Mysteries and morals: The historical fiction of C. J. Sansom

by Ralph C. Wood in the May 1, 2007 issue

Lupus est homo homini (man is wolf to man) is a declaration first made by the Roman playwright Plautus (254-184 BC) and repeated by Thomas Hobbes in his *Leviathan* (1688). Both authors were convinced that human beings prey on each other like beasts. C. J. Sansom seems similarly convinced. He thrice has detective Matthew Shardlake repeat the ancient adage in *Dark Fire* (2004), the second novel in the Shardlake series.

Through the first-person narratives of Shardlake, a 16th-century lawyer, Sansom gives fictional life to a gloomy but not hopeless view of human nature. *Dark Fire* concerns the magical concoction of a jellied petroleum akin to napalm, which King Henry VIII is terrified that Catholic forces might use against him. *Dissolution* (2003) recounts Henry's closing of St. Donatus, the Benedictine monastery located at Scarnsea on the Cornish coast, as the newly crowned king begins his massive seizure of church lands and properties. Sansom's latest, *Sovereign* (published in Great Britain last year), tells of Henry's regal "progress," his grand tour of his kingdom from London to York as a display of royal might and thus a warning against any potential uprising of Catholic forces in the north.

Discovering Sansom at the recommendation of P. D. James was like discovering James herself upon first reading *Innocent Blood*. Like her, Sansom is not a writer of airport mysteries—books to be read during a long flight and then forgotten. On the contrary, he seems destined to succeed Ellis Peters—pen name of Edith Pargeter (1913-1995)—as the eminent historical detective writer of our time. Whereas Peters set her Brother Cadfael novels in the Middle Ages, Sansom chooses Reformation England as his fictional milieu.

Having earned a doctorate in history from Birmingham and practiced as a solicitor, Sansom is well qualified to be a historical novelist. Unlike Peters, however, Sansom does not make things turn out just and right in the end. The innocent are not always

vindicated nor the malefactors always punished, and the least likely suspects often prove guilty of the worst evils. Shardlake finds himself complicit, moreover, in the very crimes he seeks to solve.

More remarkable is the relevance of Sansom's work for our own time. Though he avoids any allegorizing of characters or scenes, Sansom wrestles with issues that still press upon us: the loss of faith, the rise of the tyrannous nation-state, the seizure of wealth by political machination, the pandemic of fear lying just beneath the surface of things, the cruel violence pervading everything. It is not only under the conditions of nature that life is "solitary, nasty, brutish and short," as Hobbes famously contended. It was equally mean and unsavory, Sansom demonstrates, at the origins of modern Anglophone civilization in the 16th century.

Yet Sansom does more than offer a searing indictment of human rapacity. In ways both subtle and profound, he suggests that an Erasmian kind of Christianity might yet offer an alternative to it.

Shardlake begins his career as a reformer convinced that the evils of medieval Catholicism demands its overthrow, including the dissolution of the monasteries as promulgated by Thomas Cromwell, chief minister to Henry VIII. Shardlake's anger at monastic corruption is not theoretical. Though educated by the monks at Lichfield, Shardlake was denied his calling to holy orders because of a physical deformity. "Anyone with a visible affliction," he was told by a smug, beer-swilling cenobite in *Dissolution*, "even a withered limb, let alone a great crooked humpback like yours, can never be a priest. How could you show yourself an intercessor between ordinary and sinful humanity and the majesty of God, when your form is so much less than theirs?"

In the face of such a mangled version of the gospel, Shardlake received a revelation that he still had a divine mission in life. Christ spoke to him directly for the first and last time: "You are not alone." This double-sided declaration is typical of many words and phrases in Sansom's work. Not only will Shardlake never be metaphysically abandoned, he is not alone as a victim of the injustices that the church commits and that Christ must correct. As an unattractive hunchback, he will also have a special sympathy for those who are exiled from the human circle for reasons both physical and spiritual. *Dissolution* hints, even in its title, that not only the medieval world but perhaps civilization itself is dissolving.

Among the many admirable qualities of Sansom's work, his deromanticizing of the Middle Ages is one of the most important. Quickly we learn the origin of posies and nosegays: they were necessary to ward off the overwhelming stench. Since the publication of Eamon Duffy's *The Stripping of the Altars* (1992) it has become almost fashionable to regard the English Reformation as a massive mistake. Shardlake offers the counterview that the medieval church was often a nest of gross superstition and gross abuses of power. The nunnery at Bilston claims, for example, to possess a vial of Mary's milk. The Scarnsea monastery treasures a hand of the Penitent Thief that is supposed to cure cripples. Despite their motto *ora et labora*, the monks at St. Donatus pray without ever engaging in honest toil. Hired servants are responsible for not only "cooking and stabling, but tending the fires, making the monks' beds, sometimes helping them dress and who knows what else."

