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0521574064 - The Making of Jacobean Culture: James I and the Renegotiation of Elizabethan Literary Practice

Curtis Perry

Excerpt

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Introduction

Queen Elizabeth ruled in England for more than four decades. When she died in 1603, she left behind her a rich system of conventional behaviors and ideologies, many of which had been naturalized during the course of her long reign. Her successor, James I (James VI of Scotland), inherited subjects accustomed to Elizabethan practices and ideas. As with any new king, his performance was carefully scrutinized, and he brought with him a particularly well-articulated public style, made concrete in his published poetry, treatises on kingship, and other public volumes.¹ His works sold briskly in England, to subjects curious about their new king as well as to courtiers and would-be courtiers anxious to know how to tailor their addresses to him.

It is a critical commonplace to note marked differences between the cultural artifacts surrounding Queen Elizabeth I and those produced under her successor. Recent critics, eager to relocate Elizabethan and Jacobean literature in its social and political contexts, have clarified these differences, and traced them to the contrasting styles and ideologies of the two monarchs and their courts.² After all, the contrasts between the two monarchs are particularly sharp. The transition from Elizabeth to James was also the transition from a woman ruler to a man, from a Tudor to a Stuart, from a charismatic performer to a more aloof public personality, from a revered national heroine to a foreigner, and so on.

What remains less clear, even on the heels of a decade of powerful and persuasive historicist criticism, is the process by which a transition like the one from Elizabethan culture to the recognizably Jacobean takes place. For the circulation of the king's public image was at every point mediated by its intersection with the expectations and habits naturalized under Elizabeth, and these in turn brought with them assumptions about courtly performance, literary decorum, and the behavior of kings. The dissemination of James's influence on English

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culture during the early years of his reign necessarily involved a series of negotiations – conscious or otherwise – between Elizabethan expectation and Jacobean reality.

This study examines the role of these negotiations in the formation of a recognizably Jacobean culture, paying careful attention to ways in which various writers reshaped, reused, and rejected old ideas and conventions in response to the influence of the new king and his government. Since these negotiations are always mediated by more localized, idiosyncratic factors – specific authorial agendas, different milieux, or the formal demands of various literary genres – the book is organized as a series of case-studies designed to highlight and isolate specific strands within the larger transition from the Elizabethan to the Jacobean. Cumulatively, they are designed to provide an overview of the contingencies and mechanisms by which such change takes place, of the kinds of influence a king or queen has on a country's literary production, and of the limitations of totalizing models of culture.

These studies focus generally on the first decade of James's reign in England, though many of the paradigms I set up here have extended repercussions, and although to some degree the material in each chapter has dictated the time frame discussed. This is because a number of events crucial to English perceptions of James and the monarchy coalesce around 1612–14, with the result that attitudes toward James and the crown become increasingly rigid after this first decade. First, the death of James's eldest son, Henry, Prince of Wales, in November 1612 deprived England of its fondest hopes. Henry, in his brief life, had been widely idealized. The prospect of his eventual succession promised – to those unhappy with James's policies and behavior – to restore England to its destiny as Protestantism's international champion. Strong opposition to James's government, which had been kept uneasily in check by the hope of better things to come, was released with Henry's death.

Second, 1614 saw a marked downturn in James's ability to deal with parliament: he convened and then dissolved the so-called “addled parliament” within a few months, failing to obtain the desired financial help. And then, in an effort to generate new revenue, James's endorsed the so-called Cockayne project, which aimed to increase profits (and thus revenue to the crown) from English cloth by establishing a native dyeing industry and forbidding the export of undyed cloth. The wealthy London alderman William Cockayne was given sole control over the trade, but without adequate financial backing he was simply unable to

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buy the volume of cloth coming to London from the countryside. The plan collapsed within two years, but by then damage had been done both to the cloth trade and to the relationship between the crown and England's most important industry. The resulting constriction of the cloth trade helped put an end to a decade of mercantile expansion.³

