Prologue

Theatre, Theatricality and the Public in Early Modern England

> If intercourse in civill commerce may conduce to form the Judgement, compose the mind, or rectify the manners (as none who hath receiv'd impression thereof, can deny) no form of institution humane reason can reflect upon, more suddenly and more perfectly can attain thereto, than can the well composed illustrations of a *Theater.*
>
> Leonard Willan, Preface to *Orgula, or the Fatall Error* (1658)

This is a book about theatricality and the public in early modern England. It is based on two assumptions: that there is such a thing as early modern theatricality, and that during the seventeenth century, a public sphere developed in England that encompassed large sections of the populace. In this book, I trace the trajectory of both phenomena over the course of a century – and propose that it is in fact impossible to understand one without the other. Theatricality and the public sphere have long been buzzwords in studies of the early modern period. The two concepts, however, are seldom engaged together. Theatricality remains largely within the domain of theatre and literary studies, where it became prominent in the 1980s with the rise of New Historicism, while the concept of the public sphere has attracted most interest among post-revisionist historians since the 1990s. Furthermore, a strange watershed seems to divide interest in both concepts: studies of the early modern public sphere often begin with the steep increase of publications in the early 1640s, when tensions between Parliament and King Charles I mounted, and focus on the subsequent Interregnum period that encompassed the civil wars and the ensuing Republican and Protectorate regimes. This, however, is precisely the point where most studies on the early modern theatre stop – because in 1642, Parliament issued a prohibition of plays that remained largely intact until the restoration of monarchy in 1660. The history of English theatre is thus characterised by a strange caesura, at the very moment when transformations of the early modern public started to unfold. If the 1640s and 1650s are an exciting period to historians, when a vibrant public sphere emerged amidst

the political struggles of the Interregnum, theatre and literary scholars often consider these decades a period of decline after the great theatrical age of Shakespeare and Jonson. As a result, those who study the theatre and those who study the public sphere of the revolutionary seventeenth century seem to have little to say to each other. The aim of this book, then, is to forge a conversation between those fields and show that they have, in fact, a lot to talk about.

My project in this study is to trace the shared trajectory of theatricality and the early modern public from the Reformation in the 1530s to the end of the Interregnum period in 1660. Over the course of this century, I aim to explore the constitutive relationship between theatre, theatricality and an early modern public. In doing so, the book pays particular attention to the years from 1642 to 1660, when theatre was officially prohibited. As my discussion attends to those missing years in the history of the English theatre, it challenges two widely held beliefs about the Interregnum. Among historians, the emergence of a permanent public sphere in England is commonly attributed to print, namely the flurry of political pamphlets and newsbooks that followed the breakdown of press censorship on the eve of the civil wars. And among theatre scholars, the prohibition of theatre in 1642 is often tacitly assumed to have precluded theatrical debates and almost all performances until the Restoration. I counter both of these views by demonstrating that the prohibition actually encouraged engagement with dramatic writing and performance throughout the Interregnum. Far from being obliterated by prohibition, theatre continued to exist, and its practitioners actively explored new forms, started new ventures and resourcefully adapted to and circumvented the ban. As some historians of the Revolution have shown, performances of plays continued, albeit surreptitiously, new performance genres evolved and plays continued to be written. More importantly, theatricality continued to inform modes of political representation and debate, and to occupy the imagination of news-writers, poets, polemicists, political thinkers and philosophers. Above all, discourses circulating during the Interregnum sustained an engagement, begun in the preceding decades, with theatricality's role in addressing the people, and accordingly its potential role in the formation of early modern publics.

Even if debate persists as to whether the events of mid-seventeenth century England can properly called a Revolution, the Interregnum period witnessed unprecedented political conflict and regime change, including the execution of a king by Parliament. Most importantly, it saw the common people who, as Queen Elizabeth's secretary of state maintained in 1583, had "no voice nor authoritie in our commen wealth", assume both

