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STRATEGY AND MOTIVATION IN THE GUNPOWDER PLOT*

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ABSTRACT. *This article seeks to develop our understanding of the 1605 Gunpowder Plot by asking a number of elementary questions. Were the plotters terrorists in any meaningful sense? Were they religious fanatics, as the Jacobean state understandably chose to portray them after the event? Was their plan built on a misguided fantasy of widespread support for a Catholic insurrection, or does the Plot perhaps have a practical coherence that lies obscured by the drama of the projected strike against Westminster? How does evidence for coherent planning square with the strong desire for revenge, running through so much of the surviving testimony? Through answers to these questions, we begin to see the Gunpowder plotters as men engaged in a calculated and demonstrably pragmatic attempt to engineer a change in regime. Their planning was robust, and to the point, while the emotional power of revenge was channelled creatively by the ringleaders. The article concludes that the odds against success were long, but not impossible.*

There is little meat on old bones. Studies of the Gunpowder Plot sprawl across four centuries, discussing personalities, examining processes, analysing investigations, trials, executions, espionage, and, of course, commemoration. Works published to mark the quatercentenary of the Plot in 2005 succeed in mapping out some fresh terrain, but for all their welcome insights into matters as diverse as the career of Guy Fawkes's gaoler, the tradition of Bonfire Night in Lewes and the literary merit of the interrogation record, they never quite overcome a sense that the underlying story is an old one, and a worn one, and one that holds only limited appeal.[1] This perception is itself far from new. Writing nearly forty years ago, Joel Hurstfield regretted that certain aspects of research into the Plot had already been monopolized by conspiracy theorists. Here, he suggested, were

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[1] Fiona Bengtsen, *Sir William Waad: lieutenant of the Tower and the Gunpowder Plot* (Victoria, BC, 2005); Brenda Buchanan et al., *Gunpowder Plots: a celebration of 400 years of bonfire night* (London, 2005); Alice Hogge, *God's secret agents: Queen Elizabeth's forbidden priests and the hatching of the Gunpowder Plot* (London, 2005); James Sharpe, *Remember, remember the fifth of November: Guy Fawkes and the Gunpowder Plot* (London, 2005); James Travers, *Gunpowder: the players behind the Plot* (London, 2005). Anticipating the anniversary, but of particular interest, is A. W. R. E. Okines, 'Why was there so little government reaction to the Gunpowder Plot?', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 55 (2004), pp. 275–92.

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topics fit only to while away a wet afternoon.[2] The actions of 'terrorists', out on what Hugh Trevor-Roper once called 'the idiot fringe of the indebted gentry', may nowadays raise a shudder, or perhaps a nervous chuckle, but they do not appear to demand detailed reconsideration.[3]

A stale debate, however, permits false assumptions to stand unchallenged and encourages the survival of dubious conclusions. This article seeks to develop an understanding of the Plot by asking a number of perhaps rather elementary questions. Were the plotters unthinking fanatics, as the Jacobean state quite naturally chose to portray them after the event? Were they 'terrorists', in a modern sense? What did motivate them? Assumptions are easy to draw, indeed they are far too easy. Trevor-Roper's 'fringe' might indeed have been burdened by debt – though they had money to spend, on gunpowder, on weapons and on armour when the need arose – but were their actions really idiotic, or does the Plot perhaps have a pragmatic coherence that lies obscured by the lurid glare of the means to an end, in the shadow of all the attention paid to Fawkes and his barrels of gunpowder? Finally, if there is evidence to suggest such coherence, how does that evidence square with the strong and emotional desire for revenge, coursing through so much of the surviving testimony?

I

Reflecting on the earl of Essex's botched rebellion of February 1601, Francis Bacon argued that it was 'a vaine thing to thinke to search the rootes and first motions of treasons, which are knowen to none but God that discernes the heart, and the Divell that gives the instigation'.[4] Bacon was, of course, exaggerating for effect. Motives can be detected through actions, rhetoric, and the interrogation process; there is indeed no shortage of self-declared motives in the Gunpowder Plot. Here, as with other aspects of this conspiracy, the real problem lies not in identification, but rather in easy generalization. There is a temptation to gloss over differences, to attribute to every 'identikit' conspirator similar ambitions, and similar dreams. But the motives that carry people into high treason are always personal; character, outlook, and ambition differ from one individual to another. While every Gunpowder plotter hankered, to some degree, after a restoration of Catholicism, some were swayed by loyalty of friendship, some became involved because financial ruin left them careless as to their fate, and some acted out of chagrin, witnessing the frustration of personal political advancement.

That individuality was both exploited and accentuated by a pragmatic process of selection. Robert Catesby, the Northamptonshire gentleman who masterminded the treason, was a natural and gifted team-builder. Having devised plans

[2] J. Hurstfield, 'A retrospect, Gunpowder Plot and the politics of dissent', in Hurstfield, *Freedom, corruption and government in Elizabethan England* (London, 1973), pp. 327–51, at pp. 340–1.

[3] H. R. Trevor-Roper, *Historical essays* (London, 1957), p. 109.

[4] *A declaration of the practises & treasons attempted and committed by Robert late earle of Essex and his complices* (London, 1601), sig. Br–v.

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to blow up the House of Lords and to capitalize on the resulting confusion, Catesby was obliged to share his ideas in order to turn a dream into reality, and the ways in which he did so are revealing. Catesby assembled skills, identifying different attributes in the people he approached. Unusually, in the company of early modern traitors, he showed from the start a sure touch in selection; his first two recruits set the pattern. One was his cousin Thomas Winter, dogged, misogynistic, a good man with both a sword and a pen, and as the attorney general Sir Edward Coke conceded at Winter's eventual trial 'vniuersallye learned'.[5] The other was John Wright, a quick-tempered Yorkshireman; wealthy, and more the man of action than the man of letters.[6] Catesby chose wisely, for Winter and Wright, two very different characters, complemented his own mercurial leadership qualities; for all their differences they were both experienced in intrigue, utterly loyal, and good lieutenants in their adopted cause. Moreover, they could keep secrets.

Catesby's genius for selection is particularly well illustrated by his next two recruits. Thomas Percy, Wright's brother-in-law, was ten years older than his colleagues, a distant cousin and estate officer to the earl of Northumberland. Percy offered both maturity and an insight into the mind of their principal target. He had served as a go-between, carrying letters from his master to King James VI in Scotland before 1603 as part of those risky exercises in mutual reassurance known as the 'Secret Correspondence', and now he felt let down by the king's failure to grant immediate religious toleration to the English Catholics.[7] Crucially, he was a gentleman pensioner, with an entrée to the heart of the Court. Percy offered a respectable front when the plotters rented first a building adjacent to the House of Lords, and then a ground-floor vault directly underneath it, where the gunpowder barrels, and the iron bars, the hammers, the mauls, and the stones were eventually stacked.[8]

Today's bonfire caricature of the other new conspirator, Guy Fawkes, is profoundly misleading; Fawkes was an altogether more complex figure. His career included service both at home and abroad in the discreet office of household steward, he had a sound grasp of doctrinal argument, and he was skilled in covert negotiations at the highest level.[9] A soldier, Fawkes boasted personal experience

[5] Coke's words in *Les reportes del cases in Camera Stellata, 1593–1609, from the original manuscript of John Hawarde*, ed. W. P. Baildon (London, 1894), p. 254. For Winter's misogyny see his slightly ambiguous letter to John Grant, 31 Aug. [1605], National Archives, State Papers (SP) 14/15/44.