Finally, 1613 saw the divorce of Lady Frances Howard from her husband, the Earl of Essex, and Lady Frances's hasty remarriage to James's favorite, Robert Carr, Earl of Somerset. The divorce itself was a scandal, as was James's encouragement of the marriage. In 1615, lurid revelations about the poisoning of Sir Thomas Overbury – a follower of Somerset opposed to the marriage – capped a distasteful series of events which generally damaged the reputation of James's court. The favorite Somerset and his new wife were tried for the murder and convicted, though James stepped in to commute the death sentence. The enormous attention focused on the scandal from start to finish helped make the corruption of the court notorious. Generally speaking, these events contributed to a change in English attitudes towards James, as responses to him and his court became more clearly polarized.

Focusing my study in this way has placed it at the intersection of a number of the crucial methodological issues which have surfaced along with recent interest in historicism. Many of these, in turn, hinge on the influence in Renaissance studies of a Foucauldian notion of power as being “everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere.”⁴ As Jeffrey Weeks explains it, this means that power, for Foucault, “is not something that can be held or transmitted, it is not the possession of one class (or of one gender) over another, it is not embodied in the state or any single institution.”⁵ Rather, it inheres in what Foucault calls “the fundamental codes of a culture,” the discursive systems which govern language, “schemas of perception,” values, and “the hierarchy of . . . practices.”⁶

More importantly, this notion of power has only a tangential relation to the coercive and persuasive powers of government, though these latter are certainly among the formations determined within a culture's “fundamental codes”:

relations of power, and hence the analysis that must be made of them, necessarily extend beyond the limits of the State. In two senses: first of all because the State, for all the omnipotence of its apparatuses, is far from being able to occupy the whole field of actual power relations, and further because the State can only operate on the basis of other, already existing power relations.

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The State is superstructural in relation to a whole series of power networks that invest the body, sexuality, the family, kinship, knowledge, technology and so forth.⁷

A king speaks and acts from a position of unique privilege, but for Foucault that privilege is itself constructed by and within these networks of power.

Within Foucault's model of discursive networks, "power and knowledge directly imply one another . . . there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations."⁸ This important observation – that power relations involve the creation of fields and subjects of knowledge – has authorized much of the most exciting work done by the so-called new historicism, encouraging critics to unearth analogies between seemingly disparate discursive fields (governmental, sexual, legal, psychological, literary), and to see these analogies as the skeletons of Foucauldian networks. Foucault, however, is always evasive about the relationship between power / knowledge and more conventional notions of social domination. To a considerable degree, this is the result of his understanding of power as "both intentional and nonsubjective" – calculated but not the result of any individual's strategic decisions – a description bound to baffle any old-fashioned discussion of the give-and-take of government.⁹ Critics attempting to use Foucauldian methods while retaining an interest in the state have frequently had difficulty with the relationship as well.

The most important example for me here – both because it pioneered the use of Foucault in Renaissance studies and because it is still the most influential contemporary study of Jacobean literature – is Jonathan Goldberg's *James I and the Politics of Literature*. When Goldberg discusses King James's "means to articulate power" he combines the political centrality which comes with being a king with the systemic discursive power subtending all manner of relations and practices in Foucault's analyses.¹⁰ The result of this conflation is a King James whose royal articulations, rather than being seen as superstructural to power networks, are instead taken to be fundamentally constitutive of them. Small wonder then that in Goldberg's book "the world of absolutism begins to seem disquietingly analogous to the universe of discourse."¹¹ Authorized by this slippage within the concept of power, Goldberg's landmark study describes paradigmatic strategies and contradictions in the articulations of Jacobean power, and then attempts to

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trace reproductions of these strategies and contradictions through a wide range of artistic production. Since the reach of James's power is taken to be coterminous with the field of discourse, these juxtapositions can proceed without respect for the conventional organizing categories of genre, medium, or historical narrative, a freedom which in fact gives Goldberg's work its considerable clarity of focus.

