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Rumor and “common fame” : the impeachment of the Duke of Buckingham and public opinion in early Stuart England

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On 11 March 1626 Dr. Samuel Turner launched an attack on the Duke of Buckingham, the royal favourite of Charles I, in the House of Commons. In his speech, Turner raised six “queries” about the Duke’s conduct that questioned his competence and attacked his alleged monopoly of patronage and power. Was Buckingham, as Lord Admiral, not responsible for the loss of control of the narrow seas to pirates, Turner asked? Had the exorbitant gifts he received from the King not consumed the royal revenues? Had he not monopolised office and given important posts to members of his family who were incompetent to exercise them? Since his mother and father-in-law were recusants, did he not secretly support and favour Catholics? Did he not sell honours, places of judicature and positions in the church to the highest bidder? Finally, was Buckingham not responsible for the disastrous failure of the naval expedition recently sent to attack Cadiz, since he had entrusted others to command it and stayed at home, despite being Lord Admiral and general of the forces?¹ Rather than citing definite evidence or witnesses against the Duke,

¹ For copies of Turner’s queries, see TNA SP 16/22, fols. 99r, 101r; British Library (BL) Lansdowne 491, fol. 149r; BL Harley 161, fol. 59v; BL Harley 161, fol. 59r-v; BL Add. 22474, fol. 11v; Bodleian Library (Bod.) Tanner 72, fol. 109b; National Library of Wales Carreg-lwyd Deposit MS 651; Cheshire Archives ZCR 63/2/21. For copies in letters and diaries, see Zuane Pesaro to the Doge and Senate, 27 March 1626 (ns), *Calendar of state papers and manuscripts relating to English affairs existing in the archives and collections of Venice and in other libraries of Northern Italy* ed. Allen B. Hinds (CSPV) 1625-6, p. 366; Mead to Stuteville, 17 March 1626, BL Harley 390, fol. 27r; London newsletter, 18 March 1626, BL Harley 390, fol. 29r; Francis Staesmore to Henry Hastings, Earl of Huntingdon, 23 March 1626, Bod. Carter 77, fol. 274; James Palmer to Scudamore, 18

Turner based his queries on “common fame.” By doing so, Turner was effectively claiming that the Duke’s failings were a matter of public knowledge and discussion, and represented the settled opinion of the commonwealth.

For Buckingham and his royal master, Turner’s attack represented a puzzling reversal of fortunes from the high hopes that had greeted the start of Charles’ reign. Although the Duke had come under attack in the Parliament of 1621, he had been lauded in the Parliament of 1624 for his role in steering King James I away from alliance with Spain following the collapse of Anglo-Spanish marriage negotiations.² James avoided war with Spain, but when he died in 1625, Charles and Buckingham were free to pursue it. Unfortunately, the war proved to be a disaster. As Lord Admiral and favourite, Buckingham attracted much of the blame, and his critics included MPs and courtiers from across the political and religious spectrum.³ The Duke was openly attacked during the second session of the Parliament of 1625 for his perceived incompetence and monopoly of counsel, and the disastrous failure of the naval expedition sent to attack Cadiz later that year did nothing to improve his reputation.⁴ There had been hopes that Charles’ marriage to

March 1626, TNA C115/108/8630; Anonymous diary of public events, Trinity College, Cambridge University MS O.7.3, fol. 3v.

² For the ‘blessed revolution’ in English foreign policy, see Thomas Cogswell, *The Blessed Revolution: English Politics and the Coming of War, 1621-1624* (Cambridge, 1989). For Buckingham’s political career, see Roger Lockyer, *Buckingham: The Life and Political Career of George Villiers, First Duke of Buckingham 1592-1628* (London, 1981).

³ For Buckingham’s growing unpopularity from 1624, see Alastair Bellany and Thomas Cogswell, *The Murder of King James I* (New Haven, 2015), ch. 8.

⁴ For the attack on Buckingham in 1625, see Maija Jansson and William B. Bidwell (eds.), *Proceedings in Parliament 1625* (New Haven, 1987), 394-9, 448-9; Simon Adams, “The Protestant Cause: Religious Alliance with the West European Calvinist Communities as a Political Issue in England, 1585-1630”, Oxford DPhil Thesis

Princess Henrietta Maria, which Buckingham helped to negotiate, would secure a military alliance with France, but relations quickly soured when English ships loaned to the French crown were used to suppress a Huguenot uprising. The religious concessions to English Catholics required by the marriage treaty were also highly unpopular with Charles' more zealous Protestant subjects. At the same time, pirates based in Dunkirk seized the opportunity of war to pillage English shipping.

Despite all of this, Charles had reason to hope that the new Parliament he called in February 1626 would provide the financial support necessary to continue the war. In the early weeks of the Parliament, Buckingham's opponents in the House of Commons, led by his former client Sir John Eliot, tried to investigate the expenditure of the parliamentary subsidies granted in 1624, as well as Buckingham's alleged responsibility for the decline of Anglo-French relations as a result of his re-arrest of a French ship, the *St. Peter*.⁵ Nevertheless, these lines of attack had come to nothing by 11 March.⁶ Turner's queries dramatically revived and expanded the parliamentary attack on the Duke, forming the basis for the impeachment that followed.

Turner's attack on Buckingham in the Parliament of 1626 has received relatively little attention from historians. While important episodes in the parliamentary

(1973), 368-9; Christopher Thompson, "The Origins of the Parliamentary Middle Group, 1625-1629", *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 5th series, xxii (1972), 78. See also "A Speach made by Sr Robert Cotton, knt and Baronett in ye Lower house of Parliamt assembled at Oxford 1625", BL Egerton 3378, fol. 15v, which was not delivered.

⁵ For the early lines of attack, see Conrad Russell, *Parliaments and English Politics* (Oxford, 1979), 278-89. For Eliot's parliamentary career, see J.N. Ball, "Sir John Eliot and Parliament, 1624-1629" in Kevin Sharpe (ed.), *Faction and Parliament: Essays on Early Stuart History* (Oxford, 1978), 173-207.

⁶ Ball, "Sir John Eliot", 181-3.

history of the 1620s such as the dissolution of the Parliament of 1621, or the publication of the Petition of Right in 1628 have attracted considerable debate, the impeachment of Buckingham has not.⁷ The most detailed modern political narrative of these events, Conrad Russell's *Parliaments and English Politics*, minimised the significance of the impeachment, and Turner's intervention in particular. According to Russell, Turner's queries were not an attack on the Duke but a blueprint for compromise. Despite outward appearances, MPs sought the "reformation" rather than the "ruin" of the Duke, hoping to correct Buckingham's errors and effect a minor ministerial reshuffle rather than remove him from office. Secret negotiations were going on behind the scenes to reach a compromise between Buckingham and his critics, and Turner's queries were written in such a way as to leave the door to compromise open. Events in the House of Commons were in any case relatively unimportant since Charles had lost hope of gaining parliamentary subsidies by Easter and only kept parliament in being in order to secure justice against the Earl of Bristol in the House of Lords, the real site of action.⁸ Alastair Bellany and Thomas Cogswell have recently argued that allegations about Buckingham's involvement in James's death, which were aired during the impeachment, exacerbated a bitter conflict between Buckingham and his critics in the parliament of 1626.⁹ Nevertheless, although post-revisionist historians

⁷ Brennan Pursell, "James I, Gondomar and the Dissolution of the Parliament of 1621", *History* 85:279 (2000), 428-445; Richard Cust, "Prince Charles and the Second Session of the 1621 Parliament", *English Historical Review* 122:496 (2007), 427-41; John Guy, "The origins of the Petition of Right Reconsidered", *Historical Journal* 25:2 (1982), 289-312; L.J. Reeve, "The Legal Status of the Petition of Right", *Historical Journal* 29:2 (1986), 257-77.

⁸ Russell, *Parliaments and English Politics*, ch. 5.

⁹ Bellany and Cogswell, *Murder of King James*, chs. 8-12.

have disagreed about the content of negotiations and the reasons for the dissolution, the general thrust of Russell's interpretation has not been directly challenged.¹⁰

This article will attempt to offer a new interpretation of Turner's queries by placing them in the context of political culture in early Stuart England. Firstly, it will use the queries to explore the relationship between parliament and the wider political nation. Turner claimed that he was merely passing on allegations about Buckingham that were already circulating around the kingdom. While it is true that hostility towards Buckingham was widespread, if not universal by 1626, the repetition of rumors about his conduct in parliament and the distortion of Turner's queries as they were reported around the country indicated that MPs both reflected and exacerbated Buckingham's growing unpopularity. While MPs presented their actions as being consistent with their established role as the mouthpiece for the grievances of the people, Charles suspected that grievances were in fact being invented and stirred up at Westminster. The conflict over Turner's words

¹⁰ Richard Cust, *Charles I, A Political Life* (Harlow, 2005), 56; Thomas Cogswell, "The Warre of the Commons for the honour of King Charles': the parliament-men and the reformation of the lord admiral in 1626", *Historical Research* 84:226 (2011), 618-36.; Thomas Cogswell, "The Returne of the 'Dead Alive': The Earl of Bristol and Dr Eglisam in the Parliament of 1626 and in Caroline political culture", *English Historical Review* 128:532 (2013), 535-70. Mark Kishlansky recently cited Russell's work as evidence that Charles was willing to offer his opponents a "gracious compromise" in 1626. See Mark Kishlansky, "Debate: Charles I: a case of mistaken Identity", *Past and Present* 205 (2009), 233. Other works that endorse Russell's interpretation of the "reformation" of the Duke to a greater or lesser extent include Andrew Thrush, *The House of Commons 1604-1629* vol. I, (Cambridge, 2010), 426; David Colclough, *Freedom of Speech in Early Stuart England* (Cambridge, 2005), 191; Derek Hirst, *England in Conflict 1603-1660* (London, 1990), 117. For the impeachment of Buckingham, see also Colin Tite, *Impeachment and Parliamentary Judicature in Early Stuart England* (London, 1974), ch. 7; J.N. Ball, "The Impeachment of the Duke of Buckingham in 1626" in *Mélanges Antonio Marongiu: Studies presented to the international commission for the history of representative and parliamentary institutions* 25 (Palermo, 1967); Jess Stoddart Flemion, "The Dissolution of Parliament in 1626: A Revaluation", *English Historical Review* 87:345 (1972), p. 787; Robert Zaller, *The Discourse of Legitimacy in Early Modern England* (Stanford, 2007), 632-641.

reflected growing ideological divisions between the crown and some parts of the political nation about the nature and cause of “grievances” and parliament’s role in presenting them.

This article will also place Turner’s speech in the context of debates about rumor and the legitimacy of popular speech. An important strand of elite opinion held that rumor led to rebellion. It was associated with the ignorant and potentially seditious multitude, who were notoriously fickle and took a spiteful delight in the ruin of great men. From Charles’ perspective, Turner was acting as a dangerous popular demagogue by presenting vulgar rumors about the Duke’s behaviour as the basis for a parliamentary investigation, and he denounced such behaviour as “unparliamentary”. Turner and his allies saw matters differently, and were careful to distinguish “common fame” – the settled opinion of the community – from rumor. During the course of crucial debates about Turner’s actions, MPs were forced to confront the fundamental question of whether common fame was the same as rumor, and whether it was a legal basis for investigation. In the process, they argued for the legitimacy of popular speech in a way that ran counter to traditional elite views.

