Pagan

Like ‘heathen’, ‘pagan’ often appeared in discussions about idolatry, superstition, and polytheism. ‘Pagans’, like ‘heathens’, worshipped various deities, and unlike Christians, Muslims, and Jews, were not considered to be ‘people of the book’. Protestants and Catholics equated superstitious beliefs to the ‘unbelieving’ other, but they also used ‘pagan’ to criticise perceived corruption in their own religious communities. In every age, Thomas Adams preached in 1615, churchmen have found cause to reprove their congregations: ‘[The Church Father] Chrysostome speaketh of his times: Christians now are become like Pagans or worse: Yet who will say that the Religion of Pagans was better th[a]n the Christians?’ 1 While ‘heathen’ appeared nearly 150 times in the King James Bible of 1611, however, ‘pagan’ did not appear at all. Although the terms overlapped and converged, this made ‘heathen’ more closely associated with scriptural culture, particularly the Old Testament. By contrast, ‘pagan’ often referred either to classical antiquity, or to the pre-Roman Anglo-Saxon English past. Paganus was a post-classical Latin term which carried resonance with pagus, denoting ‘rustic’ or ‘the country’, yoking its associations with landscapes and sites beyond the control of cities. 2 Pagans were related to pantheistic, often nature-worshipping, expressions of faith. 3

A mistrust of ‘pagan’ pasts was not merely an abstract or theoretical notion but entrenched in the mythology of ancient Britain itself. Late Elizabethan and Jacobean scholars became increasingly interested in recovering evidence of the classical past. Female and male figures infused the mythos of local cities and towns. Lady Godiva, or Godgifu, was celebrated for stripping herself of her attire and riding naked through the streets of Coventry in order to redeem ‘the former freedoms’ of less extractive tributes and taxation. 4 Among news of contemporary events, the lawyer Simonds d’Ewes collected a manuscript account of the ‘Conquest of Brittain by the Pagan Saxons’ who had not yet been fully converted to Christianity. 5 The works of William

---

1 Thomas Adams, Englands sickenes (London, 1615; STC 114), sig. H4v.
3 Ibid.
Camden and John Speed recounted ancient tales that imbued familiar localities with mythic battles and sacred sites. Staffordshire had been the ‘habitation of Pagans, imbued with their blood by King Edward the elder’.\(^6\) Recounting the first planting of Christianity in Britain, Speed described how the spread of Christianity became ‘Englands great joy and fame, [being] still continued, though the spirituall sparkes thereof for a season have sometimes beene covered in the cinders of the Pagans desolations, or with the superstitious worships of man's inventions’.\(^7\)

As Speed articulated, ancient stories about Christianity vanquishing ‘superstition’ served a contemporary purpose in the post-Reformation British Isles, as Catholics and Protestants continued to debate where religious legitimacy lay. In his travel compendium, *Purchas his pilgrimage*, the clergyman Samuel Purchas combined stories of global religions with a staunch defence of Protestantism, denouncing the ‘Idolaters and Pagans’ of China, India, and Africa alongside the ‘Popish Christianitie’ of Catholics.\(^8\) Confessional debates in the seventeenth century probed anxieties over whether the Eucharist could or should be called a ‘sacrifice’, due to its strong associations with pre-Christian ritual.\(^9\) Continuing interest in omens and portents in early modern England ‘owed much to pagan mythology’, and Protestant reformers struggled against popular pastimes like celebrating May Day, or lay people interpreting prodigies and freak incidents as messages from heaven.\(^10\) Protestants in early modern England were thus aware of the fragility and cultural porosity of the reformed faith in a realm where the vestiges of paganism and Catholicism threatened the established order.\(^11\)

Beyond ancient Britain, pagans also existed in wider European cultural and intellectual discourse as a legacy of Greco-Roman antiquity. In reference to the classical world, ‘pagan’ and ‘heathen’ were at times interchangeable. In the translation of Henri Estienne’s *A world of wonders* (1607), for example, the text refers to ‘heathen poets’ (Aristotle), ‘pagan poets’ (Ovid), and ‘heathen

---


\(^{7}\) Speed, *The theatre of the empire of Great Britaine*, sig. Xxir.

\(^{8}\) Samuel Purchas, *Purchas his pilgrimage* (London, 1613; STC 20505), pp. 387, 467.


and profane pagans’. Poets and orators, wrote the Anglican churchman Thomas Tenison, were the means ‘by which the Pagan Heroes were deified’, their verses ‘justly reputed one of the great store-houses of Idols’. Paganism thus presented early modern Christian philosophers and poets with the challenge of acknowledging the political and cultural greatness of the Greek and Roman empires without condoning the fact that its thinkers had lived in religious error. The issue of salvation, and the essence of the divine, went to the heart of anxieties over Greco-Roman sophistication on one hand, and the ancients’ lack of knowledge about the ‘true’ God on the other. The veneration of pagans as intellectual and even moral heroes meant that ‘[e]ither the doctrines must be altered [...] or it must be explained’ how God could have endowed the unsaved with greatness while denying them everlasting life through Christ.

Further, the Neoplatonism espoused by some thinkers acknowledged a debt to the philosophies of ‘pagans’ like Plato, who influenced the Christian theology of New Testament thinkers and influential medieval philosophers including Thomas Aquinas. As a result, pagan antiquity remained an accepted part of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century humanist culture, permeating everything from the depictions of gods and goddesses in tapestries, jewellery, and plays to inflecting the rhetoric of letters and diary entries. ‘However fortune shall looke upon me, I will looke confidently on her’, wrote the ambassador Thomas Roe to Elizabeth, Queen of Bohemia, in 1635. ‘[Fortune] is a Pagen Goddes, yet can only hurt those, who made her’. At the theatre, staging pagan practices, from Ben Jonson’s *Sejanus* (c. 1603) to John Dryden’s *The Indian emperour* (c. 1665), served to visually impart the diversity of religious difference and ritual in the ‘old’ world and the ‘new’.

