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Andrew Hadfield

Excerpt

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*Introduction: the nation and public literature in
the sixteenth century*

The argument of this book is essentially simple, but some of the implications of its argument are not so straightforward. I want to claim that in the sixteenth century it was not obvious to many writers of 'literature' what it was they were attempting to achieve. 'Literature' was not a clear and distinctly identifiable category of writing which would be employed to deal with certain themes in a particular way. Obviously, certain modes, or types, of writing (for example, ballad, epic, romance, satire, comedy, tragedy) existed and were frequently reproduced; but it was not clear exactly how they related to each other, how they related to other forms of writing and, most importantly, what was the point of writing or reading such works.

Many writers chose to define their aims through their own particular conceptions of a public national culture for which they wrote and to which they spoke. If literature was to have a serious meaning and function, it had to be conceived of as an important constituent of a wider concern than merely fine writing. Therefore, two seemingly distinct purposes cannot easily be separated: writers had both to fashion and authorise their own utterances as literature and imagine the national community they addressed. Neither 'literature' nor 'nation' could be taken as stable entities and were always in the process of being redefined, partly as a result of their interaction and interdependence, and partly owing to other factors and relationships. Literature had to be read in relation to other kinds of discourse (some of these, of course, were also used to try to define a national identity, for example legal treatises, chronicles, maps and geographic surveys, travel writing) and the nation against

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both other nations and other forms of ‘imagined community’ (including supranational, spiritual, local or regional perceptions of identity; some of these also depending upon literary or fictional writings: see below, pp.7–8).¹

Such a project cuts across the boundaries and assumptions of academic disciplines as they often exist within current institutions of higher education. All too often, such disciplines demand discrete, self-contained rules of engagement with evidence and specific styles of writing; in effect, part of the same problem that I have outlined above. Many historians of the concept of ‘nationalism’ regard the phenomenon as a modern development precipitated by the European Enlightenment. The provocative opening statement of Elie Kedourie’s popular monograph, *Nationalism* (1960), ‘Nationalism is a doctrine invented in Europe at the beginning of the nineteenth century’, is only one instance of a common assumption.² It may well be possible to argue that a doctrine which can be defined as ‘nationalism’ post-dates the sixteenth century, but if we accept Anthony D. Smith’s recent formulation, then one can clearly counter that many writers in Tudor England saw their country as a ‘nation’: ‘A nation can ... be defined as *a named human population sharing an historic territory, common myths and historical memories, a mass, public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for all members*’ (Smith’s emphasis).³

Certainly, this definition would concur with the evidence to be found in the writings of such diverse writers as Sir Thomas Smith, Richard Hakluyt, Raphael Holinshed and Edward Hall, as well as the authors under consideration in this book (although their versions of the English nation would not encompass ‘all’ the inhabitants of England and the entire range of Smith’s points would not always be fully fleshed out or properly considered; but the same could be said of many ‘modern’ attempts to define a nation).⁴ It seems perverse that historians of nationalism have been so keen to stress only the recent history of the concept of the nation, as if the pre-history (in their terms) only led to a current state of affairs.⁵ If the nation is seen as an ‘imagined community’ which includes some people and excludes others, then surely it must constantly be re-

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imagined and renegotiated. The idea of a nation is predicated upon the existence of a public space – geographical and conceptual – which will always include competing voices desiring to speak for the ‘nation’ and fashion it according to their particular designs. Some conceptions of national identity will clearly be more successful than others and become dominant; some will disappear, as I argue in chapter 1 was the case with John Skelton’s attempt to make himself the spokesman of various national communities.

Secondly, this project challenges comfortable notions of literary history which frequently assume that literature is an unchanging, ahistorical category, even when authors of such histories are obviously aware that this is not the case but have failed to pursue their own insights as rigorously as they might have done.⁶ Literary history cannot be written in isolation if the writers of literature do not agree what literature is – as, I will argue, is the case with the authors considered in this volume. An attempt to write a ‘pure’ literary history, in the belief that a genre of writing can be isolated, will always be prone to teleological readings.⁷ In this way, a traditional literary history and a history of nationalism can be seen to mirror each other in the assumption that the object of their particular studies can be isolated and separated from other phenomena.

