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The voice of the people was often viewed with a mixture of anxiety and contempt in early modern England.¹ According to an important strand of political thought, the common people were the ‘many-headed multitude’: ignorant, irrational, fickle and susceptible to rumour.² Popular speech was caricatured as a mixture of subdued grumbling and incomprehensible ranting, and the authorities were always on the look out for seditious talk, the harbinger of popular rebellion.³ Anti-rebellion tracts, works of political theory, sermons and royal proclamations claimed that matters of state ‘farre passeth Coblers crafte’ and exhorted subjects to ‘hold your pratling, spare your penn / Be honest, and obedient men’.⁴

Of course, the common people were entitled to petition for the redress of their grievances, and it was generally accepted that good kings should at least give them a hearing. Nevertheless, David Zaret has claimed that before the 1640s, hostility to the popular voice meant that even petitions were governed by highly restrictive ‘norms of secrecy and privilege’.⁵ They only represented individuals or corporate bodies rather than the people as a whole.⁶ They neutrally presented information about local, rather than national problems, representing an ‘apolitical flow of information’ from the

¹ I would like to thank Michael Questier and Andy Wood for reading drafts of this article, as well as the anonymous readers for their very helpful comments.

² Christopher Hill, *Change and Continuity in Seventeenth Century England* (London, 1974), 181-204.

³ Andy Wood, *The 1549 Rebellions and the Making of Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 2007), ch. 3; Andy Wood, ‘A lyttul worde ys tresson’: Loyalty, Denunciation, and Popular Politics in Tudor England’, *Journal of British Studies* 48:4 (2009), 837-47; David Cressy, *Dangerous Talk: Scandalous, Seditious, and Treasonable Speech in Pre-Modern England* (Oxford, 2010).

⁴ Richard Morison, ‘A Lamentation in which is shewed what ruine and destruction cometh of seditious rebellyon’ (1536), sig. A4r; ‘The wiper of the Peoples teares The dryer upp of doubts & feares’, “Early Stuart Libels: an edition of poetry from manuscript sources.” Ed. Alastair Bellany and Andrew McRae. Early Modern Literary Studies Text Series I (2005). <http://purl.oclc.org/emls/texts/libels/>.

⁵ David Zaret, *Origins of Democratic Culture: Printing, Petitions, and the Public Sphere in Early-Modern England* (Princeton, N.J., 2000), pp. 6-7; David Zaret, ‘Petitions and the ‘Invention’ of Public Opinion in the English Revolution’, *American Journal of Sociology* 101:6 (1996), 1508, 1515-16.

⁶ Zaret, ‘Petitions and the ‘Invention’ of Public Opinion’, 1513. David Zaret, ‘Petitioning Places and the Credibility of Opinion in the Public Sphere in Seventeenth-Century England’ in Beat Kümin (ed.), *Political Space in Pre-Industrial Europe* (Farnham, 2009), 183; Zaret, *Origins of Democratic Culture*, 59, 90, 217.

localities to the centre.⁷ They were written in deferential language and did not dare to attack law or authority, or prescribe solutions to the problems they communicated.⁸ These norms applied not only to petitions but to ‘political communication’ in general.⁹ As such, public opinion was only ‘invented’ as a legitimating concept in the early 1640s, when petitions subscribed by thousands of people were presented to the Long Parliament. This was the result of technological developments – the printing of petitions – rather than any ideological change.¹⁰ Before then, the illegitimacy of the popular voice and the irrationality of public opinion were ‘unchallenged assumptions’ and ‘uncontested principles’, and contemporaries saw ‘nothing remarkable’ in royal proclamations against the discussion of state matters.¹¹ Indeed, elites afforded ‘no legitimacy to popular political discussion’, which was held to have ‘inevitably negative outcomes’.¹²

Whatever its status in elite thought, historians have shown that public opinion played an important practical role in English politics prior to the 1640s. Even medieval rulers had to take the likely reactions of those below the political elite into account when making decisions if they wished to avoid provoking popular rebellion.¹³ Passive obedience was not enough, however. Early modern governments relied on unpaid local office-holders to enact their wishes, and these needed to be persuaded of

⁷ Zaret, ‘Petitions and the ‘Invention’ of Public Opinion’, 1516; Zaret, *Origins of Democratic Culture*, 15, 59, 217; Zaret, ‘Petitioning Places’, 184.

⁸ Zaret, ‘Petitions and the ‘Invention’ of Public Opinion’, 1513-16; Zaret, *Origins of Democratic Culture*, 90.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 7-8; Zaret, ‘Petitions and the ‘Invention’ of Public Opinion’, 1508.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 1498-1500; Zaret, *Origins of Democratic Culture*, 7, 50. See also Dagmar Freist, *Governed by Opinion: Politics, Religion and the Dynamics of Communication in Stuart London 1637-1645* (1997), 5, 30-1. The notion of the ‘invention’ of public opinion is from Keith Michael Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution: Essays on French Political Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1990).

¹¹ Zaret, ‘Petitions and the ‘Invention’ of Public Opinion’, 1508; Zaret, *Origins of Democratic Culture*, 50, 55.

¹² Zaret, ‘Petitioning Places’, 182.

¹³ John Watts, ‘The Pressure of the Public on Later Medieval Politics,’ *Political Culture in Late Medieval Britain*, ed. Linda Clark (Woodbridge, 2004), 159-180.

the regime's authority and legitimacy.¹⁴ Despite frequently insisting that they were under no obligation to explain themselves to their people, Tudor and Stuart monarchs often did so.¹⁵ At the same time, individuals both within and outside the regime used print, manuscript and the spoken word to mobilise wider opinion in order to pressure the monarch into adopting various political and religious policies.¹⁶

While historians have shown that public opinion mattered, they have also challenged the anti-populist rhetoric that underpinned hostility to the popular voice, demonstrating that it had little basis in social reality. The commons, far from being irrational and unsophisticated, were in fact quite capable of negotiating the terms of their subordination and manipulating the 'public transcript' of deference to their own ends.¹⁷ Rioters and rebels were often conservative, legalistic and non-violent, bearing little resemblance to the many-headed monster of elite nightmares.¹⁸

If anything, however, recent work has tended to reinforce the notion that early modern political thought was indeed largely hostile to popular speech, even if elite rhetoric did not accurately reflect social reality and political practice. Recent examinations of seditious speech have drawn attention to elite fears about social

¹⁴ Mark Goldie, 'The Unacknowledged Republic: Officeholding in Early Modern England' in Tim Harris (ed.), *The Politics of the Excluded, c. 1500-1850* (Basingstoke, 2001), 153-94; Tim Harris, 'Charles I and Public Opinion on the Eve of the English Civil War' in Stephen Taylor and Grant Tapsell (eds.), *The Nature of the English Revolution Revisited* (2013), 1-25; Noah Millstone, *Manuscript Circulation and the Invention of Politics in Early Stuart England* (Cambridge, 2016), 64-7.

¹⁵ Kevin Sharpe, *Selling the Tudor Monarchy: Authority and Image in Sixteenth-Century England* (New Haven, 2009); *Image Wars: Promoting Kings and Commonwealths in England 1603-1660* (New Haven, 2010).

¹⁶ Peter Lake and Steven Pincus, 'Rethinking the Public Sphere in Early Modern England', in Peter Lake, and Steven Pincus, (eds.), *The Politics of the Public Sphere in Early Modern England* (Manchester, 2007), 1-30.

¹⁷ Michael Braddick and John Walter (eds.), *Negotiating Power in Early Modern Society: order, hierarchy and subordination in Britain and Ireland* (Cambridge, 2001); Andy Wood, 'Poore Men Woll Speke One Daye': Plebeian Languages of Deference and Defiance in England, c. 1520-1640 in Tim Harris (ed.), *The Politics of the Excluded, c. 1500-1850* (Basingstoke, 2001), 67-98; James Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, 1985) and *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, 1990).

¹⁸ John Walter, 'Authority and Protest' in Keith Wrightson (ed.), *A Social History of England 1500-1750* (Cambridge, 2017), 221-241.

disorder and their demands for obedience, deference and silence.¹⁹ At the same time, historians of public sphere politics have rightly emphasised that appealing to the public could be dangerous, given traditional assumptions about the ignorant multitude. Politicians who sought to muster opinion to put pressure on the monarch opened themselves to charges of ‘popularity’ and demagoguery.²⁰ Zaret’s characterisation of political thought as overwhelmingly inimical to the voice of the people has not been directly challenged and remains influential.²¹

As I hope to show, however, this view is largely mistaken. Of course, hostility towards the multitude was an important element of elite rhetoric throughout the early modern period and well beyond. Nevertheless, fear of the many-headed monster, and contemptuous denials that the common people had any legitimate voice in politics, only tell part of the story. The irrationality of the people and the illegitimacy of their voice were not uncontested principles – indeed, if they were, we might ask why anti-populist writers felt the need to argue for them quite so vociferously. In fact, these ideas were in constant trans-historical conflict with a very different and more positive set of attitudes towards the voice of the people.

Evidence for these countervailing views comes from complaint literature - a diverse range of printed and manuscript petitions and supplications that adopted the voice of the people, or some large constituency of opinion, and sought to represent their supposed grievances to the government, giving an imaginary voice to those conventionally excluded from a formal role in politics. This literature included

¹⁹ Wood, *The 1549 Rebellions*, ch. 3.

²⁰ Peter Lake, ‘Puritanism, (Monarchical) Republicanism, and Monarchy; or John Whitgift, Anti-Puritanism and the Invention of ‘popularity’, *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 40 (2010), 463-95; Thomas Cogswell, ‘The people’s love: the Duke of Buckingham and popularity’ and Richard Cust, ‘Charles I and popularity’ in Thomas Cogswell, Richard Cust and Peter Lake (eds.), *Politics, Religion and Popularity* (Cambridge, 2002), 211-58.

²¹ For a recent example see John Walter, *Covenanting Citizens: The Protestation Oath and Popular Political Culture in the English Revolution* (Oxford, 2017), 60, 213-4.

petitions that were intended for presentation to authority, as well as polemics that merely adopted the language of petitioning but sought to reach a much larger audience. Even if many ‘ordinary’ petitions – those sent to landlords, ministers or the king by individuals, towns or other corporate bodies – did indeed obey deferential norms, these texts routinely violated them.²² They appealed directly to a wide audience, and presented the grievances of the people as a whole rather than those of individuals or corporate bodies. They claimed the authority of an imagined public opinion and argued that its support conferred legitimacy on a variety of often mutually contradictory political and religious demands[□]. They often prescribed detailed solutions for perceived problems that virtually demanded action from the monarch, leaving very little room for the royal prerogative. This was a genre of literature that should not have been possible if authoritarian assumptions about petitioning really were unquestioned and ubiquitous. As we shall see, however, such norms were prescriptive, not descriptive.

As social scientists and historians from Jürgen Habermas onwards have pointed out, the phrase ‘public opinion’ was not used in its modern sense until the early eighteenth century.²³ Before then, ‘opinion’ was the opposite of truth, reason and wisdom, and was often paired with words like ‘foolish’ and ‘vain’.²⁴ Nevertheless, while complaint tracts did not use the phrase ‘public opinion’, they did use phrases that bore a striking resemblance to it. As early as 1617, polemicists were

²² For the conservatism of ‘ordinary’ petitions, see Richard Hoyle, ‘Petitioning as popular politics in early sixteenth-century England’, *Historical Research* 75 (2002), 367; Richard Hoyle (ed.), *Heard before the King: registers of petitions to James I, 1603-16* (Kew, 2006), pt. 1.