[6] Winter had to compose a quarrel between Wright and an unidentified gentleman, see the declaration by Henry Garnett, 13 Mar. 1606, SP 14/19/41.

[7] On Percy's earlier career see Mark Nicholls, *Investigating Gunpowder Plot* (Manchester, 1991), pp. 97–103, 113–14.

[8] Details of the 'mine' are given in an anonymous contemporary list at British Library, Egerton MS 2877, fo. 163.

[9] Fawkes served as steward to Lord Montagu and Sir William Stanley. See Montagu to the earl of Dorset, 13 Nov. 1605, SP 14/216/86; Sir Thomas Edmondes to Cecil, 25 Nov. 1605, MSS of the marquess of Salisbury at Hatfield House MS 227, p. 131. For his grasp of theology see, for example, Waad's letter to Cecil of 7 Nov. 1605, Hatfield MS 112/164. Perhaps this was acquired through

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of siege warfare, having fought under Spanish forces in the Low Countries; he knew how to dig a mine. He was, it seems, a likeable man, 'full of mony': his fellow plotters all spoke well of him.[10] Above all, however, because he had not lived in England for ten years, Fawkes was unknown in Jacobean London. Anonymity is a great asset. The unidentified conspirator is able to go about his business unremarked, and any alias that he adopts, however unimaginative, is likely to withstand scrutiny. As James VI and I himself remarked, when drawing up questions for a prisoner still calling himself 'John Johnson' on 6 November: 'I can never yet hear of any man that knows him.'[11] Here, then, is a potent partnership within the 'team': Percy poses credibly as the Master, Fawkes, equally plausibly, as the Servant.

Catesby's team-building talents extended to the choice of secondary conspirators outside this 'inner ring'. From May 1604, when Percy and Fawkes were recruited, until November 1605, eight men were brought into the Plot, either – as with Christopher Wright, John's brother, and Catesby's servant Thomas Bate – to help with the logistics of tunnelling under Westminster, or – as in the cases of Ambrose Rookwood of Stanningfield in Suffolk, and Francis Tresham of Rushton, Northamptonshire – to provide money for the purchase of gunpowder and military supplies. The point to bear in mind, again, is that Catesby's canny search for men with different skills and resources resulted in a group which came to the Plot with different levels of enthusiasm, and prompted by subtly differing motives. If most of the secondary conspirators shared anything, it was ignorance. Catesby withheld information selectively, and the naivety of these men when they faced the wretched aftermath of captivity, and interrogation, and certain death, is at once profound and sad. Some never really seemed to grasp the enormity of their crimes. Ambrose Rookwood, already fatally compromised in treason and engaged in open rebellion, scrupled at mere theft. He declined on the night of 5 November to take some horses from the stables of Warwick Castle, 'seing he was so well horsed as he was … he meant not to adventure himselfe in stealing of any'.[12] Sir Everard Digby was initially confident that his bare knowledge of a failed plot, and involvement in a small-scale rebellion, might be interpreted generously.[13] Though swiftly disabused, he believed to the end that his offence of rebellion was justified by its goals. Buoyed up by ideals of honour, and perhaps by hopes of winning a gentleman's death by the axe, he pleaded guilty at his trial and, with a flourish of the hat, sought forgiveness from the commissioners at the

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Fawkes's 'kinsman' Harrington, a northerner, and a soldier turned priest, mentioned by Edmondes in his letter.

[10] Notably young Everard Digby. Digby's letters smuggled out of the Tower, and discovered after the death of his son, are printed in Thomas Barlow, ed., *The Gunpowder-treason, with a discourse of the manner of its discovery* (London, 1679), pp. 229–63; see especially p. 250. See also an information touching Fawkes, n.d., SP 14/16/25.

[11] Interrogatories for 'John Johnson' compiled by the king, 6 Nov. 1605, SP 14/216/17, 18.

[12] Examination of Ambrose Rookwood, 2 Dec. 1605, SP 14/216/136.

[13] Digby to Cecil, n.d., SP 14/17/10. Travers, *Gunpowder*, pp. 114–17.

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end of the day. This at least was granted. 'God forgive you', chorused Robert Cecil and his colleagues, 'and wee doe.'[14] There was some relief to be found in carefully nurtured fantasy and delusion. These displays of 'innocence', however, highlight one strength in Catesby's planning: with secrecy so important, many members of his team simply did not need to know every detail.

Given the limited pool of talent on which Catesby could draw, it is unsurprising that the team-building process, though skillfully handled, was never perfect. In recruiting Francis Tresham the man-manager finally misread his man, with catastrophic results. Tresham, frightened and angry at being tricked into taking an oath of secrecy, in all likelihood sent an anonymous warning letter to his brother-in-law the Catholic peer Lord Monteagle.[15] As is well known, Monteagle passed on the letter to members of the privy council, a disclosure which led, more or less directly, to the discovery of the Plot. Less obviously, the process created avoidable tensions close to the heart of the treason: the recruitment of Thomas Percy, in particular, weakened Catesby's authority within the group. Catesby and Percy were both dominant figures, and small teams seldom thrive under two leaders. Percy was older, and better connected, but he was also absent for long periods, going about his master's business in the Percy family's northern heartland. His remarkable surviving letters to the earl of Northumberland show both his talents as an estate officer and his ability to separate out different strands in a complicated life.[16] Percy was always quicker to promise than to deliver. Recognizing the need for money, he guaranteed large sums out of Northumberland's Michaelmas rents. This financial payday, however, fell very late, and that inability to assist in due season seems, reading between the lines, to have rankled. So it was that Catesby turned to wealthy men in the summer of 1605, and he approached them without telling Percy. Survivors confessed that both ringleaders had enjoyed liberty to bring in recruits on their own, but Percy's obvious shock, when he discovered on 5 November that Ambrose Rookwood was in on the secret, is instructive. 'Uppon my Soule,' Rookwood remembered him saying, 'I had thought no man had bene acquainted with it but such as I had knowen.'[17]

II

Effective team building, though, is all very well. However impressive, gathered talent is simply wasted in an impossible cause. Where is the compelling logic behind the Gunpowder plotters' strategy, a strategy often dismissed as obscure, unrealistic, or downright silly by historians of the treason?[18] At first sight, the

[14] *A true and perfect relation of the whole proceedings against the late most barbarous traitors, Garnet a Iesuite, and his confederats* (London, 1606), sig. N3r–N3v.

[15] See Nicholls, *Investigating Gunpowder Plot*, p. 214. The original letter is SP 14/216/2.

[16] Nicholls, *Investigating Gunpowder Plot*, pp. 150–1.

[17] Examination of Ambrose Rookwood, 10 Dec. 1605, SP 14/17/30.

