INTRODUCTION

Jacobean press censorship and the "unsatisfying impasse" in the historiography of Stuart England

Accounts of press censorship in Jacobean England generally participate in the larger narratives of early Stuart political culture that engage the question of the English state's liberalization in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, an area of study that Kevin Sharpe reminds us has produced some of the best historical scholarship and attracted the lively interest even of general readers.[1] The place of the English revolution of the 1640s has dominated this historiography of the seventeenth century. Since the nineteenth century, Whig historians have viewed England's history as a teleological progression toward a system of parliamentary government interested in defending the values of Enlightenment liberalism. To justify the rupture with hereditary monarchical rule, this historical perspective necessitates if not the outright vilification of monarchy at least the condemnation of the Stuart version of absolutist rule as something foreign to England. Seen through the lens of Whig historiography, principally the work of Christopher Hill and Frederick Siebert, early modern press censorship functioned as a tool of royal repression, and the English Revolution with its collapse of press controls was the inevitable conclusion of a repressive system that placed constraints upon free expression.[2] According to Siebert, Jacobean government regulated the principal avenues of communication by perpetuating the repressive mechanisms of control laid out by Elizabeth: the Crown issued patents, the Stationers' Company controlled all printing, and the Church dictated what could or could not be printed through pre-print authorization and used the High Commission to enforce its will – all of which Hill simply refers to as "the censorship."[3] While Siebert acknowledges strains and stresses within this system as the early Stuart monarchs encountered opposition to their religious and political policies, he still maintains that the government employed repressive measures when it failed to

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convince by exhortation and argument. Implicit in Siebert's account is the assumption that censorship routed out oppositional discourse. As Hill puts it, "Its object was to prevent the circulation of dangerous ideas among the masses of the population."[4] But what kinds of ideas were dangerous? From the perspectives of both Hill and Siebert, such ideas appear to have been just about anything that did not conform to orthodox religion and absolute monarchy. Neither James I nor Charles I tolerated the theories and doctrines of either Romanism or Calvinism or the opinions of parliament or the common-law lawyers that the King was anything less than the embodiment of all authority – political and religious – to which all his domains were subject.

Beginning in the 1970s, a group of historians who have come to be known as "revisionists" mounted a challenge to the Whig historio-graphic hegemony in seventeenth-century studies. Their work, which depends on archival manuscript materials rather than printed parliamentary debates and collections, redirected discussion of early Stuart political culture from earlier interest in oppositional crisis to the court and to the person of the monarch.[5] One significant aspect of this work is its attention to distinctive monarchical styles. Not only may the court and politics of James I be divorced from those of his successor but the character of Charles I's personal rule need not be seen as the inevitable consequence of Jacobean political ideology. From this perspective, consensus replaces conflict as the working political model at court. One consequence of the shift in historio-graphic interest has been that the clearly intentioned and efficient picture of Stuart censorship promulgated by Hill and Siebert has become subject to reconsideration. Richard Dutton's *Mastering the Revels* revisits dramatic censorship and establishes that not only was the Master of the Revels as interested in the revenues the office garnered from theatrical licensing as he was in imposing state controls, but that the standards for public drama corresponded to those that dictated expression at court.[6] The recent work of Sheila Lambert and Mark Bland, while not so comprehensive as Dutton's study of the drama, has chipped away goodly parts of the edifice Siebert and Hill constructed. Lambert argues that documents custo-marily viewed as important evidence that the government sought to control the press by regulating the Stationers' Company actually represented government concessions to the Stationers in support of their monopoly.[7] Looking more generally at Stuart censorship,