²³ Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge, 1989), 89-102; J.A.W. Gunn, ‘Public Opinion’ in Terence Ball, James Farr and Russell L. Hanson (eds.), *Political Innovation and Conceptual Change* (Cambridge, 1989), 249; Jon Cowans, *To Speak for the People: public opinion and the problem of legitimacy in the French Revolution* (London, 2001), 10.

²⁴ Freist, *Governed by Opinion*, 2. See also Barnaby Rich, *Opinion Dieftied, Discovering the Ingins, Traps and Traynes, that are set in this Age, werby to Catch Opinion* (London, 1613, STC 20994), 2-44; Henry Peacham, *The truth of our times* (London, 1638, STC 19517), 54-7.

passing on ‘the Opinion of *your* People’ to the king without any sense that such ‘opinion’ was foolish or untrue.²⁵ The notion of public opinion as a legitimating concept predated the term.²⁶ In any case, many of the authors considered here claimed to present not so much the *opinions* of the people as incontrovertible *facts* known to virtually everyone except the monarch. Of course, these tracts did not necessarily represent public opinion accurately. Indeed a consistent, unified public opinion only ever existed in the polemical imagination, not in a messy reality where disagreement or indifference was the norm. In fact, it was precisely because the views and allegiances of the people were so divided and uncertain that polemicists felt the need to present them as speaking with one voice. My purpose here, however, is not to reconstruct public opinion but to understand how it was represented in polemical literature, and how this changed over time.

Complaint literature often presented the people as plain-speaking, disinterested, and patriotic. Far from being ignorant and bestial, they were potentially rational and often better informed about the kingdom’s problems than the monarch. Indeed, the ‘ignorance’ of the multitude, rather than being a fundamental and inherent trait, was a rhetorical tool that could be used for a variety of purposes. The rumours that the people spread were not simply sources of error. If carefully sifted, they allowed observers to ascertain the truth about politics. Moreover, the people’s predisposition for rebellion did not invalidate their voice but was instead used as a veiled threat by writers who, while not advocating rebellion themselves, hinted that it

²⁵ Anon., ‘Ballams Asse Or A Free Discourse touching the Murmurs, and feared Discontents of the Time and directed to his then Maiestie King James By way of Humble Aduertisement’, British Library, London (hereafter BL) Lansdowne MS 213, fo. 66r. This tract is not to be confused with another text of the same name that circulated in 1613. See Emily Jennings, ‘Balaam’s Asse’ Uncovered: New Light on the Politics of Prophetic Exegesis in Mid-Jacobean Britain’, *Huntington Library Quarterly* 81:1 (2018), 1-28.

²⁶ Tim Harris, ‘Publics and Participation in the Three Kingdoms: Was There Such a Thing as ‘British Public Opinion’ in the Seventeenth Century?’, *Journal of British Studies* 56 (2017), 733.

would be the inevitable result of any failure to redress popular grievances. If it is true that parliamentarians and royalists presented no ideological explanation for mass petitioning in the 1640s, this was not because no such rationale existed. Indeed, the apparently sudden ‘invention’ of public opinion becomes much more comprehensible when we realise that the mass communication of grievances existed in the polemical imagination long before it became a practical reality.

I

In many ways, the complaint literature of the early modern period was a continuation of a tradition that stretched back at least as far as the late thirteenth century. Petitions that claimed to represent entire counties and even ‘the commons’ or ‘the people’ were presented to parliament in the fourteenth century, and petitioning on behalf of some wider constituency of opinion – sometimes in demanding and undeferential terms – was a favourite tactic of the lollards.²⁷

Although the tactic of speaking for the people was not new, it flourished as never before during the sixteenth century. The reformation led supporters and opponents of evangelical reform to appeal to an adjudicating public in unprecedented ways, mobilising print to reach an ever-increasing audience and lending credence to the idea that readers could render their own judgement and answer back.²⁸ Religious divisions also created uncertainty and anxiety about the true allegiances of the people, rendering contradictory claims about their religious beliefs and grievances plausible. It also created religious minorities of Puritans and Catholics who sought to present

²⁷ Wendy Scase, *Literature and Complaint in England, 1272-1553* (Oxford, 2007), 15-16, 31-2, 87-99, 154-6; David Aers, ‘Vox Populi and the literature of 1381’ in David Wallace (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature* (Cambridge, 1999), 432-53; Anne Hudson, ‘The Legacy of Piers Plowman’ in John A. Alford (ed.), *A Companion to Piers Plowman* (Los Angeles, 1988), 251-63; Helen Barr (ed.), *The Piers Plowman Tradition* (London, 1993).

²⁸ Peter Matheson, *The Rhetoric of the Reformation* (Edinburgh, 1998), 2; Peter Marshall, *Heretics and Believers: A History of the English Reformation* (New Haven, 2017), p. xiii and *passim*.

themselves as forces to be reckoned with.

The reign of Tudor monarchs with questionable claims to the throne, one of whom was a young boy and two of whom were women, all of whom could be regarded at different times as either heretics or papists, created a crisis of legitimacy in which popularity – and claims about popularity – mattered a great deal. Monarchs also increasingly resorted to public opinion as a negotiating tool, presenting themselves to foreign powers as the only force capable of constraining (or unleashing) popular anticlericalism, belligerence and xenophobia.²⁹ Economic and social changes generated complaint about enclosure, rents and prices.³⁰

In the early decades of the sixteenth century, texts had often valorised the humble plowman or used the voice of the people to criticise the clergy.³¹ This tradition was adapted by Henrician reformers, who hoped to refute accusations that they only constituted a small and unpopular faction. Simon Fish's *Supplicacyon for the Beggars* of 1529 was presented as a petition to the king from the deserving poor, who were supposedly being 'beggared' by the exactions of their undeserving counterparts, the clergy.³² Wider opinion was also given voice in prose dialogues – no doubt influenced by similar German texts - in which relatively humble people discussed religious matters.³³ Ascribing the desire for religious reform to the commons was a way of staving off criticism that the reformation was simply imposed

²⁹ This might be said, for instance, of Henry VIII's use of the reformation parliament or James VI and I's use of the Parliament of 1621.

³⁰ Keith Wrightson, *Earthly Necessities: Economic Lives in Early Modern Britain, 1470-1750* (New Haven, 2000).

³¹ 'God Spede the Plough', BL Lansdowne MS 762, fos. 5r-6v; [John Rastell], *Of Gentylnes and Nobylyte* (London, 1525, STC 20723); John Skelton, *Colyn Cloute* (London, 1545?, STC 22601) circulated in manuscript form in the early 1520s.

³² Simon Fish, 'A supplicacyon for the beggars' (Antwerp?, 1529, STC 10883). See also [William Tyndale?], *The Praier and Complaynte of the Ploweman unto Christ* (London, 1532, STC 20036.5). Scase, *Literature and Complaint*, 151-5.

³³ Jerome Barlow and William Roy, *Rede me and be nott wrothe for I saye no thyng but trothe* (STC 1462.7, Strasbourg, 1528); William Roy, *A proper dyalogue betwene a gentillman and an husbandman* (Antwerp, 1529?, STC 1462.3); Anon, *A Godly dyalogue & dysputacyon betwene Pyers Plowman, and a popysh preest* (1550). For German Lutheran dialogues, see Matheson, *The Rhetoric of the Reformation*.

by a narrow and unpopular elite.

Claims to speak for the people were not the exclusive preserve of the advocates of evangelical reform but could be made by supporters of traditional, orthodox religion.³⁴ There is a sense in which Thomas More's *Supplicacyon of soulys*, which answered Fish's *Supplicacyon for the Beggars*, spoke for a much larger body of opinion, namely the countless souls (including the souls of beggars) in purgatory.³⁵ The plowman figure, who was used by reforming writers to attack the doctrine of the real presence, could also be enlisted by Catholic writers to support orthodoxy or to criticise the ignorance and covetousness of the commons.³⁶

Towards the end of Henry VIII's reign, reformers used the voice of the people to criticise the turn towards conservative religious policies and the growing impact of social and economic change on the commons.³⁷ This outpouring of complaint literature continued after Henry's death, and was encouraged by the liberalisation of censorship under Edward VI as well as the Duke of Somerset's attempts to court popular support.³⁸ Under Mary I, a number of supplications on behalf of the people of England were published anonymously or written by Protestant exiles.³⁹

³⁴ Sir Thomas Elyot, *Pasquil the Playne* (London, 1533, STC 7672).

³⁵ Thomas More, *The Supplicacyon of soulys* (STC 18092, London, 1529?), sigs. A1v, A4r-v.

³⁶ Wynkyn de Worde, *How the plowman lerned his pater-noster* (London, 1510, STC 20034); 'The Banckett of Iohan the Reve unto Peirs Ploughman, Laurens laborer, Thomlyn tailer and Hobb of the hille with others' (1572), Harley MS 207, fo. 2v. 'Peers Ploughman hys answer to the doctours interrogatoryes' (1582), Beinecke Library, Hartford CT, Osborn MS a18. The critical marginal notes made by a Catholic reader of Crowley's *The vision of Pierce Plowman* also testifies to continued Catholic engagement with this text. See Robert Crowley (ed.), *The vision of Pierce Plowman* (London, 1550, STC 19907), Bodleian Library, Oxford (hereafter Bod.), Douce MS L 205.

³⁷ Henry Brinkelow, *The complaynt of Roderyck Mors* (Strasburg, 1542, STC 3759.5); Anon., *I playne Piers which can not flatter* (1550) appears to attack the *Act for the Advancement of True Religion* of 1543 and may have circulated well before publication.

³⁸ 'Vox Populi, Vox Dei' 1547-48 in R.H. Tawney and Eileen Power (eds.), *Tudor Economic Documents* vol. III (London, 1924), 25-39; Robert Crowley, *An informacion and peticion agaynst the oppressours of the pore commons of this realme* (London, 1548, STC 6086); Anon., *A ruful complaynt of the publyke weale to Englande* (London, c. 1550, STC 5611.4); [Robert Crowley], *Pyers plowmans exhortation unto the lordes knightes and burgoysse of the Parlyamenthouse* (London, 1549?, STC 19905); Anon., *Certayne causes, gathered together, wherin is shewed the decaye of England* (STC 9980, London, 1552?), sig. A2r. The authorship of the exhortation is disputed. See Ethan Shagan,

It has been claimed that the mid-Tudor tradition of complaint declined after 1549 as a result of social and economic changes. Inflation and the development of agrarian capitalism polarised society, leading social commentators to emphasise obedience rather than sympathising with the grievances of the commons. The rebellions of 1549 also delegitimised speaking for the people.⁴⁰

While this view is largely correct, it requires qualification. The republication of Henrician supplications after 1549 arguably brought them to the largest audience ever.⁴¹ In addition, even texts that superseded mid-Tudor complaint literature retained vestiges of this earlier tradition. Thomas Smith's *Discourse of the Common Weal*, written in 1549 but published in 1581, broke decisively with earlier analyses of social and economic problems.⁴² Nevertheless, the beginning of the tract reads very much like a piece of complaint literature. Smith gave voice to plowmen and cap-makers and conveyed 'the common and vniuersall greifes that men complaine on now a dayes'.⁴³

In addition, although the rebellions of 1536-7 and 1549 put the authors of complaint literature on the defensive, even anti-rebellion tracts written by Sir Richard Morison and Sir John Cheke deferred to the authority of public opinion. For all that

Popular Politics and the English Reformation (Cambridge, 2003), 279; Hoyle, 'Petitioning as popular politics', 375. Nevertheless, the tract is strikingly similar to Crowley's *Information and petition*, allowing us to tentatively ascribe it to him. Crowley was of course the editor of a printed edition of Langland's poem. See Crowley (ed.), *The Vision of Pierce Plowman*.