[18] For Geoffrey Elton, the Plot was simply 'absurd' (*The English* (Oxford, 1992), p. 148). Barry Coward pointedly asks 'What were the motives of the conspirators?' before arguing that 'the extant

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plotters' plans do seem woefully imprecise, but imprecision in another light can be seen as flexibility. It rather depends on the questions being asked, and on who is in a position to answer. Three men in the 'inner ring' were killed in rebellion. Catesby, Percy, and Wright were all mortally wounded in a skirmish at Holbeach House in Staffordshire on the morning of 8 November, and were never subjected to interrogation. As the earl of Northumberland realized, their deaths set some questions beyond resolution: 'Noen but he', he wrote of Thomas Percy, 'can shew me clere as the day, or darke as the night.'[19] The deaths at Holbeach left only Fawkes, the least well informed of the five, and Thomas Winter, whose detailed confessions remain our principal sources for the planning and development of the conspiracy.[20] A tedious debate over the authenticity of Winter's longest confession has obscured more interesting contradictions and deliberate evasions in the text, for this is a very personal story. In writing a confession, Winter had his own agenda: to save his life, if he could, but more plausibly to place blame upon those already dead, to excuse his friends and family (Winter never mentions his two brothers, both involved in the Plot and rebellion) and to shield Catholic priests working in England (Winter does not refer to any such priest in his narrative).[21]

Of course, the core strategy, as it evolved over time, was swiftly established. Initially, the plan envisaged a devastating blow against parliament in session, followed by rebellion. In the spring of 1604 – a point too often overlooked – Catesby could not target James himself with any measure of certainty. Only in the autumn did it become reasonably clear that the king would use the initial sitting after prorogation to receive articles agreed by the Commissioners for the Union between England and Scotland, and clarification on this central fact seems to have transformed talk into action, spurring the frantic digging of a mine through the foundations of the House of Lords and a number of strategic discussions over Christmas.[22] At that point, the Gunpowder Plot assumed its final, familiar form. Who could replace the dead king? Setting aside as impractical a scheme hatched by Thomas Percy to abduct James's second son, Charles, duke of York, and some still less viable ambitions to secure the English-born Princess Mary, the conspirators planned to seize the king's eldest daughter, the nine-year-old Princess

historical evidence does not support conclusive answers' (*The Stuart age: England, 1603–1714* (3rd edn, London, 2003), p. 129). In the course of one of the most important reassessments of the Plot in recent years, Jenny Wormald suggests that the plotters 'hardly seem to have known what would have happened' after the explosion, 'Gunpowder, treason, and Scots', *Journal of British Studies*, 24 (1985), pp. 164–5.

[19] Northumberland to the privy council, n.d. [10 Nov. 1605], SP 14/216/225.

[20] Winter's account of the domestic treason, dated 23 Nov. 1605, and surviving in autograph draft as Hatfield MS 113/54, is significantly supplemented by his subsequent disclosure of the Spanish dimension, dated 26 Nov., in Hatfield MS 112/91.

[21] S. R. Gardiner in *What Gunpowder Plot was* (London, 1897), p. 74n. For Winter's motives in writing his confessions in the Tower see Nicholls, *Investigating Gunpowder Plot*, pp. 27–9; Nicholls, 'Discovering Gunpowder Plot: the *King's Book* and the dissemination of news', *Recusant History*, 28 (2007), pp. 397–415.

[22] As detailed graphically in Thomas Winter's principal confession, Hatfield MS 113/54.

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Elizabeth, who was then living in the household of John, Lord Harington at Combe Abbey, near Coventry, close to their midland power base. Once Elizabeth was in their hands, they planned to proclaim her queen. To this end, Catesby and Digby arranged a day's hunting for the Catholic midlands gentry, at Dunchurch in Northamptonshire on 5 November. In the new political climate following peace with Catholic Spain there was scope to raise a regiment in England to fight alongside Spanish troops in Flanders, and the hunt seems to have doubled as a recruiting exercise, adding a distinctly military flavour to the gathering. Catesby also stockpiled armour and weapons in his house at Ashby St Ledgers. After the great explosion the plotters planned to gallop to Dunchurch, where they would raise revolt and lead their ready-assembled army on Combe. When the attack on Westminster was frustrated, Catesby and his colleagues hastened to Dunchurch regardless, and unsuccessfully tried to convince their audience that both king and ministers were indeed dead. Appalled at the very thought of rebellion, most of the huntsmen took to their horses and rode away as fast as they could.

The plotters' next move is instructive. They could simply have run for their lives. They had fresh horses, a day's head start, and a knowledge of the northern and western counties. But they did not run. Rather, they considered their options. According to surviving accounts of that evening in the Northamptonshire countryside the plotters 's[h]utte the dore unto' their servants, held a hasty conference, and then set out on rebellion, compelling many of those servants to ride along by levelling pistols at them – or so the reluctant recruits testified later.[23] The weapons were brought from storage. A shepherd 'comeing very late from his folde' saw firearms being carried out of Bates's house and into a barn, to be loaded on to a cart.[24] Even though they knew the king to be alive, the conspirators hoped that their appeal to the sensitivities of the English heartland might yet carry the day, or allow them a bargaining position. Certainly, they were mistaken. The force never seems to have numbered more than eighty, and by the denouement at Holbeach only fourteen were left; by that point most servants had fled, and these desertions had not been balanced through local recruitment. As Digby lamented afterwards, 'not one man cam in to take [our] parte thoughe [we] expected for verie many'.[25] But the point is not so much that the plotters got it wrong, rather, that they had a plan; that they believed, or hoped, that this plan was sufficiently robust to survive so fundamental a setback. Their actions on the evening of 5 November set the dramatic first strike at Westminster into perspective.

What, though, of their intentions for Elizabeth? Surviving plotters were repeatedly asked to name the man who would have ruled through her, as her de facto and – perhaps in time – as her legal protector. The notion that Catesby and his friends, mere gentry, would assume this role themselves was never

[23] Examination of William Handye, 9 Nov. 1605, SP 14/216/67.
[24] Examination of John Myles, 7 Nov. 1605, SP 14/16/28i.
[25] Examination of Sir Everard Digby, 2 Dec. 1605, SP 14/216/135.

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entertained. Suspicion therefore fell on Catholic noblemen and, in particular, on Northumberland.[26] The investigators, however, failed in their search for truly incriminating evidence. While willing to work with anyone sympathetic to their cause, the plotters well understood the havoc that their blow would wreak; prudence, they said, insisted that they should wait and see who survived the explosion, and how those survivors reacted.[27] If what they said was true, and it may well have been, that tells us something else about the Plot. It again suggests a prevailing pragmatism. Common sense ruled out any decision on a protector until surviving potential candidates revealed their hands.

Catesby's plan was a gamble. Protestant England stood on watch for Catholic risings. The chances are that the Gunpowder plotters, in killing the king, would have roused the entire country against them and against their fellow Catholics, the innocent majority with the complicit minority. The chances are that either Prince Henry or Prince Charles would have been proposed as a convincing successor to their father. Having listened to Guy Fawkes's initial confessions, Edward Coke spotted the obvious weakness: 'Seing the Catholiques were fewer in number then the protestants', he wrote, in a list of questions, 'what consultation had you for there safety, against the protestants in England, and Scotland.' Coke could draw only one conclusion, and put it to the prisoner that there had been an expectation of 'forrein aide'.[28]

Fawkes emphatically rejected that inference. Under interrogation he began to hint at the plotters' thinking, their recipe for successful rebellion: they had intended to seize the initiative offered by surprise and exploit discontent of any kind, political, religious, economic, so converting a minority into a majority. The people, of themselves, would have come together, Fawkes insisted; the plotters had planned, he said, to appeal to mass sentiment: they would have been 'glad to have drawne any of what relligion soever unto them … they meant to have made use of all the discontented people of England'.[29] Discontent might indeed take many forms, but the plotters had regarded that variety as an asset to their cause. They had prepared a proclamation of Elizabeth making no mention of religious alteration.[30] They had proposed to combine under the vague banner of 'Freedom from all manner of Slavery', but also, if Everard Digby is to be believed, under a more specific pledge to end 'Wardships and all Monopolies'.[31] Here they turned, of course, to the bitter parliamentary debates over monopolies in 1601 and on wardships in 1604.[32] Perhaps there was also an echo, in Digby's words, of

[26] See Nicholls, *Investigating Gunpowder Plot*, chs. 11–13.

