Introduction

In 1640 Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury, the 52-year-old secretary to the Earl of Devonshire, had a minor reputation as a respected translator and pastoral poet. To a small number of his friends he was also known as a promising mathematician and natural philosopher, perhaps even England's answer to Descartes. By 1700 all of this had changed. Hobbes had an international reputation, but not as an acclaimed scientist. Indeed, *that* reputation lay largely in ruins. He was widely known as the most notorious philosopher that England had ever produced. His name had become a byword for atheism, immorality and a whole range of unacceptable political views. To his English readers, he was the 'Monster of Malmesbury', the 'Devil's Secretary', an 'Agent of Hell' and as one writer put it 'Nature's Pest' and 'unhappy England's Shame'.[1] By the end of the century Hobbes had managed to acquire an extraordinary and perhaps even unique place in the English imagination as the *bête noire* of his age.

The remarkable transformation of Hobbes's public image from 1640 to 1700 was the effect of over fifty years of hostile commentary on Hobbes and his works. The dominant attitudes to Hobbes were largely structured by his critics, who were numerous and sometimes organised. Their success in blackening Hobbes's reputation was such that their view of the philosopher as a misanthropic atheist profoundly influenced subsequent readers and still informs popular understandings of Hobbes's ideas today. If Hobbes is now infamous as a dour pessimist with a taste for totalitarian authority, this reading has its origins in seventeenth-century critiques. As well as shaping views of Hobbes that have proved hard to shake, Hobbes's critics were also successful in convincing historians that the philosopher and his ideas were a bizarre aberration in seventeenth-century intellectual history. On this

[1] T. Pierce, *A decad of caveats* (1679), p. 3; Joseph Cutlore, *Two sermons* (1682), p. 15; G. Burnet, *A sermon preached before the Aldermen of the city of London* (1681), p. 9; T. L., 'A Satyr' in J. Barker, *Poetical recreations* (1688), p. 74 [second pagination].

account, Hobbes was an eccentric thinker who was intellectually isolated. His ideas were at odds with all of his contemporaries and his impact was entirely negative.

Recent work on Hobbes has established that such a picture is far from the truth, and that the portrait of Hobbes provided by his critics may not be a reliable guide either to his beliefs or to his relationship with his contemporaries. Over the last forty years historians have been recovering a more complex story in which Hobbes has been shown to have closer intellectual links with the mainstream of seventeenth-century thought than his critics liked to suggest. Looked at in context, Hobbes's views seem a lot less outlandish than his critics often claim. We can now identify examples of individuals who did share Hobbes's views and followed his lead. Indeed some historians have pointed out that even the critics who assaulted Hobbes may well have had more in common with him than they cared to admit; in fact some of them may well have attacked Hobbes's theology because his other views were sometimes too close for comfort. This research raises the thought that the reception of Hobbes was a much more complicated process than it might at first appear, and in the light of this new information it seems appropriate to reconsider the question of the reception of Hobbes in all of its complexity. That is the purpose of this book, which draws upon recent research and attempts to offer a chronological account of the reception of Hobbes's political and religious ideas between 1640 and 1700. Examining how and why Hobbes's reputation was transformed so completely during this period can tell us much about the difficult relationship between Hobbes and his contemporaries, but also about the important role that Hobbes's ideas played in the political and religious discourse of the period. For as we shall see, discussion of Hobbes was not simply the idle pursuit of a discredited atheist, but often a direct contribution to political and religious debate.