³⁹ Anon., *A Supplicacyon to the quenes maiestie* (Strasburg?, 1555, STC 17562); Anon., *Certayne Questions Demanded and Asked by the Noble Realme of Englande, of her true and natural children and Subjectes of the Same* (Wesel?, 1555, STC 9981); Anon., *The Lamentacion of England* (1557, STC 10015)

⁴⁰ Andrew McRae, *God Speed the Plough: the Representation of agrarian England, 1500-1660* (Cambridge, 1996), 52; David Norbrook, *Poetry and Politics in the English Renaissance* (New York, 2002), 41, 49; John N. King, *English Reformation Literature: The Tudor Origins of the Protestant Tradition* (Princeton (NJ), 1982), 444.

⁴¹ Fish's *Supplication of the Beggars* and the Lollard *Praier and Complaynte of the Ploweman* were both reprinted in Foxe's *Acts and Monuments*. John Foxe, *The Unabridged Acts and Monuments Online* (1563 edition)(HRI Online Publications, Sheffield, 2011). Available from: <http://www.johnfoxe.org> [Accessed: 09.06.17]. 1563 edition, 496-499; 1570 edition, 515-21. Henry Brinkelow's *Complaynt of Roderyck Mors* was also republished in 1560.

⁴² McRae, *God Speed the Plough*, 54-7.

⁴³ Thomas Smith, *A Discourse of the Common Weal of this Realm of England*, ed. Elizabeth Lamond (Cambridge, 1929), 12, 36

these works attacked rebels, they did so by assuming the authorial perspective of a loyal silent majority of the people.⁴⁴ Although often quoted by social historians as evidence for elite hostility to the multitude, Morison's and Cheke's tracts did not reject the legitimacy of public opinion so much as the notion that the rebels represented it. The views of *loyal* subjects were a source of great authority and moral force.

During the reign of Elizabeth I, a number of court-sponsored complaint tracts advocated securing the succession and harshly punishing Catholic traitors.⁴⁵ In the late 1580s and early 1590s, several Puritan and Catholic texts sought to supplicate on behalf of these minorities or the people as a whole.⁴⁶ These tracts were intended to contradict conformist claims that Puritans were a tiny minority that could easily be rooted out.⁴⁷

The accession of James VI of Scotland to the English throne in 1603 created an opportunity to inform a new King about the alleged complaints and fears of his

⁴⁴ Morison, *A lamentation*, sig. A2r-v, A4r; Richard Morison, *A Remedy for Sedition* (London, 1536, STC 18113.7), sig. A2v; [Richard Morison?], 'Admonition to the rebels' The National Archives, London (hereafter TNA) SP 1/113, fos. 217r-218r; Sir John Cheke, *The Hurt of Sedicion* (London, 1549, STC 5109), sig. A2r-v.

⁴⁵ Anon, 'The common crye of Englishe men' (1566), BL Egerton MS 2836, fos. 35r-71r. The tract has been attributed to Thomas Sampson on the basis that the only surviving copy is preserved in his papers. See Susan Doran, *Monarchy and Matrimony: the courtships of Elizabeth I* (London, 1996), 85. See also Catherine Chou, 'The Parliamentary Mind and the Mutable Constitution', *Historical Research* 89:245 (2016), 470-85. Thomas Norton, *A Warning agaynst the dangerous practices of Papistes* in Thomas Norton, *All such treatises as haue been lately published by Thomas Norton* (London, 1570, STC 18677), sig. A3v-B4r. See also Peter Lake, *Bad Queen Bess? Libels, Secret Histories and the Politics of Publicity in the Reign of Queen Elizabeth I* (Oxford, 2016), 23-32. William Lightfoot, *The complaint of England. Wherein it is clearely proved that the practises of traitrous papists against the state of this realme, and the person of her Majestie, are in divinitie unlawfull, odious in nature, and ridiculous in pollicie* (London, 1587, STC 15595).

⁴⁶ [Robert Waldegrave?], *A Lamentable Complaint of the Commonalty, by way of Supplication to the High Court of Parliament, For a Learned Ministry* (London, 1585, STC 7739); Anon, *The humble petition of the communalitie to their most renowned and gracious soueraigne, the lady Elizabeth* (Middelburg, 1587, STC 7584); Anon, *A Petition directed to her most excellent Maiestie* (Middelburg, 1591?, STC 1522a). Even a hostile printed response to these tracts adopted the very same strategies of complaint used by the puritan authors it denounced. See Matthew Sutcliffe, *An Answer to a Certain Libel Supplicatorie, or rather Diffamatory* (London, 1592, STC 23450), sig. B1r; Robert Southwell, *An Humble Supplication to her Maiestie* (1591/2?, STC 22949.5), sig. A3v-A4r, E7v-E8r. The tract was produced some time after the proclamation against seminary priests of November 1591 and Southwell's arrest in June 1592. It initially circulated in manuscript form and was printed in 1600 with a false date of 1595.

⁴⁷ Patrick Collinson, *The Elizabethan Puritan Movement* (London, 1967), 248.

subjects.⁴⁸ Such tracts flourished in the crisis-ridden 1620s, stimulated by the outbreak of the Thirty Years' War, the Spanish Match and conflict between crown and parliament.⁴⁹ Particularly significant here was parliament's own increasingly assertive petitioning and a growing belief that evil counsel had alienated the people from their monarch.⁵⁰ While many of these texts attacked early Stuart government, those who supported the regime against its parliamentary critics also claimed to speak for the people.⁵¹ Although the 1630s were much more politically stable, a number of complaint tracts were produced that attacked evil counsel and Ship Money, and expressed sympathy with the Covenanters during the Bishops' Wars.⁵²

⁴⁸ Anon., 'Poor mans petition', BL Harley MS 1925, fos. 1v-2r; BL Add. MS 29606, fo. 17r; Norfolk Record Office, AYL/186. Anon., 'Aduertisements of a Loiall subiect to his Gracious Soueraigne draun from obseruacons of the peoples speeches written by an unknown Author in Anno 1603', BL Harley MS 35, fos. 460r-462v; Anon., 'Ballams Asse', fos. 57r-70r. For Catholic petitions (which did not necessarily seek to speak for the people as a whole), see for instance Anon, *A Petition Apologeticall, Presented to the Kinges most Excellent Maiesty, by the lay Catholikes of England*, (STC, Douai, 1604); John Colleton, *A supplication to the Kings most excellent Maiestie wherein, seuerall reasons of state and religion are briefly touched: not vnworthie to be read, and pondered by the lords, knights, and burgeses of the present Parliament, and other of all estates. Prostrated at his Highnes feete by true affected subiects* (STC 14432, n.p., 1604).

⁴⁹ Scott, *Vox Populi*; [John Murton?], *A most humble supplication of many the Kings Maiesties loyall subiects, ready to testifie all civill obedience, by the oath, as the law of this realme requireth, and that of conscience; who are persecuted, onely for differing in religion, contrary to divine and humane testimonies as followeth* (STC563.7, Amsterdam?, 1621); Anon., 'Tom Tell Troth or a Free Discourse touchinge the Murmurs of the tyme', Bod. Tanner MS 73, fos. 199r-230v; "If Saints in heaven cann either see or heare", "Early Stuart Libels: an edition of poetry from manuscript sources." Ed. Alastair Bellany and Andrew McRae. Early Modern Literary Studies Text Series I (2005) <http://purl.oclc.org/emls/texts/libels/>; 'The Common Peoples Apollogy to the Queene of Bohemia. 1623', Bod., Eng poet MS c. 50, fos. 21v-22v; Anon., 'The Teares of the oppressed people of England', 1623, Bod. Tanner MS 73, fo. 304r; Anon., 'To my Noble Friendes in the Lowe house of Parliament' (1628), BL Harley MS 6842, fos. 179r-185v; Robert Cotton, 'The Danger wherein the Kingdome nowe standeth: and the Remedy', BL Harley MS 160, fos. 1r-9r; Alexander Leighton, *An Appeale to the Parliament, or, Sions Plea Against the Prelacy* (STC 15429, Amsterdam, 1629).

⁵⁰ 'Rumour and "common fame:" The Impeachment of the Duke of Buckingham and Public Opinion in Early Stuart England', *Journal of British Studies* 55:2 (April 2016), 249-52; Andrew Thrush (ed.), *The House of Commons 1604-1629*, vol. I (Cambridge, 2010), 328-41.

⁵¹ Anon. 'Letter to James', [early 1624], BL Harley MS 1581, fo. 395r; Anon., 'A post Caution or rather a post monition to the Common Speakers in the Lower house of Commons the two last Parliaments', BL Add. MS 4155, fo. 77r.

⁵² Anon., 'A Letter to his Maiesty' BL add. MS 69,886, fos. 120r-121r; William Prynne, 'An humble Remonstrance to his Maiestie against the Tax of Shipp-money', BL Harley MS 737, fo. 252r-v; D.D. to John Hastings, [October/November 1638] in John Bruce and William Hamilton (eds.), *Calendar of State Papers Domestic, 1638-1639* (London, 1871), 89-90; 'Anonymous letter addressed to the King, commencing "We, your poor, yet true and loyal subjects"', TNA SP 16/415, fo. 251v; Anon., 'Observations on the generall Murmurations, their reasons, and Votes of the most and best affected of your Maiesties Subjectes', Sheffield Archives, Str P 40/91.

II

Complaint literature was a very diverse genre, encompassing a range of printed and manuscript tracts and libels. Some of these were highly influential. Fish's *Supplicacyon for the Beggars*, for instance, was reprinted in the most widely read text of the Elizabethan period, John Foxe's *Acts and Monuments*, while Thomas Scott's *Vox Populi* of 1620 was a publishing sensation whose success attracted the attention of the authorities and forced its author into exile.⁵³ While some manuscript complaint tracts only survive as single copies, others appear to have been very widely dispersed. The 'Advertisements of a loyal subject' of 1603, for instance, survives in dozens of copies.⁵⁴ The authors of complaint literature sometimes referenced or reprinted earlier texts and evidently saw themselves as contributing to a coherent genre.⁵⁵

Complaint literature circulated in a variety of ways. Robert Crowley's tracts of the 1540s were printed in cheap octavo formats with official or semi-official backing. Other tracts circulated surreptitiously, while some were scattered or posted in public places. A hand-written 'poor man's petition to the King' was 'thrown about the court' in 1603.⁵⁶ Another Jacobean libel that claimed to represent the 'Comons of poore distressed England' and pined for the imagined glories of Elizabeth I's reign was placed in the hand of a statue of the Queen in Westminster.⁵⁷ The writer of one tract

⁵³ Fish, *A supplicacyon for the beggars*; John Foxe, *The Unabridged Acts and Monuments Online* (1563 edition)(HRI Online Publications, Sheffield, 2011). Available from: <http://www.johnfoxe.org> [Accessed: 09.06.17]. 1563 edition, 496-499; 1570 edition, 515-21; Thomas Scott, *Vox Populi* (London, 1620, STC 22101).

