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Kevin Sharpe, *Reading Authority and Representing Rule in Early Modern England* (Bloomsbury: London, 2013) in *Reviews in History* (2014)

Journal Item

How to cite:

Wolfson, Sara (2014). Kevin Sharpe, *Reading Authority and Representing Rule in Early Modern England* (Bloomsbury: London, 2013) in *Reviews in History* (2014). *Reviews in History*, article no. 1643.

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Version: Version of Record

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:
<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.14296/RiH/2014/1643>

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Reading Authority and Representing Rule in Early Modern England

Review Number: 1643

Publish date: Thursday, 28 August, 2014

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ISBN: 9781441149442

Date of Publication: 2013

Price: £58.50

Pages: 352pp.

Publisher: Bloomsbury Academic

Publisher url: <http://www.bloomsbury.com/uk/reading-authority-and-representing-rule-in-early-modern-england-9781441149442/>

Place of Publication: London

Reviewer: Sara J. Wolfson

Kevin Sharpe's posthumously published *Reading Authority and Representing Rule in Early Modern England* is a collection of his interdisciplinary articles and chapters that highlight his work on redefining political history in early modern British studies from 2001. The volume is organised in two sections entitled respectively 'reading authority' and 'representing rule'. Only chapter ten, "'Something of Monarchy': Milton and Cromwell, republicanism and regality", has not been published elsewhere. The essays selected are indicative of Sharpe's position as a proponent of the 'cultural turn' in early modern studies.⁽¹⁾ They demonstrate, more specifically, his ability to appeal to a variety of audiences from readers of gallery exhibition catalogues to literary, cultural and political historians. The collection as a whole allows Sharpe to consider key elements that have dominated his research of the history of political culture, such as: the study of royal writings and portraiture as rhetorical performances; the importance of authorship and audience; and the history of the book and reading of authority. Consequently, Sharpe raises significant questions about authority as a dialogue between ruler and subject, as well as the complexity of authorship versus authorisation as crucial to the widening political discourse of early modern England.

Readers familiar with the author's work will recognise his polemical tone in urging scholars to adopt a far more wide-ranging use of source material and his convincing case for doing so.⁽²⁾ According to Sharpe, the disciplinary boundaries between History and Literature have hardened since the 1990s, with both genres defending their respective methodologies. He urges historians to adopt the 'new historicist' approach, with its emphasis on theory and understanding 'language, metaphor and trope' to engage with the records of the past as 'texts rather than mere documents' (p. 2). In doing so, he argues that it is possible to understand the interplay between written and visual sources, at the same time as broadening definitions of what constituted the political in early modern mentalities. This idea is not original to the volume, but should be considered instead as part of Sharpe's work over the last two decades. Indeed, as Sharpe points out in the introduction, *Reading Authority* was intended to reflect upon past ideas and projects outlined in earlier work, such as *Remapping Early Modern England*, *Reading Revolutions: The Politics of Reading in Early Modern England* and his edited collection with Steven N. Zwicker, *Reading, Society and Politics in Early Modern England*.⁽³⁾ In looking back to past ideas and agendas, the introduction provides a clear analysis of Sharpe's

interpretation of politics as inseparable from culture and how he sees this definition fit within the field of early modern studies today.

The first section of the volume opens with a chapter entitled 'Reading James I writing: the subject of royal writings in Jacobean Britain'. Here the author connects his interest in royal texts as literary productions to dissemination and reception. Historians may have studied James I's parliamentary speeches and works on kingship before, but his writings on non-institutional topics and poems have largely been ignored. According to Sharpe, this is a fundamental mistake. James failed to distinguish between his own political and non-political writing, seeing all words of kings as acts of sovereignty. Moreover, by drawing upon the works of Sarah Dunningan and Curtis Perry, Sharpe raises the important question of authorship in James I's writings and, therefore, the collaborative nature of the construction of authority (pp. 33–4). Sharpe highlights how the process of royal translation often included the works of others, even as the king's texts could be published or interpreted out of context. Despite James I's attempts to impose his authority over his printed and manuscript work, Sharpe shows that the king was not above reception theory or unwilling to negotiate, debate or compromise with his subject through the written word. The chapter's discussion of the independence of readers fits in well with later pieces within the collection, which are concerned with the negotiation of monarchical authority within political and biblical works.

