

The Regicide: The Execution of Charles I

Professor Paulina Kewes in conversation with Professor Andrew McRae

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Paulina Kewes: I'm with Professor Andrew McRae in the Bodleian library, and we are looking at the image of the execution of Charles I. Could you tell us more about it, Andrew?

Andrew McRae: Well this an image of a pivotal moment in seventeenth-century history. The image depicts the moment just seconds after Charles has been beheaded. What makes it so compelling to me is not just the documentary detail (you can see the bleeding head and the slumped corpse), but we also get a sense of the crowd there: the artist's depiction of people perched on the roof of the banqueting house, with arms raised in shock, and the man in the foreground turning away in horror. Charles I wasn't the first British monarch to be killed. But he was the first to be killed after the invention of printing press. And I think this image alerts us to the importance of what we might call the last battle of the Civil War: the battle to imprint in the minds of British men and women an image of the executed king. Was he a traitor? Was he a martyr? Was he a man anointed to rule by God? Or was he just another mere actor in the game of politics?

PK: How did people learn about the regicide?

AMcR: This was a time when people were following the civil wars, following the fate of the king, through a great wealth of printed material: mainly news books and news sheets, but also ballads and various other forms of news. So people were tracing the fate of the king. They were following the king's trial. And, after all these events, the execution itself became a kind of media event. And it was, it was a ritualised event, although it was a ritual that was kind of being made up as it went along. We can see this in the treatment of the corpse, and the news books talk about the treatment of the corpse. According to one news report, after the executioner had at one blow severed his head from his body, that body was put in a coffin covered with black velvet and removed to his lodging chamber in Whitehall. And then the following day (and we had only have one news report about this) the king's head is sowed on, and his corpse removed to St James and embalmed. You can see here the way they are kind of making up this ritual. Why sow the head back on? There's no obvious precedent for what they're doing. The point seems to me that although Charles may have been a traitor, he'd still been a king, and he still commands the dignity of a King.

PK: How did Charles achieve the status of a martyr?

AMcR: It seems that Charles himself understood (understood perhaps better than those who are putting into death) what was at stake in the months in the years after his execution. He understood the battle for his reputation that would be played out. So he carefully managed his performance at his trial. I think he knew what was most likely to happen at his trial, but he

carefully managed his performance. And then again on the day of his execution, with a view to securing his reputation, on the stage (and it was a stage) he prayed, he forgave the executioner, he even wore an extra shirt so that he wouldn't shiver in the winter cold on 30 January, and therefore give out the appearance that he was fearful. This was one of the most skilful performances of what had otherwise been largely unsuccessful political career. And then, in the months and years after his death, there was a battle over his posthumous reputation.

PK: What was the significance, longer term significance, of the battle over the king's imagery?

AMcR: Well as much as his supporters could present him as a martyr, they could maintain the myth of the Stuarts; they could maintain the hope that the Stuarts could come back. As long as he was presented as a traitor, then the Stuart monarchy, the house of the Stuarts, could be presented as traitors and the nation could be presented as moving towards a very different form of rule. And so perhaps one of the key texts in this battle was the text *Eikon Basilike*, 'the royal image', which became one of the bestselling books of the entire century. It's a book that may not have been written entirely by Charles (probably was written in part by Charles) but was widely accepted as the work of the king. It's presented as his meditations, a kind of spiritual autobiography in the shadow of his trial and his pending execution. And the famous frontispiece that we see here, this image, which became only great images of the of the seventeenth-century, underlines the representation of Charles as a martyr, which is a model, of course, so important in the history of Protestantism in England. We see here an image re-enacting the model of Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane, just before his crucifixion, with the earthly crown *vanitas* at his feet, the crown of thorns in his hand, and his eyes fixed on a heavenly crown. And as much as various people tried to shift this image, to try to undermine this image, it held firm. John Milton crucially, the republican and poet, tried to rebut icon basilica with his own text, *Eikonoklastes*. But it never came close to achieving the same impact as icon basilica.

PK: Could you tell us more about the Milton's *Eikonoklastes*. What sort of text was it?

