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David Cressy. *Dangerous Talk: Scandalous, Seditious, and Treasonable Speech in Pre-Modern England.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. xv + 374 pp. $50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-956480-4; ISBN 978-0-19-157317-0.

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Regulating Popular Seditious Speech in Early Modern England

In a study focusing on early modern English legal records, David Cressy creates a richly illustrated picture of "dangerous talk" by ordinary people about their monarchs from the sixteenth through the eighteenth century. By "dangerous talk" Cressy means legally actionable speech that was perceived as scandalous, seditious, or treasonous–perceptions that always were contested and shifted over time. This malicious speech was thought to damage the social fabric and endanger the crown. Without its repression, authorities feared that such speech could become a contagion that undermined the ties of allegiances throughout the social hierarchy. Cressy examines how dangerous talk was monitored, prosecuted by the legal system, and responded to through the creation of new laws and political propaganda.

Each chapter painstakingly details the rebukes typical under each monarch, and by the end of the study Cressy has made vivid the grounds for popular dissent and attacks upon the crown. Most commonly verbal attacks involved the legitimacy, succession, religious policies, and personal characters of rulers. Furthermore, Cressy's research suggests that the public was remarkably well informed and that individuals engaged in lively political critique in both private and public venues. Their rebukes–which ranged from mild mockery to incitement to regicide–initially shocked witnesses, but this shock faded over time. From the Tudors to the Hanovers, there was a shift from a culture that accepted a vigorous state response to such talk, to one which began to consider most of this talk as the "birthright of an Englishman."

Reminiscent of his earlier masterwork *Birth, Marriage and Death: Ritual, Religion and the Life Cycle in Tudor and Stuart England* (1997), Cressy engages in close readings of lengthy primary-source excerpts and, as in the latter study, he consults a rather exhaustive collection of them. In his search for popular voices critical of the crown, he examines court proceedings (the assizes, quarter sessions, and Privy Council records), law reports, and official correspondence. Supplementing these are legal statutes, as well as samplings from pastoral literature, diaries, legal guides, and newspapers. His ordinary people, who appeared as accused parties, witnesses or legal officials, came from throughout the social spectrum and from both sides of the Protestant-Catholic confessional divide. Through close readings and strong prosopography, he takes into account the wide range of elements that shaped the trajectory of the cases, including local and state politics, personal quarrels, and ideological conflicts.

Cressy's work complements studies on popular politics, dissent, and the state, which have been dominated, he asserts, by a focus on published writings. His work fits well with this literature and he expects readers will be acquainted with it: he does not include a discussion of method or historiography, makes only brief allusions to other scholars, and does not address other approaches, such as those found in works on ritual and performance. As Cressy illustrates that the religious beliefs and policies of monarchs were the basis of much dangerous talk, this study also should find a place in the history of the Reformation. He assumes that the reader is familiar with the cogent issues surrounding the dynastic, diplomatic, and religious history of the period, including major events, crises, and reforms. For less informed readers, Cressy does draw attention to key events to orient readers in context and allow them to investigate further (for instance, in his references to the Gunpowder Plot).

The history and development of the regulation of dangerous talk, however, is explained in detail. Cressy first provides a useful primer explaining what could be construed as "dangerous" talk and how both individuals and institutions sought damages and punishment for verbal injuries, that is, words that caused scandal, wounded reputations and livelihoods, or encouraged religious dis-

sent. While political authorities expected verbal discipline and deference from their subjects, and asserted that common folk should not discuss the affairs of the realm, people routinely did so in the course of everyday sociability. When individuals assumed a personal stake in royal affairs and abused or threatened the king with words, they veered into sedition and treason.