Chapter three introduces two commonplace books in early modern England: one an anonymous notebook held within the Folger Shakespeare Library collection; and the second the reading notes of Sir William Drake, a member of the Long Parliament. Instead of demonstrating an engagement with the ideas of Renaissance humanism and Christian theories as is traditionally expected of commonplace books, both manuscripts present a cynical and amoral outlook towards early modern society. Sharpe shows clearly how the two commonplace book authors comment upon the works of Tacitus and Machiavelli, with an eye to contemporary events. This suggests that the notebooks were intended to equip the annotators with the skills to survive and prosper in society. The author presents here a strong case for an intertextual understanding of political thought and readership, far removed from expected perceptions of ideas based on humanism, harmony and consent.

Chapter four, 'Reading revelations', and chapter five, 'Transplanting revelation, transferring meaning', continue to survey the independence of readers in interpreting texts but across different time and geographical circumstances. Turning his attention to the book of Revelation, Sharpe is concerned with reading the text from the Reformation to the 18th century in chapter four, whereas chapter five looks at interpretations of Revelation in a transnational Atlantic and British setting. Sharpe argues that historians have generally overlooked the study of the reception of the bible. Yet, scriptural hermeneutics were central to establishing what the bible meant and who had actual authority over its interpretation. In 'Reading revelations', Sharpe examines how Protestant commentaries of Revelation were concerned with how the text was read and who had authority to interpret the scriptures: the monarch; the Church of England; the independent reader; or the godly preacher. The chapter investigates how millenarian prophecies pervaded discourse about Revelation during the 1640s and 1650s, eventually causing a backlash from official conservative circles by the Restoration. Furthermore, the chapter's concern with how post-Restoration understandings of millenarian politics were used to valorise the Church of England and Protestant monarchy reveals the shifting process of debate between political and ideological discourse in early modern England.

At first glance, the adjoining chapter may appear to be dealing with similar themes. However, its wider geographical approach to the Stuart kingdoms and transnational discourse extends Sharpe's analysis of Protestant textual commentaries of the bible. In 'Transplanting revelation, transferring meaning', the author explores how the failure of James I to lead a campaign against the Antichrist in Britain led to the transfer of discussions about the book of Revelations to different people and places. Taking Avihu Zakai's 'Exodus Model' as a guide, the chapter investigates how the positioning of the New World as the Promised Land for the godly influenced readings of the text (p. 94).⁽⁴⁾ New England's emphasis on 'spiritual governors' and congregations represented an alternative to the episcopal structure of the Church of England overseen by divine monarchy (p. 95). Sharpe concludes that the inhabitants of New England based their national identity

on opposition and resistance to England, developing new models of piety based on textual exchanges of scripture. Despite setting out to consider the construction of authority as a textual and institutional process in the New and Old World, the transnational element could have been examined more fully on both sides of the Atlantic. Similarly, the British and Atlantic approach is frustrated by Sharpe's emphasis on largely English commentaries of Revelation at the end of the 17th century.

The second section of the collection opens with a chapter on 'Sacralisation and demystification: The publicization of monarchy in early modern England'. Drawing upon the ideas of Michel Foucault and Clifford Geertz, Sharpe examines the methods used to sacralise monarchical power through representations, ritual, print and image. Still, it is the study of how these processes of sacralisation ultimately contributed to the demystification of monarchy, which is the most novel element to Sharpe's approach. Underpinning this chapter is the centrality of the 'Word' in Reformation culture and the theory of the king's two bodies. Though monarchs attempted to determine scripture to preserve their power and unity, Sharpe points out that the openness of the bible had 'profound consequences for Christian princes' (p. 108). As Sharpe argues, Henry VIII's efforts to justify the divorce and the break from Rome in print may have reinforced the sacredness of monarchy, but it equally placed his personal relations within the realm of public debate. For Sharpe, Elizabeth I and Charles II were the most adept at balancing the human and sacred, the private and the public elements of the king's two bodies. Elizabeth achieved this through the language of love and gender to present herself as both available and unavailable to her subjects. Similarly, it was Charles II's visibility, whether touching for the king's evil or walking in St James's Park unattended, which reinforced the divine and human aspect of his kingship. The chapter may not address fully the effect of royal representation in the public sphere on the reciprocal relations between sovereign and subject as the author partly sets out to do. Nonetheless, it makes a valid point about the subtle involvement of the people in changes to political thinking and the affairs of the commonweal from the break with Rome.