Lambert concedes that the governments of James and Charles "did have a concept of censorship and a means of exercising it, and that the machinery did what it was expected to do," but she maintains that "what it was not expected to do was to suppress all expression of opposition to the Crown."[8] According to Lambert, censorship served the government's principal concerns of maintaining the integrity of its foreign policy, preserving public order, and protecting the monarch from libel.[9] Authority for censorship, according to Lambert, resided in the Bishop of London and the Archbishop of Canterbury, who oversaw ecclesiastical authorization, and, after 1611, in the High Commission.[10] By examining the practice of this authority, Mark Bland argues that censorship was largely ineffectual because Archbishops John Whitgift, Richard Bancroft, and George Abbot effected "sophisticated compromises when politically sensitive issues were involved," exposing "the controlling authority of those who would license books as not simply a product of the power vested in them but, more disturbingly, as an illusion."[11]

The revisionist emphasis on political consensus in Jacobean and Caroline politics has itself provoked a sharp response among a younger generation of scholars, especially those who insist on the ideological nature of seventeenth-century English politics. According to Sharpe,

Acknowledging and accepting the revisionists' critique of teleology, and imitating their methods – the close study of specific historical moments – the anti- or post-revisionists (the latter is a better term) rejected the revisionists' picture of contending factions in a world of shared values and urged a more nuanced address to conflict – religious and political – and to the relationships of conflicts of values to civil war and revolution.[12]

The "post-revisionists" who have taken the greatest interest in censorship are Thomas Cogswell and Anthony Milton. Cogswell's *The Blessed Revolution* constructs an argument on the oppositional political climate Jacobean policy created at the outbreak of the Thirty Years' War from evidence of censorship, while Milton's work tracks the interests and practices of Laud's ecclesiastical censors and their Jacobean precursors.[13] Although Cogswell provides the kind of "nuanced address" to the relationship between religious and political values that Sharpe applauds, his understanding of censorship practices differs little from Hill's. Milton's work, which specifically rebuts Sheila Lambert's diminution of Laud's interest in censorship, appropriately restores religious ideology to the discourse of the Revolution

but in doing so unfortunately relegates any discussion of press control to the narrative of the English Revolution, slighting the distinctive character of Jacobean censorship.

That so many historians have engaged with questions of censorship in Stuart England may suggest that yet another study of Stuart censorship is unwarranted. My review of existing work should indicate, however, that historians' interest in censorship has been somewhat limited. In essence it has pursued answers to three kinds of questions: what its mechanisms were (Siebert, Lambert, Bland, and Milton); whether or not it was repressive (Hill, Siebert, Lambert, Milton); how it related to Stuart ideology and from it to the Revolution (Hill, Lambert, Cogswell, and Milton). While these studies have shown a marked interest in political culture as an extension of either the institution of monarchy or the person of the monarch, none sufficiently distinguishes one Stuart from another. Furthermore, ever since William Prynne's 1646 account of Archbishop William Laud's trial, *Canterburies Doome*, identified the repressiveness of Stuart monarchy with Laudian censorship, "Stuart" has been indistinguishable from Laudian censorship. A study of Jacobean press censorship is thus still warranted. Granted, both Sheila Lambert and Mark Bland have done some very important work in this area, and have established the degree to which censorship was a local practice shaped by compromises made either to the Stationers' Company or by individual archbishops; but by looking only at a restricted number of instances, they leave their readers unsure of the kinds of recurring patterns that mark and alter wider censorship practices over time. A place still remains for a "post-revisionist" study of Jacobean censorship, one that looks to Anthony Milton's method – his reliance upon manuscripts *and* printed books from the period, his attention to practice, his careful historicization of the local event and of the event within the wider political culture – but on a fuller scale.

To proceed in another purely historical study of press censorship, however, if we are to believe Kevin Sharpe, will be insufficient to fully overcome the "unsatisfying impasse" to which traditional, revisionist, and post-revisionist debates about seventeenth-century political culture have led. According to Sharpe, the choice required between two historical readings – between conflict and consensus – is a false one in a complex political culture: "It may be that the traditional unspoken historical approach does not easily accommo-

