

Introduction

Owing to its mimetic qualities and the ability to pretend to be a ‘mirror up to nature’, to be an objective and unambiguous ‘reflection’ of the empirical world, a dramatic text reveals through its seeming ‘objectivity’ an enormous persuasive power, and may with ease function as an efficient instrument of propaganda. The understanding of this potentiality has always tempted those in power to take full administrative control of the dissemination of drama. This was particularly the case in societies – like that of James I – where the majority of people were illiterate. That dramatic texts could become useful tools in political struggle, or a means of persuasion that was capable of influencing wide circles of society, had already been fully recognized during the reign of the early Tudors. David Bevington’s *Tudor Drama and Politics*¹ provides an impressive amount of evidence for that. However, in most of the examples he provides, particular performances of politically engaged plays, reflecting the ideology of particular court factions, had in fact limited court audiences and took place on single occasions only. It was not until the last years of James I’s reign that, for the first time, dramatic texts were disseminated on a wide scale for basically political purposes; they were not confined to court, nor even to London itself, nor were they limited to single performances. During the period of several months, starting in November 1623, thousands of people had an opportunity to see or read dozens of plays, a number of which raised important political issues of the day, and dealt with topics of great importance to the entire nation and to what seemed to be the future of Protestantism.

This book will concentrate on the extant plays and masques that were circulated in England, both in print and in theatrical performances, during the period immediately following the return of Prince Charles and the Duke of Buckingham from Spain in October 1623. Their return was the result of the failure of the marriage negotiations through which James I had hoped to bring peace to Europe, and also marked the beginning of a new phase in English foreign policy. These dramatic texts have one thing in common: when staged, or circulated in print in 1623/24, they served an important political purpose, which this book will aim to reveal. Because of the unprecedented scale and scope of this particular theatrical season, it is difficult to avoid an impression that it was not a spontaneous reaction of the dramatists of the period against the mishandling of England’s foreign policies

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by the court, but a consciously contrived campaign, initiated and sponsored by a group of politicians whose goal it was to use all means available to win the support of both nobility and the commons. Unfortunately, in most cases, it is impossible to prove who in particular ‘stood behind’ a given performance, or publication, just as it may well have been impossible to do so in the period under discussion, but some pieces of evidence and the extant texts of plays and masques strengthen our contention that this was a consciously organized campaign, something that this book will attempt to prove. That a dozen or so plays, printed or staged within one theatrical season only, dealt directly with or alluded to the same political issues, cannot be a matter of mere coincidence. Moreover, the circulation of these plays was concomitant with, and preceded by, a positive flood of pamphlets, ballads, sermons, broadsheets and newsletters of various kinds, which in different forms treated of identical issues. The theatres, it appears, were not isolated in their newly acknowledged function as mass media, but constituted part of a larger propaganda campaign, and their importance lay, among other things, in the fact that theatre performances could appeal to and influence the opinions of the illiterate section of society. The latter purpose was in a way similar to that of sermons, for the pulpit was one of the strongest instruments for shaping public opinion.

The involvement of Jacobean plays in contemporary affairs was indeed amazing, especially in the light of strict censorship and severe punishment for those who tried to neglect the letter of the law. The very fact that new proclamations imposing harsh restrictions upon writers and printers were passed during the early years of James I’s reign is significant, for it reveals the monarch’s or, more generally, the state’s recognition of the impact of the written or spoken word; an impact – it has to be added – detrimental to the interests of the Crown. When, in 1617, James decided to enter into negotiations with Spain over the possible marriage of Prince Charles and the Infanta, Protestants in England were appalled by the prospect of having yet another Catholic Queen. But when the negotiations continued after the outbreak of what was to become the Thirty Years War, and after the hope of The Protestant Union, Frederick, Duke of the Rhenish Palatinate and King of Bohemia, together with his English wife Princess Elizabeth, were forced out of Bohemia by the imperial forces and a Spanish army occupied the Palatinate, the outcry of anger and opposition to James I’s line of policy became wide-spread. In consequence, new legal restrictions were introduced. The first drastic proclamation was issued on 24 December 1620, and was aimed at lavish and licentious speech concerning matters of state; it was reissued on 26 July 1621. A campaign against ‘disorderly printing’ began a little later than the one condemning free speech: on 25 September 1623 a proclamation was published against the printing and selling of books contrary to the laws of the land and the regulations of the Company of

