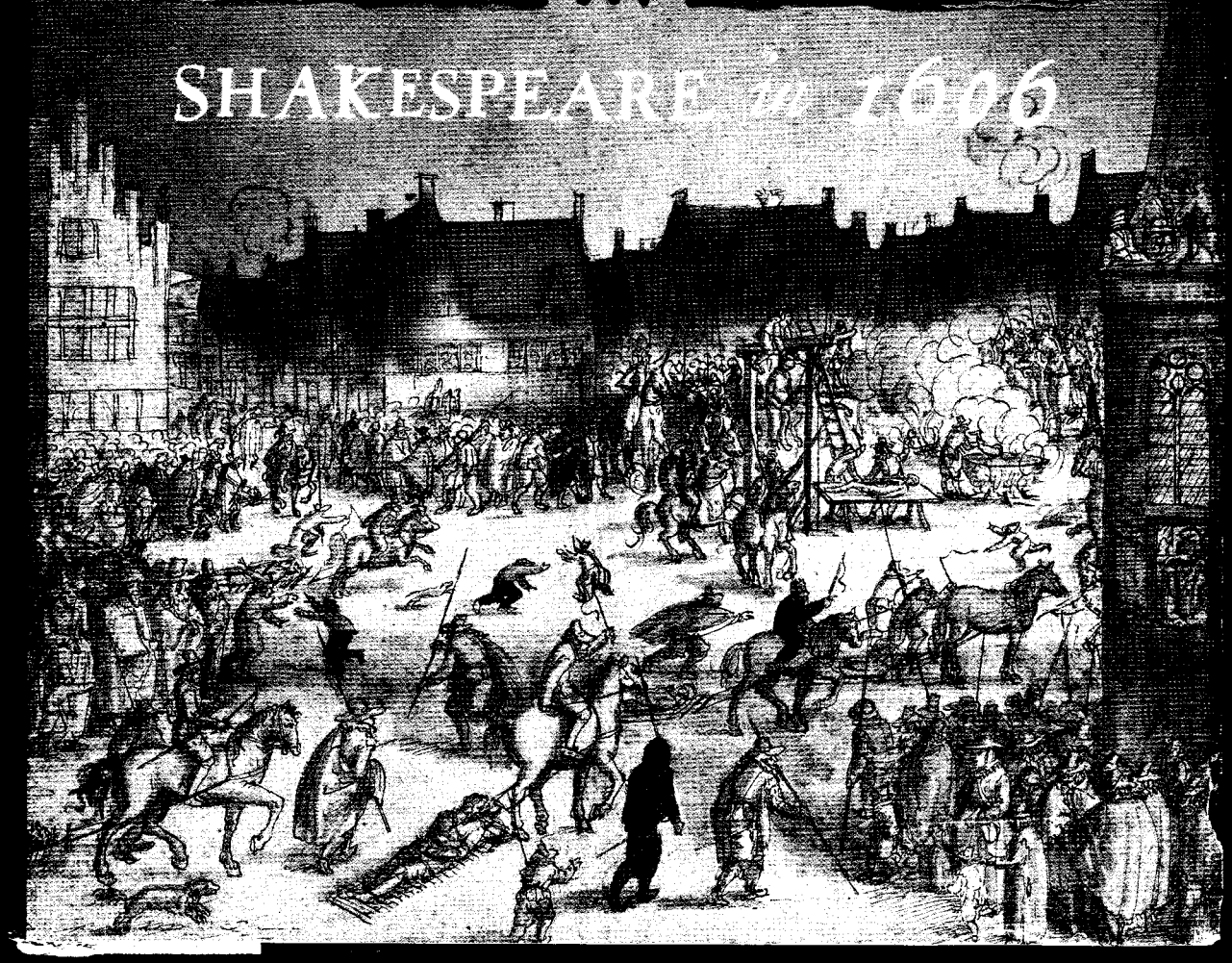
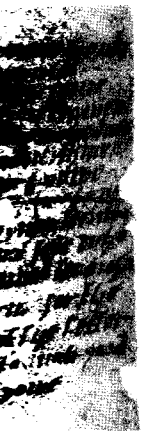
JAMES SHAPIRO

THE YEAR OF LEAR

SHAKESPEARE in 1606





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THE LETTER

By the end of October 1605 and the arrival of cooler weather, plague deaths had dropped to a level where England's nobility and gentry could safely return to town and the oft-delayed Parliament at last convene. London's acting companies must have expected the ban on playing announced earlier that month to be lifted any day, enabling them to capitalize on the increased traffic. By now, Shakespeare was likely well past the opening scenes of *King Lear*, including the one in which Gloucester enters and sees Edmund hurriedly putting away a letter and demands that it be handed over. When Edmund reluctantly does so, Gloucester reads it aloud:

> "This policy of age makes the world bitter to the best of our times, keeps our fortunes from us till our oldness cannot relish them. I begin to find an idle and fond bondage in the oppression of aged

> tyranny, who sways not as it hath power but as it is suffered. Come to me, that of this I may speak more. If our father would sleep till I waked him, you should enjoy half his revenue for ever, and live the beloved of your brother,
>
> *Edgar.*"
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> (2.45–52)

Gloucester mulls over its veiled message, rereading and repeating to himself key phrases—"Slept till I waked him," "you should enjoy half his revenue"—before demanding of Edmund, "When came this to you, who brought it?" (2.54–57). Edmund, having shrewdly allowed Gloucester to decipher the letter for himself, does his best to keep its source a mystery: "It was not brought me, my lord, there's the cunning of it. I found it thrown in at the casement of my closet" (2.58–68). Convinced that the letter has brought to light a plot to kill him, Gloucester demands to know where its instigator may be found, at which point Edmund urges him to proceed cautiously: "I do not well know, my lord. If it shall please you to suspend your indignation against my brother, till you can derive from him better testimony of this intent. . . . If your honour judge it meet, I will place you where you shall hear us confer of this." Gloucester likes the plan and encourages Edmund to "Find out this villain" (2.78–107). This use of a forged, opaque letter is found nowhere in his sources and something Shakespeare had never tried before.

Not long after Shakespeare wrote this scene, a similar one played out on the evening of October 26 at Whitehall, where members of the Privy Council were conducting state business while the king was off hunting at Royston. They were interrupted by the arrival of Lord Monteagle, who had come at this late hour from his house a mile or so away in Shoreditch. Monteagle, who was about to be seated among England's peers at the upcoming Parliament, was well known to them. Four years earlier he had been among the participants in the Earl of Essex's ill-fated rising. Salisbury would no doubt have remembered their exchanges at that time, when Monteagle had written to him from the

Tower of London begging for mercy. His life was spared, though he had been fined. Monteagle's rebelliousness hadn't ended there, for he was soon involved in a Spanish plot against Queen Elizabeth in the waning months of her reign. But he again escaped punishment and with the coming of the new monarch, Monteagle, by now in his late twenties, professed to be "done with all former plots." He publicly renounced his Catholicism and had even served as one of the English commissioners responsible for meeting with their Scottish counterparts to remove the remaining obstacles to Union. Yet Salisbury and his fellow councilors may have heard rumors that Monteagle was still "exhorting the Jesuits to arm against the king." They must have wondered which Monteagle had come knocking.

