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The Literary Culture of Early Stuart Libeling

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The death in 1612 of the Lord Treasurer, Robert Cecil, earl of Salisbury, prompted a cultural phenomenon that few observers of state affairs could have failed to notice. As the days passed, libelous verses on Cecil began to proliferate and circulate in unprecedented numbers.¹ The anxiety surrounding this wave of textual production is evident in the letters of John Chamberlain, who wrote that “the memorie of the late Lord Treasurer growes dayly worse and worse and more libells come as yt were continually.”² Writing just three weeks later, however, John Donne provided a different view. He suggested, perhaps with a touch of irony, that many of the libels were so bad that they might have been written by Cecil’s friends:

It is not the first time that our age hath seen that art practised, That when there are witty and sharp libels made which not onely for liberty of speaking, but for the elegancie, and composition, would take deep root, and make durable impressions in the memory, no other way hath been thought so fit to suppress them, as to divulge some course, and railing one: for when the noise is risen, that libels are abroad, mens curiositie must be served with something: and it is better for the honour of the person traduced, that some blunt downright railings be vented, of which every body is soon weary, then other pieces, which entertain us long with a delight, and love to the things themselves.³

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1. This phenomenon is documented in Pauline Croft, “The Reputation of Robert Cecil: Libels, Political Opinion and Popular Awareness in the Early Seventeenth Century,” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6th ser., 1 (1991): 43–69.

2. John Chamberlain, *The Letters of John Chamberlain*, ed. Norman Egbert McClure, 2 vols. (Philadelphia, 1939), 1:364.

3. John Donne, *Letters to Severall Persons of Honour* (London, 1651), pp. 89–90.

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Alongside Chamberlain's concern for biographical truth and political order, Donne's comment demonstrates a striking appreciation of the malleability of reputation. More importantly, he shifts attention from the truth-value of the libels to their aesthetic qualities. Adopting a Sidneian conception of the function of poetry, he suggests that a libel will influence only to the extent that it "delights" a reader.

Donne's letter raises important questions about the status of libels as literary products. A scurrilous poem circulated in news networks immediately after the death of a statesman has a clear strategic purpose. The Cecil libels certainly prompted Chamberlain to reassess his opinion of the man, as he wondered "whether yt be that practises and jugglings" were in truth coming "more and more to light."⁴ Its status might therefore appear to be close to that of graffiti, a form of invective as ephemeral as it is topical. Evidence supporting Donne's divergent appreciation of the libel, however, may be derived from the manuscript sources in which the poetry is preserved. In numerous verse miscellanies, libels were transcribed, often many years after their composition, alongside the work of the greatest poets of the age.⁵ The compiler of British Library (BL) MS Egerton 2230, for example, transcribed a series of Cecil libels in a section of epigrams. Rosenbach Library MS 1083/16 is even more concerned to read libels in literary terms; titled by its compiler "MISCELLANIES: OR A collection of Divers Witty and pleasant Epigrams, Adages, poemes Epitaphes &c: for the recreation of y^e overtravelled Sences: 1630," it includes a selection of libels from across the previous thirty years, along with poems by Donne, Ben Jonson, Thomas Carew, and Robert Herrick. It is even possible to discern an application of literary judgment, along the lines suggested by Donne, among the men and women who kept miscellanies. The most sophisticated of the Cecil libels, a poem often attributed to Walter Raleigh, survives in more sources than any other.⁶

The difference in function between a libelous epitaph circulated at the moment of a person's death and the same libel read in a miscellany

4. Chamberlain, 1:364.

5. On the manuscript verse miscellany, and its relation to the commonplace book, see Peter Beal, "Notions in Garrison: The Seventeenth-Century Commonplace Book," in *New Ways of Looking at Old Texts: Papers of the Renaissance English Text Society, 1985–1991*, ed. W. Speed Hill (Binghamton, N.Y., 1993), pp. 131–47 (esp. pp. 142–44).

6. I will consider this poem, "Here lies Hobinoll our Pastor [or "shepherd"] while ere," further below. The assessment of its wide circulation is made on the basis of a survey of over one hundred manuscript sources, as well as the available printed sources. Copies of the poem exist in Bodleian Library MS Rawlinson Poet. 26, fol. 78r; Bodleian MS Eng. Poet. e.14, fol. 79v; Bodleian MS Eng. Poet. f.10, fols. 97v–98r; Bodleian MS Tanner 299, fol. 12v; British Library (BL) MS Egerton 2230, fol. 34r; BL MS Harley 1221, fol. 74r; BL MS Harley 6038, fol. 18r; BL MS Harley 6947, fol. 211r; Folger Shakespeare Library

decades later requires consideration. Most of the existing scholarship on libels has been conducted by historians, concerned with issues of public opinion and political culture. Thomas Cogswell, for example, argues that the poems document “the emergence of popular political awareness”; similarly, Pauline Croft interprets them as “valuable evidence for a lively public opinion, emanating from London but not confined to the capital.”⁷ Work by literary scholars on the political poetry of the early seventeenth century has tended to avoid general questions about the mode, focusing rather on individual poems or groups of poems.⁸ The purpose of the present investigation, therefore, is to consider as broadly as possible the practices of libeling and the qualities and functions of verse libels. For, as Donne’s letter suggests, it would be wrong to approach libels as no more than strategic statements that directly reflect popular opinion. Libels were also acknowledged as literary products, and it is important to appreciate the significance of literary codes and expectations in the culture of early Stuart libeling. Such an approach promises, by extension, to illuminate the interaction between literary and political discourse in the prerevolutionary decades: at a time during which the political situation stimulated a wealth of liter-

(Folger) MS Va.345, p. 110; and “Poems from a Seventeenth-Century Manuscript with the Hand of Robert Herrick,” ed. Norman Farmer, *Texas Quarterly* 16, suppl. (1973): 41–43. It is attributed by contemporaries to Raleigh in Bodleian Rawlinson Poet. 26 and Folger Va.345; Agnes Latham’s edition of *The Poems of Sir Walter Raleigh* (London, 1951) includes a twelve-line version first printed in 1658. Croft discusses its authorship in “The Reputation of Robert Cecil,” p. 62.

7. Thomas Cogswell, “Underground Political Verse and the Transformation of English Political Culture,” in *Political Culture and Cultural Politics in Early Modern England: Essays Presented to David Underdown*, ed. Susan D. Amussen and Mark A. Kishlansky (Manchester, 1995), p. 278; and Pauline Croft, “Libels, Popular Literacy, and Public Opinion in Early Modern England,” *Historical Research* 68 (1995): 280. Other work by historians on this material includes Alastair Bellany, “‘Raylinge 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 (Basingstoke, 1994), pp. 285–310, and “A Poem on the Archbishop’s Hearse: Puritanism, Libel, and Sedition after the Hampton Court Conference,” *Journal of British Studies* 34 (1995): 137–64. Adam Fox considers a parallel tradition of libeling in localized disputes in “Ballads, Libels and Popular Ridicule in Jacobean England,” *Past and Present*, no. 145 (1994), pp. 47–83.

8. Arthur F. Marotti provides a valuable survey of the extant material in *Manuscript, Print, and the English Renaissance Lyric* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1995), chap. 2. See also Gerald Hammond, *Fleeting Things: English Poets and Poems, 1616–1660* (Cambridge, Mass., 1990), chap. 2; and James Holstun, “‘God Bless Thee, Little David!’: John Felton and His Allies,” *ELH* 59 (1992): 513–52. Kirk Combe considers a relatively small canon of poems as evidence of generic development from complaint to satire (“The New Voice of Political Dissent: The Transition from Complaint to Satire,” in *Theorizing Satire: Essays in Literary Criticism*, ed. Kirk Combe and Brian A. Connery [Basingstoke, 1995], pp. 73–94).

ature, and literature helped to provide a language for the emergent divisions in the state.

This article will initially contextualize early Stuart libeling, considering the literary origins of the form, its growth in the seventeenth century, and its construction as a licensed mode. Subsequently, I will analyze the major sources for the study of libels and will argue that the culture of the verse miscellany contributed at once to the proliferation and developing characteristics of the poems. The final section will then consider the libel's principal generic qualities and its function in literary and political discourse. As will become apparent, while the early Stuart practices of libeling overlapped with news culture, the libel demanded specific strategies of interpretation. Whereas news claimed attention for its purported truth value, the libel was by nature excessive, proffering illicit truths but simultaneously stretching into satire's realm of manifest fiction.⁹ This ambiguity invited the detached aesthetic appreciation signaled by Donne but also facilitated achievements of satiric discrimination and stigmatization which resonated throughout political discourse in the period.

