
6.1: Writing Britain

Writing Britain: James VI & I and the National Body

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Enculturation 6.1 (2008): <http://enculturation.gmu.edu/6.1/murphy>

At heart, I am a cultural materialist with one eye and both feet planted firmly in the past. The age of Tudors and Stuarts, Shakespeare and Milton, absolute monarchy and nascent republicanism is where I spend the majority of my research hours. When I received the invitation to participate in this special edition devoted to cultural studies and critical literacies, I was intrigued but uncertain how my own work would engage with the larger thematic conversation envisioned between the papers' authors and across the various disciplines we represent. What we all have in common, though, is a firm belief in granting detailed attention to rhetorical practices (both discursive and the material representations that discursivity engenders). It is, perhaps, a truism that writing produces representations that frame how individual subjects make sense of the world; but, it is one that deserves reiterating. The authority invested in writing, or writers, creates subject-readers who, in turn, become invested in the systems of power presented. This process, what Linda Charnes, in a different context, refers to as "narrative imperialism," helps its practitioners to establish an "absolute identity, in relation to which others will either conform or be rendered 'alienable'" (110).

Charnes' description of narrative imperialism, especially in relation to its ability to create an absolute identity which structures the identity of others, is similar to Slavoj Žižek's notion of the 'nodal point' or 'master-signifier'. Since an ideology is "a network of elements whose value wholly depends on their respective differential positions within the symbolic structure" (*Tarrying* 231), Žižek posits that ideological space is composed of "floating signifiers" whose identity is ultimately anchored through "the intervention of a certain 'nodal point' ... which 'quilts' them, stops their sliding and fixes their meaning" (*Sublime* 87). By affixing an ideological field, the nodal point effectuates its identity. Thus, it is not only the point through which the subject is attached to the signifier, but also "the point that interpolates individual into subject by addressing it with the call of a certain master-signifier ('Communism', 'God', 'Freedom,' 'America')" (*Sublime* 101). This master-signifier embodies the ideological field and supplies the identity of each component part. As the consolidation and naturalization of power is due, in no small part, to the manipulation of rhetorical signs and symbols, literacy can be defined as the act of learning signifiers in relation to the nodal point. Critical literacies enable us to step back from that point and deconstruct the absolute identity around which meaning is formed. Returning to Žižek, if we "see it [the master-signifier] in the light of day, it changes into an every day object, it dissipates itself, precisely because in itself it is nothing at all" (*Sublime* 170).^[1]

As my contribution to this discussion of cultural studies and critical literacies, I offer a reading of the nation-building literacies produced during the reign of England's first Stuart monarch, James I. Beginning a new dynasty with new cultural imperatives, James presided over England during a period of rapid growth and expansion. His vision, expressed through a paternally absolute discourse, sought to redefine England, both to others and herself, as a consolidated Great Britain. Courtier Francis Bacon observed that James' policies endeavored to "imprint and inculcate into the hearts and heads of the people, that they are one people and one nation" (qtd. in Ivic 135). Fostering a British national consciousness, Christopher Ivic notes, caused "[m]any of James' subjects . . . [to find] themselves rethinking their place within an emergent multi-national British polity" (135). James, unlike his predecessors, viewed himself as head of a geographically and politically unified state and his rhetorical productions strove to create an indivisible nation-state centered around the conjoined body of king and subjects. This hybrid body situated James as an all-inclusive "louing nourish-father" ("Basilikon Doron" 27) who sustained and unified the subjects of his nation.

Crucially, James exhibited his body to his subjects through writing. Textuality, the book to be studied, is as much a means to power as direct political action. Jeffrey Masten cogently describes James' position as "a figure situated at the intersection of contemporaneous meanings of *author*: authority, father, instigator, ruler, writer" (66).^[2] James recognized that to narrate is not simply to produce words, it is to produce the parameters of

being; thus, he used his published material as a forum to implement his own narrative imperialism. In the process, he raised issues of author/ity^[3] and paternity in order to position the kingly body as his ideal of *parens patriae*.^[4] One metaphor frequently used by James in this figuration is the mirror image. Calling his writing the “mirroure . . . / Which sheweth the shaddow of a worthy King,” James commands that it act as a “patterne” for his subjects (“Basilikon Doron” 1). In this, his rhetorical and material strategy is clear. The king’s body, replicated through his words, serves as the template for the bodies of his children-subjects. In the policy this analogy promotes, the king’s reflected image serves as the point of reference for each subject(ed) body.

