



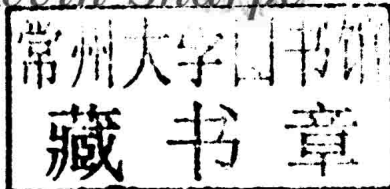
READING AUTHORITY  
& REPRESENTING RULE  
in Early Modern England

KEVIN SHARPE

B L O O M S B U R Y

# Reading Authority and Representing Rule in Early Modern England

*Kevin Sharpe*



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Reading Authority  
and Representing  
Rule in Early  
Modern England

*In Memory of Sir Joseph Williamson and  
for Keith Baker and Charles Malyon*

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# PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

With hindsight – certainly without ever having planned it – I can see that I have been inclined to publish a collection of my own essays about every ten years. I am not sure why. As I indicated in the preface to my last, financial incentives explain nothing; with each volume I probably spent more preparing the collections than I earned. In each case, I wanted to make a statement about the field of early modern studies and my own place in it. I published *Politics and Ideas in Early Stuart England* (1989) in an attempt to extricate my own work, and to move the historiographical debate, from a revisionism which had no place for ideas; in *Remapping Early Modern England* (2000), I more polemically set out an interdisciplinary agenda for my own future studies and, I hoped, as a spur to others; I advocated a new rhetoric of history and a ‘cultural turn’ and outlined what I proposed to try to contribute to it.

*Reading Authority and Representing Rule* looks both backwards and forwards. Many of the essays in this collection were written as forays into two terrains I had mapped as promising areas of historical enquiry: the history of the book and reading and visual and material culture, the history of the representations and perceptions of authority. The essays I have selected here were originally written for different purposes and I have deliberately chosen to include, as I did before, a couple of contributions intended for broader audiences or exhibitions. In the introduction, I have tried not only to assess my own work but to review the state of the art in early modern English studies since 2000 and to propose, perhaps less polemically than a decade ago, some suggestions about what remains to be done and what to me seem to be promising questions and approaches.

Controversially, I assert that, for all the rhetoric of the modern academy, there has been a retreat from interdisciplinary scholarship in an age of retrenchment and disciplinary conservatism and defensiveness. In this volume, as before, I seek to counter this trend and to argue that many of the questions in which historians are most interested invite – I would go so far as to say compel – address to a wide range of texts (poems and plays, prints and playing cards, medals and coins) and interdisciplinary methods of reading and explicating them. I make this case at the end of two decades



of working in this way and in full awareness of the disinclination of many of my historical colleagues to these approaches and of some of the critical responses to my own recent work on images of power.

Except to standardize notes or correct an occasional typo or error, I have published the essays as they first appeared. Rather than attempting to update the text or the notes (except where a work listed as forthcoming has now appeared), I have, in my introduction revisited many of these subjects in the light of recent research and publications.

For permission to publish these pieces here, I thank, in order of chapters, Daniel Fischlin, Mark Fortier and Wayne State University Press; the Folger Shakespeare Library and Sabrina Alcorn; Steve Zwicker and Cambridge University Press; Allan Macinnes, Arthur Williamson and Brill; Jeroen Deploige, Gita Deneckere and Amsterdam University Press; Karen Hearn and Tate Britain; *The Historical Journal* and Cambridge University Press; Julia Alexander, Catharine MacLeod, the National Portrait Gallery and Yale University Press (chs 11 and 12); and Steve Zwicker and Oxford University Press.

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These essays were all made possible by generous leaves funded by the Huntington Library, the California Institute of Technology, the Humboldt Foundation and, especially, the Leverhulme Trust: I would like to publicize my appreciation to them all. Though I cannot, alas, express any gratitude to the present senior management at Queen Mary, I would very much like to express my thanks to colleagues who have always stimulated and supported my work there, especially Jerry Brotton, David Colclough, Trevor Dadson, Lisa Jardine, Colin Jones and Michael Questier, as well as to former colleagues at Warwick – notably Trevor Burnard, Elizabeth Clarke, Steve Hindle, Peter Marshall and especially Mark Knights and Matthew Neufeld with whom I have had many profitable discussions.

Liz Cameron took on the unenviable job of retyping all the essays and assisting with common formatting. I am grateful to Srikanth Srinivasan copy editor and Newgen Knowledge Works who prepared the index, a



task that experience has shown I am not suited to executing. Most of all at Bloomsbury, I would also like to thank Ben Hayes who first encouraged me to prepare this collection and Claire Lipscomb who has been supportive and helpful throughout, especially with obtaining illustrations. The collection is dedicated to my old schoolmasters, Keith Baker and Charles ('Charlie') Malyon and to the memory of the founder of my school, the Restoration Secretary of State, Sir Joseph Williamson, where I had the benefit of a high-quality academic state school education sadly only rarely experienced today. Sir Joseph Williamson's Mathematical School was relentlessly meritocratic and competitive and has continued to send pupils to Oxford, Cambridge and the best universities since I left.

