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Literature and Favoritism in Early Modern England (review)

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Renaissance Quarterly, Volume 60, Number 1, Spring 2007, pp. 307-308
(Review)

Published by Renaissance Society of America



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readers a very useful review of a body of relatively unfamiliar narratives, and provides an engaging approach to the literary and authorial negotiations that shape this late Elizabethan genre.

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Curtis Perry. *Literature and Favoritism in Early Modern England*.

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. x + 328 pp. index. \$90. ISBN: 0-521-85405-9.

This new book identifies a “discourse on favorites” as it pertains to early modern English literature from the reign of Elizabeth up to the Civil War. Favorites, of course, are key political figures in English history. By their open connection to the ruler, they create a personal, interactive monarchy, one in which the monarch becomes known through his or her use of — or manipulation by — a particular favorite. In terms of discourse, the favorite comes to symbolize the monarch, the vehicle through which we, as critics of the literature that he or she inspires, can delineate a so-called public sphere, an area of discussion created by the relationship the monarch has with the favorite. The literature discussed is largely plays, but Perry also examines libels, speeches, and poems, all of which are analyzed in a historical context (i.e., how the Renaissance audience might recognize and interpret a particular character or situation as representing, say, the Earls of Leicester, Somerset, or Buckingham). But for us, as twenty-first-century critics of the literary-historical-cultural period, the discussion supplies a context through which we can appreciate the purpose for much of the literature of the period. Perry’s approach is well-argued, comprehensive, and fascinating first to last. This is an excellent book.

The heart of the question is royal prerogative, the ruler’s right to do whatever he or she wants. For the royalist, that right is ingrained into the very nature of monarchy. For the republican, it is nothing short of the problem itself. In order to govern, a monarch must be capable of self-governance. It is within this conceptual space that the wide variety of political perceptions evolve into an ongoing critical narrative on the nature of favoritism. A key figure in this narrative must be one of Elizabeth’s favorites, Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester. Perry tells us that Dudley was not Elizabeth’s only favorite, but by starting with the Catholic libel *Leicester’s Commonwealth*, the book takes us through a series of writings about Dudley’s relationship with Elizabeth that tell and retell the story as convenient for whatever point of view a particular writer was espousing. Indeed, it is Leicester and what Perry calls “his ghosts” that become the swing narrative that fostered later writers to critique other monarchs by dramatizing Elizabeth’s relationship with this particular favorite. These narratives delineate the key chapter headings that structure the book: “Amicis principis, Imagining the Good Favorite,” including a discussion on the classical interpretation of friendship; the “Poisoning Favor,” obviously the

darker side of English Renaissance political narrative; "Erotic Favoritism as a Language of Corruption in Early Modern Drama," where the monarch gives way to less than helpful urges while guiding the ship of state. Not surprisingly, Buckingham, famous today for what we describe as his homoerotic relationship with James, was attacked by his detractors as a sodomite. Buckingham is frequently discussed in this work: he was the favorite for both James and Charles. Another figure to reappear several times is Robert Carr, Earl of Somerset, famous for his involvement in the murder of Sir Thomas Overbury. Through the lens of the favorite, Perry is quite adept at coalescing the multiple political conflicts that emerge in the literature, especially as those conflicts are the same that led to the Civil War. Also included is a discussion of the many retellings of the history of Edward II (especially Marlowe's) and a chapter on *Paradise Lost*, where Satan is contextualized as God's first favorite, later in the poem to be replaced by Adam.

Also of note is Perry's excellent critical writing style. Most readers, I'm sure, will encounter discussion of unfamiliar texts, but Perry's ability to summarize a narrative is so sharp that any careful reader will be able to follow the discussion without knowing the text he describes. His examples are excellent, and he always keeps us on his point. The book is also suggestive of other areas of inquiry: the number of obscure works discussed and, for this reader, the effects of drama on social interaction. Finally, for those of us who worry about how to impart critical writing skills to our own students, this would be a good book for study. It is quite outstanding.

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

Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006. x + 234 pp. index. bibl. \$39.95. ISBN: 0-8014-4428-4.

Rebecca Lemon's *Treason by Words* addresses, first, how treason was defined when most believed England and its monarch were threatened by enemies without and within. Second, it addresses the legality of the means used to combat treason. Lemon's New Historicist approach to these problems puts them in a troubling contemporary light.

She begins this analysis with Henry VIII's 1534 statute that defined as treason any language that limited or threatened the king's majesty. Henry's redefinition was challenged immediately and the succeeding hundred years saw it modified, ignored, reinstated (by Elizabeth) and expanded (by James). Lemon claims that resistance to this definition created a prolonged controversy that substantially expanded the space for personal liberty. Her analyses of works by Shakespeare, Donne, and Jonson illustrate this claim. Before addressing Shakespeare, however, Lemon turns her attention to John Hayward's prose history, *The First Part of the Life and Raigne of King Henrie IV* (1599). Lemon points out that the arguments