I

The verse libel is unique as a literary mode because it owes its definition to the law. William Hudson's Jacobean "Treatise of the Court of Star Chamber" identified a wide range of libelous practices: "Libels are of several kinds; either by scoffing at the person of another in rhyme or prose, or by personating him, thereby to make him ridiculous; or by setting up horns at his gate, or picturing or describing him; or by writing of some base or defamatory letter, and publishing the same to others, or some scurvy love-letter to himself, whereby it is not likely but he should be provoked to break the peace."¹⁰ Francis Bacon was more attuned to the poetic dimension of libeling, noting in 1592 that libels are "sometimes contrived into pleasant pasquils and satires, to move sport."¹¹ By the seventeenth century, the libel was more

9. I am adopting here Edward Rosenheim, Jr.'s, definition of satire as an "attack by means of a manifest fiction upon discernible historical particulars" (*Jonathan Swift and the Satirist's Art* [Chicago, 1963], p. 31).

10. William Hudson, "Treatise of the Court of Star Chamber," in *Collectanea Juridica: Consisting of Tracts Relative to the Law and Constitution of England*, 2 vols. (London, 1791), 2:100.

11. Francis Bacon, "Certain Observations made upon a Libel Published this Present Year, 1592," in *The Works of Francis Bacon*, ed. J. Spedding, Robert Leslie Ellis, and Douglas Denon Heath, 14 vols. (London, 1857-74), 8:148.

specifically understood to be an unauthorized and controversial text, generally in poetic form, on a person or topical issue. Hence a poem attacking the duke of Buckingham would clearly be classified as a libel, but so too would a piece eulogizing his assassin.¹²

At the outset of the seventeenth century, practices of libeling were informed by both popular traditions and literary antecedents. Legal minds were principally concerned with cases in which libelous poems were employed in local disputes, where the poetry was often linked to traditional shaming rituals and riots. Details of such cases survive in the records of church courts and the Star Chamber, to which cases were increasingly brought from the sixteenth century.¹³ In literary and courtly circles, meanwhile, libelous verse was shaped and justified according to loose generic categories. Early in the sixteenth century, John Skelton supported his personal attacks by reference to the classical authority of “famous poettes saturicall.”¹⁴ Vague notions that satire originated in Greek satyr plays, and the appreciation that at least Lucilius among the Roman satirists attacked his targets by name, underpinned such statements.¹⁵ Satiric theory, especially before the concerted neoclassicism of the 1590s, commonly justified “taunting Darcklye certeyn men of state” or figuring “a foule-mouth Jester who might sing / To rogues, the story of a lousie king.”¹⁶ Related literary modes also contributed to the development of libeling. Celtic satire was intertwined with practices of incantation and cursing, and it was believed to have tangible effects, even causing death.¹⁷ Flying, in which Skelton ex-

12. For legal purposes, libelous epitaphs might not be actionable at common law but fell within the Star Chamber’s jurisdiction of controlling disorder (*Collectanea Juridica*, 2:103).

13. The libel cases surviving in Jacobean Star Chamber records are analyzed in Fox. For a consideration of the relation between the poetry of the Star Chamber libels and Renaissance satire, see my “The Verse Libel: Popular Satire in Early Modern England,” in *Subversion and Scurrility: The Politics of Popular Discourse in Europe from 1500 to the Present*, ed. Dermot Cananagh and Tim Kirk (London, 2000), in press.

14. Quoted in Douglas Gray, “Rough Music: Some Early Invectives and Flytings,” in *English Satire and the Satiric Tradition*, ed. Claude Rawson (London, 1984), p. 43.

15. Renaissance debates over the propriety of using real names in satire are covered at length in A. L. Soens, Jr., “Criticism of Formal Satire in the Renaissance” (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 1957), pp. 235–41, 308–12, 405–6.

16. The first quote is from Richard Stanyhurst, discussing the work of classical satirists, in the dedication to his translation, *The First Foure Bookes of Virgil his Aeneis* (Leiden, 1582), sig. A2r; the second quote is from Edward Guilpin, *Skialetheia; or, A Shadowe of Truth, in Certaine Epigrams and Satyres* (1598), ed. D. Allen Carroll (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1974), p. 58.

17. Robert C. Elliott argues the significance of Celtic satire on the English development of the genre in *The Power of Satire: Magic, Ritual, Art* (Princeton, N.J., 1960), pp. 3–48.

celled, was appreciated as a vitriolic, highly performative, and competitive poetic exchange.¹⁸ Further support for libeling was derived from the sixteenth-century Roman practice of attaching anonymous topical verses to the statue of Pasquino.¹⁹ The “pasquil,” as Bacon recognized in 1592, became a fashionable term for witty and libelous verses, particularly when distributed surreptitiously around the city and court.

The outpouring of formal verse satire in the 1590s served to clarify the status of the verse libel, largely through means of negative definition. As I have suggested elsewhere, libel was encoded as satire’s other: a mode satirists regularly invoked as a foil against which to define their work, but which could never satisfactorily be separated from their neo-classical genre.²⁰ The libel was figured as a debased mode, nurtured by popular traditions rather than classical authority, employing indigenuous meters rather than satire’s iambic pentameter couplet, attacking individuals rather than generalized types of vice, steeped in ephemeral topical issues rather than enduring moral struggles, and concerned with undermining authority rather than purging evil in the interests of authority. These arguments were pursued right through to John Dryden’s classic essay on satire, which carefully distinguishes between poets who adhere to classical models and standards of generic decorum, and the “multitude of scribblers, who daily pester the world with . . . lampoons and libels.”²¹ Although this process of discrimination was often tenuous, literary historians generally agree that it contributed to the construction of a native conception of satire. By extension, it also helped to establish the libel as an independent mode, requiring different strategies for writing, reading, and circulation.

It is clear that writers appreciated these points of distinction, though it is equally clear that many distinguished poets still chose to write libels. For example, the satirist Thomas Bastard was expelled from Oxford for his libels on university scandals, while John Harington was both a collector and writer of scandalous verse.²² A note in Harington’s *Diary* records his intention to “write a damnable storie and put it in goodlie verse about Lord A. He hath done me some ill turnes.” Remarkably, the

18. See Gray, p. 21.

19. While it is clear that English writers were aware of the Roman practice, it is more difficult to find evidence of actual Italian texts circulating in English manuscript culture. The only example of this that I have found comes from north of the border, in the miscellaneous literary collections of William Drummond of Hawthornden (National Library of Scotland, MS 2060, fol. 9r).

20. McRae (n. 13 above).

21. John Dryden, *Essays of John Dryden*, ed. W. P. Ker, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1900), 2:21.

22. See Croft, “Libels” (n. 7 above), p. 273.

following sentence recoils to the Renaissance poet's accustomed position of moral orthodoxy: "God keepe us from lyinge and slander worke."²³ The vogue for the satiric epigram around the turn of the century provided another vehicle for libelous writing. Harington's most successful poetic works were his epigrams and, like other epigrammatists of the period, many of his poems are unquestionably libelous in intent, though the use of nonce names avoids problems with the law. At least one later poet was less careful; in 1615, William Goddard published two epigrams on the controversial marriage of Frances Howard and Robert Carr, in which the latter is identified pointedly as "the dung-hill Carr."²⁴ Such examples demonstrate that purported disdain for libeling cannot necessarily be equated with a lack of interest in the mode; indeed, even Dryden, in his *Discourse on Satire*, defends a poet's right to libel his enemies in self-defense.²⁵

The Bishops' Ban of 1599, which called for the public burning of the works of certain satirists, undoubtedly affected the development of English satire.²⁶ Yet it would be overly simplistic to claim that satire was at this point forced "underground," where it took shape afresh in the form of libels.²⁷ In fact there is little evidence that the ban was enforced much beyond the initial clampdown, and numerous satiric works (including countless volumes of epigrams) were published in the early years of the seventeenth century.²⁸ It is evident, however, that verse satire at this time became at once less fashionable and less relevant. It gradually lost its earlier attachment to the universities and the Inns of Court, and it turned away from the aggressive neoclassicism of the 1590s, toward a more accessible style and more traditional themes. George Wither's capacious work of moralism, *Abuses Stript and Whipt* (1615), stands as a monument to this period. At the same time, James I's

23. Quoted in C. J. Sisson, *Lost Plays of Shakespeare's Age* (Cambridge, 1936), pp. 187–88.

24. William Goddard, *A Neaste of Waspes* (1615), facsimile ed. (Oxford, 1921), sig. F4r.

25. Dryden, 2:79–80.

26. See Richard A. McCabe, "Elizabethan Satire and the Bishops' Ban of 1599," *Yearbook of English Studies* 11 (1981): 188–93; and Cyndia Susan Clegg, *Press Censorship in Elizabethan England* (Cambridge, 1997), chap. 9.