However, James’ chosen means of author/ity was not without its potential drawbacks. Stating that he “had rather not bee a Father and childlesse, then bee a Father of wicked children” (“Basilikon Doron” 3), James poses an interesting conundrum. The vision of his subjects as mirror copies of himself would seem to imply a simple transfer of James’ ideal qualities to his subjects; yet, he acknowledges the fact that children can be “wicked.” This acknowledgment of the periodic disjunction between the fatherly body and the bodies of James’ disobedient “wicked children” can be glimpsed in the texts and contexts of his publicly released prose and in his earlier published poetry. It is in his poetry, in fact—especially *Ane Metaphoricall Invention of a Tragedie Called Phoenix* (1584)—that James first rhetorically conceptualizes his doctrine of benevolent paternal author/ity.

James wrote *Phoenix* at a time of low political power and high personal danger. At seventeen, the young Scottish king’s consolidation of authority from his fractious nobles was tenuous at best. *Phoenix* is, in part, an exercise in shaping his body as *parens patriae* through the author/ity of the written word. The catalyst for the poem’s composition was the death of his cousin and favorite, Esmé Stuart, Duke of Lennox.^[5] Lennox’s importance lies in his position as James’ mentor. While still a minor, James had a succession of regents, though none had taken a personal interest in their young charge. Rather, James’ regents exploited their position, keeping the boy-king in check in order to wield the power of the crown. Lennox’s approach with James was different. He encouraged James’ independence, teaching him the intricacies of courtly politics and intrigue. The two also developed a very close familial relationship. With the difference in their ages and his role of familial teacher, Lennox became a father figure for the fatherless James; yet, James’ kingship prevented Lennox from unambiguously assuming this role. Training James to fully embody the role of *parens patriae*, Lennox had to efface his own paternal qualities. His surviving letters to the king consistently stress “service,” “fidelity,” and “obedience” to his “good and constant master.”^[6]

Arguably Lennox was James’ first true mentor; he certainly was his last. Composing *Phoenix* allowed James to definitively state his role as father/creator by rewriting his relationship with his older favorite. Since James’ view of kingship was so steeped in patriarchal absolutism, he had to play the paternal role in all of his relationships. While *Phoenix* expresses the king’s love for and grief over the death of an intimate, its chief effect is to reinscribe Lennox within the parameters of James’ author/ity.

Phoenix begins with a preface set into a column of eighteen lines. In it, the king, writing in the first person, takes up a position of command, insisting multiple times that his readers “murne with me” (16). The prefatory column gets reprinted as an acrostic with the first and last letters of each line spelling out Lennox’s given name and title—ESME STEWART DWIKE. Lennox’s importance to the king is clear; the double repetition of his name suggests his ability to shape James’ discourse. Lennox literally borders the kingly text. Despite Lennox’s seeming domination of the preface, however, I believe that James asserts his position as sole generator from the start of his poem. The king is literally ‘writing’ Esmé Stuart. Much like Shakespeare’s sonnets to the fair youth, James “engraft[s] Lennox new” (15.14).^[7] Insisting that his words “moue all that it reid, / With me in deid lyke dolour them / to griv” (9-11), James circulates his poem so that his readers may mirror his woe. James’ poem, the child of his pen, solidifies his position as creator. In it, Lennox, allegorized as the phoenix, is reborn as a mirror image of the king’s desire: through the poet’s generative author/ity, “I her praise revive” (35).