voice and authority in the political realm and evolve as a popular public that needed to be addressed.[1] Post-revisionist historians have framed this increasing political importance of the people in terms of an emergent public sphere, in which political opponents, religious groups and actors from all social levels sought to engage a broad public. To make this claim, these historians regularly focus on the role of print in this early modern public sphere, understanding the public in terms of readership. In contrast, I will provide a number of case studies that highlight the importance of theatre as a model for public address before and during the Interregnum. As competing authorities vied for public support, theatre provided strategies to address the public and was even reimagined by some as an essential institution for the new commonwealth. Leonard Willan's preface to his play *Orgula, or the Fatall Error* (1658), quoted earlier, is a case in point. In spite of the fact that theatres had officially been closed for sixteen years, Willan's preface provided a defence of theatrical performance as an essential means of civil education and political union. To Willan, theatre was the perfect tool to facilitate the public discourse that had developed by this time, to train judgement and to "inform with delight the meanest members of the civill frame in what [the sovereign] is concerned".[2] Theatre's potential to address a large and diverse public, he argued, extended also to "gracefull entertainments in Society" such as processions, festivities or civic shows. For Willan, such theatrical events effectively shaped a "generall Union" of the people as they invited their audience to see themselves as citizens of a Commonwealth.

In this book, I take up Willan's suggestion that theatre could be an effective means of addressing the people, both through theatrical performance and through "entertainments in Society" beyond the theatre stage. I argue that such public performances on and off the stage were crucial in shaping the early modern public, and that the development of this public had an impact on theatre in turn. During the Interregnum, when theatre became enmeshed in public discourse and political tensions, many poets and political philosophers in fact took this as an opportunity to rethink the role of theatre as a political medium. The ongoing prohibition and the scarcity of actual theatre performance provided them with a blank slate, as it were, from which to reimagine theatre as a public institution in the service of the state. Others, however, tried to resist this politicisation of theatre and aimed to sustain precisely the complexity and excess of theatre that

[1] Smith (1583), 33. On popular early modern culture see Burke (1994).
[2] Willan (1658), a1v. For related contemporary arguments in France see Kolesch (2006), 139–46.

made it an incalculable means of address. Both trends played out during the Interregnum, under the pressures of prohibition and political change. And both were informed by practices and discourses that had developed since the professionalisation of theatre and the sporadic public addresses of the post-Reformation public sphere in the sixteenth century. Rather than emphasising the break of 1642, then, this book attends to the continuous development of theatre and theatricality from the thriving theatre culture of Elizabethan and Early Stuart England through the Interregnum. Following the trajectory of theatre and theatricality through a time of prolonged prohibition, I argue that theatre was absolutely vital to the public sphere that emerged during this period, and even to our evolving notion of the public sphere writ large.

Literature, Revolution and Early Modern Publics

That theatre performances did not end with the 1642 prohibition has been proven as early as the 1920s, when Leslie Hotson, Hyder E. Rollins and Thornton S. Graves published pioneering studies of theatre during the Interregnum that documented surreptitious performances of plays throughout the period, as well as the performances mounted by William Davenant with the consent of the government in the late Protectorate.[3] But it took decades before interest in the theatre of the Interregnum resurfaced, and when it did it was with a focus on drama. Dale Randall's *Winter Fruit*, a comprehensive survey of the remarkable range and variety of Interregnum dramatic literature, was published as literary historians began to appreciate the role of literature in the social and political upheavals of the period.[4] Lois Potter, in her study of Royalist style, and David Norbrook, in his discussion on republican writing, both emphasised the continuity of literary traditions during the Interregnum, as well as their development and transformation under the changing political circumstances.[5] Literary historians turned to the period with an interest to, as Thomas Corns put it, "repoliticize" its writings: to place them in their contemporary political context and trace the ways in which literature itself shaped that context.[6] Attention to the many ways in which literature responded to the tumultuous changes of the 1640s and 1650s has culminated in Nigel Smith's observation that if there was indeed a revolution, it registered most strongly in the realm of literature, which saw the development of new forms, the rise of journalism

[3] See Graves (1921); Rollins (1921, 1923); Hotson (1928). On Davenant see also Edmond (1987); Clare (1994, 2002).
[4] See Randall (1995). [5] See Potter (1989); Norbrook (2000). [6] Corns (1992), 1.

and the politicisation of printed works for an ever widening audience. This view is shared by the editors of the *Oxford Handbook of Literature and the English Revolution*, the publication of which itself has signalled a renewed interest in Interregnum literature.[7]

