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978-1-107-02829-6 - Rhetoric, Politics and Popularity in Pre-Revolutionary England

Markku Peltonen

Excerpt

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Introduction

Around 1668 Thomas Hobbes offered his analysis of the causes of the English civil war and Revolution. Parliament, he declared, had reduced ‘this government into anarchy’ and had destroyed ‘the peace of the kingdom’ mainly ‘by the help of seditious Presbyterian ministers, and of ambitious ignorant Orators’.¹ Hobbes, in other words, placed the blame for the civil war and Revolution squarely at the door of schoolmasters and rhetoricians. Gentlemen, he insisted, ‘had been so educated’ that they had read ‘books written by famous men of the ancient Grecian and Roman commonwealths concerning their polity and great actions’.² In these books, ‘the popular government was extolled by the glorious name of liberty, and monarchy disgraced by the name of tyranny’. As soon as men of such classical education had been elected to the House of Commons, they were able, even if they had not constituted a majority, to persuade the rest ‘by advantage of their eloquence’. But they had never confined their eloquence to parliament. On the contrary, ‘by their discourses and communication with people in the country’ they had also extolled ‘liberty’ and inveighed ‘against tyranny’.³ In addition, print culture played an integral part in Hobbes’s account. These ‘democratical gentlemen’, as he called them, had also ‘disgraced’ the king ‘in sermons and pamphlets’ and some of them had ‘endeavoured by books and sermons to raise sedition’.⁴

For Hobbes, therefore, there was a direct path from humanist grammar schools and universities to the Revolution and the establishment of the English republic. ‘Studying Greek and Latin’, he wrote, men ‘became acquainted with the democratical principles of Aristotle and Cicero, and from the love of their eloquence fell in love with their politics, and that more and more, till it grew into the rebellion we now talk of.’⁵

¹ Hobbes 1899, 109. ² Hobbes 1899, 2. ³ Hobbes 1899, 3, 23.

⁴ Hobbes 1899, 36. For similar accounts, see Raymond 2003, 161; Cressy 2006, 17, 115.

⁵ Hobbes 1899, 43, 158.

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The main aim of this book is to place Hobbes's account of the causes of the English Civil Wars and Revolution into its wider cultural and intellectual, pedagogical and political contexts. The book examines the centrality of rhetoric in the pre-revolutionary educational system on the one hand and the vital contribution it made to the political culture of the period on the other. Its central contention is that humanist rhetoric provided an important intellectual context in which political life was led, power exercised and debate conducted. If we are to gain an understanding of the political culture of pre-revolutionary England, we need to see it conditioned and shaped, indeed permeated, by the culture of humanist rhetoric.

My approach takes its cue from several recent studies of early-modern English political theory and culture, which emphasise the crucial importance of humanist rhetoric. It has been a commonplace for a long time that rhetoric had a central place in early-modern grammar-school education and thus in shaping the Renaissance English gentleman,⁶ but more recent scholars have carried this discussion much further. They have emphasised not only the utmost importance of the *ars rhetorica* in the actual practice of Elizabethan and early-Stuart grammar schools but also its dramatic impact on the political thought and culture of the period.⁷

Whilst I focus on rhetoric and its role in pre-revolutionary England in this book, my arguments are intended to engage with the broader debates about the nature and character of the political culture and thought of the period. First, and most obviously, whilst I do not wish to deny the importance of other intellectual and cultural factors, such as the common law⁸ or Protestantism, to the political culture and thought of the period, the aim of this book is to demonstrate the centrality of classical rhetoric and humanism more generally in pre-revolutionary political life, culture and thought. The works of Cicero and Ovid, after all, sold far more copies in early-modern England than those of Jean Calvin or William Perkins.⁹ Richard Tuck has argued that in intellectual terms 'the English [civil] war was waged by *humanists*, and its public rhetoric' rather than by 'professional administrators': 'what was important for the educated

⁶ Baldwin 1944; Crane 1937; Caspari 1954; Charlton 1965; Ferguson 1965; Simon 1966; Kinney 1986.

⁷ Skinner 1996; Fitzmaurice 1997; Fitzmaurice 2000, 30; Fitzmaurice 2003, ch. 4; Mack 2002, 176–214; Colclough 2005; Norbrook 1994b, 141; Norbrook 1999, 10; Norbrook 2002, 284–6; Achinstein 1994; Smith 1994, 35–44; Skinner 2008b.

