

gender representation, legal history, and seventeenth-century theatre. A focus on evidence foregrounds the resemblances between the formal structures; however, her argument, she says, is for “salutary caution against an over-generalising model of the drama’s critique of law” (228). Mukherji succeeds by exposing the complex interaction between these two vital cultural forces.

Curtis Perry. *Literature and Favoritism in Early Modern England*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006. ix + 328 pp. \$90.00. Review by JEROME S. DEES, KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY.

Curtis Perry’s study of court favoritism in the period between the mid 1580’s and the outbreak of the English Civil War is arranged into seven chapters and an “Afterward” that looks briefly (and revealingly) at Milton’s treatment of the subject in *Paradise Lost*. After the first, which introduces generally his aims, methods, and scope (while it would have been possible to write a history of early modern favoritism beginning with Wolsey and Cromwell,” he admits, “[t]his is not the book I have written” [20]), each succeeding chapter considers the subject from a specific angle (e.g., the assumed erotic relationship between monarch and favorite); in terms of recurrent tropes (e.g., the ubiquitous association of poison with the favorite); or in light of a specific work and its subsequent influence (e.g., *Leicester’s Commonwealth*). The two most substantial chapters examine the importance of King Edward II and of Roman history for a critical shift in the age’s “structures of feeling” about the constitutional implications of royal prerogative. He continuously refers to the five best-known favorites of the period, extensively to Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, Robert Carr, Duke of Somerset, and George Villiers, Duke of Buckingham, and more incidentally to Thomas Wentworth, Earl of Strafford and Walter Devereux, 2nd Earl of Essex.

Perry is above all committed to a principle of “continuity,” the recognition of which, he believes, is crucial for an adequate understanding of what favoritism may have meant at any given moment. He puts it most succinctly, perhaps, in the following: “. . . the discourse I am surveying here is a significant native tradition of semi-theoretical radical thought not because it provided anybody with a political program but because writers kept returning to the inherited language of corrupt favoritism to frame responses to new political

circumstances” (12). His firm adherence to the principle leads to some of his most convincing insights and allows him to articulate with some precision how one writer may be both like and unlike his predecessor, as in the following: “Instead of showing the mechanisms of control [as Jonson does], Massinger dramatizes their effect upon public discourse” (256). I quote this because it illustrates not just Perry’s insistence on continuity but also his commitment to the notion that what is most important is to get beyond a concern with or focus on individual personalities to the level of cultural discourse and its “cultural work.”

Arguably, Perry’s key word in all of this is “tension.” In each chapter, he is concerned to elucidate how a fundamental tension between two competing political theories plays out in the various discourses of the period. On the one hand is the broadly Aristotelian ideal of “balanced constitution,” in which the monarch’s rule is abetted by the counsel of noble peers, under the guidance of common law; and on the other is the practice of personal rule in which the prerogative of the monarch is absolute, his will analogous to God’s. The “profound ambivalence” produced by this incompatibility, as shown in the speeches and writings of a wide array of politicians, pamphleteers, compilers of manuscript anthologies, poets, and (especially) playwrights, some of them well-known, others barely recognizable names, constitutes Perry’s subject. But there is another “tension” at work in his book, that between his aim on the one hand of making each chapter “stand on its own” and, on the other, of producing “a deeply interwoven account of a literature whose various strands are meaningfully intercomplicated” (21). This tension produces not ambivalence but an amount of repetition that anyone reading straight through (say, a reviewer) may find himself so disgruntled as to become inattentive and lose the import of what he is being shown. This is unfortunate, because Perry’s is a significant intervention in the multiple political discourses that dominate the period leading up to the Civil War.

Although there are several kinds of repetition—e.g., a habit of explaining quotations that need no explanation—two in particular tend to weaken the overall effectiveness of Perry’s argument. Typically, a detailed reading of a work expands outward to encompass its deeper implications within its cultural moment. The following examples are typical. Speaking of the anonymous plays *A Knack to Know a Knave* and *Charlemagne* Perry claims that the “characteristic mixture of critique and avoidance gives expression to a real

cultural ambivalence about the politics of personal intimacy” (154). Commenting generally on the Edward II story, he finds that it “invokes a profound ambivalence about the nature of personal monarchy . . .” (186). Or again, generalizing from his reading of Marlowe’s *Edward II*, “. . . the balance built into the . . . story between blame for the king’s tyrannous passions and blame for the peers’ rebelliousness actually mirrors a deeper cultural ambivalence about the nature of personal monarchy and the nature, respectively, of tyranny and treason” (201). Regarding the two states of Francis Hubert’s verse history of *The Life and Death of Edward the Second*, his conclusion is that “both texts are profoundly ambivalent about the radical questions about personal rule and prerogative . . .” (211). One effect of such repetition, in almost identical language, is to flatten out real distinctions and make quite different kinds of works seem curiously alike.

Another kind of repetition may make it seem that Perry is indulging in circular reasoning. The following example is not unique. “In other words, the account of James constructed by writers like [Anthony] Weldon and [Arthur] Wilson resemble Jonson’s depiction of Tiberius and Sejanus because they all share the same classical sources. This kind of specific causality is worth revisiting in detail because it can help us understand the way received habits of thought fed into and shaped the ‘epistemic limits’ governing later Jacobean conflicts as well” (249-50). Doesn’t this say, in effect, that because we understand how Roman history is being used we can come to understand how Roman history is used?