READING THE RECEPTION OF HOBBES

The study of Hobbes's reception amongst his contemporaries is a comparatively recent concern. That this is the case can be put down to the relative success of Hobbes's early critics in convincing subsequent Hobbes scholars that there was little of interest to study beyond the bare thought that Hobbes was rejected, and often for good reasons, by his readers. Although early biographers of Hobbes do give short and quite informative sketches of Hobbes's leading critics, they spend little time considering

whether such writers could tell us anything either about Hobbes, his work or his relationship with his contemporaries.[2]

However in 1940 the American scholar Sterling Lamprecht offered a thoughtful analysis of Hobbes that sought for the first time to distinguish between Hobbes's theory proper and 'Hobbism', the caricatured *misreading* (in Lamprecht's view) of Hobbes's political ideas common to his contemporary critics.[3] Lamprecht argued that for those critics collectively, Hobbes's political theory was summed up in four points that constituted political Hobbism. The first was a misanthropic account of human nature in which man was naturally inclined to malice and fraud, violence and ruthlessness. The second was Hobbes's apparent moral relativism in which moral distinctions were merely aribitrary conventions ultimately determined by the state. The last two elements referred to Hobbes's absolutism, suggesting that *de facto* a ruler could not be unjust or immoral as his commands were the criteria of right and wrong and that any appeal to the law for the protection of rights was invalid.[4] Lamprecht argued that Hobbes *could* be read this way if he was quoted out of context, but it was this account of *Hobbism* that had dominated subsequent accounts of Hobbes himself. Lamprecht was perhaps the first writer to consider the causes of Hobbes's misrepresentation, and he put it down to three factors; firstly Hobbes's 'remarkable gift for trenchant utterance and a glee in exploiting this gift to the irritation of his opponents'.[5] Hobbes's critics, indignant at his attacks upon them, wrote out of anger and therefore put the worst possible interpetation upon his ideas. The second factor was that the bulk of the critical response to Hobbes was a reaction to his most notorious book *Leviathan*. In contrast to Hobbes's earlier work, argued Lamprecht, *Leviathan*, a heated and provocative polemic 'lacks reasoned integrity and scholarly poise'. It was therefore easy to get Hobbes wrong. Lamprecht's third suggestion referred to the fact that Hobbes's political theory was actually part of a broader philosophical system, but the failure of that project meant that Hobbes's politics were taken out of context.[6]

Lamprecht's work showed that a discussion of the contemporary response could have important implications for the modern interpretation of Hobbes's thought. His distinction between Hobbes and Hobbism still informs our understanding of the reception of Hobbes today. His argument undoubtedly captures some of the reasons why Hobbes's critics wrote

[2] G. C. Robertson, *Hobbes* (1886); John Laird, *Hobbes* (1934), pp. 247–317.
[3] S. Lamprecht, 'Hobbes and Hobbism', *American Political Science Review* 34 (1940), pp. 31–53.
[4] Ibid., pp. 32–3. [5] Ibid., p. 34. [6] Ibid., pp. 34–5.

as they did, and pointed to some of the difficulties with interpreting a self-consciously rhetorical text like *Leviathan*. However Lamprecht's primary interest in Hobbes's own theory meant that he was only interested in his critics as a united chorus of misguided disapproval; a more detailed investigation of their motives and interests in reacting to Hobbes would have to wait until the first book-length study of Hobbes's critics, John Bowle's *Hobbes and his Critics: A Study in Seventeenth Century Constitutionalism* (1951).

Bowle's book is something of a hymn to what Bowle identified as an enduring commonsense tradition of constitutionalism and the rule of law in English political thought. For Bowle this was a tradition that could stand as a bulwark against the kind of abstract political theorising that recommended arbitrary rule in the seventeenth century, and which smoothed the way for totalitarianism in the twentieth. Placed in this context, the war between Hobbes and his critics offered an historical lesson with contemporary relevance. Bowle therefore offered sympathetic surveys of nine contemporary critics of Hobbes's political theory.[7] In contrast to Lamprecht, Bowle saw the critics' account of Hobbes's 'original, far-ranging and politically wrong-headed' theory as essentially the right reading. On this account, Hobbes had failed to see the weakness of his attempt to base society upon cold calculation unsupported by myth. The critics knew better and countered Hobbes with a vigorous reassertion of the mythical foundations of political authority, divine right and natural law. Against Hobbes's medieval pessimism about human nature, the critics offered a more enlightened optimism and confidence in the human instinct for mutual aid. Above all, rightly rejecting Hobbes's theoretical and impractical absolutism, Bowle's critics united in the defence of constitutionalism and the rule of law, anticipating Locke's political theory, and the essentially correct response to the seductive power of an excessive and dangerous rationalism in politics.

