

# EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



Christopher Ivic, *The Subject of Britain 1603–25* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020). 242pp. ISBN 978 0 7190 880 4.

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As I began reading Christopher Ivic's absorbing and timely book *The Subject of Britain 1603–25* I recalled the concern expressed by Jane Gallop in 2007 that the imperative to historicise might imperil the practice of close reading central to the discipline of literary studies, especially as taught by new critics against which new historicism defined itself.<sup>1</sup> Her concern has proved unfounded. Scholars like Ivic formed under this imperative have not lost the skill of close reading; on the contrary, they deploy it deftly to tease out subtleties of meaning in texts frequently treated summarily or dismissed by historians. In Ivic's case these are the texts occasioned by, as they responded to, the cultural as well as political upheaval of the accession to the English throne of a foreign, specifically Scottish Stuart king. The book's title is itself illustrative of the literary scholar's sense of verbal ambiguity: the 'subject' refers at once to the topic of 'Britain' and to those human 'subjects' obliged to negotiate a radical change in their sense of themselves individually and collectively, 'seriously rethinking their place within a multination polity' (p. 5). As Ivic firmly tells us at the outset, he offers no 'teleological narrative', indeed no central argument but rather an examination of 'the complex and contradictory ways in which the heterogeneous writing of Britain put in place new ideologies and new ways of thinking about collective and individual identities within the context of the island's increasingly intersecting and intermingling peoples and cultures' (p. 3) — a context which was as difficult for Scots subjects to negotiate as it was for English subjects. Ivic's refusal of an overarching narrative or argument allows readers to appreciate the contested and confusing immediacy of the historical moment, which finds echo today as the union of England and Scotland comes again under strain.

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<sup>1</sup> Jane Gallop, 'The Historicization of Literary Studies and the Fate of Close Reading', *Profession* (2007), 181–86.

The first set of texts on which Ivic focuses critical attention is the writing known as succession literature, that is, those various texts — and there are many kinds — written around (in both senses) the succession of James. Though the word ‘literature’ is used in this generic sense I found myself thinking about the notion of the ‘literary’, which has recently come to the fore again in early modern studies. Indeed, the complexity and ambiguity Ivic’s eagle eye discerns in these texts have been associated in the past with the notion of the ‘literary’ as a term of critical appreciation. He points out, for instance, ambiguous uses of ‘we’ and ‘us’ in representations of the collective identity of subjects under James, and telling omissions of the name of ‘Britain’ or uses of it to refer to different geographical unities. Yet there are surely differences between these complex ambiguities and those we find in ‘literary’ texts? How might those differences be described? Is it a question of self-consciousness? Are the ambiguities and complexities of the texts studied here an occasional expression of felt difficulties, rather than consciously designed? Though beyond Ivic’s immediate concerns, I would have liked some discussion of these questions as well of the (linked) question of readership — intended and actual — and the expressed purposes, where stated, of the texts that he analyses so well. These were surely meant for discerning readers who might, however, have been looking for something other than ambiguity and complexity. Perhaps indeed they were looking, on the contrary, for clarity and counsel as to how to think through this difficult transition.

That there is a distinction to be made is borne out in the second chapter, which focuses on relevant writing by three recognised literary authors: Michael Drayton, Samuel Daniel and Ben Jonson. For all three the accession of James afforded an opportunity not only ‘to reimagine or reinforce their sense of self, especially as they came into contact with new and enabling patrons’ (p. 53), but also to assume precisely the role of poet as instructor/counsellor. Ivic shows how this is done through the frequently dismissed form of the panegyric, which he argues (like others before him) is more than mere self-serving flattery. In these texts ideological work appears more self-consciously controlled than in the texts discussed in chapter one. Thus, though Drayton’s ‘gratulatory poem’ of 1603 ‘struggles’, like the texts discussed in chapter one, ‘to articulate coherently a sense of cultural or national union’ (p. 64), his writing also exhibits a ‘conspicuous resistance to a British identity’ (p. 65), ‘reinscribing and reworking the inherited fictions of Britain and Britishness’ (p. 66). More interesting still is Ivic’s insight into the way that this poem ‘seeks to place limits on a monarch’ with explicitly expressed absolutist ideas (p. 58). For this suggests how, under the guise of the panegyric, Drayton consciously assumes the role of counsellor to the king as, in a retrospective poem of 1627, he declares himself instructor to the nation: ‘I taught his title to this Ile in rime’ (65). At the opening of a second section Ivic (quoting James