Continuing the theme of balance between the human monarch and divine representative, Sharpe turns his attention to the political theories of passion and virtue in chapter seven. Reminding the reader that definitions of these terms must follow an early modern precedent, he explores how 'virtue' was related to 'manliness' and then to the natural laws of God. Passion, on the other hand, was generally understood as a negative force representing a 'loss of control, a surrender of the self to anarchic forces' (p. 122). The question of public versus private is revisited in this chapter, as Sharpe argues that the regulation of 'the self' is linked to politics and political thought. This idea is broadened by Sharpe's discussion of the shared emphasis in classical and Christian traditions on the ideal monarch, as a figure who is in control of their emotion, ruling by reason alone. In contrast to these traditional precepts of virtue, Sharpe traces the alternative views of Machiavelli, Hobbes and Mandeville, to examine changing attitudes to pleasure by the Augustan era. The chapter successfully reveals how representations of virtue and passion can be found in a variety of cultural and political discourse, such as medical texts, architecture, poetry, theatre, music and dance. It ends by focusing upon the tensions in the discourse over the regulation of the passions in classical and particularly Protestant religious texts, as well as the differences within each of them.

The next two chapters expand upon the visual representation of authority through their mutual focus on the image of Charles I. In chapter eight, 'Van Dyck, the royal image and the Caroline court', Sharpe examines the relationship between the ruler and the artist over the 'brand' image of monarchical authority. The author presents Charles I as consciously working with Van Dyck to present a specific political philosophy about authority within the artistic representation of the king's two bodies. Sharpe observes how the personalisation of authority in Charles I's single and family portraiture combined the public and personal aspects of the king's two bodies through the visual celebration of 'love, family and marriage'. This not only reinforced the king's patriarchal authority over the realm, but it also allowed Charles to portray the essential values of good government – virtue and reason. Through the elevation of Charles and Henrietta Maria's marriage as the perfect representation of 'platonic love' in royal portraiture, Sharpe argues that the royal couple are presented by the artist as above the base appetites of men and, therefore, perfect to rule (p. 147). In his discussion of Van Dyck's wider Caroline portraits, Sharpe suggests that the artist may have intended to downplay political tensions in a similar manner as William Davenant's masque, *Salmacida Spolia*. Though

not assessed in any real detail, Sharpe raises interesting question about the shared aesthetic culture amongst future Royalist and Parliamentary sitters. What is clear in the chapter, however, is Van Dyck's ability to link the sitter to key aspects of political philosophy and court culture prior to war in 1642.

Chapter nine, "'So hard a text'? Images of Charles I, 1612-1700", focuses principally on the different readings of images of the king over his lifetime. Sharpe shows how the king went from the inheritor of Prince Henry's virtues to a chivalric lover securing the peace of the realm in art and the masques of the 1630s. With the outbreak of civil war different modes of representation of authority were displayed, namely through the royal word. According to Sharpe, 'the magic and mystique of monarchy remained remarkably resilient' (p. 159). Despite the publication of *The King's Cabinet Opened* (1645) which was intended to show the king's duplicity, Sharpe argues that this invoked sympathy amongst the populace and presented Charles as a man of 'sensibility and sincere emotion' (p. 160). More examples of the reception of the king's letters would certainly have strengthened this argument. The remainder of the chapter focuses upon the representation of Charles in *Eikon Basilike* (1649) as a martyr and, more specifically, as the unifier between the church and crown. This chapter builds upon scholarly interest into how the memory and authority of Charles I was developed in his afterlife by different monarchs and parties often with conflicting agendas.⁽⁵⁾