Monteagle had brought a letter that he thought the councilors should know about. The letter reads as follows:

> My lord, out of the love I bear to some of your friends, I have a care of your preservation. Therefore I would advise you, as you tender your life, to devise some excuse to shift your attendance at this Parliament. For God and man hath concurred to punish the wickedness of this time, and think not slightly of this advertisement, but retire yourself into your country, where you may expect the event in safety. For though there be no appearance of any stir, yet I say they shall receive a terrible blow this Parliament and yet they shall not see who hurts them. This counsel is not to be contemned because it may do you good and can do you no harm for the danger is passed as soon as you have burnt the letter. And I hope God will give you the grace to make good use of it to whose holy protection I commend you.

Like Edmund's letter, its origins were cloaked in mystery. When asked how it fell into his hands, Monteagle told them how at dusk earlier that day a "reasonable tall" stranger had stopped one of his footmen, handed him the letter, charged him to deliver it to his master, then disappeared.

"Perplexed what construction to make of it," and deciding that it was best to ignore the warning to burn the letter, Monteagle, though it was late, and dark, thought it wise to rush over immediately to Whitehall and turn it over to the privy councilors.

Salisbury read the letter, then handed it to the Earl of Suffolk. The two agreed that it was similar to what they had heard from French sources of recusant plans to stir up rebellion. They then shared it with the Earls of Worcester, Nottingham, and Northampton. Monteagle was thanked for bringing to their attention "a matter of such a nature, whatever the consequences might prove." For his part, to clear himself from any suspicion in a manner that recalls Edmund's protestations, Monteagle said "that whatsoever the event hereof might prove, it should not be imputed to him," and that he handed over the letter as a "demonstration of his ready devotion."

Five days later, on October 31, James returned to London. Salisbury didn't show him the letter until the following afternoon. Fresh from his recent exposure of the chicanery of Anne Gunter and Richard Haydock, James would have found in the mysterious letter yet another opportunity to demonstrate his detective skills. In an account published a month later that James reprinted in his collected works, he recalls how he "read the letter" and "after a little pause" reread it, pausing at two key lines: "for the danger is past as soon as you have burnt the letter," and "they should receive a terrible blow at this Parliament and you should not see who hurt them." These were all the clues he needed, for James *intuited—even though it meant construing the meaning "against all ordinary sense of construction of grammar"*—that there "should be some sudden danger by blowing up of powder, for no other insurrection, rebellion, or whatsoever other private or desperate attempt could be committed or attempted in time of Parliament, and the authors thereof unseen, except only it were by a blowing up of powder."

Salisbury made sure that credit for this interpretation of the cryptic letter, and therefore for the discovery of the conspiracy, belonged to the king alone. We know, though, from a letter he wrote not long after this,

that he and Suffolk had figured things out for themselves pretty quickly: "We both conceived," he wrote, that the "blow" could "not be more proper than the time of the building, nor by any another way like to be attempted than with powder, when the king was sitting in that assembly." And Suffolk, familiar with the layout of the building, guessed that the attack was likely to come from "a great vault under the said chamber, which was never used for any thing but for some wood or coal."

The next day it was determined, at the king's behest, to search the Parliament houses, "both above and below." But not quite yet. Delaying until the day before Parliament convened would stay "idle rumors" while at the same time allowing the plotters to expose themselves, "the nearer things were in readiness." At last, on November 4, a search was made of the "great vault" underneath Parliament. They found it filled with "piles of billets and faggots heaped up." When they asked who had rented the property, they were told Thomas Percy. Percy was a Gentleman Pensioner, that is, part of the royal bodyguard, placed in that office by his cousin, the powerful and Catholic privy councilor the Earl of Northumberland. Percy had even served as a trusted and secret messenger between the earl and King James before Queen Elizabeth's death, when Northumberland was seeking assurances from the Scottish king that he would be more tolerant to Catholics than Elizabeth had been. The mention of Percy's name further roused suspicions: Why would a member of the king's bodyguard rent a vault beneath Parliament?

The search party decided at this point to investigate no further and reported back to the king and councilors about the piles of wood and the "very tall and desperate fellow" they had encountered there. When told this, James ordered that the search be resumed late that night. They returned to the vault and found "Thomas Percy's alleged man standing without the doors," booted and spurred. He was immediately apprehended and the vault examined once again. During this painstaking search "some of the billets and coals" were overturned, underneath which barrels of gunpowder were spotted. Further searching led to the discovery of thirty-six barrels in all. Percy's man was then frisked and

"three matches and all other instruments fit for blowing up the powder" were found on him. Had the search party failed in its mission that night, the damage done the following day when Parliament was in session would have been catastrophic, almost unimaginable: the entire leadership of England, from King James, Queen Anne, and princes Henry and Charles, to the nobility and political representatives and heads of the Church gathered there from every corner of the land, would have been wiped out in a single blow.

Percy's man was hauled off to Whitehall to be interrogated in the early hours of November 5. He told the authorities that his name was John Johnson and that he was a Yorkshireman from Netherdale, and a Catholic. His interrogators reported that he appeared to them "so constant and settled upon his grounds as we all thought we had found some new Mutius Scaevola born in England"—recalling here the famous Roman assassin who, when threatened with torture, put his hand in the fire and held it there until the flames consumed it. Johnson refused to reveal the name of his confederates, other than Percy, though he freely admitted that "if he had not been apprehended this last night, he had blown up the upper house, when the king, lords, bishops and others had been there." When asked who would have ruled after the death of King James, he said that "Percy never entered into that consultation" and that "the people of themselves should decide." He did provide a motive: "When this act had been done they meant to have satisfied the Catholics that it was done for restitution of religion." He also hoped that others would have supported their action on political grounds, for it was also "done to prevent the Union that was sought to be published at this parliament." And Johnson brazenly told the Scottish courtiers gathered in the king's bedchamber where he was being interrogated that he hoped the explosion would "have blown them back again into Scotland."

