The Problems of Treason and Tyranny: The Effect of the Gunpowder Plot On Artistic Expression

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THE PROBLEMS OF TREASON AND TYRANNY: THE EFFECT OF THE GUNPOWDER PLOT ON ARTISTIC EXPRESSION

Jessica Spevak

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On November 6th, 1605, Robert Cecil, one of King James’ closest advisors, sent a letter to Sir Thomas Edmonds detailing the previous’ nights discovery of “[a] most cruel and detestable practize against the person of his Matie that ever was conceaved by the hart of man”. As Cecil wrote on, he asserted that the plot to kill the King and most of Parliament with gunpowder in the basement of the building was intended to destroy not only the King and his followers but also was intended to decimate the entirety of England. Plots had been conceived before to be sure, however, none had come quite so close to succeeding as had this one on the fifth of November.2

In the subsequent months following the Gunpowder Plot discovery, James issued a series of proclamations designed to exemplify the strength of his office in tracking down, apprehending, and executing those involved in (what became) a massive conspiracy of the “Roman religion” to assassinate the leader of an emerging empire.3 These proclamations ensured the citizens’ awareness of the malevolence of the plotters, and also ensured that the execution of the Plotters would keep the peace in the realm. Guy Fawkes, Henry Garnet, Robert Catesby, and twenty two other men were convicted and punished by January of

2 Interestingly, James’ father had died in a similar plot in 1567, which made it especially odd that James didn’t take the first threats of the plot seriously. For more information, see Jenny Wormald, “Gunpowder, Treason, and Scots,” Journal of British Studies, 24 no. 2 (April 1985): 141-168.
In the time between November 1605 and January 1606, James made it clear through the punishments of the chief plotters (Fawkes, Catesby, and John and Thomas Wintour) that he demanded uniform approbation upon the punishment of execution; only when neighbor was no longer pitted against neighbor and nobleman united with nobleman would the treason finally be avenged and the symbolic walls of monarchical authority be cemented into place once again (for a photocopy of one of these proclamations, see Appendix Image 1).

But how firm were these cemented walls of monarchical authority, particularly outside the realm of the Crown and the King’s loyal nobility? Were the common people—those not associated with the Crown in any way but by being subjects—as willing to band together with the goal of apprehending the Conspirators as James claimed in his proclamations? How can we investigate, examine, and deconstruct the mindsets of those living in the aftermath of the Plot?

The answers to these questions come in the form of authors of the time—not those directly affiliated with the King, but those who were preaching sermons and writing plays—and artists—those who were painting, carving, and printing—all of whom were not members of the kings nobility yet nevertheless had enough literary or artistic nuance to make a document multidimensional as to hold appeal for the reader or writer. It is clear that James’ symbolic power was strengthened after the punishment of the twenty two

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4 Each conspirator was tried quite differently depending on their original stature and their degree of involvement. The main conspirators all were executed or shot on site, their bodies lost or drawn and quartered for the public to observe. However, some of the lesser victims, such as lord Monteagle who received a letter notifying him of the Plotter’s attempt to blow up Parliament—which he gave to the King, thereby leading to the discovery of the Plot—were imprisoned for a brief period of time under comfortable conditions and then let go with merely a small fine to fill the King’s coffers.
Gunpowder traitors, however, what is often overlooked in studies of this infamous Gunpowder Plot is the complicated nature of James’ supposedly uniform affirmation that the Gunpowder Plot was conceived by “infernal ones with daemoniacke hart”. This omission is understandable, it is much easier to examine how the nobility acted than how the commoners simply because we in the present day have so much more documentation from the nobility than the common people. Often, records from those unaffiliated with the crown were shoddy, factually inaccurate, or simply nonexistent. The language is also more nuanced and developed in the Crown’s documents than in anything the laity could produce, and is therefore more interesting to both write about and read.

Despite the interpretive challenges of primary source texts from this time period, scholars in the last twenty years have begun to examine post-Gunpowder Plot documents from those unassociated with the Crown and have provided a solution to the problem of having only the King’s propaganda which told them that the conspirators were from hell and the Crown was acting as God’s agent to vanquish them back from whence they came. Scholars such as John N. Wall and Terry Bunce Burgin have emphasized that there is a deficit in Gunpowder Plot scholarship, one that is beginning to be filled by studying “English preachers [poets, and artists]...and their imagery, tone, and authorial stance” because they offer an opportunity to get a complete and accurate picture of what really happened in the Gunpowder Plot, not just what the Crown’s propaganda suggests about the whole nation unifying against the Catholic religion.  

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6 John Wall and Terry Bunce Burgin, “This Sermon...Upon the Gunpowder Day: The Book of Homilies of 1547 and Donne’s Sermon in Commemoration of Guy Fawkes Day, 1622,” The South Atlantic Review, 49 no. 2 (May 1984), 12.
Wall and Burgin, along with noting that there exists an avenue of Gunpowder Plot research that can be filled by studying the people’s artistic reaction to the Plot and its complication of the Crown’s claim that the whole country was unified against Catholicism, have also emphasized as well that “a history of the literary reaction to the Gunpowder Plot has yet to be written.”

