

Rime and Treason: Analysis of the Gunpowder Plot of 1605 in England through *The Weekely Newes* Publication

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Violence and controversy mired English society at the beginning of the seventeenth century. As the mantle of rule passed away from Elizabeth I, a vicious battle between Protestant and Catholic religious factions ensued. James I ascended the English throne on March 24 of 1603 as these deep religious tensions polarized English society.¹ A bitter dispute over the religious identity of the nation based on the vestiges of the religious Reformation generations earlier accompanied his coronation. James, a firm believer in the divine right of kings, stood at a pivotal position to either maintain the order inherited from Elizabeth I or enact drastic changes to the English social identity. With the aid of the English Parliament, James veritably controlled the destinies of a nation. Amid this external conflict, a conspiracy aimed at toppling the very foundations of the English government, gained momentum. Since early 1603, a group of disgruntled Catholics, led by the prominent Robert Catesby and Thomas Percy, set about recruiting various likeminded individuals to stage a daring attack on the Houses of Parliament in the fall of 1605. Catholic malcontent grew as a response to the Hampton Court Conference of 1604, wherein James imposed Protestantism as the state religion and sanctioned the creation of his own version of the Bible.² The plot by Catesby attempted to destroy the King and nobility in the House of Lords and the House of Commons as they convened to discuss the future of England. It reflects the attempt to prevent any further damage to Catholic interests and reform

¹ Antonia Frasier, *The Lives of the Kings and Queens of England* (London, UK: Futura Macdonald and Company, 1999), 182.

² John Frederick Burke, *An Illustrated History of England* (New York: D. McKay, 1976), 120.

the government in a Papal image.³ Spurred on by Jesuit priests engaging in clandestine activities without the consent of the Rome, the list of recruits grew as the conspiracy gained momentum.⁴

By November 5, 1605, gunpowder filled a room underneath Parliament. Guy Fawkes, a demolitions expert with experience fighting the Spanish in Denmark, was in position to ignite the fuses in order to fulfill his vision of a Catholic England.⁵ The apprehension of Fawkes occurred at the last minute. Authorities followed a clue from one of the conspirators warning a Catholic member of Parliament about the plot. This indication, appearing in the form of a letter to a Parliament member named Lord Monteagle, quickly alerted authorities to a threat to the lives of King and Parliament and prompted an investigation of the basements of the Parliament house.⁶ Sir Thomas Knevet, the Magistrate at Westminster, arrested Fawkes as he was about to set fire to the powder.⁷ After a brief altercation in the English countryside, authorities killed Catesby and Percy. The King's men captured the other members of the conspiracy and brought them to London to stand trial.⁸ Following a brief detainment and torture, Fawkes and the other captured conspirators stood trial before Parliament and were sentenced to death for high treason. Following their arraignment and execution on January 27, 1606, Jeffrey Chorlton, an English newspaperman, began distributing copies of *The Weekly Newes*. This January 31st issue of the publication provided an overview of the trials and executions of the English traitors, as well as the Oath of Secrecy each individual agreed upon before declaring themselves willing members

³ Elizabeth Longford, *The Oxford Book of Royal Anecdotes* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1989), 248.

⁴ Thomas Wright, *The Town of Cowper: the Literary and Historical Associations of Olney and Its Neighbourhood* (London: Low, Marston and Company, 1893), 214-15.

⁵ Charles Knight, *A History of England: AD 1547-1642* (London: Bradbury, Evans, and Company), 327.

⁶ John Gerard et al, *What Gunpowder Plot Was* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI on Demand, 2001), 122.

⁷ David Jardine, *A Narrative of the Gunpowder Plot* (London: J. Murray, 1857), 101.

⁸ Edward P. Cheyney, *Readings in English History Drawn from the Original Sources, Intended to Illustrate A Short History of England* (Boston: Ginn & Company, 1935), 432.

of the plot.⁹ This primary source reveals a great deal regarding English society as it emerged from the shadows of the Gunpowder Plot in 1605.