Despite these quibbles, there is real significance in Perry’s work. Perhaps most far-reaching is his engagement with current historical debates about the rise of Republican thought in the period before the Civil War. His careful and nuanced analyses of a large number of plays during the 1620’s, -30’s, and -40’s make a convincing case that, “while it is appropriate to see our playwrights’ conversation as *part* of the gradual development of oppositional republican *habits of thought*” (275; my italics), in no case does he find any strong evidence of “the more broadly egalitarian ideas that have come to be associated with the word” (279). In every instance, although his analyses make explicit the various ways that the playwright is digging vigorously in the seedbed of republicanism, his basic conclusion is that, to quote his formulation concerning Thomas May’s *Julia Agrippina*, “the play’s political morality . . . is conventional enough and does not seem to me to be inconsistent with the ideals of

the balanced constitution" (263). An important element in his engagement is the leverage provided by the New Historicist model of subversion and containment. Although his quarrel with its basic premise—that radical possibilities may be deployed in literature because that makes them “safe” and thus easily diffused—is not paraded prominently, it is a current running throughout, leading to his resounding final rhetorical question: “. . . given the fact of civil war, how can one say that the subversive perspectives made available within the discourses of favoritism were—ultimately—contained?” (285).

What underlies the forcefulness—and I think success—of this essentially historical intervention is Perry’s training as a literary scholar. For that is what allows him to trace more clearly, perhaps, than most professional historians the linguistic indirections whereby important directions may be found out. It helps him, for example, to keep his critical eye trained on the deep structure of the “cultural paranoia” regarding the royal favorite—i.e., the fact that both the idea of a monarch who can remain “above” the merely personal and the idea of an all-powerful favorite are equally “ideological fantasies,” one the inverse of the other (8-9). Such perceptions guide his readings of individual works, whether literary or not. And it is this same training, I think, that permits him to argue, convincingly, that, while the royal favorite may be “an imaginative construct,” the anxiety that it produces is real indeed, with real consequences.

To make this argument, Perry marshals an impressive quantity of research—the sheer number of little-known or little-examined primary works is just shy of intimidating, as is also his familiarity with the secondary scholarship, both historical and literary. His research is matched, I believe, by the acuteness of his detailed analyses of individual plays, poems, and such non-fictional works as Parliamentary speeches, political pamphlets, and histories. As might be expected, the wide cast of his net brings in a large number of big fish, for many of whom he provides lengthy and cogent commentary: e.g., Sidney’s *New Arcadia*, Marlowe’s *Edward II*, Jonson’s *Sejanus*, Massinger’s *Queen of Corinth*, Elizabeth Cary’s *History of the Life, Reign, and Death of Edward II*, among other well-known works. But of more lasting value, I think, will be his having put into critical play a host of smaller fry: anonymous works like *A Knack to Know a Knave* (late-Elizabethan), *Charlemagne* (1610-22), *The Tragedy of Nero* (1624), and *The True Chronicle History of . . . Thomas Lord Cromwell* (1600); such understudied or—appreciated plays as Massinger’s *Duke of Milan* (1623) and *The*

*Roman Actor* (1626); a substantial number of political pamphlets, such as George Eglisam's *The Forerunner of Revenge* (1626) or Marchmont Needham's *The Second Part of Crafty Crumwell* (1648); and verse histories, such as Francis Hubert's, cited above.

Perry's insightful readings are aided not just by his familiarity with a mountain of recent historical and literary scholarship, but also by the degree to which he is conversant with a range of critical methodologies and theories: in addition to the New Historicism, he calls in aid Jurgen Habermas's notions regarding the "public sphere" and Raymond Williams' theories of residual, dominant, and emergent social formations and of structures of feeling. However, probably most important for his purposes are recent developments in "sodomies" and in conceptualizations of a "bodily politics." Both of these inform his rich examination of "erotic favoritism" and of the staying power of the Edward II story. Recent advances in our understanding of sodomy as a complex and contradictory discursive category inform his ability to show how erotic favoritism offers the age an "alternative" to the longstanding habit of "blaming evil counselors for misgovernment while exonerating their royal patrons" simply by reassigning "the favorite's power to the erotic incontinence of the monarch" (135-36). This reattribution enables the hitherto "impossible" idea that whatever rottenness may be in the state emanates from the monarch himself, thus making it possible to think of a different form of government. As I indicated, no one writing about the evils of favoritism unequivocally took that next step, though, as Perry shows, several came close. One factor contributing to this state of affairs may be laid at Marlowe's door—although Perry himself does not say so. In a fine reading of Mortimer's soliloquy at 5.4.46-55, he makes clear that the political drive in Marlowe's play has been to a complete impasse, in which "both royal will and subject's opposition tend ultimately toward the chaos of passion" (201). Marlowe, as early as the 1590's saw no way out. As Perry is careful to say repeatedly, he is not claiming that the discourse of favoritism caused the Civil War, but he makes abundantly clear its unquestionable importance in the formation of the set of discursive conditions that made it possible.