

Gunpowder, treason, and Plot: Guy Fawkes & the Gunpowder Plot

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Entertainment

Midnight Facts for Insomniacs

Podcast Transcript

(Note: transcript consists of episode outline)

You're back from the dead!

Duncan, what are your thoughts about terrorists? Pro, or anti? So, not a fan.

How about failed terrorists?

Specifically terrorists who were too inept and incompetent to effectively terrorize?

I feel like that's slightly better, at least for the world as a whole, I don't appreciate them more as people since they still tried to commit acts of terrorism, but I appreciate the outcome. I am pro terrorist ineptitude. Someone is going to edit that, it's not going to look good. I am not pro terrorist. although as we've discussed in the past, the definition of terrorist frequently depends on which side of the conflict you're on.

Since we're doing word or concept association, what comes to mind when I recite this poem? Actually, can you

finish it for me: Remember, remember
the Fifth of November,
The Gunpowder Treason and Plot,
I know of no reason
Why the Gunpowder Treason
Should ever be forgot.
Guy Fawkes, Guy Fawkes, t'was his
intent
To blow up the King and Parli'ment.
Three-score barrels of powder below,
Poor old England to overthrow;
By God's mercy he was catch'd
With a dark lantern and burning match.
Holla boys, Holla boys, let the bells
ring.
Holloa boys, holloa boys, God save the
King!
And what should we do with him? Burn
him!

That took a turn. I didn't know about
that ending part, it gets pretty dark.
When I was researching this I wanted
to make sure I was pronouncing
everything right—like holla boys which
kind of threw me for a loop, I guess
boys have been holla-ing for like 400
years— so I googled the rhyme and
ended up on a kid's website and they
do not include that last line. Weird.
Calling for public immolation, a little
rough for a children's poem.

The story of Guy Fawkes and the
gunpowder plot is not complicated on
a surface level: in 1605, aspiring
terrorist Guy Fawkes was part of a
conspiracy to blow up British
parliament and kill King James the first
in a giant explosion that was scheduled
to happen on the 5th of November

1605. The reasons it didn't happen, and the story behind the plot, are more complicated, and the aftermath and legacy are even murkier still. This is a bloody tale of religious persecution, violent subjugation, cringeworthy ineptitude, and a thwarted boomsplode. It's also the story of an unlikely legendary figure, and I'm willing to wager that most of our listeners have a very inaccurate view of the man who somehow became the literal face of the entire plot despite being only a bit player: Guy Fawkes. If you think you don't know who I'm talking about, I guarantee you do. Because who this man was has become far less important than what his face represents; we're all familiar with the ubiquitous Guy Fawkes mask from movies, television, Halloween, and the most infamous group of hackers of the Internet age. This is another episode that exists at the intersection of historical fact and modern pop culture mythology, because Guy Fawkes has been appropriated, his visage has been adopted by hackers and Revolutionaries...and above all by awkward script kiddie posers who want the world to *think* of them as hackers and revolutionaries.

So to be clear from the beginning, Guy Fawkes was not a freedom fighter. You could say he was fighting to free Catholics from persecution, which is arguably true, but if he had succeeded, if he and his co-conspirators suddenly found themselves in charge, they

would have persecuted protestants just as vigorously as they themselves had been persecuted. This particular Guy wasn't standing up for democracy or free speech against an authoritarian regime, he was fighting to impose his *preferred* authoritarian regime, his own particular faction of religion...he was a religious zealot. And like so many religious conflicts, the beef between Catholics and Protestants can be boiled down to nothing more than squabbling over details. Catholics and protestants worship the same God, they read the same books, they just disagree on the hierarchy and bureaucracy. Catholics revere the pope, while protestants reject him; protestants are the "you're not my daddy" faction of the Christian faith.

So we're going to quickly take it back to the beginning and lay the foundations of this episode with a very short overview of the conflict that spawned a treasonous plot. Many of you already know this story. King Henry VIII wanted a divorce from his first wife, Catherine of Aragon, because she had failed to produce a male heir. And fun fact, human eggs contain an X chromosome, for female, while men's sperm can contain either an X or Y chromosome. and the sex of the baby is determined by which sperm fertilizes the egg: if it contains an X, the baby will be female, if it contains a Y, the baby will be male. So the male parent ultimately determines the sex of the baby. Or at least the contribution of the male parent. so the inability to produce

a male heir was Henry's fault, yet he would end up murdering multiple women as a result of their "inability" to produce a boy.