Many of the monks' prayers are offered in behalf of wealthy merchants and traders who have provided huge endowments for the saying of masses meant to shorten their passage through purgatory, while millions of ordinary souls have no way to speed their stay there. Prior Mortimus's defense of this pecuniary scheme will not win many modern converts, Catholic or Protestant: "The pope, who is God's vicar on earth, allows the purchase of redemption from sins! I told you, [Shardlake], God figures our souls in heaven, the credit balance and the debit!" Such a graceless and subchristological faith, Shardlake argues, prompted his fellow Protestants to attempt a Christian commonwealth based on simplified worship, honest skepticism about outlandish miracles and, above all, the liberation of the laity to read scripture and to serve God without the mediation of a gargantuan and often corrupt ecclesial system.

Yet Shardlake refuses to make any pristine defense of English Protestants such as can be found in *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*. On the contrary, he confesses his unblinkered disillusionment with church reform, his unabashed lament over the loss of something both religiously indispensable and culturally irreplaceable in the pre-Reformation church. Brother Guy, a Moorish monk forced to become an apothecary after his monastery is dissolved, makes a convincing Catholic apology. Though Guy has read neither Luther nor Calvin—and his critique of the Reformation as individualistic and biblicistic is wrongheaded—he is right in what he affirms about the Church of Rome, and he is especially prophetic in his final caveat:

> The Catholic Church has often been the only light of civilization in this world. Its doctrines and rituals unite man in fellowship with suffering

> humanity and all the Christian dead. And they urge him to keep charity: Jesu knows he needs urging. But your [Protestant] doctrine tells each man to find his own salvation through prayer and the Bible. Charity and fellowship then are lost. . . . I fear without the universal church to bind us together, a day will come in this land when even belief in God will be gone. Money alone will be worshipped, and the nation, of course.

Shardlake's hero is Erasmus of Rotterdam (1469-1536). The brilliant Christian humanist anticipated a "new golden age," a rebirth of church and culture through ecclesiastical reform and academic learning. Yet not long before his death Erasmus confessed, "I perceive a certain fatal change in human affairs." He referred not only to the spread of Protestantism but also to the division of Europe into autonomous nations and principalities. Whereas the various peoples of the West had once been linked by common virtues and goals, especially as they were embodied in the united body of Christ, the newly established nation-states no longer looked first to the church for their authority. Worldwide empires were being established on the basis of international commerce, the lending of money at interest and the reinvestment of profits, and thus on the new mania for "getting and spending" that Wordsworth would lament two centuries later.

Theologian William Cavanaugh has offered a fresh way of understanding the connection between the notorious 17th-century "wars of religion" and the birth of sovereign nation-states. In providing "a monopoly on violence within a defined territory," the emerging nation-states centralized political power. They also effected a radical redescription of both Protestantism and Catholicism. No longer understood as particularistic practices of Christianity, they became subspecies of a putatively more basic thing called "religion." Religion came to be understood, in turn, as mere "beliefs"—essentially private convictions held quite apart from (and usually in deference to) one's public loyalty to the state. Public discourse was deliberately secularized, he adds, in order to protect the state from the real threat posed by the churches: "Christianity produces divisions within the state body precisely because it pretends to be a body which transcends state boundaries" ("The City: Beyond Secular Parodies," in *Radical Orthodoxy*, edited by John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward [Routledge, 1999]).

Sansom seems thoroughly agreed with Cavanaugh. He also suggests that Henry VIII's attempt at a grand compromise—transferring the Catholic magisterium to himself while maintaining many Catholic traditions in order to secure acceptance by

clergy and laity alike—was more than a matter of vain ambition. It was a fatal moment in modern political and religious history. For once the spiritual power of the church had been placed in the hands of the sovereign king, the notion of “divine right” would soon follow. And while democratic ideas of government would soon arise to overthrow such holy sovereignty, the notion of state supremacy would not die with the death of the king. On the contrary, the appetite of the nation-state for power and wealth would prove insatiable.

Sansom seems also to concur with G. K. Chesterton’s description of Henry VIII’s closing of the monasteries and confiscation of their holdings as “the revolution of the rich.” In the novels, very little authentic Christianity, at least within Henry’s inner circle, prompts the royal reform of the church. Even the saintly archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Cranmer, is corrupted by his service to the throne. “God calls us to hard duty,” he explains in *Sovereign*. “Then we must find the stomach for it.”

For Shardlake (as for Sansom, it seems), it is one thing to stomach the serial annulments and remarriages of the king, but quite another to approve the torture of witnesses and the execution of heretics. Among the images that continued to haunt me long after I finished the Shardlake novels were countless heads planted on pikes, the numerous bodies burned on pyres and stretched on racks, the many corpses hanging from scaffolds—these latter souls having died only after friends came to yank on their legs and thus to break their necks, rather than letting them languish in a slow death.