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Stationers.² Plays of course had their own censor, the Master of the Revels, whose duty it was to suppress any texts that commented critically on the policies or conduct of the court; the presentation on stage of the high-born who were still living; unfavourable presentation of friendly foreign powers or their sovereigns, nobles, or subjects; comment on religious controversy; the use of profanity and oaths and personal satire about influential people.³

There is a good deal of evidence that Englishmen's interest in politics, both domestic and foreign, was much intensified after the outbreak of war in Bohemia. Through an accelerating development of events, a local conflict in Bohemia between the Estates and the Emperor, who was also the King of Bohemia, evolved into a clash of two religions, and it was generally anticipated that England would play a major role in the conflict. However, in the early phase of the war, printed sources of news available to the English were very few. The gap between the public interest and what was actually printed could not be filled with royal proclamations and declarations, which were in fact selective and propagandist. Because of the enormous interest of the general public in England in the rapidly developing events on the Continent, the country was soon to experience a revolution in the dissemination of news. This was the appearance of the first newspapers in the English language, the earliest extant copies of which were printed in the Netherlands in 1620 and 1621. At this stage, each issue – of what was to become known as *corantos* – consisted of one leaf in small folio with the text in two columns on each side of the leaf.⁴ That the Netherlands became the site of the press for various publications in English is of little surprise: it was in The Hague that Frederick and Elizabeth found refuge, and in fact the city began to be considered the capital of the Protestant party on the Continent. It certainly lay within the most relevant interests of the Elector's court that public opinion in England should be appropriately informed about events of great significance to an endangered Protestantism. It seems that these first newspapers became quite popular, for already in 1621 a series of news publications was printed in London by Thomas Archer (none of these, however, is extant), and in September of the same year another book-seller, 'N.B.', obtained a privilege to publish *corantos*, or which several numbers have survived.⁵ It is interesting to note that home news was forbidden to be printed (this could only be done, and was done, abroad), and the first English newspapers published in England were devoted entirely to foreign affairs, with Bohemia and the Palatinate figuring as the most salient countries. With an expanding reading audience, these early prints appeared insufficient to cover the whole variety of news coming from the war-torn Continent. Thus, in about the middle of 1622, Thomas Archer and Nicholas Bourne became partners and started publishing news in small quarto volumes, the so-called books-of-news, or newsbooks. In the autumn of the same year several other stationers entered the field and a sort of news syndicate was formed and their

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newsbooks were published in a numbered series.⁶ Even a brief look through the extant copies reveals an interesting fact, namely, that the focus of particular issues rested almost entirely on issues essential to the interests of Frederick and his supporters. The actions of both sides involved in the conflict were described in minute detail and the speed with which items of news reached printing presses in London was amazing. Thus, the English could follow all the recent developments on the Continent and relate them to what was publicly known or gossiped about James's policies. According to a detailed study by Folke Dahl, the number of copies of the different number printed was no less than 400,⁷ and there is no doubt that particular copies were read by or to a number of people.

We have enough evidence available for the claim that in the period under discussion there were constant attempts to use drama and theatres as a means of disseminating news. Let us give some examples to illustrate how newsbooks, ballads, sermons and other publications, and theatres, were in fact treated as complementary means of such dissemination, strikingly reminiscent of today's mass media. When news of the massacre of English merchants at Amboyna reached London by mid 1624 it was first embodied in a ballad, entitled 'News out of East India: of the cruell and bloody usage of our English merchants and others at Amboyna, by the Netherlandish Governour and Council there'.⁸ It was then related in another publication, *Cruel and barbarous tortures and execucons Done upon English at Ambo[y]na in the East Indies by the Du[t]ch*⁹. Soon afterwards, a contemporary source tells us that:

The East India Company have ordered Greenburg, a painter, to paint a detailed picture of all the tortures inflicted on the English at Amboyna, and would have had it all acted in a play, but the Council was appealed to by the Dutch ministers, and stopped it, for fear of disturbance this Shrovetide.¹⁰

This is confirmed by the well-known letter-writer of the period, John Chamberlain, who on 26 February wrote to Carleton,

the Dutch have lost their friends here. Wilkinson has printed a sermon, with a bitter preface against them, and a play is written on the Amboyna, and also a large picture of it is made for the East India Company, but both are suppressed by Council.¹¹

For our purposes here it is important to note that almost immediately after the news of the massacre had reached London, the merchants of the East India Company found it appropriate to order a play and have it presented to the general public. Some Dutch ministers, having learnt about the whole enterprise before the play had been completed, decided to make an official complaint to the Privy Council which, in turn, suppressed the play not only to satisfy the demands of the Dutch, but also for fear of public disorder. It was feared that a single performance of the play could in fact provoke public disturbances. In current terms, the Company had ordered a 'documentary' on the subject, hired a 'production team', and was planning to stir public

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opinion against the Dutch – their great competitors in trade, it may be added. By so doing, the merchants revealed full understanding of the enormous power of theatre to influence public opinion, and this power was equally acknowledged by the politicians of that period.

It is also important to note that in the case described above, it was not the Master of the Revels (the King's official censor) who decided whether or not the play should be licensed. The example provided illustrates clearly that the Privy Council had the power to suppress a play or, when needed, to influence the Master of the Revels' decision or even allow a company of actors to play without a licence. For instance, when the news of the fall of the great Dutch statesman, John of Barneveld, attracted enormous interest in England, a ballad on the subject was instantaneously composed, which was followed by a play. A contemporary letter informs us that:

The Players heere were bringing of Barnavelt upon the stage, and had bestowed a great deal of money to prepare all things for the purpose, but at the instant were prohibited by my Lo. of London [i.e. John King, the Bishop of London].¹²

The reason for the suppression of the play was certainly political: Barneveld was suddenly arrested and accused of high treason for plotting against his lord, Maurice of Nassau, Prince of Orange (who was Frederick of Bohemia's uncle and a great supporter of his cause). He was said to have been in the pay of the Spanish, and, as an influential and trusted politician, carried out treacherous schemes to the detriment of his country and of Protestants in general. Thus, to present his activity on stage would provide the spectators with an example and a warning against the dangers of 'Spanish practices', and would without doubt have evoked obvious associations with certain English personages, commonly acclaimed as the King's evil advisers; that is, with those who were said to have formed the Spanish faction at court and were in fact in the pay of the Spanish ambassador, Gondomar. That Barneveld was considered a Spanish-paid traitor may be illustrated by a passage from a treatise entitled *A Narrative of the wicked Plots carried on by Seignior Gondamore, for advancing the Popish Religion and Spanish Faction*, in which Gondomar informs the nuncio and other Spanish nobles that 'we have received late and sad news of the apprehension of our trusty and able pensioner Barnevelt, and of discovery of other our intendments'. In the play Barneveld is presented as a proud, ambitious man, jealous of the governor and Calvinist Prince Maurice of Nassau who, to achieve his goals, accepts Spanish help and organizes an armed mutiny against the state, eventually to be defeated with the aid of the English garrisons in the Low Countries.

The suppression of the play by the Bishop of London did not, however, stop the players from trying to find the support of even more influential peers and, after a fortnight, on 27 August 1619, the same man penned another letter, in which he stated that:

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Our players have found the meanes to goe through with the play of Barnavelt and it hath had many spectators and received applause.¹³

Thus, 'finding the meanes' was an important part of London's theatrical life in this period of severe censorship. The Office Book of Sir Henry Herbert includes several conspicuous examples of his interventions. For instance, in August 1623, he recorded the following:

For the Company at the Curtaine; A Tragedy of the Plantation of Virginia [another 'documentary', it seems]; the profaneness to be left out, otherwise not tolerated.¹⁴