Intense religious turmoil characterized the reign of King James I in England and gave rise to the Gunpowder Treason of 1605. The glorification of Protestantism and the vilification of Catholicism in *The Weekely Newes* publication exemplify the tensions in society. The messages in *The Newes* reveal an extremely polarized society governed through a disproportionate use of judicial power. This power eventually expedited the rise of Catholic conspirators challenging the social order. The roots of this challenge lie in the vast schism between the Protestant and Catholic citizenry in England in the early 1600s.

Religious discord slowly ripped England apart at the seams by the time James I assumed the throne in 1603. **The disparaging language used in *The Weekely Newes* reveals that England was plagued with violent religious strife that polarized its society during the seventeenth century.** English society in the seventeenth century was Christian. The divisions in society occurred as a result of two factions vying for control of the monarchy. With James I Protestantism emerged victorious as the premiere “Christian” identity of England. As a result, Catholicism was pushed to the fringes and labeling of different religious groups began to occur. The labeling of James I as a “Christian Prince,” in *The Weekely Newes*, suggests righteousness was attributed to the Protestants not seen in the labeling of the Catholics.¹⁰ James was therefore seen as an ideal to emulate in contrast to the Catholics who were seen as a group to alienate.¹¹ In contrast, the sharp, specific wording used in the terming of “Roman Catholicks” suggested a

⁹ Jeffrey Chorlton, “The Weekely Newes, 31 January, 1606,” *The Gunpowder Plot Society* [online]; available from <http://www.gunpowder-plot.org/archives/misc/weekely.htm>; Internet; accessed 29 August 2011.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ John Richard Green, *History of the English People* (Harper and Brothers, 2005), 5.

stigma attached to a specific group of people and accentuated the tensions between the religious groups.¹² These disparaging undertones promoted the idea, to those who would have read the source at the time of its publication, that Catholics were a subversive group to be avoided.¹³ The description of Catholicism as a “bloody religion” further establishes the slander of the Catholics as a means for the Protestant majority to polarize their religions.¹⁴

Catholics were alienated on the premise that their religion brought violence. The Gunpowder Plot emphasized these views through the language used in the source. The blatant act of treason shifted public opinion toward King James and away from the perceived destructiveness of Catholic faith.¹⁵ This shift is further reflected in the language of *The Newes*. The term “Traitor” carries with it a great deal of weight, especially in seventeenth century England, both because of its liberal use in the *The Newes* and its intent to disparage the Catholics labeled as such.¹⁶ Because labels relating to the traitorous activities of the conspirators usually followed references to the violent tendencies of the Catholics as a whole, as well as their aptitude for causing mayhem, this type of language further polarized the religious factions in English society.¹⁷ The use of the term “Grievance” to describe the state of England in the aftermath of the Gunpowder Plot is another instance of blaming Catholicism with the violence that has erupted

¹² Chorlton, “The Weekely Newes, 31 January, 1606.”

¹³ Paul Johnson, *A History of the English People* (New York: Perennial Library, 1985), 165.

¹⁴ Chorlton, “The Weekely Newes, 31 January, 1606.”

¹⁵ William Miller, *Mediaeval Rome from Hildebrand to Clement VIII, 1073-1600* (New York: Putnam, 1902), 356.

¹⁶ Chorlton, “The Weekely Newes, 31 January, 1606.”

¹⁷ William Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1979), 470.

throughout the kingdom.¹⁸ The word choice from this piece of evidence reveals that Catholics were being associated with the ills of English society leading up to the Gunpowder Plot. These ills would be remedied via methods of torture, the most gruesome of which was “Drawing and Quartering.”¹⁹ This unforgiving response to the Catholic rebellions reflects the growing animosity toward papist efforts and the widespread acceptance of violence to counter violence. The very spirit of society focused itself on religious dedication. Religious undertones governed nearly every action and belief promulgated from commoner to elite in English society.²⁰ Catholic dissidents began to find solace and encouragement in the Jesuit priests preaching incognito along the British countryside.