⁸ Cromartie 1999; Braddick 2000, 88, 242; Cromartie 2006; Burgess 1992.

⁹ Green 2009, 25.

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Englishman was his grammar school curriculum and the arts course of his university'.¹⁰

During the past three decades historians have conceived new ways of thinking about the pre-revolutionary polity and public life and have emphasised its participatory and semi-republican or quasi-republican elements.¹¹ Governance in pre-revolutionary England is no longer seen as a process of centralisation but rather 'as a process, a series of multilateral initiatives to be negotiated across space and through the social order'.¹² Tudor despotism, New Historicism's notion of hegemonic forces and the more general idea that the pre-revolutionary Englishman was a mere passive subject have been replaced by accounts that explore the participatory character of the period and talk about 'a participatory polity' or even 'the birthpangs of a participatory democracy'.¹³

It is a central point of departure of this book that rhetoric and classical humanism more generally were crucial to this development. As many recent historians have pointed out, the educational programme of humanism and classical rhetoric played an important role in transforming pre-revolutionary Englishmen from subjects into citizens.¹⁴ The Renaissance tradition of rhetoric, which derived from ancient Greek and, especially, Roman sources, made immense promises about power and authority, which anyone who received education in it could assume and exercise. Eloquence was, as David Norbrook has put it, 'a critical political force' because it encouraged 'a general pressure toward wider debate and discussion of public issues'.¹⁵ A detailed analysis of training in rhetoric and its impact on political thought and culture enables us to offer a more historical account of pre-revolutionary political participation.

Recent scholarship has established that pre-revolutionary political participation was more sophisticated and socially wider and more intense than was initially assumed. The earlier scholarly consensus that there was no such thing as popular politics in sixteenth- and early-seventeenth-century England – or that if there was it mostly consisted in riots and protests and was thus pre-political in its character – has been largely abandoned. The boundary which sharply distinguished between elite culture and largely

¹⁰ Tuck 1993, 225.

¹¹ Collinson 1987; Collinson 1988; Collinson 1990; Collinson 2006; McDiarmid 2007 and the essays in that collection.

¹² Hindle 2000, 23.

¹³ Withington 2011, 642; Hindle 2000, 23, 226; Hindle 2001; Goldie 2001. Cf. Condren 2006, 56–61.

¹⁴ Skinner 1996, 66–110. ¹⁵ Norbrook 1994b, 141.

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illiterate popular culture has also turned out to be rather porous and indefinite. Ordinary men and women, numerous scholars have recently pointed out, evinced keen interest in politics and were cognisant of political events; they were fully capable of forming opinions about these events and also of expressing these opinions. Our understanding of the nature and extent of popular political awareness, participation and action has been revised by a number of important recent studies on popular politics, so much so that in some of these studies pre-revolutionary politics appears popular by definition.¹⁶

Significant as these novel interpretations are, they are not complete. Historians have probed the nature of popular politics, but they have been less willing to engage in investigating its cultural and intellectual background. General suggestions have been made to the effect both that the Reformation was a central historical cause in unleashing new popular politics and that classical humanism was equally important in breathing life into it.¹⁷ Yet it is a central argument of the present book that a close study of the *ars rhetorica* in the educational system as well as the political culture and thought of the period will help us provide a comprehensive account of pre-revolutionary popular politics. What I seek to substantiate in the course of this study is that in pre-revolutionary England rhetoric was often closely linked with the common people and the multitude. Eloquence was often seen as a popular art.

The notion that rhetoric could be a popular art has a number of important consequences. First, it was widely agreed that a main aim of rhetorical training was the ability to persuade the common people.¹⁸ Although many humanists argued that a thorough training in rhetoric was meant to be restricted to the gentry and the nobility, they still insisted that an important aim of this training was to persuade the common people – the multitude. Moreover, in actual practice education in rhetoric in pre-revolutionary grammar schools was never restricted to these exclusive groups, and numerous humanists and schoolmasters were ready to spread the *ars rhetorica* as widely as possible.