The phoenix was frequently used as a symbol of monarchical qualities, with the bird’s capacity for resurrection carrying associations of hope, chastity, immortality, and light. Especially important is the phoenix’s

power of self-reproduction. Parented by no external factor, the phoenix is all of its “race . . . kynde . . . kin . . . whose offspring . . . be all in her alone” (31-33). At first reading, it seems as if James is according Lennox great power by allegorizing him with the phoenix. The dynamic between the poet and phoenix, though, indicates that the ultimate generative author/ity lies in James. The poet’s phoenix is a feminized creature, “tamed” through the poet’s efforts (76). James adopts the dominant role of Phoebus (the “Sunne”) while Lennox is situated as “Phoebus fowle” (230). Here, James engages in the standard trope of monarch as the sun who brings life and truth through his light. The poet’s enemies are described as “devills of darknes, contraire vnto light” (225) while he is one in “whome all light dois dwell” (231). Lennox, being James’ “fowle,” is sacrificed to the needs of the sun god. In her service to the sun, the phoenix “desyre[s]” to be burned and offers herself to Phoebus’ fire which “burnt her nest, her feathers, bones and skin / All turnd in ash” (218, 221-22). This hard image of service accords with Lennox’s descriptions of his relationship with James. In a 1581 letter to his king, Lennox claims that in “desiring . . . the loss of my life in doing you some good service” he will be able to display the “fidelity engraven within my heart” (qtd. in Bergeron 46).^[8]

As is standard for tales of the phoenix, James’ bird is reborn. The phoenix, fleeing from the envy of lesser birds, returns to her home. Missing her, the poet sends an ambassador to bring news of her fate. After explaining the phoenix’s fiery death, the ambassador produces “one of her race, / Ane worme bred of her ash” (256-57). Allegorically, this new birth encompasses three individuals. First is Lennox’s son, Ludovic, who James brought to the Scottish court after Lennox’s death. Second, the phoenix rebirthed is representative of Esmé Stuart. James’ authorial powers give him new and better life; his service to James is imprinted as a memorial of appropriate subject behavior. The third, and most significant, figure symbolized by the phoenix reborn is James. By the end of *Phoenix*, James holds multiple positions: the inscribing poet, the god Phoebus, and the renewed phoenix. All of these roles are steeped in generativity and find their pinnacle in the king. The poem, then, forwards James’ project of narrative imperialism—he creates an absolute identity for himself against which others must conform. Rhetorically structuring himself the sole embodiment of author/ity, seventeen-year-old James takes his beloved older male mentor, feminizes him, and transports him to the altar of the sun to die in glorious service to the kingly ideal. In the end, James, new-generated phoenix, emerges resplendent in his place.

James’ association with the phoenix continued throughout his reigns in Scotland and England, even serving as a metaphor for the Elizabethan-Jacobean succession. For instance, in the scene of Elizabeth’s baptism in *Henry VIII*, Shakespeare has Cranmer prophecy about her successor. From the old queen’s ashes will spring one who will have all of her virtues and will expand them: “Where ever the bright sun of heaven shall shine, / His honor and the greatness of his name / Shall be, and make new nations. / . . . / Our children’s children / Shall see this, and bless heaven” (5.4.50-55). Shakespeare was not alone in envisioning James as a flourishing creator of nations. This type of descriptive language was common during James’ reign. The most influential cartographic production of the period, John Speed’s *Theatre of Great Britaine*, is dedicated to James, the “INLARGER AND VNITER OF THE BRITISH EMPIRE, RESTORER OF THE BRITISH NAME, RESTORER OF PERPETVALL PEACE” (qtd. in Ivic 136).