Garrison) confirms that 'instruction of the monarch' was the 'serious purpose' authors found for the form of the panegyric (p. 68). His focus here is the still more evident 'commitment' to this 'role' of Samuel Daniel, whose 'complex *Panegyrike*' 'boldly cautions the monarch not to alter the political body of which he is now head' (p. 72). Here the question of readership, which is neglected in the first chapter, is scrupulously addressed by Ivic who examines not only the text itself but also its material production, first as a manuscript 'delivered' to the king, and then in print, both in gifted folio editions and smaller editions aimed at a broader community. Book history is here not an end in itself — as it is so often today — but a means to further understanding of Daniel's contestatory politics.

A contrast between Daniel and Jonson as writers of court masques leads into the final section on Ben Jonson, who according to Ivic seizes on the occasion of the arrival of James to fashion for himself the role of court poet to the new monarch and a national identity in accordance with the king's aspirations. Ivic claims that Jonson assumes the role of counsellor poet, like Drayton and Daniel, only to produce a very different vision of nationhood, which, he suggests, is bound up with Jonson's confessional identity as Catholic. If, however, the contrast between the different visions of nationhood is well made, it is not possible to map the Catholic/Protestant divide over the British/English divide. Indeed, probably the most important work on the Anglo-Saxon roots of a specifically English identity comes from the pen of the Jesuit activist Richard Verstegan, who is mentioned earlier by Ivic (p. 82). It is perhaps as much, if not more Jonson's Scottish ancestry that motivated him 'to imagine his place as a subject of Britain' (p. 90). There may too have been more ambivalence towards James than Ivic is willing to admit given the anti-Scottish views expressed in *Eastward Ho* to which Jonson contributed — an awkward point for Ivic's argument that is shuffled away in a footnote (pp. 110–11n206).

In the third chapter Ivic examines tracts written in support of James's project for union, specifically those by the Scotsman David Hume and the Englishman Francis Bacon. Engaging closely with previous discussions he makes a cogent case for both men as not merely self-interested king pleasers, but advisers who take distinct positions on union, differing from James as well as from each other. Strikingly, while Hume is shown to offer practical means to develop between the Scots and English 'a sense of national belonging, community and neighbourliness' (p. 122), Bacon is shown to be more theoretical, grounding the idea of union of peoples in 'speculative science' (p. 132). The chapter closes with a brief consideration of how 'British identity formation' was served by the colonising of Ireland, where 'Anglo-Scottish sameness or Britishness was being

promoted across the Irish sea' (p. 139), rather as European identity formation was served through the colonising of lands across the Atlantic Ocean.<sup>2</sup>

