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Thomas Weelkes: A Biographical Caution

JOHN SHEPHERD

MANY aspects of the life of Thomas Weelkes remain a mystery. Contemporary references are scarce, and those that do exist afford only a tantalizing glimpse into the obscurity. It is always tempting to give such isolated biographical strands a sense of direction by eliciting from them only one historical possibility. With regard to Weelkes, such a temptation has for the most part proved irresistible; it has become customary to interpret all references to him in such a way as to provide an orderly pattern of progressive degradation. Commencing with his hurried marriage to a pregnant Elizabeth Sandham and ending with the final charges that brought about recommendations for his dismissal from office, Weelkes's life is commonly presented as an exercise in disgrace, maturing steadily from one stage of alcoholic obsession and professional irresponsibility to another. Repeated selection of only one interpretation from biographical documents to support a predetermined conclusion is a hazardous procedure. It usually indicates a complacent approach to whatever other possibilities are suggested by the documents, and thus encourages distortions and exaggerations. For example, Thomas Weelkes has been described as a man of "dissolute habits," "irascible," noted for his "loutishness and drinking," and as having "turned to drink, and in that sorry condition lived out his life."¹ At Chichester, it is said, he "declined into sottish unruliness, living out the final twenty-two years of his life," and from October, 1616 (the occasion of William Lawes's accusation), "he continued to drink in

¹ G. A. Philipps, "Patronage in the Career of Thomas Weelkes," in *The Musical Quarterly*, LXII (January, 1976), 46-47.

excess for the remainder of his life."² Not only has there been a limited viewpoint, but now there are the exaggerations to go with it. It is therefore important to examine critically the documents in question. There are nine.

First, in 1609, Weelkes was declared contumacious for absence throughout the whole of Bishop Lancelot Andrewes' Visitation.³ David Brown cites this as "the first positive instance of Weelkes incurring the displeasure of the cathedral authorities."⁴ However, as Brown himself notices, many of the cathedral authorities themselves were absent, one of whom was the dean. The dean, according to ancient custom,⁵ would bear ultimate responsibility for the financial and liturgical running of the cathedral, and therefore the very one whose presence would have been most vital. Even the good bishop himself was prone to periods of extended absence in London,⁶ which could hardly have inspired his colleagues in Chichester to unparalleled heights of dedication. In the face of such distinguished absenteeism and indeed of the regular reports of absenteeism at the cathedral throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries,⁷ Weelkes's oversight is trivial. Brown surmises he was away from Chichester for the whole Visitation. This is extremely likely. He was probably in London, where he had almost certainly spent much time with Thomas Morley prior to his Winchester College appointment in 1598.

Second, the Chapter Acts of October 30, 1611, record twelve orders and decrees agreed upon by Bishop Samuel Harsnett, the dean, and chapter. Of these, Numbers 9 and 10 have been used against Weelkes:

9. No clerk, Vicar, or chorister shall be admitted before making public trial of his voice and skill before the Dean and Chapter and the choirmaster or sub-chanter.

10. The choirmaster shall give at least three hours a day to teaching the choristers:

² *Ibid.*

³ David Brown, *Thomas Weelkes: A Biographical and Critical Study* (London, 1969), p. 33. Chichester Diocesan Record Office, Ep. 1/18/29 (hereafter CDRO).

⁴ Brown, p. 33.

⁵ "The Acts of the Dean and Chapter of the Cathedral Church of Chichester 1545-1642," ed. W. D. Peckham, in *Sussex Record Society* (Cambridge, 1959) LVIII, Section 454, p. 3.

⁶ Paul A. Welsby, *Lancelot Andrewes 1555-1626* (London, 1958) p. 102.

⁷ "The Acts of the Dean and Chapter . . .," Sections 937 (p. 139), 943 (p. 141), 954 (p. 146), 1146 (p. 174), 1150 (p. 220).

if he neglects to do so, he shall, after three admonitions, be deprived by the Chapter; and another shall be appointed at the next Chapter.⁸