As the only chapter not published elsewhere, chapter ten's focus on John Milton, Oliver Cromwell and republicanism, pulls many of the collection's themes together. Indeed, Sharpe's analysis of the aesthetics and language of power under the Protectorate draws upon earlier debates about monarchical authority and reception (p. 186). The chapter focuses fundamentally upon understanding the type of republicanism supported by Milton. Sharpe traces the debate in literary scholarship over the extent to which Milton was in fact a republican, a critic of monarchy, or simply an opponent of tyrants. Through an analysis of Milton's publications and letters from 1649 until 1660, the author explores how the Latin Secretary to the Commonwealth based his republicanism on a constitutional form of government, as well as on a moral and aesthetic republican sensibility. This allowed Milton to distinguish between monarchy 'as the polity for base people' and republics that ensured religious toleration and freedom of reason by denying in part the artifice of royalty (p. 191). Sharpe argues that it was Milton's belief in a republican aesthetic, linked closely to the idea that leaders were charged with instructing the people on the 'virtues of freedom', which allowed the polemicist to support Cromwell's Protectorate in 1654. Sharpe suggests that it was Cromwell's failure to resist the trappings of monarchy, which led Milton to reject single person rule by 1659. Irrespective of the speculation that remains by the end of the chapter about Milton's republicanism, Sharpe's emphasis on the *monarchical* republican element within the Protectorate highlights the susceptibility of the English public towards monarchy.

The following two chapters are worth considering together as they are both connected to the *Painted Ladies* exhibition and catalogue that Sharpe co-curated with Julia Marciari Alexander and Catharine MacLeod in 2001. Taking the religious, cultural and literary complexities of the republic into consideration, chapters eleven and twelve question the term 'Restoration' in depicting the reign of Charles II. Written for different audiences, both chapters emphasise similar points about the political complexity of the Restoration court and Charles II himself. Chapter twelve explores how science, culture, literature and art helped to fashion a new socio-political world that increasingly questioned traditional modes of discourse about the sacredness of monarchy and the authority of the Church of England. The author argues that the creation of political parties, clubs and coffee houses reflected the movement of politics away from the battlefield towards discourse and debate. A key argument within the chapter is the celebration of sex and female power within Restoration culture. Sharpe makes a strong case for the importance of sex as a means of rejecting Puritan values and contributing to the humanisation of monarchy. Though sex, accessibility and social integration are central to Charles II's monarchical identity, Sharpe warns the reader against oversimplifying the 'Merry Monarch'. Consequently, the chapter ends with an acknowledgement of the king's 'rhetorical flexibility and political acumen', as key to Charles II's ability to overcome conflicts between new and traditional modes of thought during his reign (p. 207).

The following chapter continues to analyse the authorisation of promiscuous sex by Charles II and its effect

on representations of monarchy. In doing so, the author draws additionally upon chapter seven's analysis of the changing attitude towards the regulation of the passions in political theory. In chapter 12, Sharpe explores what he deems to be the 'new politics of pleasure' in Restoration England. Whereas earlier 16th- and 17th-century monarchs negotiated the complexities of dynasty and the king's two bodies in a variety of visual and literary forms, the chapter investigates how the extra-marital relationships of Charles II demanded a different publicisation of family. The focus on the royal body as a site of political strategy was indicative of a new monarchy based on 'calculations, interest and desire' rather than assumptions of 'patriarchy and love' (p. 223). For Sharpe, the open sexual liaisons of the king reflected Charles II's deliberate rejection of the ties between traditional government and virtue, as well as conventional codes of marriage and fatherhood. A difficulty of the chapter is showing precisely the link between this new political theory and action, especially in respect to Charles II's return to traditional methods of representation by the end of his reign. Still, the use of Restoration drama, art and literature to investigate the bond of affection based on indulgence between the king and his subjects shows the richness of an interdisciplinary approach to the evidence.