⁵⁴ In the British Library alone: Add, 4160, fo. 73; Stowe 145, fo. 34; Stowe 158, fo. 40; Harl. 3787, 12, Add. 29546, fo. 73; Harl 1130, 73; Eg. 2877, fo. 180; Harl 677, fos. 31-3; Faust. C. II, 11; Add. 22601, fo. 12; Add. 22591, fo. 54; Harl. 35, 42; Harl 1583, 17; Harl 5191, 1.

⁵⁵ [Robert Crowley], *A Supplication of the Poor Commons* (London, 1546, STC 23435.5) reprinted Fish's *Supplication*. This tract has been attributed to Brinkelow (see J.M. Cowper (ed.), *Four Supplications* (London, 1871), pp. xiv-xv), but appears to have been written by Crowley. Compare the *Supplication* sig. B6v, C2v with Crowley, *An informacion and peticion*, sig. B1v, B4v; See also Anon., *The Lamentacion of England*, 1-2.

⁵⁶ Anon., 'Poor mans petition', fos. 1v-2r.

⁵⁷ "If Saints in heaven cann either see or heare", "Early Stuart Libels: an edition of poetry from manuscript sources." Ed. Alastair Bellany and Andrew McRae. Early Modern Literary Studies Text Series I (2005) <http://purl.oclc.org/emls/texts/libels/>.

that criticised Charles I's government went to the trouble of secreting it in the King's private chambers.⁵⁸

Complaint tracts were often written anonymously. Several of them were officially banned, and governments made some efforts to identify the authors. Anonymity was not necessarily a response to censorship, however. It also strengthened a tract's claim to represent a wider constituency of opinion, the 'we' whose voice they adopted.⁵⁹

Complaint tracts broke with the norms that supposedly governed petitioning in a number of ways. Petitions were supposed to represent individuals or corporate bodies such as towns or trading companies. Rather than rejecting popular will as a source of authority, however, complaint tracts derived almost all of their rhetorical force from their claims to speak for the people as a whole, or some larger constituency of opinion. In the early sixteenth century, they often identified themselves specifically with those at the bottom of society, the 'beggars' or the 'poor commons', rather than the elite political nation.⁶⁰ At other times they used terms such as 'true hearted Englishmen' or 'good minded men', which implied virtue, patriotism and commitment to Protestantism.⁶¹ 'Honest subjects' or 'better sort' had moral connotations but could also refer to a specific social stratum.⁶² 'The people', an ill-defined yet usefully elastic term, could either refer to the elite political nation or a

⁵⁸ Anon., 'A Letter to his Maiesty', fos. 120r-121r.

⁵⁹ For the various rationales for anonymity, see Andrea Rizzi and John Griffiths, 'The Renaissance of Anonymity', *Renaissance Quarterly* 69:1 (2016), 203.

⁶⁰ Fish, *Supplicacyon*; [Crowley], *Supplication of the Poor Commons*; Crowley, *An informacion and peticion*.

⁶¹ Anon., 'The common crye of Englishe men', fos. 36v-38r.

⁶² Norton, *A Warning agaynst the dangerous practices of Papistes*, sig. M4v – N1r; Cotton, 'The Danger wherein the Kingdome nowe standeth, fo. 6v.

much more comprehensive group.⁶³ It is often impossible to tell how a writer was defining ‘the people’, perhaps because they had not resolved the ambiguities themselves, or wished to preserve a degree of plausible deniability. At any rate, it was often implied that the entire kingdom, both ‘high and lowe’ were represented, and the number of complainants were compared to the stars in the sky or grains of sand.⁶⁴ While complaint tracts almost never claimed to speak for women, one made the remarkable claim that because they were ‘partie and priuie’ to Acts of Parliament, they were entitled to read about grievances that affected the kingdom as a whole.⁶⁵

As well as appropriating the voice of the people directly by using the language of ‘we’ and ‘us’, complaint literature also adopted fictive personae. These preserved the anonymity of the author while drawing on the authority of established figures from literature and folklore. They included Piers Plowman, the spiritual guide of Langland’s medieval poem, who came to represent the humble everyman, and Colin Clout, a plain-speaking commoner whose name derived from the word for a clod of earth or the wooden clogs worn by labourers. Reformation tracts often employed the apostate friar or the clergyman’s servant – insiders able to lift the veil on clerical corruption. Pasquil, the statue to which anonymous libels were attached in Rome, and Tom Tell-truth, a fearless speaker of truth to power, were also ventriloquised.

From the later sixteenth century onwards, a different authorial pose was often assumed: the loyal informer who neutrally gathered and reported the views of the

⁶³ [Waldegrave?], *A Lamentable Complaint*, sig. 1v; Anon, ‘The Teares of the oppressed people of England’; Thomas Scott, *Vox Regis* (Utrecht, 1624, STC 11645), 24. For a discussion of the word ‘people’, see Robert Filmer, *The Anarchy of a limited or mixed monarchy* (Thomason E.436[4]; London, 1648), 8.

⁶⁴ Anon., ‘The common crye of Englishe men’, fo. 36v; Anon, *The humble petition of the communalitie*, sig. A2r, A3v.

⁶⁵ Anon, *A Petition directed to her most excellent Maiestie*, sig. E4v-F1r. Women were of course involved in the mass petitioning campaigns of the 1640s. For a Scottish example ventriloquizing women, see Mark Loughlin, ‘The Dialogue of the Twa Wyfeis: Maitland, Machiavelli and the Propaganda of the Scottish civil war’ in Alasdair A. MacDonald, Michael Lynch, and Ian Cowan (eds.) *The Renaissance in Scotland: Studies in Literature, Religion, History and Culture offered to John Durkan* (Leiden, 1994), 226-245.

people.⁶⁶ This strategy allowed writers to present themselves as disinterested observers passing on uncomfortable truths. Since powerful ministers were known to send members of their household into the city to sample public discourse, and since proclamations issued by James VI and I instructed subjects to inform on those who discussed state matters, this pretense could be construed as having official approval.⁶⁷ In some cases, the authors claimed to have overheard popular speech in public or semi-public places such as taverns, and the openness with which subjects criticised the government was intended to demonstrate how bad things were.⁶⁸ Other authors claimed to represent not so much public as *private* opinions, those that the common people were too afraid to voice publicly.⁶⁹

The complaint literature of the mid sixteenth century distinguished between the different grievances and obligations of the various estates, ultimately arguing that the greed of the gentry caused the poverty of the commonalty.⁷⁰ Thereafter, polemicists tended to present the entire kingdom as being united in complaint. The *Lamentacion of England* of 1557, for instance, appealed to all social groups, suggesting that the whole of society had suffered under Mary's regime.⁷¹

The tendency to identify grievances with society as a whole gained strength in the early Stuart period. 'The Teares of the oppressed people of England' claimed that the nobility, gentry, commonalty, and clergy had all been equally oppressed by the

⁶⁶ Norton, *A Warning agaynst the dangerous practices of Papistes*; Anon., 'Aduertisements of a Loiall subiect'; Anon., 'Ballams Asse'; Cotton, 'The Danger wherein the Kingdome nowe standeth'.

⁶⁷ Millstone, *Manuscript Circulation and the Invention of Politics*, 52; Beale to Boyle, 21st November 1663 in Thomas Birch, *The Correspondence of Robert Boyle* (1744), v, 458-60. James F. Larkin and Paul Hughes (eds.), *Stuart Royal Proclamations, vol. I: Royal Proclamations of King James I 1603-1625* (Oxford, 1973), 521; Anon., 'Tom Tell Troth', fos. 199r, 202v-3r.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, fo. 201v.

⁶⁹ Scott, *Vox Regis*, 3.

⁷⁰ Reformation tracts like *A proper dyalogue betwene a gentillman and an husbandman* argued that the corrupt clergy oppressed the gentry and commonalty alike, however. See Roy, *A proper dyalogue*.

⁷¹ Anon., *Lamentacion of England*, 5-6.

King.⁷² While earlier polemicists often assumed the identity of Piers Plowman or Colin Clout, and supplicated on behalf of ‘beggars’ or ‘the poor commons’, the archetypal speaker of truth to power of the early Stuart period was ‘tom tell truth’, a figure who was not associated with any particular occupation or social position. The playing down of social divisions made it possible to imagine a relatively monolithic people who shared common interests. It also drained complaint literature of much of its social radicalism. A voice of the people that did not blame the gentry for the problems of the commonalty, but argued instead that all social groups shared grievances, was likely to be much more acceptable to an elite audience.

III

Complaint tracts also broke with the norms that supposedly governed petitioning by addressing a large audience beyond the authority they were supposedly supplicating. Complaint tracts were often ostensibly written to the monarch and used deferential language and arguments designed to appeal to them. Fish’s *Supplicacyon for the Beggars*, for instance, addressed Henry VIII directly, arguing that clerical reform would boost his finances and authority.⁷³ Some tracts were less flattering, however, and directly criticized the monarch using language that hardly seemed calculated to elicit royal approval. The *Lamentacion of England* of 1557 bluntly depicted Mary I as a tyrant.⁷⁴

Many of these documents petitioned parliament. They often read as extended pep talks intended to encourage MPs to put pressure on the monarch, providing them

⁷² Anon., ‘The Teares of the oppressed people of England’, fo. 304r.

⁷³ Fish, *Supplicacyon*, sig. A2v-A3v. There is some evidence that it was indeed shown to the King. See Brad C. Pardue, *Printing, Power and Piety: appeals to the public during the early years of the English Reformation* (Leiden, 2012), 120.

⁷⁴ Anon., *Lamentacion of England*, 9.

with arguments and historical precedents for doing so.⁷⁵ Of course, such petitions did not necessarily exclude the monarch, whose position as king- or queen-in-parliament was seen as the most powerful expression of their royal authority. On the other hand, some tracts went so far as to lobby MPs, in the name of the people, to disobey or circumvent the monarch.⁷⁶

Even where tracts addressed the monarch or parliament, though, their real intended audience was probably much wider. The complaint literature of the mid-Tudor period, for instance, tended to use accessible language and was printed in an affordable format.⁷⁷ The fact that these tracts were printed does not by itself demonstrate that they were intended for public consumption. Even in the 1640s, petitions were often printed in order to be presented to the petitioned authority, rather than to be publicized.⁷⁸ The author of the *Lamentable Complaint* of 1585 claimed that since it was impossible to supplicate every MP individually, printing was the only means to communicate the people's alleged desires for a learned ministry.⁷⁹

Nevertheless, many of these documents broke with petitioning norms by addressing the people directly, while also, paradoxically, claiming to speak for them. Tracts were addressed to 'all true herted Englishe men' or even to 'euery man and woman of this Realme'.⁸⁰ Of course, appealing to the people was not necessarily an *alternative* to addressing authority, rather it could be a *means* to do so. Robert Southwell claimed that since Catholics were not represented at Elizabeth I's court, and would be imprisoned if they petitioned her, the only way of reaching the Queen

⁷⁵ Anon., 'The common crye of Englishe men', fos. 64v-65v; [Waldegrave?], *A Lamentable Complaint*, sig. D7v-D8r.