David Brown maintains that "these are the first real signs that Weelkes was giving cause for dissatisfaction."⁹ However, these two decrees should be considered within the context of the other ten. The basic problem was the absenteeism of the cathedral canons. This was not occasional but total absenteeism, brought about by consistent nonresidence from the place of duty. Nonresidence is an almost unavoidable characteristic of the practice of collecting two salaries at once. As early as the thirteenth century, this abuse was already so popular and so thoroughly established that it had become necessary to invent a species of ecclesiastical being to cope with it,¹⁰ the vicars choral. They were substitutes paid to fulfill the choir duties of the absentee canons. The payments were called "stall money."¹¹ Although the canons had to pay these premiums the program offered a secure percentage investment while the vicars choral were prepared to work for less than regular canons' wages. By the sixteenth century, this practice was very much a part of the clerical lifestyle, and it was useless to challenge it.¹² All that could be done was to ensure that payments to the vicars choral were kept up so that the daily round of services could be maintained. The decree to this effect is therefore the most vital of the twelve and accordingly heads the list.¹³

The next two decrees deal with absenteeism over which the chapter had some means of control. The fact of Bishop Sherburne's endowment made it possible to exact continuous personal residence from the four musicians enjoying the appointments, and weekly perdutions were threatened for "those Vicars, or Sherburne clerks absent without leave on the Sabbath day or any high feast day" (Decrees 2 and 3).¹⁴ Decrees 4, 5, and 6 warn against misbehavior both on and off duty, with particular reference to "unreverend gestures," "unseemly talking," absence during parts of the service,

⁸ "The Acts of the Dean and Chapter . . .," Section 1084, p. 191.

⁹ Brown, p. 35.

¹⁰ W. D. Peckham, "The Vicars Choral of Chichester Cathedral," in *Sussex Archaeological Society* (London, 1937), LXXVIII, 126-59.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 126-40.

¹³ "The Acts of the Dean and Chapter . . .," Section 1084, p. 190.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 190-1.

drinking, rioting, gaming, and quarreling.¹⁵ Decree 7 prevents the prebendaries and vicars from subleasing their allotted houses in the close to any other than regularly appointed cathedral employees, and Decree 8 designates a communar to oversee repairs of buildings in the close.¹⁶ Only then do the decrees in question appear. They are in no way related specifically to Weelkes, neither is he subsequently admonished as a result of them — and the chapter would not have hesitated to discipline him directly if there had been cause to do so. Rather than indicating dissatisfaction with Weelkes, Decrees 9 and 10 seem to initiate a general tightening up of control over the entire cathedral staff, ranging from the top priority areas dealing with the effects of canonical absenteeism, down to directions for bell ringers.¹⁷ Somewhere in the middle were routine comments regarding choral selection and training procedures. It would therefore seem most unwise to conclude, on the basis of these two decrees, that Weelkes was giving cause for concern. It is also worth noticing that Decree 9, far from implicating Weelkes, could just as easily be interpreted as affording protection to the choirmaster or succentor by involving the dean and chapter in the selection process. If a singer proved disappointing, the choirmaster could not then be held totally responsible. Indeed, as David Brown suggests, Weelkes may have had very little to do with the selection procedure: “After all, the subchanter was the real head of the cathedral music.”¹⁸

Third, on December 14, 1613, Weelkes was charged with a public report concerning drunkenness (*fama publica ebrietatis*).¹⁹ He replied that the report was not true (*negantis dictam famam esse veram*). He was directed to vindicate himself by the oaths of three vicars and three neighbors of good repute (*qui sunt bone fame et honeste conversationis*). No further mention of this incident is made in the records, so presumably the matter was settled to the chapter's satisfaction. It is interesting to note that the scribe chose the form *ebrietas*, which is used to specify a particular state, in preference to *ebriositas*, which would have indicated a habit, or a continuous condition. This being so, then the report refers to an isolated incident rather than an established lifestyle.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 191.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Brown, p. 35.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* CDRO, Ep. 1/18/31, folio 7v.