MPs’ defence of proceeding on the basis of common fame was not simply an isolated tactical ploy designed to justify the attack on Buckingham. Instead, it was part of a wider shift in attitudes towards the *vox populi*. A number of fascinating manuscript and printed tracts and libels written in the 1620s, which sought to ventriloquise the grievances of the people, indicate that there was a growing division in elite political culture about the

legitimacy of popular speech.¹¹ These tracts, which represented a revival of the “ploughman” tradition of political and religious polemic, celebrated the supposed honest integrity of the plain-speaking commoner, and argued that they were better informed about matters of state than the monarch. Since the monarch was surrounded by evil councillors who prevented the truth from reaching their ears, the opinions of a godly and patriotic poor man were better than those of a corrupt courtier. The fact that some in Buckingham’s circle wrote their own “ploughman” tracts in response to the impeachment, arguing that the Duke was in fact rather more popular than his parliamentary enemies, indicates the growing rhetorical strength of appeals from public opinion. Notions of the “plainspeaking ploughman” and the *vox populi* were in constant transhistorical conflict with fears about the slanderous and ignorant multitude. Nevertheless, during the 1620s divisions among political elites about the legitimacy of popular speech were perhaps greater than at any time since the mid-Tudor period, and played an important part in substantiating royal conspiracy theories about popular demagoguery in parliament.

Finally, this article seeks to place arguments about the legitimacy of the *vox populi* and the political and ideological conflict they contributed to in the context of long-term social change. Attempts to appeal to and mobilise the common people have never been integrated into existing models of social relations, which are often presented as a mixture of paternalism and fears about the many-headed multitude.¹² Turner’s attempt to appeal

¹¹ For the influence of the “ploughman” tradition in the mid-Tudor period, see Andrew McRae, *God Speed the Plough: the Representation of agrarian England, 1500-1660* (Cambridge, 1996), ch. 1; David Norbrook, *Poetry and Politics in the English Renaissance* (New York, 2002); John N. King, *English Reformation Literature: The Tudor Origins of the Protestant Tradition* (Princeton, 1982).

¹² Keith Wrightson, *English Society 1580-1680* (London, 1982), 65-9; Andy Wood, “‘Poore men woll speke one daye’: plebeian languages of deference and defiance in England, c.1520-1640”, in *The politics of the excluded*

to the *vox populi*, like later attempts by parliament to mobilise various publics in 1641, seem difficult to reconcile with an elite culture that sometimes seemed obsessed with the threat of disorder, rebellion and social revolution.¹³ Social historians have tended to leave parliamentary history to political historians, yet the debate about common fame in 1626 and the manuscript and printed tracts that express similar ideas can tell us much about social relations and elite attitudes towards “order” and the common people.

While changes in news culture and court politics go some way to explaining this shift in political culture, this article will also argue that social change played a part. The growth of the “better sort” of the multitude as a result of inflation and the development of agrarian capitalism in the sixteenth century, and their incorporation into the structures of the state through local office-holding meant that there was now a much more politically reliable subsection of the commonalty, who in many ways shared elite attitudes about the “poorer sort” of the multitude.¹⁴ The existence of a “better” or more “honest” sort meant that the views of at least *part* of the multitude were rather more acceptable and legitimate in some sections of elite culture than they might otherwise have been. This development was accentuated by the decline of popular rebellion – itself in large part a result of

in early modern England, ed. Tim Harris (Basingtoke, 2001), 67-98. For elite hostility to the “many-headed multitude”, see in particular Christopher Hill, *Change and Continuity in Seventeenth Century England* (London, 1974), 181-90.

¹³ Wrightson, *English Society*, ch. 6; J.A. Sharpe, *Early Modern England: a social history, 1550-1760* (London, 1987), 110-120.

¹⁴ Keith Wrightson, “Sorts of People in Tudor and Stuart England” in *The Middling Sort of People: Culture, Society and Politics in England, 1550-1800* ed. Jonathan Barry and Christopher Brooks (New York, 1994), 28-51; Keith Wrightson, “Estates, Degrees and Sorts: Changing Perceptions of Society in Tudor and Stuart England”, in *Language, History and Class* ed. P.J. Corfield, (Oxford, 1991), 30-52; Steve Hindle, *The State and Social Change in Early Modern England, 1550-1640* (Basingstoke, 2000).

“Wrightsonian incorporation” – which meant that traditional elite fears about popular speech and sedition were somewhat less severe than they had been in the immediate aftermath of the mid-Tudor rebellions.¹⁵ An investigation of Turner’s queries can thus help us to understand the relationship between social change and political conflict in early Stuart England.

Parliament, popularity and the reception of Turner’s queries

Turner claimed his queries were all derived from the “*vox populi*” and were matters that common fame “sounds into the eares of all the world.”¹⁶ As such he was not presenting any accusations against Buckingham that were not already familiar to MPs. “Let anie member of the house examine his owne breaste whether he hath not heard their obiections frequentlie made abroad”, as a supporter of Turner wrote in his defence.¹⁷ Moreover, Turner had not repeated the worst or most well-known rumors about Buckingham, just those that would best identify the cause of the nation’s ills.¹⁸ Were rumors about Buckingham’s misconduct really circulating widely prior to the parliament of 1626? Given claims later made by Buckingham’s circle that he was actually more popular than his parliamentary enemies, such claims cannot be taken at face value. It was entirely

¹⁵ Andy Wood, *The 1549 Rebellions and the Making of Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 2007), ch. 5.

¹⁶ Copy of a letter from Samuel Turner to the Speaker of the House of Commons, 16 March 1626, Hampshire Record Office, 44M69/G2/30; ‘Dr Turners Speach in Parliament, 11 March 1625’, BL Add. 22474, fol. 11v.

¹⁷ “A defence for Doctor Turnor”, Bod. Tanner 72, fol. 78r.

¹⁸ Copy of a letter from Samuel Turner to the Speaker of the House of Commons, 16 March 1626, Hampshire Record Office, 44M69/G2/30.

possible, as Charles tended to suspect, that Buckingham's enemies were trying to make him unpopular in 1626 by manufacturing rumors against him rather than simply reflecting public opinion. An investigation of the provenance of Turner's queries, as well as their reception in the country, allows us to examine the relationship between parliament and the wider news culture.

In order to understand Turner's intervention, we need first to examine his political tactics. The presentation of Turner's queries on the basis of common fame was an astute move by Buckingham's opponents. Previous parliamentary impeachments against Francis Bacon, Viscount St. Alban and Lionel Cranfield, Earl of Middlesex had relied on witnesses and evidence. Although not all of the accusations against Buckingham required detailed proof, the fact that witnesses were frightened of coming forward against such a powerful man still presented a problem. MPs had been reluctant to name Buckingham as the cause of the nation's grievances before Turner's intervention, and unless witnesses stuck their heads above the parapet, it would be impossible to uncover the depths of his alleged crimes. By naming Buckingham and claiming that his faults were a matter of common knowledge, MPs could hope to build momentum in their attack and encourage witnesses to come forward to substantiate their accusations. As such, there is some truth to Turner's claim that his queries were intended to identify the root cause of the nation's grievances.¹⁹

Turner's queries also broadened the basis of an attack that might otherwise have appeared to be a matter of personal animosity and factional rivalry. Turner was a client of the Earl of Pembroke, one of Buckingham's chief rivals at court.²⁰ He was not, as Conrad

¹⁹ William B. Bidwell & Maija Jansson (eds.), *Proceedings in Parliament 1626* vol. III (Yale, 1992), 317.

²⁰ Ball, "Sir John Eliot", 184-5.

Russell implied, merely Pembroke's loyal pawn. Nevertheless, there is abundant evidence to suggest some degree of co-ordination between Buckingham's enemies at court and in the House of Commons.²¹ Turner's queries allowed Buckingham's enemies to present themselves as the spokesmen of a wide constituency of opinion, rather than the tools of a court conspiracy. By presenting claims about the Duke's behaviour as questions rather than definite charges, Turner could also pose as a neutral investigator, giving his queries greater legitimacy while disavowing personal responsibility for them.

Buckingham had certainly become widely, if not universally unpopular before the parliament of 1626.²² In part, this was a legacy of earlier assumptions about his support for the Spanish match and the general tendency for royal favourites to act as lightning rods for popular discontent. The popularity he had enjoyed for his role in the collapse of the unpopular Spanish marriage negotiations in 1623-4 and the "blessed revolution" that followed was short-lived.²³ The continuing threat posed by the Spanish faction and the prospect that James could be tempted by yet more Spanish marriage offers led Buckingham to remove former supporters of the match like Lord Treasurer Middlesex, the Earl of Bristol and Secretary of State George Calvert from power and to pack the Privy

²¹ Russell, *Parliaments and English Politics*, 266, 289, 322; Cogswell, "The Returne of the 'Dead Alive'". For evidence of collusion, see Sir James Bagg to Buckingham, [3 March 1626 or shortly thereafter], *Notes and Queries* 4th series, x (1872), 325-6.

²² For an account of Buckingham's growing unpopularity, see Bellamy and Cogswell, *Murder of King James*, ch. 8.

²³ Cogswell, *Blessed Revolution*; Thomas Cogswell, "The People's Love: the Duke of Buckingham and Popularity" in *Politics, Religion and Popularity* ed. T. Cogswell, R. Cust and P. Lake (Cambridge, 2002), 211-34; Thomas Cogswell, "Thomas Middleton and the Court, 1624: A Game at Chess in Context", *Huntingdon Library Quarterly* 47 (1984), 273-88.

Council with his own supporters.²⁴ The narrowing of counsel that resulted meant that the French marriage alliance was negotiated in a highly secretive and exclusive manner, leaving Buckingham with nobody to blame for the unpopular results: a *de facto* toleration of Catholics, the loan of English ships to suppress Huguenots in France, and a disastrous military expedition under the Count of Mansfeld. Very early in the new reign the Earl of Kellie observed that Buckingham's close relationship with Charles was "not pleasing to most men nather of one degree nor uther", and the Earl of Clare referred to "complainings in our streets" about the paucity of wise counsel around the King.²⁵ Although most of the vitriolic libels against Buckingham were written after 1626, some that can tentatively be dated to late 1625 or early 1626 are suggestive of wider dissatisfaction with his leadership.²⁶

Buckingham's unpopularity was expressed in exaggerated rumors about him. Rumors that Buckingham was a Catholic had been circulating in London since at least 1623.²⁷ Suspicions and criticisms about his "presumption" in giving the ailing James I

²⁴ Adams, "Protestant Cause", 359-60.

²⁵ Kellie to Mar, 7 April 1625, *Supplementary Report on the Manuscripts of the Earl of Mar and Kellie* ed. Henry Paton, HMC 60 (London, 1930), 227; John Holles to the Earl of Arundel, 28 January 1626, *Letters of John Holles 1587-1637* ed. P.R Seddon, vol. 3 (Thoroton Society Record Series vol. xxxv), 321. Holles was hardly a disinterested observer, of course.

²⁶ "Upon the English fleete sett forth. Anno. 1625"; "Vox Britanniae Ad Hispaniam. 1626"; "Certaine verses made when my Lo: Cooke was made highe Sheriffe of Buckingham", "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/>>

²⁷ [Viscount Rochford?] to Buckingham [1623], *Cabala, mysteries of state, in letters of the great ministers of K. James and K. Charles* (1653), 160.

medicine also emerged almost immediately after the king's death in March 1625.²⁸ By November 1625 rumors were being spread that Buckingham had been imprisoned for poisoning Charles.²⁹ Although the precise geographical spread and social depth of these rumors is difficult to ascertain, they certainly circulated in court and city.