27. Cogswell (n. 7 above), pp. 279–80.

28. See, e.g., C. G., *The Minte of Deformatie* (1600); Samuel Rowlands, *The Letting of Humours Blood in the Head-Vaine* (1600), in *Complete Works*, 3 vols. (Glasgow, 1880), vol. 1; John Weever's translations of satires by Horace, Persius, and Juvenal, published in *Faunus and Melliflora* (1600), ed. Arnold Davenport (Liverpool, 1948); and the debates over satire conducted in a series of pamphlets around the turn of the century, collectively known as *The Whipper Pamphlets*, ed. Arnold Davenport (Liverpool, 1951). My argument here is supported by Clegg's research into the Bishops' Ban, which suggests that it was a reaction to certain topical references rather than a considered assault on a literary genre.

rapid expansion of royal bounty and the associated problems of court corruption both fueled increasing anxiety about the nation. The “language of corruption,” as Linda Levy Peck has argued, “provided an essential vocabulary with which to criticize” the government.²⁹ The preexistent mode of the libel, enriched by the achievements of Renaissance satire and intertwined with the rise of the epigram, was an obvious vehicle for such criticism.

A pamphlet almost certainly written in the 1620s reflects valuably on this milieu. *The Life of a Satyrical Puppy, Called Nim*, published under the initials T. M., narrates a period spent in London’s satiric culture by a young man of small but independent means.³⁰ The speaker decides “to turn *Satyrist*” in part through a fascination with processes of political preferment, as “the State at that time felt alteration; and divers great ones (plac’d before as *high* as Fortune her self could *reach*) sate then on her foot-stool, *humbled* below vulgar respect.”³¹ When he surveys the work of his fellow satirists, he notes in particular their “Fame-murdering Libells,” including several poems that can be identified in surviving verse miscellanies.³² This was a time when writers might be observed to “murmure in obscure Corners: who are fearfull even of speaking softly; therefore proclaim to others a *dumb silence* in their own *prattle*: who whisper with their pens, and darkly bring their thoughts to light in *Hieroglyphicall* words, personating Men in the natures of Beasts, whose names (*literally* or *allegorically*) doth sympathize with theirs, whom they aime at.”³³ For T. M., the context of corruption and government surveillance is the principal determinant of the poetry produced in the period. In such a context, he suggests, libel becomes the only pertinent type of satire.

The evidence of T. M. might appear to support claims that libels were written by a “literary species of . . . ‘pot poet,’” a type situated “somewhere between a court literati and a humble balladeer,” ever prepared to pen a verse for cash or beer.³⁴ Certainly this representation of libelers is endorsed by those who responded in support of controversial figures; in their writings, the authors of libels were routinely figured

29. Linda Levy Peck, *Court Patronage and Corruption in Early Stuart England* (London, 1993), p. 11.

30. The text, which was published in 1657, is usually cataloged as the probable work of Thomas May; however, Leonie J. Gibson, who valuably situates it in the 1620s, suggests Thomas Middleton (“Formal Satire in the First Half of the Seventeenth Century, 1600–1650” [D.Phil. diss., Oxford University, 1952], p. 305).

31. T. M., *Life of a Satyrical Puppy*, p. 49.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 65.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 63.

34. Cogswell, p. 281.

as emanations from the “heady Monster, Brayneles Multitude,” led by blind “fury . . . to Intrude / on princes rights.”³⁵ But it is always dangerous to accept a term of stigmatization at face value, and even more so when dealing with the febrile literary environment of early seventeenth-century London. In fact, the literary culture of the elite consistently embraced many of the qualities associated with libels. At a time when poets valorized qualities of wit and seized upon the epigram as a concise and memorable vehicle for praise or blame, the libel presented obvious attractions. As one moralist complained of court culture in 1629, “malitious detraction” was then widely “esteemed the quintessence of wit.”³⁶ Moreover, as Timothy Raylor has shown, within certain literary circles writers willfully confused stylistic markers that might appear to separate high and low forms of poetry. Poetry “that is designed to appear extempore and humorously shoddy,” he writes, was “a vital part of the courtly and would-be courtly culture of the age.”³⁷

Investigation into the scant available evidence on the authorship of libels further suggests that “pot poet” is a category that could include either all men writing poetry at the time or only a tiny and shifting number.³⁸ Certainly the few libelers who can reasonably be identified offer more complex case studies. One example is William Drummond, whose commonplace books evidence a scholarly interest in poetry of invective, especially the contemporary Italian pasquils.³⁹ Drummond is the probable author of “The Five Senses,” a sophisticated attack, modeled on a song in Jonson’s masque, *The Gypsies Metamorphosed* (1621), on the influence at court of the Duke of Buckingham.⁴⁰ Others became involved in libeling at the universities, as members of literary clubs, or within Robert Cotton’s circle.⁴¹ Alexander Gill, for example, who was

35. Transcribed from Bodleian MS Rawlinson Poet. 166, in Ted-Larry Pebworth, “Sir Henry Wotton’s ‘Dazel’d Thus, with Height of Place’ and the Appropriation of Political Poetry in the Earlier Seventeenth Century,” *Publications of the Bibliographical Society of America* 71 (1977): 167.

36. Nathaneal Carpenter, *Achitophel, Or, The Picture of a Wicked Politician* (London, 1629), p. 10.

37. Timothy Raylor, *Cavaliers, Clubs, and Literary Culture: Sir John Mennes, James Smith, and the Order of the Fancy* (Newark, N.J., 1994), p. 22.

38. See also Alastair Bellany’s skeptical comments about this explanation for authorship in “The Poisoning of Legitimacy? Court Scandal, News Culture, and Politics in England, 1603–1660” (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 1995), p. 128.

39. National Library of Scotland, MS 2060, fols. 9r, 17r; for English libels transcribed by Drummond, see fols. 15v, 53r–59r.

40. The authorship of this poem remains uncertain. It is printed in *The Poetical Works of William Drummond of Hawthornden*, ed. William B. Turnbull (London, 1890), pp. 304–7, possibly on the basis of an attribution in Bodleian MS Eng. Poet. c.50, fol. 25r.

41. On the Cotton circle, see Bellany, “The Poisoning of Legitimacy?” p. 127; on clubs, see Raylor.

arrested for libeling in Oxford in 1628, was no literary hack; he was the son of the headmaster of St. Paul's school, and was known himself in the 1630s for his Latin and Greek lyrics.⁴² Indeed, a case earlier in James's reign suggests that in some instances a considerable level of learning might even have been expected of a libeler. Edward Coke, attorney-general in 1605, judged that a libelous epitaph pinned to the hearse of Archbishop Whitgift could not have been written by the university graduate charged with the offense, "for he is no scholar."⁴³

It becomes clear from such cases that libeling was a more prevalent and also a more important phenomenon than an attribution to "pot poets" might suggest. Some, such as Gill, were apparently motivated by a conviction that corruption at court was endangering the nation. Gill was in fact as close to a revolutionary as the 1620s affords, having been known to drink a toast to John Felton, Buckingham's assassin, and to declare that "we have a fine wise King. He has wit enough to be a shop-keeper, to ask 'What do you lack?' and that is all."⁴⁴ In contrast to this political fervor, other writers may rather have followed "the sway of the multitude" which Chamberlain suspected was behind the plethora of Cecil libels.⁴⁵ Certain waves of libeling had an undeniably self-generating character, and some writers perhaps seized merely on an opportunity to exercise their powers. For instance, at least one person appears to have taken the death of Buckingham as a topic for a rhetorical exercise, writing epitaphs against and in commendation of the duke, both of which survive on the same page of a miscellany.⁴⁶ And while it would be impossible to deny that some wrote poetry in exchange for money, even in such cases a piecemeal economy shades into patronage exchanges, which were a fact of life for most of the leading poets of the age. Thus, Wither assumed that "A *Libeller* is impudently bold, / When he hath *Times*, or *Patrons* to uphold / His biting *Straines*."⁴⁷ Accordingly, a desire for reward and literary recognition within the Jonson circle,

42. *Dictionary of National Biography*, s.v. "Gill." He is identified as an author of libels, and possibly of "The Five Senses," in documents printed in *Original Papers Illustrative of the Life and Writings of John Milton*, ed. W. Douglas Hamilton (London, 1859), pp. 65–71.

43. *Historical Manuscripts Commission: Calendar of Manuscripts of the Most Honorable the Marquis of Salisbury Preserved at Hatfield House* (Dublin, 1906), 17:114. Quoted in Bellamy, "A Poem on the Archbishop's Hearse" (n. 7 above), p. 145.

44. Public Record Office, *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic Series: Charles I (1628–1629)* (London, 1856–), 116:56.

45. Chamberlain (n. 2 above), 1:364.

46. See the poems attributed to John Heape in Bodleian MS Ashmole 38, p. 14. Compare a poem on Frances Howard, which is constructed as a rhetorical exercise and divided into equal sections headed "Petitio" and "Responctio" (BL MS Add. 25707, fol. 46r).