AMcR: Well *Eikonoklastes* is directly confronting *Eikon Basilike*. It means image breaker, the title, and is out not just to rebut icon basilica, but to undermine the entire imagery of royalism. Milton is very much concerned throughout his early career to create an imagery of republicanism, and to smash all the trappings of royalism, and therefore all the imagery that mattered so much in terms of royal martyrdom. He's trying very much to present Charles instead as a traitor, just a mere political actor.

PK: What was the public outreach of *Eikon Basilike*? Was it a popular text?

AMcR: icon basilica was one of the bestselling books the entire century.

PK: What about *Eikonoklastes*? Did it ever match the popularity of the royal, the king's, book?

AMcR: Never came close. Never came close. It went through a few edition, but no where near the same reach, as *Eikon Basilike*.

PK: Could you tell us more about Icon basilica?

AMcR: Well *Eikon Basilike* is presented as Charles's meditations in the days before, and the months before, he was executed. It is presented very much as a kind of spiritual autobiography. It's presenting Charles meditating, a little bit like King David. There's elements of the Psalms running through the book. But the model of the spiritual biography was something that was becoming quite important as we move through the seventeenth century. So to position Charles in that way, as someone thinking about his relationship with God, somebody, of course, a

special such royal subject, divinely ordained figure, talking through, thinking about his relationship with God, and thinking about his afterlife as well as his position on earth.

PK: And what about Milton's retort, rejoinder to *Eikon Basilike*? How did Milton seek to rebut, to break the royal image?

AMcR: Well Milton was very much out to smash that whole idea: that Charles was in any way special, was in any way divinely ordained. So he's out to undermine all the trappings of royal imagery and anything that makes Charles in any way special. He was just another [another] subject, who happened to be a traitor against his nation.

PK: Andrew, could you describe the range of news reporting of Charles's execution?

AMcR: Well, interestingly, there isn't an awful lot. People marked the day. But while we might expect great front page spreads about the execution, actually that's not what we get. We get a few sentences in some of these, some of these news reports. It's almost as though the news editors in those times had different senses of news value. It's a time when you get a lot of newsprint devoted to speeches, a lot of newsprint devoted to the process of the trial, but not a great descriptive set piece on the death and the execution, which is not quite what we'd expect, I think. Another way, perhaps, of explaining this is that there was perhaps no language for describing this event. For example, this news book on Charles's trial at the High Court of justice, we get an extensive report of speeches at the trial, and yet very little attention to the consequences of the trial: what we would find most important, the execution itself.

PK: What was the wider significance of the regicide?

AMcR: Well the wider significance of the regicide depends very much on whether you see Charles as a traitor or a martyr. In answering that question you might want to come back to the whole question of the way in which people, in the years after the regicide, battled over understanding of what had happened: whether a king had been martyred, whether a traitor had been rightly put to death. And I think the extent to which that battle was fought in the subsequent years helps us to some degree to understand how the restoration came to be, not only thinkable, but to some degree almost inevitable.

PK: What were the immediate consequences of regicide, of the execution of the king?

AMcR: Well the immediate constitutional consequences were that a new state had to, a new form of government had to be established. And that led directly to the establishment of the republic in England.

PK: What was the longer term significance of the regicide?

AMcR: Well in many respects, of course, the execution changed everything. It led the way to the experiments with republicanism and all the debates about social structures and political structures that took place throughout the subsequent years, in eleven years without a monarch. and it proved that the nation could function without a monarch. But then, by the early 1660s, and after the monarchy being restored, it might have seemed to many British men and women that little change at all. And, interestingly, Charles II proudly dated his reign from 1649, not from 1660. And he encouraged his people simply to forget the upheavals of the 1640s and the 1650s. He had been, as he claimed, in power all that time. And I think he was helped enormously by the fact that the imagery and symbolism of the monarchy had survived. He was able to step back into those models of rule assuming the mantle of his father, assuming the mantle of the martyr king. And the regicides therefore had killed the King, but they'd have ultimately failed to extinguish the sway of monarchy. All the trappings of monarchy, all the

symbolism of monarchy, and the power that that held over the people of Britain.

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