[27] For example Rookwood's examination on 2 Dec. 1605, SP 14/216/136.

[28] Interrogatories for Guy Fawkes, n.d. [?7 Nov. 1605], SP 14/16/38.

[29] Examination of Guy Fawkes, 7 Nov. 1605, SP 14/216/37.

[30] Examination of Guy Fawkes, 8 Nov. 1605, SP 14/216/49, and in Fawkes's confession as printed in *His majesties speach in this last session of Parliament* … (London, 1605), sig. H3v.

[31] Barlow, *Gunpowder-treason*, p. 250.

[32] Pauline Croft, 'Wardship in the parliament of 1604', *Parliamentary History*, 2 (1983), pp. 39–48.

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Robert Persons's 1590s call for social reform in the wake of regime change, which had circulated widely among English Catholics.[33] The plotters had also intended to recruit prisoners in the Tower, men like the puritan Lord Grey and the Elizabethan favourites Sir Walter Ralegh and Lord Cobham, none of them known for their Catholic sympathies, but all plausibly portrayed as victims of the new regime.[34] Again the plan assumes an inclusive, pragmatic aspect, tapping into enduring grievances of English men and women. In these statements, the plotters stood a long way from madcap extremism.

Is any of this credible? Would rebellion and civil war ever have sprung from this coalition of discontent? That was always unlikely, and at first sight it appears that men who had so long played a traditional exiles' game of exaggerating support at home for the benefit of foreign ambassadors and courts began, over time, to believe their own propaganda. Consider the response at Dunchurch, when Catesby told the Catholic military gentry, men crucial to his plan, that the king was dead. Most did not trust him; most ran away. Consider the speed with which county forces in Warwickshire and Worcestershire mobilized and co-operated against a band of rebels. Consider, too, the events near Hewell Grange, one of the Catholic houses that sheltered those insurgents. There the rebels tried to recruit bystanders, declaring that they were for God and the country, whereupon 'one [of] the countrimen sett his back to the wall and sett his staff before him saying he was for king James for whome he would live and die and would not goe against him'. 'Kill him, kill him', cried the outraged, demoralized company, appreciating ever more clearly the inevitability of failure. The reaction of this anonymous, typical Englishman is instructive.[35]

First impressions, however, can deceive. The plotters' gamble did not lack a logical edge. Though long, the odds against them were not quite impossible, taking into account the lessons of English history. Their fundamental decision in the final plan to kill rather than kidnap the king drew on familiarity with the Bye Plot of 1603, in which discontented Catholics had schemed to seize James and hold him hostage while demanding religious toleration and the removal of unpopular ministers. Kidnapping is an altogether more complicated scenario, and it was over-complexity in planning – coupled with dreamy incompetence in the Bye Plot's high command – that doomed this particular conspiracy.[36] Catesby was not a man to shy away from kidnapping, as his plans for the young princess demonstrate, but more complex elements in his strategy were founded on a simple, brutal vision of initial political slaughter. Different lessons were derived from Essex's revolt. The turmoil that day had demonstrated the possibilities of swift military action, aimed at the person of a monarch. Nevertheless, Essex's plot had

[33] I am grateful to Michael Questier for pointing out the possible connection with Persons's discourse.

[34] SP 14/216/37, 49.

[35] Examination of Thomas Maunder, 26 Nov. 1605, SP 14/216/119.

[36] Fawkes was well aware of the potential complications in a kidnapping plot, SP 14/216/49. See also Mark Nicholls, 'Treason's reward: the punishment of conspirators in the Bye Plot of 1603', *Historical Journal*, 38 (1995), pp. 821–42.

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failed, and Catesby, who had ridden with the earl, grasped many of the reasons for that failure. Essex had lost, not simply because he had been unable to secure the person of Queen Elizabeth, but because he had been too squeamish, had not kept his intentions secret, and had never devised any credible alternative plan. The Gunpowder plotters addressed all these failings. At first sight there seemed little sense in shifting the focus of operations away from the all-important capital city, but even here there was a lesson to be learnt, in terms of relying only on trusted allies, and working to the plotters' strengths. As Fawkes admitted, in London 'they had noe forces'; their friends were few, their enemies many.[37]

It is also probable that the Gunpowder plotters looked back a generation for inspiration. Half a century earlier, in a political vacuum following the death of a king, a regional force of Catholic gentlemen had staged a successful rebellion and had set the Catholic Queen Mary on the throne, while much of the country either refused to react or reacted too late. Was it wholly unreasonable to expect, or to hope, that at the death of a new, Scottish, king the political nation might be propelled into accepting his daughter as queen (she had a reassuring name), and the betrothal of that daughter to an English Catholic nobleman, or perhaps to a foreign prince? The king's sons may indeed have lived, but they were young, and minorities, particularly unanticipated minorities, were notoriously problematic. Familiar English history offered further encouragement. The Plot was Catesby's creation, and Catesby, a descendant of Richard III's henchman, William Catesby, was led by family history to reflect on an example of swift, decisive manoeuvring during an unexpected minority, on another instance of regicide in the wider interests of a specific political goal.

Of course, no plotter, in any surviving confession, looked back explicitly to 1553, let alone to 1483. There is actually little in any surviving documentation to suggest that they denied James his legitimacy as king, if only as king de facto. Given their plans for James's daughter, their whole analysis necessarily turned on 'the succession'. With the king dead, the plotters – following the testimony of Robert Keyes, the man installed as custodian of the plotters' house in Lambeth where the gunpowder was originally stockpiled – were convinced 'that all the Catholiques and discontented persons would take there partes and proclaime the lady Elizabeth being next heire',[38] a statement which, if correctly reported, itself conceded legitimacy to the House of Stuart. Any argument from silence is manifestly risky, but most confessions and depositions survive in the form of answers to questions, and in framing those questions interrogators were simply not interested in ancient precedent, or indeed in anything that showed the actions of the plotters in a more level-headed, more logical light. The Jacobean state found it much easier to deal with desperadoes.

[37] SP 14/216/49. [38] Examination of Robert Keyes, 30 Nov. 1605, SP 14/216/126.