The Jesuit priests, thought to be direct agents of Rome when in fact were independent fighters in the war for religious reform, played a monumentally crucial role in igniting the fuse toward the attempted social revolution in the Gunpowder Plot of 1605. A call for reform, initiated in order to attempt an overthrow of governmental powers that ran contrary to the pontificate, grew as a response to this growing debate of what were perceived to be Catholic rights in England. Growing paranoia regarding clandestine Catholic plots to overthrow James I, and in particular replace the Protestant majority government, cast automatic suspicion on anything and anyone carrying papist sympathies.²¹ Drawing and quartering became the punishment for subversion of the King’s authority, especially in the light of the Gunpowder Plot. This manner of execution, in which the victim was hung, disemboweled, and cut into four pieces,

¹⁸ Chorlton, “The Weekely Newes, 31 January, 1606.”

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Green, *History of the English People*, 9.

²¹ Wright, *The Town of Cowper*, 214-15.

reflects the bloodlust underlying English society at this time.²² It was expected that the victims would suffer this fate, their bodies put on display to deter any future acts of treason. In the process, any future discontent among English Catholics was ideally pushed to the shadows, or so hoped James and Parliament.²³ Drawing and Quartering was the sole means by which high treason was punished in England.²⁴ With this particular punishment being especially cruel to Catholics, a precedent set during the previous reign of Elizabeth, the Gunpowder conspirators risked much indeed in attempting a grand revolt to overthrow the balance of power in the monarchy. In reviewing the evidence, it seems clear that English society, commoner and noble alike, did not know anything other than violence in the name of religious affiliation and control. This absolute control was greatly magnified in the courts of the English government, whose arbitrary justice spurred the drive toward conspiracy and, had the Gunpowder Plot succeeded, a vast Catholic revolution.

Absolute power in the hands of the government motivated by religious dominance characterized Parliamentary procedures in 1603. ***The Weekely Newes* reveals the presence of this disproportionate judicial power, from King and Parliament, which crushed the religious aspirations of Roman Catholics in the English society of 1605.** The English government during the seventeenth century was controlled by King James I and his Parliament. The “Parliament House” itself, consisting of different judicial entities possessing arbitrary control over even minor prosecutions, contributed greatly to the discontent and fear among the

²² Michael Powell, *Forbidden Knowledge: 101 Things Not Everyone Should Know How to Do* (Avon, MA: Adams Media, 2007), 182.

²³ John William Wallace, *An Old Philadelphian, Colonel William Bradford: the Patriot Printer of 1776, Sketches of His Life* (Philadelphia: Sherman & Printers, 1884), 151.

²⁴ George Augustus Sala, *Living London: Being "Echoes" Re-echoed* (London: Remington & Company, 1883), 248.

citizenry.²⁵ The term “Parliament House” is used in *The Newes* to refer to the place of absolute power within the government. Any reference to the Houses in relation to the conspirators only serves to make the individual appear insignificant to the collective might of the government. The Chancery “Court” mentioned in *The Newes* could sit anywhere, at any time, and once the chancellor felt he had enough information he arrived at a decision.²⁶ It was quick and inexpensive justice. If the chancellor did not possess papist sentiments, the Catholics could not attain favorable decisions. The “Star Chamber,” considered the sister to the Chancery Court, was another symbol of the ruthless judicial actions that segregated Catholics from the rest of society.²⁷ Torture was a common and accepted form of punishment for offenses that ranged from minor to severe. Along with the Court of Chancery, the Chamber gained the reputation as the most oppressive judicial body of England’s seventeenth century. This judicial system placed the Star Chamber in a position to impede any fair progress the Catholics may have sought. The government showcased its vast might through the manner in which it responded to threats.