Although Bowle's critical instincts were blunted by his ambition to celebrate the constitutionalism of Hobbes's critics and to condemn the modern consequences of Hobbesian-style theorising, his readings successfully isolate an important strain of the response to Hobbes's work. As we shall see, constitutional Royalists in particular would respond to Hobbes's theory through a vigorous restatement of their core beliefs, and indeed it is true to say that the controversy with Hobbes produced some of the classic

[7] J. Bowle, *Hobbes and his Critics: A Study in Seventeenth Century Constitutionalism* (1951). Bowle discusses Filmer, Ross, Ward, Lucy, Lawson, Bramhall, Eachard, Clarendon and Whitehall.

statements of the constitutional Royalist and Presbyterian positions.[8] But that said, Bowle's determination to place Hobbes and the constitutional writers in rigidly segregated camps conceals the considerable interpenetration between their arguments. Hobbes's ideas would actually be silently adapted by some extremely successful constitutional Royalist writers, but as we shall see even those who explicitly opposed Hobbes's views had more in common with them than one might at first suppose. *Hobbes and his Critics* demonstrates the dangers of taking the critics' account of their relationship with Hobbes at face value, and also illustrates the continued influence of those writers upon twentieth-century interpretations of Hobbes's work.

Just over a decade after *Hobbes and his Critics* was published, Samuel Mintz produced what is still the standard work on the reception of Hobbes, *The Hunting of Leviathan* (1962).[9] What really distinguished Mintz's work was not only the fact that he took Hobbes's critics seriously as thinkers, but also his sophisticated understanding of the complexity of the encounters between Hobbes and his readers. Mintz's central thesis was that although Hobbes was relentlessly assaulted throughout the second half of the seventeenth century, he exerted a subtle effect upon those writers who engaged him. Mintz argued that Hobbes's critics were obliged to employ his own method of rational argument, thus absorbing his method while they resisted his ideas.[10] For Mintz, the classic example of this process could be seen in the reaction of the Cambridge Platonists; in responding to Hobbes they softened their neo-Platonism and 'concentrated on logical arguments for the existence of God and spirit'.[11] In doing so, they acquired a more secular and rationalist outlook, and as a consequence their arguments took on a Hobbist form while their conclusions were diametrically opposed to Hobbes's ideas. On Mintz's account, Hobbes may not have produced any disciples or founded a school, but in spite of this almost entirely negative direct impact, he did contribute to the growing secular rationalism of the Enlightenment.[12]

This striking thesis offers a subtle re-reading of Hobbes's impact. Mintz pursues the argument through an investigation of the philosophical reaction to Hobbes's materialism and his moral philosophy, foregrounding the work of opponents like Henry More, Ralph Cudworth and John Bramhall.

[8] Particularly Lawson's *An examination of the political part of Mr. Hobbs his Leviathan* (1657) and Clarendon's *A brief view and survey of the pernicious errors to church and state, in Mr Hobbes's book, entitled Leviathan* (Oxford, 1676).

[9] S. Mintz, *The Hunting of Leviathan: Seventeenth Century Reactions to the Materialism and Moral Philosophy of Thomas Hobbes* (Cambridge, 1962).

[10] Ibid., p. viii. [11] Ibid., p. 151. [12] Ibid., pp. 147–8.

Mintz also included a striking chapter on Hobbes and libertinism, scotching the view that the libertinism so often associated with Hobbes's name was anything more than a debased adaptation of Hobbes's work. For what it set out to do, *The Hunting of the Leviathan* was, and remains, a remarkably successful book, but it still held fast to the dominant view that Hobbes was an unusual and isolated figure. In the 1960s this thought was challenged in a series of ground-breaking articles by Quentin Skinner, whose work brought about a revolution in Hobbes studies, and injected new life to the question of Hobbes's reception.[13]