James’ use of the written word as a means to promote his author/ity as *parens patriae* continued throughout his reigns in Scotland and England; yet, while *Phoenix* assumes a unified interpretive community shaped by the poet’s words, his later prose publications frequently highlight the dangerous possibility of misinterpretation. This concern is well exemplified through the prefaces attached to his scholarly prose. Rather than being written prior to the body of the text, the prefaces were composed and inserted afterwards. In them, the king regularly complains that there has been an unlicensed distribution of the work and insists that this premature release has caused a misinterpretation of his words. The added preface corrects the misreading and endeavors to ensure the reader has an accurate understanding. In his discussion of James’ prefatory additions, Simon Wortham stresses the importance of James’ reverse chronology; what was written last is placed first. He writes that the backward nature of James’ composition allows him to “inhabit and order the interpretative space normally occupied by the reader in the construction of textual meaning” (190). I agree that James’ explanatory prefaces strive to structure his text’s interpretive boundaries. Nonetheless, according to James, his language has already been misread. The necessity of any prefatory argument shows that no author, not even a royal one,

exercises absolute control over meaning.

Emphasizing the desirability of pure author/ity, James' treatise on kingship, *Basillikon Doron*, asserts that books "are vive Ideas of the authors minde" (9). This seemingly uncomplicated one-to-one correspondence, however, is not only contained within a preface prompted by initial misinterpretation but set between threatening descriptions of misreading. Immediately prior to the king's description of books as an untainted mediator between author and subject, James excoriates the men "fraughted with causlesse envie at the Author, [who] did greedily search the booke, thinking their stomache fit ynogh, for turning never so wholesome food into noysome and infective humours" (9). James' identity, mediated through his book, is literally poisoned: the "wholesome food" produced by James' textual body is rendered "noysome." This poses a danger for the national body; as the template body, James' own words become "infective."

James' *Speech to the Lords and Commons* treads similar rhetorical ground. He opens by calling his words a "Christall Mirror" into the "heart of your King" (179). James' words mediate his heart just as James' person mediates the identity of his subjects. In a moment of rhetorical symmetry, James closes his speech by invoking this same mirror. Now, though, he warns about the dangers of misrecognizing the reflected image. If his subjects look upon the mirror with what he calls "false light," they will "mis-understand" his speech. His readers/listeners can also dirty the mirror with "vnckleane hands," "pervert[ing]" James' words (203). Despite kingly desire for absolute patriarchal author/ity, misrecognition is always a possibility.

In consistently returning to the dangers of misinterpretation, James displays an understandable anxiety over the possibility of absolute authorship. In the sixteenth- and seventeenth-centuries, collaboration was the prevalent mode of textual production. The assignment of sole authorship was prescribed by neither law nor custom. Even when individual authorship was claimed, of course, texts did not emerge from a vacuum. As seen by James' critique of his misreaders, his words do not simply or absolutely assign meaning. Responding to this danger, James took the unusual step of authorizing the collation and publication of his texts in 1616's *The Workes of the Most High and Mighty Prince, James*. This was a crucial move in James' establishment of narrative imperialism. In the words of historian Kevin Sharpe, *Workes* marks the "moment when the authority of the text resided in the name of the creator" (17).

How was James' author/ity effectuated? In his preface to *Workes*, the Bishop of Winton describes the collection as "divers Off-springs . . . proceeded[ing] from one braine." He continues that, in re-membling the scattered corpus, *Workes* "give[s] euery childe [its] owne Father; [and] euery Booke [its] trew Author." In this, Winton echoes James' rhetoric of benevolent paternal author/ity. The readers are prepared to view James as the generative father, birthing his textual offspring. As children of the true father, they properly reflect his image. Then Winton's language takes a darker turn: the kingly text has been divorced from the royal body, resulting in the need to "recover those that have bene lost." The lost offspring, separated from the king, are "abused by false copies" (qtd. in Masten 72). The reproductive metaphor has morphed into malevolence. *Workes* attempts to contain that malevolence and place rhetorical reproduction firmly into the king's hands.

