

Anne James. *Poets, Players, and Preachers: Remembering the Gunpowder Plot in Seventeenth-Century England*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016. 412 pp. with 8 illus. \$85. Review by BRENT NELSON, UNIVERSITY OF SASKATCHEWAN.

The story of the Gunpowder Plot and its importance and remarkable endurance in the English calendar are well known. Less well known, it turns out, is the remarkable cultural industry it spawned in the political manipulations and negotiations of the long seventeenth century. Anne James's magnificent study tells the story of the complex interplay between government attempts to maintain an official version of these events in the public memory and the inevitably divergent interpretations, both official and non-official, literary and non-literary, that sprung up around the Plot's anniversary remembrances. James's main contribution to scholarship on the Gunpowder Plot is her focus on genre—specifically, how this contested event led to generic adaptation and modification—with a secondary interest in audience and reception, specifically, how these representations enabled audiences to engage in the interpretation and meaning-making opportunities of these annual commemorations. Thus, a third interest is to see these forms of cultural engagement as eruptions of a nascent public sphere (building on the work of Rebecca Lemon and others), where interest and engagement by the public in political events is assumed, but where representation of these events often escapes official control by the state, leading to generic adjustment and modification and opportunities for various public voices to present differing versions of these events and their meaning for the English nation.

After laying a clear roadmap for her study in an introductory chapter, James establishes historical context in chapter two, outlining the way in which King James developed a culture of commemoration to disseminate a providential view of England's Protestant history and identity. This history begins with Queen Elizabeth and her government's use of printed material, alongside other public channels (chiefly the pulpit), to contain and control public knowledge and opinion on key moments of national deliverance in forging a national memory through occasional acts of thanksgiving. North of the border, in response to a threat of his own in the Gowrie conspiracy, King James

of Scotland adopted and adapted this tradition, adding the crucial element of annual celebration. In merging and consolidating these traditions in the Gunpowder Plot anniversary within the national calendar and collective consciousness, James saw opportunity to memorialize the founding of a new national identity in a unified England and Scotland. Attempts to shape public memory through sermons, liturgies, and official printed accounts, however, were from the start undermined by competing voices in print and pulpit that engaged and involved the public in remembering and interpreting political events. While King James was able to knit these English and Scottish traditions in the annual Gunpowder Plot remembrances, he and his successors were not so able to maintain an official narrative or control the form and tack these remembrances would take.

Chapter three demonstrates King James's failure to control the narrative of events with an examination of how the theatre evoked, alluded to, and invited reinterpretation of the Plot and its aftermath (in particular the spectacle of the plotters' trials) and raised questions about the motives of the conspirators and the response of the King and his advisors. This chapter looks at how the trials and official representations of them were shaped by dramatic convention (particularly tragedy), and in turn, how the stage itself adopted and adapted its own theatrical conventions to interrogate that official narrative. James examines three plays written and performed within a year of the Plot—John Day's *The Isle of Gulls*, Ben Jonson's *Volpone*, and Thomas Dekker's *Whore of Babylon*—and how they responded to the Plot and to each other, the first two adopting a satiric mode to echo suspicions of Cecil's motives and handling of the Plot, and the latter resurrecting Elizabethan allegory to question James' role and efficacy in managing the Catholic threat. Critique of this failure to contain the threat posed by the conspirators is the central theme in the author's extended analysis of Jonson's *Catiline, his Conspiracy*. In Sylla's ghost, which opens the play, Jonson adapts the conventional ghost of Elizabethan theater as an elusive specter of ambition-fueled rebellion and destruction whose threat is expressed in *Catiline*, an infection that cannot be contained or managed by the ruling authorities and institutions, whose own rhetoric and posturing raise complicating questions of motive and ambition. Jonson also brings back into the public memory the role

of women, elided in the official narrative of the Plot, who are recast in *Catiline's* context as recusants working behind the scenes to enable the conspirators, raising again the suggestion that religion served as a support for the plotters' ambition. The chapter ends by briefly tracing the resurgence of Jonson's play later in the seventeenth century and various adaptations of Jonson's ghost of rebellion into non-dramatic forms, from an unpublished epic by Thomas Campion to anonymous satire in the 1680s.

Chapters three and four focus on Virgilian epic and King James's project of a new Protestant Britain comprised of a unified England and Scotland founded in a historic moment of providential deliverance and sustained through the king's self-styled paternal care. Those seeking patronage at court in the early aftermath of the Plot recognized and responded to the king's agenda in kind with Latin epics circulated in manuscript; but again, these authors exploited the epic tradition to both praise and offer critique and advice, urging vigilance in the face of continuing threat from the Catholic other. This chapter takes us into relatively unfamiliar territory, with works by lesser known authors like Michael Wallace, William Gager, and Francis Herring, as well as Phineas Fletcher and Thomas Campion. More strident Protestant voices take over as epic narrative moves from manuscript into print and from Latin into English. Particularly interesting in this context is the curious case of Herring's 1609 sequel treating the Midlands rebellion, which signals a turn to a more militant form of protest epic as it becomes oriented toward a broader general public. This history provides context for an extended reading of Milton's *In Quintum Novembris* (the last extant Latin epic), where Milton expresses doubt about the ability of the monarch to preserve the Protestant nation, concerns that are completed in John Vickers's "dilations" of Herring's poem, which "completes the genre's transformation from court panegyric into godly propaganda" (25). This backdrop sets the stage for Milton's re-envisioning of a Christian heroism located not in the state or its institutions, but in the individual, leading to a much enriched reading of Milton's use of gunpowder in the war in heaven.

The final chapter returns to one of the state's official channels of commemoration to re-examine the founding of a new genre, the anniversary sermon, which became not only an opportunity for the

ruler to reestablish authority, but also a platform for the preacher to provide counsel to power and to negotiate the role of church and state in the face of threats from Catholicism and then Puritanism. Again, the author's interest is the development of genre in relation to official versions of events. This is perhaps the most vivid example of how King James's success in establishing an enduring tradition of official memorialization yielded unintended consequences. After a brief introduction to the establishment of the anniversary sermon and some of the factors involved in interpreting sermon literature, James focuses on four sermons as examples of how preachers adapted the form to address their particular circumstances and, in particular, how they related the Plot to their audiences. John Donne's 1622 anniversary sermon, intended for Paul's Cross and delivered in the shadow of King James's *Directions for Preacher*, sought to maintain obedience to the king in avoiding blatant anti-Catholicism while structuring key points of the sermon in such a way as to open up opportunity for his congregation to interpret events for themselves. Reading practices and interpretation become explicit points of controversy in the Laudian establishment's attack on Henry Burton for his series of controversial Plot sermons in 1636, where the preacher employed critical close-reading of recent revisions to the Plot liturgies to call into question Laud's Protestant commitment. Seth Ward, preaching to Charles II in 1661, viewed his court congregation quite differently than either Donne or Burton, "seeing them not as competent interpreters, but as potential subversives needing to be coerced into submission" (239).

Poets, Players, and Preachers is an ambitious book, as rewarding as it is challenging, covering a wide range of genres stretching across a hundred years of history and drawing on a wide range of scholarship and theory. In covering such vast territory, James wisely chooses to focus on a few illustrative (rather than entirely representative) samples contextualized by historical surveys of their respective generic fields. In some of the more unfamiliar terrain (the Latin epic chapters, for example), I found myself wishing for a bit more context, but the author makes excellent use of chapter introductions and conclusions to recap and continually reorient the reader.