

Rumor and “Common Fame”: The Impeachment of the Duke of Buckingham and Public Opinion in Early Stuart England

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Abstract This article reexamines the parliamentary impeachment of the Duke of Buckingham, the royal favorite of King Charles I, by placing this event in the broader contexts of political culture and social change in early Stuart England. Buckingham's enemies based the impeachment on “common fame,” claiming that his faults were a matter of public knowledge. Charles, however, believed that the charges were based on seditious rumors. The impeachment undercut an important element of elite rhetoric that associated rumor with the rebellious multitude, revealing ideological divisions over the nature of grievances and the legitimacy of popular speech. The article contextualizes the impeachment within 1620s underground literature that purported to present the views of the common people, arguing that there was a wider tendency to ventriloquize public opinion. When Buckingham's allies produced their own tracts featuring the persona of the “honest ploughman,” appeals to the authority of public opinion were clearly gaining in strength. By explaining this development in political culture with reference to the growth of a more politically reliable “middling sort,” the article contributes to debates about the relationship between social change and political conflict in early Stuart England.

On 11 March 1626, Dr. Samuel Turner launched an attack in the House of Commons on the Duke of Buckingham, the royal favorite of Charles I. In his speech, Turner raised six “queries” attacking the duke's conduct and his 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 monopolized office and given important posts to incompetent members of his family? Did he not secretly support and favor Catholics? Did he not sell honors, places of judicature, and positions in the church to the highest bidder? Finally, was Buckingham not responsible for the disastrous failure of the recent naval expedition against Cadiz, since he had entrusted others to command it, despite being lord admiral and general of the forces?¹ Rather than citing definite

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¹ For copies of Turner's queries, see TNA, SP 16/22, fols. 99r, 101r; Landsdowne 491, fol. 149r, British Library (hereafter BL); Harley 161, fol. 59v, BL; Harley 161, fol. 59r–v, BL; BL Add. MSS. 22474, fol.

evidence or witnesses against the duke, Turner based his queries on “common fame.” By doing so, Turner claimed 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 hopes that had greeted the start of Charles’s 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 James I away from an 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. When the war proved to be a disaster, as lord admiral and royal favorite, Buckingham attracted much of the blame; his critics included MPs and courtiers from across the political spectrum.³ Buckingham 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’s marriage to 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 unpopular with Charles’s more zealous Protestant subjects. At the same time, pirates based in Dunkirk seized the opportunity of war to pillage English shipping.

Nonetheless, 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 Sir John Eliot, tried to investigate the expenditure of the parliamentary subsidies granted in 1624, as well as Buckingham’s alleged responsibility for the

11v; Tanner 72, fol. 109b, Bodleian Library (hereafter Bod.); Carreg-lwyd Deposit MS 651, National Library of Wales; ZCR 63/2/21, Cheshire Archives. For copies in letters and diaries, see Zuane Pesaro to the Doge and Senate, 27 March 1626, *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 1625–6*, ed. Allen B. Hinds (London, 1913), 366 (hereafter CSPV); Mead to Stuteville, 17 March 1626, Harley 390, fol. 27r, BL; London newsletter, 18 March 1626, Harley 390, fol. 29r, BL; Francis Stareshmore to Henry Hastings, Earl of Huntingdon, 23 March 1626, Carter 77, fol. 274, Bod.; TNA, C115/108/8630, James Palmer to Scudamore, 18 March 1626; Anonymous diary of public events, MS 0.7.3, fol. 3v, Trinity College, Cambridge University.

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), chap. 8.

⁴ For the attack on Buckingham in 1625, see Maija Jansson and William B. Bidwell, eds., *Proceedings in Parliament 1625* (New Haven, 1987), 394–99, 448–49; Simon Adams, “The Protestant Cause: Religious Alliance with the West European Calvinist Communities as a Political Issue in England, 1585–1630” (PhD diss., Oxford University, 1973), 368–69; Christopher Thompson, “The Origins of the Parliamentary Middle Group, 1625–1629,” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th ser., 22 (December 1972): 71–86, at 78. See also “A Speech made by Sr Robert Cotton, knt and Baronett in ye Lower house of Parliament assembled at Oxford 1625,” Egerton 3378, fol. 15v, BL, which was not delivered. I am grateful to Noah Millstone for drawing this source to my attention.

decline of Anglo-French relations as a result of his rearrest 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 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*, minimized 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 rather than remove him from office. There were private negotiations between Buckingham and his critics to reach a settlement, and Turner's queries were written in such a way as to leave the door to compromise open.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 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

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 *Faction and Parliament: Essays on Early Stuart History*, ed. Kevin Sharpe (Oxford, 1978), 173–207.

⁶ Ball, "Sir John Eliot," 181–83.

⁷ Brennan Pursell, "James I, Gondomar and the Dissolution of the Parliament of 1621," *History* 85, no. 279 (July 2000): 428–45; Richard Cust, "Prince Charles and the Second Session of the 1621 Parliament," *English Historical Review* 122, no. 496 (April 2007): 427–41; John Guy, "The Origins of the Petition of Right Reconsidered," *Historical Journal* 25, no. 2 (June 1982): 289–312; L. J. Reeve, "The Legal Status of the Petition of Right," *Historical Journal* 29, no. 2 (June 1986): 257–77.