date the fluidity of meanings possible and/or 'intended' in the documents on which historians rely."[14] While Sharpe certainly esteems (and practices) the historian's attention to documentary evidence and the "close situating and historicizing of texts and events," he maintains that "interdisciplinary and critical approaches are essential to understanding a Renaissance culture in which epistemology, interpretation, the exegesis of meaning had not fragmented into discrete disciplinary practices."[15] Sharpe believes that postmodern semiotic, philosophical, and literary theory may enable scholars and historians of early modern England to "reimagine a Renaissance culture that did not share the positivism or 'the organicist ideology of modernism'."[16] Postmodern theory, as Sharpe understands it, has demonstrated the degree to which the discourses, texts, and performances which a culture produces are the means by which it constructs meaning and the only "reality" that can be known by humans. Since these constructions are themselves the subject of historical inquiry, Sharpe believes that historians can benefit by recognizing the degree to which any "event" or "document" is itself a construct rather than a transparent "truth":

> A greater willingness by historians . . . to see systems of authority and order as culturally constructed rather than, as it were, outside culture would surely facilitate a more nuanced history of the performance of power: how the relations between sovereigns and subjects functioned and shifted in the early modern state. Once we take on board something of the argument that authority and meaning are constituted through language and texts, we are led to consider authority itself as more indeterminate, more open to multiple meanings and interpretations than our traditional concept of the sovereign utterance (commanding, as well as issued by one in command) usually implies.[17]

Sharpe does not intend to suggest here that there has been no interdisciplinary work in seventeenth-century studies, but rather that historians might benefit by expanding their sources of evidence to include cultural practice and by engaging in a more nuanced reading of these texts – much in the way that literary critics identified as New Historicists have. Sharpe applauds New Historicist interest in removing arbitrary categories of writing – fictive, literature, and history – and in recognizing literature as a cultural text that, like other cultural productions, encodes "the structures of meaning, and especially the arrangements of power, in the society and state that produced them."[18] Sharpe envisions an alliance between the

methods of revisionist historians – "the close situating and histor-
icizing of texts and events" – and the interests of New Historicists in
reading cultural productions as a means to raising important ques-
tions as yet unasked about a society that was itself grounded in the
performativity of language – a society "in which all who were
educated were trained in oratory, rhetoric, translation, language; in
which writers and readers of literature (a literature which included
what we would separate as philosophy, history and fiction) were
sensitive to the genre, form and materiality of their texts."[19]

Sharpe's desiderata hold particular relevance for a study of
Jacobean press censorship. As already shown, historical studies of
press censorship in the seventeenth century have inevitably engaged
in the wider historiographic narratives of conflict and consensus,
confining any understanding of censorship practices to a bipolar
model in which the king censors and the subject either resists or
complies. Historians have relied principally upon documents of
control – statutes, proclamations, Star Chamber decrees, Stationers'
Company orders, publication records – as evidence for censorship
without fully considering the documents themselves as rhetorical
productions with multivalent meanings. Literary scholars have re-
cognized censorship as a cultural phenomenon but have insuffi-
ciently historicized its practice. In this regard, Annabel Patterson's
Censorship and Interpretation has proved enormously influential. Patter-
son's "hermeneutics of censorship" has taught a generation of
readers of early modern literature how to "read between the lines,"
that is how to discern the complex construction of textual meaning
in a culture where agents of the monarch monitored what could be
said or read.[20] While I concur with Sharpe that Patterson ranks
among the best of the literary scholars engaging in historicist studies
– those whose work is "well researched in contemporary records and
historiography" – *Censorship and Interpretation* defers to the work of Hill
and Siebert for its understanding of censorship practice in early
modern England and in doing so perpetuates without question an
outmoded historical model of unified and repressive state censorship.
Patterson's legacy has been both negative and positive. Unfortu-
nately, because *Censorship and Interpretation* was insufficiently histor-
icized, it has perpetuated among literary scholars the image of Stuart
political culture as authoritarian and abusive. On the other hand,
her work has been influential in establishing the degree to which
reading and writing in early modern England were intimately bound

up in and inseparable from political culture. To understand press censorship in Jacobean England is to view it and the documents evidencing its practice as cultural constructs that require nuanced reading in a culture where politics mattered deeply.