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# 1

## Reading authority and representing rule: Introduction

### I

Over ten years ago, in an introduction to a volume of my essays, *Remapping Early Modern England*, I set out an agenda for a new cultural history of early modern politics.<sup>1</sup> I urged a broader definition of the political and address to a wider range of texts for studying early modern politics; proposed the adoption – or rather the appropriation from other disciplines – of some new methods and approaches; and set out a number of projects that illustrated the kinds of interdisciplinary practice that I sought and in particular some that I was engaged upon. As my own contributions towards ‘a cultural history of politics or a history of political culture’, I planned a study of – then almost entirely neglected – royal writings;<sup>2</sup> promised a study of the reading of authority, shaped by the work of critics and historians of the book who have demonstrated that it is readers as much as authors who make and determine the meanings of texts; and sketched a ‘major project’ – a study of royal representations and images of power from the Henrician Reformation to the 1688 Revolution.

A decade later seems a good time to take stock of those projects and the larger agendas that I outlined, as well as to reconsider the state of the field and the future (as I see it) of early modern studies. First, however, it seems fitting to look back: to how *Remapping* was reviewed and at the reactions to the arguments I ventured and the agenda I outlined. As a contribution to early modern studies, I had intended that the volume move away from what I had come to think was a stale and sterile debate between revisionists and anti- or post-revisionist historians. Some critics, however, read – and criticized – the book as still a revisionist study: the essays, it was objected (even by friendly reviewers) played down the revolutionary changes of the

century and their revolutionary causes; they focused on the monarchy, the court and elites and ignored, among other subjects, religion and popular politics.<sup>3</sup> One long and considered review essay judged *Remapping* as, if not still an entirely revisionist text, a book yet immersed in the debates over revisionism, not one that would productively lead us out of them.<sup>4</sup> I think those criticisms are largely fair in so far as it is true that my own work did then focus – and has since continued to focus – on rulers and courts. But what I had sought and seek is a history that recognized that the exercise of rule and the culture of authority could never simply focus on rulers and elites: that, as I have gone on to argue at length, the representation and exercise of authority perforce involved a dialogue with subjects.<sup>5</sup> Given that recognition, I wanted to reject the prevailing revisionist high narratives of politics in which, as well as the people, it often felt that ideas and ideology had no place. As a former (though, as reviewers observed, never in some respects a straightforward) revisionist, I published *Remapping* to insist that the ideas be put back into the story of seventeenth-century politics and to make it indefensible to write that narrative without them. To what extent it was a consequence of my intervention is not for me to say, but what has clearly happened since 2000 is the end of the historiographical wars that first fired, then attenuated, work on early modern England. Historians of the period now seldom identify themselves or are labelled as ‘revisionist’ or ‘anti-revisionist’; more importantly, the perspectives of both now inform the best work which, as well as a broad address to popular politics and a ‘public sphere’, retains a concern with exact moments and contexts so often missing from the old whig narratives.<sup>6</sup> Though there remains uncertainty (to which I will return) about where the field is going, it is clear that historians of early modern England have moved on.

As well as a contribution to our history of seventeenth-century England, the essays in *Remapping* urged historians to embrace new materials and new methods for study of the Renaissance state. As an academic who had spent time in interdisciplinary research centres and libraries in the United States, I had been influenced by the methods of other disciplines (then principally literary studies but also anthropology) and had – reluctantly and resistantly – been compelled in discussion to confront the challenges of various theoretical moves to the (untheorized) assumptions and working practices of historians.<sup>7</sup> While I never fully embraced the turn to theory that characterized much discourse in the humanities – with (in the main) the exception of history – in the 1980s and early 1990s, I had found the questions about claims to historical truth, the constructedness and ideology of all historical narratives and representations stimulating.<sup>8</sup> And I was certain of the importance for historians of the critic’s concerns with language, metaphor and trope, of the critical languages (of genre, for example) and of the engagement with records of the past as texts rather than mere documents: that is with processes of reading and interpreting which encompassed all the rhetoricity and instabilities of texts and meanings, the affective as well as

rational force of scripts, and the anxieties and faultlines they disclosed – some of which new schools of criticism (feminist or deconstructionist, for instance) had emphasized more than had traditional close readings.<sup>9</sup> More particularly – and more pertinent to my own area – was the influence on my work and working methods of the ‘new historicism’ which flourished in the 1980s. In collapsing borders between historical documents and literary texts, in reading all discourses as texts of power and resistance, in insisting on ‘the historicity of text’ (and more radically, ‘the textuality of history’), new historicist critics seemed to me to extend an attractive invitation to historians, especially of early modern England to cooperate in a better explication and understanding of a Renaissance culture in which modern disciplines had neither existed nor would have made any sense.<sup>10</sup> Though already by the time I prepared the essays in *Remapping*, there were many criticisms of new historicist scholarship and methods – both by critics and historians who largely discredited its claims to be historical – I still felt the best work showed the rich opportunities that might lay ahead for collaboration across the disciplines which *Remapping* was published to advance.<sup>11</sup>