Now obviously this was a time before divorce was considered acceptable. Cheating on your wife was acceptable, beating your wife was acceptable, but leaving someone who was cheating on you or beating you, very frowned upon. Or in this case leaving someone because you were a dick. In fact, per Catholic tradition, only the pope had the ability to grant Henry a divorce, and Pope Clement the seventh wasn't having it. I think he was just jealous because he was a higher number, he was a lowly seventh and Henry was an eighth. Isn't that how it works? That's just math.

So Henry did not like being told no, and decided to go nuclear. Some men just like to watch the church burn. Henry rejected the pope, and instead created an entirely new faction of Christianity—the Anglican church—with him as its head. This was a huge religious upheaval, but maybe not quite as upheaving as it seems, because Henry cleverly attached his cause to the protestant reformation, a movement that had been growing in Europe and sought to sever the church from the corruption of the increasingly powerful network of bishops and Cardinals and of course the pope, all of whom had been enriching themselves through selling "indulgences" etc., basically charging people for forgiveness. Henry had never had a problem with the

Catholic Church when it was allowing him to bone whoever he wanted, and had been opposed to the reformation, but it suddenly became very convenient for him to hitch his wagon to a revolutionary horse. Within a matter of months protestants were in power and Catholics were out of favor with the crown. Over the following years Catholics would be increasingly persecuted; however, the story gets a little messy because when Henry died, his daughter Mary became queen, and the pendulum swung back in the other direction. She was the daughter of Henry's first executed wife, and she went after protestants, trying to stomp out all of the reforms that Henry had made, she was a devout Catholic and also might have been a little bit salty about the whole beheading her mother thing. This was the famous bloody Mary of legend, but the return to Catholicism would be short-lived because the next monarch, Queen Elizabeth, reinstated Henry's reforms and once again forced Catholics into hiding. This was a freaking rollercoaster. It got even worse for Catholics when Elizabeth was excommunicated by the pope, which meant that Catholics were now torn between a monarch who told them they had to attend protestant services or face fines and punishment, and a pope who forbid them to attend protestant services or face eternal damnation. So Catholics had to choose between their pocket books and their souls...it wasn't a tough choice for rich Catholics but if your

pocketbook could barely afford to put food on the table, this was a brutal decision. Many Catholics chose to publicly convert while still practicing their Catholic faith on the under; they created an underground railroad of Catholicism. Catholic priest were being smuggled in and out of England via a network of transporters and purveyors of safe houses that would conceal these priests in so-called priest holes under floorboards. You can still find these priest holes in many houses in England today. This was all way more vicious and dramatic than I had realized: the crown had a Secret Police force dedicated to hunting down Catholics, they employed priest hunters with specially trained sniffer-dogs that would be used to sniff out priests during raids on safe houses. It's easy for the dogs, priests smell like wine and biscuits, and little boys. Sorry, but seriously, this was no joking matter: if a priest were caught he would be tortured and executed, as would the people who housed him. Shades of Anne Frank, this is dark stuff. So now we finally come to Elizabeth's successor, James the first, who promised to be uniter and heal the realm. And at first Catholics thought that maybe they were going to get a reprieve. James was the son of the Catholic Mary Queen of Scots, and his wife was Catholic, so there seemed to be some grounds for hope. But James dashed those hopes when he promptly reinstated many of the fines that were imposed on Catholics for not attending Protestant church services. It quickly

became clear that James was going to continue the status quo. So now you have a bunch of angry Catholics who had been experiencing the historical equivalent of a sine wave; a bipolar cycle of acceptance and persecution, which could make anyone a little grumpy.

In fact Catholics were so grumpy that within a few months of Elizabeth's death and James Ascension, two plots against the king were uncovered.

Spoiler alert: king James would die at age 58 of dysentery while suffering from gout and arthritis, so it turns out the Catholics have a pretty dismal track record of murdering monarchs. We all have our strengths and weaknesses: Catholics are great at sexual repression and shame, not so great at targeted assassinations. You can't have everything.

So by the early 1600s nothing was going the Catholics' way, and it got even worse when James signed a peace treaty with Spain. Because Spain was considered the final hope for English Catholics; Spain and England had a long, simmering feud and Catholics had been optimistic that Spain would invade England and the Catholic monarchy would restore Catholicism as the national religion. With their final hopes dashed, and plots against the King failing left and right, Catholics became increasingly desperate, and the metaphorical Powderkeg was about to be ignited.