In *Reading Revolutions* Sharpe calls for a historiographical approach that "reads" culture and text with the nuances of literary studies and attends to historical evidence – documents both in manuscript and print – closely situating and historicizing their texts and events. I do not wish to be so presumptuous as to say this study fulfills Sharpe's agenda, but it has proceeded from a similar concern about documents and texts. Constructing histories of press censorship only from documents of control has inevitably distorted our understanding of censorship. To study only documents of control, especially with a purely transparent reading of their intention and meaning, ignores the question of practice – whether the regulation was implemented, whether or not it met with compliance, whether compliance was temporary or sustained. This says nothing about the document itself – when it was produced in relationship to the publication of an offending text or texts, what other concerns besides the text itself may have led to its production, who wrote it, what rhetorical devices it employed, what audience it sought, how it was read and received. From the perspective of the "record" of censorship alone, this study seeks to establish how censorship in Jacobean England was intended to work and how those intentions were both implemented and received. Chapter 1 establishes the conceptual framework of censorship in Jacobean England from the perspective of the documents of control – royal patents, proclamations, court decrees – and seeks to elucidate through closely historicizing individual acts of control how the practice of censorship proceeded in relation to these controls. It discovers the degree to which cultural contingencies shaped the practice of press censorship even when abstract sets of fixed principles existed.

The documents of control, even when "read between the lines," tell only part of the story of press censorship. Press censorship is more than the political practice it is usually seen to be. Because it involved the printed text, it necessarily participated in a cultural phenomenon that in early modern England was transformative. Elizabeth Eisenstein's *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformations in Early Modern Europe*[21] established that the mere fact of the existence of printing altered cultural

practice. While this is not the place for a summary of the impact of
printing on early modern English culture, it is sufficient to remember
that, when James came to the throne, the Book of Common Prayer
and English editions of the Bible had transformed English religion;
literary epics like Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene* and chronicle
histories like Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland* had
helped construct an English national identity; and Crown and
subjects alike employed printed propaganda to popularize their
religious and political agendas – all at a time when the Stationers'
Company's royal charter was less than fifty years old!

The full implications of the ways in which printing transformed
English culture are beginning to receive the attention they deserve.
Eisenstein's contention that printing sustained its extraordinary
cultural impact because of its authority and durability has elicited
considerable scholarly response, most of which has been theoretically
innovative and imaginative. While I do not propose to offer a
sustained critique of theories of textual authority and their relation
to authorship and kingship, it is useful to recognize two dominant
strains in studies of textual authority. One group of theorists
associates the rise of authoritarian cultural practices – monarchy and
patriarchy – with the emergence of printing.[22] Others, some of
whom are historians, have addressed printing's role in transforming
subject positions. Following the work of Michel Foucault and Jacques
Lacan, who identify the notion of the emergence in the seventeenth
century of the autonomous self as a repositioning of the historical
construction of the subject position, printing is seen as an agent of
transformation that enables alternative forms of agency. Language in
general, and printed language in particular, plays a fundamental role
in reconstituting the self and the subject, giving rise (in England, at
least) to alternative narratives of authority – science, the "public,"
the author.[23]

The historical assumptions underpinning studies of the relation-
ship of print to authority in early modern England are persistently
Whiggish, however. Despite the apparent differences among these
studies, they persistently return to the idea that print was the means
by which Tudor and Stuart authoritarianism fashioned and sustained
itself until alternative agencies discovered the mediating aspects of
print culture – authorship, allusion, subversion, and contestation –
adopted them, and undermined royal authority. Censorship occupies
an essential subtext of this narrative. According to Foucault, "Texts,

