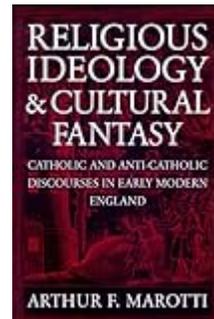




**Arthur F. Marotti.** *Religious Ideology and Cultural Fantasy: Catholic and Anti-Catholic Discourses in Early Modern England.* Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005. xii + 307 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-268-03479-5.



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**Published on** H-Albion (November, 2005)

## Facts and Fantasies

Arthur F. Marotti's lively book is a further recovery of some marginalized voices, those of the early modern English Catholics. They were in an invidious position: officially persecuted with varying intensity, caricatured as subversives, blamed for so many prevailing ills, implicated in international conspiracies, and all tarred with the brush of their most extreme members. Once created, the image was impossible to shake. The Catholics—the Jesuits, in particular—became the arch-protagonist around which England's Protestant identity was shaped and its history developed. A succession of major events formed an anti-Catholic, providentialist narrative structure for England's history. The list includes such moments as the Spanish Armada, the Gunpowder Plot, the Irish Rebellion, and the Popish Plot. Whig history has further cemented this view, linking Protestantism with progress, with such effect that English Catholicism may well be the last frontier of revisionism.

All of these ideas are colorfully drawn in *Religious Ideology and Cultural Fantasy*. Marotti explores “a developing set of rhetorical codes and ideological fantasies” that took shape in printed works and circulated manuscripts

(p. 2). By surveying the conversations that Catholics held among themselves and the anti-Catholic polemic of their opponents, he reveals “the exaggerations, historical distortions, and, in some cases, paranoid reasoning endemic to the form” of writing (p. 2). In the first chapter he describes some early Catholic martyrs and the fascination of Catholics with their relics. He then focuses more narrowly on the Jesuits, “the perfect object of paranoid imagining” (p. 50), showing that ordinary Catholics felt some discomfort at their enthusiasm for a martyrdom the authorities were only too happy to supply. Chapter 3 uncovers an international Catholic network along which manuscripts were passed to encourage the faithful. Chapter 4 navigates the process of Catholic conversion, an act which inevitably carried political overtones and implications. In the last and longest chapter, Marotti describes how the essential structure of English history was put in place, built around the events listed above.

This book, then, vividly recovers some voices that had been lost or obscured, but it is not without its weaknesses. To be fair, they are signaled from the very beginning. Marotti explains that he is most interested in the

perceptions that were held, rather than the facts of the matter: “what people thought happened,” not “what actually happened” (p. 4). So the bulk of the book comprises lengthy quotations from primary sources (the longest is just short of two pages) without much in the way of historical context to ground them. This is, after all, much more of a literary study than a historical one, but when Marotti concludes (for example) that martyrdom stories bound the Catholic community together we simply have no evidence this is the case except for the existence of the stories themselves. And if the facts of the matter are not determined, how can we know if what we have at hand is “fantasy” or not?

This issue raises another—one of selection. Marotti concludes his book by admitting that his “own interests and biases have, of course, determined some of the emphases evident in this study” (p. 203). He accounts for his selection and rightly points out other subjects that might have been chosen. Given that his book includes so many

direct quotations selected from a considerable body of evidence, Marotti’s candor emphasizes just how reliant we are on what he chose to include, and what he left out. Marotti also admits that his book “is not arranged to deliver a single or single-minded argument” (p. 6). By this he means that the component chapters do not necessarily flow into each other, which is true. But it also reflects the relative lack of analysis that is brought to bear on the material he explores. Key conceptual words such as “paranoid” are given no further attention or analysis. The many quotes he selects are certainly placed within a very well-organized thematic framework, but they are often left to speak for themselves.

To turn this around, the strength of his approach is that the English Catholic community is indeed allowed to speak for itself. Marotti does not unnecessarily intrude on their conversations, but brings them back fresh to our ears. In doing so he does us a valuable service and lays a foundation on which others can surely build.

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**Citation:** Tim E. Cooper III. Review of Marotti, Arthur F., *Religious Ideology and Cultural Fantasy: Catholic and Anti-Catholic Discourses in Early Modern England*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. November, 2005.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=10945>

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