There is evidence that Turner was indeed drawing on such rumors when he formulated his queries. A collection of reports about Buckingham, some of which later found their way into Turner's attack, is preserved among the papers of Sir John Eliot, one of the leaders of the impeachment.³⁰ Some of the more salacious and extreme charges apparently collated by Eliot were not aired in parliament, and it seems likely that Turner was telling the truth when he claimed that his queries were not the worst that was being said about the Duke.³¹ An obviously provocative and muckraking attack on Buckingham risked alienating neutral MPs who might balk at open confrontation. Instead of charging Buckingham with being a crypto-Catholic, Turner's queries suggested that the Duke supported and favoured recusants, and the rumors about his sexual affairs presented in

²⁸ Kellie to Mar, 22 March 1625, *Mar and Kellie*, 226. See Bellany and Cogswell, *Murder of King James*, 90-1.

²⁹ "The Information of Martin Danby", 26 November 1625, TNA SP 16/10, fol. 52r.

³⁰ Accusations against Buckingham, BL Add. 4155, fols. 143r-144v; Cornwall Record office EL 655/2. Eliot seems to have employed at least one agent tasked with gathering information at court and in London. See 'Sir John Eliotts Instructions to his Agents', TNA SP 16/18, fol. 95v.

³¹ Copy of a letter from Samuel Turner to the Speaker of the House of Commons, 16 March 1626, Hampshire Record Office, 44M69/G2/30.

Eliot's draft were not explicitly repeated in parliament.³² The queries therefore presented widely-circulating rumors about Buckingham in a somewhat sanitised and ambiguous form.

MPs seized upon public rumors about Buckingham as the basis for their attack, yet by doing so, they encouraged and legitimated far wider discussion of these accusations than might otherwise have been the case. Copies of Turner's speech circulated widely, meaning that even if damaging rumors about Buckingham had not been public knowledge before Turner's intervention, they certainly were afterwards. Moreover, the ambiguous and suggestive wording of the queries meant that they could function as a political dog whistle, with one thing being said in parliament but a much more damaging message being received in the country. The queries often became distorted and exaggerated as they spread across the country, and accusations that were only expressed in relatively moderate or implicit terms by Turner became much more radical and uncompromising in the retelling.³³ One version of the queries, for instance, claimed not just that gifts to Buckingham had "consumed" or "impaired" royal finances, but that he was responsible for the "exorbitant wasting and misemployment of the King's estate and revenue."³⁴ Another

³² When Eliot presented the charges against Buckingham in the House of Lords, he did glancingly refer to the 'veneries' of Sejanus, to whom he compared Buckingham. See *Proceedings in Parliament 1626* vol. III, 223.

³³ I have taken the version of the queries reported in Whitelocke's parliamentary diary and the very similar copy reproduced in TNA SP 16/22, fol. 100r as the most reliable versions. There are a number of similarly worded copies in a number of archives. See *Proceedings in Parliament 1626* vol. II, 268, n 60. The state papers also include two other versions that differ significantly. See TNA SP 16/22, fols. 99r, 101r. Some copies claimed that there were seven or eight queries. See BL Lansdowne 491, fol. 149r; Zuane Pesaro to the Doge and Senate, 27 March 1626 (ns), CSPV 1625-6, 366; Anonymous diary of public events, MS 0.7.3, Trinity College, Cambridge University, fol. 3v. Joseph Mead initially reported a garbled list of queries, along with the false report that they had been voted on by the House of Commons, to his friend Sir Martin Stuteville. See Mead to Stuteville, 17 March 1626, BL Harley 390, fol. 27r.

³⁴ Francis Staesmore to Henry Hastings, Earl of Huntingdon, 23 March 1626, Bod. Carter 77, fol. 274.

held that Buckingham had sold not just any old offices but the “seven great offices of the kingdom.”³⁵ He was held to have “neglected”, “misgoverned” or “ill managed” the navy rather than simply staying at home during the Cadiz expedition.³⁶ New queries were inserted in copies, such as “whether it be fit that one man, viz., the Duke of Buckingham, should rule the whole kingdom without the advice of a council of state.”³⁷

The query relating to Buckingham’s support for recusants was subject to the most distortion in copies that circulated around the country. Turner’s original query had trod relatively carefully, asking “whether there be not a secret favouring and upholding of recusants by him, my Lord Admiral’s mother and father-in-law being recusants, great upholders of that faction.”³⁸ These suspicions were articulated in a much more explicit form in some of the copies. One asked “whether popery since the reformation of religion had ever such an increase as since the Duke was so high in favour” while another claimed that popery “had growth and countenance by him.”³⁹ His mother and father-in-law were not merely “upholders” of Catholics but “the heades of that party.”⁴⁰ Several copies

³⁵ “Dr. Turner’s queries against the duke of Buckingham”, Bod. Tanner 72, fol. 109b.

³⁶ See London newsletter, 18 March 1626, BL Harley 390, fol. 29r; NLW Carreg-lwyd Deposit MS 651; “Dr Turners 6 questions that were deliuered in the lower house of parliament the 11 March 1625”, BL Harley 161, fol. 59r-v.

³⁷ Mead to Stuteville, 17 March 1626, BL Harley 390, fol. 27r. Although this was not one of Turner’s queries, Buckingham’s near-monopoly of counsel was one of the main complaints of his critics in parliament, which probably explains the mistake.

³⁸ *Proceedings in Parliament 1626*, vol. II, 261-2.

³⁹ Mead to Stuteville, 17 March 1626, BL Harley 390, fol. 27r; James Palmer to Scudamore, 18 March 1626, TNA C115/108/8630.

⁴⁰ James Palmer to Scudamore, 18 March 1626, TNA C115/108/8630.

suggested that Buckingham was himself a papist. One described him as “a seeming Protestant” who was nevertheless “a faouer and supporter of Iesuits and Romish Preists and Popish Recusants”, while another held that he was “suspected for his religion.”⁴¹ Several copies drew the conclusion that Buckingham was “a dangerous man in the State”, and questioned whether it was “fitt and saffe” that he hold so many offices.⁴² While the accusation of upholding recusants was dropped during the parliamentary investigation, perhaps to preserve the widest possible coalition against him, it was revived later in the parliament during the course of a long debate about whether he had bowed to the sacrament in Spain.⁴³

Turner’s queries were both a demonstration of Buckingham’s unpopularity and a means to render him unpopular. As such, Parliament acted as a link between popular and elite politics, an echo chamber in which accusations against the Duke were amplified and reinforced. Although Buckingham never quite gave up attempts to recover his former popularity, the impeachment proceedings largely succeeded in destroying his reputation as a virtuous Protestant warrior.⁴⁴ Indeed Charles seems to have assumed that this was the aim of his enemies in parliament. In a proclamation published after the dissolution, he wrote that the Commons’ Remonstrance, drafted at the end of the session, was intended

⁴¹ 'Dr Turners 6 questions that were deliuered in the lower house of parliament the 11 of March 1625', BL Harley 161, fol. 59v; Mead to Stuteville, 18 March 1626, BL Harley 390, fol. 29r.

⁴² “doctor Turner his speech in Parliament the second of March, 1625”, Cheshire Archives ZCR 63/2/21; “Dr Turners Speach in Parliament, 11 March 1625”, BL Add. 22474, fol. 11v.

⁴³ *Proceedings in Parliament 1626* vol. III, 162-3.

⁴⁴ Cogswell, “The People's Love”, 211-34; Thomas Cogswell, “Published by Authoritie”: Newsbooks and the Duke of Buckingham's Expedition to the Ile de Ré', *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 67:1 (2004), 1-25.

to “prepossesse the world with an ill opinion” of Buckingham.⁴⁵ Even John Rous, a relatively neutral provincial observer, worried that the worst reports about the Duke might be true. The “strange, usuall, and bould” accusations against Buckingham had caused “great wonder” in the country, he wrote, and if they were true, “‘tis pity he liveth.”⁴⁶ While MPs claimed to represent the grievances of the country, there was a reciprocal relationship between parliament and broader opinion.

Buckingham and the grievances of the commonwealth

Differing attitudes towards the redress of grievances were an important context for Turner’s intervention, and help to explain why compromise between the crown and its opponents in parliament was so difficult to achieve. Turner and his allies argued that his presentation of “fames” was entirely consistent with parliament’s traditional and legitimate role as the mouthpiece for popular grievances. Despite the narrow social profile of the House of Commons, it was a political commonplace that it represented the realm as a whole.⁴⁷ During the late Elizabethan and early Stuart period, members increasingly

⁴⁵ *A proclamation prohibiting the publishing, dispersing and reading of a declaration or remonstrance, drawen by some committees of the Commons-House of the late dissolved Parliament, and intended to haue beene preferred by them to his Maiestie* (16th June 1626).

⁴⁶ Mary Anne Everett Green (ed.), *Diary of John Rous* (Camden vol. 66, 1856), 3. See also Bellany and Cogswell, *Murder of King James*, 247. Thomas Scott of Canterbury was no doubt referring to Buckingham when he wrote that those who were responsible for military matters were guilty of wasting money, as well as ‘treason and villanie’ for allowing them to come to nothing. See Thomas Scott, ‘A true Relation of that *which* was done... at the Election’ for parliament in 1626, Canterbury Cathedral Archives, CCA-U66/1, fol. 82r. This source appears to have been written in March/April 1626.

⁴⁷ Zaller, *Discourse of Legitimacy*, 496-7.

stressed their duty to honestly communicate the grievances of the people, particularly the poor, who could not speak for themselves, and to seek redress for them.⁴⁸ A willingness to communicate grievances in parliament without fear of disfavour was increasingly seen as an electoral asset. In Sir Richard Grosvenor's address to the freeholders in the 1624 election, he praised candidates who were "without fear to utter their country's just complaints and grievances."⁴⁹ The belief in the representative function of parliament was frequently repeated in 1626, not least when a committee to investigate the evils of the kingdom were set up so that MPs could "hear the people."⁵⁰

Royal and parliamentary views about grievances and MPs' role in presenting them had been growing further apart since at least the beginning of the reign of James I. Although MPs presented themselves as the neutral conduits for the grievances of the people, James had become increasingly suspicious that they were in fact actively seeking out complaints or inventing them in order to bring his government into disrepute. When presented with a petition of grievances in 1606, he asked "whether the Countryes from whence [they] came did possesse [them] with these Grievances, or that the Same were suggested here in London."⁵¹ In 1610 he told the Commons that grievances should not be "greedily sought out by you, or taken up in the streets" and expressed concern that MPs

⁴⁸ Richard Cust, "The 'public man' in late Tudor and early Stuart England", in *The politics of the public sphere in early modern England*, ed. Peter Lake and Steven Pincus, (Manchester, 2007), 131; David Sacks, "Parliament, Liberty, and the Commonwealth" in *Parliament and Liberty from the Reign of Elizabeth to the English Civil War*, ed. J.H. Hexter (Stanford, 1992), 88, 92; Stephen D. White, *Sir Edward Coke and 'the Grievances of the Commonwealth', 1621-1628*, (Chapel Hill, 1979), 32.

⁴⁹ Ann Hughes, *The Causes of the English Civil War* (Basingstoke, 1998), 69.

⁵⁰ *Proceedings in Parliament 1626*, vol. II, 114.