There is, moreover, an important aspect of Chichester Cathedral life which helps explain all the reported incidents concerning Weelkes's drunkenness. W. D. Peckham has already noted it, but his observations have not been developed in relation to Weelkes.²⁰ Originally, the canons constituted a worshipping community centered at the cathedral. They formed a collegiate society in the monastic tradition; living, working, praying, singing, and eating together. Communal worship and communal living went hand in hand.²¹ However, the absentee abuse had seriously endangered this conception of a collegiate society. The only hope was to encourage a similar sense of collegiality among the substitutes.²² At first, it seems there was some measure of success. Earliest indications are of a strong group of some thirty celibates. Their organization was such that on December 30, 1465, they were legally instituted as a corporation, and this submission was updated on June 15, 1467.²³ In 1526, Bishop Sherburne endowed places in the choir for four lay singing men.²⁴ Eight years later, in 1534, he drew up the Statutes of the Corporation of the Vicars-choral.²⁵ These two actions are of great importance. They obviously testify to the extent of Bishop Sherburne's enthusiasm for the musical life of the cathedral. Yet they also suggest that the community of the vicars choral was in trouble. Of the original thirty members in the period around 1400, there were only twelve when Bishop Sherburne presented the statutes in 1534. It seems likely, therefore, that the bishop's endowments were intended to improve these flagging numbers and that his work on the statutes was designed to give the organization a fresh start. But herein lay the difficulty. The statutes are concerned to impose a lifestyle totally anachronistic and impractical for vicars choral of the sixteenth century. The statutes envisaged a collegiate experience more appropriate to an earlier age. It was surely optimistic of Bishop Sherburne to assume that a thoroughly medieval concept

²⁰ Peckham, pp. 136, 147.

²¹ *Ibid.* p. 133.

²² It is uncertain who first introduced this idea of a resurrected collegiality for the vicars choral at Chichester. The date is equally elusive, although there is evidence that by the time of Robert Rede's Visitation of 1402-3 a collegiate community was well established. Peckham has discovered references to the existence of the buildings of the vicars close, the hall, a principal, and the operation of a common fund.

²³ Peckham, p. 134.

²⁴ *Ibid.* p. 143.

²⁵ *Ibid.* p. 136.

of cathedral worship would have much hope of prolonged survival in a society already feeling the impact of significant religious change. Certainly by 1534, a reappraisal of the meaning of "collegiality" would have been appropriate. For example, the vicars choral of the fifteenth century were celibates. Therefore an extraordinarily close-knit community life could be demanded of these single men with no immediate family responsibilities. By 1534, however, most of them were married, making it less rational to persist in the idea of a closed, mutually dependent community living together under monastic discipline. Bishop Sherburne's statutes gave no hint of any new thinking. On the contrary they were specifically concerned to reinforce the ancient disciplines. For example, there was real concern over the keeping of concubines in the close, for which offense there was a fine of 3s.4d.²⁶ As pastimes go, concubinage seems more germane to the style of the single, cloistered monastic than to that of Bishop Sherburne's married vicars choral. Extramural liaisons may well have flourished with similar intensity, but concubinage is hardly the vice most easily available for the married family man. Again, even though frequent dining together in hall in the style of a monastic community was clearly impossible as early as 1534, nevertheless, in 1568, three vicars choral were directed to "keep their statutes concerning commons . . . under the penalties of the statutes."²⁷ By 1583, the chapter had cut the requirements, leaving the vicars choral to appear in hall only once a month.²⁸ However, this monastic requirement, albeit a token, was still on the books, and was indeed repeated in 1598.²⁹ Just as unrealistically, the chapter admonished the vicars choral in 1601 to "suffer no tippelinge or vittaylinge and interteyninge of strangers by day nor by night in their cloister."³⁰ This rather drastic admonition reveals the extent of the chapter's commitment to a policy of monastic containment, whereby the life of the community was protected from potentially disruptive outside influences. It is this same concern for a mutually supportive and self-sufficient society that explains the chapter's urgent admonition, "on pain of deprivation" to all vicars choral, singing men, Sherburne clerks, and other officers of the church to "abstain from slanderous reports of one

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ "The Acts of the Dean and Chapter . . ." Section 707, p. 58.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, Section 849, p. 109.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, Section 964, p. 149.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, Section 984, p. 153.

another and such talebearing as caused brawls."³¹ A monastic organization would not, of course, wish its dissensions to be advertised, but rather that they be dealt with internally. Therefore the vicars choral were instructed "not to go to law with one another, but to bring before the Chapter any future disputes, and the suits already begun."³² The decrees of September 27, 1616, show just how ludicrous the whole concept had become. The senior vicar choral was instructed to keep his fellow vicars under lock and key for the night: "The principal is to see that the outer doors of their cloisters are locked or barred by nine o'clock every night, and keep the keys himself."³³ He was also directed to "see the cloisters kept staunch and sweet." However, far from being staunch and sweet, or, indeed, displaying any monastic tendencies whatsoever, the vicars choral, Sherburne clerks, and singing men seem to have been a happy-go-lucky band of supposedly musical clerics and laymen, living and dying with enormous enthusiasm and with little or no respect for ecclesiastical pomp whether inside a cathedral or out. Oblivious of this basic social orientation, the chapter constantly brought them all to account for everything from howling to whoring, in varying degrees of monastic obsession. Peckham pointed out this anomaly with regard to the change of marital status: "Instead of recognizing the material difference that these changes had made, and altering the Statutes, the Chapter persisted in attempts to enforce them, invariably, I should judge, without lasting success."³⁴

