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Poets, Players, and Preachers: Remembering the Gunpowder Plot in Seventeenth-Century England. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016. Pp. ix + 412. Hb., \$85.

The Gunpowder Plot is one of those topics that in the past has suffered, perhaps unfairly, from a kind of rigid dualism in the way it has been studied. Almost from the time of the incident itself, there were those who said it was the product of a black ops maneuver on the part of the new Stuart regime, directed not just against those who had built the bomb but also against their Jesuit clergy friends, including the Jesuit mission superior, Henry Garnet. On this account, whatever the accused had done, it was not what the regime said it was. For others, King James I and his ministers were simply telling it like it was. Between these two positions, in the customary terminology, there was little room and, over the years there have been a fair number of “plotterological” theories about the alleged conspiracy to blow up the House of Lords at the state opening of parliament in November of 1605. For those scholars who cannot easily remember which missing document is which or whether such and such a signature on a copy of a confession (of which the original is lost) may or may not have been genuine, there has been a tendency, I think, simply to give up and leave it to the experts.

One way out of this difficulty has been to look at the literary trail left by the Gunpowder Plot. This is what the present volume engages in, and does so convincingly. In this way, one can say something definite and talk, at last, about known knowns, as the phrase is. It reconstructs the ways in which memory of the plot continued to circulate in the years after 1605 through a range of media, especially stage plays and sermons. Indeed, it explores how such memory was performed outside of any accurate understanding of what actually happened. However, it is worth noting that the Gunpowder Plot had such currency simply because so many people had an interest in propagating their own reading of it; it was not just a convenient topic for a narrow Puritan form of anti-popery. There were plenty of other serviceable subjects from the reign of Elizabeth I had they needed to bolster the anti-popish canon. But, as James ably demonstrates in her book, the plot was available to a certain sort of Protestant who wanted to turn his fire not just on a certain sort of Catholic but also on those whom they considered to be Puritans in a negative sense. This was a subject which was explored a few years ago in the ground-breaking *Government by Polemic* by Lori Anne Ferrell (Stanford, 1998). The plot was equally available to a certain kind of Catholic who wanted to stress what they took to be the political lessons inherent in the revival of monarchical power in France during the later sixteenth century and the crushing of the kind of radical political

thinking and, indeed, practice, which had found full expression in the Holy Catholic League during the wars of religion, buoyed up and pushed along, allegedly, by zealots in the Society of Jesus. The Jesuits and their friends were Catholics who did not, their critics argued, understand the true relationship between politics and religion, and between temporal and spiritual authority. Some of the cruelest remarks about the fate of the plotters and those associated with them came from other Catholics. Equally, as the second chapter brings out, there were Catholics (notably the Jesuit John Gerard) who wanted to turn aside the thrust of the accusations made by the regime.

The Gunpowder Plot thus stood as a figure for more than just the madness and fury of a particular oddball Catholic interest group in early seventeenth-century England. Rather, it was a topic that could be used to interpret and gloss all sorts of contemporary theory about appropriate political behavior and it was accessible at a variety of levels to many different commentators. Indeed, this explains King James's own attempt to assert control over the narrative of the plotters' abortive exploit immediately after the event and then subsequently. If the king experienced difficulties in doing this, it was primarily because so many people had an interest in embedding interpretations of it which did not serve simply to confirm readings of sovereign power along the lines that, for example, the king would have liked to have been viewed as normative.

All this the book brings out, to my mind, very well. In that sense it militates, refreshingly, against teleological and neo-Whiggish readings of the political history of the period that tend to treat this and other incidents as merely strange and unrepresentative.

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