Skinner's new contextualist approach to the study of Hobbes demanded a more thorough examination of Hobbes's intellectual milieu as a means of establishing the character of his theoretical interventions. The more detailed understanding of the relationship between Hobbes and his contemporaries resulted in a dramatic revision of the character of his reception. Skinner demonstrated that Hobbes was far from being the isolated thinker portrayed by previous writers. He argued that Hobbes's ideas were often closely related to concepts available in contemporary political debate, and that it simply was not the case, as Mintz and others had argued, that Hobbes's positive ideas were simply rejected. The classic example studied by Skinner is Hobbes's involvement in the engagement controversy of 1649–51, where Skinner demonstrated that Hobbes not only shared much of his *de facto* theory with other engagement theorists, but also that Hobbes was widely quoted as an authority on the matter by subsequent writers. Uncovering an impressive amount of previously ignored evidence, Skinner was able to suggest that Hobbes's work was read and admired by many of his contemporaries, both in England and on the Continent. This work transformed the modern perception of Hobbes's relationships with his contemporaries and cast new light upon the activities of his critics. Far from attacking a single source of heterodox opinion, close examination of their works revealed that 'they took themselves to be attacking the ablest presentation of a political outlook that was gaining dangerously in acceptability.'[14] Hobbism, in the form of the beliefs that political obligation was based upon self-interest, and that human nature was basically anti-social,

[13] Q. Skinner, 'History and Ideology in the English Revolution', *The Historical Journal* 8 (1965), pp. 151–78; 'Hobbes and his Disciples in France and England', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 8 (1966), pp. 153–67; 'The Ideological Context of Hobbes's Political Thought', *The Historical Journal* 9 (1966), pp. 286–317; 'Conquest and Consent: Hobbes and the Engagement Controversy', in G. E. Aylmer, ed., *The Interregnum: The Quest for Settlement* (1972), pp. 79–98. Updated versions of these articles are also available in Skinner's recent collection of essays, *Visions of Politics*, 3 vols. (Cambridge, 2002), III, pp. 238–323.

[14] Ibid., p. 267.

were not simply creative misreadings of Hobbes's work, but accurate accounts that were in fact getting a foothold in English society.[15]

The recognition that Hobbes had a richer and more subtle relationship with his contemporaries would in time inform the best work discussing the reception of Hobbes's over the next few decades. Richard Tuck's exploration of Hobbes's place within the European natural law tradition provided an illuminating context for understanding Hobbes's complicated relationships with contemporary natural law theorists in general, and his friends from Great Tew in particular.[16] Noel Malcolm's unpublished dissertation highlighted the complexity of Hobbes's relationship with his Latitudinarian opponents, suggesting that much of their opposition to Hobbes stemmed not from their intellectual distance from Hobbes, but rather because in many respects they were too close to the disreputable philosopher for comfort.[17] This insight was explored in Malcolm's work on Hobbes's relationship with the Royal Society, where it was clear that the scientists' concern about Hobbes was that his growing theological notoriety might compromise the rationalist and scientific projects that they had in common.[18] The powerful thought here for understanding the reception of Hobbes's ideas was that Hobbes might have more in common with his mainstream contemporaries than we might think, and that the fact of his public exclusion from such company may have had more to do with contingent circumstances than any deep intellectual incommensurability between his views and those of his opponents. A similar theme emerges from John Marshall's treatment of Latitudinarian Hobbism and I pursued Malcolm's argument in my own work on Richard Cumberland.[19] Many of

[15] Part of the reason for stressing the veracity of these accounts of Hobbes's work was to counter the so-called Warrender–Taylor thesis, which suggested that Hobbes was offering a deontological theory of moral obligation. The fact that none of Hobbes's critics thought that this was the case, and castigated Hobbes for holding a theory founded purely upon self-interest, together with Hobbes's failure to make the case in response, strongly suggested that Warrender, Taylor and Hood were all incorrect in their interpretation of Hobbes's ideas.