⁸ Russell, *Parliaments and English Politics*, chap. 5. Russell's argument regarding negotiations and his claim that that Buckingham's opponents sought his "reformation" rather than his "ruin" is based on a misreading of the evidence. See David Coast, "Reformation' or 'Ruin'? The Impeachment of the Duke of Buckingham and Early Stuart Politics," *Historical Research* (forthcoming). For the impeachment of Buckingham, see also Colin Tite, *Impeachment and Parliamentary Judicature in Early Stuart England* (London, 1974), chap. 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*, vol. 25 (Palermo, 1967), 35–48; Jess Stoddart Flemion, "The Dissolution of Parliament in 1626: A Reevaluation," *English Historical Review* 87, no. 345 (January 1972): 784–90, at 787; Robert Zaller, *The Discourse of Legitimacy in Early Modern England* (Stanford, 2007), 632–641.

⁹ Bellany and Cogswell, *Murder of King James*, chaps. 8–12.

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, no. 226 (April 2011): 618–36; Thomas Cogswell, "The Returne of the 'Dead Alive': The Earl of Bristol and Dr Eglissham in the Parliament of 1626 and in Caroline Political Culture," *English Historical Review* 128, no. 532 (June 2013): 535–70; Mark Kishlansky, "Debate: Charles I: A Case of Mistaken Identity," *Past and Present* 205, no. 1 (November 2009): 175–237, at 233; Andrew Thrush, *The House of Commons 1604–1629* (Cambridge, 2010), 1:426;

This article offers a new interpretation of Turner's queries by placing them in the context of early Stuart political culture. Firstly, I use Turner's queries to explore the relationship between Parliament and the wider nation. While MPs presented their actions as consistent with their role as the mouthpiece of the people, Charles suspected that grievances were invented at Westminster, and the distortion of the queries as they circulated around the country meant that MPs both reflected and exacerbated Buckingham's growing unpopularity. The conflict over Turner's words reveal growing ideological divisions between the crown and parts of the political nation about the nature and cause of "grievances" and Parliament's role in presenting them.

This article further places 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's perspective, Turner was acting as a dangerous demagogue by presenting vulgar rumors about the duke's behavior as the basis for a parliamentary investigation. Turner and his allies saw matters differently and were careful to distinguish common fame—the settled opinion of the community—from rumor. When MPs debated whether common fame was a legal basis for investigation, they argued for the legitimacy of popular speech in a way that ran counter to traditional elite views.

MPs' defense of proceeding on the basis of common fame was part of a wider shift in attitudes toward the *vox populi*. A number of manuscript and printed tracts and libels reveal wider divisions in elite political culture about the legitimacy of popular speech, suggesting that appeals from public opinion were growing in rhetorical strength in the 1620s.¹¹ These tracts, which represented a revival of the "ploughman" tradition of political and religious polemic, gave voice to the grievances of the plain-speaking commoner, and argued that they were better informed about matters of state than the monarch. Even Buckingham's allies wrote ploughman tracts in response to the impeachment, arguing that the duke was, in fact, rather more popular than his parliamentary enemies. 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 this played an important part in substantiating royal fears about demagoguery in parliament.

Finally, this article seeks to place arguments about the legitimacy of the *vox populi*, and the political conflict to which they contributed, in the context of long-term social change. MPs' attempts to mobilize the common people have never been integrated into existing models of social relations.¹² Such behavior seems difficult to reconcile with an elite culture that sometimes seemed obsessed with the threat of disorder,

David Colclough, *Freedom of Speech in Early Stuart England* (Cambridge, 2005), 191; Derek Hirst, *England in Conflict 1603–1660* (London, 1990), 117.

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), chap. 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), 65–69; 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 in Early Modern England*, ed. Tim Harris (Basingtoke, 2001), 67–98. For

rebellion, and social revolution.¹³ Social historians have tended to leave parliamentary history to political historians, yet the debate about common fame in 1626 can tell us much about social relations and elite attitudes toward order and the common people. The growth of the “better sort” and their incorporation into the structures of the state during the sixteenth century 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 views of at least *part* of the multitude became 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, which meant that traditional elite fears about popular speech and sedition were less severe than they had been in the immediate aftermath of the mid-Tudor rebellions.¹⁵ An investigation of Turner’s queries can help us 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. As a supporter of Turner wrote, “[l]et anie member of the house examine his owne breaste whether he hath not heard their obiections frequentlie made abroad.”¹⁷ Moreover, Turner had not repeated the worst rumors about Buckingham, just those that would best identify the cause of the nation’s ills.¹⁸ Given claims later made by Buckingham’s allies that he was actually more popular than his parliamentary enemies, Turner’s claims cannot be taken at face value. It was entirely possible, as Charles tended to suspect, that Buckingham’s enemies were trying to make him unpopular by manufacturing rumors against him. 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.

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*, chap. 6; J. A. Sharpe, *Early Modern England: A Social History, 1550–1760* (London, 1987), 110–20.

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. Penelope J. Corfield (Oxford, 1991), 30–52; Steve Hindle, *The State and Social Change in Early Modern England, 1550–1640* (Basingstoke, 2000).

