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Rebecca Lemon, Treason by Words: Literature, Law, and Rebellion in Shakespeare's England
Treason by Words: Literature, Law, and Rebellion in Shakespeare's England by Rebecca Lemon

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Keilen avers in his introduction that he does “not ordinarily make contemporary professional concerns, or even contemporary readings of English Renaissance poetry, the objects of his study” (30–31). But surely there is a middle ground between making “professional concerns” and “contemporary readings” the object of one’s study and ignoring them. Precisely because Keilen has not engaged the most likely audience for his book, as well as poetry written between the first and the sixteenth centuries, his book offers at best a handful of interesting glosses on a few early modern texts.

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Treason by Words: Literature, Law, and Rebellion in Shakespeare’s England. *Rebecca Lemon*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006. Pp. v+234.

Rebecca Lemon’s excellent *Treason by Words* has two purposes: one overt, one unspoken. The first, as she writes in the introductory chapter, “Sovereignty, Treason Law, and the Political Imagination in Early Modern England,” concerns “the discursiveness of treason,” and she asks the question: “What happens . . . when we approach [treason] not as a violent action but as a verbal phenomenon” (2). It would seem that Lemon intends a purely deconstructive analysis of treason, one that owes more to Paul de Man than to, say, Louis Montrose or David Kastan. But, thankfully, that is not the case, for by “verbal phenomenon,” Lemon really means the various texts written in the years surrounding key acts of treason (the Essex Rebellion [1601] and the Gunpowder Plot [1605]) that directly confront the issues raised by both the rebels and the government’s response. To that end, Lemon provides chapters on Sir John Hayward’s *History of Henry IV* (1599), Shakespeare’s *Richard II* (1596) and *Macbeth* (1605), John Donne’s *Pseudo-Martyr* (1610), and Ben Jonson’s *Catiline* (1611). Lemon argues that in the wake of the terror created by Essex’s aborted rebellion and the attempt by Catholic plotters to blow up parliament, both Elizabeth and James significantly expanded the range of the treason laws and increased their invocation of absolutist views of monarchy. In response, the state’s subjects started exploring “rival theories of law and government,

Gazing on Secret Sights: Spenser, Classical Imitation, and the Decorums of Vision (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990); Susanne Wofford, *The Choice of Achilles: The Ideology of Figure in the Epic* (Stanford University Press, 1992); Heather James, *Shakespeare’s Troy: Drama, Politics, and the Translation of Empire* (Cambridge University Press, 1997).

turning to classical and continental models in order to voice challenges to the monarch's increasing articulation of absolute sovereignty" (4). While Lemon's thesis applies broadly, treason in this period was associated with Catholicism, and Lemon demonstrates how some Catholics, such as Robert Persons (sometimes spelled "Parsons"), reacted to their oppression at the hands of the government by appropriating the language of the Ancient Constitution and continental rights theory to justify resistance to regimes they believed were fundamentally unjust. Lemon then traces how such writers as Hayward, Donne, and Jonson recirculate these arguments in their works.

For example, in the first chapter, Lemon situates Hayward's *History of Henry IV* "in relation to contemporary pamphlets [such as Person's *A Conference about the Next Succession* (1594)] voicing theories of resistance to Elizabeth's monarchy" (29), noting that "Hayward's Canterbury articulates the central arguments of the contemporary Catholic writers who challenge Elizabeth" (33). But Hayward is not so much endorsing these views as balancing them against the more conservative arguments of the Bishop of Carlisle, who echoes Jean Bodin's monarchism (43). Lemon's point is that the charges of treason against Hayward were seriously misplaced because rather than promoting sedition, Hayward seeks to reproduce "contemporary sovereignty debates in a manner typical of both his Tacitism and his civilian (i.e., civil law) training" (26). Lemon takes a similar approach to Shakespeare's *Richard II*, with one part of the play encapsulating "the arguments of the radical theorists who justify resistance to monarchical tyranny" while also rehearsing "political truisms on submission to royal authority" (54). Consequently, as Lemon writes, "the play produces a meditation on rulership itself. . . . How, the play asks, can subjects respond to bad or tyrannical rule?" (54).

The next three chapters focus on reactions to the Gunpowder Plot in imaginative literature. Lemon argues that in *Macbeth*, Shakespeare "imagines treason beyond ideologically confining polemical discourses that proliferated at the time of its production" (86) and, following David Kastan and Harry Berger Jr., she notes that the play implicitly critiques Jacobean absolutism by placing "the future king into league with the traitor" (86).¹ Donne, faced with trying to justify the act of parliament demanding that all subjects swear allegiance to the king in all temporal matters and explicitly dismiss the deposing power of the pope, writes, at royal behest, apparently, *Pseudo-Martyr*, in which Donne

1. David Scott Kastan, "Macbeth and the 'Name of King,'" in his *Shakespeare after Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 165–82; Harry Berger Jr., "The Early Scenes of *Macbeth*: Preface to a New Interpretation," in his *Making Trifles of Terrors: Redistributing Complicities in Shakespeare* (Stanford University Press, 1997), 70–97.