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III

The state did, indeed, have a point. Rationality and logic can explain the Plot only so far. There was more to this treason, some element which, while never quite defying logic, nevertheless twisted it to suit a particular goal. Any argument for a prevailing pragmatism in the Gunpowder Plot must confront the fact that many conspirators were manifestly driven on by hatred for the government, and by contempt for the king. One motive shared by everyone in the Plot's inner ring was revenge. Fawkes made no secret of this in all that he said and did immediately after arrest; the destruction of the House of Lords would have simply represented justice done.[39] Nor did Robert Keyes trouble to hide his feelings. His spluttering truculence at his trial and execution spelt out his disdain for the authorities: the chief justice of the King's Bench, Sir John Popham, had concluded long before that Keyes was a 'man of spiryt [if] of noe state', and after sentence was passed the prisoner openly declared that he was as ready to die then as at any other time, 'and for this cause rather then for an other'.[40]

Hatred, contempt, and their consequences seemed to ignite the treason. Evidence against Catesby is tainted by the natural temptation for surviving plotters to lay guilt on a dead colleague, but it remains obvious that Catesby was animated by detestation of the Protestant regime, that his thinking was dominated by the desire to revenge thirty years of religious persecution, of being consigned to the political margins. When Catesby recruited to the Plot, his arguments were underpinned by anger, and by an apocalyptic vision of the future for Catholicism in England. His play for support from the brothers Thomas and Robert Winter demonstrated the point particularly well. When he met Thomas at Lambeth, early in 1604, Catesby appealed directly to emotion and a sense of injustice. Knowing that Winter had considered living abroad, he pressed on his friend 'howe necessary it was nott to forsake our country … but to deliver her from the servitud where she remained'. Winter responded that he had 'often hazarded [his] life uppon far lighter tearmes', but added that he could see no means of achieving their goal. Thereupon Catesby unveiled his plan 'to blow up the parlament howse with gunpowder, for sayd he in that place have they done us all the mischeif, and perchance God hath desined that place for their punishment'.[41] The focus was on the place, the institution, above all on revenge. As well he might, Winter 'wondered att the straingnes of the conseipt'; he feared the consequences of failure. Catesby, so charismatic in his anger, stood his ground. 'The nature of the disease', he insisted, 'required so sharp a remedy.' In the face of this eloquence, spurred on by his own vision of a Catholic England, Winter committed himself to the Plot.[42]

[39] SP 14/216/49.

[40] List of suspects compiled by Sir John Popham, 6 Nov. 1605, SP 14/216/20A; *True and perfect relation*, sig. K4v.

[41] Hatfield MS 113/54. Fawkes says almost the same thing in his confession published in *His majesties speach*, sig. H2v, cf. SP 14/216/49.

[42] Hatfield MS 113/54.

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A year later, when Robert Winter was introduced to the conspiracy, the message had not changed. Why risk all on such a step, Robert asked. Catesby answered that 'all Catholiques [e]states were all redy desperate, and that he well knewe ere the Parlyament ended, there would be soche lawes made, as should bringe all Catholiques within premunire at the Leaste'. 'God forbidd', Winter answered, at least in his own version of events, but Catesby insisted that 'sure yt would be soe'.[43] Here the logic of revenge demanded pre-emptive action. Punishment in this world lay at the heart of Catesby's design. Those who were harrying, fining, and imprisoning his friends deserved to be chastised, and in that chastisement Catesby and those friends accomplished something justifiable, even laudable. Nothing thereafter stood in his way, even when the risks increased a week before 5 November, when there was every chance that the conspiracy had been betrayed. So long as there was some prospect of success, he clung to the possibility of striking back. When, for one moment and one only, Catesby wavered, Percy's arrival from the north provided a robust fresh look at the risk, and confirmed what both ringleaders wanted to believe.[44] The consequences were fatal, but in that crisis the high command co-operated and strengthened, just as Catesby had always intended.

Revenge was directed against erstwhile friends as well as professed enemies. Rather than suffering from inadequate support among the peerage, the energy and drive of the Gunpowder Plot depended upon an 'us against the world' mentality, defensive, reactionary, at odds not only with the Protestant establishment but also with much of that sustaining powerhouse of English Catholicism, the conservative Catholic aristocracy and wealthier gentry. While the conspirators agreed in principle to preserve as many of their friends among the nobility as 'were Catholick or so disposed',[45] and while Catesby assured new recruits unwilling to see patrons die that tricks would be used to dissuade certain noblemen from journeying to Westminster on 5 November, it is clear that he did not always mean what he said. On one occasion, Catesby's low opinion of the peerage led him to declare, more truthfully, that, rather than risking the security and consequent success of his plot, he would consent to the death of every nobleman in England. Not 'for the chamber full of diamonds' would he gamble his enterprise against a single, merciful warning. As Robert Keyes told it, Catesby looked upon the English nobility without exception as 'atheists, fools, cowards', 'dead Bodies would be better for the common wealth then they'.[46] If accurately reported, these remarks open a window into Catesby's soul. The long-serving Superior of the Jesuits in England, Henry Garnett, trying perhaps to be charitable, thought that Catesby had regretted the likely death of the earl of Rutland in

[43] Confession of Robert Winter, 21 Jan. 1606, SP 14/216/176.

[44] The events following the delivery of the Monteagle letter, seen from the plotters' perspective, are best described by Thomas Winter in Hatfield MS 113/54.

[45] Hatfield MS 113/54.

[46] SP 14/216/126.

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the House of Lords, but on reflection Garnett honestly recalled how it seemed that 'he was contented to lett him go'.[47]

Defining himself as an instrument of providence, Catesby simply refused to consider a more moderate course; as Ambrose Rookwood recalled, he swept aside scruples over the shedding of 'so much blood'. 'Catesby aunswered that he was resolved that in conscience it mought be done and wished this examinate so to satisfie himselfe'. Indeed, if success depended on that point, innocent blood must lawfully flow with the guilty. He had consulted spiritual advice in 'the like case', and had been assured that this was so.[48] What is striking is the ease with which the other plotters, even by their own admission, swallowed his apocalyptic arguments. One after another, Catesby told them that he had taken advice, and that he was resolved in conscience that the destruction of Westminster was justifiable in the sight of God. One after another they took him at his word. It was only what most of them wanted to hear, and they rationalized savagery in their own particular ways. 'I do not think there would have been three worth Saving that should have been lost', wrote Everard Digby, languishing in the Tower, looking back with lingering regret upon the what might have been.[49]

Some historians, such as Antonia Fraser, have suggested that Catesby enjoyed the cut-and-thrust of theological disputation; that he engaged Garnett and another Jesuit, Oswald Tesimond, in discussions over the legitimacy of his intended actions essentially for the pleasure of debate.[50] Reading Garnett's testimony, however, the impression emerges that Catesby was only going through the motions. Garnett conceded that he sensed the fury of revenge implicit in Catesby's confession to Tesimond, and he warned Catesby explicitly against shedding innocent blood. Yet here too the emphasis was on innocent blood. By implication, Garnett recognized that some in King James's circle, including more than one Catholic, deserved chastisement. It does Garnett no disservice to suggest that he might have made some allowance for revenge. He had been on the run from Elizabeth's and James's agents for nearly twenty years, and those years had taken their toll on his health and morale.[51]

Consider, though, that Catesby's pragmatism underpins his anger. Men and women in Jacobean England understand revenge, even within its relatively narrow modern definition; the principle that wrongs demand satisfaction was embedded in the collective consciousness. The Essex rebels in 1601, and particularly their leader, were fired by thoughts of revenge against their enemies at Court. A year earlier, in laboriously discounting fears that Essex's execution would provoke blood feuds, Sir Walter Ralegh had only underlined both the currency of and the logic behind such fears in a candid letter to Cecil.

