

Annabel Patterson. *The Long Parliament of Charles II*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008. vii + 283 pp. \$45.00. Review by RICHARD C. TAYLOR, EAST CAROLINA UNIVERSITY.

On one level, this audacious, frustrating, and deeply entertaining work by the distinguished historian Annabel Patterson focuses on the Byzantine political maneuverings of the “Long Parliament” that served at the pleasure—and perhaps more often at the displeasure—of Charles II from 1661 to 1679. She follows her slyly titled *Nobody’s Perfect: A New Big Interpretation of History* (2002) with another book that is unabashedly hostile towards monarchy (Charles is a “deceitful crook” [52]) and delightfully dismissive of the rules and conventions of historiography. Placing herself in the company of Steven Pincus and Tim Harris, she frames her work in an ideological “extreme” bold enough to ask, “Do ‘we’ believe that the Restoration was desirable, or simply the only possible outcome after the collapse of the Protectorate, and hence a necessary evil?” (6-7)

She acknowledges but resists the attraction of chronological narrative: for those needing chronology, she begins her second chapter by laying out the highlights of the struggle between Charles and his Parliament in a timeline extending a dozen pages or so. After that, the reader is asked to follow her analytical gaze as it shuttles frenetically back and forth across two decades. For those familiar with the major events and controversies of the period, such an approach is highly refreshing. This strategy comes at a price, though. Readers puzzled by her early references to the assault on Sir John Coventry’s nose are forced to be patient. Those unfamiliar with the Shirley/Fagg affair will have to turn outside the text for assistance, and those not well read in the literature of the Popish Plot will likely be turned away. Early in her discussion of sources, she mentions Grey’s *Debates*, an account of the publication of which she delays until the end of the book, where she misdates a proposal to publish the debates in the *Gentleman’s Magazine* as 1645, rather than 1745 (245). It is a minor error in an exciting and valuable book, but it highlights the risks involved in resisting chronological narrative.

She chides those of her colleagues who present copious concatenations of sources without engaging those sources with the sort of

rhetorical skill and sensitivity she can bring to her more selective list of historical witnesses. With the skill of a literary critic—and with a pardonable hubris—she “hears” her sources, including the speeches of Charles to the extent they have been accurately reconstructed, with a subtlety and care missing in those historians more concerned with the number of their historical witnesses than with their lucidity. She complains that the standard histories create “a large cocktail party. No sooner have these witnesses been introduced than we forget their names” (8).

What she prefers is a careful analysis of a handful of often contradictory sources, towards a kind of “group psychology.” In spite of the impressive assembly and variety of sources, prominent among them the accounts of Andrew Marvell, it is the King’s speeches to Parliament that wind up most compelling the reader’s attention. Patterson identifies in him a “psychostrategical attitude towards parliament” that runs counter to the received opinion of Charles as a hedonist lacking in political savvy. (68 and *passim*) The rhetorical machinations involved in his constant requests for Parliamentary “supply”—and the “jealousies” or hostile rumors to which the King responded and used for psychological leverage—suggest one answer to the question of this Parliament’s longevity (68). For the better part of two decades, the King believed himself largely in control of this group, or at least more likely to have his way with this group than some newly elected one.

Patterson’s metacritical focus on sources reminds readers not only that the “witnesses” vary widely in their accounts but also that virtually all of them are elicited or illegal. At a time when newspapers were in their infancy, scribal publications, personal correspondence, diarists and memoirists, and the editors of “scofflaw pamphlets” provide such “facts” as are extant concerning Parliamentary business. Assuming the often scurrilous and contradictory nature of these sources, the historian relies on a careful analysis of voice, the subtleties of rhetoric on which revisionist conclusions might be drawn. A prime example is the aforementioned nose of Sir John Coventry. In a debate over taxing the playhouses to raise revenue, Sir John, according to several sources, made an inappropriate crack about the King’s enjoyment of the theatre. All of the subsequent accounts of the “Nose Bill,” and the responses to the ensuing physical attack on the Coventry proboscis,

are subject to multiple interpretation, depending on the historian's sensitivity to the multiple "voices" doing the witnessing.

This technique is best displayed in analyses of the King's speeches. She fixes on his repetition of the word *jealousies*, which Patterson defines as "hostile rumors." Because the King's speeches were much more likely to be disseminated than other Parliamentary records, the effect of his broadcasting annoying rumors—about his financial malfeasance, for example—had the effect of substantiating and prolonging them. She notes throughout what she identifies as a defensive tone in the royal addresses. She also claims, "Charles was not only disingenuous in his speeches. He was capable of telling outright lies" (82). Apparently, discerning listeners or readers might identify those points at which the King seemed most vehement in his denials as a kind of lie detection system.

A final example of Patterson's narrative disruption will serve to illustrate both the uniqueness of its structure and the challenge it presents to readers. After repeated cursory allusions to Edward Hyde, Earl of Clarendon throughout the early part of the narrative, this figure who loomed so prominently in the early years of the Restoration is re-introduced in Chapter Four, an account of the various memoirists on whom the author relies. Again, the chapters weave back and forth from direct analysis of the events impinging on the business of the Long Parliament to metacritical consideration of historiography. Indeed, the book concludes with a chapter set a century later: an account of the historicizing of this period that occurred in the later eighteenth century. It is a pleasant surprise, in this context, to be introduced to James Ralph, a remarkable figure prominent in a wide variety of mid-eighteenth-century histories, as himself one of the early creators of Parliamentary history.

For those not using this book as a historical reference—its organization deliberately resists access as an introduction to Restoration politics—the book serves as a quirky and stylish account of the Carolean period—a designation Patterson would surely reject—whether one views these decades as a period of heroic resistance to royal tyranny or as an endlessly complex multi-plot drama featuring schemers trying to achieve political advantage on their own terms.