⁵¹ D.H. Willson (ed.), *The Parliamentary Diary of Robert Bowyer, 1606-7* (London, 1931), 166.

might try to create the impression that “all things in this government were amiss and out of frame.”⁵² Presciently, he warned that the House risked becoming “a place for Pasquils, and at another time such Grievances may be cast in amongst you, as may conteine Treason or scandal against Me, or my Posterity”, also warning that his prerogatives should not be redefined as grievances.⁵³ A tract written by Lord Chancellor Ellesmere the following year similarly criticised parliament’s recent attempts to “contriue and sett forth many supposed grievances in the state and gouvernement”, arguing that this was part of a larger conspiracy to expand the powers of parliament at the expense of the royal prerogative.⁵⁴ James repeated his suspicions that MPs simply invented grievances in order to create public discontent with his government in the parliaments of 1621 and 1624.⁵⁵

While James acknowledged that legitimate grievances existed, his view of their scope and causes was limited. He defined grievances as “notable oppression” bribery and the miscarriage of justice, primarily concerning monopolies, the administration of justice, and commercial matters.⁵⁶ These arose through the corruption of specific individuals and their failure to observe royal instructions, rather than any more fundamental problem with government. In 1610 he said that MPs had a duty to report grievances, because “it may

⁵² Johann Sommerville (ed.), *King James VI and I: Political Writings* (Cambridge, 1994), 189.

⁵³ Sommerville (ed.), *Political Writings*, 190-1.

⁵⁴ Louis A. Knafla (ed.), *Law and Politics in Jacobean England: The tracts of Lord Chancellor Ellesmere* (Cambridge, 1977), 258.

⁵⁵ Sommerville (ed.), *Political Writings*, 255; James’ speech at the closing of the parliament of 1624, BL Add. 18597, fol. 205r-v.

⁵⁶ “A Proclamation declaring His Majesties grace to His Subjectes for their reliefe against publique Grievances” (14 February 1623), in *Stuart Royal Proclamations*, ed. James F. Larkin and Paul L. Hughes, vol. I (Oxford, 1973), 568-70.

very well bee, that many Directions and Commissions iustly giuen forth by me, may be abused in the Execution thereof, vpon the people.”⁵⁷ He emphasised that while he was willing to hear grievances, any complaints should be “just” and presented in a “modest and temperate” manner.⁵⁸

James had also sought to demonstrate that the redress of grievances did not rely on parliament. While parliament was adjourned in 1621, he issued a proclamation inviting subjects to inform him and the Privy Council about their grievances, saying that he needed “no assistance of Parliament for reforming the same.”⁵⁹ In 1623, he published a proclamation announcing that a committee of the Privy Council had been created to hear his subjects’ grievances, and that his concern for their welfare was “not confined unto Times and Meetings in Parliament.”⁶⁰ The committee does not appear ever to have sat. Nevertheless, it demonstrates James’ desire to establish an alternative and more tractable mechanism for addressing grievances than parliament, while also signalling his kingly readiness to hear his subjects’ complaints.

Perceptions of the nature and significance of “grievances” became even more polarised under Charles. Like James, Charles emphasised that he was happy to redress grievances, but only those that were “just” and “true”, and presented in a “dutiful and

⁵⁷ See Sommerville (ed.), *Political Writings*, 190.

⁵⁸ ‘Proclamation against publique Grievances’, 569.

⁵⁹ “A Proclamation declaring His Majesties grace to his Subjects, touching matters complained of, as pubique greevances” (10 July 1621), in *Stuart Royal Proclamations* vol. I, 519.

⁶⁰ “Proclamation against publique Grievances”, 569.

mannerly” way.⁶¹ There was little doubt that he would be the judge of whether such grievances were indeed “just”. He also instructed the Commons not to “make” or “curiously inquire or hunt after” grievances, but act to “prevent such as are imminent and cure such as are.”⁶² He framed the traditional process of redress as seeking solutions to problems rather than endlessly investigating causes and identifying culprits. As he told the Commons in March 1626, “we shall think him the wisest reprehender of errors past who (without reflecting backwards) can give us counsel how to settle the present state of things and to provide for the future honor and safety of the kingdom.”⁶³ This interpretation of grievances was therefore consistent with demands for supply. In a speech to MPs, Buckingham implied that the main grievance of the kingdom was the crown’s inability to raise sufficient funds for war, which could of course be redressed by a generous parliamentary grant.⁶⁴

James’ and Charles’ attitudes developed in a context in which parliamentary definitions of “grievances” were becoming much more expansive, while novel procedures for presenting them were introduced. While grievances were usually presented individually

⁶¹ Lord Keeper’s speech to the Lords and Commons, 29 March, *Proceedings in Parliament 1626*, vol. II, 392; Letter from Charles to the Commons, 20 April 1626, *Proceedings in Parliament 1626* vol. III, 36; “A declaration of the true causes which moued His Maiestie to assemble, and after inforced him to dissolue the last two meetings in Parliament” STC 9246 (30 June 1626), 5; Letter from Charles to the Commons, 20 March 1626, *Proceedings in Parliament 1626* vol. III, 324.

⁶² Charles’ speech to the House of Commons, 15 March 1626, *Proceedings in Parliament 1626* vol. II, 294.

⁶³ Charles’ letter to the Commons, 20 March 1626, *Proceedings in Parliament 1626* vol. II, 324. See also Charles’ speech to the House of Commons, 15 March 1626, *Proceedings in Parliament 1626* vol. II, 294; Buckingham’s speech to the House of Commons, 30 March 1626, *Proceedings in Parliament 1626* vol. II, 405.

⁶⁴ *Proceedings in Parliament 1626* vol. II, 405.

under Elizabeth, under James the Commons began collecting them together and presenting them in the form of a petition.⁶⁵ At first, these petitions did not fundamentally criticise royal government. Instead, they complained about unconnected matters of varying importance, such as impositions, patents for lighthouses and the conduct of the merchant adventurers, and this was as true of the petition of grievances presented in the parliaments of 1624 and 1625, as of those presented in 1606 and 1610.⁶⁶ As Stephen White has argued, these kinds of grievances were “conducive with compromise” because they were seen as isolated abuses that could be blamed on corrupt individuals.⁶⁷

This approach to grievances began to change in the early 1620s, but the transformation did not become fully apparent until after 1625.⁶⁸ By 1626, grievances were increasingly seen by MPs as fundamental and interrelated threats to the commonwealth, caused by a conspiracy of evil counsel. Phrases like the “redress of grievances” became what Michael Calvin McGee has dubbed “ideographs” - political slogans that represent a commitment to a normative goal or belief that are used by all sides but which in fact have no agreed definition.⁶⁹ Speakers can use the vagueness of ideographs to their advantage by stretching their meaning and applying them to new circumstances, conferring legitimacy on

⁶⁵ For the presentation of grievances in the 1605-6 session of James’ first parliament, see Wallace Notestein, *The House of Commons 1604-1610* (New Haven, 1971), 160-180.

⁶⁶ Maija Jansson and William Bidwell (eds.), *Proceedings in Parliament 1625* (Yale, 1997), 302-5. For the petition of grievances in 1626, see *Proceedings in Parliament 1626* vol. III, 315-36.

⁶⁷ White, *Sir Edward Coke*, 37, 188, 191.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁶⁹ M.C. McGee, “The ‘ideograph’: A link between rhetoric and ideology”, *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 66 (1980), 1-16.

novel or questionable political actions by appealing to a non-existent ideological consensus. This was precisely what MPs were doing when they used the traditional language of grievances to justify their attacks on Buckingham, who was becoming not simply the cause but the embodiment of grievances. The seemingly unexceptional appeal to the traditional rhetoric of the “reformation of grievances”, and the insistence that redress precede supply, took on radical and divisive implications when views about precisely what constituted a “just” grievance diverged, and when definitions of “grievances” expanded to include the person of the royal favourite himself.

The Duke’s allies did not allow parliament’s claims to represent the commonwealth go unchallenged. Rather than simply arguing that the views of the common people were irrelevant, however, some of them tried a different approach. Two manuscript tracts produced by Buckingham’s supporters claimed that parliament did not represent the views of the people at all, and that the Duke was in fact rather more popular than his enemies. As Thomas Cogswell has shown, in the 1620s Buckingham and his circle made a series of attempts to muster support for his foreign policy and to regain the popularity he had enjoyed in 1624.⁷⁰ Although the manuscript separates considered here do not appear to have circulated widely, they seem to have been written with a similar purpose in mind.

One of these anonymous tracts, which was addressed to the King and may have been intended only for internal consumption, claimed that the Duke’s opponents consisted of a whole social stratum of “covetous landlords, inclosers, depopulators and justices of the peace who have got a habit of Omni-regency [in the country], and a hope to extend the same against the King in Parliament.” These gentlemen diverted the attention of the

⁷⁰ Cogswell, “The People’s Love”, 211-34; ‘Middleton and the Court’, 273-88; “Published by Authoritie”, 1-25.

people from their own economic oppression by blaming the commons' grievances on Buckingham. As the anonymous author wrote, the King's parliamentary opponents "do ease themselves, to afflict those who are the true Commons, and yet perswade them, that the grievances are caused by the Duke, and the ill government of the King."⁷¹

Another remarkable manuscript tract written in defence of Buckingham after the dissolution went even further to dispel the notion that the Commons represented the commonwealth when they attacked Buckingham. Although it does not appear to have circulated widely (its author might have thought better of disseminating it), it was clearly written for a wide audience. The author claimed to be "a playne Countryman" from Worcestershire. The tract was accompanied by an anonymous letter addressed to Edward Sackville, earl of Dorset, one of Buckingham's supporters, which claimed that it had been found in the pocket of the author, "a paraliticke poore man" who died on the road to London.⁷² In keeping with the Piers Ploughman tradition, the writer presents himself as a plain and honest man who would not "forbeare to tell the truth because it shames the divill."⁷³

According to this "playne Countryman", parliament had raised a "greate Clamor against the duke", and had wasted time "rippinge vpp the dukes offences, ever since he had any life in his mothers wombe." The charges against him were false, however. The idea that Buckingham was a papist was ridiculous, since English Catholics "hate him to the death

⁷¹ "To his sacred majesty, Ab Ignoto", *Cabala Sice Scrinia Sacra* (1691), 256.

⁷² "A post Caution or rather a post moition to the Common Speakers in the Lower house of Commons the two last Parliaments", BL Add. 4155, fols. 77r, 85v.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, fol. 84v.

and would eate him *with salt*.” Nor had he consumed royal revenue. Everything James had given him had been fully accounted for, and parliament had never complained about the King’s largesse before. The writer also refuted the charge that Buckingham held a monopoly of office, arguing that in any case the King could appoint whoever he wished. In focusing on Buckingham, moreover, parliament had neglected the commons’ real grievances, which included ecclesiastical government, abuses of justice and the decay of hospitality. “Wee the Commons” were astonished by these actions, and demanded an explanation.⁷⁴

The source of the problem, according to the author of the tract, was that the House of Commons was unrepresentative. Too many MPs were parasitic lawyers who oppressed the commons rather than representing them. Legal expenses forced the people to “waste more every yeare in suites then twentie subsidies will amounte vnto”, and because lawyers imprisoned so many people for criminal offences or debt, they had made Charles “the kinge of more slaves then all his neighbour kings about him.” In addition, parliament was riven by private factions, MPs were often too young and they served constituencies they never even visited. As a result, the House was full of empty oratory, and eloquent lawyers were able to overawe the plain and honest representatives of the commonwealth. Lawyers were able to make “longe and intricate speaches *which* amuses the vulgars iudgement”, while “playne honest elected burgeses” said nothing, because they did not know the “quainte tearmes” of eloquent speech and could not cite “Olde records and Statutes” like the lawyers could. While plain speech was mocked, eloquence was applauded, even when

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, fols. 77r-78v; 79r; 79v; 80r-v; 78r-v; 77r.

hearers didn't even understand the meaning of the speeches.⁷⁵ By moving on to the same rhetorical territory as Buckingham's opponents and claiming to represent the views of the common people, the authors of these tracts demonstrate the growing strength of appeals to the authority of public opinion in 1626.