47. George Wither, *Britain's Remembrancer* (1628), facsimile ed. (New York, 1967), fol. 285v.

rather than any ideological commitment, appears to have been the motivation behind James Smith's authorship of a poem in praise of Felton. Around the same time, Smith's associate, John Mennes, wrote a poem attacking Gill, but with exactly the same end in mind.⁴⁸ Such details are valuable reminders of the fluidity of literary and political allegiances in early Stuart England.

But while the libel had an identifiable status within patronage networks, it remained perforce an anonymous mode, and authors were rarely identified beyond a small coterie. The need for anonymity is evidenced by the experience of Zouche Townley, who was widely identified as the author of a panegyric on Felton and was consequently forced to flee the country.⁴⁹ As well as being a practical restraint on a poet seeking recognition, however, anonymity should also be considered as a condition which contributed to the character of libelous verse. Most notably, it underset the rhetorically inflated, taunting voice adopted by many of the writers. In one poem attacking Buckingham for his leadership of the failed Isle of Rhé military expedition in 1627, the author mocks the duke, admitting that he was injured in the expedition and, hence, may almost be identifiable, but nonetheless exploits his namelessness:

Now I have said enough to thee, great George,
If I were knowne, 'twould make thy radge disgorge
Its venome on me; yet for all this hate
Let's on this distance expostulate.⁵⁰

The "distance" of anonymity is empowering. The "expostulation" is thus by nature evasive: inevitably more of a protest or remonstrance than a debate.⁵¹

Anonymity was reinforced by the libel's status as a manuscript mode. A few libelous poems were printed, but the vast majority derived both an audience and a reputation through means of manuscript publication.⁵² This characteristic further distinguishes the libel from formal verse satire, which was emphatically a product of print culture. Apart

48. Raylor (n. 37 above), pp. 55–56, 43–44.

49. See *The Court and Times of Charles I*, comp. Thomas Birch, 2 vols. (London, 1848), 1:427–28. Townley's poem, "Enjoy thy bondage; make thy prison know," is printed in *Poems and Songs Relating to George Villiers, Duke of Buckingham; and his Assassination by John Felton*, ed. Frederick W. Fairholt (London, 1850), pp. 74–76.

50. "The Duke Return'd Againe," in Fairholt, ed., p. 22.

51. See *OED*, s.v. "expostulate," 2 and 3.

52. For examples of libelous poems in print, see Goddard's *A Neaste of Waspes* (n. 24 above), sig. F4r; and for evidence of the punishment of men who printed a ballad celebrating the violent death of Buckingham's physician, Dr. John Lambe, see Birch, comp., 1:367–68. On the notion of publication through means of manuscript distribution, see Harold Love, *Scribal Publication in Seventeenth-Century England* (Oxford, 1993).

from Donne, no writer of neoclassical satire chose to circulate work in manuscript; nor did collectors transcribe such work, even after the Bishops' Ban removed many texts from the marketplace.⁵³ (The epigram, by comparison, resists classification along these lines; it flourished in both print and manuscript forms.) Hence, the claim that in commonplace books and verse miscellanies the "abstract satire of the literary world met and merged with the popular verse libel" unjustly diminishes the significance of the libel.⁵⁴ As I have already argued, the distinction between "literary" satire and "popular" libel breaks down under analysis. Moreover, of the two modes only the libel was prized by the men and women of high degree who were the most common compilers of manuscript miscellanies. This would not only have encouraged poets moving in literary circles at court, the universities, or the Inns of Court to compose libels; it would at the same time have discouraged "popular" writers whose projects of self-promotion were bound to the medium of print.

The libel should therefore be situated in a peculiarly licensed discursive space. Freedom of speech was in fact a vexed issue in early Stuart England. Protestant polemicists argued that "where there is not liberty, there can be no fidelity, and where there is freedom of the tongue, there can be no danger of the heart, or hand."⁵⁵ But this view was not endorsed by the government. Even in Parliament, "free debate . . . was not the equivalent of free speech," but was rather circumscribed by royal edicts "against 'excess lavish and licentious speech of matters of state.'"⁵⁶ Manuscript poetry, however, offered greater scope. As David Colclough argues in his analysis of John Hoskyns, the Jacobean parliamentarian and manuscript poet, authors and texts within this context "provide a way of exploring the area in which the shift occurs between liberality and excess of language; a liminal space whose instability is evinced in the dual implications of the words 'liberty' and 'licence/ license' in the period. Frankness, or candid speech, is considered as a

53. This impression contradicts the undocumented claims of John Wilcox ("Informal Publication of Late Sixteenth-Century Verse Satire," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 13 [1949–50]: 191–200). My argument is confirmed by a survey of prominent 1590s satirists in Peter Beal's *Index of English Literary Manuscripts*, vol. 1, 1450–1625, 2 parts (London, 1980). There are no listings of surviving manuscript versions of the satires of major writers such as John Marston and Thomas Lodge, while the only listing for Joseph Hall's satires is a reference to a volume of material on heraldry, in which the compiler has transcribed twenty-seven lines on the topic from the beginning of *Virgidemiarum* (1599), bk. 4, no. 3 (BL MS Add. 26705, fol. 130r).

54. Croft, "Libels" (n. 7 above), p. 273.

55. Thomas Scott, *Vox Dei* (1623), p. 71, reprinted in *Works* (1624), facsimile ed. (Amsterdam, 1973).

56. Mark Kishlansky, "The Emergence of Adversary Politics in the Long Parliament," *Journal of Modern History* 49 (1977): 619.

rhetorical figure in many classical and Renaissance handbooks and its name, *licentia*, carries a similar potential for slippage into licentiousness.⁵⁷ Hence the undeniable political charge carried by the mode. Although neither the writers nor their poems were necessarily oppositional in any organized sense, and although much manuscript poetry in fact favors courtiers and government policy, the practice was embedded in anticourt aesthetics and politics. Its licentiousness crudely counters the constrained exchanges of parliament and undermines the orthodox consensual political discourse which “eschewed faction and interest.”⁵⁸ James had some appreciation of this; he attacked those “That Kings designs darr thus deryde / By railing rymes and vaunting verse.” He warned them rather to “Hold . . . the publique beaten way / Wounder at Kings, and them obey.”⁵⁹ Ironically, James’s poem was distributed through the same medium as libels and is copied in several contemporary miscellanies along with libelous pieces.⁶⁰

James also perceived that the inherent excess of libelous verse involved a slippage from illicit truths to malicious fictions. While “God and Kings doe pace together,” he argued, the “Vulgar wander light as feather.”⁶¹ Indeed the medium created an expectation of scurrility; as Harold Love suggests, it “would have been hard” for a writer of manuscript verse on political topics “not to be obscene and not to traduce the great.”⁶² Later in the century, the earl of Rochester would claim that “the lies in . . . Libels came often as Ornaments that could not be spared without spoiling the beauty of the *Poem*.”⁶³ Yet to equate early Stuart libeling with mere lies, or “politically motivated falsehood,” as Debora Shuger has done, diminishes their artful confusion of the categories of fact and fiction.⁶⁴ As becomes apparent in the best-known

57. David Colclough, “‘Of the alleadging of authors’: The Construction and Reception of Textual Authority in English Prose, c. 1600–1630: With Special Reference to the Writings of Francis Bacon, John Hoskyns, and John Donne” (D.Phil. diss., Oxford University, 1996), p. 107. See further Colclough, “Parrhesia: The Rhetoric of Free Speech in Early Modern England,” *Rhetorica* 17 (1999): 177–212.

58. Kishlansky, p. 618. See also Conrad Russell, *Parliaments and English Politics, 1621–1629* (Oxford, 1979), pp. 1–34.

59. *The Poems of James VI of Scotland*, ed. James Craigie, 2 vols. (Edinburgh, 1955–58), 2:182.

60. See, e.g., BL MS Egerton 923 (James’s poem at fols. 37r–38r).

61. *The Poems of James VI of Scotland*, 2:182.