The government was unsure how deep the conspiracy ran and impatient to discover who was behind it. King James personally drew up a detailed list of questions he wanted put to Johnson (and added, ominously, "If he will not confess, the gentler tortures are to be first used

unto him, *et sic per gradus ad ima tenditur*"—that is, "and step by step until the ultimate is reached"). A manhunt was set in motion to locate the only other named suspect, Thomas Percy, and all English ports were closed. The Venetian ambassador reported home that a hundred men were dispatched to prevent Percy from fleeing to the Continent. It was vital to learn whether Percy was trying to leave the country or on his way to join up with other conspirators in a coordinated rebellion. A royal proclamation was rushed into print—a "Wanted" poster—notifying one and all "to make all diligent search for the said Percy, and him to apprehend by all possible means, especially to keep him alive, to the end the rest of the conspirators may be discovered" (shades here of how, in the manhunt for Edgar in *King Lear*, "his picture" is sent "far and near, that all the kingdom may have note of him" [6.81–83]). Percy, "privy to one of the most horrible treasons that ever was contrived," is described as "a tall man, with a great broad beard, a good face, the color of his beard and head mingled with white hairs, but the head more white than the beard, he stoopeth somewhat in the shoulders, well-colored in the face, long footed, small legged."

As they awoke on the morning of November 5 to news of the thwarted plot, Londoners were in a state of alarm. The chronicler Edmund Howes recalled that "the Privy Council, not knowing how far this treason might extend, nor what degrees of persons were in this conspiracy, yet well perceived to be commenced, and practiced by some discontented papists, gave order to the Lord Mayor of London and the City of Westminster to set a civil watch at their gates." Bonfires were lit that evening "in the principal streets," by order of the Lord Mayor, serving a double purpose: signifying relief at being spared, while at the same time keeping the jittery city lit at night, as it had been when threatened with invasion in the past. John Chamberlain, one of the great letter writers of the age and an invaluable source, wrote that there was "great ringing and as great store of bonfires as ever I think was seen."

Though devastation had been prevented on November 5, it wasn't clear that bloodletting could now be averted. Molino, the Venetian

ambassador, vividly describes the fear that gripped London: "The city is in great uncertainty; Catholics fear heretics, and vice-versa; both are armed. Foreigners live in terror of their houses being sacked by the mob that is convinced that some, if not all, foreign princes are at the bottom of the plot." As "a precaution against a tumult," trained bands were posted on the city's streets. "All," as another observer put it, "was in a buzz." Molino was grateful that the authorities had "thought it advisable to quiet the popular feeling by issuing a proclamation, in which they declare that no foreign sovereign had any part in the conspiracy. God grant this be sufficient, but as it is everyone has, his own share of alarm." Salisbury was warned that the people "do so murmur and exclaim against the Spaniards" that precautions needed to be taken. The Lord Lieutenant of the Tower, preparing for as-yet-unknown threats, reported to the council his military preparedness: "Because I hear all the gates of London are kept, I have brought all the warders into the Tower and set a watch at the postern, and the gate of S. Katherine's, and at the landing stage. The night-watches are the severest in any fort in Christendom."

No one as yet knew how deep the conspiracy ran. Rumors circulated that the attack on Parliament was part of an orchestrated international campaign of murder and anarchy. According to Howes, "Many factious persons [are] reporting that against the aforementioned Tuesday, the French King and the King of Denmark should have been murdered, and that the Duke of Saxony . . . should be offered like violence." London's foreign embassies took their own measures to calm the anger in the streets. The Spanish ambassador lit celebratory bonfires and "threw money amongst the people," and "the like gladness was showed by the ambassador of the Archduke, and by those of the French and Dutch Church." The latter were Protestant Huguenots; as they had been subject to antialien violence in the past in London, discretion was clearly called for. One can only wonder what the mood was like on the corner of Silver and Muggle Streets, where Shakespeare lodged in a French Huguenot household.

Edmund Howes recalled how in the immediate aftermath the

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"common people muttered and imagined many things, and nobles knew not what to say nor whom to clear or suspect, and for certain days a general jealousy possessed them all." What they muttered or imagined, and the nature of this collective atmosphere of "general jealousy," crucial to understanding the national mood, is largely lost to us. And muttering too loudly could be dangerous, as a man named Beard, who lived on Fetter Lane, learned that day. He asked a servant to a shoemaker in Holborn, who had come to measure him for a new pair of boots, about the "watching and warding" going on in London's streets, then commented that "it had been brave sport if it had gone forward." And he didn't say this "in any laughing or jesting manner." Beard quickly caught himself and "spoke against the [plot] very much," but it was too late and he was reported. Even as there were those who spoke their minds a bit too freely that day, there were others eager to ingratiate themselves with the authorities by assisting in the hunt for potential conspirators or their supporters. We know about Beard's case because Francis Bacon, undertaking a bit of freelance investigating, had gone to the Inns of Court to learn what he could that might interest the Privy Council.

The problem at this moment was, in Molino's words, "as yet it is very difficult to arrive at the truth." A plot masterminded by a disgruntled court servant (and his man, Johnson) made no sense. There had to be someone ambitious or powerful behind it, as yet unknown: "People say that this plot must have its roots high up," Molino adds, "for it is not to be supposed that Percy, if guilty, embarked on this affair alone and without an object; for it was not a question of simply killing the king, but his sons and all the nobility as well. . . . The first suspicion then falls on the disaffected nobility, among the chief is the Earl of Northumberland." The government had already been keeping a close eye on prominent Catholics and potential troublemakers, and on November 5 began interrogating some of them. A day after the discovery of the Gunpowder Plot, Salisbury already had in hand a list of potential suspects, all disaffected Catholic gentry. The list turned out to be surprisingly accurate, especially since none of these men, as yet, had been implicated: "There is

pregnant suspicion to be had of... Robert Catesby, Ambrose Rookwood, one Keyes, Thomas Winter, John Wright, and Christopher Wright and some suspicion of one Grant." Most of them had had brushes with the authorities in the past and several had been locked up, as a precautionary measure, in the politically fraught days following the death of Queen Elizabeth, before James's peaceful succession was assured. That list was presumably cross-checked against others, including a list of those who had been spied dining together a month earlier at the Irish Boy on the Strand, including Robert Catesby, Thomas Winter, Lord Mordaunt, Francis Tresham, and the Earl of Northumberland's brother, Sir Jocelyn Percy. Ben Jonson, a known recusant, had been spotted dining with this group. Jonson was probably unaware that he had been spied in their company or even that some of them were now suspects in the plot. But in the close-knit recusant community, everyone risked guilt by association. So it must have been unnerving for Jonson to receive—a day after a list of suspects sent by the Lord Chief Justice, Sir John Popham, arrived on Salisbury's desk—a warrant from the Privy Council. Jonson was told to use his Catholic contacts to find an unnamed priest and escort him to them. Quite possibly, the priest was needed to persuade John Johnson that it was both necessary and permissible for him to reveal the names of his coconspirators.