There is another and more obvious connection between the two disciplines. If the standard error of historians of national identity is to assume that concepts can be seen to have a pre-history and a history ‘proper’, literary historians often seem to make the related mistake of believing that, just because certain literary styles and forms did not succeed in influencing later writers, they must have been always automatically doomed to failure; and, conversely, those which enjoyed a long history did so because they were always better adapted to survival in the hostile swamps of culture. Thus, it is often argued that the sonnet form, imported from Italy by Wyatt and Surrey in the reign of Henry VIII, led directly to the explosion of sonnets in the 1580s and 1590s.⁸ This narrative ignores numerous complexities and ideologically circumscribes an intricate history of textual transmission. Italian authors like Petrarch had been

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adapted by Chaucer during the reign of Richard II, but the influence had not survived long after his death in 1400, ie, the sonnet form had already been adapted into English and failed to become a dominant norm before it was reintroduced in the sixteenth century. Similarly, before the publication of *Tottel's Miscellany* (1557), it had a relatively minor influence on English poetry and other verse forms (complaint, *de casibus* tragedy, Skeltonics and other related styles, rime royal and so on) played a much more dominant role in the history of an English literature. In fact, when Chaucer was re-invented as the great English poet in the Renaissance, he was usually seen as a proto-Protestant, as part of the vernacular tradition against which the courtly poets of the 1580s and 1590s were reacting in attempting to establish an English poetic style based on Italian and French models. So the forerunner of a tradition went unrecognised and actually had what he first started – the English adoption of Italian poetic forms – eventually defined against the use made of him by later writers. Such an ironic reversal illustrates the unstable nature of literary history. The willingness of literary historians to overlook this and other similar examples argues another case of a teleological narrative being applied to distinguish a pre-history from a history proper.⁹ The chief desire is to create a smoothly progressive and easily manageable chronology.

More importantly still, it ignores the vast literary production of the mid-sixteenth century when very different styles of literature were sponsored at the court of Edward VI as the researches of John N. King have unearthed recently.¹⁰ It is by no means an obvious 'fact' of literary history that such literature need only be seen in relation to the later forms which developed in the closing stages of Elizabeth's reign and can be dismissed as the 'drab' forerunner of a courtly culture which situated itself in relation to certain kinds of Henrican literature.¹¹ If Wyatt and Surrey seem like the harbingers of Sidney and Spenser, that is because those later authors *sometimes* read them that way. Literary history forms a discontinuous narrative even in terms of its own intra-textual process and to read it as a gradual development is absurd; who knows what might have happened

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had Edward VI not succumbed to consumption in 1553? It should always be remembered that some types of literature die not because they are inherently doomed, but because of the accidents and strange circumstances of a history that can never be merely 'literary'.

One might point to the perpetual suppression of a hyphen in the writing of English literary history, for, after all, to write a history of English Literature presupposes that both the nation and its literature are separate, stable entities, congruent yet unrelated bodies of empirical data which belong quite naturally together. English literary history tends far too often to concentrate upon a canon of literary texts and not upon what makes them English or why they are considered to be literary; the hyphen joining nation and literature is silently passed over so that, in an ideological manoeuvre, neither 'literariness' nor 'Englishness' are considered, only a body of works of literature. Therefore, a history of a national literature justifies itself in terms of a current imagined state of that nation, oblivious to the prospect that that state will always be open to dispute, as the acrimonious debates concerning the *national* curriculum illustrate.¹² Who, in the final analysis, speaks for the nation and decides how it has to be written?

If we examine some of the most widely read literary texts produced in the sixteenth century, it would seem that answers given to this question vary considerably. Different authors trace different genealogies, articulate various notions of literariness, adopt multifarious clusters of myths and historical memories and assume different political positions. What all the texts analysed in this book have in common is their desire to help constitute and participate within a national public sphere.

I have adopted – and adapted – this concept from Jürgen Habermas's well-known formulation:

By the 'public sphere' we mean first of all a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed. Access is guaranteed to all citizens. A portion of the public sphere comes into being in every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body. They then behave neither like business or professional people transacting private affairs, nor like members of a

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constitutional order subject to the constraints of a state bureaucracy. Citizens behave as a public body when they confer in an unrestricted fashion – that is, with the guarantee of freedom of assembly and association and the freedom to express and publish their opinions – about matters of general interest.