⁷⁶ Anon., 'The common crye of Englishe men', fo. 65r-v.

⁷⁷ McRae, *God Speed the Plough*, 29-30.

⁷⁸ Jason Peacey, *Print and Public Politics in the English Revolution* (Cambridge, 2013), 278-9.

⁷⁹ [Waldegrave?], *A Lamentable Complaint*, sig. 1v.

⁸⁰ Anon., *A Petition directed to her most excellent Maiestie*, sig. E4v-F1r; Anon., 'The Teares of the oppressed people Of England', fo. 304r-v. See also Robert Crowley, *The way to wealth wherein is plainly taught a most present remedy for sedicion* (London, 1550, STC 6096).

was to publish his *Humble Supplication* as widely as possible in the hope that a sympathetic Protestant might read it and relay his message to her.⁸¹ As such, the people, or at least those who read polemical works, were not the represented body, but a medium through which grievances might be communicated. Critics were of course highly sceptical of such claims.⁸²

Although petitions were supposed to neutrally transmit information about grievances without prescribing solutions, complaint literature often set out a programme of redress. Henry Brinkelow, for instance, made a detailed list of solutions to the kingdom's perceived problems in the 1540s. This included setting rents at the level of forty years before, and punishing lawyers who accepted excessive fees by cutting off their right hand. 'Ballams Asse' of 1617 complained about the projectors and suitors who surrounded the King, but also set out a project of its own to redress the problem, which its author just so happened to be well qualified to supervise.⁸³ If the King happened to think that the author of 'Ballams Asse' should be appointed to the 'thanklesse office' of cleaning up court and city, he would humbly and reluctantly accept – all the King needed to do was to sign the attached petition.⁸⁴

According to conventional wisdom, the prince reserved the absolute right to accept or decline petitions. The authors of complaint literature adhered to the letter, but not the spirit of this stricture. They frequently protested that they would not dare to tread on the royal prerogative by prescribing solutions to problems.⁸⁵ Nevertheless, while the monarch's theoretical freedom of manoeuvre was preserved, the possibility

⁸¹ Southwell, *An Humble Supplication*, sig. F4r. See also Anon., *England's Petition to their King, or a Petition of the Distressed Subjects of England* (E3013 (Wing), London, 1643), sig. A1v.

⁸² More, *Supplycacyon of soullys*, sig. A3r; Matthew Sutcliffe, *The supplication of certaine masse-priests falsely called Catholikes. Directed to the Kings most excellent Maiestie, now this time of Parliament, but scattered in corners, to mooue mal-contents to mutinie* (STC 14430.5, London, 1604), sig. A2r.

⁸³ Anon., 'Ballams Asse', fos. 67v – 68v.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, fo. 70r.

⁸⁵ Anon., 'The common crye of Englishe men', fo. 56r; Norton, *A Warning agaynst the dangerous practices of Papistes*, sig. N1v.

that, once properly informed, they might reject the petition, or ignore it entirely, was rarely even considered. Instead, the reader of complaint tracts were inexorably led through a chain of logic and argument that left only one legitimate course of action open. In the process, they repeatedly crossed the rather blurry line between merely informing the monarch about grievances and telling them how to redress them.

Thomas Norton, for instance, piously insisted that he would never be so presumptuous as to tell the Queen what to do about the threat posed by Catholic plotters. While he genuflected in the direction of monarchical sovereignty, however, he left very little for the Queen to decide. In the very next sentence he exhorted her not to ‘cherish them [i.e. Catholics] with vnmeasurable and dangerous clemencie’.⁸⁶ Only the detailed execution of anti-Catholic policy, the means rather than the ends, were entrusted to the proper authorities. The Queen was free to do whatever she wanted to do, of course. It was just that if she exercised clemency, she would be going against common sense, her own interests, the interests of the kingdom, and the will of both her people and of God.

‘The common crye’ similarly left the royal prerogative intact while insisting that all courses of action but one would have dire consequences. While the Queen could refuse to marry or choose a successor, this would result in anarchy, foreign conquest, the election of a new monarch, or even the conversion of England into another form of government.⁸⁷ Only a negligent or perhaps tyrannical ruler could allow such a terrifying outcome to occur.⁸⁸ Good rulers, the author wrote, died with the satisfaction that they had left the country better off than they found it. Only tyrants like Tiberius and Nero were content to let the Empire burn after they died, and

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, sig. N2r.

⁸⁷ Anon., ‘The common crye of Englishe men’, fos. 48r-v, 70r.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, fo. 69r-v.

Elizabeth was not a tyrant, was she?⁸⁹ In practice, then, tracts like the ‘common crye’ paid scant regard to the deferential conventions of petitioning. If you agreed with the author’s premises about the dangers of an insecure succession, only one conclusion was really possible. Very little was left to royal or even parliamentary decision-making.

The voice of the people was all the more forceful because of its association with the voice of God. J.A.W Gunn argued that the phrase ‘*vox populi, vox dei*’ was often merely employed as a ‘sentimental invocation of the virtues of ordinary people’.⁹⁰ In fact, the association between the two voices could have much more compelling implications. The people were often presented as the mouthpiece for God’s ordinances.⁹¹ Indeed, God and people were so much in agreement about the threats facing the kingdom that several polemicists moved from speaking for the people to ventriloquising God himself.⁹² The *vox populi* was almost omniscient, able to pierce through the deceit of Machiavellian evil counsellors, to reveal the truth and to reprove the faults of Kings just as God could.

IV

One of the most basic justifications for breaking the politically correct conventions of petitioning was to claim that the writer was responding to an emergency. Addressing the monarch on the people’s behalf became a pardonable offence when the kingdom was allegedly in mortal danger. Quite what constituted an emergency was, of course, in the eye of the beholder.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, fos. 60v-61r.

⁹⁰ Gunn, ‘Public Opinion’, 247.

⁹¹ [Waldegrave?], *A Lamentable Complaint*, sig. D8v; Anon, *The humble petition of the communitie*, sig. B4v.

⁹² Crowley, *An informacion and peticion*, sig. A6r; Norton, *A Warning agaynst the dangerous practices of Papistes*, sig. N2v-N4r.

The favourite metaphor complaint tracts used to demonstrate the necessity of speaking out was the ship of state. If a lowly sailor saw that their ship was approaching rocks and risked shipwreck, he should warn his superiors.⁹³ ‘The moost expert mariners’, as Crowley wrote, ‘wil not disdayne sometime to be admonished by an inferioure Parson’ in tempestuous weather.⁹⁴ The metaphor could extend to implicit criticism of the monarch, who might be accused not merely of ignorance, but of being asleep at the wheel.⁹⁵ This was a vision of the people as active citizens rather than passive subjects.

Thomas Norton used a more elaborate metaphor. If a King was being pursued by enemies and sought sanctuary in the safety of their castle, he said, it would be ridiculous for the castle porter to refuse them entry on the basis that they were insufficiently noble to open the door. Traditional injunctions against the discussion of high politics were thus recast as a matter of overblown courtesy and propriety. Those who observed these rules were, by implication, fawning jobsworths, ignorant of the true interests of their monarch.⁹⁶

Speaking for the people was also justified, of course, on the basis that the normal channels of communication between subject and sovereign were obstructed by flattering evil counsellors who prevented the truth from reaching the monarch’s ears. Crying out under such circumstances was natural, involuntary and almost impossible to suppress. In a characteristically colourful metaphor that drew on medical ideas about the importance of ‘flow’ to health, Thomas Scott claimed that resorting to print when the normal channels of communication between subject and monarch were

⁹³ Smith, *A Discourse of the Common Weal*, 10.

⁹⁴ [Crowley], *Pyers plowmans exhortation*, sig. A7v-A8r.

⁹⁵ Scott, *Vox Regis*, 24; Anon., ‘The common crye of Englishe men’, fo. 67v.

⁹⁶ Norton, *A Warning agaynst the dangerous practices of Papistes*, sig. A2v.

blocked was as natural and unavoidable as vomiting when one was severely constipated.⁹⁷

The authors of supplicatory literature often justified their writings by claiming the authority of the monarch themselves. Simon Fish's *Supplicacyon for the Beggars*, for instance, borrowed much of its language from recent vagrancy legislation, presenting itself as a response to government concerns.⁹⁸ Crowley's tracts against enclosure responded to Protector Somerset's agenda of agrarian reform in a similar manner. In the Jacobean period, 'Ballams Asse' sought to align itself with official policy by complaining that the capital was overpopulated, a subject of repeated royal proclamations. In the 1620s, writers cleverly seized on proclamations against discussing state matters, which had urged loyal subjects to report any seditious speech they overheard. Proclamations against lavish speech were thus used to justify engaging in the very discussion of politics they were supposed to forbid.⁹⁹

More radically, speaking for the people as a whole could also be justified on the basis that matters of dynastic politics, religion and foreign policy, far from being private affairs or matters of royal prerogative, were the legitimate concerns of every subject. Elizabethan speakers of truth to power argued that the insecure succession touched everyone, making state matters legitimate subjects for complaint.¹⁰⁰ Similar sentiments were expressed about the Spanish marriage negotiations of the Jacobean period.¹⁰¹ The people, it was claimed, had a right to discuss state matters that would directly affect them.¹⁰²

⁹⁷ Scott, *Vox Regis*, 44.

⁹⁸ See Dunstan Roberts, 'Simon Fish, A Supplicacyon for the Beggars' (<http://eebo.chadwyck.com/bathspa.idm.oclc.org/intros/htxview?template=basic.htx&content=intro99845344.htm>).

⁹⁹ Larkin and Hughes (eds.), *Stuart Royal Proclamations*, 521; Anon., 'Tom Tell Troth', fo. 199r.

¹⁰⁰ Norton, *A Warning agaynst the dangerous practices of Papistes*, sig. A2v; Anon., 'The common crye of Englishe men', fo. 36v.

¹⁰¹ Scott, *Vox Regis*, 13.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*; Anon., 'The Teares of the oppressed people of England', fo. 304v.

V

While complaint literature frequently broke the norms that were supposed to govern petitioning, it also contradicted stereotypes about the irrational, bestial multitude. The notion that the people were united in complaint, and demanded a specific programme of redress, challenged the idea that the popular voice was incoherent, fickle and clamorous. A fractious, many-headed multitude was apparently speaking with a consistent, unified voice. Although lip-service was sometimes paid to the notion that the people were ignorant, writers often presented an ironic contrast between their lack of knowledge and the alleged wisdom of the monarch and their advisers. To some extent, then, these tracts adopted the language but not the spirit of anti-populist political thought, manipulating these traditional but always malleable ideas into new shapes.