I mentioned that Fawkes was not a central figure of this plot; in fact, he was more of an afterthought than a mastermind. The plot was hatched and conceived by a gang of rebellious Catholics led by a wealthy Englishman name Robert Catesby. Catesby had been educated at Oxford but left before earning his degree because he refused to take the so-called oath of supremacy. This was a requirement for graduation that was instated by Henry the eighth and functioned basically as an oath of fealty to the king and a rejection of the pope. The oath was required all holders of office in England as well as university graduates.

During the reign of Queen Elizabeth, Catesby was involved in a failed plot against her that became known as the Essex rebellion, during which he had been captured, so he was well known to the crown as an agitator. However, Catesby was actually pardoned by Queen Elizabeth herself, which you would think might result in some gratefulness, but she had also fined him the equivalent of \$6 million, costing him his estate, so you could say they were hard feelings on both sides. After the Queen's death, Catesby and his fellow Catholics had briefly been optimistic that the situation would improve, but when James showed his true colors, Catesby was ready to try again. In February 1604 he invited his first two co-conspirators—Thomas Wintour and John Wright—to a meeting at his house. Wright was an expert swordsman who had fought with

Catesby during the Essex rebellion, and Wintour was a distinguished scholar whose uncle, Francisco Ingleby, had been executed for being a Catholic priest. Wintour had recently returned from Spain where—on behalf of Catesby—he had unsuccessfully petitioned king Phillip III to attack England. With their final hopes for outside rescue dashed, Catesby and company sketched out a tentative plan to blow up parliament. At this point they didn't have any specifics, but they knew they couldn't do it alone, and so Catesby implored the men to find additional help. That additional help would first come in the form of a friend of John Wright's brother Christopher, a soldier serving in the Spanish army named Guy Fawkes. Fun fact, when fighting for the Spanish, he was known as Guido Fawkes. Also señor Fawkes. I assume. Fawkes has been described as "tall, powerfully built, with thick reddish brown hair, a flowing mustache in the tradition of the time, and a bushy reddish brown beard." Ironically he would eventually become famous due to his complete lack of fame or status at the time. He was valuable to the conspirators because he was a nobody; he had been in Spain for a decade and was virtually unknown in England. And it's possible that even HE viewed himself as expendable, because his role in the plot was potentially a suicide mission: he was chosen to be the one who infiltrated the basement of parliament to ignite the powder and then try to hightail it out of there...but he was chosen

specifically due to the fact that he wouldn't be recognized if spotted. Unlike some of the more prominent conspirators, Fawkes was of "low birth." He had been raised protestant but when his protestant father died, his mother married a Catholic. You would think the young boy might rebel against his stepdad, but the opposite happened...Fawkes took to the new faith and became such a fervent Catholic that he traveled across the channel and enlisted in the Spanish army to fight against the protestant Dutch. That is dedication. Or some serious daddy issues. Can you imagine enlisting in another country's army because you're so eager to kill strangers who disagree with your stepdad? My new daddy doesn't appreciate your perspective on the Eucharist. You must die. While soldiering in Spain Fawkes met Thomas Wintour and tagged along on the mission to persuade the Spanish king to attack England. And we know how that turned out. Shocking that a few random dudes asking a foreign country to start a war wasn't more successful. Aw, cmon, just invade England, what's the big deal? Quit being a bitch, if you don't commit to a full scale invasion of a sovereign country I will be forced to call you a chicken and make bawk-bawk noises while flapping my arms. Don't think I won't. Just remember, you made me do this.

The plan was officially set in motion in May 1604 at an infamous meeting of the first five conspirators at the duck

and drake tavern near the strand in London. In attendance were Catesby, Wintour, Wright, Fawkes, and Thomas Percy, a disillusioned Catholic who had recently bonded with Catesby over their shared hatred of the king. The men drank and plotted and schemed in their own private room where they also swore an oath of secrecy on a Bible. Presumably not the King James Bible, which probably would've been a little bit awkward. The king James Bible actually wasn't yet completed by 1605 so I guess that wasn't an issue. At some point in between the plotting and scheming, perhaps right before colluding, maybe a few minutes after conspiring, Catesby gave a famous little mini-speech, saying, "the nature of the disease requires so sharp a remedy.... we will blow up the parliament house with powder, because that is the place where they have done us all the mischief, and that is the place that god has reserved for their punishment." Pretty presumptuous, to assume you know God's agenda. God is very busy killing people with cancer and letting babies die in the bubonic plague which—as creator of the universe and everything in it—he personally unleashed on the world. I'm just saying, God's god shit to do. He's like, wait, the Fifth of November? That's not going to work for me, I can't punish protestants until the 6th at the earliest. I've got a whole slave trade to oversee. I'll stop dissing God now. I apologize to our religious listeners and also to God, just in case he exists, better safe than sorry. I am a

coward and lack the conviction of my beliefs.