Rumour, common fame and the legitimacy of the vox populi

Turner's queries revealed and deepened ideological divisions over the legitimacy of popular speech. By basing the attack against Buckingham on common fame, the leaders of the attack appeared to richly justify Charles' developing fears of a popular conspiracy theory to undermine monarchical authority.⁷⁶ One man's "common fame" was another man's seditious rumor, and it was not clear whether MPs were neutrally transmitting reports about Buckingham or maliciously inventing and spreading them. On 29 March the King sent the Lord Keeper to the House of Commons to complain that the investigation was "unparliamentary." Since he had authorised all of the Duke's actions, he interpreted an investigation of his favourite as an attack on his own rule, and demanded that Turner be punished.

The idea that common fame was a legitimate basis for parliamentary investigation ran counter to a strong element of traditional elite rhetoric. The concept of "fame" was closely associated with potentially seditious rumor. In Greek and Roman mythology, the goddess of fame represented rumor and gossip as well as "fame" in the positive sense of

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, fols. 78r; 77v, 82v, 84v; 82v-83r.

⁷⁶ For the development of this conspiracy theory, see Richard Cust, "Charles I and Popularity", in *Politics, Religion and Popularity*, ed. Thomas Cogswell, Richard Cust and Peter Lake (Cambridge, 2002), 235-58.

renown. She was the daughter of Gaia, and had been brought forth as a revenge on the Gods for defeating the Giants. As such, slanderous “fames” represented a weapon of the weak, an alternative means of fighting and undermining authority. Virgil represented fame as a terrifying winged beast with many tongues that was capable of terrifying entire cities.⁷⁷

The classical association between rumor and rebellion was a commonplace of early modern elite rhetoric. As Francis Bacon wrote, rumors were “preludes of seditions to come... seditious tumults, and seditious fames, differ no more but as brother and sister.”⁷⁸ Rumor had indeed played a part in numerous medieval and early modern rebellions, since reports about the imposition of new taxes or the existence of a rival claimant to the throne could legitimise and encourage resistance. Naturally, monarchs tried to suppress such rumors, and a number of laws against spreading them were introduced or strengthened during this period.⁷⁹ Rumor was particularly associated with the ignorant multitude, who were conventionally presented as being susceptible to slanders and seditious reports that might undermine proper obedience to authority, particularly when these rumors were

⁷⁷ See Virgil's *Aeneid*, book IV. For a detailed investigation of the representation of rumor in classical and early modern literature, see Philip Hardie, *Rumour and Renown* (Cambridge, 2012). For rumour in early Stuart political culture, see also Adam Fox, “Rumour, News and Popular Opinion in Elizabethan and Early Stuart England”, *The Historical Journal*, 40: 3 (1997), 597-620; Daniel Woolf, ‘News, history and the construction of the present in early modern England’ in Brendan Dooley and Sabrina Baron (eds.), *The Politics of Information in Early Modern Europe* (Abingdon, 2001), pp. 80-118; Claire Walker and Heather Kerr (eds.), *Fama and her Sisters: Gossip and Rumour in Early Modern Europe* (Leiden, 2015); David Coast, *News and Rumour in Jacobean England: Information, Court Politics and Diplomacy, 1618-25* (Manchester, 2014).

⁷⁸ Francis Bacon, “Of seditions and troubles” in *Works of Francis Bacon*, ed. James Spedding, vol. XII (London, 1857-74), 123-30.

⁷⁹ For laws against rumor and other forms of seditious speech, see David Cressy, *Dangerous Talk* (Oxford, 2010), 29, 37.

stirred up by popular demagogues.⁸⁰ A speech given by Robert Cecil to Justices of the Peace in 1599 set out the traditional government line eloquently. The “vulgare sorte”, he said, were “apt to be inveigled with false apprehensions” and libels about the Queen’s ministers. It was the duty of their social superiors to contradict and suppress such rumors, or else rebellions on the scale of 1381 or 1450 would result.⁸¹ Given these associations, the use of common fame to attack Buckingham, and the insistence by some MPs that the *vox populi* was the *vox dei*, could appear threatening, even revolutionary.

Buckingham and his allies were well aware of the traditional association between rumor and rebellion. The anonymous author of a letter written in defence of Buckingham castigated those who would “move soe many lealousies, rumours, and misinterptetations” about the Duke. These “malicious Spiritts, envious, and false that sought to stirr the passion of the people by false informaccons” had been “lett loose to misguide, misinforme and sowe sedition amongst those weake spiritts that cannot perfectly ludge of truth, but Loue lyes, and scandalls the food of Enuy and mallice.”⁸² A letter written to Charles around the time of the impeachment similarly claimed that popular speeches had not been allowed since the reign of Henry IV, because they were the “certain symptoms of subsequent Rebellions, Civil Wars, and the dethroning of Kings.”⁸³

⁸⁰ Adam Fox, *Oral and Literate Culture in England* (Oxford, 2000), 339.

⁸¹ TNA SP 12/273, fol. 69r-v.

⁸² “Relation made to a freind concerning the present affaires”, 28 February 1626, TNA SP 16/21, fols. 136r-7r. Conway similarly claimed that Turner’s queries were ‘libels’ and that the Duke’s enemies were really aiming at the King himself. See Conway to Buckingham, 12th March 1626, SP 16/523, f. 73r.

⁸³ “To his sacred majesty, Ab Ignoto”, *Cabala*, 256.

The threat of a popular conspiracy against Buckingham was nothing new. In 1623, when Buckingham was in Spain, Tobie Matthew had warned that his enemies were “setting on, meaner people, to complayne to the body of the Counsayle, of diuers thinges as bitter greuances to the Commonwealth, *which ar sayd to haue been carried by your greatnes.*” There was a plan “to make your *lordship* very odious; and (that once soundly done) to goe to the kinge, as soone as they shall find courage enough in theyr owne harts, and confidence enough in the truth and malice of others, and to beseech his *Maiestye*, that iustice may be done agaynst yow, in some exemplar course.”⁸⁴ Turner’s presentation of popular rumors against Buckingham appeared to fulfil these long-held plans.

Buckingham himself tended to adopt a more moderate and diplomatic line, at least in public, by suggesting that the House of Commons had simply been misinformed. On 8 June, when defending himself against the Commons’ charges, he asked the Lords “Who accused me? Common fame? Who gave me up to your Lordships? The House of Commons. The one is too subtle a body (if a body), the other too great a one for me to contest with... Therefore though the House of Commons have not willingly wronged me, yet I am confident it will be at length found that common fame has abused both it and me.”⁸⁵ At other times he warned that the slanderous tactics used against him could one day be used against his fellow Lords.⁸⁶

Turner and his allies viewed their actions very differently. Common fame, was, after all, a perfectly sound basis for legal proceedings. “Fame” was not as insubstantial as mere

⁸⁴ Tobie Matthew to Buckingham, 29 March 1623, BL Harley 1581, fol. 80r-v.

⁸⁵ *Proceedings in Parliament 1626* vol. I, 565.

⁸⁶ *Proceedings in Parliament 1626* vol. IV, 161.

rumor, but represented the settled opinion of the community, and was used as grounds for presentment in church courts and in common law.⁸⁷ As Turner argued, precedents also existed for using common fame as the basis for parliamentary investigations. The impeachment of William de la Pole, First Duke of Suffolk in 1450 had been based on “fames” about the royal favourite, as had attacks on “undertakers” in the parliament of 1614.⁸⁸ As such, Turner insisted that he had proceeded in a “manerly and parlementary way” in presenting his queries against Buckingham.⁸⁹

For many MPs, the threat of misinformation came not so much from popular rumor as the misreporting of their own words to the King. From as early as the 1570s, MPs had argued that conflict between King and Parliament was the result of malicious individuals who misreported parliamentary speeches to breed discord and sedition between the monarch and their subjects.⁹⁰ False reports about parliamentary speeches were thought to spread very much like rumors. As the Commons’ remonstrance prepared in the dying days of the Parliament of 1626 had it, “words misreported, though by an echo... have oft a louder sound than the voice itself, and may sound disloyalty, though the voice had nothing undutiful or illoyal in it.”⁹¹ Although few would deny the danger of popular rumor, the

⁸⁷ Martin Ingram, *Church Courts, Sex and Marriage in England, 1570-1640* (Cambridge, 1987), 328.

⁸⁸ *Proceedings in Parliament 1626* vol. IV, 207. See also “Dr. Turner’s explanation”, Bod. Tanner 72, fol. 110v.

⁸⁹ Copy of a letter from Samuel Turner to the Speaker of the House of Commons, 16 March 1626, Hampshire Record Office, 44M69/G2/30.

⁹⁰ Zaller, *Discourse of Legitimacy*, 530; Colclough, *Freedom of Speech*, 139-140, 143, 148-9, 153, 156, 178, 183, 186.

⁹¹ Speaker of the House of Commons to Charles I, June 1626, quoted in John Rushworth, *Historical Collections*, vol. I (1680), 397.

threat of misinformation between parliament and the crown appeared to be a greater threat.

The notion that political disagreements were mere misunderstandings rather than evidence of fundamental conflict could be a useful fantasy for both sides. The notion that the King might be accurately informed about parliamentary speeches and still disapprove of them was more troubling. Indeed, by 1626, the House of Commons was flatly denying that MPs had made inflammatory speeches, even when it was manifestly obvious that they had. Although the weight of evidence indicates that Clement Coke did indeed say words to the effect that it was better to die by a foreign enemy than to suffer at home, the House of Commons nevertheless unanimously declared to the king that he had said no such thing.⁹² Dudley Digges and John Eliot were similarly exonerated by the Commons for comparing Buckingham to Sejanus and allegedly implicating Charles in his “transcendent presumption” of administering medicine to the dying James I, although the disagreement was as much about the intentions of the speakers as their words.⁹³ Such moves were political ploys that left the King with little option but to release the arrested MPs, but this does not mean that fears about the misreporting of parliamentary speeches were always insincere. For MPs who were mystified by the growing gulf between crown and parliament, “misreporting” provided a simple explanation for disharmony.

The fundamental point of disagreement between the crown and the leaders of the attack on Buckingham was whether common fame was a legitimate basis for impeachment.

⁹² “To the Kinges most excellent Maiestie the humble remonstrance off youre Commons, now assembled in Parliament 1626”, William Davenport's commonplace book, Cheshire Archives ZCR 63/2/19, fol. 43r.

⁹³ Bellamy and Cogswell, *Murder of King James*, 249-58.

Turner's queries had set the Commons' investigation in motion, and although some accusations had been dropped and others added, they still formed the core of the formal charges against Buckingham. If it could be shown that this method of proceeding was "vnlegall and unparliamentarie", the whole basis of the impeachment in its current form might be undermined.⁹⁴

The matter was initially debated on 22 March. Thomas Malet, a client of Sir Edward Conway and a supporter of the government, took issue with the alleged precedents for proceeding on the basis of common fame. Malet pointed out that the Duke of Suffolk had been accused of treason, and had admitted his guilt, neither of which applied to Buckingham. More recent precedents, as Malet argued, demonstrated that such proceedings were illegitimate. In 1614 Richard Neile, the Bishop of Lincoln, had been attacked on the basis of rumors that he had made a speech in the House of Lords attacking the Commons. On that occasion, the Lords had declared that "no member of their House ought to be called in question where there is no cause but common fame."⁹⁵ A number of MPs argued against Malet, but the matter was left unresolved.⁹⁶ Although a full debate was deferred several times while the investigation into Buckingham went on, it was discussed briefly in the debate on the remonstrance on 1 April.⁹⁷ Surprisingly, given MPs' obsession

⁹⁴ Conway to Wake, 14th April 1626, SP 99/27, f. 32r.