Though critical approaches and new historicism had been at the centre of my interdisciplinary project, by 2000 I had become interested in other kinds of texts (partially or non-verbal) in and through which contemporaries explored meaning and their own identities and communities, personal, social and civic. From the early 1990s I had been working on images of authority in early modern England; and, along with research, I had been engaging with new scholarship in not only art history but what was beginning to be renamed the history of visual and material culture and with the challenges and questions such work had presented to a connoisseur tradition that still dominated in some fields and which had helped to marginalize visual texts and objects such as copies of paintings, prints and woodcuts, medals and porcelain.<sup>12</sup> Though it was then early on in my own thinking about those challenges, I discerned not only the subjects – and texts or documents – they opened, but the possibilities for a methodological dialogue between those working with written and visual texts and conversations between both and social and political historians, many of whom had paid them scant or no attention. Accordingly, in *Remapping*, I advocated a ‘cultural turn’ (a term I used consciously to echo the ‘linguistic turn’, which had transformed the history of political ideas) which, I then hoped, might enrich our understanding of early modern England and transform the way we wrote political history.<sup>13</sup>

For all their rather different reactions, it was evident that both literary scholars and historians (interestingly – and perhaps a sign then of the distance between them and historians – no art historian reviewed it) recognized my polemical agenda. Though he regretted my insularity that had precluded a European perspective, a French reviewer observed that *Remapping* had laid out a long-term programme for interdisciplinary research; the reviewer in *Shakespeare Studies*, with a nice sense of the polemical edge implied by

the term, called it an 'agenda'; a later website using more explicit political terms, described my introductory essay as 'the closest thing there is to a manifesto for the benefits of interdisciplinary work on this period.'<sup>14</sup> In the main that manifesto was greeted more positively by critics than historians. One reviewer in a major historical journal (who had clearly not been much immersed in scholarship that had problematized his terms) sounded concerned that my approach would 'substitute language for process and structure'; a similar anxiety may underline another reviewer's summary of my claim that 'Language, symbol, and gesture were as political as were debates and statutes.'<sup>15</sup> On the other part, some commentators lamented that my own methodological invocations were inadequately theorized or drew on eclectic and contrary theoretical schools.<sup>16</sup> To that last criticism I happily plead guilty. Rather than attaching myself to any school, I have preferred to borrow and use whatever keys open new doors for me or whatever tools help me to do my job of understanding early modern English culture and politics.<sup>17</sup>

What then of the agenda and approaches I advocated? By 2000, there was already a clear reaction in the academy to the dominance of theory; along with historians who breathed a sigh of relief that the challenge had passed, critics, though they continued to be influenced by various moves lumped together as postmodernism, increasingly ceased to foreground a theorist or theoretical school in their work. Less apparent at the time, but now more increasingly obvious (as I shall discuss) new historicist criticism had also passed its heyday and few young scholars positioned themselves as doing new historicist work. Whether a consequence of these developments or another unconnected causally to them, the interdisciplinary doors opened in the 1980s also began to close. As I will explore further, the rhetoric of interdisciplinarity remained ubiquitous; but in reality the disciplines of history (particularly) and literature returned to police their borders and to insist on the unique skills and rigour of their methods – or craft as historians preferred to call it. Professor Richard Evans's *In Defence of History*, published in 1997, was symptomatic of the new mood, which has even led literary critics to talk of a new formalism.<sup>18</sup> This is not to say that literary scholars are not doing historical work – though the reverse *is* true: few historians engage with literary texts let alone critical methods. But the historical studies published by literary scholars no longer emerge from any evident dialogue with historians who, in the main, feel entitled to ignore them as existing in a parallel universe, in the same way that 'popular' histories were (and still are?) disregarded by academic historians. In universities, certainly in the United Kingdom, since the turn of the century when *Remapping* appeared, interdisciplinary schools have been closing as programmes are organized in departments, and my sense is that joint degrees are fewer and less popular than they were.<sup>19</sup>

Only in one area of early modern studies has there been an increase in the kind of interdisciplinary work that I had urged – visual culture.