So this gunpowder plot was an ambitious plan, to say the least. And I can't shake the comparison to Timothy McVeigh and the Oklahoma bombing. Or the terrorist bombing of the Boston Marathon. Or 9/11 of course...there are so many real-life parallels as well as to literature and film, the end of fight club, where they talk about erasing the debt record... The entire parliamentary archive would have been leveled. it would've been in their eyes a chance to wipe the slate clean. Most importantly though the targets were the king and his heir, the conspirators planned to kill the king and his son, and then kidnap the King's nine-year-old daughter Elizabeth who was conveniently housed at Coombe Abbey near the midlands where many of the conspirators lived. They would then somehow install her as a puppet ruler presumably after some strong arming and brainwashing. I don't feel like she would've been receptive otherwise. Hello Elizabeth, bad news, we had to sort of kill your father a little bit earlier today, sorry about that. Bad luck. Now how would you feel about doing our bidding?

Parliament was scheduled to convene in February of 1605, and in the meantime Thomas Percy was able to arrange lodging near the Prince's chamber, adjacent to the House of Lords in Parliament. Guy Fawkes posed as Percy's servant and acted as the property manager. The building was

conveniently located directly across the Thames river from a house owned by Catesby, and so the men began ferrying barrels of gunpowder across the river at night. Eventually they would accumulate 36 barrels or a metric ton, more than enough to level parliament if all had gone according to plan.

Unfortunately, nothing would go according to plan. Unfortunate for *them*. Not for everyone else. First off, in October 1604 there was an occurrence that would be all too familiar to those of us who lived through Covid: an outbreak of plague caused the government to temporarily shut down, and so the convening of Parliament was delayed. We like to think we're the first generation that had to deal with quarantine, it was very traumatic for us with our FaceTime video calls and grocery deliveries. It could've been worse, you guys.

Anyway, In the ensuing trial of Guy Fawkes and his co- conspirators, the prosecution would claim that the men took advantage of the plague-delay to begin tunneling under parliament, an assertion for which that is very little evidence and one that seems frankly unlikely considering none of them had any mining experience nor were any tunnels ever discovered. However Fawkes did confess to tunneling under parliament...during his fifth round of interrogation, which is about the time when I would probably confess to being the Earl of sandwich or whatever you want me to tell you. Just make the hurty stop. so the tunneling may or

may not have happened, but what is undisputed is that during this time a slew of new conspirators joined the crew. Never a bad sign for keeping a secret—when the number of people who know the secret is rapidly growing. The addition of new conspirators would ultimately be their downfall; the plot grew from 5 to an eventual 13, that's a fortuitous number, nothing menacing about that, and let's just say that some of the new recruits were not of the highest caliber. Some were not even invited. "In December Catesby recruited his servant, Thomas Bates, into the plot, after the latter accidentally became aware of it." That's not recruitment, that's damage control. OpSec, not on point. Well, Bates didn't *accidentally* become aware of it, per se, he basically figured out what was going on because he lived in Catesby's house and he noticed a slight accumulation of explosives and a bunch of sneaky sneaks being sneaky. So Catesby had to let Bates in on the plot, or kill him I guess. Which would have only hastened his fate, spoiler alert. The outcome would have been the same, and probably less painful. Another man who joined the conspirators at this point was a tall, red haired Catholic named Robert Keyes, whose primary role would be to guard the gunpowder at Catesby's house on the Thames before it was transported across the river. He was described by a prominent historian as "a desperate man, ruined and indebted." Just the kind of stable, reliable accomplice you're looking for

when you're working on an intricate mass murder plot. Keyes was a Catholic who had fallen on hard times, and whose only good fortune was that his wife was employed as governess to one Lord Henry Mordaunt. Keyes was most likely paid for his participation in the plot, so his loyalty was available for a price, and there are suspicions that he might have been the plan's downfall. Because he faced a dilemma: his wife's employer was scheduled to attend the meeting of parliament and there was a good chance that he would be very much blowed up in the explosion, and even if he survived, might not be in any condition to sign paychecks. Grip the pen between his stumps. Keyes petitioned Catesby to allow him to warn his wife's boss, but Catesby wasn't having it. So Keyes might have leaked the info basically for the purposes of job security. However, when it comes to assigning blame for the failure of the plot, there is another more likely suspect, as we will see.