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

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

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

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

In order to understand Turner's intervention, we first need to examine his political tactics. The presentation of Turner's queries 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 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 stepped forward, 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. 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 politics. Turner was a client of the Earl of Pembroke, one of Buckingham's chief rivals at court.²⁰ He was not, as Conrad Russell implied, merely Pembroke's loyal pawn. Nevertheless, there is abundant evidence to suggest some degree of coordination between Buckingham's enemies at court and in the House of Commons.²¹ Turner's queries allowed the duke'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 behavior as questions rather than definite charges, Turner also posed 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 This was a legacy of earlier assumptions about his support for the Spanish match and the general tendency for royal favorites 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 1623–24 and the "blessed revolution" that followed was short-lived.²³ The continuing threat posed by the Spanish faction led Buckingham to remove former supporters of the match from power and to pack the Privy 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

¹⁹ William B. Bidwell and Maija Jansson, eds., *Proceedings in Parliament 1626* (New Haven, 1992), 3:317.

²⁰ Ball, "Sir John Eliot," 184–85.

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 ser., 10 (1872), 325–26.

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

²³ Cogswell, *Blessed Revolution*; idem, "The People's Love: The Duke of Buckingham and Popularity," in *Politics, Religion and Popularity*, ed. Thomas Cogswell, Richard Cust, and Peter Lake (Cambridge, 2002), 211–34; idem, "Thomas Middleton and the Court, 1624: A Game at Chess in Context," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 47, no. 4 (Autumn 1984): 273–88.

²⁴ Adams, "Protestant Cause," 359–60.

ships to suppress Huguenots in France, and a disastrous military expedition under the Count of Mansfeld. Early in the new reign, the Earl of Kellie observed that Buckingham's close relationship with Charles was "not pleasing to moste men nather of one degree nor uther," and the Earl of Clare referred to "complaininges 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 about his "presumption" in giving the ailing James I 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 in the city.

Turner appears to have drawn 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 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 A 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 favored recusants, and the rumors about his sexual affairs presented in Eliot's draft were not explicitly repeated in parliament.³² The queries therefore presented widely circulating rumors about Buckingham in a somewhat sanitized and ambiguous form.

²⁵ Kellie to Mar, 7 April 1625, *Supplementary Report on the Manuscripts of the Earl of Mar and Kellie*, ed. Henry Paton, Historical Manuscripts Commission 60 (London, 1930), 227; John Holles to the Earl of Arundel, 28 January 1626, *Letters of John Holles 1587–1637*, vol. 2, ed. P. R. Seddon, Thoroton Society Record Series 35 (Nottingham, 1983), 321.

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," in *Early Stuart Libels: An Edition of Poetry from Manuscript Sources*, ed. Alastair Bellany and Andrew McRae. Early Modern Literary Studies Text, 1st ser. (Bristol, 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* (London, 1653), 160.

²⁸ Kellie to Mar, 22 March 1625, *Mar and Kellie*, 226. See Bellany and Cogswell, *Murder of King James*, 90–91.

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

³⁰ Accusations against Buckingham, BL Add. MSS. 4155, fols. 143r–44v; EL 655/2, Cornwall Record office. Eliot seems to have employed at least one agent to gather information in London. See TNA, SP 16/18, fol. 95v, "Sir Iohn Eliotts Instructions to his Agents."

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

³² When Eliot presented the charges against Buckingham in the House of Lords, he did glancingly refer to the "veneries" of Sejanus. See Bidwell and Jansson, eds., *Proceedings in Parliament 1626*, 3:223.

By seizing upon public rumors about Buckingham as the basis for their attack, MPs 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 afterward. Moreover, the ambiguous and suggestive wording of the queries meant that while one thing was being said in parliament, a much more damaging message could be received in the country. The queries often became distorted and exaggerated as they spread, becoming 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 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 ... 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 as it circulated around the country. Turner's original query had trod relatively carefully, asking "whether there be not a secret favoring 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 suggested that Buckingham was himself a papist. One described him as "a seeming Protestant" who was nevertheless "a faouer and supporter

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 Bidwell and Jansson, eds., *Proceedings in Parliament 1626*, 2:268n60. 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 Landsdowne 491, fol. 149r, BL; Zuane Pesaro to the Doge and Senate, 27 March 1626 n.s., CSPV 1625–26, 366; Anonymous diary of public events, MS 0.7.3, fol. 3v, Trinity College, Cambridge University. 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, Harley 390, fol. 27r, BL.

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

³⁵ "Dr. Turner's queries against the duke of Buckingham," Tanner 72, fol. 109b, Bod.

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

³⁷ Mead to Stuteville, 17 March 1626, Harley 390, fol. 27r, BL.

³⁸ Bidwell and Jansson, eds., *Proceedings in Parliament 1626*, 2:261–62.

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

⁴⁰ Ibid.

of Jesuits 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, it was revived later when it was alleged that he had bowed to the sacrament in Spain.⁴³

Turner’s queries were both a demonstration of and a means to increase Buckingham’s unpopularity. 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.⁴⁴ Indeed, Charles seems to have assumed that this was his enemies’ aim. In a proclamation published after the dissolution, he wrote that the Commons’ Remonstrance was intended to “prepossesse the world with an ill opinion” of Buckingham.⁴⁵ By this point, even more damaging allegations about Buckingham’s involvement in James’s death had emerged. Even John Rous, a relatively neutral provincial observer, worried that the worst reports about the duke might be true. MPs’ 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 toward 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 queries was consistent with parliament’s traditional and legitimate role as the mouthpiece for the whole realm.⁴⁷ During the late Elizabethan and early Stuart period, MPs increasingly stressed their duty to communicate the grievances of the people—particularly the poor, who could not speak for

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

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

⁴³ Bidwell and Jansson, eds., *Proceedings in Parliament 1626*, 3:162–63.