It is clear, therefore, that Bishop Sherburne's statutes of 1534 formalized a concept of a collegiate cathedral community which even then was out of date, and which became increasingly irrelevant during the next century. The cathedral chapter, with an ingenious sense of the absurd, continued to impose this anachronistic lifestyle upon a clearly secular establishment. Hence the excessive concern of the chapter with ethical regulations affecting community life. It is surely within this anachronism that Thomas Weelkes is caught. He is a victim of the chapter's vain attempt to impose a strict personal discipline of monastic rigor upon its musicians. Consequently it is impossible to assess accurately the seriousness of Weelkes's reported offenses. While it is reasonable to assume that the incidents reported

³¹ *Ibid.*, Section 965, p. 149.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*, Section 1128, p. 208.

³⁴ Peckham, p. 136.

in the Chapter Acts did occur, it is far less certain that they warranted reporting in the first instance, or that the charges were responsibly entered. The offenses may well have been quite minor and insignificant, unnoticeable but for the chapter's narrow definition of misdemeanor. Also we do not know whether the charges are the work of unscrupulous competitors, malicious enemies, or half-witted gossips. The Chapter Acts, therefore, ought not to be regarded as reliable interpreters of Weelkes's personal conduct; it would be most indiscreet to conclude, on the basis of these documents, that Thomas Weelkes was a man of "dissolute habits," or that he "declined into sottish unruliness," or that he was in any way as debauched as his chroniclers have assumed.

Fourth, eleven of the musical establishment were reprimanded by a Doctor Barker.³⁵ This was made possible because the statutes were also concerned to maintain a medieval lifestyle with regard to attendance at the Divine Offices. The vicars choral, Sherburne clerks, and singing men were required to attend Morning and Evening Prayer every day. This rule is part of the same monastic principle of a worshipping community, keeping up the daily round of Offices throughout the year. The rule was obviously not regarded with much enthusiasm by those for whom it was intended. Accordingly, eleven vicars choral, Sherburne clerks, and singing men were presented for "intolerable negligence in not coming to Church." The same Doctor Barker "did warn and admonish all and singular the vicars-choral and singing-men before named . . . and also enjoined . . . that they should every one of them repair diligently to the Church every day to say Morning and Evening Prayer as they ought to and are enjoined by the statutes and orders of the said Church, upon pain of perditions and such other penalties. . . ." That Weelkes was one of these eleven does not seem in the least significant; it is more a reflection on the rationale of the statutes themselves than on Weelkes's behavior. In any case, official wrath was directed at the musicians generally and certainly not at Weelkes in particular. If anyone warrants singling out, it is Godfrey Blaxton, who earned himself a special admonition over the whole affair.

Fifth, on May 6, 1616, the chapter passed a decree relating to the instruction of choristers. There is some confusion as to the intent of this decree, so it is best quoted in full:

³⁵ Brown, p. 35. CDRO, Ep. I/18/32, folio 18v.

The Chapter . . . decreed that John Juxon, John Lytle, Thomas Trigges, and Richard Mose, choristers, shall go to the song school every day for instruction in singing by Weekes, organist and choirmaster, from nine to ten in the forenoon, thence to church, and again from three to four in the afternoon, thence to church. Nicholas Windres, Thomas Weeks, Robert Randoill, and Thomas Butcher the younger, choristers, shall likewise go from eight to ten in the forenoon, then to church, and again from two to four in the afternoon, thence to church. Defaulters' wages shall be stopped at the quarter day by the communar. Each chorister shall provide himself with "eyther a duble psalter or a Comunion booke" and shall bring it to the Choir. Trigges and Little, then absent, shall be warned by the verger.³⁶

Brown interprets this decree as "an order . . . from the Chapter for greater efficiency."³⁷ Later he claims that this "measure to combat Weelkes's inefficiency occasioned the first reference to him by name in the Act Books of the Cathedral."³⁸ There is, however, another possible interpretation; namely, that this decree is intended as a disciplinary measure, not against Weelkes, but against the choristers. There are several reasons to support this.