[47] Nicholls, *Investigating Gunpowder Plot*, p. 67.
[48] SP 14/216/136.
[49] Barlow, *Gunpowder-treason*, p. 251.
[50] Antonia Fraser, *The Gunpowder Plot* (London, 1996), p. 112.
[51] For a recent, sympathetic treatment of Garnett's dilemma see Hogge, *God's secret agents*. See also Nicholls, *Investigating Gunpowder Plot*, pp. 62–73.

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Not everyone would have been convinced by Ralegh's deliberately optimistic conclusion that the 'humors of men succeed not, butt grow by occasions and accidents of tyme and poure'.[52] Rather, the belief that 'humors' did indeed run down the generations was repeated time and again in contemporary literature, and was applied through that literature to societies in every age. The power of revenge transcended death – particularly in the broader Jacobean sense of 'revenge', which came closer to retribution, to the due punishment of wrongs.[53] Ghosts of every degree, from Hamlet's royal father to ragged, unnamed corpses 'lapt in some fowle sheete', all cried out for satisfaction: 'Vindicta, Revenge, Revenge'.[54] In so much contemporary writing, the obligation to act lay squarely on the individual: on the wronged son, the persecuted servant, or the citizen enduring tyranny. There may well be no happy ending. It may not necessarily be God's will that the tormented should strike back at the tormentor, but the gesture was intensely human, and at least understandable.[55]

The Gunpowder Plot emerged from a society in which 'revenge' was ritualized, most potently in the burgeoning, increasingly busy law courts, where the state itself codified and lent its authority to the principled righting of wrongs. No one, and no one from the political nation in particular, was in principle disbarred from this ritual. For measured revenge, not infrequently capricious in its execution, was as much an instrument of vendetta as was the duelling weapon or the gang of hired thugs lurking behind hedges, armed with cudgels. The plotters' desire to revenge themselves on their perceived enemies is less an expression of extreme dissatisfaction, and more a methodical, if violent, manifestation of mainstream political thought processes.

It also served a practical purpose. Revenge was the emotional cement that bonded Catesby's plot together. His emphasis on retribution helped steel men to commit a spectacularly horrible deed, and spill blood on an entirely new scale. In Catesby's projected coup, the impact of the initial shock was crucial. By the early seventeenth century, in the context of achieving the destabilization necessary to secure a military head start over opponents, the question to be asked was whether simple king killing remained sufficient? In its final form the Gunpowder Plot marked a new departure, and an escalation in the infernal logic of bloodshed, simply because it had to do so.[56] By 1605, the would-be regicide had learnt certain lessons. The violent death of princes was not now an unfamiliar occurrence.

[52] Ralegh to Cecil, n.d. [*c.* Mar. 1600], Hatfield MS 90/150.

[53] Ronald Broude, 'Revenge and revenge tragedy in Renaissance England', *Renaissance Quarterly*, 28 (1975), pp. 38–58.

[54] *A warning for faire women: containing, the most tragicall murther of master George Sanders* (London, 1599), sig. A2v.

[55] On the extensive literature of revenge in early modern England see, for example, John Kerrigan, *Revenge tragedy: Aeschylus to Armageddon* (Oxford, 1996); K. E. Maus, ed., *Four revenge tragedies* (Oxford, 1995); Jong-Hwan Kim, 'Waiting for justice: Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and the Elizabethan ethics of revenge', *Journal of English Language and Literature*, 43 (1997), pp. 781–97.

[56] See John Morrill, 'King-killing in perspective', in Robert von Friedeburg, ed., *Murder and monarchy: regicide in European history, 1300–1800* (Basingstoke, 2004), pp. 293–5.

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When William the Silent and Henry III perished at the hands of assassins, the individual or faction behind the deed had derived small advantage, if any advantage at all. Administrations had developed and were still developing ways to combat, to discount the threat of regicide. In Elizabethan England, for example, the Bond of Association, an extraordinary measure of mutual defence, and defiance, had been engineered and then manipulated by the privy council following the shock of William the Silent's death in 1584.[57] Now the would-be regicide had to adopt a wider approach, targeting both monarch and administration and planning to shed still more blood, simply to achieve the same goal. The 1605 strike against Westminster went far beyond wholesale political slaughter. As the author of the officially sanctioned narrative of the Gunpowder Plot put it, the explosion would have erased the buildings and records of parliament, 'our insensible Monuments reserved for future ages'. 'Not onely we, but the memory of us and ours, should have beene thus extinguished in an instant.'[58] The 'tabula rasa' had become a necessary prequel to rebellion. This alone could guarantee the paralysis that stayed the hand of authority, and ceded the initiative to rebels. It is clear that Catesby, in his conditioning rhetoric of violence, understood these new realities very well indeed.

IV

Revenge, though, has its due season, and there still seems something perverse about this mass assassination planned for 1605. The plotters were pressing ahead with their scheme in the first years of James's reign, at a time when English Catholics could look forward with some confidence to a happier future. Why? One long-popular interpretation suggests that their decision grew out of unrealized hopes within the Catholic community, which had been raised and then, equally politically, dashed by a manipulative king.[59] There is vigour in this argument; James's opposition to any outward religious diversity did indeed harden in the later months of 1603, and his proclamation of February 1604 which ordered all Catholic priests to leave the realm, and which explicitly denounced those who had nourished 'a vaine confidence of some Innovation in matters of Religion to be done by Us, which Wee never intended, nor gave any man cause to expect', dismayed several hitherto optimistic English Catholics.[60] The actions and statements of one or two plotters also support this construct. Thomas Percy, as the

[57] See David Cressy, 'Binding the nation: the bonds of association, 1584 and 1696', in DeLloyd J. Guth and John W. McKenna, eds., *Tudor rule and revolution* (Cambridge, 1982), pp. 217–34.

[58] *His majesties speach*, sigs. E3v, E4r. There may be an echo here from Act IV of Ben Jonson's *Sejanus*, first printed in 1605.

[59] See, for a recent restatement, Pauline Croft, 'The Gunpowder Plot fails', in Buchanan et al., *Gunpowder Plots*, pp. 14–19, 33.

[60] James F. Larkin and Paul L. Hughes, eds., *Stuart royal proclamations* (2 vols., Oxford, 1973–80), I, p. 71. The king's speech to parliament in March 1604 may also be seen as a catalyst, Nina Taunton, and Valerie Hart, '*King Lear*, King James and the Gunpowder treason of 1605', *Renaissance Studies*, 17 (2003), pp. 695–715, at pp. 699–704.

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man who carried the earl of Northumberland's letters to James VI during their 'secret correspondence' before 1603, relayed rather vague promises of religious toleration from the Scottish king, and does seem to have felt cheated, even betrayed, by James's subsequent statements. Yet the evidence is far from straightforward. Percy's motives are particularly obscure, and one man's discontent provides only a shaky basis for the broader argument. Percy's recruitment may have represented an attempt to tap into such unhappiness, and another strand in Catesby's coherent team building, his construction of a coalition of dissatisfaction. That strand was indeed strengthened by the late recruitment of Digby and Rookwood who, from the vantage point of summer 1605, certainly saw James as a breaker of promises.[61] In these moves, perhaps, the plotters were again seeking to appeal to 'all the discontented people of England'.