[16] R. Tuck, *Natural Rights Theories: Their Origin and Development* (Cambridge, 1979) and more recently *Philosophy and Government, 1572–1651* (Cambridge, 1993), ch. 7, but see also M. Dzelzainis, 'Edward Hyde and Thomas Hobbes's *Elements of Law, Natural and Politic*', *The Historical Journal* 32: 2 (1989), pp. 303–17.

[17] N. Malcolm, 'Thomas Hobbes and Voluntarist Theology', unpublished PhD dissertation, Cambridge University, 1982.

[18] N. Malcolm, 'Hobbes and the Royal Society', in G. A. J. Rogers and A. Ryan, eds., *Perspectives on Thomas Hobbes* (Oxford, 1988), pp. 43–66, and also in N. Malcolm, *Aspects of Hobbes* (Oxford, 2002), pp. 317–35.

[19] Latitudinarian 'Hobbism' 'The Ecclesiology of the Latitude-men 1660–1689: Stillingfleet, Tillotson and Hobbism', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 36: 3 (1985), pp. 407–27; J. Parkin, *Science, Religion and Politics in Restoration England: Richard Cumberland's De Legibus Naturae* (Woodbridge, 1999).

these developments were summed up in Mark Goldie's magisterial survey of the reception of Hobbes in his contribution to *The Cambridge History of Political Thought*.[20] Placing Hobbes's political theory in the context of the wider philosophical conflict between voluntarist and anti-voluntarist arguments allowed Goldie to explore the sometimes surprising connections between Hobbes and other Protestant voluntarist thinkers. This theological lens also revealed that Hobbes's sternest critics could be distinguished in terms of their anti-voluntarist views. Most recently, Noel Malcolm has applied this more contextually sensitive approach to the neglected story of Hobbes's Continental reception. Here once again the traditional story of Hobbes's philosophical marginalisation is shown to be only partly true. Malcolm's stunning overview of Hobbes's reception across the Continent uncovers a rich and complicated story of adaptation and appropriation. Malcolm stresses the extent to which Hobbes influenced not only radical thinkers, but also more mainstream political traditions.[21] Here, in one of the most dramatic outcomes of the new approach to Hobbes studies, attention to Hobbes's reception uncovers Hobbes's central role in early Enlightenment discourse.

RETHINKING RECEPTION

In the light of this considerably revised account of Hobbes's fate it seems like an appropriate moment to reconsider the reception of Hobbes's ideas in his own country. This book builds upon the recent work on Hobbes's relationships with his contemporaries to offer an overview of the reception of Hobbes's political and religious ideas in England between 1640 and 1700.[22] It also attempts to do so in a slightly unusual way in that I have avoided a more traditional thematic presentation of the material in favour of a chronological approach. I have done so partly because of a

[20] M. Goldie, 'The Reception of Hobbes', in J. Burns and M. Goldie, eds., *The Cambridge History of Political Thought 1450–1700* (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 589–615.

[21] N. Malcolm, 'Hobbes and the European Republic of Letters', in *Aspects of Hobbes*, pp. 457–545.

[22] I have only included discussions of the reception of Hobbes's scientific and mathematical work insofar as they have a bearing on or illuminate those aspects of Hobbes's reception that I am concerned with. The reception of Hobbes's mathematical work is dealt with admirably in Douglas Jesseph's excellent *Squaring the Circle: The War between Hobbes and Wallis* (Chicago, 1999), and I partly rely upon Jesseph for my own account of the disputes between the two. Hobbes's scientific work and its reception has become an area of lively controversy, particularly since the publication of Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer's *Leviathan and the Air-pump: Hobbes, Boyle and the Experimental Life* (Princeton, 1985). I draw upon this work and the literature that has developed on the subject, particularly Emilio Sergio's *Contro il Leviatano. Hobbes e le controversie scientifiche 1650–1665* (Rubbettino, 2001).

dissatisfaction with some of the effects of treating reception thematically, but also in the hope that arranging the material in this way will shed light upon some of the processes of reception in this particular case.