Since the end of the 1990s, perhaps as a consequence of the pioneering exhibition and catalogue by Anthony Griffiths of *The Print in Early Stuart England* and Timothy Clayton's study of engraving in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England, several young scholars have turned to the study of a neglected genre of visual culture and have read prints as texts and records of the past, not (as was long customary) used them as mere illustrations to decorate their books.<sup>20</sup> While much of this work has come out of scholars in departments of literature, historians such as Mark Knights have centred satirical prints and even illustrated playing cards in their analyses of politics and partisanship at the end of the century, and (not least thanks to the pioneering databases such as British Printed Images) early modern English historians are increasingly venturing to 'read' visual and material texts – as well as portraits, title pages, ballads or landscapes.<sup>21</sup> Recently too the work of art historians of early modern England has taken a more historicist turn as exhibitions on and studies of the Reformation, Tudor and Stuart portraiture and statues, early tapestries and textiles, silverware and gardens have situated and interpreted various visual texts as performing in and on their age.<sup>22</sup> I shall return to consider the future research possibilities this promises. For now, I wish only to note how in this respect what I had hoped for in the 1990s has surpassed my greatest expectations. For all the nervousness that remains among historians concerning reading visual texts, younger scholars are publishing exciting and truly interdisciplinary studies which have overturned many earlier assumptions: about Protestant iconophobia, the exclusivity of courtly visual forms, the representation of early modern women and the relationship of visual materials to politics.<sup>23</sup>

More generally, historians – especially younger scholars – have taken 'a cultural turn' and, as some scholars lament, traditional political narrative has become an unfashionable form. Though the interdisciplinary agenda I laid out in 2000 has not been pursued, some of the most interesting recent studies of the seventeenth century have moved far from the narrow conceptions of politics and restricted materials of older and revisionist narratives to embrace the visual representations of rulers, favourites and courtiers, the rituals of Restoration kingship and the cartoons through which, along with pamphlet polemics, party warfare was conducted from the 1680s.<sup>24</sup> Albeit not entirely in the ways I had advocated, and although the contours yet remain unclear, seventeenth-century English history is indeed being remapped.

## II

In *Remapping Early Modern England*, as well as proposing a programme of interdisciplinary research for others, I outlined a cultural history of politics or history of political culture from the Reformation to the 1688 Revolution

and specified three projects that I was setting myself – as examples of the kind of studies and approaches I sought.

The first was a study of royal writings and locutions from Henry VIII to William III. I had long been puzzled as to why and how historians had all but ignored the various genres and forms of script written by monarchs: as well as speeches, declarations and proclamations, pamphlets, political treatises, prayers and biblical commentaries and devotions, stories, poems and songs. Historians had, of course, cited royal speeches or proclamations, but these had almost never been read as texts – as rhetorical performances that artfully deployed language, syntax and trope to make a case or to evoke feelings and fears. And the other genres – especially poetry and song but curiously also scriptural exegesis and memoir – had been neglected, as though the proper terrain of others, perhaps critics or theologians.<sup>25</sup> Just as curiously, literary scholars had shown surprisingly little interest in royal poems, songs or stories (such as Charles II's escape from the battle of Worcester and his hiding in the oak tree).<sup>26</sup> Though it might have been expected that new historicist critics, with their focus on discourse and power, might have seized the opportunity to study royal texts, they showed no interest in the writings of Henry VIII, Edward VI, Elizabeth I or their Stuart successors – perhaps on account of a political aversion to regal forms. During the 1980s and 1990s, as critics assiduously sought and found republican voices and sensibilities in early modern texts, with a few exceptions (such as the *Eikon Basilike*) royal writings remained unstudied.<sup>27</sup>

Just as *Remapping* was published, however, the situation began to change. I suspect that it may have been (feminist) political commitments that encouraged, as it did so many biographies of the queen, the project to edit the works of Queen Elizabeth that has provided us with definitive texts of the last Tudor's speeches and letters, prayers and poems, and translations in Latin and foreign languages as well as English.<sup>28</sup> And, in the wake of that edition, literary scholars have at last published studies of some of the writings of Henry VIII and James I, and a much-needed edition of the works of Charles I is in preparation.<sup>29</sup> It is worth observing that in all cases these editions and critical studies have been the work of literary scholars and that historians have remained uninterested in royal texts, especially verse; indeed an edition of James VI and I's political writings omits any poems by a monarch who prided himself on his vatic accomplishments, wrote what amounted to two volumes of verse and published a treatise on the art of poetry which he considered related to the arts of government.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, for all these invaluable works, I remain struck by what remains unedited and unstudied: in the case of Henry VIII, the polemical pamphlets such as *A Glass of the Truth*, or *A Necessary Doctrine*; the diary of Edward VI, the prayers of Charles I or the devotions of James II, for example.<sup>31</sup> And beyond texts of the royal hand, we need to consider all those writings – proclamations and prayers – which were published under the royal name, with royal privilege and by the royal printer but where we cannot be sure how much, if any, was