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, no. 1 (March 2004): 1–25.

⁴⁵ *A proclamation prohibiting the publishing, dispersing and reading of a declaration or remonstrance, drawn by some committees of the Commons-House of the late dissolved Parliament, and intended to haue beene preferred by them to his Maiestie*, 16 June 1626 (London, 2nd ed.), STC 8826.

⁴⁶ Mary Anne Everett Wood Green, ed., *Diary of John Rous*, Publications of the Camden Society 66 (London, 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 “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, CCA-U66/1, fol. 82r, Canterbury Cathedral Archives.

⁴⁷ Zaller, *Discourse of Legitimacy*, 496–97.

themselves—and to seek redress for them.⁴⁸ A willingness to communicate grievances without fear of disfavor 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, including when a committee to investigate grievances was created so that MPs could "hear the people."⁵⁰

Disagreements between king and Parliament about the latter's role in presenting grievances had been growing since the beginning of James I's reign. Although MPs presented themselves as neutral spokesmen, James became increasingly suspicious that they were actively seeking out or inventing complaints in order to bring his government into disrepute. When presented with a petition of grievances in 1606, he asked "whether the Countreyes 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 might try to create the impression that "all things in this government were amiss and out of frame."⁵² Presciently, he warned that the Commons risked becoming "a place for Pasquils" where the king himself might be brought into disrepute and his prerogatives redefined as grievances.⁵³ A tract written by Lord Chancellor Ellesmere the following year similarly criticized parliament's recent attempts to "contrue and sett forth many supposed grievances in the state and gouernement," arguing that this was part of a larger conspiracy to expand the powers of Parliament at the expense of the prerogative.⁵⁴ James repeated his suspicions that MPs simply invented grievances in order to create public discontent 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 the administration of justice and commercial matters.⁵⁶ These arose through the corruption of individuals and their failure to observe royal instructions, rather than any more fundamental

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), 85–121, at 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 Bidwell and Jansson, eds., *Proceedings in Parliament 1626*, 2:114.

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

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

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 190–91.

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

⁵⁵ Sommerville, *King James VI and I*, 255; James's speech at the closing of the parliament of 1624, BL Add. MSS. 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*, vol. 1, *Royal Proclamations of King James I, 1603–1625*, ed. James F. Larkin and Paul L. Hughes (Oxford, 1973), 568–70.

problem with government.⁵⁷ He emphasized 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’s desire to establish an alternative and more tractable mechanism for addressing grievances, while also signaling his kindly readiness to hear his subjects’ complaints.

Perceptions of the nature and significance of “grievances” became even more polarized under Charles. Like James, Charles emphasized that he was willing to redress grievances, but only those that were “just” and “true,” and presented in a “dutiful and 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 The redress of grievances was conflated with demands for taxation. 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’s and Charles’s attitudes developed in a context in which parliamentary definitions of “grievances” were becoming much more expansive and new procedures for presenting them were introduced. While grievances were usually presented individually

⁵⁷ See Sommerville, ed., *King James VI and I*, 190.

⁵⁸ “Proclamation against publique Grievances,” 569.

⁵⁹ “A Proclamation declaring His Majesties grace to his Subjects, touching matters complained of, as publique greevances,” 10 July 1621, in *Royal Proclamations of King James I, 1603–1625*, 519.

⁶⁰ “Proclamation against publique Grievances,” 569.

⁶¹ Lord Keeper’s speech to the Lords and Commons, 29 March 1626, Bidwell and Jansson, eds., *Proceedings in Parliament 1626*, 2:392; Letter from Charles to the Commons, 20 April 1626, *Proceedings in Parliament 1626*, 3:36; “A declaration of the true causes which moued His Maiestie to assemble, and after inforced him to dissolve the last two meetings in Parliament,” 30 June 1626, STC 9246, 5; Letter from Charles to the Commons, 20 March 1626, *Proceedings in Parliament 1626*, 3:324.

⁶² Charles’s speech to the House of Commons, 15 March 1626, Bidwell and Jansson, eds., *Proceedings in Parliament 1626*, 2:294.

⁶³ Charles’s letter to the Commons, 20 March 1626, Bidwell and Jansson, eds., *Proceedings in Parliament 1626*, 2:324. See also Charles’s speech to the House of Commons, 15 March 1626, *Proceedings in Parliament 1626*, 2:294; Buckingham’s speech to the House of Commons, 30 March 1626, *Proceedings in Parliament 1626*, 2:405.

⁶⁴ Buckingham’s speech to the House of Commons, 30 March 1626, Bidwell and Jansson, eds., *Proceedings in Parliament 1626*, 2:405.

under Elizabeth, under James the Commons began collecting them and presenting them as a petition.⁶⁵ At first, these petitions did not fundamentally criticize royal government. Instead, petitions presented in 1606, 1610, 1624, and 1625 complained about unconnected matters of varying importance, such as impositions, patents for lighthouses, and the conduct of the merchant adventurers.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.⁶⁸ By 1626, grievances were increasingly seen by MPs as fundamental and interrelated threats to the commonwealth caused by 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 novel or questionable political actions by appealing to a nonexistent 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 favorite himself.