1. The choristers are specified individually by name. There would be no need to do so if the decree were directed at Weelkes. In that case, it would be sufficient merely to list the practice times required of Weelkes, rather than the individuals involved.
2. Immediately after the rule is set out, the penalty is specified. The penalty clearly refers to more than one person (Defaulters' wages . . .). There is no penalty specified for any shortcoming on Weelkes's part.
3. The decree continues to involve the choristers, not Weelkes, with what appears to be another example of their shortcomings. They are instructed to provide themselves with "a duble psalter" or "a Comunion booke," the assumption being that the choristers had previously been negligent in this regard.
4. Two choristers were absent and were to be warned individually. The implication is that the warning to the choristers was to be transmitted to the absentees. Therefore the whole thrust of the decree is directed unequivocally toward the choristers, not Weelkes.
5. On the same day, May 6, William Lawes and John Lylliatt were

³⁶ "The Acts of the Dean and Chapter . . .," Section 1123, p. 204.

³⁷ Brown, p. 36.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

admonished for poor attendance. This is not important. What is important is that during the course of the reprimand, William Lawes (who was succentor, and therefore responsible for the musical organization of the cathedral), told the chapter that "Robert Randoll and Nicholas Wyndres . . . were insufficient in singing, and unlikely ever to be otherwise."³⁹ It is manifest, therefore, that the fault lay with the choristers and that the decree was aimed entirely at them.

6. In addition to William Lawes's testimony, the Chapter Acts record that on October 11, 1616, the chapter "declared the places of John Juxon and Thomas Triggs, choristers, void, and admitted thereunto Edward, son of John Lylliat, Vicar-choral, and John Floyde."⁴⁰ It seems possible that Juxon and Triggs were useless as well. Reading on further, we find that, on January 21, 1617, "the Dean, with the consent of the residentiaries, admitted Thomas Hooke and William Sandham as choristers on the resignation of John Lyttle and Richard Moose."⁴¹ In the light of the previous four expulsions, it is possible to imagine that these two "resignations" were not discouraged and that they reflect two additional weaknesses in the choir. Of the original eight choristers mentioned on May 6, 1616, six had left by the following January. The other two were Thomas Butcher who on October 10, 1617, is listed as deceased,⁴² and Weelkes's son, Thomas, who was replaced on August 4, 1617.⁴³ All in all, not a very encouraging group, and, in the light of these later dismissals and "resignations," it is they who are the more likely defendants of the Chapter Acts of May 6, 1616.

Sixth, the decrees of the dean and chapter recorded in the Chapter Acts of September 27, 1616, contain instructions for the master of the choristers, the choristers, the organist, the subchanter, and the entire choir.⁴⁴ It is a document intended for the entire cathedral staff. It is by no means aimed solely at the members of the musical establishment. The musical points that are raised take their place within a broad appraisal of the efficiency of cathedral life. The scope

³⁹ "The Acts of the Dean and Chapter . . .," Section 1123, p. 204.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, Section 1130, p. 210.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, Section 1132, p. 211.

⁴² *Ibid.*, Section 1137, p. 214.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, Section 1135, p. 213.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, Section 1128, p. 206-9.

is indicated by the multiplicity of categories: church officers, bell-ringers, sextons, praecular, vergifier, lay vicars, choral vicars, receiver, subtreasurer, chapter clerk, in addition to the musical categories already mentioned. This document, therefore, is an extremely thorough ecclesiastical inventory, with every aspect of cathedral life receiving an updated job description. The master of the choristers is reminded that either he or the subchanter must oppose each chorister before admission, then report their findings to the dean. Rather than indicating dissatisfaction with Weelkes, this decree could just as easily represent increased confidence in the master of the choristers by the dean and chapter, for the Chapter Acts of October 30, 1611, required the actual presence of the dean and chapter at the admission trials. Not only are they now not required at the trials, but only the dean is to receive the choirmaster's report. The exclusion of the chapter from this process was no accident, for the words "and Chapter" have been deliberately struck out by the secretary. It would be unwise to assume, on the basis of this decree, that "incompetence had evidently reared its head again."⁴⁵