In this brief paper, I consider myself absolutely unable to fill that requirement. To do so would require an entire monograph filled with extensive study of numerous preachers, poets, and artists, which would require more length than I am allotted here. However, in this short paper I do wish to begin explore the literary reaction to the Gunpowder in a brief way by examining three instances of artistic reaction to the Gunpowder Plot, both before and after James 1622 restriction on preaching and artistic license; I explore these in order to provide to the reader a more clear picture of what actually occurred in the aftermath of the Plot.

One example of the effect of the Gunpowder Plot on artistic expression can be found in by Claes Nicholaes Visscher, a broadsheet propagated after the 1622 restriction which seems to both defy and support the crown’s show of strength during the punishments of the traitors. The second is John Donne’s “Sermon Upon the Gunpowder Day” given on the thirtieth anniversary of the Plot. The third is Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, a text which has generated countless articles and monographs, and has even inspired a play about its political implications.

Written during the discovery of the Plot and before the literary restrictions of 1622, *Macbeth* gives us a unique insight into the complications of treason.

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7 Ibid.
8 This required approval of all documents that would be preached, as to curb anyone preaching against the King and for the Catholic religion.
9 For more information on Macbeth scholarship, all of which have influenced my writing of the brief section on Macbeth, see Rebecca Lemon, “Scaffolds of Treason in Macbeth”, *Theater Journal*, 54 no. 1 (March 2002), 25-43.
and the doubt that existed of the crowns’ ability to stabilize the national consciousness. There are three mediums of artistic expression, each very different in the limits attached to the genre and the freedoms given to it, however, each form of artistic expression deals similarly with the idea of national consciousness. In this paper, I will examine two ways in which the theatrical show of power put on by the Crown is critiqued. Firstly, in “The Death of the Gunpowder Conspirators” I will demonstrate that Visscher is commenting on James’ broader vision of national identity. Secondly, I will prove that both Donne’s “Sermon Upon the Gunpowder Day” Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* and are examining the formula by which James constructs national identity in the wake of the Gunpowder Plot; Donne critiques this formula generally, while Shakespeare focuses on one aspect of the formula. These two types of critiques—that of critiquing the James’ ascension to the “sole locus of arbital power” and the formula by which James’ ascends to power—demonstrate that the concept of English nationalism following the Gunpowder Plot was one rife with complications, confusion, and chaos.

Despite the fact that scholars have not devoted great deals of time to discussing the complications inherent in James’ ascension to unifier of English national identity, there have been many who have devoted monographs, articles, and essays to the study of James as a unifying monarch and the political symbolism of James’ proclamations between November of 1605 and January of 1606. Many have also devoted their academic life’s work to noting how the symbolic punishment commissioned by the crown after the punishment of a traitor in other periods of English history was way to both represent and restore the stability of a monarch. J.A. Sharpe, who in many ways initiated a new twentieth century academic focus focusing on criminal law and how it came to be known more during the
Tudor and Stuart periods as the King’s law. Sharpe noted the “passage from private warfare [that is, the feudalism to determine who would rule that had dominated more than three hundred years previous] to gradual acceptance of king’s justice as the sole locus of arbital power which deliver his subjects”\textsuperscript{10}; in other words, Sharpe noted that during Tudor and Stuart periods there was a recognition that the Crown was in power and that it was wholly responsible for punishing and protecting the kingdom from treason and the overthrow of the commonwealth\textsuperscript{11}.

Malcom Gaskill, in his \textit{Crime and Mentalities in Early Modern England}, concurred with Sharpe’s assessment of the growing role of the Crown in preventing the overthrow of the commonwealth, but also examined the Crown’s growing role in other aspects of English life through the development of a network of “multi-dimensional power relations”\textsuperscript{12} which cemented the king’s authority through those in local communities advocating the king’s loyalty and punishment of anyone who went against the king’s law.

Into the twenty first century post Gaskill and Sharpe, scholars such as Vanessa MacMahon and her \textit{Murder in Early Modern England} have become the primary scholars of the study of treason during James’ reign and beyond. MacMahon—no doubt elaborating on arguments such as those made by Gaskill and Sharpe—noted the role of treason and murder as a way for a leader to exemplify his power through the punishment of the traitor;

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\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.
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\textsuperscript{12} Malcom Gaskill, “Reporting Murder: Fiction In the Archives In Early Modern England.” \textit{Social History} 23, no. 1. (Jan. 1998), 143.
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since murder (and treason) was “disruptive and wicked”\textsuperscript{13} it was necessary for it to be punished in order for the leader to maintain “the sense of law and order...[to prevent] the concept of a community [being] challenged by murder [and treason alike].”\textsuperscript{14} These scholars, though by no means all who have done work on the subject, are the best known, and their work remains useful for scholars and students such as myself alike in our quest to find an “Early Modern Mentality” in particular with regards to how people in the Early Modern Period (especially artists, poets, and preachers) responded to tragedy such as the assassination attempt on the King on November the fifth\textsuperscript{15}.