The Foucauldian model of culture, as used by Goldberg and others, occludes crucial historiographical and sociological questions. And since the present study attempts to give a very different model of cultural production and transmission, it seems worth taking up these questions here in some detail. As a starting-point, I have found E. P. Thompson's remarks about "The Poverty of Theory" to be as relevant to Foucauldian cultural analysis as they were to the Althusserian structuralism which they were intended to counteract. For the Foucauldian notion of power as "intentional and nonsubjective" also offers us what Thompson has called a "pseudo-choice: either we must say that there are no rules but only a swarm of 'individuals', or we must say that the rules *game* the players."¹² And this in turn means that a social science based on Foucault's discursive networks can have "no category (or way of handling) 'Experience,'" and consequently "no adequate categories to explain . . . change."¹³

Foucault's own work, as Hayden White points out, avoids this problem by eschewing narrative line altogether and representing historical change as a series of abrupt, inexplicable, catastrophic shifts.¹⁴ By the same token, Goldberg's study of Jacobean art focuses on relations of similitude within a synchronic cultural moment rather than on diachronically conceived historical developments. That is to say, his study treats James's long reign as a more or less homogeneous cultural moment.

This historiographical move characterizes many of the familiar new historicist essays. Louis Adrian Montrose describes it as a basic tenet of new historicist methodology, arguing that its project is to revise traditional literary history by reorienting "the axis of inter-textuality, substituting for the diachronic text of an autonomous literary history the synchronic text of a cultural system."¹⁵ Enabled by the Foucauldian model of culture traduced by networks of power / knowledge, the critics Montrose describes have traced compelling and unexpected connections within a "cultural system" that includes literature. A major cost of this reorientation, however, has been the substitution of analogy and similitude for cause and effect as the structuring principle

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of argument. The result, it seems to me, is a body of scholarship which has generally been reluctant to describe either the material transmissions and causalities involved in its similitudes, or historical significance of the sort distributed and argued for in old historical narratives.

I see this book as part of an ongoing movement in Renaissance studies towards the reconsolidation of the considerable advances of new historicism with old historical narratives of individual agency (Thompson's "experience"), and cause and effect. This trend follows naturally on the heels of early new historicist polemics, and in some cases has even been the work of the same critics.¹⁶ In keeping with this program, there has been a renewed emphasis in a great many recent studies on the material circulation of texts, on the specific strategies used by different writers, and on the causal significance of the social work done by literature, either as propaganda or by contributing to cultural ideals, stereotypes, and fantasies. All of these emphases serve to move the study of culture away from the impersonal Foucauldian notion of "intentional and nonsubjective" structures, and to put historicist literary criticism back into dialogue with traditional historical narrative.

Turning from the historiographical to the sociological implications of the Foucauldian model of culture, we find a closely related series of problems: we might call them the problems of top-down analysis. Here too *James I and the Politics of Literature* is representative, for critics of Goldberg's book have argued that its analysis of royal discursive power implies a reductive model of culture, focusing narrowly on "a dominant social order that reproduces itself by producing and containing its own controlled subversion."¹⁷ This understanding of the functioning of the dominant culture elides any useful understanding of individual agency and intention, explaining literary production as a function of the discursive matrices put into play by the social elite or the king himself.¹⁸ One deficit of this often reproduced model of cultural production is that it has difficulty allowing for the possibility of genuine opposition to the dominant social order.¹⁹

In place of Goldberg's functionally absolute king, this study offers a version of James caught up within structures of discourse, ideology, and sentimental association over which he often had little control, structures which in turn influenced the dissemination and reception of his words in his new realm. Though James was a centrally important figure in the period that bears his name, his influence on literature and culture was manifold, mediated in practice by a wide variety of local

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agendas and contingencies: he was a figure to be commented on, flattered, ignored, copied, feared, courted, revered, advised, and mocked.