books, and discourses really began to have authors . . . to the extent
that authors became subject to punishment, that is, to the extent that
discourses could be transgressive."[24] Authorship – what Foucault
refers to as the "privileged moment of individuation"[25] – thus
becomes a transgressive act defined by its subjectivity to external
authority. From the perspective of seventeenth-century British histor-
iography, absolute authority is overthrown not once but twice (in
1642 and again in 1694), each time that parliament suspended
licensing (the Crown's tool of press control). The ultimate victory
here went to the individual author, who, with the 1709 Copyright
Act, received full rights in the product of his labor.[26] That Douglas A.
Brooks can observe that in the seventeenth century the authority of
the monarch's position in England moves on an inverse trajectory of
the author's is no accident of history, but is, instead, a consequence
of the hegemony the printed word achieved through the course of
the 1600s.[27]

Despite the considerable subtlety both literary theorists and
revisionist and post-revisionist historians have brought to the study
of seventeenth-century political culture, studies of the relations
between systems of government, models of subjectivity, and modes of
textual production retain a persistent polarity in their cultural
analyses. These analyses perpetuate a model of authoritarian poli-
tical culture organized on the binary of control and subversion even
though a generation of scholars has effectively demonstrated the
degree to which royal authority is a textually constituted fiction open
to interpretation, imitation, and appropriation. That so many
theoretical constructions of the interrelationship of print to power
have begun with the figure of James I is not surprising – James,
perhaps more than any other monarch, figured his political ideology
in print, especially notable in the 1617 publication of his *Workes*
(dated 1616).[28] What is remarkable is that James's political writings
have not received the kind of critical attention that, for example,
Stephen Orgel has given to court masques – that is, as a kind of
performance engaged in constructing the fiction of royal authority.
Instead, they are generally viewed as a transparent expression of
James's ideology of kingship, open perhaps to some interpretation,
but ultimately non-negotiable. To properly theorize (and historicize)
the relationship between modes of authority, subjectivity, and print
in Jacobean England requires moving beyond the sustaining binary –
which in historiographic studies of the period has produced the

conflict/consensus stalemate – to a close reading of multiple dis-
courses in which authority, subjectivity, and printing participated.

Turning to one of the central tropes by which historians and
literary scholars alike have understood Jacobean culture – the
patriarchal model of kingship – illustrates the multiple negotiations
between competing authorities that arise in a culture married to
print. This model, of course, has been central both to theories of
print culture interested in the relationship between printing, auth-
ority, and gender, and to historical narratives concerned with
Jacobean political ideology. The text to which scholars repeatedly
return is *The Trew Law of Free Monarchies*, written before James
assumed the English throne. The first edition of *The Trew Law of Free
Monarchies* was published in 1598 by Robert Waldegrave, the King's
Printer, and although it appeared anonymously, it was widely known
to have been written by the King.[29] Although the patriarchal model
of royal authority recurs throughout his political writings, it is in
Trew Law that James most succinctly articulated "the stile of Pater
Patriae," which describes the King's relation to his subjects as that of

a loving Father, and careful watchman, caring for them more then for
himselfe, knowing himselfe to be ordained for them, and they not for him;
and therefore countable to that great God, who placed him as his lieutenant
over them, upon the perill of his soule to procure the weale of both soules
and bodies, as farre as in him lieth, of all them that are committed to his
charge.[30]

While James readily admits that this is a common trope, a complex
series of historical negotiations engages with James's choice to
construct an ideology of monarchy based upon it, to express that
ideology in print, and to return repeatedly to this trope; none of
which sustains the kind of transparent reading of James's patriarchal
absolutism that it so often receives.

First of all, as J. P. Sommerville points out, James's political
ideology was constructed in response to his own education and to
conditions that he faced as King of Scotland. James's tutor, George
Buchanan, spoke strongly against royal absolutism, and, like John
Knox, subscribed to the idea that people may openly resist a ruler
who does not promote the true religion. James's own childhood and
early rule in Scotland saw repeated struggles with the Presbyterian
leaders like Andrew Melville, who maintained that the Church held
moral and religious authority over him. Furthermore, on the Con-
tinent similar arguments for the rights of subjects to resist "heretical"