What James' work rhetorically reproduces is a hybrid body encompassing himself and his subjects. Agreeing with Peter Sloterdijk's contention that "[t]o embody a doctrine means to make oneself into its medium" (102), I argue that James sought to discursively and materially embody the doctrine of paternally generative author/ity. Exhibiting his body through writing, he creates a new literacy—a new common-sense map of meaning that consolidates his vision of absolute monarchy. As part of this process, James' rhetoric extends out from the page to the material body. Calling his "life" a "law-booke and a mirrour to [his] people," James insists that subjects "read" in him "the practice of their owne Lawes; [that] therein they may see, by [his] image, what life they should lead" (*BD* 34). Authorship goes beyond the written word when the body of the king is the "law-booke" for his people. Stressing the conjoined nature of monarch and subject, James acknowledges that any "sinne" committed by the king is not "a single sinne procuring but the fall of one; but . . . an exemplare sinne . . . draw[ing] with it the whole multitude to be guilty of the same" (*BD* 12-13). As a mirror to his people, a monarch's sin is never singular; it is reflected back by the "whole multitude" of his subjects.

For James, the power relations inherent in patriarchal absolutism demand a hybridized kingly body; one

that is antithetical to democratic principles. Acting as a hybridized network composing the body of the state, the king's body is not only joined to, but symbiotic with, the body of his nation. All life flows from James, and in him there is all life. In *Speech to the Lords and Commons*, James states, "For the King that is *Parens Patriae*, telles you of his wants. Nay, *Patria ipsa* by him speaks to you. For if the King wants, the state wants, and therefore the strengthening of the King is the preservation and standing of the state; And woe be to him that divides the weale of the King from the weale of the kingdom" (195). Sharing a body, king and country are indivisible. With his hybrid body, James sustains his state with his voice containing all voices and his welfare translating into national welfare. Constructing a hierarchy of paternal author/ity, James displays his body through the written word as a means of creating a new national literacy. In these terms, the maps of meaning created by James place him as the fecund father, the literal embodiment of the law, the mirror for his subjects, and the boundary of the national body.

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[1] For a discussion of critical literacies working against national literacy, Žižek provides a Marxist-psychoanalytic approach (see especially *The Sublime Object of Ideology* and *Tarrying with the Negative*). Other authors tackling patriarchal and/or national literacies are Judith Butler, Vicki Kirby, and Gayatri Spivak. For analysis specific to the early modern period, Bryan Reynolds' "transversal" theory and Maureen Quilligan's work on female agency are useful. And, within this issue of *Enculturation*, Randi Kristensen's "From *Things Fall Apart* to *Freedom Dreams*: Black Studies and Cultural Studies in the Composition Classroom" links the practices of literacy to the practices

of pedagogy.

[2] Earlier definitions of 'author' are broader than today's. They include not only material productions but notions of authority. In addition to one who sets forth written statements and one who originates, the OED includes the following definitions of 'author': "one who begets; a father" (def. 2a); "he who authorizes" (def. 1d); and "one who has authority over others; a director, ruler, commander" (def. 5). For an excellent discussion of the conjunction of authorship and authority in the early modern period, see Masten's *Textual Intercourse*.

[3] I borrow the term "author/ity" from Masten who uses it to signal "both the *author* (the writer) that is within it and the authority that so often accompanies the use of the term in this period" (66).

[4] James makes frequent use of the term *parens patriae*. A representative example can be found in *Speech to the Lords and Commons*: "Kings are also compared to Fathers of families: for a King is trewly *Parens patriae*, the politique father of his people" (181).

[5] James met his cousin Lennox in 1579 when James was thirteen years old and Lennox was thirty-seven. Leaving his family in France and allying himself with James at the start of the king's period of personal rule in Scotland, Lennox played a significant role in James' political and personal life. By 1581, Lennox was James' chief political advisor, recognized as the most powerful noble in Scotland, and a dangerous threat to other court factions. His opponents joined together to overthrow him in the summer of 1582. By the end of the year, he was exiled to France where he soon died. With Lennox gone, so was James' political support; the king was seized and imprisoned by his nobles. It was after James' escape from captivity that he wrote and published *Phoenix*.

[6] David Bergeron reprints Lennox's three surviving letters to the king (44-51).

[7] The concluding couplet of Shakespeare's fifteenth sonnet reads, "And, all in war with Time for love of you, / As he takes from you, I engraft you new" (15.13-14).

[8] True to his word, Lennox's will arranged for his embalmed heart to be sent to James.