In fact, he was even a figure to be spoken for, ventriloquized, manipulated: it has been recognized that some of James's early initiatives were shaped and guided by Cecil, Henry Howard, and their followers.²⁰ More strikingly, R. C. Munden has suggested that the speech delivered by James to the House of Commons following the dispute over the election of Sir Francis Goodwin in 1604 was written for him to serve the interests of Cecil and Lord Chief Justice Popham. This, Munden argues, has been the cause of some misunderstanding since the speech is written in the style of James: "On the face of it, the main body of the speech might have been written for [James's] critics. It is pompous, didactic, and even contains the customary biblical allusion."²¹ Elsewhere, the same speech has been described as "the king at his worst."²² This ventriloquization, using the king's voice against his own better interests, seems strikingly emblematic of a point I want to insist on: James did not have – could not have had – full control over the received meanings of his own public image.

These chapters, insofar as they are attentive to such mediating acts of circulation, offer an approach to royal influence which recognizes and describes the king's centrality without relying on a reductive model of his relation to his various subjects. Literary studies which take the influence of monarchs into account often oversimplify the relationship between royal orthodoxies and the expression of subjects, either by overemphasizing the monarch's interest in intervention or by overstating his or her power of imposition. As to the latter, it is important to remember that many writers imagined audiences for their writings (various patrons, theatre audiences, coteries, book-buyers, and so on) whose interests were different than the crown's. As to the former, Leeds Barroll has recently overturned generations of topical readings of Shakespeare's Jacobean plays by arguing persuasively that James himself probably did not care much about the contents of Shakespearean drama.²³ His argument could be extended as a challenge to political readings of a range of non-Shakespearean literary production as well.

In order to allow for the variety of kinds of circulation and dissonance found everywhere in cultural production, critics have increasingly turned toward different models of social interaction based on ideas of negotiation.²⁴ This has been a keyword in Renaissance studies at least since the publication of Stephen Greenblatt's *Shakespearean Negotiations* in 1988.²⁵ For Greenblatt, negotiation names the range of

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exchanges (of money and of cultural capital), appropriations, exclusions, and influences which make up the cultural field within which both subjects and their artifacts are constituted. The advantage of using negotiation as a model for these interactions is that it presumes some agency (however attenuated by Greenblatt's poststructuralist critique of individualism) for all parties involved – instead of only for the dominant culture or the king – and consequently allows Greenblatt's analyses to move beyond the totalizing impulses of a subversion-containment model of social interactions. Subsequent critics have recognized the usefulness of this model, but have attempted to revise it, to politicize it, to make it less abstract. Ann Rosalind Jones, for example, argues that a model of cultural interaction based on negotiation, rather than emphasizing impersonal circulation, should be “the basis for an analysis of deliberate strategies that human agents direct against repressive cultural systems.”²⁶

I want to retain both senses of the word here, for it has become clear that the processes which made England Jacobean are themselves made up of a variety of kinds of response, both deliberately strategic and otherwise. Indeed, one of the goals of this project has been to describe how these two kinds of negotiation – individually strategic and impersonally cultural – interact with each other. For this book attempts throughout to locate the individual representational choices of canonical and non-canonical writers with a wide variety of backgrounds, interests, and agendas within and against larger cultural paradigms and trajectories.

The six chapters that follow are divided into three pairs, each of which isolates a different approach to the problem of England's negotiated response to James. The first pair examines ways that James's public pronouncements and literary performances influenced literary genres and fashions, as cues taken from the king himself interfered with Elizabethan assumptions about the function and purpose of various genres and modes of address. These studies presuppose a court culture in which writers negotiate self-conscious solutions to representational problems and cues, taking into account notions of decorum, a sense of what is current, and the extant resources of genre and mode in order to create literary artifacts responsive to James's ideas, interests, and public style. At the same time, these productions have an influence on literary fashions which extends well beyond those texts produced specifically for James or for his important courtiers, which means that sophisticated literary responses to court decorum must be seen as part

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of a larger process of cultural negotiation in which less self-consciously courtly – and occasionally even subversive – texts also participate.