While it is often assumed that wealth and social status conferred legitimacy in early modern petitioning, the poor had a number of things going for them. The prayers and complaints of the poor were thought to be particularly pleasing to God.¹⁰³ The poverty and powerlessness of humble petitioners highlighted their vulnerability and the need for royal protection and redress. Simon Fish's *Supplicacyon for the Beggars* demonstrated that, for rhetorical purposes, the poorer the imagined supplicant was, the better. The more the imaginary petitioners abased themselves and used the exaggerated rhetoric of suffering, the more worthy they were of royal

¹⁰³ Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars* (New Haven, 1992), 360-2; Brodie Waddell, *God, Duty and Community in English Economic Life, 1660-1720* (Woodbridge, 2012), 75; Crowley, *An informacion and peticion*, sig. A6v-A7r.

sympathy.¹⁰⁴ The poverty of the supplicants also showed how low otherwise prosperous and respectable subjects had supposedly been brought by clerical exactions.

Supplicants who were poor and powerless were also untainted by high political battles and therefore neutral and disinterested. The relatively lowly social status of the ‘plain countryman’ who supposedly wrote a defence of the Duke of Buckingham in 1626 lent his work greater credibility.¹⁰⁵ He did not know the powerful royal favourite and was unlikely to seek the kinds of offices and rewards that Buckingham could bestow.¹⁰⁶ His account of the impeachment of the Duke, which he claimed reflected the views of ‘the commons’ in general, was therefore unsullied by any personal interest in the outcome. The ‘post Caution’ reversed traditional notions that only political elites were entitled to voice their opinions. The low social status of the ‘plain countryman’, far from undermining his credibility, meant that he was more clear-sighted than his political and social superiors.

During the early Stuart period, some polemicists also argued that the voices of the commons were worthy of attention because they were more reliably patriotic than the aristocracy. During the early 1620s, the common people were presented as being deeply concerned about the Protestant cause in general and the plight of Elizabeth of Bohemia in particular. A libel that addressed Elizabeth on behalf of the common people claimed that the ‘poore mechannickes’ of England were eager to fight for the exiled princess, but were restrained from doing so by King James.¹⁰⁷ Claims that the people were thirsting for war in the early 1620s may have belied a certain

¹⁰⁴ In this sense the rhetoric of supplication was similar to the exaggerated self-abasement of commoners who sought to manipulate the ‘public transcript’ of elite protection. See Wood, ‘Poore Men Woll Speke One Daye’, 68-9.

¹⁰⁵ Anon., ‘A post Caution’, fo. 77r.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, fo. 80v.

¹⁰⁷ ‘The Common Peoples Apology to the Queene of Bohemia. 1623’, Bod. Eng poet MS c. 50, fos. 21v-23v.

nervousness that they were in fact reluctant to pay the necessary taxes and might be just as happy with James' policy of negotiated settlement.

Thomas Scott shared the general thrust of this social analysis. The common people, he wrote, bore 'an inbred spleene' towards Spain, expressed in the form of insults and even attacks on the Spanish ambassador and his attendants by London apprentices.¹⁰⁸ The common people, rather than representing a rebellious and ignorant multitude, were thus recast as patriots. If anything, it was the cosmopolitan aristocracy who were either dangerously complaisant about, or perhaps complicit in, the real threat to the kingdom – international popish conspiracy. The 'better sort', Scott claimed, never participated in attacks on the Spanish ambassador and his household.¹⁰⁹ Indeed, courtiers and aristocrats supported the Spanish match.¹¹⁰ The Catholic propagandist Richard Verstegan, one of Scott's polemical opponents, shared his views about the relative hostility of the multitude towards Spain.¹¹¹

As well as emphasising the virtues of the common people, complaint tracts sought to mitigate their perceived vices. Chief among these was their alleged ignorance and irrationality. To some extent this stereotype was undermined by the reforming notion of a priesthood of all believers. German Lutherans and English reformers alike often idealised simple peasants, arguing that even the lowliest member of the commonwealth was capable of grasping the simple truths of the Bible.¹¹² Enlisting beggars and humble plowman allowed reformers to draw the starkest possible contrast between those who were materially poor yet spiritually rich, as Christ and his followers had been, and the wealthy yet spiritually corrupt Church.

¹⁰⁸ Thomas Scott, *The second part of Vox populi* (London, 1624, STC 22103), 12.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 34-35.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹¹¹ [Richard Verstegan], *Londons Looking-Glasse* ([St. Omer], 1621, STC 18327), 8, 11-13, 18-19; Richard Verstegan, *A toung-combat, lately happening, between two English soldiers; in the tilt-boat of Grauesend* (1623, STC 1689:08), 21

¹¹² Lutherans were much less apt to do this after the German Peasants' War, however.

This was an important theme of *The Praier and Complaynte of the Ploweman unto Christ*, a lollard text from the late fourteenth century that was first published in 1531 and adapted by reformers.¹¹³ The sixteenth century preface, probably written by William Tyndale, pointed out that Christ and his disciples had been poor, humble fishermen and carpenters who were denounced by the religious authorities of their day as ‘ydiots’ and members of the ‘rude... rascall sorte’.¹¹⁴ This point was echoed by a later supplicatory text, which pointed out that the gospels were written by ‘poore fysher men and symple creatures, euen taken for the dregges of the worlde’.¹¹⁵

The humble faith of the people was contrasted with the deliberately obscure theology of the popish priesthood. This contrast was neatly encapsulated by *A Godly dyalogue & dysputacyon betwene Pyers Plowman, and a popysh preest*, in which a humble plowman took on and bested a priest in theological debate. As the tract implied, the message of the bible was so powerful that even a humble commoner could understand it, despite the efforts of the clergy to obscure the truth in order to bolster their own authority.¹¹⁶ Popish doctrines such as transubstantiation, by contrast, were so stupid that only an intellectual could believe in them. Indeed, in one sense, the ‘ignorance’ of the commonalty was a virtue. Since they had not been indoctrinated into the corrupt ways of the church, the common people were in fact better able to learn the truth than the clergy. This belief could shade into the claim that they had been created by God as ‘reasonable creatures’ or that they had ‘reasonable soules’ and couldn’t help but use them.¹¹⁷ To the extent that it existed at all, the ignorance of the people was not a permanent characteristic but a *temporary* state that reformers wished

¹¹³ Douglas H. Parker (ed.), *The praier and complaynte of the ploweman vnto Christe* (Toronto, 1997), 3-4.

¹¹⁴ [Tyndale], *Praier and Complaynte*, sig. A2r.

¹¹⁵ [Crowley], *Supplication of the Poor Commons*, sig. A4v. See also Anon., *I playne Piers*, sig. A7r; [Murton?], *A most humble supplication*, 12.

¹¹⁶ Anon., *A Godly dyalogue*, sig. A2r.

¹¹⁷ Anon., *I playne Piers*, sig. C1v.

to alleviate. Indeed, authors often imputed suspiciously sophisticated knowledge of scripture and ancient history to humble plowmen, to the extent that the credibility of their authorial pose was severely stretched.

All of this was not necessarily to argue that the people were capable of sophisticated theological reasoning. The fact that even plowmen were capable of understanding the basic message of the Bible showed how simple and unambiguous it was. To claim that the people could understand the Bible, moreover, was not necessarily to imply that they were, strictly speaking, rational. Comprehending God's message did not require the use of reason, and not all doctrine was subject to rational inquiry. Luther believed, for instance, that the mystery of the real presence of Christ in the sacrament could not be explained and simply had to be believed.

Nevertheless, to assume that the multitude were believed to be intrinsically ignorant is to misread the polemical function of 'ignorance' in early modern source material. Polemicists aimed to win arguments, not to accurately describe society, and they used the 'ignorance' of the people as a rhetorical tool. Even the authors of complaint literature sometimes presented the common people as ignorant, but this was not seen as an essential, unchanging characteristic. Rather, it conveniently explained the *past* behaviour of a commonalty who had now seen the light. Crowley's *Supplication of the Poor Commons*, for instance, complained about the restrictions on the reading of the scriptures introduced by parliament in 1543. The difficulty for Crowley, however, was that since parliament was supposed to represent the people, and had approved the Act for the Advancement of True Religion, it was difficult to claim that the people wanted access to vernacular Bibles. Here the notion that the people were ignorant came to the rescue. Crowley claimed that in 1543, the people, not knowing their own best interests, had rejected God's word through their

parliamentary representatives. Now, however, they begged the King to ‘forget our obstinacie’ and allow wide access to the scriptures.¹¹⁸ The people were *previously* ignorant and obstinate, and this explained their apparent support for religious conservatism, but they were nevertheless capable of recognising their former errors.

Notions of the ignorance of the people were used to very different effect by Christopher Goodman, one of the Marian exiles. For Goodman, ignorance and powerlessness were not fundamental attributes of the common people, rather they were *excuses* that they used to escape their duty – which was to overthrow Mary.¹¹⁹ The common people were ‘reasonable creatures’, not ‘brute beasts’, he wrote, and they could not claim that their lowly social status and ignorance of state matters relieved them of their obligations to God.¹²⁰ The ‘ignorance’ of the people could thus be used in the service of very anti-authoritarian arguments.

Puritan writers adopted very similar arguments to earlier reformers, arguing that the stubbornness and ignorance of the people explained their previous indifference or hostility towards Puritan reforms. Although the people had not demonstrated a conspicuous desire for an educated, preaching ministry in the early part of Elizabeth’s reign, this was not because it was not needed or wanted. Instead, the commonalty had actively concealed ‘the miserable estate wherein we stand’ from parliament because they were ‘children in vnderstanding, and men in malice, and all rude behaiour’.¹²¹ The *humble petition* of 1588 repeated the claim that the people had ‘deferred’ informing the queen about the need for a preaching ministry because they were ‘very babes & children, not knowing our right hande from our left in

¹¹⁸ [Crowley], *Supplication of the Poor Commons*, sig. A5v.

¹¹⁹ Christopher Goodman, *How Superior Powers Ought to be Obeyed* (1558), 147. Of course, he also criticised the people’s idleness, drinking and attachment to popular Catholic religious festivals. See *Ibid.*, 153.

¹²⁰ Christopher Goodman, *How Superior Powers Ought to be Obeyed* (1558), 146-9.

¹²¹ [Waldegrave?], *A Lamentable Complaint*, sig. A7v.

matters that concerne the kingdome of heauen'.¹²² This argument allowed Puritan writers to have it both ways, envisaging a commonalty who were sometimes content in their ignorance but also capable, at other times, of recognising their true spiritual interests. By having the people condemn themselves in their own words, Puritan writers rendered the common people's irreligion and ignorance, and thus their need for a preaching ministry, much more vivid and convincing.¹²³

The familiar language of the ignorant multitude was never entirely absent from later polemics that claimed to speak for the people. The author of 'Tom Tell Troth', which circulated in 1622, acknowledged that the people's speech was foolish because 'they never thinke before they speake, but rashly vent whatsoever gets into their fancy be it true, false, or probable, good, badd, or indifferent'.¹²⁴ While the author might tut at the foolishness and license of the people, he did so in a rather indulgent manner, larding criticism of the people's speech with irony.¹²⁵ 'I can come into noe meetinge', he wrote, 'but I finde the predominant humour to be talkeinge of the Warrs of Christendome the honour of their Countrey or such like treason'.¹²⁶ While 'Tom Tell troth' gestured in the direction of traditional anti-populist hostility, it fundamentally endorsed the alleged concerns of the people. As such, its use of anti-populist rhetoric was a world away from the earnest admonitions of Richard Morison, John Cheke or James VI and I.