More importantly, it is clear that training in rhetoric was largely political in its character. From the most elementary training in letter-writing to rhetoric proper, political and civic topics and themes occupied a central

¹⁶ Cogswell 1990b; Cogswell 1995; Fox 1997; Wood 2001; Withington 2005; Harris 2001; Cust 2005a, 167–71; Mears 2003. For an inclusive notion of popular politics, see Shagan 2003, 19–20; Shagan 2007.

¹⁷ Hill 1997, 327–42; Alford 1998; Alford 2002.

¹⁸ Howell 1956, 3–4.

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place. Whilst many vernacular rhetoric manuals emphasised the civic and public role of eloquence, as soon as we turn to those manuals that English schoolmasters produced for classroom use, the picture is even more astonishing. Pre-revolutionary grammar schoolboys were often taught and encouraged to write and speak about such political topics as foreign policy and taxation, liberty and tyranny.

There are several other features of pre-revolutionary popular politics of which a study of contemporary rhetoric helps us to deepen our understanding. One is the centrality of libels, which are no longer seen as transparent windows to the mentality of the common people but are seen instead as signs of political activism, and thus as not just reflecting possible opinions but in fact making and shaping them.¹⁹ This has been a valuable point, but as David Colclough has pointed out, libels formed an important part of demonstrative rhetoric, and ‘the formal exercise of both praise and blame was part of everyday life’ for many in pre-revolutionary England.²⁰ It follows that placing political libels into their intellectual context of demonstrative rhetoric enables scholars to provide a more historical account of them and of their role in popular politics. This close link between libels and vituperative rhetoric, which has tended to be sidelined in recent scholarship, was taken for granted by contemporaries. One author defending the Spanish match in the early 1620s claimed that the Elizabethan war against Spain had been caused in part by relentless vituperative rhetoric against Philip II in England: ‘the Philippicae and inuectives in euerie pulpit: ballets [*sic*] and libels in euerie press against king Philip; wear [*sic*] such prouocations, as flesh and blood, nay crownes and scepters could hardlie digest’.²¹

Another important aspect of pre-revolutionary popular politics, which has recently captured a good deal of scholarly attention, is news culture. Our understanding of early-modern news and the surrounding culture has been transformed as historians have explored not only the ways in which news was spread and received, but also the role these processes played in political opinion formation and in the development of the political culture of the period.²² Again, the result has been a valuable one, and my intention is merely to complement it by exploring its intellectual and

¹⁹ Bellany 2001; Sawyer 1990, 7–9; Croft 1991; Bellany 1994; Fox 1995; Cogswell 1995; Croft 1995; Bellany 1995; Gordon 2002; O’Callaghan 2003; Bellany 2007.

²⁰ Colclough 2006. ²¹ P[attenson] 1623, 9–10.

²² Cust 1986; Raymond 1996; Cogswell 2004; Cogswell 1990b; Sawyer 1990; Smith 1994, 1–32; Zaret 2000, 100–32; Raymond 1999; Dooley 2001 and the essays in that collection; Baron 2001; Cogswell 2002; Bellany 2002, 74–135; Clark 2003; Mears 2005, 107–25.

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pedagogical background. If it is true, as has been suggested, that news culture played a key role in ‘the potentially destabilising evolution of new forms of political culture within a monarchical system’,²³ it follows, I contend, that the humanists need to shoulder a share of the blame. Writing about news was part and parcel of the humanist grammar-school curriculum. When schoolboys were taught letter-writing in their elementary training in rhetoric, specific ‘newsletters’ formed a part of this training. Whilst the topics of these newsletters included private and domestic matters, schoolboys were also instructed to write about civic and political matters. Richard Cust has called attention to the fact that, when ‘informed and active citizens’ transmitted news and information, they ‘used their rhetorical skills to persuade and influence others’.²⁴ When the Ré expedition was defended in a coranto in 1627 as ‘honorable, profitable and feasible, being grounded upon the necessities of Policie and Religion’,²⁵ it must have been immediately clear to every contemporary reader that he was reading a deliberative oration, whose intention was to win his support for the expedition. For many humanists, contemporary news was similar to history not only because their rhetorical structures were close to one another but also because they served a similar rhetorical function.