The next two men added to the conspiracy were less problematic from an operational security standpoint; these were, Robert Wintour and Christopher Kit Wright, Brothers respectively of Thomas Wintour and Jack Wright. Catesby also added John Grant, Wintour's brother in law, an especially important addition for them because of his wealth.

And money was increasingly becoming an issue. Catesby had a decent war chest but as we know he had already lost the equivalent of \$6 million in his

last boneheaded scheme, so the conspirators were in dire need of funds and supplies and horses. Which is where the next two conspirators came in: Sir Everard Digby and Ambrose Rookwood. Digby and Rookwood also owned a large number of horses which would be useful in the planned post-boomsplode uprising. Because, as mentioned, there were actually two phases to the plot. So Phase 1 involved smuggling a metric fuckton of gunpowder—that's a technical term—in close proximity to parliament. When the king entered the chamber, Fawkes would light the slow-burning fuse and attempt to high-tail it out of there, and Catesby would ride to the Red Lion in Dunchurch in the midlands, where Digby would be waiting with a group of servants disguised as a hunting party. They would kidnap Elizabeth at nearby Coombe Abby. After that it gets a little hazy...I almost feel like these guys had figured that in the unlikely event that all of this worked, they would just wing it, because hey, if they had somehow beaten these astronomical odds then God was clearly on their side and he would just make it all work out.

The final conspirator deserves his own special introduction. I mentioned that there was another possible weak link in the plot apart from Keyes, and this next shady character seems to me to have been the most likely culprit for blowing up the blowup-parliament plan. His name was Francis Tresham, and the reason he was recruited are obvious: he was Catholic and very wealthy. However, there are two reasons he

probably *shouldn't* have been: specifically his two brothers-in law who were members of the house of Lords and who would be very much 'disassembled by the plans' success. That's the term I'm going to use from now on instead of sploded or blowed up. It's more sophisticated, and refined. So just like Keyes had done before him, Tresham implored Catesby to allow him to warn the potential victims, but Catesby again refused, saying "the innocent must perish with the guilty, sooner than ruin the chances of success." In other words, the means justify the ends, because I don't have any friends or family who are going to be disassembled.

On Saturday the 26th of October, a date most notable for being the day before my birthday some 300 years later, one of Tresham's brothers-in-law—the 4th Baron Monteagle—received an anonymous letter.

"My Lord, out of the love I bear to some of your friends, I have a care of your preservation. Therefore I would advise you, as you tender your life, to devise some excuse to shift your attendance at this parliament; for God and man hath concurred to punish the wickedness of this time. And think not slightly of this advertisement, but retire yourself into your country where you may expect the event in safety. For though there be no appearance of any stir, yet I say they shall receive a terrible blow this Parliament; and yet they shall not see who hurts them. This counsel is not to be condemned

because it may do you good and can do you no harm; for the danger is passed as soon as you have burnt the letter. And I hope God will give you the grace to make good use of it, to whose holy protection I commend you"

The 4th Baron Monteagle, concerned for his own safety and also a giant tattletale, ran directly to secretary of State and head of the secret police Robert Cecil, and Cecil, also a filthy snitch, took the letter to the king. This next part is amazing, because the conspirators actually found out about the letter— they quickly learned that the king was aware of a plot against his life. but for some batshit crazy reason they decided to still go ahead with the plot.

I imagine part of their reluctance to give up the scheme was due to an amazing stroke of luck; months earlier, for the first time in a long time, providence had seemed to go their way, a storage room immediately below the house of Lords had become available for rent, and on the 25th of March the conspirators had finalized their contract to rent the so called undercroft, a giant basement made of brick with massive vaulted ceilings. It had initially been used for coal storage, and has been described as "unused and filthy," but also "ideal for what the group planned to do." as we've discussed, the men had spent months acquiring and stockpiling barrels of gunpowder near parliament, and this sudden stroke of amazing luck

probably seemed like a sign from God, so I can only imagine that's why they were reluctant to give up the plot even when they received a conflicting sign from God that also seems pretty emphatic. This is an example of sunk cost fallacy, when you put this much effort and time and money into something, it's incredibly hard to just take the L and let go. But you need to, because otherwise you might end up disassembled. That phrase also applies to what happened to the conspirators, as we shall see.