⁹⁵ *Proceedings in Parliament 1626* vol. II (1992), 342; Maija Jansson (ed.), *Proceedings in Parliament 1614* (Philadelphia, 1988), 410; Zaller, *Discourse of Legitimacy*, 606. Ironically, Malet had been on the other side of the argument about the legitimacy of proceeding on the basis of common fame on that occasion. See *Proceedings in Parliament 1614*, 385.

⁹⁶ *Proceedings in Parliament 1626* vol. II, 344.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 357.

with the legitimating power of precedents, William Noye argued that although there were no precedents for proceeding on the basis of common fame, “yet it were good to make one of this.”⁹⁸

The long-delayed but vital debate on common fame was finally held on 22 April.⁹⁹ Once again, Malet argued that the actions of Buckingham’s attackers were unprecedented.¹⁰⁰ A large number of MPs then spoke in favour of common fame, arguing that it was accepted as grounds for presentment in other courts, and that it was the only recourse against powerful men. In any case, common fame was only the basis for the initial accusations against the Duke, rather than his condemnation. The charges that MPs had subsequently developed were supported by solid evidence and witnesses.¹⁰¹

In the process of these debates, MPs went to some lengths to define “common fame” and to distinguish it from the tainted concept of rumor. Some MPs, including Thomas Wentworth, argued that fame was more legitimate because it was the speech of a larger number of people, whereas rumor was the speech of a minority.¹⁰² Edward Littleton argued that there was “a great difference between common fame and rumour. The general voice is common fame. *Vox populi vox Dei.*”¹⁰³ To others, common fame, unlike mere

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 420.

⁹⁹ See *Proceedings in Parliament 1626* vol. III, 45-8. For other copies of the debate, see Hampshire Record Office, 44M69/L22/16; Cornwall Record office EL 655/4, fols. 21v-23v.

¹⁰⁰ *Proceedings in Parliament 1626* vol. III, 45.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 45-50.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 46.

rumor, derived legitimacy from the social position of the speaker. According to John Wilde a “fame” could be used as grounds for accusation, but only if it arose among the “better sort” of the multitude.¹⁰⁴ John Selden substituted the traditionally hostile reading of the mythological origins of “fame” with a more positive interpretation. “The faults of the Gods noe man dared complaine of”, he said, “till the *terra parens* brought forth Fame.”¹⁰⁵ The special pleading evident in these arguments suggests that defending common fame did not come naturally to Buckingham’s opponents. MPs were instead engaged in the difficult search for a political language that would justify Turner’s queries and allow the impeachment to go ahead. In the end, their arguments prevailed, and the leaders of the impeachment won the debate. In the process they were forced to argue for the legitimacy of popular opinion and speech in a way that ran counter to a strong element of traditional elite rhetoric.

The ploughman tradition and early Stuart political culture

It is tempting to see MPs’ arguments about the legitimacy of common fame in 1626 as an isolated and insincere political manoeuvre. Turner’s queries were only raised when the attack on Buckingham was stalling. MPs’ attempts to argue that “fame” was a legitimate basis for investigation, and to distinguish it from “rumor” have an air of *post facto* rationalisation, suggesting that MPs would have justified any methods as long as they resulted in Buckingham’s downfall. However, a number of manuscript tracts, libels and printed pamphlets written in the early Stuart period which purport to present popular

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹⁰⁵ Cornwall Record office EL 655/4, fol. 22v.

rumors and opinions to the King articulate some remarkably similar ideas to those expressed by MPs in the debates about the legitimacy of common fame in 1626. Alastair Bellany and others have explored how underground verse could express discontent with royal policies during this period.¹⁰⁶ The tracts and libels considered here, while often critical of the government, also suggest that there was a wider tendency within early Stuart political culture to argue that the views and reports of the common people had some value. Anti-populist hostility towards the “vulgar multitude” and the seditious rumors that circulated among them were important elements of elite rhetoric throughout this period and well beyond. Nevertheless, by adopting the persona of the multitude, the writers of these tracts presented the common people and their views in a much more favourable light. The existence of these tracts suggests that the appeal to common fame in 1626 was not merely an unprincipled political ploy, but was part of a developing division in early Stuart political culture about the legitimacy of popular speech.

At the accession of James I in 1603, a few surviving manuscript separates attempted to inform the new King about the fears and grievances of the people. These separates were written at a time when the royal agenda appeared to be up for grabs, and when the authors could plausibly claim to be informing a new king about unfamiliar English concerns. The “Aduertisements of a Loiall subiect to his Gracious Soueraigne draun from obseruacons of the peoples speeches” warned James about his people’s fears, particularly that the court would be dominated by Scots, that he would abandon the Dutch alliance, and would

¹⁰⁶ For early Stuart libels, see Alastair Bellany, “Rayling rymes and vaunting verse: Libellous politics in early Stuart England, 1603-1628”, in Sharpe, Kevin and Lake, Peter (eds), *Culture and Politics in Early Stuart England* (London, 1994), 285-310; Andrew McRae, *Literature, Satire and the Early Stuart State* (Cambridge, 2004); Pauline Croft, ‘Libels, popular literacy and public opinion in early modern England’, *Historical Research* 68 (1995), 266-85.

“altere the manor of our gouernmente” by continuing to raise subsidies and abandoning trial by jury.¹⁰⁷ A “poor man’s petition” to the King, which was “thrown about the Court” in 1603 mixed religious and legal grievances with complaints about high political matters.¹⁰⁸ The Commons *Apology* of 1604, which was written from the perspective of the “poor Commmons” and “the subject” rather than MPs, was in many ways reminiscent of this underground sub-genre.¹⁰⁹ Shortly before James’ journey to Scotland in 1617, another manuscript tract presented popular fears about disorder, rebellion, and the unchecked growth of London.¹¹⁰ Although these tracts contained material that James would hardly have approved of, the complaints and fears they expressed were generally couched in traditional terms of deference and loyalty.

The outbreak of the Thirty Year’s War, the Spanish match and the rise of the Duke of Buckingham meant that similar separates circulating in the 1620s took on a much more strident and radical tone. A libel placed in the hands of Elizabeth I’s statue in Westminster in 1621, written as a petition from “the most wretched and most Contemptible, the Commons of poore distressed England” attacked monopolists and corrupt courtiers,

¹⁰⁷ “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 35, fols. 460r-v, 461v.

¹⁰⁸ “The poore mans petition to the King”, Norfolk Record Office, AYL/186.

¹⁰⁹ Zaller, *Discourse of Legitimacy*, 576-84.

¹¹⁰ “Balaams 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”, BL Lansdowne 213, fols. 57v-60v.

claiming that everything had been better in Elizabeth's days.¹¹¹ The author of another libel, "The Common Peoples Apollegy to the Queene of Bohemia", claimed that the "knotty fisted Ploweman" and "poore mechannickes" of England were eager to fight on the continent, but were being restrained by James.¹¹² "Tom Tell Troth", written in 1622, complains about the influence of Catholics at court and James' failure to intervene in the Thirty Years' War.¹¹³ Some tracts expressed discontent at James' attempts to censor the discussion of politics.¹¹⁴ "The Teares of the oppressed people of England", written in 1623, suggested that James was wilfully ignoring the miserable state of the kingdom. "Never was kinge more ungratefull to his people then owres", the anonymous author wrote, before complaining that the nobility was "supprest, the Comunaltie opprest, the Lawes of the Realme vyolated, the gentry discountenanced, the Clergie silenced, the freedom of speech taken away, the very thoughtes of men punished."¹¹⁵

¹¹¹ "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/>.

¹¹² "The Common Peoples Apollegy to the Queene of Bohemia. 1623", "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/>.

¹¹³ "Tom Tell Troth or a Free Discourse touchinge the Murmurs of the tyme directed to his Maiestie by way of humble advertisement", Bod. Tanner 73, fols. 199r-230v.

¹¹⁴ See Cogswell, *Blessed Revolution*, 20-35. For the issue of freedom of speech in general, see David Colclough, *Freedom of Speech in Early Stuart England* (Cambridge, 2005).

¹¹⁵ "The Teares of the oppressed people of England", 1623, Bod. Tanner 73, fol. 304r. It is possible that this was the tract that provoked James' poem "The wiper of the Peoples teares", which was in turn answered by "An answeare to the wiper away of the Peoples teares", another poem that ventriloquized the common people.

A few printed pamphlets, such as Thomas Scott's *Vox Populi*, which went through several editions, also claimed to represent the people's views.¹¹⁶ *Vox Populi* may seem a puzzling title for Scott's tract, since it was supposedly based on an intercepted and translated account of a secret meeting of elite Spanish councillors. Nevertheless, as Scott later insisted, although the details of *Vox Populi* did not come from "the people", the general thrust of his analysis of Spanish machinations was shared by the mainstream of English opinion. Scott had observed "the general feares, discontents, and grieuances of the best affected in the State" and in *Vox Populi* "collected such *Passages of State*, as obuiously presented themselues; together with the peoples censure and comment made vpon them." Although Scott knew it was dangerous to present the King with such a "Mirror of the Multitude", he nevertheless saw it as his duty to publish *Vox Populi* "as containing the common-peoples priuate and retired discourses."¹¹⁷ Similarly, John Reynolds' *Votivae Angliae* drew much of its rhetorical force from its claim to present the wishes of the people in general to go to war with Spain.¹¹⁸

Claims to represent the common people were not only made by those who opposed the Spanish match and hankered after war with Spain. Individuals with a variety of views could similarly enlist what might loosely be called "public opinion" to bolster their arguments. An anonymous letter addressed to James in early 1624 that claimed to represent the beliefs of the people opposed the recent turn towards war with Spain, accusing Buckingham of conspiring to usurp royal authority by taking the direction of

¹¹⁶ Thomas Scott, *Vox Populi* (1620); Lake, "Constitutional Consensus' and Puritan Opposition in the 1620s: Thomas Scott and the Spanish Match', *Historical Journal* 25 (1982), 805-825.

¹¹⁷ Thomas Scott, *Vox Regis* (1624), 2-3.

¹¹⁸ John Reynolds' *Votivae Angliae* (1624).

affairs into his own hands.¹¹⁹ As we have seen, one of Buckingham's supporters enlisted the views of a "playne countryman" to demonstrate that the common people viewed the parliamentary attack on the Duke in 1626 as a misguided distraction from their true grievances. By adopting the persona of the common people, even the Duke's supporters implicitly acknowledged the value of arguments based on the supposed views of the multitude.

Who did these tracts claim to represent? Many writers implicitly excluded minorities of Catholics and evil councillors, as Scott did when he referred to the "best affected in the State", while others, like the author of the anonymous letter to James, appealed to an imagined moderate silent majority that excluded both puritans and papists.¹²⁰ Some used socially heterogeneous terms like "the people", while others use a variety of terms, "the commons", "the common people" "the multitude" and the "*vox populi*" to refer to the lower orders of society. Like Samuel Turner, they often claimed that they were merely passing on matters that were common knowledge, but were not specific about precisely whose views they represented. The author of Tom tell-troth claimed that he could "come into noe meetinge" without hearing criticism of James' policies, but refused to name names because "if all that are infected with this kinde of Kings Evill, should be brought before you, I feare that both *your Maiestie* and *your Chyrurgions* would be quickly weary of touchinge them."¹²¹ Others were more specific. The "post Caution" produced by one of Buckingham's allies tried to establish a chain of evidence, however

¹¹⁹ Anonymous letter to James, [early 1624], BL Harley 1581, fols. 395r-397r.