Judicial action was the vessel through which King and Parliament dominated the political sphere. It was here that the absolute powers of the ruler would have stifled Catholic aspirations for progressive change.²⁸ The King’s power, although absolute, was funneled through various individuals who were close to him. The plot to destroy Parliament threatened this relationship. The mention of the Council as being a distinct body in the government reveals that

²⁵ Chorlton, “The Weekely Newes, 31 January, 1606.”

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ F.W. Maitland, *Selected Historical Essays* (London: Cambridge UP, 1957), 129.

disproportionate power did exist in the hands of many individuals in the upper echelons of the English government. However, The Houses of Parliament were in a tenuous relationship with James I, due in large part to the king's propensity toward higher taxation of its noble members. By the time of James's ascent to the throne, Parliament was a separate and weaker institution than the monarchy. While still possessing a significant amount of political clout in legislative and judicial affairs, Parliament continued to function as an extension of the king's power.²⁹ This perceived weakness between of the governing wings of English rule must have seemed, in the eyes of the Catholic dissidents, ample reason to reform the very structure of English government, thereby shaping political actions to their own will. "Westminster" was the palace complex containing the superior courts of James I.³⁰ As such, it was the outlet through which King and Parliament exerted its political influence. After Westminster became the physical seat of Parliament's power, it also became the target for annihilation during the Gunpowder Plot. As much as the physical damage may have shocked the foundations of English society, the destruction of Westminster, a historical symbol in its own right, would have afforded the conspirators a symbolic victory against the perceived tyranny of James I and the English government.³¹

Statements in *The Newes* mention "Worcester" as the location of the executions of many of the conspirators.³² During the time of James I, the county of Worcester was used as the setting for the retelling of the crimes of Guy Fawkes and others and the subsequent execution of a

²⁹ Lacey Baldwin Smith, *This Realm of England: 1399-1688* (Lexington, Massachusetts: D.C. Heath and, 1996), 238.

³⁰ Chorlton, "The Weekely Newes, 31 January, 1606."

³¹ Cheyney, *Readings in English History*, 432.

³² Chorlton, "The Weekely Newes, 31 January, 1606."

number of the conspirators of the Gunpowder Plot in 1606. Because Worcester was the center for spreading negative Catholic sentiment directly after the discovery of the Gunpowder Plot, it reflects the power of government to disparage, at will, any individuals who go against it. Politically, one of the effects of the Gunpowder Plot was that it allowed King and Parliament to identify a common enemy and, in the eyes of the people, assert greater influence in the name of maintaining order and safety throughout the realm.³³ Without meaning to be, the Conspiracy became a political tool to further unify a nation ripped apart by religious dissidence.

King James I's leisurely pursuits reflect the disconnect between the monarch and his subjects and reveals the overall state of the government beginning in 1603 as marginally concerned for the interests of the people over the interests of the Crown. Although Parliament controlled a vast share of governing power, the ultimate control lay in the power of the English throne. King James I's isolation from his people only furthered the societal divide. This divide fueled the fires of religious dissidence throughout the kingdom as Catholics in particular found themselves losing a game of dominance. James I's pastime of "Hunting" is mentioned only in the retelling of the discovery of the Plot but offered an important glimpse into the dominant tendencies of the Crown. Hunting is a game of dominance over one or many individuals, in which a powerful hunter exerts strength and influence over the weaker prey.³⁴ This logic would have translated onto the style in which James governed. Namely, the King was equipped with the divine right of God to rule his subjects. He could exercise his power in whatever manner he saw fit, even to the point of stifling Catholic aspirations. Hunting says more about his political mind than many of his other actions as king. His propensity to take long trips into the countryside to

³³ Josephine Ross, *The Monarchy of Britain* (New York: William Morrow and Company Inc, 1982), 112.