The jewel in Ivic's crown is the fourth and final chapter, which revisits Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Initially, it is not the play itself but the 'readings' '*Macbeth* continues to solicit' that he describes as 'complex and contradictory' (p. 155) — as he earlier describes succession literature and the writing of literary authors. But once this initial throat-clearing is done he proceeds to show that the play itself is complex and contradictory in 'reassessing and reconfiguring the concept, indeed the language of nationhood' (p. 158). His focus is the many, diverse 'political keywords' (p. 170), which reveal different and conflicting forms of nationalism, the implied Scottish 'ethnic nationalism' (p. 178) represented by Macbeth being set against the implied 'incorporating union' represented by Macduff and Malcolm (p. 189). That the nationalism of Macbeth summons complex responses is highlighted by a series of questions to which Ivic does not seek to provide definitive answers (p. 181). This complexity extends to the nationalism of Macduff, notably as expressed through his use of the word 'Birthdome'. Ivic discusses the possible meanings of this Shakespearean neologism which, he observes, 'bears witness to the historical pressures attending the concept of nationhood at the time of the play's production' (p. 176), but he does not mention what surely lies behind it, namely, the administrative neologism, *post-nati* coined to designate those born after the accession on both sides of the border. James's wish to see mutual naturalisation was recommended by the Anglo-Scottish commission set up in 1604, but their recommendations were vigorously contested, notably in a parliamentary debate of February 1607/8 as a speech by the Lord Chancellor 'touching the *Post-nati*', published in 1609, highlights. The language of the Lord Chancellor's concluding affirmation clearly indicates how Shakespeare's coinage engages with the new administrative coinage: 'hee that is borne an intire and perfect subject, ought by Reason and Lawe, to have all the freedoms, priviledges, and benefites pertaining to his **Birth-right** in all the Kinges **Dominions**; and such are all the *Post-nati* in *England* and *Scotland*' (bold font mine).<sup>3</sup> This finds echo in the *OED*'s gloss to Shakespeare's word (which is the only instance given): 'possessions or privileges to which a person is entitled by birth; inheritance, birthright' (as quoted by Ivic, p. 175). Tellingly, 'our ...Birthdome' is used by Macduff (not Malcolm [Ivic, p. 176]) to refer to Scotland, asserting what the Lord Chancellor dismissively calls 'the inconvenience of this imaginary local allegiance' — an inconvenience that Shakespeare suggests on the contrary is of visceral importance. His coinage, that is, pushes against the implications

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<sup>2</sup> Mark Greengrass, *Christendom Destroyed. Europe 1517–1648* (London: Penguin, 2015), pp. 151–183.

<sup>3</sup> *The Speech of the Lord Chancellor of England....touching the Post-nati* (London, 1609), p.103.

of the new category of *post-nati* — the dissolution of identities grounded on national boundaries in place and the new alternatives either of a theoretically conceived, but not internalised, common identity as British (a new form of identity that for Bacon was to be produced by the mingling of the two peoples and nations [Ivic, pp. 178–9]), or of an as yet (indeed still) inconceivable dual identity as both English and Scottish. Alerting his audience (including perhaps James) to the crucial importance of a national ‘local allegiance’ prior to and in tension with the change of kingdoms, this complicates still further the play’s engagement with ‘the need to redefine nationhood in the wake of James’s accession to the throne’ (p. 184).

Throughout the book, as here, the renegotiation of identities attendant on the accession of James is explored primarily through a focus on political keywords. If this is certainly helpful, it does mean that other more material expressions, or manifestations, of national identity are sidelined or ignored: dress, customs, language, and ‘behaviour’, for instance. It is the ‘behaviour’ of ‘Englishmen’ that has contaminated Malcolm according to the figure of Macduff in one of Shakespeare’s sources (quoted Ivic, p. 180). It is defining national behaviour too that Macbeth evokes when he contemptuously bids ‘false Thanes’ ‘fly’ ‘And mingle with English epicures’ (quoted Ivic, p. 178), a description which may have resonated for James with his perception of English courtiers.

There might too have been discussion of another fault line — that within England between the North and the South — which is comparable to that within Scotland between highland and lowland which, as Ivic shows, was one of the stakes in the ideological and political negotiations between the two nations. This regional fault line is pointed up in Shakespeare’s Henry IV plays in which the Earl of Northumberland forms an alliance with the Scots against the English king and then takes refuge in Scotland. It is pointed up too through the figure of Siward, also Earl of Northumberland, who, in one of the sources of *Macbeth*, is represented as kingmaker in Scotland, as Ivic notes (p. 184). It is a fault line that, like the fault line between England and Scotland, has re-emerged to prominence in recent years, indeed recent months. But perhaps this requires another book, another subject for the nuanced thoroughness with which the subject of Britain is treated here.