In the wake of this trend, scholars have also turned to the period's dramatic literature and have attended to stylistic innovation, politicisation and the place of drama in a widening print market. More recent handbook articles, notably by Janet Clare, note the formal innovations of Davenant (as well as his strategic appeals to the Protectorate government) and discuss the political pamphlet plays of the period which used dramatic form to convey news, criticism and ideology to a popular readership.[8] The role of dramatic writing in the "Pamphlet Wars" of the 1640s and the political shifts after the regicide in 1649 have attracted particular attention, from Susan Wiseman's study of the political content and context of the period's dramatic literature to Elizabeth Sauer's exploration of the migration of the "theatrical mode" into print and Rachel Willie's discussion of the ways in which drama negotiated political changes beyond the Restoration.[9] And as literary historians rediscovered the importance of the period's literature as a forum to reflect and address political issues, they found that polemicists and pamphleteers often employed dramatic writing in order to address a new audience: the people at large, which emerged as a political force in the conflicts of the seventeenth century.[10]

The mounting conflict between Charles I and his parliamentary opposition in the 1640s indeed saw the unprecedented involvement in politics of the English people at large, particularly in London. Tens of thousands of ordinary people signed petitions, participated in demonstrations and consumed the news-books and pamphlets that reported and discussed political matters. Historians have long struggled with this new role of the common people as a political force. Marxist historians, most notably Christopher Hill, have emphasised the social conflict and increasing popular opposition to religious and political authorities in a "world turned upside down",

[7] See Smith (1994); Knoppers (2012). On the debated question whether the civil wars and the ensuing Republic and Protectorate constituted a revolution in the political realm see Knoppers (2012), 4–7.
[8] See Clare (2004, 2012).
[9] See Wiseman (1998); Sauer (2005); Willie (2015).
[10] Many major works focus on literature and rhetoric in relation to politics, such as Skerpan-Wheeler (1992); Achinstein (1994); Norbrook (2000); Worden (2007). Other studies attend to a range of media, including performance, but restrict themselves to specific periods within the interregnum, such as Kelsey (1997); Sherwood (1997); Holberton (2008). Sauer (2005) explicitly discusses the influence of theatre on Interregnum writing, and Knoppers (2000) provides a remarkable study of the representation of Cromwell through different media and by different actors. Lately, Kevin Sharpe has broken new ground with his three-volume history of political representation that spans the period from the early sixteenth to late seventeenth century; see Sharpe (2009, 2010, 2013).

while revisionist historians insisted that a wide-ranging consensus prevailed in the decades before the civil wars, when the political elites appeared untroubled about popular opposition.[11] In the late 1980s, post-revisionist historians who were interested in the involvement of the people in political debate sought to overcome the divide between conflict and consensus, and between 'elite' and 'popular' perspectives. And to do so, they could take their cue from a text whose English translation, published in 1989, proved a timely intervention: Jürgen Habermas's *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*.[12] In his study of the bourgeois public of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Habermas put forth the notion of the public sphere as the realm in which a critical public was addressed and actively debated political matters in public, forming and articulating opinions and effectively contesting the authority of the state. Habermas argued that such public debate was facilitated by a number of institutions such as salons and coffee houses, but also, most importantly, by an independent press. Conceptualising the public largely as a community of readers, Habermas characterised public debate as inclusive, allowing participation "without regard to all pre-existing social and political rank", and characterised by rationality.[13] Although these claims have been exhaustively criticised, Habermas's theory has nevertheless been highly instructive to historians of the seventeenth century.[14] A public sphere perspective that focusses on public debate and the relation of state authority to the public allowed for a discussion of the tumultuous decades preceding and following the civil war in terms other than conflict or consensus. Post-revisionism thus attended to the shift that occurred during the seventeenth century as a public hitherto only passively addressed by the state began to assume a voice of its own, debate political issues and articulate a public opinion that engaged the state, held it accountable and challenged its political monopoly. Whereas a sense of ownership of the state was before restricted to a small elite, it gradually extended as large sections of the populace took part in political debates, including the lower orders of society such as small shopkeepers,

[11] See especially Hill (1972, 1974). For a compact discussion of the different historiographical approaches see Peacey (2013), 6–14. For criticism of such broad narratives that disregard the local circumstances for revolts and other articulations of popular will see Walter (2006).

[12] The book had appeared in German as early as 1962, but it was only with the publication of the English translation and an accompanying conference that resulted in the publication of a volume of critical essays, edited by Craig Calhoun, that Habermas's concept of the public sphere received wide recognition among British and American scholars. See Calhoun (1992); Habermas (1991).

[13] Habermas (1991), 54.