Although Sharpe, Gaskill, and MacMahon all provide compelling and detailed arguments for why the Crown’s power was strengthened and punishment legitimated in the Tudor and Stuart reigns, our picture of the Gunpowder Plot and its effect on artistic expression remains incomplete. We need the perspective of those such as Visscher, Shakespeare, and Donne in addition to that of the Kings propaganda that Sharpe, Gaskill, and MacMahon excel at in order to more fully understand the Gunpowder Plot and its consequences. How can we know the people of the time; not only just what the Crown wants us to think but what the people actually felt in their own words about the Gunpowder Plot and the punishment of the conspirators? How we know their emotions, feelings, thoughts, and knowledge about what actually happened that night of November


\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{15} Before I begin this paper, I would like to emphasize that I don’t believe that we will ever find a official “Early Modern Mentality” to assume that we could is both antiquated and false, one mindset for a historical period is impossible to assume. However, I do think that in studying more of those not officially affiliated with the king gives us the chance to better immerse ourselves in the society we are studying. The concept of “mentalities” is drawn from Malcom Gaskill and his “Crime and Mentalities in Early Modern England”, which I use just briefly to illustrate a point about where some scholarship falls short.
the fifth and what the Crown wants them to believe happened? Visscher, Shakespeare, and Donne, allow us—however brief—a window into the minds of the early seventeenth century.

**Recusary Fines and the Developing Plot: what Influenced the Gunpowder Conspiracy?**

We first see in historical events pre-Gunpowder Plot that James ascension to the “sole locus of arbital power” was not an easy one. There have been two main schools of thought as to what exactly led Catesby to devise the Gunpowder Plot, but despite these two scholarly opinions it is clear that there were forces of conflict at work long before Robert Catesby began to plot the assassination of James in 1604. Until the late twentieth century, the consensus was that the plotters were angry at James for reneging on his promise to be more friendly to English Catholics than his predecessor Elizabeth was during her reign. The increase of recusary fines in the later half of the sixteenth century—which made it a crime to support any religion other than the state’s, first punishable by fine and then by jail—and the invention of fines which prevented English from skipping state sponsored Mass, had made the relative ease of practicing private Catholicism (while claiming to be a Protestant in public) a thing of the past. By 1570 all English judges, lawyers, teachers, and other higher officer positions had to swear an oath of Supremacy to the Queen, and all Catholics (private or public) were considered rebels.

However, these laws which made Catholicism a treasonous religion were more symbolically relevant than literally enforced, and this is at the crux of why early twentieth century scholars believed that James was the cause of the Gunpowder Plot. After Elizabeth’s death and the end of the Spanish English war, James VI of Scotland—who,
Despite being Elizabeth’s named successor upon the event of her death, was not favored to take the Crown—began to drop hints to English Catholics that he would consider the possibility of conversion if the larger population would support his ascendance to the throne of England. This, combined with the Scotland queen reaching out to English Catholics, convinced the country to support James in his ascendance to the throne of England. Catholics were undoubtedly placated as well when they learned of a letter from the pope in 1602 that agreed to support the succession if James would raise his son Catholic.

Despite all of these measures used to convince English Catholics that James would be much more tolerant of them than any other monarch since the Reformation had begun, James, upon his ascendance in 1603 to the throne of England, immediately rejected the pope’s mandate and reemployed—and enforced liberally—any and all recusary fines that were against Catholics. According to these early twentieth century scholars such as A.H. Dodd, this is the reason that Catesby and the Wintours began sending Guy Fawkes over to Denmark and Spain to plead for Spanish support in the overthrow of James’ reign. Hopes of a future with Protestant-Catholic toleration or even Catholic acceptance over that of the established state-church had been dashed, and the Gunpowder Plot was a culmination of the dissenters frustration with a monarch who had deceived them and a wish to help Catholicism regain its respected position in English life.

This theory of jilted Catholics executing revenge on a deceitful king that has dominated pre-Plot scholarship for the past fifty-plus years proves problematic when you consider the numerous other Plots that were attempted before James’ retraction of religious liberty. If the Gunpowder Plot was a culmination of Catholic frustration with a
deceitful monarch, how can we explain the Essex rebellion set to depose Elizabeth or the Bye Plot which planned to kidnap James and force him to repeal anti-Catholic legislation (both of which happened before James had come out as vehemently anti-Catholic)? Scholars in the past thirty years, despite these problems which complicate the way the influences of the Gunpowder Plot can be viewed, have offered an alternative solution for why, exactly, the thirteen Gunpowder conspirators chose to act against James and the entirety of Parliament.

Jenny Wormald, in her “Gunpowder, Treason, and Scots” argues that James was not at all to blame for the Plotters; on the contrary, he “made himself accessible to the three major Catholic powers” The King, according to Wormald, purposefully weakened his position as a ruler in order to reconcile Catholics and Protestants. However, the plotters refused to compromise in any way with the monarchy, being “[un] prepared to…wait and see what benefits would follow or to wait in anticipation of his conversion.” The Plotters, according to recent scholarship, would accept nothing less than an overthrow of the current monarchy and the re-imposition of a Catholic King or Queen (using force if necessary). They had been plotting to overthrow the Protestant-leaning monarchy since the Essex rebellion three years earlier and the Gunpowder Plot was simply a way to accomplish those means; the fact that it came closer to succeeding than the others was a happy accident.

