

Mapping Erasure: England's Insular Fantasy and the Vanishing of Scotland

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Hutson, Lorna. *England's Insular Imagining: The Elizabethan Erasure of Scotland*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2024. xii + 320 pages. ISBN 9781009253575. Hb. £30.

At a time of renewed debate about national sovereignty and identity, Lorna Hutson's *England's Insular Imagining* offers a timely examination of how cultural artifacts from the early modern period shaped and perpetuated the ideology of English dominance. By analyzing literature, legal rhetoric, paintings, and cartographic representations, Hutson uncovers England's cultural project that erased Scotland's sovereignty and reinforced England's imperial ambitions. Through an interdisciplinary approach, she shows how the idea of English insularity and maritime supremacy was constructed that subtly subordinated Scotland while projecting an image of British unity. Hutson's work not only dismantles the self-proclaimed myth of English indifference to Scottish sovereignty but also illuminates the mechanisms by which cultural products shape political ideologies—a critique that has profound implications for understanding the legacy of British imperialism in both history and contemporary political culture.

With this volume, Hutson builds on her outstanding work in the field of early modern literary studies, in which she has looked at intersections of rhetoric, law, and national identity. Her earlier book, *The Invention of Suspicion: Law and Mimesis in Shakespeare and Renaissance Drama* (Oxford UP, 2007), examined the role of legal rhetoric and evidential practice in shaping early modern drama and offered groundbreaking insights into the ways in which Shakespeare's works reflect the epistemic framework of their time. Now, Hutson broadens her focus to examine how these rhetorical strategies not only reflect imperial ideologies but actually shape them.

The interdisciplinary methodology of this volume places it in a broader scholarly tradition, alongside influential works such as Richard Helgerson's *Forms of Nationhood: The Elizabethan Writing of England* (U of Chicago P, 1992), which examines how early modern literature shaped English identity, and Lauren Benton's *A Search for Sovereignty: Law and Geography in European Empires, 1400–1900* (Cambridge UP, 2009), which investigates spatial and legal claims in the making of empires. Hutson's innovation lies in the interweaving of these perspectives. For example, while Helgerson focuses largely on canonical texts such as Shakespeare and

Spenser, Hutson integrates visual and geographical artifacts such as the famous “Ditchley” portrait of Elizabeth from 1592 by Marcus Gheeraerts the Younger and Elizabethan cartographer Laurence Nowell’s maps to show that England’s insularity was as much a visual as a literary construct.

Central to Hutson’s argument is how English cultural productions systematically erased Scotland’s role as a sovereign nation and reduced it to a symbolic or marginal presence in narratives of British unity. Hutson shows how English narratives and visual products reframed Scotland as territorially and politically insignificant, thus diminishing its historical agency through ambiguous and often dismissive symbols. In Shakespeare’s *Henry V*, for example, the term “Scot” is used ambiguously as shorthand for a territory, a rebel or an abstract threat, without ever acknowledging the King or the Kingdom of Scotland as an independent entity. This rhetorical ambiguity, Hutson argues, served to obscure Scotland’s importance within the British Isles while reinforcing England’s dominant role. Similarly, in *Macbeth*, Scotland is imagined as a kingdom, but its portrayal is oriented towards residual medieval ideologies of vassalage, which delicately subordinates its independence to England’s imperial vision.

Her analysis of English insularity shows how Elizabethan and Jacobean cultural productions constructed an image of Britain as a unified, self-contained nation protected by the sea. This narrative relied heavily on maritime metaphors, such as Britain as an island with the sea as its walls, to emphasize natural boundaries and disguise internal divisions, particularly with Scotland. Hutson examines how rhetoric supported this narrative, analyzing in Chapter 5 Edmund Plowden’s 1567 *Treatise on the Succession*, among many other early modern legal and military texts. Plowden’s arguments positioned England as the center of a naval empire and tied its sovereignty to control of the seas rather than the disputed lands to the north of the country. By depicting the sea as both a defensive barrier and a unifying force, cultural productions such as cartographic and chorographic representations diverted attention away from the land border with Scotland, effectively erasing its political implication. This construction of insularity not only reinforced the notion of England as an inherently sovereign entity but also laid the foundations for its future imperial ambitions by presenting maritime dominance as a logical extension of its geographical identity. In addition to maps, other products of visual culture also played a key role in creating or contributing to this narrative, as shown by the “Ditchley” portrait of Elizabeth I that Hutson examines in Chapter 3. In this iconic image,

Elizabeth stands over a map of England, surrounded by the sea, with Scotland notably absent from its northern borders.

Hutson's examination of Ben Jonson's *The Masque of Blackness* (1605) in Chapter 7 also reveals how England's insular identity was closely linked to imperial and racial ideologies. She analyzes Jonson's depiction of blackness versus pigment removal as metaphors for assimilation to Britannia: by the end of the masque, blackness is reduced to a layer of soluble paint applied to white skin (221). This removable "blackness" symbolizes the condition of incorporation into the imagined British Empire, in which racial and cultural difference must be erased or transformed to conform to English identity. Jonson's play reflects a broader strategy that aims to define England's insular unity not only by what it includes but also by what it excludes, making whiteness the core of Britannia's identity. Jonson's conceptualization of blackness as an inherent, immutable quality of those outside Britain is reminiscent of England's treatment of Scotland in earlier cultural productions. Much like Scotland, which was erased or rendered marginal and unassimilable in English visual and textual representations, the masque constructs blackness as a symbolic marker of exclusion. By positioning England at the center of an expanding multiracial empire, Jonson envisions a global imperial reach, but one that simultaneously preempts the full inclusion of those outside its boundaries. This dual strategy—of projecting an expansive imperial vision while maintaining strict racial and cultural hierarchies—ties Jonson's masque to the broader patterns of erasure and inclusion that Hutson reveals throughout the book.