[14] Habermas's theory, particularly his emphasis on equality and rationality, has been criticised from a number of angles; see particularly Fraser (1990) and the essays in Crossley and Roberts (2004).

day-labourers and apprentices.[15] And while not all addresses to the people invited critical engagement, and often rather sought to manipulate and control them, the period witnessed a "spread of political consciousness" precisely because the lower strata of society were increasingly included in addresses to 'the people'.[16]

Peter Lake and Stephen Pincus have described this transformation as a shift from a post-Reformation public sphere, which emerged during the Reformation in the early sixteenth century and lasted until the 1640s, to a post-revolutionary public sphere, which began to take shape in the 1640s and 1650s and was fully developed by the late seventeenth century. They suggest that the post-Reformation public sphere of the sixteenth and early seventeenth century was in fact a "series of public spheres", constituted by temporary attempts to stir public opinion in the pursuit of religious or political objectives.[17] These short-lived publics intended to put pressure on the authorities rather than to incite long-term debate. They were called into being through pamphlets published by Protestants, Catholics or Puritans in opposition to the regime, but also through campaigns of courtiers and political leaders.[18] Addressed "during moments of perceived crisis or emergency", these were publics "of sorts" that nevertheless suggested the possibility of critical public debate:

> A variety of media – print, the pulpit, performance, circulating manuscript – was used to address promiscuously uncontrollable, socially heterogeneous, in some sense 'popular' audiences. Such activity implied the existence of – indeed, notionally at least called into being – an adjudicating public or publics able to judge or determine the truth of the matter in hand on the basis of the information and argument placed before them.[19]

Lake and Pincus situate the transition from post-Reformation to post-revolutionary public sphere at the outbreak of the civil wars, when debate about political issues and news of war events became widely available through print media like news-books and petitions after the breakdown of censorship in 1641. Over the course of the civil wars, discussion of religious and political matters increased in scope and involved a broad public on a regular basis. And as this public emerged as a permanent addressee,

[15] See Baldwin (2000), 200. [16] Burke (1994), 259. [17] Lake and Pincus (2007b), 3.
[18] See Lake and Pincus (2007b), 5. The fact that publics not only emerged in opposition to established authorities, but were also strategically evoked and instumentalised by members of the regime qualifies a Habermasian understanding of publics as emancipatory and democratic. For discussions of the instrumental nature of publics in the early modern period see Hammer (2007); Lake (2007); Doty (2010).
[19] Lake and Pincus (2007b), 6.

attitudes towards it changed: "while participants in the post-Reformation public spheres considered political communication to be a necessary evil, by the end of our period many (though by no means all) political actors understood relatively unfettered public discussion to be normatively desirable".[20]

The early modern period thus saw its own structural transformation of the public sphere, facilitated by changing political circumstances and conflict. The public that emerged was shaped by the concrete ways in which a number of individual actors – statesmen, officials, artists, writers and speakers – addressed it. Throughout the period, these actors participated in what Michael Warner has called the "poetic world-making" of public discourse.[21] Publics, Warner claims, are called into existence by being addressed: from this vantage point, the countless early modern pamphlets, proclamations and performances were not addressed at a public that already existed, but themselves turned their readers and audiences into a public. Each mode of address invited engagement and judgement, and provided those that responded to it with self-awareness and terms of expression. Warner's concept of public-making has had a strong influence on the study of early modern publics. Understanding publics to be subject to strategic evocation, historical circumstances and processes of change, numerous scholars have attended to the material practices of public-making and the impact of works of art on the formation of early modern publics.[22] As Bronwen Wilson and Paul Yachnin note in their introduction to *Making Publics in Early Modern Europe*, this expanded field of study challenges monolithic notions of an early modern public:

> An analysis of early modern works of art and intellect and the fields of activity that grew up around them suggests, however, that the formative work of public making is far less unified and uniform than has been thought and also that forms of public expression, identity, and action include poetry, play and performance (to mention only a few forms) as well as rational debate.[23]

This approach provides a necessary complement to Lake and Pincus's structural perspective for two reasons. On the one hand, it attends to the concrete practices of public-making, emphasising agency and the underlying strategic interests of such practices. On the other hand, it engages the heterogeneity of the early modern public sphere, accommodating the plurality

[20] Lake and Pincus (2007b), 20.
[21] Warner (2002), 82.
[22] See the numerous projects within the Making Publics network on www.makingpublics.org as well as Wilson and Yachnin (2010a).
[23] Wilson and Yachnin (2010b), 6.