62. Love (n. 52 above), p. 189.

63. David Farley-Hills, ed., *Rochester: The Critical Heritage* (London, 1972), p. 54.

64. Debora Shuger, “Civility and Censorship in Early Modern England,” in *Censorship and Silencing: Practices of Cultural Regulation*, ed. Robert C. Post (Los Angeles, 1998), pp. 91–94.

of the Cecil libels, the poems operate most commonly in the shadowy discursive territory of rumor:

Here lies Hobinall, our Pastor while ere,
That once in a Quarter our Fleeces did sheare.
To please us, his Curre he kept under Clog,
And was ever after both Shepherd and Dog.
For Oblation to Pan his custome was thus,
He first gave a Trifle, then offer'd up Us:
And through his false worship such power he did gaine,
As kept him o'th' Mountaine, and us on the plaine.
Where many a Horne-pipe he tun'd to his Phyllis,
And sweetly sung Walsingham to's Amaryllis.
Till Atropos clapt him, a Pox on the Drab,
For (spight of his Tarbox) he died of the Scab.⁶⁵

The poem is rather suggestive than forthright, relying on a context of rumor, itself shaped in part by numerous more outspoken libels. It moves through claims of financial exploitation, conventionally figured as an abuse of the minister's pastoral role, to the unsubstantiated sexual intrigue which linked Cecil with Catherine Countess of Suffolk and Lady Walsingham. The shepherd's concern with the treatment of "scab" alludes to the allegation that Cecil died of venereal disease, despite the ministrations of one of the foremost physicians of the time.⁶⁶ Ultimately, the poem's success might be judged as much in literary as in political terms: as a text that was read and appreciated over succeeding decades as much as a text which swayed contemporary opinion of Cecil. It succeeds as a sophisticated piece of poetry; and, as I will argue in the following section, it circulated among men and women who exhibited a comparable level of sophistication in their reading practices.

II

The circulation of libels in early modern England has been well documented.⁶⁷ Some were strategically scattered or posted when first written, in order to gain a suitable impact; it seems likely, however, that all surviving works were subsequently transmitted in manuscript form around the court, city, and country. Some may have been scribally reproduced for sale, but the majority circulated through less formal

65. Raleigh (n. 6 above), p. 53.

66. Croft, "The Reputation of Robert Cecil" (n. 1 above), pp. 58–59, 60–62.

67. The best account is in Bellany, "The Poisoning of Legitimacy?" (n. 38 above), pp. 143–50.

channels.⁶⁸ Much evidence for libeling, in fact, survives from the period's emergent manuscript networks for the spread of news.⁶⁹ But much more evidence survives in verse miscellanies, which drew upon the period's thriving news culture yet laid claim to a less ephemeral and more literary status. An analysis of these sources will offer a greater appreciation of the situation of libeling within literary culture. Such an approach will also illuminate the textual practices of libelers, who commonly exploited the interaction between their work and the circulation of news, as they fashioned poetry with inherently excessive qualities. A libel was always less and more than news: unreliable in its facts but intriguing in its fictions.

The news culture of early Stuart England had established oral and written dimensions. Its heart was St. Paul's Cathedral, the acknowledged metropolitan center for seekers and gatherers of news, and an obvious site in which libels might be passed into circulation.⁷⁰ The rapid transmission of libels into the provinces is documented by sources such as the regular newsletters written by the Cambridge academic Joseph Mead to a more isolated associate and the news diary maintained by the Suffolk clergyman John Rous—texts which have been central in historical studies of news and political awareness. Such sources also underline the danger libels posed to the reader according to contemporary law. In the opinion of the Star Chamber, "it seemeth to be a perylouse thinge to keepe a lybelle, especiallye if it touche the state"; it was held instead to be imperative that libels be brought immediately to the attention of a magistrate, and ultimately put before the Privy Council.⁷¹ Mead was well aware of the dangers: when sending his correspondent one libel on Buckingham he commented, "I know you will not think it fitt to be shoven, though I send it you. If you do, at your owne perill. Ile deny it."⁷²

Consumers of news were also well aware that libels required different reading practices than those applied to the standard prose reports.⁷³ News was assessed in terms of its truth value. As David Cockburn has shown, Mead was particularly rigorous in his analysis,

68. Bellany raises this possibility in *ibid.*, pp. 143–44.

69. On the importance of news, see Richard Cust, "News and Politics in Early Seventeenth-Century England," *Past and Present*, no. 112 (1986), pp. 60–90.

70. Cogswell (n. 7 above), p. 281.

71. *Les Reportes del Cases in Camera Stellata 1593 to 1609. From the Original MS. of John Hawarde* (London, 1894), p. 373.

72. David Anthony John Cockburn, "A Critical Edition of the Letters of the Reverend Joseph Mead, 1626–1627, Contained in British Library Harleian MS 390" (Ph.D. diss., Cambridge University, 1994), p. 615.

73. Andrew Mousley considers news as "a problematic form of knowledge," in "Self, State, and Seventeenth-Century News," *Seventeenth-Century* 6 (1991): 149–68.

categorizing reports in terms ranging from “information” or “intelligence” for news considered to be reliable, down to the more suspect categories of “report,” “relation,” “tale,” or mere “talk.”⁷⁴ By comparison, libels were often tantalizing in their offering of truths beyond the public record but remained an unquestionably suspect textual mode. Shuger has argued that even the most mendacious of libels were widely read as statements of fact, and as such they exercised an unfortunate influence on the political process.⁷⁵ The majority of evidence from the sources in which the texts survive, however, does not support her argument. Rous, for example, transcribed a long poem about the Isle of Rhé expedition but commented that “whether any more be sette downe then vulgar rumor, which is often lying, I knowe not.”⁷⁶ Although generally scornful of “light scoffing wittes” who “rime upon any the most vulgar surmises,” Rous nonetheless recorded a significant number of libels. The “scorne of witte” clearly held a certain appeal, despite the patrician rhetoric.⁷⁷ Simonds D’Ewes, with the benefit of hindsight and with greater capacities of literary analysis, was more appreciative when he discussed libels in his *Autobiography* (1845).⁷⁸ The murder of Thomas Overbury in 1613, he wrote, “gave many satirical wits occasion to vent themselves in stingy libels.” Similar qualities were assumed in the readers: two libelous anagrams on the names of Frances Howard and Overbury at this time came to his “hands, not unworthy to be owned by the rarest wits of this age.”⁷⁹

Some libels explored and exploited the implications of this ambiguous relation to news. One poem, which is unusual in not being transcribed in verse miscellanies despite its distinct currency in news networks, was intended, in the words of D’Ewes, “to show the meanness of [Buckingham’s client] Sir Nicholas Hyde, and to deliver the

74. Cockburn, pp. 94–104. As Mousley argues, the concern with the sources of news evident in the news diaries of John Rous and Walter Yonge demonstrates similarly discriminating reading practices (pp. 162–65).

75. Shuger (n. 64 above), pp. 94–95.

76. *Diary of John Rous, Incumbent of Santon Downham, Suffolk: From 1625 to 1642*, ed. Mary Anne Everett Green (New York, 1968), p. 22.

77. *Ibid.*, p. 30.

78. Rous’s capacity as a literary critic is opened to question by his assertion that Richard Corbett’s characteristically obsequious royalist panegyric “On the Birth of Young Prince Charles” does “not seeme to be” by Corbett but, rather, “may be subscribed by some other, and it may be by such an one as is . . . termed Puritan” (*ibid.*, p. 55).

79. The anagrams, which were circulated widely, were: “Francis Howarde. Car finds a whore” and “Thomas Overburie. O! O! a busie murther” (*The Autobiography of Sir Simonds D’Ewes*, ed. James Orchard Halliwell, 2 vols. [London, 1845], 1:87).

four preceding Chief Justices to be remembered by posterity." Until the final line it functions almost as a memory-aid:

Learned Coke, Court Montague,
The aged Lea, and honest Crew;
Two preferred, two set aside,
And then starts up Sir Nicholas Hyde!⁸⁰

Rous in fact transcribed this in such a way as to reduce it to news: instead of including the barbed "starts up" (or "upstart" in other sources), his final line reads, "There's *now in place* sir Nicholas Hide."⁸¹ D'Ewes, however, considered the "significant tetrastich" to be another product of "wit" and recalled hearing it recited "at the Bury Lent assizes in Suffolk, in 1627, upon the bench, the same Hyde then sitting in his robes there"; the reading "so loud as I feared he would have overheard."⁸²

Another poem of the early 1620s, titled variously "A Proclamation" or "The Cryer," adapts the conventions of official news distribution to attack Giles Mompesson, Francis Michell, and Bacon:⁸³

Oyes,
Can any tell true tideinges
of a Monopolist
Knight of the Post for rideing
'cause he wist,
It argued no small cunning
To make his leggs the instruments
To save his necke by running.⁸⁴
Come forth
Thou bawdy house Protector
Pattentee of froth
Of signe posts the Erector⁸⁵
Our true worth,
Thy Quorum shall not checke,
For thou shalt unto Newgate ryde,
With Canns about thy necke.
.....

80. *Ibid.*, 2:48.

81. Rous, p. 8. The single word "upstart" is used in *The Letters of John Holles, 1587–1637*, ed. P. R. Seddon, 3 vols. (Nottingham, 1975–86), 2:346; and *Diary of Walter Yonge, Esq.*, ed. George Roberts (London, 1848), p. 100.