The legal basis for the Master of the Revels' power to licence plays was the Royal Commission of 1581, which was reissued in 1603 and in 1622, and which included the following clause:

in case any of them, whatsoever they be, will obstinately refuse upon warning unto them given . . . to accomplish and obey our commandment in this behalf, then it shall be lawful to . . . Master of the Revels . . ., or his sufficient deputy, to attack the party or parties so offending, and him or them to commit to ward, to remain without bail or mainprise until such time as the same . . . Master of the Revels, or his sufficient deputy, shall think the time of his or their imprisonment to be punished for his or their said offences in that behalf.¹⁵

The consequences of neglecting the Master of the Revels' decisions were serious. But this happened every now and then to the extent that sometimes plays were staged without being licensed at all. We learn about such an incident in 1624, when the players apologized to Sir Henry for staging a play called *The Spanish Viceroy*.¹⁶

Because the interests of various court factions were often different from those of James I, the Master of the Revels experienced at times difficult situations, when he had to take into account the pressures of equally influential sides. He could fall into disgrace for licensing a play, or for the opposite. In the summer of 1624, for instance, he licensed Thomas Middleton's play, *A Game at Chesse*, by which he caused the King's fury, but also, on the other hand, fully satisfied Prince Charles and the Duke of Buckingham. This will be discussed in detail in chapter 4. So, to keep his position, the Master of the Revels had to balance carefully between the often contradictory demands of his superiors, the most important of whom was, of course, the King, with his genuine interest in the theatre.

Sometimes, the Master of the Revels received complaints from ordinary people and requests to suppress a play that they found offensive. But in these cases his decisions seem to have been totally arbitrary. For instance when, in the summer of 1624, rumours spread about a play being written on one of the recent events that occurred in London,¹⁷ an official complaint was made by one Anne Elsdon, who was the victim of a cunning plot against her life and prosperity, and who was also the heroine-to-be of the play, claiming that libellous and scandallous enterlude & play . . . being thus contriued & made . . . to scandalize & disgrace Anne Elsdon & make her ridiculous to the world, cause & procure the . . . play or enterlude to be seuerall tymes acted & played at the playhouse called the Bull at Clarkenwell on the Countye of Middlesex by the players there.¹⁸

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Nevertheless, the play was licensed in September 1624, and when it was first acted at the Red Bull, Anne Elsdon made another attempt to suppress it, and sent her son-in-law to the Deputy Master of the Revels with a petition to him to prohibit the performance. The Deputy Master of the Revels accepted a bribe of twenty shillings and promised to forbid the play, which he never did. Thus, the only result of the petition was to double the fees of the Office of the Revels.¹⁹

Most of the examples given above inform us that plays were talked about not only after they had been acted, but also while they were being written. This in itself proves the important role played by theatre in the life of London. Like newsbooks, plays were in a way expected to deal with contemporary matters, and this undoubtedly excited people's interest to see a particular play that was the 'talk of the town'. Rumours and gossiping also served the function of an advertising campaign, and may have in fact been spread by the players themselves. All of this heightened people's desire to see the 'forbidden fruit of politics' displayed on the theatre stage. This desire was also stimulated by other forms of disseminating the news, which were usually written and printed before the playwrights rendered the same, or similar, plots into dramas. All these non-dramatic publications prepared the ground, as it were, for attracting the attention of theatrical audiences, who went to see plays expecting events known to them from elsewhere to come 'alive', and were certainly capable of understanding all the allusions the players made to events or people they were not allowed to show directly in theatre. Moreover, plays often circulated in manuscript copies, some of which survive today in different transcriptions.²⁰ The players in Philip Massinger's *The Roman Actor* are attacked in a conspicuous way:

You are they
That search into the secrets of the time,
And, under feigned names, on the stage, present
Actions not to be touched at; and traduce
Persons of rank and quality of both sexes,
And, with satirical and bitter jests,
Make even the senators ridiculous
To the plebeians

(I.iii)

The actors' defence is also worth quoting, for it must have been frequent around the time the play was written:

... And, for traducing such
That are above us, publishing to the world
Their secret crimes, we are as innocent
As such as are born dumb.