The unprecedented bloodletting of our own time—roughly 180 million slaughtered in the 20th century alone, more than in all preceding centuries combined, mostly in the name of secular ideologies—already lurks here in these novels set in the 16th century. So do other unsavory qualities of the modern age. The burgeoning nation-state gives birth, for example, to a monstrous bureaucracy built on the amassing of paper records. Henry’s lavish passage from London to York and back involves a colossal expense, not unlike the vast sums of money entailed in a modern presidential visit. The invention of the printing press proves to be as much bane as blessing, since it immediately becomes the means of vicious propaganda no less than naive biblicism. A new Augmentation Office has been created as well, the better to assess the qualifications of the newly rich to be elevated to the ranks of the nobility, as Sansom forecasts our own identification of wealth with honor.

Yet Shardlake has no nostalgic desire to reverse the course of history, as if the drastic conflicts and changes that first surfaced in the 16th century—and that would be consummated in the past century—might somehow be undone by a return to a purified Anglicanism or Puritanism or Roman Catholicism. On the contrary, he appears to be something of a realist in the mode of Reinhold Niebuhr. Though it's unlikely that Sansom has read Niebuhr, his narrator-hero has the Niebuhrian conviction that all large social groups and institutions are inherently predatory and immoral, though their individual members can occasionally muster a modicum of decency and virtue, despite their inevitable involvement in the sins of their society. Shardlake thus remains a curious paradox: Lutheran in his estimate of corporate human nature, Erasmian in his hope for individuals.

Shardlake is an immensely decent and virtuous person. He is especially troubled by the fate of Elizabeth Wentworth, an innocent lass in *Dark Fire* who suffers horribly after being falsely accused of murder. So terrible are the injustices done to her that Elizabeth can no longer believe in God. The sympathetic lawyer understands why: "She had been pious once, no doubt, but the terrible blows she had suffered had turned her faith inside out. And was there not an awful logic to her belief that God had deserted her? Surely he had? I thought of the thousands of children who lay abandoned, begging in the streets." Shardlake devotes himself to Elizabeth's exoneration, convinced that his own hope for moral integrity lies largely in defending such innocents.

It is not only the ardor of Shardlake's reforming Protestantism that gradually cools; so do his churchmanship and even his prayer life. Because of an ever-increasing convergence of Protestant and Catholic concerns historian Mark Noll and others have recently asked, "Is the Reformation over?" Shardlake asks, at least implicitly, a far more troubling question: "Is the church itself finally finished?" Sansom provides no ready, much less easy, reply. Yet we find his lawyer-detective having ever less to do with the body of Christ, ever more becoming a Christian humanist seeking his own way, after the fashion of Erasmus.

Shardlake believes that God demands nothing less than the truth and that detached observation and disinterested reason are the means for finding it, but also that reason alone is a weak thing when set against rapacious human passions. Even so, he never surrenders his Erasmian conviction that "faith and charity would be enough to settle religious differences between men." When doctrinal disputes lead to the shedding of blood, then the gospel has been fatally abandoned. How can the love of

God justify hatred and violence, asks Shardlake, especially in view of the suffering already inherent in the world?

It cannot, of course. Yet Sansom's novels suggest that divine charity can still enable personal probity. Caught in the conflict between his keen religious conscience and his morally ambiguous work as the king's lawyer—as also between his reforming Protestantism and his late-won admiration for Rome—Shardlake is neither wholly pure nor wholly compromised. He is a complex mixture of self-giving and self-interest. Yet Shardlake is far more self-sacrificing than self-seeking. Indeed, because he is so often agonized by the difficult attempt to weigh evidence carefully and to sift motives fairly, he becomes an increasingly admirable narrator.

Like Thomas More, another Christian humanist from this same period, Shardlake is "a man for all seasons"—for times of corruption and despair no less than times of confidence and optimism. Sansom's first-person depiction of this humble lawyer's goodness is a remarkable artistic feat. For how can such a patently virtuous narrator portray his own excellence without becoming vainglorious? Shardlake succeeds in this seemingly impossible task by reporting only the praise that others heap on him, always deflecting it away from himself, always remaining deeply aware of the devices and desires of his own flawed heart.

For those convinced that to be a Christian is to belong to Christ's ever-repentant, ever-renewed people called the church—the only community against which, despite its terrible failings, the gates of hell will not finally prevail—Sansom's historical detective fiction will remain problematic. Yet for all their dark forecast of the evils to come, the Shardlake novels retain a marvelously bracing quality. They embody the hope that Christian faith and charity, at least in individual cases, might yet redeem our inveterate wolfishness.