This brings me to the most important aspect of recent scholarship on pre-revolutionary political culture. Libels and news and their centrality in popular politics have led historians to question the revisionist account of the harmonious and consensual character of English politics and to portray it in more adversarial terms. In his seminal study of scribal publications, Harold Love has argued that ‘oppositional texts were frequently circulated scribally’.²⁶ Print culture has also been suggested as the primary instigator of early-modern polemic.²⁷ Nonetheless, it is above all within the post-revisionist historiography that the question of conflict and opposition occupies a central place, and the whole notion of popular politics is meant to characterise pre-revolutionary political culture as one of conflict rather than harmony. Ethan Shagan, for instance, has recently argued that ‘the principal effect of public Reformation polemic’ was ‘to build a culture in which division rather than unity was acknowledged as the fundamental wellspring of politics’.²⁸

Many scholars agree with Shagan about the interconnectedness between popular politics and adversary politics, although they tend to

²³ Bellany 2002, 18. ²⁴ Cust 2007a, 53–4.

²⁵ Cogswell 2002, 230. ²⁶ Love 1998, 188–9.

²⁷ Lander 2006, 1–36. ²⁸ Shagan 2003, 199.

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locate the emergence of the latter to a somewhat later period. Those who have explored news culture have stressed its tendency to concentrate on political conflicts rather than consensus. Cust has pointed out that news ‘helped to erode the impression of harmony and consensus’ and had a ‘characteristic stress on conflict’, presenting ‘politics as a process involving division, struggle and the need to oppose disruptive influences’.²⁹ Those who have examined libels and their role in popular political activism have likewise portrayed them as vehicles of political conflict and opposition. According to Andrew McRae, they ‘helped to provide a language for the emergent divisions in the state’,³⁰ and he has drawn a sharp distinction between ‘an orthodox Tudor commitment to consensus and harmony’ and an early-Stuart ‘culture’, which was ‘becoming increasingly anxious, and undeniably curious, about the phenomena of dissent and division’, so much so that by 1642 satire was seen as ‘a weapon of warfare’.³¹

Rhetoric and its teaching in pre-revolutionary England, I seek to argue, form an important cultural and intellectual background to practically all of these manifestations of political and ideological conflicts.³² The *ars rhetorica* provided theoretical and practical tools for adversary politics. Whether it was in the form of manuscript or print and whether it was in a libel or a newsletter, rhetoric furnished the pre-revolutionary Englishman with a full-scale programme of adversary politics. From elementary training in letter-writing to rhetoric proper, schoolboys and university students learned as much about conflicts and adversaries as about harmony and consensus. They were habitually told that a chief aim of an oration – whether oral or written – is to move the audience to their own side and to destroy and demolish the opponent. Rhetorical training thus took it for granted that there was always the other or contrary side, and no matter what kinds of views or policies were put forward and supported, there was always room for a counterargument. To claim that a linguistic act was ‘a weapon of warfare’ was to state no novelty whatsoever in 1642. For a century schoolboys had been drilled to see speaking and writing in the military terms of warfare. As long as we do not fully take rhetoric into account, our explanations of adversary politics in pre-revolutionary England must remain incomplete.

²⁹ Cust 1986, 74–87; Smith 1994, 1–2, 24, 26–32, 96.

³⁰ McRae 2000, 366–7; Bellany 1995, 163; Holstun 1992, 514, 517, 543; Holstun 2000, 18, 84, 144–5.

³¹ McRae 2004, 1, 6, 133, 190–1, 211.

³² Mack 2002, 176–214; Colclough 2006, 29–30; Fontana *et al.* 2004 and the essays in that volume.

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Finally, this new scholarly interest in popular and adversary politics has also led historians to assess the possibility of applying Jürgen Habermas's theory of the modern public sphere into early-modern England.³³ Historians have been quick to point out that Habermas's theoretical model of the modern public sphere, which omitted religion and emphasised rationality as a distinctive mark of the public sphere, is not directly applicable to early-modern England.³⁴ They have accentuated the un-Habermasian character of the public debate in Elizabethan England.³⁵