The collection ends with a chapter that fuses together the two parts of the text – 'Reading authority' and 'Representing rule' – through a case study of the life of James II. Sharpe traces the different approaches to the genre of life writing from the Renaissance model of morality to the emphasis on character by the end of the 17th century. More specifically, the author draws upon Ian Donaldson's methodology in approaching life writing as a text that takes into account the complexities of authorship, audience and interpretation. Likewise, John Guy's recognition of the multiplicity of performance and representation in his biography of Sir Thomas More forms an additional noteworthy element to the genre of life writing for Sharpe. The combination of these two approaches allows the author to offer a critique of traditional royal biography, particularly the failure to include royal writings or to read these works as complex representations of monarchy. It is this concern with interpreting the public and private elements of the king's two bodies, as well as the various exchanges and negotiations of power in the life and afterlife of a monarch that Sharpe argues is essential to royal life writing. By applying these various approaches to the autobiographical, memoir and history writing of James II, Sharpe surveys the several images that the king wished to present of himself; the audience that he was writing for; and the interplay of various texts and translations within the king's own life writing. Sharpe's focus on James II's military memoir and devotional works creates a vivid account of the centrality of royal writings in reconstructing the human and sacred elements of monarchical authority and representation.

The text as a whole presents a rich and detailed interdisciplinary analysis of changes in early modern English political culture. While the title of the volume focuses upon early modern England, a clearer awareness of 'Britain' would arguably have enriched this collection, above all in relation to the Stuart dynasty. Nonetheless, a key strength of the text is Sharpe's effort to understand the reciprocal relationship of power and the reception of authority. Indeed, the chapters raise significant questions about the extent to which monarchical authority permeated popular culture. Although the author is not always able to answer these questions fully, by accepting the limitations of empirical evidence and adopting a 'historicised approach', Sharpe deepens our understanding of early modern mentalities. As sadly one of Sharpe's final works, it is possible to argue that the text should be considered as a representation of the scholar throughout his career. (6) The selection of chapters was undoubtedly deliberate to present a detailed account of Sharpe's interests, his methodology, and the various audiences that he has written for. The inability to separate culture from politics, or the genres of History from Literature in the various chapters would appear to be equally intentional. In this way, his awareness of audience is apparent, as he both displays and promotes his interdisciplinary method as essential to an understanding of early modern England. It is the author's multifaceted approach to texts, images and representations of authority which is the fundamental message of the collection and, for that matter, from Sharpe himself.

Notes

1. For a general introduction to the ideas behind the 'Cultural Turn', see Lynn Hunt, 'Introduction:

- history, culture and text', in *The New Cultural History*, ed. Lynn Hunt (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA, 1989), pp. 1–24.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. See for instance: Kevin Sharpe, *Remapping Early Modern England: The Culture of Seventeenth-Century Politics* (Cambridge, 2000).[Back to \(2\)](#)
 3. Sharpe, *Remapping Early Modern England*; Kevin Sharpe, *Reading Revolutions: The Politics of Reading in Early Modern England* (New Haven, CT, 2000); *Reading, Society and Politics in Early Modern England*, ed. Kevin Sharpe and Steven N. Zwicker (Cambridge, 2003).[Back to \(3\)](#)
 4. Avihu Zakia, *History and Apocalypse in the Puritan Migration to America* (Cambridge, 1992).[Back to \(4\)](#)
 5. See for instance: Andrew Lacey, *The Cult of King Charles the Martyr* (Woodbridge, 2003); Laura Lunger Knoppers, 'Reviving the Martyr King: Charles I as Jacobite icon', in *The Royal Image: Representations of Charles I*, ed. in Thomas Corns (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 263–87.[Back to \(5\)](#)
 6. Another publication posthumously printed was Kevin Sharpe, *Rebranding Rule: The Restoration and Revolution Monarchy, 1660–1715* (New Haven, CT, 2013).[Back to \(6\)](#)
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