There follows an instruction for the choirmaster to "conduct them [the choristers] to and from church after each lesson 'ranking them orderly by two and two. . . .'" Surely this is an instruction of the utmost triviality. In any case, encouraging choristers to march in schoolboy formation is hardly the task appropriate for a composer and organist of Weelkes's stature. More importantly, this decree specifies that the choirmaster should teach the choristers each morning from eight until ten and each afternoon from three until four. Once again, it is not fair to assume that, because the decrees specify a task, it was either not done or not done well. Where improvement was required, the chapter takes care to mention it specifically. Bell-ringers are to "come sooner" to church; the praecular is to perform his prescribed office "more diligently"; the vergifier is to wait "more solemnly" on the chapter; the lay vicars are to come "more devoutly" to church, and are to "read with more distinction, pause and reverence." The decree does not say that the choirmaster was to teach the choristers "more effectively," that he was to teach them "for the full time allotted," or that he was to resume teaching them after an unauthorized lapse. There is no specific hint of negligence. The chapter merely stated what it wanted done, and whether or not the decree

⁴⁵ Brown, p. 40.

“reflected [Weelkes’s] continued neglect of the training of the choristers” is strictly a matter of speculation.⁴⁶

The paragraph for the organist requires him to “remain in the choir till the last psalm be sung, then to go up to the organs, and having done his duty there to return to the choir to bear his part, on pain of 3d. fine.” It is possible that this was a new requirement for Chichester and that it does not indicate any negligence on Weelkes’s part. There is no previous reference to this practice elsewhere in the Chapter Acts, and the fact that the chapter felt it necessary to add a rather apologetic reason for the rule strongly indicates a new policy: “This is thought a meete manner in all duble Quiers, much more ys yt necessarie in all halfe Quiers, as oures is.” Moreover, when viewed dispassionately, the rule may well contain a compliment to Weelkes’s vocal ability. It was apparently thought an advantage to have Weelkes with the choir. If his voice had been of no use whatsoever, the chapter would have been only too happy to see him disappear to the organ loft.

Eighth, there is the first of two specific references to Weelkes’s drunkenness. It was charged “that he hath been, and is noted and famed for a common drunkard and a notorious swearer and blasphemous; his usual oaths are that which is most fearful to name, by the wounds, heart and blood of the Lord.”⁴⁷ This charge was presented in October, 1616. Weelkes pleaded not guilty and was therefore required to produce witnesses on his behalf in order to “purge” himself. He was unable to produce these witnesses on the set day, November 18, and the proceedings were adjourned. On January 16, 1617, Weelkes appeared before Bishop Samuel Harsnett and there received the Episcopal judgment. Harsnett “read and made public a certain sentence set out in writing for publishing, declaring, for removing and depriving, and for doing such other things as are contained in it.”⁴⁸ The original charge was probably presented by William Lawes; discipline was his job, and also it is couched in the same shocked, emotive terms as the following charge laid before Bishop Carlton upon his first Visitation in 1619. For this reason the two charges are best considered together. The 1619 charge, the ninth piece of documentary evidence against Weelkes, reads:

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 41. CDRO, Ep. 1/18/33, folio 16v.

⁴⁸ Brown, p. 42. CDRO, Ep. 1/18/33, folio 20.

Most of the choir and other the officers of the same (as many as come to Divine Service) demean themselves religiously all the time of prayers, save only Thomas Weelkes, who divers times and very often comes so disguised either from the tavern or alehouse into the choir as is much to be lamented, for in these humours he will both curse and swear most dreadfully, and so profane the service of God (and especially on the Sabbath Days) as is most fearful to hear, and to the great amazement of the people present. And though he hath been often times admonished by the late Lord Bishop, the Dean and Chapter to refrain these humours and reform himself, yet he daily continues the same, and is rather worse than better therein. . . . I know not any of the choir or other the officers of the Church to be a common drunkard but Mr. Weelkes.⁴⁹

There are two aspects of these charges that hint at the kind of relationship Weelkes may have had with William Thorne and William Lawes.