One of the underlying assumptions of this book is that classical rhetoric should be seen as a major factor in constituting pre-revolutionary public debate. As David Norbrook has pointed out, the expansion of the press and public life more generally in early-modern England should be seen in the context of rhetoric and republicanism rather than nascent liberalism.³⁶ This has, I contend, important consequences for our interpretation of the nature of the public debate of the period. As long as we seek our heuristic models from theories based on notions that were by and large foreign to early-modern people, we run the obvious risk of anachronism. Habermas's theory of the modern public sphere conceives public debate in terms of rational conversation and is closely related to a Platonic emphasis on reason and the concomitant distaste for rhetoric. It is 'the intellectual progenitor' of modern deliberative democracy³⁷ and it belongs to a tradition that emphasises rationality and conversation, the force of the best argument and the neutral search for truth, and thus the consensus and harmony of public debate. Rhetoric as the art of persuasion must remain positively detrimental to such a project.³⁸

Whilst many of these values were not in themselves alien to pre-revolutionary Englishmen, it is nevertheless the case, this book seeks to demonstrate, that their concept of public debate was largely based on classical rhetoric. They did not perceive it purely as a cognitive process governed

³³ Withington 2007; Norbrook 1990, 8; Norbrook 1994a; Norbrook 1994b; Achinstein 1994, 9, 40–1, 73–4; Fincham and Lake 1996, 856–8; Lake and Questier 1996; Halasz 1997; Norbrook 1999, 13, 58, 98–100, 114, 118–19; Raymond 1999; Levy 1999; Lake and Como 2000; Holstun 2000, 107–12, 194–200; Hindle 2000, 234–5; O'Callaghan 2000; Zaret 2000; Bellany 2002, 132; Cogswell *et al.* 2002, 17; Raymond 2003, 255–75; O'Callaghan 2003; Mears 2005; the essays collected in Lake and Pincus 2007.

³⁴ Norbrook 1994a, 5; Norbrook 1999, 100; Ferrell and McCullough 2000; Claydon 2000; Peacey 2004, 313–32; Barry 2004, 207.

³⁵ Lake 2007b; Lake and Pincus 2006, 260–71; Lake 2007a; Lake and Questier 2000. Cf. Condren 2006, 77–9.

³⁶ Norbrook 1994a, 5, 6, 10, 11–12, 24.

³⁷ Remer 2004, 140.

³⁸ Fontana *et al.* 2004; Fontana 2004; Remer 2004; Murphy 2004; Palonen 2008, 103.

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by reason but, following classical and Renaissance rhetoricians, admitted that interests and emotional arguments were its essential ingredients. They embraced Cicero's distinction between conversation and rhetoric and insisted that it was the latter that governed public debate. The aim was not to find out the truth or to reach consensus but to persuade the audience and to clinch the victory in the war of words.³⁹ It followed that politics was adversarial rather than harmonious and consensual in its character. Moreover, from the early-modern point of view the Habermasian insistence on the superiority of the best argument in a public debate would have sounded perhaps admirable but ultimately naive. An orator, as rhetoricians pointed out, could indeed claim that the strongest argument carried the day. Yet this was not a privileged position, but only one argument amongst many. Another orator could endeavour, as they also noted, to dispute this and insist on the primacy of authoritative testimony, for instance.⁴⁰ Hence there was no inexorable necessity why the former orator would have gained the victory; it all depended on the audience. As Richard Mulcaster ruminated, 'for both the thing, which is in question, must make shew of some good, ear [*sic*] it will be receiued: and the partie that persuadeth, must be of good credit, if he think to be beleueed'.⁴¹ A good example is Herbert Croft's comment in parliament in 1607 that 'in Committees by short Arguments many times truth is beaten out, yet I have observed, that in Committees when every man may reply, some speciall Persons of Place, by speaking often, and countenance doe prevaile more then by their reasons'.⁴² The standards of pre-revolutionary public debate were thus more sophisticated than the Habermasian model assumes.

The first part of this book examines pre-revolutionary rhetoric and rhetorical training and its implications for the political thought and culture of the period. It emphasises three things: the centrality of politics in rhetorical training, the essentially popular character of rhetoric and the adversarial nature of rhetoric and thus of politics. In the second part, I turn to the uses of rhetoric in the political debates of the period. In a series of case studies, I seek to show that school education did not fall on completely stony ground and that many in pre-revolutionary England practised what the rhetoricians and schoolmasters preached.

³⁹ Shuger 2006, 27–55; Dawson 2007, 82–4; Remer 1996, 18–38.

⁴⁰ See also Skinner 2002, II, 264–85.

⁴¹ Mulcaster 1582, 5–6; Mulcaster 1581, 10–14.

⁴² Willson 1931, 246.

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