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16 Another problem with this theory is stated by Jenny Wormald in her “Gunpowder, Treason, and Scots”. Wormald notes that in many ways, 1603 was the best year that English Catholics would have until the late 1800s.
17 Wormald, 154.
18 Wormald, 153.
19 The Plotters, according to Wormald, favored Isabella of Spain. However, upon traveling to Spain and offering her the possibility of the Crown, she denied, not wishing to once again disrupt relations with the English after a long and costly war.
I have shown the theories that Dodd and Wormald advocate, very conflicting theories, to emphasize how complicated the concept of English nationality was before the Gunpowder Plot. There were still some private Catholics left in England, and there were more yet who believed that Protestant-Catholic toleration was something they had been living with already and to make it official would not have been terrible. There were those who supported James, and those who feared having too close ties to Scotland. Upon his ascension to the throne of England, James had complicated national identity further, by first offering Catholic-Protestant toleration and then going back on his promise and reinstating the recusary laws, forcing many Catholics to become “closeted” once again.

By 1604 a treaty had been signed with the Spanish which brought an end to English-Catholic hopes of a forcible change of religion. Priests had been exiled from England, and it was clear that if fringe Catholics wanted to change the religion, they were going to have to mastermind another plot (For a copy of Parliament as it might have looked in 1605 see Appendix, Image 2). Robert Catesby, twice mastermind of previously failed plots, had decided not long after “to blow up the Parliament house with Gunpowder, for sayd he, in that place have they done us all the mischief, and perchance God hath designed that place for their punishment.”

“Remember the Fifth of November”: The Monarchy’s Reaction to the Gunpowder Plot

The Gunpowder Plot was only discovered second time the King’s soldiers searched the basement of Parliament; when they had received information about Thomas Percy’s servant John Johnson—nee Guy Fawkes—acting suspiciously in the Parliament building. In actuality, if James had not learned that Johnson, Thomas Percy’s servant, was in actuality the Guido Fawkes of the Spanish army, Fawkes would have succeeded in his endeavor,
which makes the story of how the Plot was discovered all the more interesting. Upon first being brought the Monteagle letter from Monteagle himself on the night of November 5th ordering Monteagle away from Parliament due to his often Catholic sympathies, James did not take the threat as seriously as he perhaps should have. He ordered his soldiers to search the basement—they did, passing completely by “Jonson” the man-servant without so much as a second glance. James then himself led a second charge—after the discovery that Jonson was Fawkes-- into Parliament building with the express intent of finding and interrogating Fawkes. They did, catching him just hours before he was due to blow up Parliament completely (For a photocopy of the Monteagle letter by which the Gunpowder Plot was discovered, see Appendix Image 3).

The King’s last minute, rather haphazard discovery of the Plot would not be mirrored in the punishment of the conspirators. In addition to the Proclamations at Westminster Hall given by James in the months after the Plot, the crown put out mass-media propaganda in an effort to cement the Plotters as demons from Hell in the eyes of the common people and to mold the national response. We can divide these pieces of propaganda into three main categories: trial propaganda, poems, and broadsheets. Throughout their efforts, it is obvious that the Crown was acting on a desire to “unite royal and ecclesiastical power...[in order to] sanctify the state.”

The Crown attempted to “sanctify the state” firstly through the public criminal trial—in particular, the Trial of Guy Fawkes, from whom they received the most information about what the details of the failed Plot. In a trial such as this, firstly there would have to be an official legal document regarding the formulaic accusation of a

defendant. Then, the indictment was read in public—this included the statement that “Faux was styling himself prince of the damned crew, and ambassador fit for the message to be sent betwixt the pope and the devil.”\textsuperscript{21} and then the defendant was either jailed or bailed until the trial. The phrase “the damned crew” in particular in significant due to the fact that it equated him with disorder and with the devil, having the definition in this time of being “doomed to or undergoing eternal punishment; consigned to hell”\textsuperscript{22}. In opposition, therefore, James and Edward Coke, the royal prosecutor, could claim that they were acting against hell on behalf of heaven. It is the trial itself, the formal indictment was the step of the Early Modern criminal process which leant itself most perfectly to propaganda. Trials such as Fawkes’, trials where a treasonous act was involved, were more of a staged production than anything like the present day. Public involvement in trials was at an all time high, and popular distance from popular law was neither “desired nor achieved”\textsuperscript{23}.

This legal process which tended towards drama became the perfect stage for James’ royal prosecutor Edward Coke. Coke, despite being excessively loquacious, was an excellent orator and a first-rate lawyer, and despite the fact that only a judge could decide whether or not a criminal was to be executed, he nonetheless made an impassioned plea for execution of the “traitor” Guy Fawkes.\textsuperscript{24}

For first after a traitor had his just trial and his convicted, he shall have his judgment to be drawn to the place of execution from his prison and being not worthy anymore to


\textsuperscript{22} Oxford English Dictionary, “damned” accessed September 4 at 7:56 p.m. www.oed.com

\textsuperscript{23} Vaness MacMahon, \textit{Murder in Shakespeare’s England}.

\textsuperscript{24} According to Vanessa MacMahon, “the punishment itself was the sole responsibility of the judge”. If a murderer was to be convicted to hang—as would Fawkes—the judge would come out of his chambers wearing a black head-cloth, signifying that he had reached a verdict. For more information, see Vanessa MacMahon, \textit{Murder in Shakespeare’s England}.
tread upon the face of the earth wereof he was made; also for that he hath been retrograde
to nature, and whereas God had made the head of man the highest and most supreme part,
so Fawkes must be drawn with his head declining downward, and lying so near the ground
as may be, being though unfit to take benefit of common air...being hanged up by the neck
between heaven and earth, as deemed unworthy of both, or either.