The duke’s allies did not allow Parliament’s claim 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 tracts 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 manuscripts, which was addressed to the king and may have been intended only for internal consumption, claimed that the duke’s opponents consisted 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

⁶⁵ For the presentation of grievances in the 1605–1606 session of James’s 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* (New Haven, 1997), 302–5. For the petition of grievances in 1626, see Bidwell and Jansson, eds., *Proceedings in Parliament 1626*, 3:315–36.

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

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁶⁹ Michael Calvin McGee, “The ‘Ideograph’: A Link Between Rhetoric and Ideology,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 66, no. 1 (February 1980): 1–16.

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

same against the King in Parliament.” These gentlemen diverted the attention of the people from their own economic oppression by blaming the commons’ grievances on Buckingham and the “ill government of the King.”⁷¹

Another remarkable manuscript tract written in defense of Buckingham went even further to dispel the notion that the Commons represented the commonwealth. Although it does not appear to have circulated widely, it was clearly written for a wide audience. The author was said to be “a playne Countryman” from Worcestershire whose writings had been found in his pocket after he 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 the author, parliament had raised a “greate Clamor” against Buckingham, 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 and would eat 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. Legal expenses forced the people to “waste more every yeare in suites then twentie subsidies,” 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 Commons was full of empty oratory. Lawyers were able to make “longe and intricate speaches which amuse[d] 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 hearers didn’t 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.

⁷¹ “To his sacred majesty, Ab Ignoto,” in *Cabala Sive Scrinia Sacra*, 3rd ed. (London, 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. MSS. 4155, fols. 77r, 85v.

⁷³ Ibid., fol. 84v.

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

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

RUMOR, 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, its leaders appeared to justify Charles's developing fears of a popular conspiracy 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 authorized all of the duke's actions, he interpreted an investigation of his favorite 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 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 played a part in numerous medieval and early modern rebellions, since reports about the imposition of new taxes or other government actions could legitimize 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 slander and seditious reports that might undermine proper obedience to authority, particularly when these rumors were stirred up by 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

⁷⁶ For the development of this conspiracy theory, see Richard Cust, "Charles I and Popularity," in Cogswell, Cust, and Lake, eds., *Politics, Religion and Popularity*, 235–58.

⁷⁷ See Virgil's *Aeneid*, book 4. 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," *Historical Journal* 40, no. 3 (September 1997): 597–620; Daniel Woolf, "News, History and the Construction of the Present in Early Modern England," in *The Politics of Information in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Brendan Dooley and Sabrina Baron (Abingdon, 2001), 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 (London, 1857–74), 12:123–30.

⁷⁹ David Cressy, *Dangerous Talk* (Oxford, 2010), 29, 37.

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

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 defense of Buckingham castigated those who would “move soe many Iealousies, rumours, and mis-interptetations” 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 Iudge of truth, but Loue lyes, and scandalls the food of Enuy and mallice.”⁸² A letter written to Charles 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

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, *whi*ch ar sayd to haue been carried by *your* greatnes.” Buckingham's enemies planned to make him unpopular, and then to use this as an excuse to beg James to remove him from power.⁸⁴ Turner's presentation of popular rumors against Buckingham appeared to fulfill these long-held plans.

Buckingham himself tended to adopt a more 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 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 favorite, as had attacks on “undertakers” in the

⁸¹ TNA, SP 12/273, fol. 69r–v.

⁸² TNA, SP 16/21, fols. 136r–37r, “Relation made to a freind concerning the present affaires,” 28 February 1626. Conway made similar claims. See TNA, SP 16/523, fols. 73r, Conway to Buckingham, 12 March 1626.

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

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

⁸⁵ Bidwell and Jansson, eds., *Proceedings in Parliament 1626*, 1:565.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 4:161.

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

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 between the monarch and his subjects.⁹⁰ False reports about parliamentary speeches were thought to spread very much like rumors. As the Commons’ remonstrance 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 threat of misinformation between parliament and the crown appeared to be greater.

The notion that political disagreements were mere misunderstandings rather than evidence of fundamental conflict could be a useful fantasy for both sides. The idea 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 denying that MPs had made inflammatory speeches, even when they had. Although 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 ploys 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. 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. 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

⁸⁸ Bidwell and Jansson, eds., *Proceedings in Parliament 1626*, 4:207. See also “Dr. Turner’s explanation,” Tanner 72, fol. 110v, Bod.

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

⁹⁰ Zaller, *Discourse of Legitimacy*, 530; Colclough, *Freedom of Speech*, 139–40, 143, 148–49, 153, 156, 178, 183, 186.

⁹¹ Speaker of the House of Commons to Charles I, June 1626, quoted in John Rushworth, *Historical Collections* (London, 1680), 1:397.

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

⁹³ Bellany and Cogswell, *Murder of King James*, 249–58.