³⁴ Chorlton, "The Weekely Newes, 31 January, 1606."

fulfill trivial pleasures made him disconnected with a populace that desired its king's presence in a time of political and ideological turmoil.³⁵ This disconnect translated to the larger gap seen between the English gentry in Parliament, and the commoners forced to work within Parliament's larger shadow. Catholic dissidents would have been outraged at not only the persecutions on their people, but the largely unequal treatment of the English masses at large. These were key motivations on the road to enacting the Gunpowder Plot in 1605.

The conspiracy born from all the religious unrest plaguing England in 1605 was very long in coming. Yet the reactions of the people, even Catholics, were of shock and awe at the audacity of such an act. **The manner in which the conspirators were portrayed in *The Weekly Newes* reveals the Protestant contempt of the Catholic plot to overthrow English Parliament during the seventeenth century.** Prior to the Gunpowder Plot and the events in *The Newes*, Catholics were driven underground or to society's fringes. This exclusion fostered anger in many individuals, Protestant and Catholic. The commentary on each conspirator's execution, compared to the manner in which the Protestant officials who discovered the plot were portrayed, reveals that there was great discrimination between the two groups. This discrimination would have affected the public perceptions of the citizenry present at this time, further driving Catholics underground.

Excerpts from *The Newes* relay the last requests of "Everard Digby." The cold manner in which it was presented reveals that no quarter was given toward the criminals. *The Newes* cites that Digby's attempts at prayer as he ascended the scaffold were "vain and superstitious,"

³⁵ Herman Ausubel et al, comps., *Collection of Essays: The Makings of English History* (New York: Holt, Rhinehart, and Winston, 1952), 217.

reflecting the hopeless inevitability of his suffering.³⁶ This same attitude was shown with “Graunt” who was described as stubborn and idolatrous, totally deserving of his fate.³⁷ The views on “Ambrose Rookewood” and “Thomas Winter” were further implicated in the bloody religion that Catholicism portrayed.³⁸ The depiction of Guy Fawkes as “the Devil” incarnate because of his central role in attempting to light the fuse to destroy Parliament clearly delineates the views of the royal retinue conducting the trial and executions, as well as those of the writer of “The Weekely Newes.”³⁹ The massive exposé by *The Newes* as to the extent of the revulsion toward the traitors reveals that society as a whole were unwilling to sacrifice the perceived order of the nation in exchange for anything short of successful revolution bringing about a less corrupt system of government. In the eyes of the people, the conspirators were merely threats to their own national security. The language used reflects the utter derision for individuals like Fawkes, who literally threatened the very existence of the people of England.

In terms of motivation for the Plot, each member of the conspiracy had his own unique one. Robert Catesby was imbued with an uncommon hatred to the established religion, a hatred that would involve him in many uprisings against the great persecution of Catholics during the Elizabethan era and to instigate a plan to overturn the government and replace the monarch with a Catholic sympathizer.⁴⁰ It comes as no surprise that Catesby was one of the true originators of the Plot. His history of rebellion made him an obvious candidate for leadership within the ranks of the Conspirators. Catesby’s rebellious tendencies were a reflection of an English society torn

³⁶ Chorlton, “The Weekely Newes, January 31, 1606.”

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Knight, *A History of England: AD 1547-1642*, 327.

apart by religious tensions. These tensions resulted in violent altercations between Protestant and Catholic. The underlying sentiments pervaded English society at large and fostered an environment that would have facilitated radical change had it been successfully executed.

Everard Digby's religious motive for joining in the plot was that all promises made by James to the Catholics were extinguished by the Conference at Hampton Court. This conference moved England toward a divinely ordained Episcopalian monarchy; one in which the divine right of kings prevailed and Catholicism in particular was seen as a rebellious practice.⁴¹ They generally feared harder laws from Parliament against recusants, literally making it lethal to be a Catholic.⁴² Catholic sentiment seemed to reflect this idea of fear in the government. However, the majority of Catholics chose to bear the weight of the persecutions in silence. The risk of fighting the larger power seemed, to the majority of the Catholics, too great in comparison to the rewards of success. Yet there were those who utilized their experiences to attempt to bring about this Armageddon.