Edward III's Statute of Westminster laid the foundation of the law on verbal treason and provided an enduring point of reference. Under this law, to intend or imagine the death of the king or queen was an act of treason, a capital offense. The statute condemned the "devisors of tales" who fostered conflict between the king and his subjects. To "tell or publish any false news or tales, whereby discord or occasion of discord or slander may grow between the king and his people" was an offense subject to prosecution (p. 37). Tudor statutes reinforced and broadened the law. Under Henry VIII, words that slandered the king and queen were acts of high treason, or, the lesser charge of misprision of treason. Marian legislation criminalized "seditious" words and rumors that undermined king or queen, and in legal proceedings seditious speech became distinct from treason. Late medieval and early modern evidence indicates that treason through speech was difficult to prosecute without proof of either the intent to harm the king or queen or treasonous or politically suspect activities. "Seditious utterances," on the other hand, could cover a wide variety of verbal abuse against the crown, made prosecution easier, and allowed a more flexible punitive response (the pillory, disfigurement, prison, and fines).

Over the course of the book, Cressy explores the application of the laws and the general nature of the criticisms and threats each monarch faced. He proceeds chronologically, examining the judicial records, government correspondence, and statute law under each monarch (and during the interregnum). Throughout, Cressy suggests how the unique problems and personal idiosyncrasies of each ruler helped shape the popular discourse of rebuke. For each ruler, he breaks down the verbal attacks into categories and isolates the most popular slurs: Elizabeth I's sexuality and gender were targeted; James I, Charles I, and Charles II were deemed unwise fools or rogues with poor religious policies; Cromwell's authority was challenged; the Hanovers' German background and right to rule was doubted. Continuities are clear as well. Attacks on the crown's religious beliefs and politics plagued each monarch, as did questions of succession and fitness for the throne. As for the zealous application of the law to these unruly subjects, Cressy does a thorough job illustrating what type of speech merited a response under each monarch and how harsh that response was. Unsurprisingly, in times of political or religious instability edgy monarchs became more sensitive and severe.

Over time, however, the notion that speech-acts against the king or queen were actionable as treason–or even "seditious"–became less and less tenable. By the eighteenth century, this was due to the greater threat of written dissent, the relative stability of the crown, and changes in the legal and political culture of England. Cressy draws particular attention to the precedent set by the "landmark determination" in the high-profile case against the lawyer Hugh Pyne, which clarified the distinction between felonious treason in speech and scandalous or seditious words. In this case, and increasingly afterwards, it was difficult to prosecute the accused for treason or sedition based upon abusive words unless he or she also plotted against, or incited direct violence to, the monarch. Words alone might be deemed "seditious," but they, too, would grow increasingly difficult to prosecute successfully. Additionally, proponents of a unique English citizenship extrapolated from the Bill of Rights (which granted open speech in Parliament) a certain leeway for verbal critique of the state and the monarch. By the modern period, dangerous speech expressed new social and political concerns, such as republican sentiments, class antagonism, and, more recently, racial hatred.

Social and legal historians may find his approach to the sources to be both compelling and at times frustrating. Cressy goes to great lengths to explain the context and development of the cases and helps the reader understand how to read the sources, pointing out why cases might have been recorded in the way they were. For each case studied in any detail, he indicates the role that formal structures (institutional and procedural, and record-keeping practices), politics (local and state), and ideology played in shaping the case, from its reportage to punishment. In the end, the reader is left with a strong sense of the nature and variety of these cases in general, but may wish that Cressy had done more to quantify and compare the numbers and types of cases, punishments, and sentences over time. Cressy offers rough estimates of relative numbers and at points provides numbers drawn from his investigations and those of other historians (readers need to hunt in the footnotes for these in some instances). Also interesting would be quantitative breakdowns of the people accused, whose diversity (by sex, profession, or social status) is suggested anecdotally. A few tables or an appendix would have helped readers better see general trends and patterns. Ultimately, however, Cressy seeks

to hear voices we often do not hear, to understand popular political discourse in detail, and to help us understand how the state's response to dangerous words shifted over time, rather than to quantify: in this, he succeeds.

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