Moreover, the notion of a duped and consequently resentful community does little justice to the constancy of most Gunpowder plotters. In England's fractured Catholic society, they belonged to a minority that had at no point trusted James's conciliatory gestures. This Protestant king would, they reasoned, never restore a Catholic England. As Robert Cecil reminded Coke, when preparing for the plotters' trial, 'before his Majestys face was seene or that he had don any thing in government' these people were once again doing what they had so often done before: begging military aid from Spain.[62] That was no exaggeration. One of Catesby's first acts following James's accession was to send a messenger, Anthony Dutton, to the Spanish Court, to establish whether Philip III was still likely to pursue the war against England.[63] James did not simply represent a check to the ambitions of Catesby and his friends; as an adult Protestant king and as the founder of a Protestant dynasty he symbolized the continuation of an established state religion, far into the future, and so threatened to destroy all their hopes. While many Catholics viewed the new regime as preferable to the old, this embittered faction saw nothing but 'new and more grievous vexations … yet more and more heavy whips wherewith to scourge us'.[64] Hugh Owen, a Catholic intelligencer working closely with the English Jesuits, put it more personally before the end of 1603: 'I perceave', he wrote, 'that there is no hope at all of amendment in this stinking king of ours.'[65] It involves little stretch of the imagination to see Catesby, Winter, or Fawkes sharing that view.[66]

[61] See Digby's speech at his trial, *True and perfect relation*, sig. L2v.

[62] Memorandum from Cecil to Coke, n.d. [Jan. 1606], SP 14/19/94.

[63] Albert J. Loomie, 'Guy Fawkes in Spain: the "Spanish treason" in Spanish documents', *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research*, Special Supplement 9 (1971), pp. 45–6, 59–60; Nicholls, *Investigating Gunpowder Plot*, p. 57.

[64] John Morris, ed., *The condition of Catholics under James I: Father Gerard's narrative of the Gunpowder Plot … with his life* (London, 1872), p. 25.

[65] Albert J. Loomie, *The Spanish Elizabethans: the English exiles at the court of Philip II* (London, 1965), p. 82.

[66] Points central to the compelling argument presented in Wormald, 'Gunpowder, treason, and Scots', pp. 154–7.

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These conspirators were witnessing a catastrophe, for their religion and their political hopes, and the Gunpowder Plot was their considered response. The time had come to act, and, as they correctly appreciated, it would never come again. Their projected appeal to every discontented group was itself an acceptance that there was already no overwhelming unhappy Catholic groundswell on which to draw, and a recognition of their own minority status. The faction to which they belonged (for those used to the rather simplistic division of the Jacobean Catholic community into 'Jesuit' and 'Secular' factions, the plotters stood foursquare in the former camp) was already losing ground in its power struggle against the one-time appellant clergy. Peers such as Lord Montagu, a man honoured among Catholics as a courageous opponent of the recusancy legislation before the 1604 parliament, increasingly turned to the 'secular' priests to map a route forward for English gentry Catholicism. Even among like-minded Catholics the plotters' argument was failing in its appeal, since many were now prepared to wait on events. In the next generation, the plotters' own families would muster among the loyal supporters of the Stuart kings. Ambrose Rookwood's son was knighted by James in 1624. Everard Digby's elder son, Kenelm, was knighted in 1623, while his younger son John died fighting for Charles I in 1645. If the choice confronting Catholic families before the Civil War lay between two perceived evils, it was still a choice easily made.[67]

Early in 1604, the emphasis did indeed shift to self-help, but it did so because real promises were broken by former friends. As Jenny Wormald has demonstrated so effectively, xenophobia colours this very 'English' treason at every turn.[68] That xenophobia took at least two forms. According to a credible story, when Guy Fawkes was questioned informally by a group of Scots courtiers, early on the morning of 5 November, he told them that he would happily have 'blown them back to Scotland'.[69] Perhaps this was 'Yorkshire talk', but Fawkes was not the only Englishman with a grudge against Scots. Even if it did not of itself make men rebels, the domination of the bedchamber, and other household offices, by Scotsmen certainly rankled.[70] In one of his confessions, Fawkes mentioned a proclamation drawn up by the plotters which contained their rallying call to England: it would, he said, have 'protested agaynst the union, and in noe sort to have meddeled with Religion therein'.[71] Again, religion was pointedly set aside.

It remains hard to say how much of this was calculated, and how far it represented a genuine dislike of the 'perfidious Scot'. The Gunpowder plotters' strategy was, however, dictated by a second and much more potent manifestation of xenophobia. In that same confession, Fawkes admitted that the plotters would

[67] On the career of Viscount Montagu, and more generally on the diversity of Catholic attitudes and fortunes in Jacobean England see Michael C. Questier, *Catholicism and community in early modern England: politics, aristocratic patronage and religion, c. 1550–1640* (Cambridge, 2006); Alexandra Walsham, *Church papists: Catholicism, conformity and confessional polemic in early modern England* (London, 1993).

[68] Wormald, 'Gunpowder, treason, and Scots', pp. 152–64.

[69] Ibid., p. 161.

[70] Diana Newton, *The making of the Jacobean regime: James VI and I and the government of England, 1603–1605* (London, 2005), p. 38.

[71] SP 14/216/49.

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have 'protested allsoe agaynst all strangers'; he and his colleagues had grown utterly disenchanted with Catholic Spain. Over many years, these same men had negotiated and pleaded for Spanish intervention in England. Besides Catesby's initiative, both Thomas Winter and Guy Fawkes had travelled to Spain during 1602 and 1603 to seek Philip III's support for another Armada, coming home with guarded encouragement, with the hope, at least, of action in due course.[72] James's accession, however, facilitated a process that led to the signing of the Treaty of London in August 1604. The product of some particularly pragmatic diplomacy, that treaty set aside Philip III's genuine personal concern for his co-religionists and made no reference to English Catholics.[73] It did not really have to. For most war-weary English Catholics, peace sufficed. But as Catesby saw these developments, Spain had failed Catholic England, and that failure presented not only a rationale, but also a compelling logic for rebellion. Early in January 1605, Catesby said as much to Robert Winter, in his usual graphic way. 'All forreine Princes theire Ambassadors had ben here', he pointed out, 'and had don nothinge for Catholiques, neither did he hope of good from any of them, And therefore he had resolved of that Course.'[74] 'That Course' – the destruction of James in parliament – was now the only option, and as manipulated by Catesby the lack of choice actually became a strength. The prospect of action uplifted the spirits of the plotters, unified them, and sealed them in a brotherly pact.[75] Thus united, and encouraged, the golden opportunity for a first strike dictated their timetable.

V

Any argument for coherence in the planning of the Gunpowder Plot must finally confront the surviving record, the mass of documentary evidence, painstakingly acquired by privy councillors and their colleagues. All the testimony, all the lists of and responses to interrogations, emphasize detail at the expense of grand strategy. Can it be the case that the investigations into the Gunpowder Plot exposed flaws and omissions in the design, that they failed to plumb the depths of the treason specifically because of weaknesses in the Plot's logistical coherence, and because certain matters had never been resolved? While valid enough, up to a point – the projected explosion dictated a degree of flexibility, and one looks in vain through the confessions for any planning of a coronation, any scheme for replacing the peers, bishops, and state officials slaughtered in Westminster – this argument may again do Catesby a disservice. The elusiveness of certain secrets has perhaps less to do with poor strategy, and more to do with both prevailing priorities for the interrogators – to identify guilty individuals above all – and problems in the examination process itself. The effort required from investigators

[72] Hatfield MS 112/91.