82. D'Ewes, 2:48.

83. A fourth stanza, omitted here, concerns Sir Robert Floud. The four men are identified in marginal notes to a version of the poem in BL MS Add. 33998, fols. 65v–66r.

84. Mompesson fled the country when charges against him were laid.

85. Michell was one of the patentees for alehouses, which explains the references to "froth," "signe posts," and possibly also to "bawdy house(s)," since alehouses were often depicted as sites of sexual depravity.

Sitt sure,
 Thou quaking quivering Keeper,
 A tent⁸⁶ thou must endure,
 Least thy wounds grow deeper,
 and past the cure,
 For if thy faults prove comon
 Thou soone shalt feele a Nimble Coke
 Slice collops from thy Gammon.⁸⁷

Whereas a proclamation disseminates a strictly official discourse, this poem translates news of political scandals into the idiom of popular balladry, setting the “true worth” of the people against the misdeeds of courtiers. The endemic corruption in the Jacobean government’s use of monopolies and patents as a means of regulating economic practice was one of the major issues of the 1621 parliament, which brought about the impeachment of Mompesson and Bacon.⁸⁸ The libel does not set out to simplify but in fact assumes an informed reader, erecting around a series of witty allusions a carnivalesque mode of satire, aligned with popular shaming rituals. Hence, the attack on Bacon plays predictably on his name, from his political wounds “past the cure,” to the attentions of the most zealous of his enemies in the Commons, Edward Coke. A contemporary report contextualizes the poem’s reference to Michell’s punishment, recording that “he was sent unto finsbury Jaile . . . and made to ride on a leane jade backward through london, holding the tail in his hand having a Paper upon his forehead, wherein was written his offence.”⁸⁹

Despite this poem’s obvious interaction with news culture, the sources in which it survives suggest overlapping spheres of readership, shading into an identifiably literary milieu.⁹⁰ In BL MS Harley 4955, it is transcribed in a collection of poetry largely composed of the work of Jonson and Donne; in BL Additional MS 33998, a carefully prepared verse miscellany dating from the reign of Charles I, including all the major poets of the period and a contemporary first-line

86. (Surgical) probe; cf. Hector’s description of “modest doubt” as “the tent that searches / To th’bottom of the worst” (*Troilus and Cressida* 2.2.16–17).

87. BL MS Harley 4955, fol. 86r.

88. Russell (n. 58 above) details the proceedings against monopolists and patentees, including the three attacked in this libel (pp. 98–113).

89. William Whiteway, *His Diary 1618 to 1635*, Dorset Record Society 12 (Dorset, 1991), p. 36. On such rituals, see Martin Ingram, “Ridings, Rough Music and Mocking Rhymes in Early Modern England,” in *Popular Culture in Seventeenth-Century England*, ed. Barry Reay (London, 1985), pp. 166–97.

90. My research has revealed only two contemporary sources; however, the final stanza on Bacon forms the first eight lines of another eighteen-line poem, which survives in BL MS Add. 22118, fol. 38b; and Beinecke Library MS Osborn b. 197, pp. 182–83.

index, it is one of only a handful of poems which could be considered politically sensitive. This appropriation of a topical poem into literary anthologies may be explained by acknowledging the predominant interests of many contemporary readers. Manuscript verse was circulated widely within London and beyond, and the sites of greatest activity for this practice included the court and the Inns of Court. Meanwhile, numerous informal social and cultural associations proliferated in London and around the fringes of the court. One group, centered on Hoskyns, which met at the Mitre in Fleet Street early in James's reign, was responsible for pieces including "The Parliament Fart," a widely read series of witty observations on members of the House of Commons.⁹¹ From the latter 1620s, further groups of poets, playwrights, and patrons formed into clubs in which political discourse could be volatile, if not directly oppositional.⁹² One man active in these circles was Herrick, who is best known to literary historians as a committed royalist, but who was the probable compiler of a miscellany which is now one of our best sources of political poetry.⁹³

The most important centers for the transmission of libels, however, were the universities. Oxford and Cambridge remained the principal training grounds for writers and readers throughout the period, and libelous discourse on university affairs was an accepted part of student life. One popular Elizabethan libel on Oxford identities circulated widely at both universities, and in the early seventeenth century similar poems on university affairs proliferated.⁹⁴ Satire was also officially sanctioned in practices of oratory, although the experience of Hoskyns evidences the contested boundaries of such areas of license. Hoskyns was elected university buffoon at Oxford in 1592, but his speeches were adjudged to have overstepped the bounds of his privileged status, and he was forced to leave the university.⁹⁵ By the 1620s and 1630s, university writers had become intensely concerned with both national politics and popular poetic forms. Oxford had a considerably more active literary culture than Cambridge in these years, and no single writer was more influential than the dean of Christ Church, Richard Corbett. Although he was a client of Buckingham and a leading apol-

91. See Baird W. Whitlock, *John Hoskyns, Serjeant-at-Law* (Washington, D.C., 1982), pp. 392–93, 283–88, and his annotated text of "The Parliament Fart," pp. 288–92.

92. See Raylor (n. 37 above), chaps. 4 and 5.

93. *Ibid.*, pp. 87–90.

94. The best text for "Mr Buckley's Libell of Oxon" is Bodleian MS Tanner 465, fols. 105r–109r; though a partial version is printed in *The Arundel Harington Manuscript of Tudor Poetry*, ed. Ruth Hussey, 2 vols. (Columbus, Ohio, 1960), 2:279–86. One Cambridge reader of the poem was John Finet (Bodleian MS Rawlinson Poet. 85, fols. 72v–75v). On early seventeenth-century university libels, see Marotti (n. 8 above), pp. 31–35.

95. Louise Brown Osborn, *The Life, Letters, and Writings of John Hoskyns, 1566–1638* (New Haven, Conn., 1937), p. 19.

ogist for the Caroline court, Corbett's interest in popular culture was instrumental in shaping a form of highly topical poetry, expressed in a "coarse and colloquial" style.⁹⁶

An interest in topical and libelous poetry thus informed literary tastes in the great period of English miscellany compilation, which lasted from around 1620 to the 1640s.⁹⁷ The vogue for the miscellany was a phenomenon centered on though not restricted to the universities; this vogue not only preserved poetry, but also helped to shape the work of writers. Some miscellanies combine poetry with prose documents or notes. Many others are purely devoted to poetry and evidence a prevalent concern among readers to gather the work of major contemporary poets. Significantly, no writer is more consistently represented in miscellanies than Corbett, whose poetry circulated widely beyond Oxford and is fundamental in the many surviving volumes associated with Christ Church.⁹⁸ Other important poets in this context include William Strode, Henry King, Carew, Herrick, Donne, and Jonson. Apart from Jonson, these were poets who eschewed printed publication and relied on the miscellany as a medium for establishing personal reputation and textual survival. Although the libel has been described as an "underground" form, it in fact thrived in a literary context in which manuscript circulation was valorized by most of the major writers.

The cultural work of contemporary collectors of poetry helped to establish literary standards and generic conventions. Miscellanies, in which compilers variously selected, organized, and annotated their material, are therefore best approached as active interventions in literary culture rather than as documentary reflections of poetic activity. The majority of extant manuscripts which include political poetry simply mix such pieces with conventional collections of elegies, love poetry, and occasional verse. Even this act is significant, however, as it situates libelous verse unproblematically within an established literary culture, inviting a reader to move from a Donne love lyric to an unattributed political libel. Other compilers attempted more actively to make sense of poems. British Library Sloane MS 826 is perhaps the most notable collection on a single topic, gathering prose documents and poetry relating to the life and death of Buckingham.⁹⁹ A number of other manuscripts contain sections devoted to particular topics,

96. Mary Hobbs, *Early Seventeenth-Century Verse Miscellany Manuscripts* (Aldershot, 1992), p. 34. I expect to consider further the work and influence of Corbett in a book-length study of early Stuart political satire.

97. See Marotti, p. 32.

98. See Hobbs, p. 3.

99. This manuscript was by far the single most important source for Fairholt's collection (n. 49 above).

such as that in Bodleian MS Rawlinson D 1048, fol. 64r–v, headed “Carres Ignomynye,” and containing six libels on the scandal surrounding the marriage of Carr and Howard. Few such instances indicate that the compiler wished to promote a particular political position. Rather, they suggest a certain detachment, perhaps reinforced by a temporal distance from the controversy which produced a particular piece.