During the 1620s, polemicists frequently argued that the common people, far from being ignorant, were well informed, perhaps even better informed than the monarch. A contrast was often drawn between humble subjects and flattering

¹²² Anon., *The humble petition of the communaltie*, sig. A3v.

¹²³ Eamon Duffy, 'The Godly and the Multitude in Stuart England', *The Seventeenth Century* 1:1 (1986), 33-5; Wrightson, *English Society*, 224.

¹²⁴ Anon., 'Tom Tell Troth', fo. 202v.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, fo. 199v.

courtiers. Thomas Scott argued that the ‘counsel and intelligence of meane persons is more profitable, then of wiser and better men; because these speake freely; the other, with reference to *favour* and their owne *fortune*’.¹²⁷ It followed that the monarch, who relied on flattering councilors for information, could be much worse informed about the state of the kingdom than his own subjects. The ‘teares of the oppressed people’ argued that although James seemed to think that his people were ‘ignorant not vnderstanding the misteries of state’, there were in fact wiser and more honest men among his subjects than Privy Councilors like the Duke of Buckingham and the Earl of Middlesex.¹²⁸ The fact that even cobblers or people in alehouses realised that a policy was misguided showed just how foolish, deluded, or perhaps wicked the king’s councilors must be.

The more humble the subject was, the closer they were to the sharp edge of political, religious and social grievances. They were thus quicker to perceive problems that the monarch, in their comfortable yet isolated state, might be blithely unaware of. ‘As Famine is felt first by the Poore; and as Frost strikes the Valleys, when higher grounds [e]scape free’, Scott wrote, ‘so euen the Commons are they, where the disorders of a State, & the mischiefs approaching, are first felt, and sonnest discerned’.¹²⁹ The common people could also legitimately claim expertise in social and economic problems. Who better to voice opinions on enclosure than those who worked in the field every day? As Thomas Smith argued, every man deserved to be listened to concerning ‘that arte he is most exercised in’.¹³⁰

During the 1620s, a new argument emerged. Matters of high politics, religion and foreign policy, it was argued, were simply not as mysterious, complex or

¹²⁷ Scott, *Vox Regis*, 31.

¹²⁸ Anon., ‘The Teares of the oppressed people of England’, fo. 304v.

¹²⁹ Scott, *Vox Regis*, 18.

¹³⁰ Smith, *A Discourse of the Common Weal*, 11.

profound as the king and his ministers liked to pretend, and were thus susceptible to common people's understanding. James, like monarchs before him, believed that he was uniquely able to steer the ship of state by virtue of his wisdom, experience and access to privileged information. Not all of his subjects agreed. The author of 'Tom Tell Troth' acknowledged that all wise princes reserved certain topics, the *Arcana Imperii*, for their exclusive knowledge and decision-making. Like God, their purposes were not always immediately apparent, and they pursued their eventual goals in sometimes mysterious and circuitous ways. The difference between those princes and James, however, was that although other princes 'locte vpp in the clossetts of their breasts their incomunicable purposes', it eventually became apparent that 'theise their secrett designes ever tended to the publique good'.¹³¹ James' diplomacy, by contrast, was 'not onely inscrutable, but diametrically opposite to poore mans vnderstandinge and soe farre from givinge vs any hopes of good effects hereafter as they doe alreadie fulfill the vtmost of *our* feares'.¹³² Indeed, the author sarcastically suggested, there must be something superhuman about James' knowledge, 'otherwise it could not be that *your* proceedings should soe varie, as they doe, from the whole Currant of humane discourse'.¹³³

Underlying this critique was a belief, no doubt encouraged by the steady diet of foreign news consumed by armchair statesmen in the 1620s, that there was nothing particularly complex about statecraft, that politics and foreign policy were ultimately matters of common sense. As such, 'poore mans vnderstandinge' of the international situation was not necessarily inferior to the King's. The traditional contrast between a wise monarch and the irrational multitude was thus reversed.¹³⁴ The notion that the

¹³¹ Anon., 'Tom Tell Troth', fos. 213r-214r.

¹³² *Ibid.*,

¹³³ *Ibid.*, fo. 213r-v.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, fos. 213r-214r.

common people judged events by external appearances without understanding the deeper truth was also neutralised. The common people judged by ‘the exterior of your accons’ that James did not really care about the welfare of his exiled daughter, Elizabeth of Bohemia – but perhaps outward appearances were accurate.¹³⁵ There was nothing mysterious, the author implied, about James’ apparent ineptitude or indifference. The simplest explanation appeared to be the truth.

While it was taken for granted that the multitude were susceptible to rumours, this did not necessarily invalidate their views. The authors of complaint literature often insisted that rumours had some value, since they constituted the imperfect raw material from which an accurate understanding of the state of the kingdom could be formed.¹³⁶ The best way of discovering the truth was to cast one’s net as widely as possible, including information circulating among the multitude. Thomas Scott argued that although such information might be false, dung made for excellent fertilizer.¹³⁷ If information was imperfect, this merely demonstrated the powers of judgment exercised by monarchs who sifted truth from misinformation.¹³⁸ Switching scatological metaphors, he compared the King to a doctor who could diagnose the ills of body politic by examining the ‘Vrine or Excrements’ it produced.¹³⁹ This was a view of the king that, while seeming to flatter his abilities, differed markedly from the official version. There was no mention of privileged knowledge or *arcana imperii*. Instead, Scott presented the king as just another observer, trying like everyone else to make sense of the welter of news and rumour that circulated publicly.

We can perhaps detect here an epistemological shift from deductive to inductive reasoning, a willingness to connect the dots between disparate and

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, fo. 200v’.

¹³⁶ Millstone, *Manuscript Circulation and the Invention of Politics*, 177.

¹³⁷ Scott, *Vox Regis*, 32.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 35. For similar ideas, see also Anon., ‘Tom Tell Troth’, fos. 202v-3r.

¹³⁹ Scott, *Vox Regis*, 35.

imperfect data to arrive at sound generalisations rather than relying on authority and *a priori* assumptions. Thomas Norton, for instance distinguished between ‘matter of contemplation’, truths that could be uncovered by counsellors discussing matters in the council chamber, with ‘matter of information’, truths which could only be brought to light ‘by relation of true and faithfull subiectes, by common rumor and speach of the honest sort’.¹⁴⁰ While contemplation was of course reserved for the Queen’s chosen advisors, ‘common rumor’ had a part to play in informing those discussions. Thomas Scott also appears to have endorsed a provisional, probabilistic method for arriving at the truth. The people’s suspicions about Spanish plotting contained in his tract *Vox Populi*, he said, had been ‘onely probable, and possible, and likely, not historicall’.¹⁴¹ Nevertheless, he said, these allegations had largely turned out to be true.

While the traditional imagery of the ignorant multitude disparaged popular speech, in the 1620s a new and more positive metaphor - the market - was sometimes used. Scott claimed that his purpose in writing *Vox Populi* was to inform James ‘how the Market went’.¹⁴² Similarly, when justifying his own, very different representation of the views of the people, the author of another complaint tract referred to the saying that ‘by the Markett people all prizes are knowen abroad’, adding that ‘it is not altogether vnproper the Comparison with state affayres’.¹⁴³ The metaphor had striking implications. By evoking a busy marketplace, both writers implied that high politics were already a subject of open and noisy discussion. Moreover, just as the web of commerce might provide traders with information about the price of commodities in distant places, so the widespread discussion of news might enable even humble

¹⁴⁰ Norton, *A Warning agaynst the dangerous practices of Papistes*, sig. M4v – N1r.

¹⁴¹ Scott, *Vox Regis*, 10.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁴³ Anon., ‘A post Caution’, fo. 77r.

people residing in the provinces to form opinions about state matters. The metaphor implied a reversal of the traditional exhortation for the common people to stick to their own employments rather than meddling in matters above their station. Public discussion of politics and religion, like the price of goods, were matters that concerned everyone. Market folk, Scott wrote, ‘euer talke freely and feelingly of ther owne affaires’, which, by implication, included the machinations of Spain.¹⁴⁴

Moreover, markets were capable of forming collective judgments that were superior to those of individuals. Listening to the market of public discussion did not only allow monarchs to understand what their people *thought* about politics. Rather, it provided a method of discovering the *truth* about such matters as Spanish conspiracy or the innocence of the Duke of Buckingham. Just as those involved in buying and selling were the best informed about the state of the market as a whole, the truth of high politics and foreign affairs was best understood, it seemed, by listening to the relatively humble people who trucked and bartered with such information on a daily basis. The wisdom of crowds trumped traditional notions that the best information was privileged and secret.

Complaint literature also complicated the stereotype that the multitude was predisposed to rebellion. Of course, supplications and complaints often bore an awkward resemblance to the petitions drawn up by rebels, and authors were vulnerable to the accusation that they sought to stir up popular discontent. As a result, they tended to cultivate a loyalist tone, gesturing in the direction of passive obedience and castigating rebellion.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁴ Scott, *Vox Regis*, 19.

¹⁴⁵ Brinkelow, *The complaynt of Roderyck Mors*, sig. A4r; Robert Crowley, *The voyce of the laste trumpet blowen by the seue[n]th angel* (1549), sig. A3r-A8v.

The humble and deferential language of complaint literature should not be taken too literally, however. It was all the more necessary for these tracts to adopt a loyal and obedient tone when what they were actually doing was radical and subversive. Moreover, many supplications took a rather more ambiguous stance towards rebellion. In contrast to the full-throated denunciations that characterised anti-rebellion literature, supplicatory tracts tended to attack rebellion in half-heartedly ways, drawing a moral equivalence between the rebels and those who had provoked them. While Robert Crowley condemned the rebellions of 1549, he argued that the rebels who disobeyed authority were only as guilty as the wealthy landlords who had disobeyed laws against extortion and oppression, thus provoking the unrest in the first place.¹⁴⁶ More generally, he argued that the only true remedy for rebellion was to understand and redress the causes of popular discontent.¹⁴⁷ Crowley was tough on rebellion, tough on the causes of rebellion. By shifting the blame from the people and their spokesmen to those who were alleged to cause rebellions in the first place, he neutralised the threat popular disorder posed to the legitimacy of speaking for the people.