Ben Jonson seems to have done as he was told, or at least said that he did, explaining in a fawning letter two days later, on November 8, that he had immediately approached Molino's chaplain to assist him—for both agreed that "no man of conscience or any indifferent love to his country would deny to do it." But he failed in his efforts to find the priest—if in fact he tried at all—who, Jonson assumed, must have fled town. Was Jonson, who at this very moment was writing a court masque, secretly working for the government, reluctantly or in exchange for patronage? Even if he were, was he nonetheless a confidant of the Gunpowder conspirators? Four centuries later, it is impossible to know. But however deeply he was implicated, and whichever side he might have been playing against the other, how terrified he must have been—and others like

him—to have been caught up in this expanding manhunt for those who had tried to destroy the state. A week later Molino reported that "not a day passes but what some one is arrested or some baron confined to his own house, or placed in the custody of others. This is merely a precautionary measure, because they are leading Catholics, and they arrest them till full light can be thrown on the whole affair." Though he put on a good public face, King James himself was shaken. Molino reported back to Venice that his sources told him that the "king is in terror; he does not appear nor does he take his meals in public as usual. He lives in the innermost rooms, with only Scots about him."

A massive explosion caused by thirty-six barrels of gunpowder would have carried considerably further than the House of Lords, under which the barrels had been positioned. King James privately told Molino that "had the scheme been carried out thirty thousand persons would have perished at a stroke, the city would have been sacked, and the rich would have suffered more than the poor; in short, the world would have seen a spectacle so terrible and terrifying that its like has never been heard of." While thirty thousand dead sounds exaggerated, contemporaries with knowledge of explosives agreed that the devastation would have been massive and widespread. The repositories of English law and history, along with London's greatest architectural landmarks—"the Hall of Judgment, the Court of Records, the Collegiate Church, the City of Westminster, yea, Whitehall"—also would have been casualties of the explosion and ensuing flames.

In the absence of any physical damage, this terrible outcome had to be imagined. Other than that ambiguous and unsigned letter, as yet the only concrete proof of the intended blow was the unexploded barrels of gunpowder, and the mysterious servant prepared to detonate them. Nor was there any knowledge of who was ultimately behind it. Yet a compelling narrative had to be circulated quickly to shape popular perception before competing versions might take hold. The government immediately turned its energies to crafting a convincing story, one that dwelled less on the unknown perpetrators or their motives and more on

the sheer evil and destructiveness of the intended plot. But in encouraging the nation to reflect upon the reach of the destructiveness of the Gunpowder Plot, extending to the king himself, the authorities were caught in a bind. In 1351 statutes had been established in England, still in force, declaring it treason to "compass or imagine the death of the king" (and in the coming months, when he confronted the Gunpowder plotters, Attorney General Coke recalled this statute, reminding them that it "is treason to imagine or intend the death of the king, queen, or prince"). If this were the law, then the government was now in the awkward position of urging the nation to engage in just such an act—one of the things that made them so nervous about those histories and tragedies in London's public theaters that invited playgoers to imagine such outcomes.

On the Sunday following the failed attack, Bishop William Barlow stood in the pulpit at Paul's Cross before a large outdoor crowd of anxious citizens who until now had had to subsist on gossip and rumor, as reports, sometimes wild ones, circulated in the city. What was needed was one powerful and unifying message. Barlow was the right man to deliver it, having proven himself in similar challenging circumstances from this very pulpit in the tumultuous aftermath of the Earl of Essex's abortive uprising just a few years earlier. He began his sermon by reminding his fellow Londoners that the destruction would not have stopped with the deaths of so many leaders and citizens in the initial explosion. Terrible aftershocks would have shredded the fabric of the nation and in the ensuing chaos the social contract itself would have disintegrated. It would only have been a matter of time before a defenseless England was conquered and laid waste. Those killed in the initial conflagration, Barlow suggested, would have been the lucky ones: "What rapes, what rapines, what riflings, what slaughters had ensued? A thing more miserable to the survivors than to them which were slain?" The time would have been ripe for "a foreigner to invade" or a "domestical usurper to intrude." After conjuring this apocalyptic vision, Barlow read to the crowd the letter that Monteagle had delivered to the

Privy Council a fortnight earlier, which had providentially delivered in turn the king and kingdom. It's understandable why the authorities felt that the incriminating letter had to be shared with the public: much had irrevocably changed in England the previous week, yet nothing visibly.

The government didn't feel that it could wait five days before getting out its version of what might have happened. The day before Barlow preached to the throng gathered at Paul's Cross, King James himself addressed the nation's political and religious leaders about "this great and horrible attempt, whereof the like was never either heard or read," in the very building where they had all come so close to dying. It was more sermon than anything else, with James at the outset of his speech comparing recent events to nothing less than the apocalypse. While reminding them that assassination threats had been the recurring story of his life, James also acknowledged that this most recent plot had threatened "a destruction prepared not for me alone, but for you all that are here present, and wherein no rank, age, nor sex should have been spared." The king's speech contained a drumbeat of key words, singly and in pairs, that offered a much-needed working vocabulary for a plot and a sense of evil the enormity of which contemporaries were struggling to put into words: "cruel and unmerciful," "horrible and fearful," "raging and merciless." While acknowledging that he had "spoken more like a divine" than a king this day, James could not resist circling back to his Union agenda, reminding those gathered that day that if not for the delivery of the Articles of Union "which was thought most convenient to be done in my presence," his appearance in Parliament on November 5 "had not otherwise been requisite." Having risked life and limb in support of the Union of England and Scotland, James wanted Parliament to ratify it when they reconvened on January 21.

It is a testament to the brilliance of the government's story that its account of what happened remains largely intact four hundred years later. To reinforce this message, James's speech to Parliament was hurried into print that month. It was widely read and reprinted with fresh material added to it, and was known simply as "The King's Book." In the

nineteenth century the government's version of what happened was further codified in "The Gunpowder Plot Book," a compilation of surviving primary documents of which the crown jewel is the Monteagle letter. Further cementing this providentialist narrative, in January 1606 a new section was added to the Prayer Book, a thanksgiving service condemning "Popish treachery" and commemorating for all time how the English nation was spared that day.

