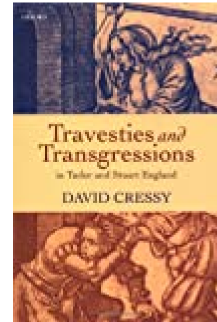

David Cressy. *Travesties and Transgressions in Tudor and Stuart England.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. xii + 351 pp. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-820781-8.

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Telling Tales

David Cressy is probably more successful than any other early modern English historian today at finding good and telling stories in the archives. He also has a gift for defining important questions, and his books are marked by an extraordinary range of archival evidence, used to provide a rich sense of the world of early modern England. Given his gift for finding such stories, and for telling them, it is not surprising that he has chosen to put together a book of case studies of some of these stories. He offers the weird and the wonderful, as well as the interesting and puzzling. The first seven chapters of the book focus on issues relating to sex and childbirth; the last eight focus more on issues relating to religion, the church, and its rites. This is territory that Cressy knows well, though in several of the later essays he seeks to bring his sensibility as a social historian to the less familiar (to him) territory of politics and religious history. Cressy describes this project as an effort to "capture and calibrate historical noise" (p. 2). To this end, he provides extensive quotations from the sources, and presents his stories as clearly as possible – though inevitably they reveal the frustrating and fragmentary nature of much historical evidence. The stories are good, and the issues they raise interesting and intriguing.

In the end, however, this collection frustrates the reader – or at least this reader. One way of explaining my frustration is to say that there are too many stories, and too little meaning making. Often the analysis is cut off before it is complete; in some cases, as in "Rose Arnold's Confession," it is virtually non-existent. In other cases, Cressy suggests angles of analysis, but doesn't engage in them, as if he knows the kaleidoscope is there, but has decided to describe its work rather than show it. To put this more abstractly, the book exhibits a peculiar combination of post-modern concern with multiple and competing narratives, and a positivist sense that there can be certain knowledge of the past, as Cressy often seeks one "right" interpretation, rather than exploring the merits of competing or complementary ones. In the process, Cressy sells both his material and his abilities as a historian short.

For instance, Cressy's first chapter tells the story of "Agnes Bowker's Cat." Both Agnes Bowker and a midwife alleged that in January 1569, Agnes gave birth to a cat. The typical birth chamber scene for an unmar-

ried woman is interrupted by this extraordinary event. Cressy tells the story as it emerges in the records, not as a coherent narrative, providing readers the opportunity to experience the confusion of those who investigated the birth. In a set of shifting tales, the cat is described, then demonstrated by some of the local men to be an older local cat, not one just born; then Agnes provides an account of her seduction which leaves open the question of what she gave birth to. The local archdeacon included in the packet of transcripts he sent on to higher authorities a drawing of the cat. Having presented the evidence, Cressy asks, "where does one go from here?" (p. 24) While he indicates a number of lines of exploration, he doesn't engage with them, arguing that trying to discover "what really happened" (p. 24) sidesteps the potential significance of Bowker's story. That significance turns out to be in its alien and elusive qualities.

Yet this argument posits a false dichotomy: historians can pursue many of the lines of analysis that Cressy suggests not to find out "what really happened," but to illuminate the relationship between extraordinary events and their cultural context. We could paraphrase Cressy in his next chapter on pamphlets describing such monstrous births: extraordinary tales "might mean many things, but they could not be allowed to mean nothing" (p. 36). The stranger and more transgressive the event, the more problematic this is; in cases that are relatively straightforward, like "Mercy Gould and the Vicar of Cuckfield" it is less troublesome, if only because the territory is more familiar.

On the occasions Cressy's discussion does go further, it remains frustrating. In "Cross-Dressing in the Birth Room," he explores the case of a young male servant from Great Tew who dressed in women's clothing to visit a woman in childbed. Cressy takes off from this to explore cross-dressing and its role both in contemporary literary studies and Renaissance literature.

It is an interesting discussion, but seems designed as much to ridicule literary scholars' gender theory as to illuminate cross-dressing. He fails to use the work of such historians as Phyllis Mack and Thomas Laqueur, which might have shed light on his comment "that the inner and outer signs of gender identity formed a topic of continuing concern" (p. 109): how could it not, in a world where gender was not altogether fixed, and clothes were thought to define it? He concludes that the problem was less the cross-dressing but "the intrusion of inappropriate behavior into privileged space" (p. 113): of course, but the problem with cross-dressing was precisely that it facilitated and made possible such intrusions. The lack of response to this particular incident, and his analysis of London comedies, leads Cressy to argue that the early seventeenth century did not show "a sex-gender system in crisis" (p. 114). Those of us (historians) who have argued that the sex-gender system of the early modern period underwent some kind of crisis have used vastly different evidence from that Cressy considers, and the central problem was never keeping men in line, but keeping women in line. None of the sources Cressy deploys in this study challenge that contention.