¹²⁰ Scott, *Vox Regis*, 2; Anonymous letter to James, [early 1624], BL Harley 1581, fol. 395r.

¹²¹ "Tom Tell Troth", fol. 203r.

implausible, explaining how the views of a commoner could find their way into court-sponsored polemic. Yet in some ways the actual existence of these speakers was beside the point. Even those tracts that placed opinions in the mouths of literary or figurative speakers like *Piers Ploughman* or *Tom Tell-truth* had something of the “truthiness” of Scott’s *Vox Populi*. Even if grievances were not attributed to real people, these fictional characters were presented as spokesmen for the kinds of things that real people were saying.

Given the potentially seditious nature of these tracts, it is hardly surprising that most of them were written anonymously, and their authors took pains to justify their unusual actions. They typically posed as patriotic subjects who were passing on what they heard out of loyalty to the King. Since monarchs had always expected magistrates to be on the lookout for seditious speech that might lead to rebellion, their actions could be glossed as being entirely traditional and legitimate. The author of *Tom Tell-Troth* appealed to the word, if not the spirit, of James’ proclamations against lavish speech, which had instructed subjects to inform against those who discussed matters of state. He claimed that the proclamations could not have been intended “to intrapp *your* Subiects and bringe them to the blocke of punishment, but rather out of a pollitique desaigne to sounde their greifes.”¹²² In effect, he was using the proclamations against state matters as an excuse to discuss state matters, and like many of the authors, although he claimed to be addressing the King, his real intended audience was much wider. The spectre of rebellion was frequently raised. Thomas Scott wrote that 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... and I never could read

¹²² *Ibid.*, fols. 202v-3r.

of Prince, who contemned his peoples affections, and wilfully contradicted their general desires, without great *perill*.”¹²³ The authors of these tracts were thus working within the traditional framework of elite ideas about the *vox populi* and rebellion, but drawing very different conclusions about the nature of popular speech and the real threats to the kingdom.

A major justification for the authors was that the King was surrounded by evil councillors who flattered him and prevented the truth from reaching his ears. As the author of “Tom Tell-Troth” wrote, “they that haue the honour to appertayne vnto you haue neither the courage nor the Conscience to acquainte you with the fearefull discontents of the tyme.”¹²⁴ The authors were encouraged in their belief by the King himself, who had found it politically expedient to admit that the truth had been concealed from him when the abuses of monopolists were revealed by the parliament of 1621. Although the tracts represented extraordinary interventions in public debate, their authors argued that they were the only way of informing the King of the truth.

The plain-speaking honesty of the commons was repeatedly contrasted with the corruption and flattery of courtiers. As Scott wrote, “oftentimes both 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 *fauour* and their owne *fortune*.”¹²⁵ The author of “The Teares of the oppressed people of England” complained that “the kinge pleaseth to terme his people Ignorant not vnderstandinge the misteries of state”, but if he

¹²³ Scott, *Vox Regis*, 32.

¹²⁴ “Tom Tell Troth”, fol. 199r.

¹²⁵ Scott, *Vox Regis*, 31.

listened to them, he would find that they were wiser than his councillors.¹²⁶ Scott came close to arguing that the cosmopolitan aristocracy as a whole was potentially corruptible, while the virtuous multitude remained staunchly patriotic. In *The second part of Vox populi* he had Gondomar boast that nobles in England supported the Spanish match, adding that they respected the Spanish “with all obseruance.”¹²⁷ The common people, on the other hand, bore an “inbred spleene toward vs”, as evidenced by the rude and occasionally violent treatment of Spanish ambassadors on the streets of London.¹²⁸

Lip-service was sometime paid to the traditional rhetoric of the vulgar multitude. The author to “Tom Tell-Troth” wrote that the common people were often rash and foolish in their speech.¹²⁹ Nevertheless, the beliefs of the multitude had some value to the King even if they were wrong. As Thomas Scott wrote, “The weaker the information be, the greater strength of iudgement doth he shew, that can make good vse of it: as Physitions behold the state of the sicke patient, in his Vrine or Excrements.”¹³⁰ Some writers went even further, arguing that in many respects, ordinary subjects were better able to discover the truth about the state of the kingdom than James was. A number of vivid metaphors were used to make the point. The author of “Balaam’s Asse” compared James to a mighty Eagle, which was able to discover “moats in the Sunne, and pry into the wayte, and

¹²⁶ “Teares of the oppressed people of England”, fol. 304v.

¹²⁷ Thomas Scott, *The second part of Vox populi* (1624), 11, 35.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 34.

¹²⁹ “Tom Tell Troth”, fol. 202v.

¹³⁰ Scott, *Vox Regis*, 35. For similar sentiments, see also ‘Tom Tell Troth’, fols. 202v-3r.

working of the Stars”, but could not see the facts on the ground as well as the little wren.¹³¹

Several writers compared the commons to mariners who were better able to see approaching rocks than the captain of the “ship of state.”¹³² Thomas Scott used a different metaphor, saying that “as Famine is felt first by the Poore; and as Frost strikes the Valleys, when higher grounds scape free: So euen the Commons are they, where the disorders of a State, & the mischiefs approaching, are first felt, and sonnest discerned.”¹³³

The rhetorical strategies that these tracts employed and the ideas about the multitude that they expressed all had deep roots. The depiction of the countryside as a place of innocence and honest labour can be traced back to Virgil, while the figure of the honest ploughman owes much to William Langland’s *Piers Ploughman*. Written in the aftermath of the Black Death, when the bargaining power and living standards of peasants had improved, Langland’s poem was as much a call for peasants to know their traditional place as a celebration of their virtues.¹³⁴ The anticlericalism of Langland’s poem was seized upon by the Lollards, who circulated their own anticlerical satires, and early reformers continued this tradition, writing several tracts that purported to represent the views of the common people and were often addressed directly to the king.¹³⁵ *A Supplication for the Beggars*, written by Simon Fish and probably published in 1528-9, was written as a plea

¹³¹ “Balaams Asse”, fol. 60v.

¹³² Scott, *Vox Regis*, 24; William Gorges, “Observations, and Ouertures for a Sea Fight vpon our owne Coasts”, BL Lansdowne 213, fol. 45r.

¹³³ Scott, *Vox Regis*, 18.

¹³⁴ John Hatcher, “England in the Aftermath of the Black Death”, *Past & Present* 144 (1994), 18.

¹³⁵ Norbrook, *Poetry and Politics*, 36. *The Plowman’s Tale*, wrongly attributed to Geoffrey Chaucer, was an example of this literature.

from Henry VIII's subjects, who were supposedly being beggared by clerical abuses.¹³⁶ The *Supplication of the Poor Commons*, which was published in 1546 and has been attributed to Henry Brinklow, advocates further clerical reform in a similar manner.¹³⁷

A number of mid sixteenth-century writers known as the "commonwealthsmen" also celebrated humble and hardworking ploughmen while criticising the selfishness of greedy gentlemen, considerably simplifying a complex and stratified social reality.¹³⁸ Although socially conservative, writers like Robert Crowley appealed to a wide audience, asserting that humble people could pass judgement on their social superiors.¹³⁹ While attacking the superstition of the common people, he also attacked the illegal enclosures of the gentry.¹⁴⁰ Some texts written in this tradition of complaint literature, such as *Vox Populi*, *Vox Dei* and *Pyers Plowmans exhortation* are presented as humble petitions from the common people, complaining about economic and social grievances.¹⁴¹

Although the Ploughman tradition did not disappear during the later sixteenth century, it seems that it was undermined by its association with popular disorder in general

¹³⁶ See Frederick J. Furnivall and J. Meadows Cowper (eds.), *Four Supplications* (London, 1871), 1-15. A *Supplication to our moste Soueraigne Lorde Kynge Henry the Eight*, published in 1544, similarly complains about clerical abuses, but does not ventriloquize the poor. *Ibid.*, 19-58.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 61-92.

¹³⁸ McRae, *God Speed the Plough*, 23-57; Norbrook, *Poetry and Politics*.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 45-9.

¹⁴¹ "Vox populi vox dei" in *Tudor Economic Documents*, ed. R.H. Tawney and Eileen Power vol. III (London, 1924), 25-39; *Pyers Plowmans exhortation unto the lordes knyghtes and burgoysses of the Parlyamenthouse* (1550).

and the 1549 rebellions in particular.¹⁴² Protestant complaint literature was suppressed during the reign of Mary I, and there was no significant revival under Elizabeth.¹⁴³ Instead, writers increasingly criticised the backward practices of ignorant ploughmen while satirists presented them as self-interested individuals just like everyone else, rather than innocent victims of covetous landlords.¹⁴⁴ Although Martinist writers drew on the anticlericalism of the Ploughman tradition, other texts written in the same style tended towards general social satire or pastoral rather than the political and religious radicalism of earlier times.¹⁴⁵ The idea that a conspiracy of evil council prevented the monarch from hearing their subjects' just complaints informed controversial Elizabethan political tracts like *Leicester's Commonwealth* and John Stubbe's *The discoverie of a gaping gulf*.¹⁴⁶ The notion of an adjudicating public was also implicit in many Elizabethan works of political and religious polemic.¹⁴⁷ Nevertheless, although the authors of such tracts might write in a racy and

¹⁴² McRae, *God Speed the Plough*, 49-52; Norbrook, *Poetry and Politics*, 43, 49; Keith Wrightson, *Earthly Necessities* (London, 2000), 153.

¹⁴³ McRae, *God Speed the Plough*, 52.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 52-7, 80-109.

¹⁴⁵ For Martinist "ploughman" tracts, see *I Plaine Piers Which Can not Flatter* (1589); *Plaine Percevall the Peace-Maker of England* (1590).

¹⁴⁶ D.C. Peck (ed.), *Leicester's Commonwealth* (London, 1985), 74, 75-6, 96, 189; Lloyd Berry (ed.), *John Stubbs Gaping Gulf, with Letters and other relevant Documents* (Charlottesville VA, 1968), 30. For the ambivalent representations of the common people in Elizabethan drama, see J.E. Howard and P. Strohm, "The imaginary 'Commons'", *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 37:3 (2007), 5462-71; Andy Wood, *Riot, Rebellion and Popular Politics in Early Modern England* (Basingstoke, 2002), 1-5.

¹⁴⁷ For the Elizabethan "public sphere", see Peter Lake, "The politics of 'popularity' and the public sphere: the 'monarchical republic' of Elizabeth I defends itself" in *The politics of the public sphere in early modern England*, ed. Peter Lake and Steven Pincus (Manchester, 2007), 59-94; Peter Lake and Michael Questier,

accessible style that potentially appealed to a broad audience, they did not claim to speak for the multitude. John Stubbe instructed the “meaner sort” to “know your place to be in all subjection and peaceable patience.”¹⁴⁸

While literary scholars tend to argue that the radical “ploughman” tradition largely disappeared as a cultural force during the reign of Elizabeth I, the tracts discussed above indicate that it underwent a process of revival and reinvention in the 1620s. Turner’s queries based on common fame, and the subsequent debate on the legitimacy of rumor did not happen in a vacuum. Instead, these events were part of a wider tendency among literate elites to argue that the speech of the common people had value and legitimacy.