So King James took the letter seriously, he immediately suspected some type of incendiary plot. It probably didn't hurt that his father had been murdered by a gunpowder explosion, true story, or I guess it did hurt, but anyway, you might say that King James was triggered by boomsplodes. That feels like some kind of pun, so I'm going to take credit for it.

So King James ordered a thorough search of parliament, "both above and below." The first search was unsuccessful though the search party did encounter Guy Fawkes, who gave the name John Johnson—crack thinking there, buddy—before explaining that he was the servant of Thomas Percy, who had rented an underscores for storage. So to quickly recap, Fawkes gave a fake name for himself and then the actual name of his co-conspirator who was a known Catholic agitator. I hope he was a good

soldier because he was a terrible everything else. When in doubt, give the most blatantly fake alias and then immediately blurt out the name of a terrorist, isn't that standard protocol for half assed schemes? When the king received the report from his search party, he was like *hmm*. Things that make a King go *hmm*. I can only imagine that what went through his head was something like, look, I am the result of literally generations of inbreeding but even I am not THIS stupid. The king listened to his gut and ordered one final search the night before parliament was set to convene. The search party again encountered Guy Fawkes, this time at midnight in the undercroft. nothing shady about that, a guy hanging out by himself at midnight in a filthy, drafty, vaulted brick basement, carrying nothing but a box of matches and surrounded by 36 barrels of gunpowder attached to a long slow-burning fuse. The secret police put on their best Sherlock Holmes deductive-reasoning caps and determined that something fishy was going on. Fawkes was taken into custody; over the next two days he would be interrogated and eventually tortured and he would give up all of the names of his associates. Torture was actually illegal in England at the time, but so was blowing up parliament, and this was the era of monarchy so when it came to the king, laws were more like suggestions. A warrant for Thomas Percy's arrest was immediately released, and thus word quickly spread among the populace that a dastardly

plot had been thwarted. You might think at this point the conspirators would finally throw in the towel but that good old sunk cost fallacy is no joke. Catesby's stubborn ass stuck to the plan, he rode to the Midlands and met up with the rest of the bumbling stumblefucks (as I will call them for the duration of this episode). The crew then galloped desperately and aimlessly around the Midlands seeking shelter and support, but in a shocking turn of events none of the local Catholics wanted to be an accessory to treason. The crew finally holed up in Holbeche House, owned by one of their few remaining sympathizers name Stephen Littleton. By this time they were exhausted and soaked from rain and some of their gunpowder was wet, so the men stretched out in front of the fire and laid down the gunpowder to dry. By the fire. What followed was the only boomsplode of the gunpowder plot. See why I called them stumbling bumblefucks? Catesby was badly burned, John Grant was blinded, the other men were injured. Disfigured, and presumably humiliated, Catesby convinced the men to make their last stand, so they filled their muskets and awaited the secret police. The scene was very Butch Cassidy and the Sundance kid, their hideout was surrounded on 8 November by 200 Kingsmen and a firefight ensued. I think of this historical era as being all duels with rapiers but there was no shortage of guns, and this was the absolute definition of going out in a blaze of glory. Very Young Guns.

I was wondering...when it comes to religious zealots, in those last few minutes when they realize they've failed—like when the men were surrounded, there was no escape and Catesby knew he was going to die, was there a moment where he was like, "well, damn. I guess God prefers protestants after all. We picked the wrong team. Oops."

Catesby and the conspirators were mowed down and the remaining plotters, including Bates, Keyes, Digby, and Tresham and of course Guy Fawkes would be drawn and quartered.

Are you familiar with drawing and quartering? I didn't really understand it. It sounds a lot more artistic or geometrical than it was. A quick definition: the men would be "hanged (almost to the point of death), emasculated, disemboweled, beheaded, and quartered. remains would then be displayed in prominent places across the country, such as London Bridge, to serve as a warning of the fate of traitors. For reasons of public decency, women convicted of high treason were instead burned at the stake."