(I.iii)

Thus, revealing the 'secret crimes' of those 'above' to the general public was seen as one of functions of the theatre.

Plays were only a part, undoubtedly a very important one, of a campaign of political propaganda, carried out on an unprecedented scale and initiated in

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the last months of 1623. Apart from sundry ‘legal’ publications, printed in London, the country was flooded by various tracts and pamphlets in English printed abroad, which – dealing directly with domestic matters – had to be smuggled into England. The consequences of this, or of un-licensed printing of political literature, were very serious. For instance, in 1623 one William Philips was committed for translating a French pamphlet and sentenced to death.²¹ John Reynolds was sent to prison and fined £1000 in 1624 for printing without a licence *Votivae Anglia*.²² Even though George Hakewill, Prince Charles’s chaplain, did not publish the treatise he had written against the match with Spain, but simply passed it over in manuscript to the Prince’s tutor, and to Charles himself, he was nevertheless imprisoned for his ‘bald interference’ and dismissed from the chaplaincy.²³ These publications were persistent, often shrewd and openly critical of James I, with a frequent touch of personal satire and ridicule, and their influence can be measured by the extent to which they aroused public opinion. When, for instance, Thomas Scott’s *Vox Populi* was published anonymously in 1620 (it had four editions in that year alone), the Venetian ambassador noted in his report to the Doge and Senate, dated 4 December, that the book

severely castigates the Spanish ambassador here [i.e. Count of Gondomar], who therefore foams with wrath in every direction and it is said that he has sent it to the King to make complaint. This has transpired and given rise to much comment.²⁴

The serious political consequences of Scott’s book were also described about the same time and in greater detail by Sir Simond D’Ewes in his journal, where he commented:

But the King himself, hoping to get the Prince Elector, his son-in-law, to be restored to the Palatinate by an amicable treaty, was much incensed at the sight of it [i.e. of *Vox Populi*], as being published at an unseasonable time . . . There was, therefore, so much and so speedy search made for the author of it, as he scarcely escaped the hands of the persuivants, who had they taken him, he had certainly tasted of a sharp censure: for the Spanish Ambassador himself did at this time suppose and fear the people’s eyes to be opened so far with the perusal of this book and their hearts to be so extremely irritated with that discovery of his villainous practices, as he caused his house for a while to be secured in Holborn by a guard of men, it being the Bishop of Ely’s house, at the lower end of Holborn.²⁵

That Scott was able to escape severe punishment may be readily accounted for by the fact that he had been a chaplain to William Herbert, Earl of Pembroke, and his anti-Spanish stand coincided with that of his patron. Scott was by no means an isolated example, and although James made constant attempts to silence the militant clergy, they continued to meddle in state matters and preached against Spain.²⁶ For example, John Everard, reader at St Martin-in-the-Fields, was imprisoned at least twice for sermons against the Spanish marriage of Prince Charles; and when John Knights of Oxford concluded in his sermon that ‘if kings grow unruly and tyrannical they may

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be corrected and brought into order by their subjects', King James threatened 'to have the copy of it publicly burnt by the hangman as heretical'.²⁷ Even pictures and caricatures were used by James's opponents, and we know of a minister at Ipswich imprisoned upon Gondomar's complaint for rendering a picture of the Gunpowder Plot, depicting the Pope sitting in a council with a cardinal on one hand and the devil on the other.²⁸ And the same Thomas Scott, in another treatise entitled *Vox Coeli, or News from Heaven*, mentions in his address to the Parliament of 1624 that he 'sawe Allureds honest letter [Thomas Allured was Lord Ever's secretary, and was the author of a letter against the Spanish match, for which he incurred the Duke of Buckingham's displeasure], Scots loyal Vox Populi, D. Whiting, D. Everard, and Claytons zealous Sermons, and others suppressed and silenced; as also Wards Faithful picture'.²⁹