Several of the essays, most notably those on clerical insults and altar rails, depend not on one particular incident, but on the accumulation of lots of evidence to tell a story. Here again, Cressy tells his story well, and we can trace, for instance, the debate about altars and communion tables, and altar rails, from Elizabethan times to the Civil War. But again it is presented as narrative, with no significant analysis of ritual and its meaning. Attacks on clergy are indeed problematic, as Cressy argues, because of "their calling and their relationship to God" (p. 141); that itself caused problems because the clergy were the only group in early modern society whose status existed entirely without reference to their economic standing.

Cressy is too good a historian to be doing this accidentally. Rather, the very things that frustrate me in the book are part of his objective. It therefore seems useful to explore the epistemological assumptions Cressy makes, and my argument against them. Cressy's approach is rooted in an approach to history that is suspicious of theory. "The danger, in these matters, lies in projecting present preoccupations onto the past, and bringing our opinions to the evidence, rather than deriving them from it. There may well be politicized transgressive energies at work here, but not all are confined to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries" (p. 114). Or as he says in his conclusion, "the past is ultimately intractable, though always worthy of pursuit" (p. 281).

Cressy cannot avoid, however, bringing his present preoccupations to the past. These include demonstrating the misuse of history by literary critics, and a belief that the past should be studied only for its own sake. These preoccupations are by no means unique to Cressy, and he at least has read the literary and theoretical work he criticizes. Perhaps my discomfort with these as abiding passions (though there are certainly many times when I share them) is rooted in pedagogical context. I teach adults who are by and large not interested in history, and Cressy's approach strikes me as self-indulgent, at least

for historians of Britain teaching in the United States. Of course we find the past endlessly interesting, and those of us who make our careers teaching and writing about it find it worth pursuing for its own sake. (We certainly don't do it for the money!)

Given the almost complete lack of historical context in contemporary America, however, we have an obligation to show why history matters now. I try to show my students how history helps illuminate dimensions of the world we live in; how looking at the past –especially across the ocean and several centuries back – gets us out of a world where we know what we think and forces us to look at ourselves in a new way. In my experience, this works better than trying to convince people that history is intrinsically fascinating.

Not only is Cressy's approach self-indulgent, his obsessions with proving theory (and particularly the theories of literary scholars) wrong leads him to flatten out the richness of the past. It means that he never really develops the ideas about narrative implicit in the book, or indeed about transgression. Is it useful to use the term "transgression" to describe both out-of-wedlock pregnancy and the baptism of a horse? There are indeed competing narratives in early modern communities, just as there are competing interpretations in the modern scholarly community. But just as multiple narratives tell different truths, different interpretive frameworks offer different kinds of understanding.

Like Cressy, I have certainly found some literary approaches to history frustratingly self-important. Some years ago at a conference I took a literary historian to task for saying that historians wrote micro-history and literary scholars used it to write cultural history: the contempt for historical method implicit in her statement was breathtaking. More often than not, however, I find literary interpretations not so much wrong as partial, ignoring some dimension of an event that seems central to me. I found myself wishing that Cressy extended to the ideas of his fellow scholars some of the generosity he extends both to his historical subjects and his colleagues in person. The past is often opaque, and we need all the ideas, and all the interpretive tools we can get, to help us make sense of it. Our work as historians is always a dialogue between the present and the past, and the most powerful works of history use the passions of the present to illuminate the past in new ways. Whether we do it just for fun, or because we find some larger meanings in the past, historians are in the business of making meaning. When Cressy says at the end of his discussion of "The Essex Abortionist," "Readers may make of this what they will" (p. 82), it is not unreasonable to want to know what such a knowledgeable and experienced social historian makes of the story.

David Cressy has done his homework. He knows not only the archives and historical literature on the period, but also the literature and literary scholarship. The essays he has written here touch on many important issues in early modern England, and offer readers a sense of the complex and multi-faceted nature of English society in the period. They suggest ideas that need more exploration; for instance, in several places they suggest that we need to think more about the sacred as a category of analysis. The varied narratives show how hard it is to understand many things in the past, how the past is indeed a foreign country. Cressy's refusal to move beyond the stories, however, means that they are less telling than they could be – and we are the poorer for it.

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