We see Coke’s first biblical references in the speech in his specific use of the word
“judgment”. One of the ways that the word was used during Coke’s time was to mean “the
trial of moral beings by God” and was used in conjunction with the word phrase “judgment
day”. 25 Through the use of that word, for Coke to imply that Fawkes is being tried not only
by the English court but by the Godly court both excuses the crown’s actions and makes the
Crown acting in God’s best interest. In this brief speech, Coke is able to both punish Fawkes
and emphasize that the rest of England should be united against him with the Crown and
God in order to prevent “judgment” upon themselves.

Viewing Coke’s speech along with the other of the Crown’s propaganda exemplifies
through its language and through the spectacle that the trial itself tells us that it was just as
important for people to see the Fawkes as deserving of the punishment than for him to actually
receive it; naturally, therefore, a great oratory style such as the one Coke possessed was
necessary. In the reference to Fawkes as a traitor, Coke was invoking another Biblical allusions
besides the one in the word “judgment”. The word traitor as used in text in Cokes’ day was
associated with Judas Iscariot, the disciple from the bible who betrayed Jesus and led him to his
death 26. Since the word was commonly was commonly associated in this time with the ultimate
traitor, therefore Fawkes was equated to both treachery and the worst kind of treachery. Not only
would people have probably been aware of this connotation of the word “traitor” as well the

www.oed.com
word “judgment”, in painting Fawkes akin to the worst betrayer in biblical history the speech allows Coke to paint himself and his king in opposition to Fawkes, making them agents of Godly wishes.

The punishment Coke demands of Fawkes in this passage is literally secular and figuratively religious, allowing Coke to portray the king and himself as agents of God. Cokes speech, one quite typical of trial speeches he would have given during his reign as royal Prosecutor, is an example of “ritualization of punishment” in which Fawkes is made into a symbolic image of evil by drawing his head (“the highest and most supreme part”) down towards hell, instead of up towards heaven, because he is “unfit to take the benefit of common air.” For the legal punishment Coke demands of Fawkes to be so symbolically ripe with religious imagery is a way of creating the King and God as acting together; for the King to demand that Fawkes head be drawn downward towards hell is a representation of the secular forces literally cooperating with God.

After the trial was over and Fawkes had his “judgment day” by being hanged in the public yard at Westminster, the Crown still made an effort to put out propaganda allying themselves with God and the Plotters with the devil such as in poems written and widely circulated which kept the Gunpowder myth alive. One particular poem, circulated immediately after Fawkes’ execution, uses the word “daemoniacke” (demonic) similarly to how Coke uses “judgment”; the goal in the poem just as in Fawkes’ trial is to ally Fawkes with the devil and the Crown with God in opposition. The poem reads:

Infernall Fauks with Daemoniacke Heart,
    Being ready now to act his Hellish part,
    Booted and spurr’d, with Lanthorne in his hand,
    And match in’s pocket, at the door doth stand;

27 MacMahon, 235.
But wise Lord kneuet by Divine Direction,  
Him apprehends, and finds the Plot’s detection.  

According to S.E. Sprout in his article “The Damned Crew”, the phrases “damned crew” and “daemoniacke” were often used to refer to treasonous acts; for example, the phrases were used liberally to refer to the Essex conspirators. According to Sprout “The damned, [daemoniacke] crew...scandalized their contemporaries...they were thought to be reprobate with devils in hell” 29 Those associated with the devil were essentially condemned to suffer in the underworld. Once again, we see the phrase used in this poem to equate Fawkes with the devil; the phrase is also used in the poem to deter people from taking the same path of committing treason. 30

The poem, and the use of the word “daemoniacke” begins to solidify James’ image of the body politic through equating Fawkes with the devil. Since James’ is the one prosecuting Fawkes, in a sense then, he is the one prosecuting the ultimate traitor and the ultimate reprobate; this both morally elevates him and strengthens his claim that he is acting in God’s interest by prosecuting and executing Fawkes. James’ image of the body politic as a strong, uncompromising force acting in the interests of good and Godliness is further expanded in the use of the word “infernall”; the Crown emphasizes with the use of this word that Fawkes again clearly went against God in his attempt to blow up Parliament. Used first in the fourteenth century, the word in the Early Modern period 31 meant “

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28 “The Plotters Routed”.  
30 In medieval writings, demons were also dangerous because they were either hybrid (more than one creature, human/monster) or were changeable, which made them difficult to pin down onto one figure only.  
31 First used in 1603 in R. Knolles General History of the Turks. He wrote, “The Sultan carried with an infernall furie, defaced, and most shamefully polluted the sepulchre of our blessed
of the character, or having some of the attributes of hell; hellish”. To use the word “infernall”, then, to describe Fawkes, is to make him hellish and Satan-like; in making him satan-like the poem is emphasizing a need for someone to go against him to come out on the side of God. At the end of the poem when the “wise Lord kneuet by Diuine Direction./ Him apprehends: and finds the plot’s detection” we know there is someone who does come out on the Godly side. Although it is unable to be completely clear what “Lord” is being talked about in the poem, the fact that he goes after Fawkes as representative of the Plot in general with something divine at all puts him opposed to Fawkes in the sense that he is acting in the Godly way, not in the hellish like “infernall” Fawkes. The poem here is fundamentally creating an image of a devilish figure that everyone who hopes to lead a Godly life should go against.