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

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. The Duke of Suffolk had been accused of treason when impeached, and had admitted his guilt—neither of which applied to Buckingham. More recent precedents, 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, “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. Surprisingly, given the MPs’ obsession with the legitimating power of precedents, William Noye suggested that although there were no precedents for proceeding on the basis of common fame, “yet it were good to make one of this.”⁹⁶ A full debate was deferred several times while the investigation into Buckingham continued.⁹⁷

The long delayed but vital debate on common fame was held on 22 April.⁹⁸ Once again, Malet argued that the actions of Buckingham’s attackers were unprecedented.⁹⁹ A large number of MPs then spoke in favor 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.¹⁰⁰

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.¹⁰¹ Edward Littleton argued that there was “a great difference between common fame and rumour. The general voice is common fame. *Vox populi vox Dei*.”¹⁰² To others, common fame derived legitimacy from the social position of the speaker. According to John Wilde, common fame could be used as grounds for accusation, but only if it arose among the “better sort” of the multitude.¹⁰³ 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.”¹⁰⁴ These arguments suggest that defending

⁹⁵ Bidwell and Jansson, eds., *Proceedings in Parliament 1626*, 2:342; 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 Jansson, ed., *Proceedings in Parliament 1614*, 385.

⁹⁶ Bidwell and Jansson, eds., *Proceedings in Parliament 1626*, 2:420.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 344, 357.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 3:45–48. For other copies of the debate, see 44M69/L22/16, Hampshire Record Office; EL 655/4, fols. 21v–23v, Cornwall Record Office.

⁹⁹ Bidwell and Jansson, eds., *Proceedings in Parliament 1626*, 3:45.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 45–50.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 46.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹⁰⁴ EL 655/4, fol. 22v, Cornwall Record Office.

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 an important 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 maneuver. Turner's queries were only raised when the attack on Buckingham was stalling. MPs' attempts to argue that common fame was a legitimate basis for investigation, and to distinguish it from rumor have an air of post facto rationalization and special pleading, 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 articulate some remarkably similar ideas to those expressed by MPs in the debates about the legitimacy of common fame in 1626.¹⁰⁵ These tracts and libels, which purported to present popular rumors and opinions to the king, suggest that there was a wider tendency within early Stuart political culture to argue that the views and reports of the common people had value. Antipopulist hostility towards the "vulgar multitude" and the seditious rumors that circulated among them were important elements of elite rhetoric throughout this period. Nevertheless, by adopting the persona of the multitude, the writers of these tracts presented the common people and their views in a much more favorable light. These tracts suggest that the appeal to common fame in 1626 was not merely an unprincipled political ploy, but was part of a growing 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 grievances of his 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. One tract "draun from obseruacons of the peoples speeches" warned James about his people's fears: that the court would be dominated by Scots, that he would abandon the Dutch alliance, and would "altere the manor of our gouernmente" by continuing to raise subsidies and abandoning jury trials.¹⁰⁶ A "poor man's petition" to the king, which was "thrown about the Court" in 1603 mixed religious and legal

¹⁰⁵ For early Stuart libels, see Alastair Bellany, "Rayling Rymes and Vaunting Verse: Libellous Politics in Early Stuart England, 1603–1628," in *Culture and Politics in Early Stuart England*, ed. Kevin Sharpe and Peter Lake (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, no. 167 (October 1995): 266–85.

¹⁰⁶ "Aduertisements of a Loiall subiect to his Gratiouse Soueraigne draun from obseruacons of the peoples speeches written by an unknown Author in Anno 1603," Harley 35, fols. 460r–v, 461v, BL.

grievances with complaints about high political matters.¹⁰⁷ The Commons' *Apology* of 1604, which was written from the perspective of the "poor Commons" and "the subject" rather than MPs, was reminiscent of this underground subgenre.¹⁰⁸ Shortly before James's journey to Scotland in 1617, another manuscript tract presented popular fears about disorder, rebellion, and the unchecked growth of London.¹⁰⁹ Although these tracts contained material that James would hardly have approved of, the complaints and fears they expressed were generally couched in 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 Commons of poore distressed England" attacked monopolists and corrupt courtiers, claiming that everything had been better in Elizabeth's days.¹¹⁰ The author of another libel, "The Common Peoples Apollegy to the Queene of Bohemia," claimed that the "knotty fistid Ploweman" and "poore mechannickes" of England were eager to fight on the continent, but were being restrained by James.¹¹¹ "Tom Tell Troth," written in 1622, complained about the influence of Catholics at court and James's failure to intervene in the Thirty Years' War.¹¹² Some tracts expressed discontent at James's attempts to censor the discussion of politics.¹¹³ "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 Comunalitie 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."¹¹⁴

A few printed pamphlets, such as Thomas Scott's *Vox Populi*, also claimed to represent the people's views.¹¹⁵ *Vox Populi* may seem a puzzling title for a tract that was supposedly based on an intercepted account of a secret meeting of elite Spanish councilors. 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

¹⁰⁷ "The poore mans petition to the King," AYL/186, Norfolk Record Office. I am grateful to Andy Wood for drawing this source to my attention.

¹⁰⁸ Zaller, *Discourse of Legitimacy*, 576–84.

¹⁰⁹ "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," Landsdowne 213, fols. 57v–60v, BL.

¹¹⁰ "If Saints in heaven cann either see or heare," in Bellany and McRae, eds., *Early Stuart Libels*.