Habermas alleges that such a free public space ‘grew out of a specific phase of bourgeois society’ and only exists in the ‘modern bourgeois constitutional state’, so that he too is a historian who dates modernity as a post-Enlightenment phenomenon.¹³

Habermas has been rightly criticised for his Utopian faith in the successful operation of the public sphere in Western democracies and his apparent belief in ideologically unfettered speech acts competing to form public opinion.¹⁴ His brief history of the development of the ‘bourgeois public sphere’, from the ‘representative public sphere’ of the high Middle Ages, which depended upon the personal power of the monarch, to the ‘new sphere of “public authority” which came into being with national and territorial states’ and which consisted of private individuals who were in opposition to state structures and hierarchies, before maturing into the public sphere proper – something which ‘was unique and without historical precedent’ – betrays the same teleological assumptions of historians of nationalism. It might be argued, *pace* Habermas, that the public sphere has always been an *ideal*, a hope for an unrestricted medium of debate beyond the reaches of state authority and outside the delusive confines of ideological distortion. Habermas does not examine ancient political philosophy or any history of thought outside Europe, a strange and disturbing ethnocentrism given the grandeur of his claim that the public sphere ‘was unique and without historical precedent’.¹⁵

Habermas specifically contrasts the ‘political public sphere’ to the literary one; it should be asked why the two spheres can never overlap, especially if the place of literature within a range of discursive formations is always subject to change? To cite one example: during the Pilgrimage of Grace (1536–7), much of the propaganda produced by the rebels seeking a restoration of the traditional rights and functions of the church was in the form of

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ballads and poems and most produced by the Henrican authorities was in the form of proclamations and tracts.¹⁶ However, one poem seems to have been written at the government's behest, namely Wilfrid Holme of Huntington's *The Fall and Evill Successe of Rebellion* (1536).¹⁷ The poem is a dream vision in which the author meets the figure of Anglia who asks him to explain to her about sedition. Holme responds with a wealth of Biblical and Roman examples and a brief survey of English Medieval history, before coming to the recent 'commotion', ie, the Pilgrimage of Grace. Much of Holme's narrative is a straightforward dramatisation of Henry's response to the Pilgrims' five articles, which demanded that the Catholic Church be fully restored with its independence from the monarch left intact, unpopular laws such as the Statute of Uses be repealed, the King's Council be purged of 'villein blood' and replaced with traditional nobles, and those blamed for the Protestant onslaught (for the Pilgrims always proclaimed their loyalty to what they saw as the deluded sovereign), Cromwell and Richard Rich, be banished as heretics.¹⁸ Henry's replies had been printed and circulated throughout the rebellious areas, Lincolnshire, Lancashire and Yorkshire, and often what Holme writes is simply a transference of these from one medium to another, so that the verses can be lined up against the original statements.¹⁹

But there is a point in the story where narrative strategies seem to be laid bare and illusionistic pretence turns against itself. Anglia, chiding Holme for being over-detailed in providing an exhaustive list of the principal rebels, loses her temper and demands he obey the rules of her discourse:

Then with an ardent fury quod Anglia and frowned,
 Holme it is but *fiction* I say thou dost devise,
 Shewdest thou not me that gentlemen and men that were,
 Fled to castles & fortresses, what made them then to rise?
 (fo. 7; my emphasis)

In this poem, literary fiction and political discourse do not exist as antitheses and one does not preclude the other: rather, in this specific context, politics demands fictive treatment. Anglia is not angry because she does not believe Holme's account of

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events narrated in the poem, but because he has elaborated factual details at too great a length. Anglia's point is that a 'fiction', the ability to craft a narrative and tell a story, will represent her more truthfully than a chronicle of unselected information. As a reader of herself, she will understand a political situation better if it is narrated as a literary fiction rather than as a morass of confused observations. Fiction, for Anglia, is 'real' because without a conception of fiction (literature), 'facts' are meaningless, so that fictionality can be seen, paradoxically, to be both anterior and posterior to factuality. The desire of the narrator to prise the actual away from the fictional will always be frustrated.

The Fall and Evill Successes of Rebellion is a state-sponsored poem and so excludes itself from the public sphere as defined by Habermas: 'The state and the public sphere do not overlap as one might suppose from casual language use. Rather they confront one another as opponents' (p.46). However, the crucial suggestion that literary fiction can and should be used to discuss political matters obviously opens up the possibility that literature could be used to articulate an oppositional public voice as well as a national one (something Holme achieves through his use of the prosopopoeia of Anglia). Indeed, one might suggest that many sixteenth-century writers explicitly attempted to link the 'imagined community' of the nation to a 'public sphere', in that they used their fictions to create a critical national literature.