The affect that Coke’s trial speech and the poem about “infernall Fauks” showing Fawkes descending into Parliament building with matches is nothing less than a reflection of the image James wishes to create for himself in the aftermath of the Plot. By demonizing the “other” Fawkes, the Crown attempted to create a new, coherent national identity unified behind the king and only the king; James’ was attempting to make the common people “communicants of a Church upon which the Crown stamped its imprimatur.”32 As we have seen so far with regards to the influences of the Plot, as we will see with regards to Macbeth, Visscher, and Donne, national identity was not as simple as the Crown’s propaganda made it to be. Making national identity so coherent then has the affect today of revealing the Crown’s fear of a national uprising against him in light of the numerous closeted Catholics that still existed in England. These fears—the fear that somewhere,

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32 Gaskill, 293.
someone was doubting that his propaganda contained the full truth with regards the compartmentalization of all English Catholics under the lens of treachery were well founded; in the artists, those who wrote, preached, and drew, the very doubts about national identity and the prosecution of English Catholics that James’ feared were realized and legitimized.

Ambiguity Visualized: Claes Nicholaes Visscher’s Uncertainty About the Order of England

Unfortunately, we are unsure of the exact date of Claes Nicolaes Vischers’s composition of the broadsheet “The Death of the Gunpowder Conspirators”. We know that it as given to the National Portrait gallery in London in 1916, and we know that the style of broadsheet was popular in the years following the Gunpowder Conspiracy. We also know that Visscher lived around the time of the Gunpowder Plot, and so he would have been around to witness the influx of popular cultural documents put out by James following the assassination of the conspirators. Particularly to broadsheets of the time, however, the document is in no way intended to accurately depict what happened in January of 1606 at the execution of the conspirators. Visscher takes one notable creative liberty in the broadsheet’s creation: he clumps the execution of all of the Gunpowder Conspirators into one event (we know this from the Latin scroll being held by the two angels Fortune and Justice at the top of the painting). This creative liberty made by Visscher and numerous other artists and poets alike during the Plot aftermath tells us that the broadsheets is not concerned with factual accuracy. But what does this lack of concern for factual accuracy tell

33 Factual accuracy was less important in this period than in purporting one’s message. We see this proven in this document as well as the works of Shakespeare, Donne, and numerous other artists during this period.
us? Upon closely examining the broadsheet, the purpose of the “Death of the Gunpowder Conspirators” becomes clear.

In addition, knowing as we do that Visscher was not a member of the nobility nor was he beholden to the King in any way, we can see his broadsheet in a unique light as a reflection of what those outside the king’s retinue may have thought of the Gunpowder Plot. The broadsheet included in the appendix (image 1) is the same given to the national portrait gallery in 1916, accepted to be an original of Visscher’s sole composition. The image, like many of the time, is multi-layered in that it simultaneously adheres to the Crown’s message condemning Fawkes and his co-conspirators as “daemoniacke” figures while also providing a more complicated view of the unity of the nation than the Crown’s propaganda purported. Upon the first viewing of the image, one may immediately think of chaos. There are many things going on in the image simultaneously, numerous people seeming packed into the landscape without any clear order. There is smoke in the upper left background of the broadsheet, and children running rampant in the center of the painting close to the scaffold holding the conspirators on the upper left hand side.

However, when taking a second glance at the painting, another level of meaning becomes evident in the supposed disorder; this level of meaning is quite adherent to the type of propaganda we have seen so far coming from the Crown. Within the disorder of the military men, the smoke, and the children running rampant throughout the scene, there is order. If you take notice of each civilian pack, those in the upper and lower portions of the painting being restrained by soldiers, it is evident that they are in straight lines and

34 The image is actually quite popular in reproduction, however, the majority of images that are reproduced for the present fail to include the two angels at the top of the broadsheet, nor the Latin saying which details the punishment of the conspirators, things which I think are vital to an accurate understanding of the complicated nature of Visscher’s piece.
appear to be in no way anxious to escape the clutch of those by whom they are being held. The spectators are anxious yes, that is obvious in the set of their body, but the anxiousness seems to be more to get sight of the execution of the Gunpowder conspirators than any anxiousness to get out from under the soldiers’ grasp.

I would also like to return to the image of the angels up at the top of the broadsheet. Adding to this layer of monarchical propaganda on top of the supposed outward disorder of the painting are these angels, which attributed a great deal of religious power to the Crown. Early Modern Society was deeply Christian, and the king’s men surely had to find a way to justify their punishment of Guy Fawkes in which God was at the top of their hierarchical structure. This is first done very literally in the woodcarving. At the very top of the carving, there are two angels (in obvious religious imagery). One is entitled “Justitia” (justice) and one “Fama” (fame, fortune). They are holding up a banner which gives the exact date, and way that Fawkes was executed: he would have been hanged, left there while he “danced”\(^{35}\), cut down before he was fully dead, then ripped open.