Clearly there are advantages to adopting a thematic approach to reception studies, not least that it provides a sensible way of structuring heterogeneous material and is undoubtedly convenient for the reader who wishes to know how Hobbes's contemporaries reacted to particular themes in Hobbes's work. The disadvantage is that thematic treatments foreground the work of the author being received rather than the concerns of his or her readers. Such accounts frequently conceal the historical reasons why particular readers engaged with the texts in the first place, and also the changing contexts for their commentaries upon a particular author. What we lose is a sense of exactly why a text like *Leviathan* should have come to occupy such an important place in the political, religious and social discourse of its time, and how it earned the reputation that it did. Recontextualising Hobbes's readers and critics and putting the emphasis upon them, rather than upon Hobbes, thus becomes a way of approaching this issue afresh, and allows us to consider the uses to which Hobbes and his work were put in the latter half of the seventeenth century.

Such an approach reveals the contingent but cumulative character of what I have been calling the reception process. By this I mean the complicated hermeneutic and social process by which a text comes to bear particular public meanings, meanings sometimes quite at odds with the author's intentions. For reasons that will be explored below, Hobbes's controversial but politically and theologically underdetermined texts were peculiarly amenable to creative or hostile interpretation. Works like *Leviathan* potentially bore a variety of political and religious meanings, some innocuous and others freighted with danger. Readers, and communities of readers, came to Hobbes's unusual arguments with a variety of preconceptions, prejudices and agendas that they used to make sense of the unusual and paradoxical *mélange* of elements that they found there. Hobbes's texts would be 'decided' in readings that could make clear the uncertain dangers lurking within. Such decisions often had a political dimension. Hobbes's work was often read against the background of specific political and religious debates, in which his work could, sometimes erroneously, become aligned with specific positions. As we shall see, Royalists in the 1640s read Hobbes's political theory under the shadow of a debate over parliamentary claims to sovereignty; a decade later the Oxford scientists read *Leviathan* in the context of a political debate over the future of the universities. The contingent political circumstances in

which these readings took place conditioned the character of published responses to Hobbes's work. This meant that although Hobbes usually attempted to avoid identification with particular political and religious causes, the often deliberate ambiguity of his texts meant that he was ultimately associated with a surprising range of positions, in ways that he could not control, and mostly to his detriment. Hobbes would be read as a champion of rebellion and as a proponent of arbitrary government, as a dangerous exponent of the new science and as someone who really hadn't grasped what the new science was about. Arguably none of these responses captured the complexity of Hobbes's own ideas, but they would come to inform the public discussion of his work. Such characterisations often played an important role in turning Hobbes's ideas into what Lamprecht called 'Hobbism', deliberate reductions of Hobbes's views, often linked to undesirable social and political signifiers such as atheism and immorality.

A less obvious consequence was that the condemnation of Hobbism could deliberately conceal genuine similarities between Hobbes and the views of his critics. Here the cumulative effect of Hobbes's notoriety becomes important. As Hobbes was increasingly condemned, writers who shared arguments and premises with the philosopher would seek to distance themselves from him, often through attacks which reconstructed Hobbes's views in a way that emphasised their distance from orthodox ideas. The construction of Hobbes as an unacceptable follower of Epicurus, for example, would ultimately help natural philosophers and natural lawyers to put clear classical water between Hobbes's ideas and their own.

This reconstruction of Hobbes's ambiguous ideas and identity into various forms of Hobbism are part of the process that converted discussion of Hobbes into a way of talking about politics more generally. Once Hobbes had been reviled as a proponent of absolutely unacceptable absolutism, or an advocate of libertinism, and the claim that he was had been accepted, then the charge of Hobbism and the discussion of the iniquity of Hobbes's view could become part of a critical discourse about power and authority, or public morality. Certainly this seems to have been the role played by Hobbes in the discussions of writers like Harrington and Lawson in the 1650s, where a caricature of Hobbes's political views could serve as a stalking horse for the 'Hobbesian' threat posed by the Protectorate. The same would be true of Hobbes's contractarian ideas, which would in time become the favourite target of Royalist assaults upon consent theory; any theorist alluding to consent could be tarred as a Hobbist, and rejected with anti-Hobbesian arguments. This process explains the extraordinary