Guy Fawkes's primary experience that influenced his ideals for radical action against non-Catholics was his service with the Spanish armies suppressing Protestant revolts in Flanders. Fawkes arrived in London, where he met with the head conspirators of the Gunpowder Plot. Fawkes was a firm believer in Millenarianism, the belief that Christendom would experience the victory over the forces of evil and the destruction of England before Christ's second coming.⁴³ This belief caused Fawkes' disillusionment as the England he was born into turned away from

⁴¹ Smith, *This Realm of England: 1399-1688*, 241.

⁴² Wright, *The Town of Cowper*, 214.

⁴³ Smith, *This Realm of England: 1399-1688*, 242.

the Catholic Church toward what he viewed as Protestantism.⁴⁴ Fawkes used his knowledge of gunpowder and explosives to place himself in a key position to carry out the destruction of Parliament.⁴⁵ Fawkes's actions, and later notoriety with the publication of *The Weekely Newes*, represented an extreme in the actions that sought to end the reign of a King who favored Protestantism. Socially, Fawkes represented one manner of English citizen gravely affected by the intense religious strife that was ripping the nation apart. In truth, it seemed that English society during this time period was fragmented into many different groups, with even the ones in power holding a tenuous position.

There is no doubt that James I inherited an England that was ready to implode at the slightest provocation in 1603. The political and judicial oppression of the Catholics by Parliament merely contributed to the growing dissent already festering at the heart of society. A combination of individual vendetta and Jesuit persuasion goaded a militant group of Catholics to rise in arms against what they viewed as an oppressive system.⁴⁶ In this sense, the Gunpowder Plot was unavoidable. It is the reaction to the aftermath of the conspiracy, reflected in the writings of the *Weekely Newes*, which portray the emotions of England during the reign of James I in 1606. Although the Catholics suffered greatly at the injustices sanctioned by the English government, public opinion held that Catholicism until the revelation of the treason was violent but incapable of gravely endangering the state. Following the arraignment of the traitors at Westminster, however, public opinion shifted dramatically away from Catholic toward support

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Knight, *A History of England: AD 1547-1642*, 327.

⁴⁶ James Caulfield, *The History of the Gunpowder Plot; with Several Historical Circumstances Prior to That Event, Connecting the Plots of the Roman Catholics to Re-establish Popery in This Kingdom* (London: Vernor and Hood, 1804), 80.

for James I's rule. The contrasting views of the Protestants and Catholics in *The Weekly Newes* reflected the divisions not just amid the religious factions in England, but the English people as a whole. The glorification of Protestantism and the vilification of Catholicism in *The Weekly Newes* publication exemplify the tensions in society. Due to the traditional tendency toward religious strife during the initial years of James I's reign, the Gunpowder Plot can be said to be the grand culmination of all the unrest plaguing society at the time. Without the generations of religious dissidence inflaming the passions of the citizenry, English society at the assumption of James I in 1603 would not have had the motivation it required to push the radical papists to attempt the utter destruction of King and Parliament in 1605.

These conclusions, as do many historical studies, offer insight into the world at present. It is important to understand that the grand occurrences that are often highlighted in textbooks and newspapers have much deeper contexts beneath them. Failing to understand the roots of major historical events, including the Gunpowder Plot, imperialist expansions, presidential assassinations, and economic crises, disseminates ignorant opinions throughout society. There is great danger in taking only what the victors have to say into account when judging the events of history. Often, it is the voice of the one who is suppressed that can offer greater knowledge into the dilemmas of a society; for the reasons for alienation can speak volumes regarding the values of the citizenry. Failing to become informed of the presence of those voices, however minute, will force the events of today to mirror those of yesteryear.

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