Counternarratives, dismissive of this selective official account, argue that a great deal of evidence was suppressed or destroyed, and maintain that these gaps in the record indicate that the authorities knew about the plot well before November 5 but allowed it to go forward in order to advance the ends of the state, especially the suppression of England's Catholics. In an extreme version of this view, the plot is thought to have been the brainchild of a Catholic-hating Salisbury, the plotters his manipulated and doomed puppets, who until the moment of their execution believed that they would be spared. But such claims have never gained much traction, in large part because the Jacobean regime, which had a near monopoly on evidence, told its version of the story so effectively by ignoring *why* and emphasizing instead *what might have been*. It is easy to forget that what sets the Gunpowder Plot apart from subsequent infamous terrorist plots (especially those also significant enough to be remembered by their date) is that in this case *nothing happened*. Which meant that, like one of those great Jacobean dramas, its impact and aftermath didn't depend on actual violence but rather on making people imagine an unforgettable tragedy, the kind that feels as real as *Lear* or *Macbeth*. The catharsis would have to await the capture, torture, and spectacular public execution of those responsible.

England's dramatists, forbidden from writing about current events except obliquely, must have looked on in grudging admiration. The shrewdest of them must also have recognized that even if nothing had been physically destroyed, something had inescapably changed in their world. The plot was itself decisive evidence that things had been bubbling up—pressures, resentments, fantasies that even a government with

a network of spies had missed. It was not an intelligence lapse so much as a failure of imagination, an inability to grasp what, thirty months into James's reign, had for some of his subjects become intolerable. And despite the lip service paid to the work of the devil, it was also a failure to imagine the possibility that anyone, possessed or not, was evil enough to commit such an indiscriminate atrocity. In the ensuing year it would fall to England's writers to probe more deeply and search for what was ultimately at stake in this unfolding story.

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By the time that the inquisition of the "massing relics" took place in Stratford-upon-Avon in late February, Ambrose Rookwood was dead. So too were his friends John Grant and Robert Winter, as well as many others who had plotted with them at Clopton House.

After several rounds of interrogation and debilitating torture, the defiant John Johnson was finally broken. When he supplied the authorities with a full confession on November 9, he was so weak he could barely sign it. But he did so with his real name, Guido Fawkes. Guy Fawkes—as he was universally called—and his fellow conspirators had plotted "to blow up the king with all the nobility about him in Parliament," then "resolved to surprise the Princess Elizabeth" and "make her queen," and had "prepared, in her name, a proclamation against the Union of the kingdoms." The plan, according to another conspirator, Sir

Everard Digby, was for Catesby to proclaim her heir apparent at Charing Cross before riding north to abduct the princess. As idealistic as they were, the plotters were pragmatic enough to reach out to non-Catholics. Fawkes confessed that they had intended to make "use of all the discontented people in England"; the appeal, Digby writes, would have been broad, including a call for abolishing "wardships and monopolies."

The originators of the conspiracy had been Robert Catesby, his cousin Thomas Wright, and Thomas Winter. The charismatic Catesby, who came up with the plan to blow up James and Parliament, had approached the other two in early 1604. They then recruited Thomas Percy and Fawkes (whose military experience in the Low Countries and training as a mining engineer were major assets). The five soon realized that more manpower and money were needed and over the course of the next year or so handpicked eight others to join them. Percy rented a building next to the old palace of Westminster, and they planned to tunnel from there to a spot under the House of Lords where they could set off the explosion. Three new recruits, John Grant, Christopher Wright, and Catesby's trusted retainer Thomas Bates, helped with the digging. It was grueling manual labor for gentlemen unused to it, and noisy enough to attract attention, so there was considerable relief when a lease for a spacious ground-floor storeroom directly beneath the first floor of the House of Lords became available in March 1605. Percy secured the lease, enabling the plotters to hide nearly a ton of gunpowder, then cover it with stones, wood, and iron bars, to disguise the explosives and increase their destructive force.

Because the plot had grown more expensive, two others, Digby and Ambrose Rookwood, were invited to join and provide much-needed funds. Expanding the group one final time was its undoing; the well-to-do Francis Tresham, recruited just three weeks before the plot was discovered, was probably the author of the letter delivered to his brother-in-law Monteagle. When first told the details of the plot, Tresham was so horrified that he offered to pay the others to flee to the Continent rather than go through with it, fearing that if it failed "the whole kingdom"

would turn its "fury upon such as were taken for Catholics." Quite a few others—besides their Jesuit confessors and English Catholic contacts on the Continent, who were in on the secret—must have suspected or known that a plot was in the works, though their identities are now lost to us. The conspirators had much in common. Many were bound by ties of blood or marriage and had roots in the Midlands. Most of them were gentlemen in their thirties, young enough to be daring, but old enough to have had some experience of failure. All were recusants who chafed at the mistreatment of Catholics in England and, almost three years into the new reign, held out little hope that things would change.

Word of Fawkes's arrest reached them in the early hours of November 5. With fresh horses waiting, they raced north on an eighty-mile dash to Warwickshire to their appointed rendezvous that evening with Digby's hunting party at an inn at Dunchurch—a cover for the planned abduction of Princess Elizabeth—stopping only to arm themselves at Percy's home at Ashby St. Ledgers. When they met up with Digby's party, Catesby flat-out lied about what had happened in London, still hoping to keep the floundering rebellion alive, telling Digby that "there was such a pudder bred in the state by the death of the king and the Earl of Salisbury as the Catholics would now stir." There was talk as well of joining forces with an army of a thousand supporters at Stephen Littleton's estate at Holbeach, in Staffordshire. But it was impossible to conceal the truth for very long and most of Digby's friends, rather than join them, quietly slipped away into the night. The conspirators were left at this point with "not above fifty horse," but they remained hopeful that they could attract followers and that their uprising would succeed. They failed to see that while England's Catholics were suffering under punitive recusancy laws and might grumble about their limited toleration, they weren't about to commit treason and risk all to right those wrongs. Yet in truth, nobody at this moment had sounded the depth of Catholic resentment. The government certainly took the possibility of a Catholic uprising seriously. The attempted rebellion would put the loyalties of English Catholics to the test. Digby was especially crushed

by their failure to find popular support: "Not one man came to take our part," he lamented, "though we expected so many." Their own servants abandoned them and guards soon had to be stationed to prevent further desertions.

The next forty-eight hours passed in a nightmarish haze. The rebels covered fifteen miles to Warwick to steal Benock's horses, then another twenty-six or so after their brief stop at Norbrook on their way toward Huddington (by which point, whatever rumors local officials had heard, their numbers continued to dwindle). Thomas Bates peeled off from the group as they passed Alcester, riding a few miles north to Coughton Court, an estate that had been rented by Digby. His mission was to deliver a letter to Henry Garnet, England's senior Jesuit, who was hiding there and knew of their plans, urging him to join them. Garnet refused, but another Jesuit, Oswald Tesimond, rode back with Bates, and the two caught up with the conspirators still riding hard to Huddington, where they slept on the night of the sixth. Early the next morning the troop, now shadowed by a local posse, made a short detour to find more arms (but once again disappointingly few recruits), raiding Lord Windsor's home at Hewell Grange. If any doubts remained about the reluctance of the people to join them, they were put to rest here. When Catesby cried out to the villagers there, "Will you come with us?" one of them said in response, "It may be, if we know what you mean to do." Catesby's reply—"We are for God and the country"—failed to win any of them over. One of the villagers coolly answered, "We are for King James as well as for God and the country, and we will not go against his will."