¹¹¹ "The Common Peoples Apollegy to the Queene of Bohemia. 1623," *ibid.*

¹¹² "Tom Tell Troth or a Free Discourse touchinge the Murmurs of the tyme directed to his Maiestie by way of humble advertisement," Tanner 73, fols. 199r–230v, Bod.

¹¹³ See Cogswell, *Blessed Revolution*, 20–35. For the issue of freedom of speech in general, see Colclough, *Freedom of Speech*.

¹¹⁴ "The Teares of the oppressed people of England," 1623, Tanner 73, fol. 304r, Bod. It is possible that this was the tract that provoked James's poem "The wiper of the Peoples teares," which was in turn answered by "An answer to the wiper away of the Peoples teares," another poem that ventriloquized the common people.

¹¹⁵ Thomas Scott, *Vox Populi* (1620); Peter Lake, "'Constitutional Consensus' and Puritan Opposition in the 1620s: Thomas Scott and the Spanish Match," *Historical Journal* 25, no. 4 (December 1982): 805–25.

was shared by the mainstream of English opinion. Scott had observed “the general feares, discontents, and griuances 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.”¹¹⁶ Similarly, John Reynolds’s *Votivae Angliae* drew much of its rhetorical force from its claim to present the wishes of the people to go to war with Spain.¹¹⁷

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 public opinion to bolster their arguments. An anonymous letter addressed to James in early 1624 claimed to represent the opposition of the people to the recent turn toward war with Spain and accused Buckingham of conspiring to usurp royal authority.¹¹⁸ 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 excluded minorities of Catholics and evil councilors, as Scott did when he referred to the “best affected in the State.”¹¹⁹ 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’s policies, but refused to give 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 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 claimed to approximate the truth, as Scott did in *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.

¹¹⁶ Thomas Scott, *Vox Regis* (1624), 2–3.

¹¹⁷ John Reynolds, *Votivae Angliae* (1624).

¹¹⁸ Anonymous letter to James, [early 1624], Harley 1581, fols. 395r–397r, BL.

¹¹⁹ Scott, *Vox Regis*, 2.

¹²⁰ Anonymous letter to James, [early 1624], Harley 1581, fol. 395r, BL.

¹²¹ “Tom Tell Troth,” fol. 203r.

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. Although their real intended audience was much wider, they often claimed to be addressing the king. They typically posed as patriotic subjects who were passing on what they heard out of loyalty. 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’s 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 discussing state matters as an excuse to discuss them. The specter of rebellion was frequently raised. 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 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 councilors who flattered him and prevented the truth from reaching his ears. As the author of “Tom Tell Troth” wrote, the king’s advisors had “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 tacitly admitted 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.

Far from being ignorant, plain-speaking commoners were presented as being better informed about the threats to the kingdom than flattering councilors—or even the king himself. 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.”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 listened to them, he would find that they were wiser than his advisers.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

¹²² *Ibid.*, fols. 202v–3r.

¹²³ Scott, *Vox Regis*, 32.

¹²⁴ “Tom Tell Troth,” fol. 199r.

¹²⁵ Scott, *Vox Regis*, 31.

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

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

spleene toward vs,” as evidenced by their rude and occasionally violent treatment of Spanish ambassadors on the streets of London.¹²⁸

Lip service was sometimes paid to the traditional rhetoric of the vulgar multitude. The author of “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 beheld 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 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.”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 labor 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 “ploughman” texts, 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* was written as a plea from Henry VIII’s subjects, who were supposedly being beggared by clerical abuses.¹³⁶ The *Supplication of the Poor Commons* advocates further clerical reform in a similar manner.¹³⁷

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.

¹³¹ “Balaams Asse,” fol. 60v.

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

¹³³ Scott, *Vox Regis*, 18.

¹³⁴ John Hatcher, “England in the Aftermath of the Black Death,” *Past and Present* 144, no. 1 (August 1994): 3–35, at 18.

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

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

¹³⁷ Tracy, *A Supplication to our moste Souereigne Lorde Kyng Henry the Eight*, 61–92.

A number of mid-sixteenth-century writers known as the commonwealthsmen also celebrated humble and hardworking ploughmen while criticizing the selfishness of greedy gentlemen, 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 judgment 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, 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 was undermined by its association with popular disorder in general, 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 criticized 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 toward general social satire or the 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 style that 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

¹³⁸ McRae, *God Speed the Plough*, 23–57; Norbrook, *Poetry and Politics in the English Renaissance*.

¹³⁹ Norbrook, *Poetry and Politics in the English Renaissance*, 3.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 45–49.

¹⁴¹ "Vox populi vox dei," in *Tudor Economic Documents: Being select documents illustrating the economic and social history of Tudor England*, ed. R. H. Tawney and Eileen Power (London, 1924), 3:25–39; *Pyers Plowmans exhortation vnto the lordes, knyghtes and burgoyses of the Parlyamenthouse* (London, 1550).

¹⁴² McRae, *God Speed the Plough*, 49–52; Norbrook, *Poetry and Politics in the English Renaissance*, 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 and anti-Martinist "ploughman" tracts, see *I Plaine Piers Which Can not Flatter* (1589); Richard Harvey, *Plaine Percevall the Peace-Maker of England* (London, 1590).