First, none of these proceedings are recorded in the Cathedral Chapter Acts. The Chapter Acts, however, are remarkable for their meticulous accounting of personal and corporate failure. For example, the chapter's struggle with the flamboyant John Meade is recorded in infinite detail. Yet it would appear that Weelkes did not face the chapter. In fact, the Chapter Acts of October 11, 1616, list him as a Sherburne clerk in good standing, due for payment of 16d. for the King's Feast.⁵⁰ The chapter met again on October 14, but there is no mention of Weelkes. There was then no meeting until January 21, 1617. It was therefore the bishop whom Weelkes faced, not the chapter, for the three meetings dealing with the 1616 charge (October, November, and January), and for the meeting concerning the final charge in 1619. This is inconsistent with the chapter's clear policy of tending to all disciplinary problems. It cannot be that Weelkes was so far depraved that it was thought he could only be dealt with by the bishop. No one could have been more of a problem than John Meade, and the chapter gallantly persisted with his case until the very end. (In this instance, the "end" was Meade's death, with that intrepid vicar choral continuing to irritate the chapter until the last possible moment.) It is unlikely, moreover, that Weelkes's being organist and choirmaster was a significant factor. John Cowper, who was choirmaster for a period around 1595, was being constantly arraigned before the chapter on charges of negligence and drunkenness. It seems that for some reason the chapter chose not to

⁴⁹ Brown, p. 43. CDRO, Ep. I/20/9.

⁵⁰ "The Acts of the Dean and Chapter . . ." Section 1130, p. 210.

deal with the matter and passed it on to the bishop for his determination. This is all the more surprising since bishops did not normally deal directly with disciplinary matters within their cathedral; the actual running of the establishment was (and still is) jealously guarded by the dean and chapter. The dean throughout this entire period was William Thorne. Peter Le Huray has suggested that Thorne may have had a hand in arranging Weelkes's appointment to Chichester in the autumn of 1602.⁵¹ Not only were both Weelkes and Thorne at Winchester College, but Thorne was also a Fellow of New College, Oxford, the same college from which they both took degrees in July, 1602. In any case, as dean, Thorne would certainly have made the final choice of organist and choirmaster. Consequently, the dean may well have felt some responsibility for Weelkes and may not have wished to initiate his prosecution. This would adequately explain why there are no formal proceedings taken against Weelkes in the Chapter Acts, and, of course, why the whole matter was passed on to the bishop. As well as enjoying the support of the dean, it also appears as though Weelkes received a favorable judgment from the bishop. "A certain sentence" was "set out in writing for publishing, declaring, for removing and depriving, and for doing such other things as are contained in it." The "certain sentence" is not quoted, it is merely described as existing. Weelkes's removal was therefore not entirely straightforward, otherwise the scribe could just as easily have reported that Weelkes was finished. "Such other things" were apparently too involved for the scribe to quote exactly. Subsequent events shed some light on the sentence. Weelkes remained in the choir establishment; he continued as a Sherburne clerk and was again named as organist in 1622. "Such other things," therefore, may well have specified his removal as choirmaster and organist, yet retention as Sherburne clerk, and his subsequent reinstatement as organist after a period of suspension. The knowledge of such a lenient penalty may have persuaded Weelkes not to oppose the charge and to change his protest, *dissent(is)*, to acceptance in silence, *tacent(is)*. The confusion of Weelkes's fellow Sherburne clerks, Jacob Hillary and Valentine Austen, as to Weelkes's status is interesting: "And further for Mr. Thomas Weelkes, who was one

⁵¹ Peter Le Huray, *Music and the Reformation in England 1549-1660* (London, 1967) p. 297.

of our foundation of Bishop Sherborne's Clerks, but being expelled by your Lordship's predecessor, Bishop Harsnett, in his last visitation, since which time we never knew him admitted or sworn into his place again. . . ."⁵² Perhaps Weelkes was initially dismissed as Sherburne clerk as well as organist and choirmaster, and his reinstatement went unnoticed, or, as David Brown suggests, Hillary and Austen were denying knowledge of the reinstatement in order to avoid responsibility for his reported behavior. If, in fact, Weelkes *was* totally deprived by Bishop Harsnett, then it could only have been the personal intervention of the dean that kept him on the cathedral payroll at all.