The tired troop, their numbers still shrinking, and traveling more slowly now through muddy roads while towing a cart full of weapons, veered north rather than heading westward toward the imagined safety of Wales, perhaps having heard that roads and bridges ahead were manned. They arrived at Holbeach House, Stephen Littleton's home, on the evening of November 7. They would ride no further. They had left London less than three days earlier and had covered more than 150 miles. That evening, while they were drying out gunpowder dampened

by the rain, disaster struck. The gunpowder accidently exploded, badly wounding some of the core group, including Rookwood, Catesby, and Grant, whose "face was much disfigured and his eyes almost burnt out." The irony was not lost on any of them. A shaken John Wright grabbed hold of the injured Catesby and said, "Woe worth the time that we have seen this day," before calling for the rest of the gunpowder so that "they might all together be blown up." A despondent Catesby "began to think he had offended God in this action, seeing so bad effects follow from the same."

The conspirators and their handful of supporters determined to make their final stand there and die fighting. By morning, Holbeach was surrounded. When some of the leading rebels charged out, local forces fired on them, hitting both Percy and Catesby. Other plotters were soon shot or fatally stabbed. Several were captured, including those too badly injured to fight on. A few managed to flee in the confusion but didn't get far. Robert Keyes was caught the next day. Robert Winter and Stephen Littleton evaded the authorities for two months before they were betrayed and arrested. Winter later told Fawkes (their conversation overheard by a spy in the Tower of London) that while on the run he was haunted by nightmares in which he saw "steeples stand awry and within those churches strange and unknown faces," before realizing to his horror that "the faces of his associates so scorched resembled those which he had seen in his dream." Only Tesimond, a long-hunted Jesuit experienced at making his way unnoticed through England, eluded his pursuers and found safety on the Continent.

The Midlands uprising was over, though not even members of the posse at Holbeach, now fighting over spurs, stockings, and all the other booty they could lay their hands on, knew it. Local forces throughout the Midlands remained on alert and England's ports remained closed. Devonshire's army was still attracting volunteers—including, brazenly, Francis Tresham, the sole conspirator remaining free in London. When King James addressed Parliament the following day, November 9, he focused on what had happened in London. News of the shootout at

Holbeach reached the court that same day, and the bedraggled remnants of the conspiracy arrived in London three days later, exactly a week after they had left, knowing full well the punishment that awaited them. James's "King's Book" would describe their entry into the city itself. The passage, attributed to the king and deemed significant enough to be reprinted in his collected works in 1616, recalls how they were "met with a huge confluence of people of all sorts, desirous to see them, as the rarest sort of monsters; fools to laugh at them, women and children to wonder, all the common people to gaze, the wiser sort to satisfy their curiosity, in seeing the outward cases of so unheard of a villainy." It must have been an extraordinary scene, regardless of whether onlookers felt fury, pity, or a mixture of both. The phrasing of the official and royal account of crowds gazing on these "rarest sort of monsters" stuck with Shakespeare, for the words are closely echoed in his next play in Macduff's challenge to that archfiend Macbeth:

> *yield thee coward,*
> *And live to be a show and gaze o'th' time!*
> *We'll have thee, as our rarer monsters are,*
> *Painted upon a pole.*
>
> (5.8.23–26)

Hearing James's description of those "rarest sort of monsters" who tried to kill him repeated in this way (in words spoken to a man who had in fact killed a Scottish king) must have come as a jolt to crowds at the Globe in 1606, one of those rare moments in Shakespeare's work—akin to the Chorus's words in *Henry the Fifth* about Londoners welcoming home the Earl of Essex—that neatly elides past and present and sharpens the topicality of the play.

The government might easily have held their trial that week or the next, while outrage was still fresh. Their treason, after all, was manifest. But their trial and execution were put off until late January. One reason for the delay was that nobody in authority really believed that a group

of gentry could have done this without the assistance of a foreign enemy or an as-yet-unidentified English nobleman. The king shared this view: Molino writes that James "was amazed that so vast and so audacious a scheme should have been hatched in the mind of a man of such low and abject estate." So the surviving conspirators—along with anyone with knowledge of the plot—were repeatedly interrogated and their stories checked against each other in the hope of discovering who was really behind it.

Sir Thomas Edmondes, the English ambassador in Brussels, reported in mid-November how hard he was finding it to convince others of "the truth of the said conspiracy." Those he spoke with on the Continent were convinced that if not a devious Puritan plot, or a Dutch-inspired antimonarchical one, it could only have been the work of a Protestant-leaning devil, eager to rid England of her Catholic subjects. No friend to the Catholics himself, Edmondes added that he hoped that his government "may make that use of it, as we have just cause to do." His words point to the two great challenges facing the authorities. The first was to craft a version of the story that would displace competing ones already circulating. The official report, first published as *A True and Perfect Relation of the Proceedings at the Several Arraignments of the Late Most Barbarous Traitors* published in the winter of 1606, was written in part to combat the "diverse uncertain, untrue, and incoherent reports" that "do pass from hand to hand." The second challenge was to discover what political advantages could be gained, an early modern version of the political adage "No crisis should go to waste." But King James was only interested in punishing extremists. At a time when his primary political goal was Union and he felt as threatened by radical Puritans as he did by seditious Catholics, it wouldn't help to create fresh divisions within his kingdoms.

Still, the story had to be told, whatever the uses to which it might be put. And that task fell to Salisbury, whose hand is visible behind both James's speech to Parliament and Barlow's sermon at Paul's Cross. Over the course of the next two months Salisbury played a role familiar to London's playwrights, as he pored over his sources and chose key plot

lines and characters. Survivors of the skirmish at Holbeach, along with plotters seized in London, were forced to provide long and detailed accounts of their involvement. Salisbury then took their various confessions and wove them into a narrative that suited the government's interests. He knew that he had to strike the right balance between a main plot (in London) and the subplot (those "Robin Hoods" in Warwickshire), as well as between heroes and villains. King James, in uncovering the conspiracy, had to play a starring role, and Monteagle cast as best supporting actor. There were several candidates for the leading villain. Should this be, as initially scripted, Percy's plot? Or should Catesby, whose plan it was, be cast as the archtraitor? Though not fully satisfied with the choice, Salisbury decided to cast one of the lesser players, the one who most captured the popular imagination and acted as a lightning rod for their feelings: that mysterious and foreign-sounding "Guido" Fawkes, the "villain in a vault," the "Machiavellian with a match."