If you want to see some really detailed depictions of this type of torture—because why wouldn't you?—there is a three-part mini series on HBO called *Gunpowder* starring Kit Harrington

(who btw is a descendant of Catesby) and this show is so graphic it would make Eli Roth blush. It's the gunpowder plot meets hostel. Pretty gross. So yeah, if you like torture, watch that, and you shouldn't watch it for any other reason, because it is Hollywood silliness. There's a scene of Guy Fawkes battling the forces of the king in the basement, single-handedly dispatching multiple members of the secret police. It's bonkers. Guy Fawkes was arrested with zero incident, he was like my name is John Johnson and they were like that seems unlikely come with us and he was like OK. these screenwriters did not care one wit about accuracy except for when it came to impeccably rendered torture porn. All of a sudden they became very detail oriented, I don't know what else I can say about that series, I guess the acting is pretty good, or at least the agony is believable, did I mention it was really painful to watch?

Ironically, while the conspirators would suffer massively from torture and execution in the short term, the most painful long-term consequences would be borne by the very religious group they had championed and to whom they had hoped to provide relief from oppression: their fellow Catholics. The British government and the king used the plot as a promotional strategy to drum up patriotic fervor, support for the government, and absolute brutality against Catholics. The 5th of November would become a national holiday known as bonfire night,

although the official title was "An act for a publick thanksgiving to Almighty God every year on the fifth day of November" and observance was not optional. That's amazing, can you imagine if Thanksgiving in America was mandatory? If you could be arrested for not giving sufficient thanks. I would be making citizens arrest all over town. "You don't look very appreciative sir. You're going to jail, you ungrateful bitch." the law was passed in early 1606 and required citizens to attend special church services during which the entire text of the act would be read aloud by the minister. So it had two goals, apparently: to commemorate the occasion and to test the patient of children. That sounds like something a lot of restless kids with ADHD had to suffer through. To be fair, there were no prescribed penalties in the law so my whimsical fantasy of citizens arrests was just wishful thinking, the law was technically pointless. Like I guess if you were the one church that refused to participate, you might look a little shady, you'd probably end up on some type of list. But you couldn't be officially punished. You'd just disappear, but no one would know why. Bonfire day or Guy Fawkes Day has become a hugely popular tradition in England, nowadays it's mostly bonfires and fireworks but in the past kids would don Guy Fawkes masks and beg for money, pyres would be lit to burn the conspirator in effigy. Those Guy Fawkes effigies were the original "guys," people would go into the effigy store and be like, give me one of those

guys to burn, and that's how the term guy came to be associated with dudes. I'm glad I'm not making that up because it sounds too stupid to be believable but it's true. Except there probably wasn't an effigy store. I don't know where they sold those things, it's a strange item to have next to the spam or whatever. "Tom, go pick up some sides for dinner and also a catholic that we can burn in front of the kids."

But the version of the Guy Fawkes mask that we are all familiar with didn't take form until the modern era, it was created by Alan Moore and David Lloyd, the writer and illustrator respectively of the comic book series "V for vendetta," which depicted a dystopian British future in which a lone superhero wearing a highly stylized Guy Fawkes mask battles against an evil dictatorship. The very nuanced and visually striking graphic novels were adapted into an arguably less nuanced 2006 film which became a hit among the type of people who like those kinds of movies. The Duncans of the world. I'm not trying to be a hater, I'm just saying there is a certain type of person who loves V for Vendetta and Boondock Saints and that kind of person is you and many edgelord 14-year-old boys. Including many of the edgelord 14-year-old boys who would fancy themselves digital freedom fighters, adopt the mask as their symbol, and form the loosely organized (if there is any organization to this organization) hacker collective known

as anonymous. And thus through the years the Guy Fawkes mask has become meaningless—or maybe I should say it is capable of taking on any meaning you want to project onto it. Here's a quote that really sums up everything I found fascinating and silly about the squishiness of these types of symbols, and the Guy Fawkes mask in particular:

"On 17 April 2006 a pair of rival groups wearing Fawkes masks confronted each other outside the New York City offices of Warner Brothers and [DC Comics](#). One group... protested against a perceived misrepresentation of the Anarchist movement in the film *V for Vendetta*. The other group... counter-protested against the anarchists, wearing masks purportedly supplied by a Time Warner employee." Classic

So in conclusion, nothing is sacred, every symbol is meaningless, and we're all just winging it out here. Guy Fawkes wasn't a hero, but who is, really? Heroes on one side of a conflict are villains to another and there's no point in assigning meaning to a meaningless universe, so let's all have a coke and a smile and chill the fuck out.

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