Why, it should be asked, was this the case? I am not attempting to claim a unique status for the diverse works of Skelton, Surrey, Bale, Sidney, Spenser, the authors of the theoretical literary treatises discussed here (Wilson, Gosson and Puttenham) and the authors of *A Mirror for Magistrates*. Other sixteenth-century writers could also have been included – notably, perhaps, Wyatt, Lyly, Marlowe and Nashe.²⁰ I have not considered dramatic writings (excepting Gosson's tract and certain of Bale's works), partly owing to considerations of space and partly because various monographs have already started to deal with the sorts of question I have been asking.²¹ I am also not attempting to assert that every sixteenth-century writer of

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literature has to be read in terms of their relationship to a public national culture, nor that many had not defined themselves in this way before – Chaucer, Gower, Malory and other interpreters of Arthurian material are pertinent examples – nor that many would continue to do so after the death of Elizabeth in 1603 – Drayton, George Herbert, Ben Jonson, Milton and Dryden are only among the most obvious examples.²² What I am suggesting is that the problem of national identity required urgent attention in the sixteenth century, principally owing to the Reformation and the consequent stress placed on the need to establish vernacular languages and cultures in each respective European country.²³ Imagined national communities had existed before the spread of Protestantism, but with the break-up of the Latinate culture of the late Middle Ages a new impetus was given to the development of national language which should become expressions of a territorial integrity. There was a greater pressure than there had been immediately before on the importance of defining identity as national and those who saw the need to write an English literature and establish this particular vernacular culture recognised that such a task involved renegotiating the relationship with the political authority under which this writing would exist.²⁴

However, as the case of Skelton illustrates (chapter 1), a history of national identity – like a literary history – is discontinuous: the Reformation served to kill off certain forms of national identity as well as to foster and proliferate new ones. It would be false to argue that the Reformation inaugurated such debates and erroneous to read Skelton's ideas solely in terms of a reaction to Protestant thought. Skelton's different visions of an English nation did not disappear because they were necessarily unfeasible, but because events which he could not have foreseen overtook him and rendered him an anachronism.

In a crucial sense, any literary discourse had an ambiguous status in the sixteenth century. On the one hand, literature affirmed a free space outside the constraints of a consciously politicised vocabulary and mode of writing; on the other, as a key component of a national culture, it played a specifically political role. An appreciation of this aporia is vital to our

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understanding of the relationship between the nation, literature and the public in this period. Literature could be seen as a form of ideological cement in helping to constitute the nation; but also as a public sphere in that it provided writers with a means of separating their utterances from the political constraints of state-approved discourses. It was thus a site of knowledge saturated with ideology and simultaneously a Utopian hope of a free, interactive critical space. Current arguments regarding the subversion/containment of Renaissance literary texts are all too often blind to this ambiguity and the potential for directly opposed readings of the same works which have to exist as ultimately contradictory statements. It is not always necessary – or possible – to insist on a definitely clear and distinct reading, aligning the text with one specific range of meanings.²⁵

Censorship under the Tudors is a complex and thorny problem. Some scholars argue that there was a deliberate and programmatic policy, whilst others see the process as a far more random and *ad hoc* affair determined principally by luck and official sloth.²⁶ Whatever the truth of the matter, it is clear that literary texts often worried the authorities and the mechanisms of censorship threatened every writer who was bold, foolish or ignorant enough to challenge accepted norms. What got censored and what did not often seems surprising to a modern reader; how did the authors of the first edition of *A Mirror for Magistrates* escape when that work appears to challenge the prerogative rights of monarchs? The answer to this particular question may be that the work was not read as critical of contemporary authoritarianism but as a celebration of a British/English history, something it was to be transformed into in its later manifestations (see chapter 2). Was *The Old Arcadia* never published because of fear of censorship? There is no direct evidence for this contention, but episodes which seem to criticise the rulers of Arcadia in that text are transferred to more exotic locations in *The New Arcadia*, possibly removing a reading which both versions invite, that Arcadia can be read as Elizabethan England (see chapter 5). Why were Spenser's poems never actually censored despite the hostile attention they generated and the barely disguised attacks on the queen in the later books