“paradoxically articulates the right of conscious in the midst of an argument upholding the king’s policy” (135). Finally, in a wonderful chapter on a very bad play, Lemon proposes that in *Catiline*, Ben Jonson highlights “not only the necessity but also the dangers of Cicero’s extralegal actions,” showing how “the use of extralegal power, as much as treasonous plotting, threatens the state” (141).

As I hope these summaries (which perforce in no way suggest the range and historical depth of Lemon’s scholarship) make clear, one of the great virtues of Lemon’s book is that she tries to get beyond the crude dichotomy of either endorsing or subverting the dominant ideology that one sometimes finds in literary critics influenced by the New Historicism. In fact, the whole point of her analysis of *Richard II* is that the play “invites the audience . . . to recognize what Richard cannot: slavish loyalty and violent resistance are not our only political options” (66). She provides as evidence the perhaps surprising example of the vacillating York, whose “shifting from loyal counselor to blindly submissive subject, dramatizes the more broadly shifting views on loyalty and moderation in the play” (75). York, however, represents something more tragic, perhaps even more tragic than Richard himself, because York ultimately represents the problem of the middle in an era during which the center no longer holds: he dramatizes “the untenable status of the middle ground in a situation where compromise is no longer considered possible” (75).

The book’s final chapter, “Treason and Emergency Power in Jonson’s *Catiline*,” brings these themes to a head. This play, Lemon argues, may have been a dramatic disaster (the original audience hated it), yet it is worth reading and teaching because *Catiline* brings into sharp focus the problem of how far one ought to go in combating treason before one’s methods bring down the very state one is trying to protect: “Struggling to fight a treasonous threat, the hero Cicero must troublingly invoke discretionary power to execute the traitors. If such extralegal maneuvers seem necessary, Cicero’s exercise of such power nevertheless contributes to the later downfall of the Republic. As a result, this compromised hero frustrates audience sympathy and exposes the dangerous connection of treason and tyranny” (140). Jonson thus creates a Cicero exemplifying “the tension surrounding a statesperson who maintains and upholds his country’s laws while occasionally bending those laws in the name of protecting the state” (145).

Lemon’s book has a great deal to recommend it. The prose is luminously clear, and the argument is scrupulously researched. Her chapter on Jonson’s *Catiline*, however, is so compelling because of the unstated second purpose of this book, which is to comment on contemporary affairs, in particular the problem of the unending “war on terror” and

the subsequent depredations of the Constitution (e.g., warrantless wiretapping, holding “enemy combatants” without trial in perpetuity, or trying them using secret evidence). I have always believed that the best scholarship draws its energy, if not its inspiration, from contemporary events, on which it offers an oblique comment using the past as an implicit mirror for the present, and Lemon perfectly exemplifies this principle. When Lemon writes that “Cicero’s suspension of law and the manipulation of consensus reveal a ruler that ignores the state’s own form of governance” (155), it is very hard not to read Jonson’s Cicero as prefiguring former president George W. Bush, just as Lemon’s characterization of York as a man struggling “to remain decent, obedient, and neutral in an environment in which competing stories and allegiances compromise objectivity” (75) reads as a kind of everyperson figure for today, who is trying to make sense of the welter of competing stories and narratives about national security. I should also say that Lemon does not make these connections explicit, and except for a brief mention in the afterword of the late chief justice William H. Rehnquist’s view that the laws “will not be silent in time of war, but they will speak in a somewhat different voice” (quoted on 161), contemporary events are never mentioned. Even so, Lemon’s *Treason by Words* helps clarify not only the early modern period but our own, and therefore, for both of these reasons, *Treason by Words* should be read by as many people as possible.

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A Companion to the Eighteenth-Century English Novel and Culture. Edited by Paula R. Backscheider and Catherine Ingrassia. Oxford: Blackwell, 2005. Pp. xiii+550.

What does one want from a companion? In Jane Austen’s *Persuasion* (1816), the heroine Anne Elliot describes her idea of good company as “the company of clever, well-informed people, who have a great deal of conversation” and is famously informed by her cousin Mr. Elliot that “that is not good company; that is the best.”¹ Readers of the new Blackwell *Companion to the Eighteenth-Century English Novel and Culture*, edited by Paula R. Backscheider and Catherine Ingrassia, will find themselves invariably in good company and often in the best. Gathering essays by twenty-four distinguished scholars, the collection at first glance might

1. Jane Austen, *Persuasion*, ed. Patricia Meyer Spacks (New York: Norton, 1995), 99.