The suppression of freedom of speech and printing, and the prosecution of writers generally acclaimed as patriotic, were certainly difficult to comprehend for the majority of people. The discrepancy between what they viewed to be the vital interests of the country and the King's unpopular stand seemed to have no rational explanation, unless someone dared to accuse James of high treason. The blame was placed, therefore, if not on James directly, then on either his 'evil' councillors, representing the so-called Spanish faction,³⁰ or on the Spaniards themselves, who – it was thought – through the machiavellian practices of Gondomar and others, managed to dupe the King by false promises. For instance, in another tract that Scott wrote, entitled *A Narrative of the wicked Plots carried on by Seignior Gondamore, for advancing the Popish Religion and Spanish Faction*, written c. 1623/24, Gondomar himself – who appears in a dispute with the Papal nuncio and other Spanish nobles – admits that

both in England and Scotland, all, for the most part . . . oppose this match to the utmost, by prayers, counsels, speeches, and wishes; but, if one be found longer-tongued than his fellows, we have still means to charm their sauciness, to silence them, to expel them [from?] the court; to disgrace them . . . For instance . . . a doctor of theirs, and a chaplain in ordinary to the King, gave many reasons in a letter, against this marriage . . . which I understanding, so wrought underhand, that the doctor was committed.³¹

It may be added that this was at times also the fate of English peers who had the courage to speak openly against James's policy. For instance, when in 1621 the Earl of Oxford spoke over his wine against Popery and the Spanish match, and this was reported to the King, he was imprisoned in the Tower.³² Although he was soon released, Oxford had not learnt his lesson and fell into disgrace again in 1622, this time for saying that England had a King who had placed his ecclesiastical supremacy in the hands of the Pope, and his temporal supremacy in the hands of the King of Spain and thus he was nothing better than Philip's viceroy. This also was reported to the King and the Earl was immediately sent back to the Tower, and James talked of bringing him to

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trial for high treason, and of cutting off his head.³³ Oxford remained in confinement until the early months of 1624.

Therefore, if dramatic literature was to become involved in the politics of the day, to face strict censorship and the severe consequences of neglecting the latter, playwrights and players had to find a means of conveying political messages in such a way as would not endanger their personal freedom. In the majority of cases discussed in the subsequent chapters of this book, the extant plays and masques are often strongly biased against the line of James I's foreign policy, and constitute in fact its conspicuous criticism, so one may suspect that, in spite of all the risk involved, the players and playwrights felt secure enough to engage themselves in what seemed to be an anti-royal campaign initiated by the new court party of Prince Charles and the Duke of Buckingham. If they had not been supported by their influential patrons, they would undoubtedly either have abstained from provocative political comment, or suffered its serious consequences. The latter factor was widely acknowledged by theatre people. In the Prologue to Wentworth Smith's play *The Hector of Germanie, or the Palsgrave, Prime Elector*, published in 1615, we read the following lines:

Our Authour for himselfe, this bad me say,
 Although the Palsgrau be the name of th'Play,
 Tis not that Prince, which in this Kingdome late,
 Marryed the Mayden glory of our state;
 What Pen dares be so bold in this strict age,
 To bring him while he lives upon the Stage?
 And though he would, Authorities sterne brow
 Such a presumptuous deed will not allow:
 And he must not offend Authoritie ... (A₂^v)

These lines could actually serve as an epigraph to this book, for they reveal the author's consciousness of the restrictions imposed upon him as the playwright, and of the spectators' or readers' ability to associate the protagonist of this pseudo-historical play with Frederick, the Duke of the Rhenish Palatinate who had recently married James's daughter, Elizabeth. This ability of both theatre and reading audiences to associate dramatic characters, either historical or fictitious, with their contemporary 'equivalents', and also to grasp the underlying meaning and the allusiveness of seemingly non-political plots, to 'read between the lines', is in fact a characteristic feature of the entire period under discussion. It enabled playwrights to create pseudo-historical and pseudo-mythological, or allegorical, texts which had the potential ability to evoke predictable and desired associations in both spectators and readers.

This ability characterized of course the 'other side' too, that is, those whose duty it was to protect the interests of the King, like the Master of the Revels and his deputy and informers, and it also characterized James himself. His sensitivity to plays, and his grasp of the underlying 'message' or – in fact –