[73] Pauline Croft, '*Rex pacificus, Robert Cecil, and the 1604 peace with Spain*', in Glenn Burgess et al., eds., *The accession of James I: historical and cultural consequences* (Basingstoke, 2006), pp. 148–9.

[74] SP 14/216/176.

[75] A point well made in Travers, *Gunpowder*, pp. 34–6.

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confronting complex, extensive, and tangled treasons, about which they initially knew very little, should not be underestimated.[76] Cross-examination was most effective when addressing a specific question, and when confronted with a handful of suspects. Lies and obfuscations could then be exposed, and discrepancies between stories exploited to telling effect. The examination of Elizabeth Vaux, taken on 18 November, provides one example: Vaux's testimony is accompanied by marginal notes in Coke's hand, identifying individuals ('this is a priest'), noting discrepancies from other evidence ('this is untrue for Sir George Fearmor confesseth that she sent for him on Wedensday morning') and highlighting new lines of enquiry ('this is a suspicious tale against Huddelston').[77] But when there were dozens of suspects, and when their wives, relations, and servants also had tales to tell, the interrelationships became complicated, the inconsistencies multiplied, and the investigator had to separate points that held significance from the many that were simply irrelevant.

Here, perhaps, the early modern state touches its bounds. The laborious questions and answers in the written record of the Gunpowder Plot established guilt and innocence, and marked out the immediate danger. By contrast, they left a haphazard collection of glimpses into motivation and an imperfect understanding of intended strategy. Although the process was relatively efficient by contemporary standards, there was little that was either innovative or imaginative in the investigation. For all the obvious industry and hard slog, the work was in some ways rather poorly handled. In the course of his own interrogations, Garnett suggested that the questions asked of him had for the most part been too general, and too inconsequential, to serve any purpose.They had focused on 'Trifles and circumstances'.[78] Coke and the council fell back on processes honed through decades of treason investigations, culminating in that particularly clear and recent precedent, the Essex rebellion. Essex's revolt had not, however, been investigated very thoroughly, speed having been of the essence, and it had also been a much simpler affair, the earlier, Irish dimension apart.[79] In 1605, time was again limited, and busy counsellors again had to think beyond the immediate complexities of a far more convoluted treason. Indeed, the cascade of letters landing on Cecil's desk was now augmented by requests from men and women who hoped to profit through the downfall of the plotters.[80]

Subordinates imitated their betters, sometimes under direction, sometimes on their own initiative. A subsidiary commission established on 19 November to examine many less-important prisoners adopted the same time-consuming and frustratingly unproductive approaches. The victor at Holbeach, Richard Walshe, was instructed by the privy council to put a long list of often inconsequential interrogatories to his prisoners. Walshe dutifully obeyed, but it was wasted

[76] On the examination process, see John Bellamy, *The Tudor law of treason: an introduction* (London, 1979), pp. 104–9. [77] SP 14/216/104. [78] Nicholls, *Investigating Gunpowder Plot*, p. 64.
[79] Some parallels with the 1601 investigations are detailed in ibid., pp. 33–4.
[80] For example from Susan, dowager countess of Kent, on 15 Nov. 1605, Hatfield MS 113/11.

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labour; even before reading the results the council had appreciated that they would have to apply their own accumulated knowledge to the very same process in London.[81] At Coldham Hall, near Bury St Edmunds, the JPs of Suffolk, once they had finished breaking up 'cupbordes, deskes, and other places wher wryttynges were kept', resorted to formal interrogation to demonstrate their zeal in examining Ambrose Rookwood's servants.[82] The results were, predictably, meagre in proportion to the effort. As suspects of every degree, from Winter and Digby in the Tower to the recusant prisoner in Cambridge Castle, Nicholas Bestwick, soon discovered, it was easy enough to give 'contrary answeres', to lie consistently to hard-pressed examiners.[83] Bestwick took particular pleasure in confounding his interrogators, the Vice-Chancellor of the University, Richard Clayton, and three other Heads of Houses.

To understand the Gunpowder Plot, it is thus necessary to look beyond Fawkes and his barrels, beyond all the evidential difficulties, and to see the enterprise for what it was, a failed rebellion. The Plot may well have been the work of desperate men, but however desperate those men never really constituted the 'idiot fringe' of extremist fanaticism, represented in popular and much academic opinion. The traditional, and enduring, tendency to emphasize their family connections, and their shared militant Catholicism, actually masks differences in motives and ambitions. There is scope to suggest that the ringleaders were pragmatists, informed by history, and in step with the politics of the age. While they aimed at a religious upheaval, and drew on the power of religious conviction, they were essentially political creatures, who had worked for years in the political heartland, scheming with Essex and with the Spanish Court, pinning their hopes on military aid from Kildare, or on another Armada. They understood the consequences of their actions, and they understood the risks that they ran. Catesby chose his team well. His plan was elaborate, but it was also practical, a calculated roll of adversely weighted dice. Above all, it could be adapted to changing circumstances: to the growing certainty that the conspirators could count James himself among their victims, to unexpected prorogations, to the perceived vulnerability of royal children, and to the availability of a vault in which to stockpile powder. The timing had a compelling logic. The tactics adopted were dictated by the execution of military surprise, and if the plotters' actions perhaps have a modern resonance, it is important to recall that they regarded the destruction of Westminster as the first strike in a coup, not as an end in itself. Guy Fawkes planned to live, rather than to die, with his victims, and this instinct for self-preservation lingered on after 5 November. While Fawkes declared that, had he been able to, he would have exploded the mine rather than submit to arrest, this is just bravado, and bravado reported second-hand.[84] The seven plotters who pleaded 'Not Guilty' at their

[81] Richard Walshe to the privy council, 13 Nov. 1605, SP 14/216/87, 88.
[82] JPs of Suffolk to the privy council, 12 Nov. 1605, SP 14/216/78.
[83] Letter to Robert Cecil as chancellor of the University of Cambridge, 13 Nov. 1605, with the examination of Nicholas Bestwick, SP 14/216/84, 85.
[84] *His majesties speach*, sig. G4v.

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trial, in the face of all the evidence, took the view that they would rather lose their lives than give them away.[85]

At the same time, both strategy and motivation among the Gunpowder plotters arose from a very defensive, even a desperate mindset, responding to xenophobia, lashing out at inexorable forces – rapprochement with Spain, and the introduction of bare toleration for English Catholics – which forever frustrated their dreams. This is not to dismiss their attachment to their faith, nor is it to deny that some current of elemental revenge underpins their shared motives. Such considerations do, however, set that desire for revenge in context, and show it as a unifying force which strengthened the conspirators in their pragmatic pursuit of assassination, mayhem, rebellion, and, ultimately, a Catholic England.

[85] Ambrose Rookwood specifically gave this as his reason for entering a 'Not Guilty' plea (*True and perfect relation*, sig. K4v).

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