The first chapter takes as its subject the phenomenon of the poet-king. Within the patronage system, many characteristic gestures of poetic self-presentation are directed at and formed in relation to the authority of their potential patron. Supplication and apology, to give two examples, are conventional gestures of the occasional courtly poet which formally encode the poet's offer of service to his patron-reader. James's volumes of poetry, because they consciously follow conventions of poetic self-presentation, reproduce these gestures of service despite the fact that they are at best paradoxical and at worst indecorous in a king. At the same time, James's poems encode their author's power in a variety of ways, with the result that his poems fit only uneasily within conventional lyric forms: James tries to establish a parallel between poet and king, but the performative norms of the two roles interfere with each other. The poet-king is forced to invoke his privileged royal insight in order to avoid the disempowered stances built into poetic performance.

If James found the poet's stances difficult to reconcile with his authority, occasional poets in England found the figure of the poet-king equally difficult to address. The poet under the poet-king was in danger of seeming either redundant (Drayton writes: "thine owne glory from thy selfe doth spring") or presumptuous (by aligning oneself with the king's voice).²⁷ The many panegyrics written to celebrate James's accession generate a variety of strategic responses to this difficulty. Moreover, I argue that this problem of royal address influences epideictic style even in occasional verse not directed to the king. Sophisticated, courtly verse addressed to a variety of early Jacobean subjects by Donne and Jonson demonstrates their mastery of court fashion by reflecting the epideictic maneuvers developed to praise the king. Put briefly, Donne obsessively interrogates the coupling of subservience and authority in the person of the poet, while Jonson's occasional lyrics repeatedly ask "What need hast thou of me? or of my *Muse*?"²⁸

The second chapter looks at early Jacobean pastoral literature, with an eye towards broader questions of generic continuity. Because pastoral was a specially privileged mode for Elizabethan courtly expression, its formal conventions were shaped by demonstrably Elizabethan exigencies. Early Jacobean writers, responding both to the mode's residual prestige and to Jacobean courtly fashions, produced texts characterized by gaps and equivocations which mark subtle incompatibilities between received generic conventions and Jacobean innovation.

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These discontinuities, in turn, illuminate differences between Elizabethan and Jacobean court ideologies: more specifically, I argue that these local generic disjunctions reflect differing formulations – within the genre – of the subject’s position in relation to larger communities and authorities. Exemplary here are Drayton’s 1606 revision of his *Idea, The Shepherdes Garland* (1593), Daniel’s *Queenes Arcadia* (1605), and Fletcher’s *The Faithful Shepherdess* (1609), as well as a number of less familiar texts by a variety of early Jacobean writers.

The second pair of chapters shifts my focus from questions of generic renegotiation to the ways that early Jacobean drama staged and commented on key issues of the new reign. Though scrutinized by the censor, plays produced for public performance are on the whole less closely tied to interests of king and court, since “the better playwrights had just enough economic independence to earn a living without regard to the whims or special tastes of anyone beyond their immediate audience.”²⁹ Of course, even if comparatively free from the strictures and rewards of courtly literature, many early Jacobean plays are nevertheless powerfully motivated by their observation of and interest in issues of public government. Here I have found useful David Bevington’s discussion of topical meaning in Tudor drama, and in particular his observation that political drama often handles “ideas and platforms rather than personalities.”³⁰ Though early Jacobean drama has its share of *roman à clef*, its most interesting responses to James lie in its stagings of the crux issues of Jacobean kingship.

The exploration of the ideals of kingship undertaken in these plays has been seen as a contribution to the development of radical thought in England.³¹ But to see early Jacobean political drama in this way is to assimilate it to a familiar literary history in which its radicalism is seen as an early indicator of political trouble to come. Raymond Williams, for example, writes that

the Jacobean [dramatic] form enacted the condition of the ‘war of all against all’ which, in the next generation, was to be taken by Hobbes as the starting point for a new political philosophy which ‘answered’ the dramatically unanswered questions, in its justification of an absolute safeguarding power.³²

If these plays participate in the larger intellectual and ideological trajectories, however, the political situations dramatized by early Jacobean playwrights are informed by observations of, speculations about, and relations to the specific, concrete governmental practices of their day. Their interest in the state, in other words, is not necessarily animated either by general radicalism or by dislike for the monarch.