Many compilers also felt that libels required situating in generic terms. The compiler of Folger MS V.a.345 placed a collection of libels in a section devoted to epigrams, while Richard Boyle, earl of Burlington, set a number of libelous epitaphs in a section otherwise devoted to laudatory elegies and epitaphs.¹⁰⁰ (Folger MS V.a.103 is more discriminating, as it separates a section of “Laudatory Epitaphs” from a subsequent section of “Epitaphs Merry & Satyricall.”) Bodleian Rawlinson Poetry 26, which has sectional headings for “Verses. Poems. Sonnets. Moral and Divine” and “Songs. Ballads. Libels,” ranges across a period from the later sixteenth century to the early 1640s, but the ordering of material is by genre and topic rather than date. A similar sense of a compiler approaching libels with a view to establishing a canon of the best pieces from the early Stuart period is evident in the volume maintained by John Holles, second earl of Clare (BL MS Harley 6383). Much of this book consists of prose, including an account of the 1624 Parliament.¹⁰¹ The poetry section was carefully compiled, with numbered pages and an index. Its collection of political poetry, much of which Holles identifies in headnotes as “libels,” might fairly be called discerning on literary grounds. The volume also has three poems concerned with the squabble between Jonson and Inigo Jones (fols. 73r–76r), a fact which further suggests an identifiably literary interest in poetry of invective.

A process of canon formation is most clearly apparent in Bodleian MS Malone 23, which is composed almost entirely of early Stuart political poetry.¹⁰² The consistent hand and the predominance of poems on Buckingham suggest that the volume was composed at one time, probably around 1630.¹⁰³ It contains about eighty poems, ranging in length from the pithy epitaph on Buckingham, “This little grave embraces / One Duke and twentie places,” to John Hepwith’s early Caro-

100. Folger MS V.a.125, fols. 1–19; the volume was compiled around 1630.

101. This has been published as *The Holles Account of Proceedings in the House of Commons in 1624*, ed. Christopher Thompson (Orsett, 1985).

102. Apart from the poetry, it includes a letter and prose notes, in Latin and English, concerning the rationale and morality of Felton’s murder of Buckingham.

103. Marotti (n. 8 above) claims that “it looks like a presentation volume to a social superior,” but he offers no supporting evidence (p. 85).

line beast satire *The Calidonian Forest*.¹⁰⁴ The material from early in the century reads as a selective survey of political controversy, though it is of course impossible to judge whether particular pieces were selected on factional or aesthetic grounds, or merely because they were all the compiler had to hand. For the 1620s it is more comprehensive; but although weighted, due to the nature of the mode, toward the scurrilous and subversive, it also includes James's poem in response to Buckingham libels and a strong selection of eulogistic epitaphs on Buckingham. The compiler appears to have wished to represent a range of the political poetry of the period, rather than to promote a coherent ideological position.

According to Arthur Marotti, who is keen to align this manuscript with an "opponentist critical perspective," its collection of poems both eulogizing and vilifying Buckingham is "unusual."¹⁰⁵ My research indicates, on the contrary, that it is far more unusual to find a miscellany with a consistent political position. This is not to say that some compilers did not hold identifiable political views; debate on Buckingham in the late 1620s was the single dominant issue in the nation, and there are certainly examples of miscellanies in which the compiler's opinion on such matters shaped a collection.¹⁰⁶ But it is instead characteristic of the miscellany at this period for compilers to gather together poems presenting diametrically opposed arguments. This fact undermines interpretations of the poems as delineating a "starkly binary political vision, which was available first in manuscript and then after 1640 in print."¹⁰⁷ Although the nature of the mode prompts individual writers to adopt extreme positions, the miscellanies provide good reason for believing that readers were generally capable of a certain critical detachment and appreciated the poems on grounds other than those of ideology. The libel is a mode of political poetry, and it would be misleading for a reader—either in the seventeenth or the twenty-first century—to situate the poems only in relation to codes of political discourse, without considering codes of poetic practice.

104. Bodleian MS Malone 23, pp. 145, 67–102. *The Calidonian Forest* was published in 1641; other manuscript copies are in Folger MS Va.275, pp. 63–86, and BL MS Harley 6920, pp. 1–22.

105. Marotti, pp. 87, 108.

106. See, e.g., Bodleian MS Eng. Poet. c. 50, which contains only libels on Buckingham; and J. A. Taylor's discussion of Leicestershire County Record Office MS DG 9/2796, which contains rare poems in support of the Duke ("Two Unpublished Poems on the Duke of Buckingham," *Review of English Studies* 40 [1989]: 232–40).

107. Cogswell (n. 7 above), p. 295.

III

Although the libel received only the barest attention from contemporary poetic theorists and encompasses a broad range of forms and styles, it is nonetheless possible to identify certain conventions which characterize it as a literary mode. It is hardly surprising that the poetic voice of the libeler is generally notable for vitriolic outspokenness. This point was commonly made by those attacking libels. Thomas Bastard, the Elizabethan satirist, depicted the libel as "all rawe with indigested spite" and the libeler's pen as clumsily "leak[ing] blots of spitefull infamine"; similarly, Jonson slated Gill for his "blatant Muse."¹⁰⁸ But just as satirists were advised to adopt a "low familiar way of speaking," so many libelers self-consciously embraced a quality of harshness.¹⁰⁹ One libel on Cecil begins with the invocation, "Advance, advance, my ill-disposed muse, / With uncouth stile and ill-disposed verse."¹¹⁰ Another writer redraws indices of social transgression as marks of authority: "Bridewell I come be valiant muse and strip / ride naked in despite of Bridewells whip. / Goe to y^e Court let those above us knowe / they have their faults as well as we belowe."¹¹¹ The construction of poetic voice in terms of social degree is thereby figured as at once legitimating and empowering, as the speaker freely acknowledges the "faults" of the common people but sets out to undermine the pretensions of the rulers.

The overt populism of the mode should also be appreciated as a valuable poetic strategy. One writer speaks of adopting a "rurall pen" suited to his task, while another claims that although "I was not wont to scould and scawle," the subject's behavior has forced him to "dippe my penne in gall."¹¹² This principle similarly underpins choices of form. The construction of libels in song and ballad forms may in many instances have facilitated oral circulation; however, this need not mean that their authors were directing their work principally at readers of low degree. A song on the court of James, for example, combines popular form and coterie allusion, as it scrutinizes the king's love of masculine entertainments:

108. Thomas Bastard, *Poems English and Latin*, ed. Alexander Grosart (Manchester, 1880), p. 39; *Ben Jonson*, ed. C. H. Herford, Percy Simpson, and Evelyn Simpson, 11 vols. (Oxford, 1954–70), 8:411.

109. Daniel Heinsius, *De Satyra Horatiana* (1629); quoted in Dustin Griffin, *Satire: A Critical Reintroduction* (Lexington, Ky., 1994), p. 14.

110. "Poems from a Seventeenth-Century Manuscript" (n. 6 above), p. 45.

111. Bodleian MS Eng. Poet. c.50, fol. 30r.

112. BL MS Add. 22601, fol. 37v; BL MS Add. 23229, fol. 30r.

King James hath meat. King James hath men
 King James loves to be merry
 King James too is Angrie nowe and then
 But it makes him quickly wearie
 Hee dwells at Court wheare hee hath good sport
 Att Christmes hee hath daunceing
 In the Summer tyde abroad will hee ryde
 With a guard about him pranceinge.
 With a hey downe downe &c.

Att Royston and newmarket hele hunt till he be leane
 But hee hath merry boys that with maskes and toyes
 Can make him fatt againe
 Nedd Zouch, Harrie Riche, Tom Badger
 George Goringe, and Jacke Finett
 These will dance A heate till they stinke of sweate
 As if the Devill weere in it.
 With a hey downe &c.

But o Iacke Maynard Jacke Milliscent
 Two Joviall boyes of the Rout
 For a maske or play beare the bell away
 If Jacke Milliscent be not out
 Alas poore Jacke money didst thou lacke
 When thou wert out at Saxum
 Thou wer't wont to have boldnes
 A pox on thy Coldnes
 Was cause that thou did'st lacke some
 With a hey downe downe &c. ¹¹³

Despite the conventional ballad refrain, the poem belongs primarily in a context of manuscript distribution, at court and among observers of the court. Anthony Weldon helps to contextualize the personal references. He recalls the rise of “pastimes and fooleries” at court during Buckingham’s period of greatest influence in the 1620s: “in which Sir *Ed. Zouch*, Sir *George Goring*, and Sir *John Finit* were the chiefe and Master Fools . . . Zouch his part it was to sing bawdy songs, and tell bawdy tales; *Finit*, to compose these Songs . . . and *Goring* was Master of the game for Fooleries . . . But Sir *John Milliscent* . . . was commended for notable fooling, and so was he indeed the best extemporary foole of them all.”¹¹⁴ Hence, the poem’s form is significant not just because it is popular, but also because it aligns with the “bawdy songs” favored

