Numa’s actions with a reference to the passage in Quintus Curtius, among others, and may be the source of Aubrey’s confusion (see Livy, *Historiarum quod extat*, 3 vols., ed. Gronovius [Amsterdam, 1665], i. 41). Aubrey’s own copy of this edition, heavily annotated, is lacking its first volume (Livy, *Historiarum quod extat*, 3 vols., ed. Gronovius [Amsterdam, 1678], Bodleian Library Ashmole D 23–4, signed on the title page of D 24, ‘Musaeo Ashmoleano dedit V. C. Joannes Aubrey’).


(48) BL MS Lansdowne 231, fols. 109v, 111r, 178r, 205v, and passim.
Ovid in the West Country

(49) BL MS Lansdowne 231, fol. 178r (= Aubrey, Remaines, 124); Brief Lives, i. 146–7.

(50) BL MS Lansdowne 231, fols. 168v, 188r (= Aubrey, Remaines, 105, 138).

(51) BL MS Lansdowne 231, fol. 176v.

(52) BL MS Lansdowne 231, fol. 140v (= Aubrey, Remaines, 68).

(53) Bodleian MS Aubrey 9, fol. 29r (= Aubrey, ‘Hobbes’, i. 18).

(54) BL MS Lansdowne 231, fols. 121r, 221v (= Aubrey, Remaines, 40, 180).

(55) See, for example, BL MS Lansdowne 231, fol. 143r (= Aubrey, Remaines, 70). The name of Aubrey’s nurse survives in a marginal annotation at Bodleian MS Top. Gen. C. 25, fol. 200bv (for its context see Aubrey, Three Prose Works, 444–5).


(57) BL MS Lansdowne 231, fol. 177r (= Aubrey, Remaines, 121). This point is discussed at length by Dragstra, ‘Readers’, 41–53.


(59) Cramer, Disputatio juridica inauguralis de commodis paupertatis ... Balthas. Gothofredus Cramerus ... [Basel, 1671]Three Prose WorksNatural HistoryAubrey

(60) Buchanan-Brown (Aubrey, Three Prose Works, 402–3) thought that these notes were written by John Ray, presumably as transcriptions of material supplied by Cramer, but Hunter identified the handwriting with that, known to be in Cramer’s hand, in Royal Society MS 92 (the fair copy of Aubrey’s Natural History) and doubted that Ray had ever seen the Remaines (Hunter, Aubrey, 161).
Ovid in the West Country

(61) BL MS Lansdowne 231, fol. 168r (= Aubrey, *Remaines*, 103). The relevant passage is at Catullus 45.8–9, ‘hoc ut dixit, Amor, sinistra, ut ante / dextra, sternuit approbationem’ (‘As he said this, Love on the left, as before on the right, sneezed goodwill’).


(63) BL MS Lansdowne 231, fol. 124r (= Aubrey, *Remaines*, 46).

(64) Bodleian MS. Ashmole 1814, fol. 109r.

(65) Bodleian MS. Aubrey 12, fol. 251.

(66) Bodleian MS. Aubrey 12, fol. 255r.

(67) Bodleian MS. Ashmole 1814, fol. 117r.

(68) *A Collection of Several Pieces of Mr. John Toland, Now First Publish’d from his Original Manuscripts* Justin Champion, *Republican Learning: John Toland and the Crisis of Christian Culture, 1696–1722* (Manchester, 2003), 69–70.


(70) Bodleian MS. Aubrey 13, fol. 199r.

(71) *ODNB*, s.n.

(72) For Kennett see G. V. Bennett, *White Kennett, 1660–1728, Bishop of Peterborough: Study in the Political and Ecclesiastical History of the Early Eighteenth Century* (London, 1957); *ODNB*, s.n. Additional evidence of Wood’s role as intermediary comes from a note in his diary for 26 April 1695 that he was at the Fleur de luce in the company of Aubrey, Kennett, Thomas Tanner, Nicholas Martin, and a Mr Colling (*The Life and Times of Anthony Wood, Antiquary, of Oxford, 1632–1695*, 5 vols., ed. Andrew Clark [Oxford, 1891–1900], iii. 483).

Ovid in the West Country

(74) Bodleian MSS. Ashmole 1814, fol. 118r; Ashmole 1829, fol. 78r.