The vox populi and social change

This article has sought to demonstrate that Turner’s presentation of queries about Buckingham on the basis of common fame in the parliament of 1626 was a much more radical, damaging and uncompromising act than revisionist historians have tended to argue. Turner revealed and deepened divisions between the crown and some MPs about the scope of “grievances” and parliament’s role in presenting them, as well as the legitimacy of popular speech. Turner’s intervention was not simply an opportunistic political ploy, but part of a wider tendency in political culture for some polemicists to ventriloquise the common people, and to argue that in some respects they were better informed about the threats facing the country than the king himself. Although fears of

“Puritans, papists and the ‘Public Sphere’: The Edmund Campion Affair in Context”, *Journal of Modern History*, 72 (2000), 587-627.

¹⁴⁸ Berry (ed.), *John Stubbs Gaping Gulf*, 92.

popular demagoguery and disorder remained an important element of elite culture, even some of Buckingham's allies were prepared to embrace the idea that popular speech had some legitimacy and to adopt the persona of the "playne Countryman" in their writing.

In effect, the MPs and polemicists considered here were appealing to the authority of public opinion, and as such, the 1620s were a crucial decade in the "invention" of public opinion in England.¹⁴⁹ Of course, "public opinion" had always existed in the sense that rulers had to varying degrees been forced to take the likely reactions of their subjects in to account when formulating policy. In addition, a single, unified public opinion never exists. Instead, by the "invention" of public opinion, proponents of the concept mean its emergence as a legitimating element of political rhetoric. During the 1620s MPs, political pamphleteers and the authors of anonymous tracts increasingly appealed to the authority of a real or imagined "public opinion" (although the phrase was not used), and argued that the support of public opinion conferred legitimacy on particular courses of action to a much greater extent than before.

The question remains why appeals to the authority of "public opinion" underwent something of a revival during the 1620s. Changes in political culture provide part of the explanation. A common theme of the "vox populi" tracts, as well as Turner's queries, was that the King was surrounded by corrupt, flattering courtiers who blocked out the voices of his plain-speaking subjects. As Richard Cust has argued, from the 1590s the court was

¹⁴⁹ For the notion of the "invention" of public opinion, see Keith Michael Baker, "Public Opinion as Political Invention", in *Inventing the French Revolution* (Cambridge, 1990), 167-199; David Zaret, "Petitions and the 'Invention' of Public Opinion in the English Revolution, 1640-1660", *American Journal of Sociology* 101:6 (1996), 1497-1555.

increasingly seen as irredeemably corrupt, and this resulted in the emergence of a new type of idealised “public man” who was untainted by the court and was therefore able to represent the “country” or commonwealth.¹⁵⁰ Such ideas were only encouraged by the large number of sexual and financial scandals that engulfed the Jacobean court from the 1610s onwards. Political events in the early 1620s had reinforced the notion that the monarch could be duped. The court corruption uncovered by the Parliament of 1621 and Buckingham’s relation about the machinations of the Spanish in 1624 both seemed to demonstrate that the king could be misinformed or even manipulated by those around him, and that parliament was the best forum for discovering the truth.¹⁵¹ The anonymous tracts discussed above were also written in the context of the Spanish match negotiations, conflict with parliament and war with Spain. Political crisis and perceived corruption at court legitimated attempts to enlist and mobilise various publics in a way that might have seemed unacceptable under other circumstances.

In addition, as David Underdown has argued, elite and popular political culture increasingly converged in the early seventeenth century. Hatred for Buckingham, fear of popery and opposition to arbitrary taxation were expressed by the “middling sort”, and perhaps their poorer neighbours, as much as by gentlemen.¹⁵² Many of the grievances complained about in the 1620s, from billeting, piracy and taxation to the threat of popery had the potential to affect the whole of society. The increased circulation of news around

¹⁵⁰ Cust, “The ‘public man’”, 116-43.

¹⁵¹ Lockyer, *Buckingham*, ch. 4; Robert Zaller, *The Parliament of 1621: A Study in Constitutional Conflict* (Berkeley, 1971), ch. 2; Cogswell, *Blessed Revolution*, 171-3.

¹⁵² David Underdown *A Freeborn People: Politics and the Nation in Seventeenth-Century England* (Oxford, 1996), 10, 33-4, 44-5; David Underdown, *Revel, Riot and Rebellion* (Oxford, 1989), 123-6.

the country, often in forms that a popular audience could easily understand, lent plausibility to claims that the political views of a relatively well-informed multitude might have some value.¹⁵³ The division of political interests between elites and the common people implicit in the language of the “vulgar multitude” was therefore much less clear-cut in the early seventeenth century than it had been in the sixteenth.

This convergence is to some extent reflected in the social vision of the “ploughman” tracts and libels of the 1620s, which rarely distinguished between the interests of rich and poor but instead frequently claimed that grievances were universal. The “commonwealthsmen” of the mid sixteenth century had pitted the common people against enclosing landlords, claiming that the interests of these groups were often, although not ideally, opposed. By contrast, many of the tracts written in the 1620s derived much of their rhetorical force from the idea that the *whole* of society was suffering as a result of the policies pursued by the regime, and was united against them. Although Thomas Scott came close to setting a patriotic, Protestant commonalty against a nobility that often sympathised with Spain, he also implied that Catholic conspiracy was in some vague sense responsible for the ills of the entire kingdom. As Peter Lake has pointed out, everything from “sheep rot to slack husbandry to the corruption of the court and the (temporary) negligence of the nobility” could be attributed to the presence of the Spanish ambassador.¹⁵⁴ Indeed, rather than distinguishing between the interests of social groups,

¹⁵³ Richard Cust, 'News and Politics in Early Seventeenth Century England', *Past and Present* 112 (1986), 60-90; F.J. Levy, 'How information spread amongst the gentry, 1550-1640', *Journal of British Studies* 21:2 (1982), pp. 11-34; Bellany, “Rayling rymes and vaunting verse”.

¹⁵⁴ Peter Lake, ‘Constitutional Consensus’, 821.

some writers argued that the commons and the nobility were equally oppressed.¹⁵⁵ Rather than attacking the gentry, they attacked foreign ambassadors, Catholics, evil councillors and even the king himself. Ironically, it was the tracts that circulated within the regime that echoed the more oppositional model of the commonwealthsmen, setting “covetous landlords” and clever lawyers against the common people and appealing to the crown’s traditional role in alleviating the social and economic pressures they faced.¹⁵⁶ While Elizabethan “ploughman” tracts had adapted to the realities of urbanisation and social change, the Buckinghamite tracts to some extent harked back to an imagined, simplified social order of ploughmen and landlords reminiscent of the mid-Tudor complaint literature.

Moreover, although ruling elites shared a strong concern for order in the late Elizabethan and early Stuart periods, popular rebellion was no longer the threat it had once been. The

Oxfordshire Rising of 1596, the Midland Rising of 1607 and the Western Rising of 1626-32 indicated that the threat of popular disorder had not disappeared.¹⁵⁷ Enclosure and food riots were widespread throughout the period, and fears of social disorder were of course an important factor in generating support for Charles during the English Civil War.¹⁵⁸ Nevertheless, the last really dangerous popular rebellions had taken place in 1549, and these were a distant memory by the 1620s. There is some truth to Lawrence Stone’s

¹⁵⁵ “The Teares of the oppressed people of England”, 1623, Bod. Tanner 73, fol. 304r.

¹⁵⁶ “To his sacred majesty, Ab Ignoto”, *Cabala Sice Scrinia Sacra* (1691); “A post Caution or rather a post mointion to the Common Speakers in the Lower house of Commons the two last Parliaments”, BL Add. 4155, fols. 256; 84v; 82v-83r.

¹⁵⁷ John Walter, “A ‘Rising of the People’?: The Oxforsshire Rising of 1596”, *Past & Present* 107:1 (1985), 90-143; Buchanan Sharp, *In Contempt of All Authority* (London, 1980), ch. 4.

¹⁵⁸ John Walter, *Crowds and Popular Politics in Early Modern England* (Manchester, 2006), 183-6.

observation that the fear of rebellion, which “might have held congeries of ruling elites together and deterred them from fighting amongst themselves” had become much less severe by the early seventeenth century.¹⁵⁹ While Charles and Buckingham raised the spectre of popular demagoguery and rebellion in 1626, many MPs appear to have thought that the threat of disorder was less severe than the threat of popish conspiracy. As Ann Hughes has argued, “a crucial aspect of the period before the civil was is that elites were divided over what the major threats to social order were and over the best ways of dealing with them.”¹⁶⁰

Social change may also have played a part in legitimising popular speech. Social explanations for political conflict in the early Stuart period have long been unfashionable.¹⁶¹ As Ann Hughes and Robert Brenner have argued, however, it is possible to reject deterministic social explanations for the English Civil War while acknowledging that politics did not take place in a social vacuum, and that links between social change and political conflict might exist.¹⁶² Inflation and the growth of agrarian capitalism in the sixteenth and early seventeenth century polarised the lower orders of society. The language of social description increasingly distinguished between a “better” sort and a “meaner” or “poorer” sort of the multitude.¹⁶³ The “better sort” of yeoman farmer became increasingly prosperous, benefitting from enclosure and the increase in the price of food

¹⁵⁹ Lawrence Stone, *The Causes of the English Revolution 1529-1642* (London, 1972), 79.

¹⁶⁰ Hughes, *Causes of the English Civil War*, 133.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, , 114.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 122; Robert Brenner, *Merchants and Revolution: Commercial Change, Political Conflict, and London's Overseas Traders, 1550-1653* (Cambridge, 1993), 644-9.

¹⁶³ Wrightson, “Sorts of People”, 36-7.

relative to waged labour. The incorporation of the “honest” “better sort” into the structures of the state through local officeholding, and the tendency of this group towards puritanism, meant that the upper levels of village society took an increasing role in disciplining their poorer neighbours, who were increasingly criminalised, or at least viewed as feckless and immoral.¹⁶⁴

These social divisions meant that the traditional strand of elite rhetoric that presented the common people as a monolithic “many-headed multitude” whose views should be ignored was harder to sustain in the early seventeenth century than it had once been. A few of the MPs and authors that have been considered here explicitly distinguished between the “better sort” and their poorer neighbours. In the debate on common fame in 1626, John Wilde argued that “fame” was legitimate, but only if it arose among the “better sort”.¹⁶⁵ Robert Cotton, in a manuscript tract written in 1628, claimed that he was presenting the opinions of the “better sort” of the multitude about the dangers the kingdom faced.¹⁶⁶ A “better sort” of the common people who were aligned with the economic and political interests of the political elite could be much more easily enlisted as legitimate allies in political arguments, even if the remainder of the multitude were still treated with traditional elite hostility. This does not mean that there was a direct link between social change and political conflict in the 1620s. Rather it suggests that social change helped to legitimate certain arguments and stances relating to popular speech and

¹⁶⁴ Wrightson, *English Society*, 181-9, 234-5; Wood, *1549 Rebellions*, 187-94. For the moral and social connotations of the word ‘honest’, see Andy Wood, “‘A lyttul worde ys tresson’: Loyalty, Denunciation, and Popular Politics in Tudor England”, *Journal of British Studies* 48:4 (2009), 840-2.

¹⁶⁵ *Proceedings in Parliament 1626* vol. III, 45.

¹⁶⁶ “The Danger wherein the Kingdome nowe standeth: and the Remedy”, BL Harley 160, fol. 6v.

opinion, which did indeed foster political conflict between Buckingham's parliamentary critics and the crown.