According to the doctrine of passive obedience, one of the few legitimate responses to tyranny and oppression was ‘prayers and tears’. Although this sounds rather feeble to a modern audience, the relationship between tyranny and the people’s tears was a two-way street. To claim that the people were praying and crying was, *ipso facto*, to imply that they were being oppressed, and perhaps even that the monarch was a tyrant. Neither were the prayers and tears of the people the opposite of

¹⁴⁶ Crowley, *The way to wealth*, sig. B3v.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, sig. A2r-v; Robert Crowley, *One and thyrtye Epigrammes, wherein are bryfely touched so many Abuses* (1550) in J.M. Cowper (ed.), *The Select Works of Robert Crowley* (London, 1872), 21-3. See also ‘The defence of John Hales ayenst certyn scelaunders and false reportes made of hym’ in Elizabeth Lamond (ed.), *A Discourse of the Common Weal of this Realm of England* (Cambridge, 1929), p. lviii.

effective action, since they could elicit providential relief. Indeed, to pray was to go over the head of the monarch and to appeal to a higher authority, one that had the power to influence or punish an errant ruler – hardly a light threat when the reality of hell was taken for granted. Of course, petitionary prayer did not provide a mechanistic guarantee that God would intervene, but it was still very far from mere passive endurance. These were prayers and tears that virtually demanded redress.

Later writers played up the threat of popular unrest. According to Thomas Scott, James VI and I had become so unpopular that his people were inclined towards a ‘general defection’.¹⁴⁸ Informing the monarch about the people’s grievances, even if done publicly, was not meant to stir up rebellion. Rather, it was the only way to avert it. Anarchy and destruction would be the consequence, not of speaking for the people, but of failing to do so. Rebellion should be condemned, of course, but if it occurred, the regime only had itself to blame.

While the common people were traditionally described as a ‘many-headed multitude’, their bestial nature was not always straightforwardly accepted. According to Thomas Scott, the commons were ‘a *Beast* (if they list to call it so, and count it so, and make it so) that is not to be contemned: for if it hath many heads, it hath more hands’.¹⁴⁹ As such, the people were not naturally predisposed towards rebellion, rather they only *became* a many-headed beast when ‘made so’ – in other words, when provoked.

Complaint literature also described the voice of the people using more positive ‘bestial’ metaphors. When the people spoke truth to power, they were sometimes likened to dumb beasts that had been miraculously imbued with mysterious or providential powers of warning, like the legendary geese of the Roman capitol that

¹⁴⁸ Scott, *Vox Regis*, 19.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 32.

cackled to warn of the invading Gauls.¹⁵⁰ The title of ‘Balaams Asse’ alluded to just such an episode from the Book of Numbers. In this story, God sent an angel to prevent Balaam from cursing the wandering Israelites. Balaam could not see the angel, however. It was only visible to the donkey that carried him, which refused to move. When Balaam began beating the donkey for its apparent stubbornness, it miraculously spoke to complain about his mistreatment. At this point, Balaam saw the angel, who told him that the donkey had saved his life by refusing to carry him any further. In this metaphor, then, the apparently ‘beastly’ people, unjustly punished and usually silent, were divinely inspired to speak in order to prevent their oblivious rider, the King, from blundering into disaster.

VI

The gradual emergence of an authoritative popular voice in polemical literature meant that the idea of mass subscription petitioning was clearly conceivable long before it became a political reality. The earliest proponents of mass petitioning campaigns seem to have been prompted by the failure of Puritan complaint tracts. The *Lamentable Complaint* and *humble petition* of the 1580s failed to persuade either parliament or the Queen to institute further reform. A Martin Marprelate tract written in the immediate aftermath of this failure appears to have been the first to advocate the mass circulation, subscription and presentation of petitions.¹⁵¹ The author of the *Iust Censure and Reproofe of Martin Junior* of 1589 suggested that all Puritans, ‘both lordes, knights, gentlemen, ministers, and people’ subscribe to a petition calling for

¹⁵⁰ Norton, *A Warning agaynst the dangerous practices of Papistes*, sig. A2r-v; Anon., ‘Ballams Asse’, fo. 67r.

¹⁵¹ Annabel Patterson, *Reading Between the Lines* (Madison, WI, 1993), 69-74.

Presbyterian church government and the creation of a learned ministry.¹⁵² The author claimed that such a petition would easily gain 100,000 signatures, demonstrating that Puritans were not ‘a few, and of small reputation, but in a manner the strength of our land’.¹⁵³ The first real mass subscription petitioning campaigns did not occur until the 1640s, but the repeated invocation of the voice of the people in polemical literature meant that this was merely the next logical step, a means of substantiating claims that grievances were indeed shared by large numbers of people.¹⁵⁴

Complaint literature also appears to have laid the foundations for the emergence of theories of parliamentary and popular sovereignty in the 1640s. These theories rested on the idea that in the distant past the people had collectively decided to confer their power on a monarch. For supporters of parliament this meant that the King’s powers were limited and could be reassumed by parliament, the representative of the people, in the public interest.¹⁵⁵ The Levellers took this one stage further, arguing that the sovereign people could themselves reassume power entrusted to parliament.¹⁵⁶

A key component of the theory of popular sovereignty developed by the Levellers was the notion that the interests of the people were different from those of their supposed representatives in parliament. Complaint tracts made this distinction remarkably early on. Traditional political thought held that parliament was the only body capable of representing the kingdom and addressing the monarch on its behalf. By virtue of their knowledge of the complaints of their constituents, members of the

¹⁵² Anon., *The Iust Censure and Reproofe of Martin Junior* (1589, STC 17458), sig. C3r.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, sig. C4r.

¹⁵⁴ **For mass petitioning campaigns, see** Anthony Fletcher, *The Outbreak of the English Civil War* (London, 1981); Keith Lindley, *Popular Politics and Religion in Civil War London* (Aldershot, 1997).

¹⁵⁵ J.P. Sommerville, *Royalists and Patriots: Politics and Ideology in England 1603-1640* (Harlow, 1986), 61-69; Edmund S. Morgan, *Inventing the People: The Rise of Popular Sovereignty in England and America* (London, 1988), 57-9.

¹⁵⁶ Rachel Foxley, *The Levellers: Radical political thought in the English Revolution* (Manchester, 2013), 22-28, 52-3.

House of Commons had the collective ability and authority to gather and investigate grievances. Properly speaking, then, the presentation of popular grievances was the job of parliament, not polemicists who claimed to speak for the people. Indeed, the sitting of parliament might be thought to render extra-parliamentary appeals redundant. The very act of petitioning parliament called into question the idea that it was the institutional embodiment of the will of the people. If MPs were already knowledgeable about the complaints of their constituents, why did they need to be informed about them in printed supplications?

Doubts about the ability of parliament to represent the people's grievances emerged as early as the 1540s, when writers like Crowley and Brinkelow became increasingly disenchanted with MPs' apparent unwillingness to address social and economic problems and their support for Henry VIII's turn towards religious conservatism. A body that supported such policies clearly did not represent the interests of the common people, and needed to be reminded what they were. Writing in the aftermath of the Act of Six Articles, Henry Brinkelow complained that honest, godly candidates for parliament were crowded out by rich, covetous boasters and office-holders.¹⁵⁷ Crowley pointed out that parliament was largely composed of wealthy landowners and merchants who had a vested interest in ignoring popular grievances such as inflation and the raising of rents.¹⁵⁸ At times, Crowley came close to describing MPs as 'evil counsellors' who tried to persuade the King that all was well in parliament and in the kingdom.¹⁵⁹ These complaints put Crowley and Brinkelow in the invidious position of criticising the very body that they were supposedly supplicating.

¹⁵⁷ Brinkelow, *The complaynt of Roderyck Mors*, sig. B2r-v.

¹⁵⁸ Crowley, *An informacion and peticion*, sig. A3v, B2r; [Crowley], *Pyers plowmans exhortation*, sig. A1v-A2r

¹⁵⁹ [Crowley], *Supplication of the Poor Commons*, sig. C5r.

Crowley's and Brinkelow's criticisms are remarkably similar to the royalist critique of parliament that developed in the early Stuart period.¹⁶⁰ The 'post Caution', which attacked parliament's attempt to impeach the Duke of Buckingham, the royal favourite, sought to undermine the House of Commons' authority by arguing that it did not represent the voice of the people. Parliament was riven by faction and dominated by wrangling lawyers whose interests were far removed from the people they claimed to represent.¹⁶¹ MPs showed little interest in the true grievances of the people because they helped to cause them. These included legal delays, high fees and imprisonment for debt. Just as lawyers in the country extorted the common people and strung out legal actions, so lawyers in parliament blackmailed the King and extended the parliamentary term with dilatory tricks.¹⁶²

Even before the meeting of the Long Parliament, some complaint tracts began to suggest that the people could 'vote' for policies in a way that suggested direct rather than representative democracy. The author of one tract written in 1640 claimed that the people not only *wanted* the King to make peace with the Covenanters, but that this course of action was the 'strong vote of the Subject in generall'.¹⁶³ At a time when votes made in parliament were the subject of widespread discussion, the notion that the people might also 'vote', metaphorically if not in practice, and for a policy rather than for a representative, seems to have held some rhetorical appeal. A few years later, at the beginning of the Civil War, royalist propaganda asserted that that people had 'voted' against parliament's actions.¹⁶⁴ This was a notion that seemed to give the people much more agency and power than the deferential traditions of petitioning

¹⁶⁰ Anon., 'A Presentation of Forepast Parliaments to the view of present times and posteritie' (1629), BL Lansdowne MS 213, fos. 162r, 165v-66v.

¹⁶¹ Anon., 'A post Caution', fo. 82v.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, fo. 78r-v.

¹⁶³ Anon., 'Observations on the generall Murmurations'.

¹⁶⁴ Anon., *A Complaint to the House of Commons* (Oxford, 1642, C5620 (Wing 2nd ed.)), 3.

would suggest. When Levellers and others came to construct theories of popular sovereignty, the notion that a popular will existed independently of parliament was lying close at hand.

As Edmund S. Morgan has pointed out, popular sovereignty was much harder to conceptualise than royal sovereignty. While the King was a visible presence, the people were a much more nebulous entity.¹⁶⁵ It was also difficult to explain how the original transfer of power from people to king could have taken place, or could have lent its recipient any authority, if the people were inherently irrational, fickle and ignorant. In both cases, complaint literature made these conceptual hurdles easier to overcome. The rhetorical tactic of speaking for the people habituated readers to the idea that the common people could speak with a united voice and were in some senses superior to government, able to perceive its faults and suggest solutions. By positing the existence of a unified, rational multitude in the present, the authors of complaint literature bolstered the idea that the people – perhaps even relatively humble people – had been capable of collective decision-making in the past. It is no coincidence that theorists of parliamentary and popular sovereignty also wrote tracts that claimed to speak for the people.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁵ Morgan, *Inventing the People*, 153.

¹⁶⁶ [Henry Parker], *A Petition or Declaration, Humbly Desired to be Presented to the View of His Most Excellent Majestie; by All His Majesties Most Loyall and Dutifull Subjects* (London, 1642); [Henry Parker], *The Danger to England Observed, Upon Deserting the High Court of Parliament. Humbly Desired by all Loyal and Dutifull Subjects to Bee Presented to His Most Excellent Majestie* (London, 1642); Michael Mendle, *Henry Parker and the English Civil War: the political thought of the public's 'privado'* (Cambridge, 1995), 112; [Richard Overton], *A Remonstrance of Many Thousand Citizens* (Thomason E.343[11], London, 1646); The 'large' Petition in G.E. Aylmer (ed.), *The Levellers in the English Revolution* (Wallop, 1975), 75-81; Anon., *To the right honourable and supreme authority of this nation, the Commons in Parliament assembled* (Thomason 669.f.13[16], London, 1648).