Hutson also highlights the powerful role of myth in the construction of insular identity and England's imperial ambitions and shows how narratives of unity and overlordship shaped national and imperial consciousness. At the center of her analysis is Geoffrey of Monmouth's *The History of the Kings of Britain* (1136), which served as a foundation for Union propaganda during the reign of James VI. These medieval myths portrayed Britain as a unified island nation under the legendary rule of Brutus and his descendants, a narrative that conveniently marginalized Scotland by excluding its distinct history and identity. Hutson shows how these myths were weaponized in political discourse to justify James's accession and the vision of a unified Britain by presenting England's supremacy as both natural and historically inevitable.

Hutson situates her analysis of cultural erasure and identity construction in the political crises of the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras, focusing on the tense debates over the union of England and Scotland. With

the succession of James VI to the English throne in 1603, these tensions came to the fore, and issues of sovereignty, mutual naturalization, and national identity became deeply contested. Hutson highlights how legal rhetoric, particularly in Plowden's *Treatise*, portrayed the Union as a consolidation of English dominance. Plowden's "geopolitical theology" (174) translated England's claims of authority over Scotland into constitutional terms and presented the Union not as a negotiation between equal kingdoms but as an extension of English control under the guise of British unity.

In Chapter 8, Hutson examines how these anxieties are reflected in Shakespeare's *King Lear*. While the play is not explicitly about the Union, it takes up themes of division and union and reflects the contentious relationship between England and Scotland. Hutson argues that the fragmentation of Lear's kingdom and the ensuing chaos reflect the tensions that arise when a single ruler presides over two politically distinct nations. Shakespeare's alteration of the traditional Lear narrative—rejecting the redemptive arc of earlier versions—emphasizes the uncertainty and instability that surrounded the Union debates.

Hutson's style is both incisive and subversive. She brings literary theory, historical criticism, and global perspectives to her analysis to challenge accepted narratives of England's imperial expansion in the early modern period. Her examination of sources from the Anglo-Scottish wars of the sixteenth century illustrates her ambition to deconstruct the ideological manipulation embedded in language. For example, by describing the phrase "rough wooing" as carnivalesque, she exposes how this euphemism—ironically, first coined by the Scottish historian Patrick Abercromby, later popularized by Sir Walter Scott—trivializes the brutal military campaigns of Henry VIII and Edward Seymour, the first Duke of Somerset, and hides systemic violence under a playful metaphor of courtship. Hutson argues that such trivializations, including the condescending representations of violence found in William Patten's *The Expedition into Scotland* (1548), continue to perpetuate a superficial recognition of this devastating conflict, often still jocularly referred to by contemporary military historians.

Hutson's examination of metalepsis in these early modern texts—from literature to legal documents, letters, war reports, and more—further underpins her interdisciplinary approach. Metalepsis, traditionally a narrative device in literary works, becomes a powerful metaphor for how English propaganda reshaped historical narratives by transferring the causes of war onto the Scots and absolving England of its responsibility. This rhetorical

sleight of hand mirrors the disruption of historical causality by propaganda, which inserts ideological justification in place of facts.

Her invocation of Lauren Benton's work on rivers as instruments of imperial claims brings a global dimension to her analysis. By comparing Somerset's riverine strategies in Scotland with those employed in the Americas, Hutson situates these conflicts within a continuum of imperialist practices. This comparison underscores the universality of spatial manipulation in conquest and appraise the ideological contradictions of empire, such as Somerset's metaphor of Britain as a naturally unified island, which obscures the military violence needed to enforce that unity. This thematic parallel between Scotland and global imperial spaces decouples England's actions from any claims to exceptionalism and shows how its tactics fit into broader patterns of domination.

Ultimately, Lorna Hutson's *England's Insular Imagining* is a landmark contribution to the study of early modern Britain, offering a compelling examination of how English cultural productions erased Scotland's sovereign identity while constructing an insular, imperial British mythos. Challenging both historical and critical complacency, Hutson dismantles sanitized narratives of English expansion. By revealing how language and metaphor mask violence, she pushes readers to reconsider the ideological underpinnings of history and criticism. Through careful analysis of literature, legal texts, and cartography, Hutson exposes the subtle but pervasive ways in which English narratives subordinated Scotland's agency and transformed diverse histories into a unified vision of England's supremacy. What distinguishes this book is its interdisciplinary depth and its ability to link early modern cultural strategies to enduring myths in British political and academic culture. Hutson's work not only sheds light on the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras but also invites us to reflect on the tensions between England and Scotland and the myths that continue to shape these relations. In the age of post-Brexit and renewed debates about Scottish independence, the book's insights feel as urgent as they are illuminating. While its dense style may be challenging for some readers, the book's scholarly rigor and provocative conclusions reward close attention. *England's Insular Imagining* not only rewrites our understanding of British history but also challenges us to engage with the narratives that define national identity today. It is essential reading for historians, literary scholars, and anyone interested in the cultural and political foundations of Britain as we know it.

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