Though only the plotters themselves would be destroyed in this high drama, emphasis had to be placed on the king and kingdom as the tragic victims. Barlow was correct, then, to draw attention in his early sermon at Paul's Cross to the plot as "a devilish brutishness, and an hyperbolical, yea an hyperdiabolical devilishness." But he overreached in then speaking of it as "this late tragic-comical treason"; "comical" would have to be suppressed. So too would the plotters' accusatory words that cast the king and his plans for Union in an unfavorable light. The plotters' hit list, mentioned by Molino, of "all the houses inhabited by Scots, so that after the explosion they could be massacred," was also quietly omitted from all governmental accounts of the plot.

Visuals too were needed. The Privy Council was disappointed to learn that the authorities in Staffordshire had thoughtlessly buried the bodies of the conspirators they had killed and stripped at Holbeach. So they ordered that their corpses "be taken out of their graves and bowelled and their quarters to be set up in some principal towns where they most led their lives, and the heads of Percy and Catesby to be sent up hither purposely." Their heads, soon displayed on iron poles

at Parliament, had the intended effect on onlookers. One of them was a sixteen-year-old student at Westminster who was so struck by the frightening sight that he wrote a poem, "Trayterous Percyes & Catesbyes Prosopopeia," in which he imagines seeing, as if in a dream, the pair of severed heads conversing. It's a terrifying vision: "Two monsters' skulls, which never plotted good, / Grim, ghastly, pale, shagged-hair, sulphurous eyes, / Piercing the air with howlings, yells, and cries." On both sides, then, if we consider Robert Winter's dream of his friends' scorched faces and this teenager's dream of talking heads, the Gunpowder Plot was producing nightmares, tapping deep into Jacobean political and religious anxieties.

On January 27 the eight surviving plotters—Guy Fawkes, Thomas Winter, Robert Winter, Robert Keyes, John Grant, Thomas Bates, Ambrose Rookwood, and Sir Everard Digby—were brought from the Tower to stand trial at Westminster Hall. King James was present, though hidden, as were Queen Anne, three months pregnant, and Prince Henry. As in the public theaters, you had to pay more for a decent view. One member of Parliament felt cheated when he and "diverse others" paid ten shillings for standing room in a space reserved for members, only to discover that many of the "baser sort" were squeezed into their crammed section for as little as three or four pence each. The crush for this once-in-a-lifetime event, and the price too, was far greater than at any sold-out performance at the public playhouses.

The judges, a special commission made up of the leading officials in the kingdom, were also part of the show. It wasn't a trial in the modern sense: the accused weren't permitted to defend themselves and had no counsel. From the perspective of the state, there was no need. It must have caused a stir when, "contrary to the general expectation," with the exception of Digby they all pleaded not guilty. Digby chose to plead guilty with an explanation: he had acted because the government's "promises were broken with the Catholics." The punctilious attorney general, Sir Edward Coke, got in the last word before the verdict was read. He reminded those present how lucky these traitors were that the

king hadn't devised any "new torment or torture" for them. He then provided a plot summary of the spectacle that would soon follow. Everyone already knew what was coming, but Coke understood that they needed to hear once more the horrific punishment facing the conspirators. After being "drawn to the place of execution," each traitor was to be hanged, then cut down before strangling to death. While still alive, he was then "to have his privy parts cut off and burned before his face" and his bowels "taken out and burned," before his head would be "cut off." Lastly, his body was to "be quartered, and the quarters set up in some high and eminent place, to the view and detestation of men and to become a prey for the fowls of the air."

The show trial was almost over. After the guilty verdicts were delivered Digby asked for forgiveness, Robert Winter pleaded for mercy, and his younger brother Thomas gallantly if fruitlessly begged that he "be hanged both for his brother and himself." The blinded Grant "was a good while mute" before admitting that he was guilty of "conspiracy intended but never executed," and Fawkes, aggressive to the last, sought to exonerate the Jesuit priests who were implicated in the plot, insisting that "we never opened the matter to them." Rookwood begged for mercy, not because he feared death but because "so shameful a death should leave so perpetual a blemish and blot unto all ages upon his name and blood."

On January 30, Digby, Robert Winter, Grant, and Bates were bound and drawn on wicker sleds to St. Paul's to be hanged, castrated, eviscerated, then cut to pieces. Having plotted "not only to make our kingdom headless but memberless," as the preacher Samuel Garey put it, they would now suffer that very fate themselves. London itself was the stage and there was room for everyone keen on viewing part of the spectacle. The procession to the gallows had its own drama as family members hoped to greet the condemned for the last time. Martha Bates managed to slip past the armed guards and throw herself on the bound body of her husband, Thomas, as he was dragged to St. Paul's. The executions took place at the western end of St. Paul's churchyard and offered

a combination of sanctity and savagery in equal measure. Digby was the first to mount the scaffold, followed by Winter, Grant, then Bates. According to John Aubrey, Digby was eloquent to the end. After asking forgiveness he prayed quietly for a quarter hour, "often bowing his head to the ground," before ascending the scaffold. He was only hanged for a very short while before being cut down and butchered. It was said that when the executioner plucked out his heart and exclaimed to the crowd, "Here is the heart of a traitor," Digby in his dying breath cried out "Thou liest!" True or not, it was reported that common folk gathered there "marveled at his fortitude" and talked "almost of nothing else."

It was not the wisest time to criticize how the government chose to stage these executions, but Sir Arthur Gorges took that chance, complaining to Salisbury about the choice of site, not finding St. Paul's "a fit place" to "make a butchery in the churchyard, and almost under the eaves of the most famous church of our kingdom." Gorges added that it might generate invidious comparisons between King James and Queen Elizabeth: "I well remember that that was the place of happy memory . . . where our late dread and dear sovereign offered up in all humility upon her knees her thanksgiving to God for the great victory upon the Spaniards and therefore too worthy to be now polluted with gibbets, hangmen, or the blood of traitors." Salisbury saw that Gorges was right, and the cumbersome set was dismantled and hastily moved to a new site, the Old Palace Yard at Westminster, so that on the following day Londoners could witness a repeat performance. On this day Thomas Winter went first, followed by Rookwood, Keyes, and last of all the star attraction, Guy Fawkes. His body broken by torture, Fawkes was "scarce able to go up the ladder." But his end was luckier than that of the others, for his neck snapped when he was hanged, killing him before he had to endure the horrors then visited upon his body. When the carnage ended, "their quarters were placed over London gates" and their heads overlooking London Bridge.