Two factors emerge: the support of the dean and the leniency of the bishop. Both imply that Thorne and Harsnett had such high regard for Weelkes's work that they were prepared to overlook the ferocity of Lawes's charges. On the face of it, the reports were so condemnatory that the bishop, dean, and chapter had a perfect excuse to be rid of Weelkes forever. This opportunity was deliberately avoided by all concerned. It was obviously thought to be musically advantageous to have him remain on the staff. If he was deprived as organist and choirmaster, that leaves admiration for his composition and singing as the extraordinarily compelling reason for his retention. The final charge was presented in 1619, at which date he was clearly thought to be of musical value in either or both of these categories. Weelkes died in 1623. It is therefore difficult to assume that he "declined into sottish unruliness, living out the final twenty-two years of his life."⁵³

Second, the charges against Weelkes are couched in particularly emotional terms; they are so subjective in their descriptions as to already contain the judgment. We are left in no doubt as to how Lawes feels about it all. "Common," "notorious," "fearful," "much to be lamented." "most dreadfully," "profane," "most fearful to hear," "to the great amazement of the people," "rather worse than better"; the phrase "common drunkard" occurs in both charges, despite the three-year gap between them. The nervous excitement underlying these charges hints more at Lawes's own indignation and frustration than total depravity on Weelkes's part. Moreover, Lawes's approach

⁵² Brown, p. 44. CDRO, Ep. 1/20/10.

⁵³ Philipps, p. 47.

strongly suggests a personal tension between the two men. There are aspects of Lawes's duties as succentor at Chichester which would account for such a strained relationship with Weelkes.

Lawes alone was responsible for the choice of music. On January 20, 1597, the chapter directed him "to appoint what songs shall be sung daily."⁵⁴ He also controlled the condition of the music itself, and what works were to be kept current.⁵⁵ That the organist and choirmaster should be excluded from these responsibilities may well have been far too restrictive for the creative Weelkes, and subsequent ill feeling with Lawes would inevitably develop.

Lawes was in charge of choral discipline. He had been appointed "to keep a book of perditions for those absent from service without leave, the perditions to be greater for absence on Sabbath and holy days."⁵⁶ Later he was ordered to "bring in perditions himself when at home and to produce another Vicar to do so in his absence." As well as handing out these reprimands, he was directed to "order the choir and reform disorders, if in the choristers by correcting them, if in any other by complaining to the Dean or President."⁵⁷ These responsibilities placed him in an extremely difficult position with at least one of his colleagues, and very likely with many more as well. Lawes reported John Meade as being absent from choir 183 times between Michaelmas and Christmas, 1618, and 141 times from Christmas to March 24, 1619.⁵⁸ As a result, Meade was deprived of his bread ration. Meade's opinion of Lawes is unequivocal:

That forenoon, Meade's bread having been stopped, Dr. Buckenham went to the "Binn" to distribute; Meade resisted him, entered the room by the window, and took the bread by force, saying that he and his company [meaning the Dean and Chapter] had no right to meddle, that he would maintain his right against them even if forsaken by the other Vicars, and that if Mr. Lawes, the ordinary distributor, was there he would have the bread out of his guts.⁵⁹

Meade clearly felt nothing less than a deep loathing for Lawes, even apart from his position as distributor, for Dr. Buckenham, the distributor for the day in question, was the recipient of no special ani-

⁵⁴ "The Acts of the Dean and Chapter . . .," Section 954, p. 146.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, Section 1128, p. 208.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, Section 954, p. 146.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, Section 1128, p. 208.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, Section 1150, p. 220.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

mosity. Meade's attitude indicates that Lawes's long-standing position as watchdog and informant had not made him the most popular member of the group. Mounting pressure to tighten discipline by increasing perditions would not have improved matters. In such an atmosphere of distrust, personal antagonisms would be certain to flourish, and the spiteful enthusiasm of Lawes's charges bears all the signs of long-term incompatibility. Here are two widely disparate personalities that were bound to clash — the one a solid, pedestrian disciplinarian, the other an unorthodox, imaginative maverick. These are all factors of distinct possibility that would have affected the relationship between the two men to such an extent that Lawes significantly exaggerated his reports.

It can therefore be demonstrated that the documentary evidence hitherto employed to catalogue Weelkes's trail of disorder and disgrace is capable of other interpretations. The extent to which these other interpretations are feasible varies considerably. Yet in all cases these alternatives fall well within the bounds of historical possibility and therefore serve to bewilder current assumptions with reasonable doubt. It becomes abundantly clear that it is not possible to bundle Weelkes up into the watertight category of a progressively declining wastrel and drunkard. Hitherto, such a simplistic biographical interpretation has generally prevailed, and it is perhaps now time for a more cautious approach.