These two angels are clearly above everything else, putting them hierarchically at the top as representatives of God. Secondly, their names are clear pieces of evidence of the portrayal of Fawkes’ punishment as being judged right under God, and having them literally overlooking the entirety of the scene holding up the punishment that the secular forces doled out, also in the picture shows perfectly the viewpoint of the Crown argument that, more than anything else, the ordeal exists as a part of a medieval viewpoint that “God exists, acts, knows[that God exists in

\(^{35}\) A term used in the early modern period to describe slow strangulation under a noose. For more information, see MacMahon, 237.
the Early Modern World, acts in favor of the king’s men to dispense justice, and knows about the way the secular forces have been punishing Fawkes, and approves]  

So what viewpoint do we take away from this piece by Visscher? Do we see it as a broadsheet of rampant disorder, one where Visscher is questioning the ability of the king to unite the country behind anything, let alone the execution of numerous prisoners, some of whom would have been of a religion that many people, even then, were still either sympathetic to or a part of? Or, do we see Visscher’s broadsheet as an exemplification of how the king and his supporters are able to restrain the masses into neat orderly lines, putting out enough propaganda to make them more interested in watching the execution as one would watch a circus than being concerned for the Crown’s new role as the dispenser of God’s justice?  

Unfortunately, in the course of my research I have not come across a paper dealing in detail with Visscher’s broadsheet; those that have mentioned it have used it solely as another example of the extension of the crown’s widespread war of propaganda that had sped into any artistic medium that followed the Gunpowder Plot and continued in some form or another in the English national consciousness until the nineteenth century. However, also noticing the disorder in the broadsheet: the smoke, the children running, and the disparity between the neat, classical way the “fama” and “justitia” are portrayed leads us to a unique interpretation for this broadsheet and the way in which it critiques James’ formula for a unified English national identity. When considering the disorder and the multiple layers of meaning within the broadsheet, considering the true disparity between these layers and yet how they seem to co-exist rather covertly within the broadsheet tells us that Visscher was if nothing else noticing the distinction between the national identity that actually existed in the wake of the Gunpowder Plot and what actually

36 Bartlett, 130.
existed. Visscher was recognizing that the public faces that the Crown put on the conspirators, the Catholic religion, and the Plot itself is not necessarily the face that exists in reality. Visscher recognized, and noted in his broadsheet, that there was a gap between what the subjects thought of national identity and James’ claim about the unification of national consciousness

**Attacking the Politic: Donne’s Questioning of National Consciousness**

Similarly to how Visscher focused on the uncertainty of James as purveyor of “Fama” and “justitia” in pictorial format and how Shakespeare revealed the complications of the “scaffold speech” formula, so did John Donne do the same in spoken format, in his 1622 address “Upon this Gunpowder Day”. In It, Donne—a Catholic forced Protestant by James’ increasing edicts—condemns only those Catholics who were responsible for the Plot, making the emphasis in the treatment of the Plot more about the challenging of the Crown’s authority, than about a Catholic attack, despite the fact that the Crown had condemned “the Roman religion” as responsible for the conspiracy.

The most notable scholarship done in detail on the topic of Donne’s “Sermon Upon the Gunpowder Day” was began by Terry Bunce Burgin and John n. Wall in 1984. They, the same who argued that “a history of the literary reaction to the Gunpowder Plot has yet to be written” developed a sophisticated analysis of Donne’s speech, which shows that he was both affirming the king’s political authority and questioning his Godly authority to blame all Catholics. Burgin and Wall begin their analysis by iterating the importance of the sermon in historiographically as something that reflects “the authors understanding of received religious traditions and the demands of the historical moment… sermons are for a specific moment of an age” Sermons provide valuable insight into the mindset of the early modern person by giving us a different type

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37 John N. Wall and Terry Bunce Burgin, 22.
38 Wall and Burgin, 25.
of lens to that time period than is present in pictorial documents like Visscher’s or written documents like Shakespeare eventually intended to be performed.

All sermon givers at this time period after James 1622 edict were required to “respond to difficult political situation[s] in a way that asserted the official policy of Supporting James while undermining the arguments of the crown’s opponents”\(^{39}\) Donne began his sermon by doing just that with “[James] is the word of our text, spiritus, as spiritus is the Holy Ghost, so farre, by accommodation, as that he is gods instrument to convey blessings upon us…so he is the breath of our nostrils, our speech, our lives, and our soules are his.”\(^{40}\) But yet, according to Burgin and Wall, he seems to speak more of the plot itself than of the Catholic religion.

If we focus on that part of the sermon that doubts James ability despite his platitude, if we focus on the cat that Donne refused to attack the Catholic religion to the same degree as the crown, we can see the same sort of questioning of the Crown’s propaganda in all three pieces. Visscher’s “The Death of the Gunpowder Conspirators” doubts the ability of the Crown to be bringers of “fama” and “justititia”, Shakespeare’s Macbeth doubts the ability of there to ever be true repentance when repentance is forced by the Crown’s hand, and Donne doubts that all Roman Catholics should be blamed for the mistakes of a select few; each expresses in a slightly different way an anxiety with the ability of the Crown to be able to be “the sole locus of arbital power”. In the ambiguity of each author’s message, we see that national consciousness is not quite so unified as the Crown would have it appear.