113. Bodleian MS Malone 23, pp. 20–21.

114. Anthony Weldon, *The Court and Character of King James* (London, 1651), pp. 84–85.

among this allegedly debased courtly coterie. Within this frame, it establishes a suggestive nexus between courtly entertainments and sodomy, conveyed through provocative imagery and a consistently arch tone: as evidenced, for example, in the reference to the king's waxing "fatt[ness]," and in the suggestion of Jack Milliscent's financial loss due to his "coldnes" with James. The poem positions the reader as a person detached from this milieu, yet equipped nonetheless with a suitably worldly wit. "But to dance with a man like a puritan," it continues, "'Tis a drie and ugly sport."¹¹⁵

In a manner characteristic of the mode, this poem operates by subverting discourses of hierarchy and praise. Whereas orthodox representations of courtly pleasures stress the dignity of the aristocracy and elevate the monarch above worldly concerns, the libel knowingly explores a world of "sweat" and shame. This strategy is typified by the mock epitaph, the most common form employed by libelers. Practices of memorial, including funeral services and monuments, reached new heights of extravagance in this period.¹¹⁶ Within this context, the mock epitaph operated subversively by undermining established conventions through which the life of an individual was situated within social and political structures. Its resources range from the cultivated poetry already observed in "Here lies Hobinoll our Pastor while ere," down to the idiom of the popular jest book. One piece of bawdy misogyny on Penelope Rich, for example, has an air of hackneyed folk humor: "One stone contents her, loe w^t death can doe, / That in her life was not content wth two."¹¹⁷ Many other pieces confront conventions of lapidary brevity and decorum with a railing excess, as is evident in one Buckingham libel:

Fortune's darling, king's content,
Vexation of the parliament,
The flatterer's deitie of state,
Advancer of each money-mate,
The divell's factor for the purse,
The papist's hope, the common's curse,
The saylor's crosse, the soldier's greife,
Commission's blanke, and England's theife,

115. Bodleian MS Malone 23, p. 21. I am grateful to Bradin Cormack for his comments on this poem.

116. See Michael Neill, *Issues of Death: Mortality and Identity in English Renaissance Tragedy* (Oxford, 1997), pp. 39–40.

117. Folger MS Va.345, p. 28. (Other manuscripts preserve this epitaph without the specific link to Penelope Rich; e.g., Folger MS Va.103, fol. 21v, which titles the piece, "On a lascivious Gentlewoman.")

The coward at the Ile of Ree,
 The bane of noble chivalrie,
 The night-worke of a painted dame,
 Confederate with doctor Lambe.
 All this lies underneath this stone,
 And yet, alas! heere lies but one.¹¹⁸

Like a number of other libels on Buckingham, the poem parodies a commonplace of contemporary epideictic epitaphs, “the motif that one person contains all the different virtues.”¹¹⁹ The poem’s force is derived from the rhetorical accumulation of insult, met at the close by the ironic evocation of Buckingham’s tombstone. As one supporter of Buckingham complained, the wave of libels had effectively appropriated the monumental decorum of the epitaph: “But w^t good deeds we doe ar writt in sande, / What bad (though done by chance) in Marble stande.”¹²⁰

Another poem on Buckingham’s death addresses more directly the way in which courtly discourse had sustained his power:

But where are now his plumed Troopes? those high
 Cedars, which tooke swift growth but in his Eye?
 Those gilded Flatterers too that did torment
 Their Active Lungs, t’indeavour a consent
 An Echo to his speech? are they all fled?

 Whom supple knees adore for secrett ends,
 Greatness many followers hath but few friends.¹²¹

The ironic glances at “supple knees” and “secrett ends” posit panegyric as the preeminent mode of deceit. Consequently, as the excess of the libeler is counterposed against the courtly dissimulation of the “gilded Flatterer,” notions of truth in the construction of reputation are problematized, undermined by the confrontation of discursive models. As several contemporary commentators argued, flattery and slander are equally duplicitous, diverging alike from an ideal of language that is “single” and “the very Image of our mind.” “Lady flattery,” one writer suggested, is “kinswoman, cosen germain to Dame sclaunder.”¹²²

118. Fairholt, ed. (n. 49 above), p. 66.

119. Joshua Scodel, *The English Poetic Epitaph: Commemoration and Conflict from Jonson to Wordsworth* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1991), p. 74.

120. BL MS Sloane 542, fol. 15v.

121. BL MS Egerton 2725, fol. 84r–v.

122. *A Plaine description of the Auncient Petigree of Dame Slaunder* (1573), sigs. F3v, C4v.

The play of irony in such poems thereby becomes a powerfully anarchic force, which carries the potential to erode the structures on which the authority of the monarch was erected. One poem demonstrates this effect in a comment on the notorious case of Frances Howard, who received a divorce from the earl of Essex, to whom she had been married as a child, after she claimed that the marriage had not been consummated. Howard then married James's court favourite Carr but was subsequently convicted of planning the murder of Carr's associate Overbury, who had consistently opposed the match.¹²³ The libel sets the skepticism of the politically powerless against the machinations of the powerful:

Tis painefull rowing gainst y^e bigg swolne tide
 Nor dare wee say why Overburye dide
 I dare not marry least when I have layde
 Close by my wife seven yeare shee prove a mayde
 And that her greatness or y^e law consent
 To prove my weapon insufficient
 Some are made greate by birth some have advance
 Some clime by witt some are made greate by chance
 I know one made a lord for his good face
 That had no more witt then would bare y^e place.¹²⁴

The poem panders to the bawdy humor and misogyny that surrounded the case; however, the ironic suggestion that "greatness or y^e law" can conspire to "prove" a man's "weapon insufficient" touches significantly on the foundations of justice in the state. The commission which ultimately decreed Howard's virginity was constituted of the Archbishop of Canterbury, three other bishops, and six civilian lawyers and judges. When it was deadlocked, James added another two bishops to secure the decision he wanted.¹²⁵ The implication of the king in the corruption is reiterated in the final lines, which note the promotion of Carr to a "place" for which he was manifestly unfit, merely on the grounds of "his good face."

Other writers employ irony to shape artfully ambiguous poems, which challenge the claims of truth raised by opposing sides in political controversies. One epitaph on Raleigh slides treacherously in intent according to the weight laid on either half of the final line: "Of Raleighs life and death the sum of all to tell / none ever livde so ill,

123. On this case, see David Lindley, *The Trials of Frances Howard: Fact and Fiction at the Court of King James* (London, 1993).

124. BL MS Egerton 2230, fol. 69r.

125. Lindley, pp. 81–82.

that seem'd to dye so well."¹²⁶ Another piece on Buckingham similarly holds criticism and panegyric in uneasy tension:

Here lyes great George y^e Glory of our state
 Noe way, Our Kingdome did him hate,
 Wrong did he, non he writed, even
 Disloyall was he counted, never
 Faithfull he was, in any thing
 Unto his countrie, and to his Noble King
 He did deceave, both Rome, & spayne
 Then wish him Now alive againe.¹²⁷

The poem translates the epitaph into a mode of comic instability. It endorses and exploits a culture of political controversy, collapsing the identity of the duke between the play of competing discourses. Although unusual, the poem typifies the libelous attention to the fashioning of reputations and mirrors the practices of the compilers of miscellanies, who transcribed together poems presenting diametrically opposed views.

This celebration of semantic instability provides further evidence of the literary sophistication which informed the culture of early Stuart libeling. Just as the practices of miscellany compilers evidence an appreciation of libels as literary texts that cannot merely be equated with news or popular opinion, so authors may be observed exploring the resources of the mode, with its capacity for the bitterest of invective or for a subtler but equally subversive irony. The libel functioned as an independent literary mode, broadly satiric but recognized by writers and readers alike as separable from formal verse satire. Its artful excess always had a performative quality, which demanded recognition on literary grounds. Simultaneously, however, the libeler's railing and irony undermined both orthodox discourses of authority that were dependent on assumptions of social order and strategies of courtly panegyric. Moreover, libels employed powerful strategies of discrimination and stigmatization, which helped to provide a language for the attacks on courtly corruption which gathered force throughout the 1620s and 1630s.

Libels must therefore be acknowledged as subversive, though not necessarily oppositional. Their greatest significance within political culture resided in their attention to language and the construction of identities, rather than in any project to divide the polity into identifiable parties. Hence, arguments that they represent a polarized political culture,

126. Folger MS Va.418, fol. 5v.

127. Huntington Library MS HM 116, pp. 47–48.

which anticipates that of the 1640s, require modification. It is an overstatement to claim that this poetry “constructs a mode of emergent oppositional rationality”—not least because the mode rarely laid claim to a voice of reason.¹²⁸ Libels were not just political statements but also literary constructions, shaped according to identifiable conventions. Contemporary readers appreciated this. They understood that the libel was a mode which sprawled across the shadowy line separating illicit truth from manifest fiction, unauthorized news from artful satire. A historicized approach to the manuscript literature of this period should aim to recover this sophistication, and thus to appreciate more fully the verse libel within its cultural context.

128. Holstun (n. 8 above), p. 517.