While we will never know in what ways the Gunpowder Plot and its aftermath affected Shakespeare personally, it's nonetheless possible

to recover some of the traces it left on his work. Its most obvious impact would be on the next play he would write, *Macbeth*, which begins and ends with the killing of a Scottish king. In its use of squibs in the opening scene—small fireworks made of brimstone and saltpeter that made a slight but noisy explosion—it must have even smelled like a Gunpowder play. The plot also left its mark on *King Lear* before it had even been staged. How uncanny was it to have imagined before the Fifth of November a story that turned on a mysterious and forged letter, in a play that took an old tragicomedy and reworked it into a tragedy that ended apocalyptically, with the destruction of the entire British royal family? Kent's grim question at the end of the play—"Is this the promised end?"—and Edgar's rejoinder: "Or image of that horror?" (24.59–60) foreshadowed the language of "The King's Book" and Barlow's Gunpowder sermon. In Lear's words on the heath, confronting the terrible elements, decrying ingratitude, and calling down destruction on his head, Shakespeare had written one of his most powerful speeches:

> *Blow, wind, and crack your cheeks! Rage! blow!*
> *You cataracts and hurricanoes, spout*
> *Till you have drenched our steeples, drowned the cocks!*
> *You sulphurous and thought-executing fires,*
> *Vaunt-couriers to oak-cleaving thunderbolts,*
> *Singe my white head; and thou all-shaking thunder,*
> *Smite flat the thick rotundity o' the world,*
> *Crack nature's mould, all germens spill at once,*
> *That make ingrateful man.*
>
> (9.1–9)

The effect of this speech would be intensified in the wake of the trial of the traitors, with the words of Sir Edward Coke still fresh in Londoners' minds, linking this description of elemental violence with the forces that would have been unleashed on the Fifth of November: "Lord, what a wind, what a fire, what a motion and commotion of earth and air there

would have been!" Lines in the play such as the Fool's jibe about monopolies (4.146), the kind of oblique political criticism that only a few months earlier would have slipped by the censor, now had to be cut, once the king's abuse of monopolies had been invoked by the Gunpowder plotters to justify regicide. And in its handling of the consequences of the division of the kingdoms, the politics of *King Lear* had become more fraught, if more timely, for the expected resolution of the Union question by Parliament in early November had been delayed once more. There would be other effects on as-yet-unwritten plays. After the Fifth of November (with the exception of the late and collaborative *Henry the Eighth*), Shakespeare would never again delve into what had been a recurrent interest in his work, most famously in *Hamlet* with its ghost come from Purgatory: nostalgia for the residual pull of Catholicism in a world in which the old religion continued to make its presence felt. It was not that Shakespeare had stopped thinking about these matters. Who could, at a time when neighbors of opposing faiths were eyeing one another more warily than before? But it had become too volatile to engage as comfortably or as directly as he once had.

Along with Shakespeare's late plays and the King James Bible, the story commemorated every Fifth of November is the only cultural artifact created during the first decade of King James's reign that still matters four hundred years later. Why these three? The Authorized Version of the Bible is perhaps the easiest to explain. The teams of scholars and churchmen that James commanded at the Hampton Court Conference to produce a new translation were phenomenally knowledgeable and talented, and the English language, as the many celebrated poets and playwrights of the day recognized, was at a particularly rich moment in its evolution. The result, rare in anything done by committee, was a sonorous translation that made the divine word more accessible and urgent. And it has probably helped that, in sharing that moment's linguistic heritage, it sounds so "Shakespearean."

The longevity of the Fifth of November is more surprising. A ruler can't simply declare that a day is a holiday and assume that it will last

forever. If that were so, every August the Scots and English would still be lighting bonfires in celebration of Gowrie Day. What's all the more strange is that the Fifth of November recalls a collective experience, a day of communal deliverance, on which nothing actually happened. Nobody has fully explained the deep hold that "Remember, Remember the Fifth of November" continues to have on the British psyche (though its grip seems to be slackening and the image of Guy Fawkes may soon be associated more with the visage on the masks worn by anonymous protesters). The holiday clearly touched upon religious and political issues not so easily identified or named, and, like Shakespeare's plays, managed to evolve over time as political and religious circumstances, and anxieties, have changed. Perhaps too, much like the public theaters, the holiday filled the vacuum left in the late sixteenth century by the elimination of Catholic pageantry and communal celebration, as saint's days were suppressed and eliminated from the public calendar. The King James Bible, Shakespeare's plays, and the Fifth of November all managed to preserve the past, sacred and secular, for present-day needs. The plotters had tried to do the opposite, obliterating the history of post-Reformation England, for the intended blast would have eliminated England's rulers along with the archives of her parliamentary and ecclesiastical history. Had their attempt succeeded, they would have effectively turned the clock back sixty years.

It's not widely know that John Milton, born in 1608, too late to have lived through the Gunpowder Plot itself, was obsessed as a teenager with it and wrote five short Latin poems, school exercises, on the subject. He then returned to it in a more substantial Latin poem on the twentieth anniversary of the threatened attack, titled simply "*In Quintum Novembris*" ("On the Fifth of November"). In this poem Satan flies to Rome and urges the pope to destroy Britain's leaders "and scatter their bodies through the air, burning them to ashes, by exploding gunpowder under the room where they will assemble." But God intervenes and "thwarts the daring Papists' outrages." The evildoers are punished, God thanked, bonfires lit, and a promise made that henceforth

"throughout the whole year there shall be no day more celebrated than the Fifth of November." The poem, in touching on temptation, the nature of evil, and providential intervention, anticipates much of what, decades later, Milton explores so incisively in *Paradise Lost* (not least of all Book 6, where Satan invents gunpowder as a weapon to challenge God's powers). Yet what makes this Fifth of November poem so unreadable today is that for the young Milton the Gunpowder Plot was about answers, not questions. He knows where evil originates. Good and bad, fair and foul, are always legible. They aren't in *Paradise Lost* (even if Milton thought they were) and they certainly aren't in Shakespeare.

Though he had finished writing *King Lear*, Shakespeare would continue to brood over Harsnett's stories of possession, deception, and the human propensity for evil. The Fifth of November, that "confection of all villainy," gave those issues fresh relevance, for it had prompted not only Shakespeare but also everyone else in the land to confront questions they had never been forced to grapple with so deeply or desperately: How can ordinary people attempt such horrible and unthinkable crimes? In doing so, what kind of lies or stories must they tell themselves and others? Does this evil come from satanic forces or from within us? What binds us together—be it a family or a marriage or a country—and what can destroy these bonds? Recognizing the hunger for a play that probed the very questions that now haunted his world, Shakespeare began to read and think about Macbeth.