As with ‘heathen’, depictions of ‘pagans’ came from Christians more than from individuals who claimed the title for themselves. Since the Church

---

15 Ibid., p. 29.
16 [Sir Thomas Roe] to Elizabeth, Queen of Bohemia, 23 June 1635, Kew, The National Archives, SP 16/291 f. 60v.
17 Ben Jonson, *Sejanus his fall* (London, 1605; STC 14782); John Dryden, *The Indian Emperour, or the Conquest of Mexico by the Spaniards* (London, 1667; Wing D2288); John Kuhn, ‘Sejanus, the King’s Men Altar Scenes, and the Theatrical Production of Paganism’, *Early Theatre: A Journal Associated with the Records of Early English Drama*, 20 (2017), 77–98.
recognised that not all people were saved, the question of how to assimilate non-Christian peoples into English society remained problematic. In 1610, the Member of Parliament, Edwin Sandys, lamented that Nanawack, a young Algonquian boy, had been living in London for several years, and yet ‘heard not much of Religion, but saw and heard many times examples of drinking, swearing, and like evills, [and] remained as he was a meere Pagan’.\(^{18}\) Sandys desired Nanawack to be moved to a more godly home, where good example would compel him to embrace Christianity. The example also highlighted how the sinful behaviour of English men and women made them akin to pagans, rendering them incapable of successfully converting or ‘civilising’ non-Europeans.

Records suggest that conversion did not necessarily serve to fully integrate non-Christian peoples into English communities. The case of an unnamed ‘negro’/’Moor’ in the arraignment of Captain William Longcastle, brought to trial for piracy in 1609, presents one such example. An English factor brought the boy from North Africa to London to testify as a witness and to condemn Longcastle of piracy. Having been ‘brought to be a Christian’, the boy arrived in court to supply evidence.\(^ {19}\) Longcastle seemed baffled at the appearance of his black servant, and ‘denied him not to be his boy, but intreated of the Court, that the tongue of a Pagan, an Infidel, whose testimonies were no evidence to confirme the Jury [...] might not be the are [sic] to hew downe the tree of his life’.\(^ {20}\) ‘I beseech your Lordships’, Longcastle pleaded, ‘let the tongue of a Christian and not of a Pagan cut off my life’.\(^ {21}\) On one hand, the testimony of a North African boy in a London court speaks to the remarkable possibility that such a testimony might influence metropolitan judicial matters. On the other, while they may have taken the boy’s testimony into account, those presiding over the court informed Longcastle before convicting him that ‘it was not the aprovement of [the Moor’s] tongue [...] which made them give credit, that now they stood guilty, but the resolved oath of Anthony Wye’.\(^ {22}\) Longcastle’s vehement repetition of ‘pagan’ – likely in an attempt to delegitimise the testimony of an individual who could not legitimately swear on the Bible in court – suggests that the word could be


\(^{19}\) The lives, apprehensions, arraignments, and executions, of the 19 late pyrates (London, 1609; STC 12805), sig. E2r.

\(^{20}\) Ibid.

\(^{21}\) Ibid., sig. E4r.

\(^{22}\) Ibid.
invoked in attempts to strip non-European peoples from speaking with authority in the political realm.

Throughout the seventeenth century, ‘pagan’ remained a word that writers used to vilify or criticise those who rejected civil, Christian behaviour. ‘Brutes that you are!’ wrote the anonymous author of *The reformed gentleman* in 1693. ‘How unreasonably do you style your selves Christians, when as you do that on the *Lords-Day* which a Modest Heathen would blush to do at any time? Are there any *Pagans* in Nature worse than your selves in Practice?’

Such rhetoric pitched Christians against other societies and cultures, but it also reinforced the word's connection with the natural world and Indigenous belief systems, ones that the English sought to eradicate through violence and the enforcement of English civility in colonial spaces. In the political turmoil of the mid-seventeenth century and following Oliver Cromwell’s schemes to target Spanish activity in the Caribbean (known as the ‘Western Design’), concerted attempts to expand English sovereignty in America coincided with the language of paganism and heathenism often used by Puritans. The English were well placed, wrote Beauchamp Plantagenet in 1648, to ‘conquer on Indians, and convert Pagans, and civilise them, and bring them to the obedience of our Soveraign [...] to make our Soveraign an Emperour of America’.

In 1679, the long-time colonist in New England, Roger Williams, sent a deposition to London vouching for the reputation of the son of the recently-deceased planter Richard Smith. The younger Smith, Williams wrote, deserved to keep his lands in North America, for he had been well regarded among the ‘English and pagans’. Smith had faithfully served under several generals in ‘the late bloody pagan war’, fighting to secure and maintain lands ‘in the pagan wilderness and Nahigonsik country’.

Such language placed the legitimacy of succession in English hands while seeking to dismiss Indigenous resistance.

‘Pagan’ thus contained meanings that remained in tension with each other. The veneration of classical antiquity, including Greco-Roman political

23 *The reformed gentleman, or, The old English morals rescued from the immoralities of the present age* (London, 1693; Wing M6), sig. I4v.
philosophy and poetry, retained a powerful hold over the English imaginary. Yet categorising non-European peoples as 'pagans', especially those who seemed to possess a powerful connection to the natural world or to what Europeans viewed as the wilderness, often justified dispossession and invasion, even as alternate ways of expressing spirituality and authority captivated those who encountered them.

Related keywords: convert, heathen, interpreter, savage/barbarian