

Writing the Monarch in Jacobean England: Jonson, Donne, Shakespeare and the Works of King James. Jane Rickard.

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The author of a previous book about the writings of James VI and I, Rickard here sets out to examine the responses of three major English authors to the published words of that king. A long introduction sets the stage by discussing methodological issues and

summarizing James's activities as an author. His youthful poetry (which some people in England noticed even before 1603) and prose treatises seemed to invite responses from his subjects, especially after most of these writings were reissued in London following his accession to the English throne. A number of English writers referred to these writings, often in bids for his patronage, which usually failed. Rickard argues that James did not covet empty flattery but did want other writers to respond to his works in ways that acknowledged his cultural authority. She sees Jonson as the English poet who best understood how to do this. He engaged in a tacit dialogue with key passages of *Basilikon Doron* in pageants written for James's entry into London and a "Panegyre" celebrating the convening of his first English Parliament. The latter reworked some of James's arguments into a condemnation of Tudor religious persecution.

Rickard argues that Jonsonian epigrams referring to the king form a series that acknowledges his status as a major poet but then proceed to rewrite his words in ways that implicitly subject him to Jonson's literary authority. The notes on witchcraft that Jonson appended to the published text of his *Masque of Queens* similarly echo arguments in James's *Daemonologie* but also draw upon a much wider range of ancient and modern authorities, tacitly suggesting that Jonson understood the subject better than his royal master. Through these strategies Jonson sought to position himself as a privileged author capable of articulating James's ideas and defending his authority more effectively than the king himself. But this stance came under increasing pressure toward the end of James's reign, as his pro-Spanish policies stirred criticism and news reporting, which he tried to counter through additional prose treatises and manuscript poetry.

Rickard takes issue with critics who point to Donne's drawing of analogies between God and the king as evidence of his quest for royal patronage and unequivocal support for divine-right doctrines. Donne's religious writings emphasize the immense gap separating kings from God and the deceptive nature of all rhetorical constructs and human images used to describe religious truths. Rickard acknowledges that Donne supported some of the king's positions but reads his sermons of the 1620s as being "especially concerned to resist James's exploitation of scripture for political purposes" (171).

Although Shakespeare did not directly reference James's writings, Rickard argues that "he seems to have been acutely aware of the complex issues of control, agency, perception, interpretation and trust that they raise" (209–10). She resists topical applications of Shakespearean texts to specific political circumstances but contends that plays like *Macbeth* and *Measure for Measure* "enact a kind of resistance to the King's attempts to control the speech and thought of his subjects through his writings" (212) by demonstrating the slippery nature of truth and the futility of attempts to fix concepts of authority definitively through speech.

This book addresses the important and previously neglected topic of responses to James's publications, while providing some insightful readings. But its focus on relations between a limited number of texts by James and a handful of canonical authors also limits its range as a historical analysis. Early on Rickard approvingly quotes Susan Clegg's

claim that by resorting to print “James unwittingly empowered his subjects as readers, interpreters and imitators, giving rise to alternative discourses of authority” (2). Can we really assume, however, that if the king had never published his subjects would have refrained from “interpreting” his reported words and actions and framing “discourses of authority”? A substantial amount of historical evidence suggests otherwise. Although James’s published works undeniably played a role in shaping debate, it is highly reductive to treat political discourse concerning royal power essentially as a dialogue between the king’s texts and those produced by a few other writers. Rickard’s book makes a valuable start but James’s participation in the controversial discourse of his age merits a wider consideration.

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