In the Christmas holidays of 1609 an unlicensed play was staged at Gowlthwaite Hall, the home of Sir John Yorke, in the north Yorkshire village of Nidderdale. The players, a group of brothers named the Simpsons, were apparently recusants. So boisterous was this “seditious interlude,” involving an uproarious scene in which a devil carries off a Church of England minister on his shoulders, that it caused something of a riot and even attracted the attention of the local authorities.1

As Phebe Jensen has pointed out in her detailed analysis of the episode, the exposing of the interlude was not in fact the consequence of a Jacobean policy of zero-tolerance toward recusants but the result of a specifically local act of denunciation. Sir John’s anti-Papist neighbor, Sir Stephen Proctor, was able to smuggle one of his Protestant preachers into the house. Even though a servant had been placed at the door to screen out hostile observers, an interloper named Marmaduke Darnbrook managed to slip through and later denounced the interlude as “seditious” (Jensen, “Recusancy,” 103). Proctor brought the case before the Star Chamber, which led—two years later—to Sir John and his family being fined more than four thousand pounds. A few years later, unable to pay this staggering amount, Sir John and his wife, Lady Julyan, were imprisoned in the Fleet Prison and released only in 1617, at which time the total penalty was reduced to one thousand two hundred pounds, which was paid off in installments ending in 1631 (Jensen, “Recusancy,” 104).

As Jensen has pointed out, the long-term survival of the Simpson touring company indicates that such entertainments were important enough to contemporary Catholics for those risks to be run by both players and hosts: “Such an established pattern of defiance suggests that these activities yielded positive cultural benefits sufficient to outweigh
clear and obvious risks” (Jensen, “Recusancy,” 107). As Jensen argues, the performance of the interlude was part of a recusant attempt to recreate late medieval dramatic culture (Jensen, “Recusancy,” 108). But the recusants’ defiance was as much politically motivated as it was culturally inspired. The intention in staging the seditious interlude was to subvert the power of the Protestant authorities by mocking the representatives and rites of the established Anglican Church. In fact, as Jensen suggests, the play may have been written by a Jesuit priest intent not only on recreating the cultural life of medieval England but also on reestablishing its old religion in defiance of the new one.

The north of England had had a long tradition of political resistance to the established Anglican Church. Part of this resistance was the continuance of medieval cultural practices in a region far from the centralizing control of London. A famous example is the Pilgrimage of Grace, a northern uprising against the enforced religious reformation of Henry VIII. A document drawn up at Richmond on October 15, 1536, listing a number of grievances against the government, was signed by Captain Poverty, a reference to William Langland’s fourteenth-century allegorical poem *Piers Plowman*. Like the allegorical characters in the medieval poem, the northern “pilgrims” were not merely engaged on a spiritual journey to the Castle of Truth, they were also expressing a political protest against the abuses of the rich and powerful against the poor and powerless.

What is most striking about the Nidderdale episode and its punitive aftermath is the lengths to which the players and their audience were prepared to go to defy the authorities and to assert their religious beliefs in dramatic form. The recusants were determined to perform their interlude in spite of the dangers involved (imprisonment, fines) while the authorities were intent on pursuing the matter as an infringement of law and order (Jensen, “Recusancy,” 113). But Sir John Yorke had the last word in the affair. Although he eventually recanted his religion in 1617 and took the Oath of Allegiance, he did so as an expedient measure to avoid paying the crippling fines imposed upon him (Jensen, “Recusancy,” 113). In 1628 he took his revenge on the authorities by hosting another interlude in which an actor playing the Devil carried King James on his back to hell (Jensen, “Recusancy,” 114). Jensen sees this final “seditious interlude” as a form of cultural continuity, which it surely was. But it was also an act of political defiance. As we shall see with reference to the play *King Lear* as well as the Russian film version based on it, ideological resistance is inseparable from the expression of cultural continuity with the past.