**The Uncertainty of a Formula: Anxiety in Macbeth**

Over the course of the twentieth and twenty first century, many monographs, articles, and essays have been written concerning the political implications of

\(^{39}\) Burgin, 20.
\(^{40}\) Burgin, 24.
Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*. Considering the fact that it was written immediately after the Gunpowder Plot’s discovery and during the subsequent capture, trials, and executions of the conspirators allows its many messages about the nature of treason and the workings of the Early Modern structure to be investigated in great detail. Rebecca Lemon’s interpretation of *Macbeth*, in particular, is a singularly sophisticated commentary on the limitations of the accepted political structure in the wake of treason; Lemon’s commentary exemplifies that Shakespeare’s treatment of the scaffold speech was a way to critique one particular aspect of James’ formula for the creation of a unified national identity following the Gunpowder Plot. The “uncertainty of the accepted formula [of national identity]”\(^{41}\) evident in *Macbeth* was a way for Shakespeare to “dissent without dissenting”\(^{41}\)

Lemon’s “Scaffolds of Treason in Macbeth” focuses on one particular type of propaganda used by the Crown in *Macbeth*: the scaffold speech. A scaffold speech was given by prisoners immediately before they were executed, in which they were supposed to proclaim their confession publicly and ask forgiveness from God for their sins. In the case of treason, which was the case in both the Gunpowder Plot and *Macbeth*\(^{42}\), the scaffold speech was particularly important. Not only did it “serve as a critical sight for the apparent affirmation of the communal public order”\(^{43}\) during the process of the prisoner affirming his own guilt and thereby also affirming the rightness of those who were doing the punishing, the scaffold speech asks forgiveness from God’s agent in addition to God. If we see the Crown’s propaganda discussed in a previous section of this paper as affirming the

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\(^{41}\) Rebecca Lemon, 30.

\(^{42}\) In *Macbeth* it is the successful assassination of a king, in the Gunpowder Plot, the assassination is not successful, however, possibly this was a way for Shakespeare to comment on what might have happened had Fawkes and his cohorts succeeded on November fifth.

\(^{43}\) Lemon, 25.
fact that “God exists, acts, knows that God exists in the Early Modern World, acts in favor of the king’s men to dispense justice, and knows about the way the secular forces have been punishing Fawkes, and approves”\(^{44}\) then in asking forgiveness from God the accused is also asking forgiveness for the fact that they disobeyed God’s earthly representative. Fawkes and his other co-conspirators would have doubt been given the chance to make a scaffold speech before their execution, and so in their potential for asking forgiveness for their sins, they are also asking forgiveness from King James and affirming the fact that he was right.

This scaffold speech—this plea of forgiveness from the earthly and Godly power—is, according to Lemon, something that is questioned in *Macbeth* and in many ways is a reflection of Shakespeare’s questioning of the Crown’s Gunpowder Plot propaganda. Just as how in Visscher we see a layer of recognition that the propaganda of the Crown exists, so we see it in the lines “very frankly he confessed his treasons,/Implor’d your highness par don/ and set forth a deep repentance”\(^{45}\) which serves to “legitimize the whole structure of religious and secular authority”\(^{46}\). This is akin to Visscher keeping the mobs in his broadsheet in order, restrained by the soldiers that are guarding the execution. Similarly, the angels at the top of Visscher’s broadsheet are textually represented here. By putting the scaffold speech in the play at all, Shakespeare recognizes that with each word, the Crown becomes more the controller of “fama” and the purveyor of “justitia”.

Despite this supposed affirmation of the Crown’s secular and religious legitimacy in the scaffold speech, the end of the play casts doubt on the established order of cementing the

\(^{46}\) Lemon, 31.
authority of the Crown. With the lines “true repentance is indeed never too late, but late repentance is seldom found true”47 Lemon emphasizes how this dying speech of Macbeth casts doubt upon the true ability of the scaffold speech to forgive the accused from God; furthermore, she argues that Macbeth’s dying speech is a reflection of the “uncertainty of the formula[ the formula being the establishment of the Crown as bringer of justice, protector of the public safety, and sent by god to do his bidding]”. In Macbeth, just as in “The Death of the Gunpowder Conspirators” broadsheet, we see an ambiguity that fails to resolve itself, rather it exists ambiguously in order to call into question the Crown’s response in the aftermath of the Plot.

For scholars and students in the present day United States of America, it can be difficult to see why an form of dissension in this period was so important. We ought not to forget, however, the fundamental governmental differences between an absolute monarchy and the largely free democratic society we live in today. In the seventeenth century—when Shakespeare, Donne, and Visscher were writing, speaking, and engraving—dissension would have resulted in hanging, drawing, and quartering, a process involving removing the entrails of a victim when they were not-quite-dead followed by removal and display of the head of the victim. In other words, dissension in Early Modern England was a risk incomparable with any risk we might experience today in America.

47 Lemon, 33.
As By the King.

To manifest to the world by all our proceedings how firmly we are resolved to suppress the Monarchical Plot of our Nation, which since it was given to the knowledge of all persons, hath been carried on with such violence and secrecy that it was not easy to apprehend them; yet the King, his Council, and all his officers and subjects, have taken all necessary measures to prevent the same. And the King hath, upon the advice of his Council, determined to publish this Proclamation, that all may be informed of the necessity and danger of suppressing such perilous plots, and that all persons may be enabled to take the necessary steps to prevent the same.

God save the King.

Description of the several parties above named.

[Text continues with details about the plot, the King's advisors, and the actions taken to suppress the plot.]


http://www.archive.org/stream/whatgunpowderplo00gardiala#page/80/mode/1up

Accessed on Sunday, September 18 at 4:05 p.m.


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