¹⁴⁶ D. C. Peck, ed., *Leicester's Commonwealth* (London, 1985), 74, 75–76, 96, 189; Lloyd E. Berry, ed., *John Stubbs's "Gaping Gulf," with Letters and other relevant Documents* (Charlottesville, 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, no. 3 (Fall 2007): 549–77; 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 Lake and Pincus, eds., *The Politics of the Public Sphere in Early Modern England*, 59–94; Peter Lake and Michael Questier, "Puritans, Papists and the 'Public Sphere': The Edmund Campion Affair in Context," *Journal of Modern History* 72, no. 3 (September 2000): 587–627.

¹⁴⁸ Berry, ed., *John Stubbs's "Gaping Gulf,"* 92.

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 to argue that the speech of the common people had value and legitimacy.

THE VOX POPULI AND SOCIAL CHANGE

In this article I have 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 to ventriloquize the common people, and to argue that they were better informed about the threats facing the country than the king himself. Notions of the “plainspeaking ploughman” were in constant transhistorical conflict with fears about the slanderous and ignorant multitude. Yet although fears of 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 been forced to take the likely reactions of their subjects into account when formulating policy. In reality, a single, unified public opinion never exists. Its “invention” refers to 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 a revival during the 1620s. Changes in political culture provide part of the explanation. A common theme of the tracts, as well as Turner’s queries, was that the king was surrounded by flattering courtiers who blocked out the voices of his plain-speaking subjects. As Richard Cust has argued, from the 1590s, the court was increasingly seen as irredeemably corrupt, and this resulted in the emergence of a new type of idealized “public man,” who was untainted by the court and was therefore able to represent

¹⁴⁹ For the notion of the “invention” of public opinion, see Keith Michael Baker, “Public Opinion as Political Invention,” in *Inventing the French Revolution: Essays on French Political Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1990), 167–99; David Zaret, “Petitions and the ‘Invention’ of Public Opinion in the English Revolution, 1640–1660,” *American Journal of Sociology* 101, no. 6 (May 1996): 1497–555.

the “country” or commonwealth.¹⁵⁰ Such ideas were only encouraged by the sexual and financial scandals that engulfed the Jacobean court from the 1610s onwards. 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 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 of Buckingham, fear of popery, and opposition to arbitrary taxation were expressed by the “middling sort” and their poorer neighbors as well 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 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 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 sympathized with Spain, he also implied that Catholic conspiracy was in some 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 Rather than distinguishing between the interests of social groups, some writers argued that the commons and the nobility were equally oppressed.¹⁵⁵ Instead of attacking the gentry, they attacked

¹⁵⁰ Cust, “The ‘Public Man,’” 116–43.

¹⁵¹ Lockyer, *Buckingham*, chap. 4; Robert Zaller, *The Parliament of 1621: A Study in Constitutional Conflict* (Berkeley, 1971), chap. 2; Cogswell, *Blessed Revolution*, 171–73.

¹⁵² David Underdown, *A Freeborn People: Politics and the Nation in Seventeenth-Century England* (Oxford, 1996), 10, 33–34, 44–45; idem, *Revel, Riot and Rebellion* (Oxford, 1989), 123–26.

¹⁵³ Richard Cust, “News and Politics in Early Seventeenth Century England,” *Past and Present* 112, no. 1 (August 1986): 60–90; F. J. Levy, “How Information Spread Amongst the Gentry, 1550–1640,” *Journal of British Studies* 21, no. 2 (Spring 1982): 11–34; Bellany, “Rayling Rymes and Vaunting Verse.”

¹⁵⁴ Peter Lake, “Constitutional Consensus,” 821.

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

foreign ambassadors, Catholics, evil councilors, 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 urbanization and social change, the Buckinghamite tracts 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 Risings 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 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 specter 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, while fears of disorder were widespread, “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 legitimizing popular speech. Social explanations for political conflict in the early Stuart period have long been unfashionable.¹⁶¹ As 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 polarized 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 relative to waged labor. The incorporation of the

¹⁵⁶ “To his sacred majesty, Ab Ignoto,” 256; “A post Caution or rather a post moition to the Common Speakers in the Lower house of Commons the two last Parliaments,” BL Add. MSS. 4155, fols. 256, 84v, 82v–83r.

¹⁵⁷ John Walter, “A ‘Rising of the People’? The Oxfordshire Rising of 1596,” *Past and Present* 107, no. 1 (May 1985): 90–143; Buchanan Sharp, *In Contempt of All Authority* (London, 1980), chap. 4.

¹⁵⁸ John Walter, *Crowds and Popular Politics in Early Modern England* (Manchester, 2006), 183–86.

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), 644–49.

¹⁶³ Wrightson, “Sorts of People,” 36–37.

this group into the structures of the state through local office holding, and its tendency towards puritanism, meant that the upper levels of village society took an increasing role in disciplining their poorer neighbors, who were increasingly criminalized—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 neighbors. 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 This middling group, which was 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 strategies relating to popular speech and opinion, which did indeed foster political conflict between Buckingham’s parliamentary critics and the crown.

¹⁶⁴ Wrightson, *English Society*, 181–89, 234–35; 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, no. 4 (October 2009): 837–47, at 840–42.

¹⁶⁵ Bidwell and Jansson, eds., *Proceedings in Parliament 1626*, 3:45.

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