of potentially overlapping or oppositional publics. The early modern public sphere was just as heterogeneous and conflicted as society itself, which was stratified along parameters of political allegiance, religion, gender, class, race, income, education and urbanisation. In this society, different interest groups developed their own mode of address in search of an audience, constituting different publics – be they the King publishing an order, women marching through town to protest against taxation, or a bishop preaching at Paul's Cross. The early modern public sphere thus consisted of numerous publics, including oppositional or segregated ones – the multiple "subaltern counterpublics" that Nancy Fraser, in an early critique of Habermas, has identified as constitutive of the "public-at-large".[24]

The early modern public sphere that developed over the course of the seventeenth century, then, was vibrantly dynamic and made up of different, often competing publics evoked through different practices. In their search for broad engagement and support, however, most practices aimed for an address that was as wide as possible and were directed, at least potentially, at what Fraser calls the "public-at-large". Yachnin and Wilson observe that early modern publics competed "for the attention and approval of 'the public,' a totality that is conjured into existence on the strength of each public's address to 'the world' and each one's aspiration toward growth".[25] Most texts, images and performances accordingly addressed themselves generally to 'the people'. Even though their actual audience was limited, they were directed at a public that potentially comprised all of the English populace. Royalists and Republicans, Laudians and Puritans, Levellers and reformers all addressed the people at large and thus sustained the idea of a single, overarching public the support of which they wanted to enlist. The point of an approach that attends to the making of publics, then, is also to understand ways in which individual practices of address shaped the role and idea of the public at large. Rather than focussing on structural changes, such as lifting of censorship or political conflict, this approach suggests that we can arrive at a notion of the early modern public and its impact on society by looking at the concrete practices that constituted individual publics while appealing to the public at large.

While a number of studies have engaged the ways that an early modern public was addressed, however, most have limited their scope to print as the medium of address. This is true for studies of the early modern period as a whole, such as those by Alexandra Halasz, David Zaret or Joad Raymond, as well as for those that focus on the changes in the mid-seventeenth

[24] Fraser (1990), 68. [25] Wilson and Yachnin (2010b), 6.

century.[26] This approach is plausible, given the impact of the printing press in the sixteenth century and the proliferation of printed tracts and newsbooks during the civil wars, when censorship of the press had effectively broken down.[27] And of course printed works and other texts also make up the majority of sources with which we as historians can approach the early modern period in the first place. But to understand the early modern public only in relation to texts significantly limits our understanding of that public. For one, such a perspective largely excludes the illiterate majority of the population that was not the immediate addressee of printed texts. David Zaret acknowledges this point, and uses it to caution against idealisation of the public as democratic and all-encompassing:

> Debate in the early-modern public sphere often invokes "the people" and involves persons drawn from remarkably diverse social backgrounds. But participants in those debates – even broadly constructed as speakers, hearers, writers, publishers, printers, readers – represent only a subset of "the people". For the most part . . . , participation in the nascent public sphere in early-modern England depended on access to unequally distributed literary and economic resources that facilitated participation in print culture.[28]

The problematic limits and silent exclusions of a general idea of "the people" as audience concerned many writers of the period. Milton is a prominent example for an author's complicated relationship to the public and his ongoing struggle with the question of who should actually be included in the community of "the people" that were his intended audience.[29] But while it is important to be aware of the limits and silent exclusions of the early modern public, we should also be careful not to limit our own perspective on the public sphere to those who could access printed works, as Zaret seems to suggest. Early modern thinkers were in fact well aware of the problem of unequal access and illiteracy and were trying to overcome it specifically by turning to other media than printed texts. Leonard Willan, in his preface, acknowledged the necessity to reach illiterate and uneducated people, and he promoted theatre as a means to convey information specifically to "the illiterate and orebusied multitude: who usually want vacancy or capacity to peruse, conceive, or retain the sence thereof under the tedious, abstruse forms of publique manifests".[30] Print was not the only way of addressing a public, and frequently, different media were used amidst efforts to reach particular audiences. Activists printed notices

[26] See Halasz (1997); Zaret (2000); Raymond (2003). On the period of the Civil Wars and the ensuing years see Holstun (1992); Achinstein (1994); Smith (1994); Raymond (1999); Norbrook (2000).
[27] See the introduction in Holstun (1992), 1–13; also see Raymond (2003).
[28] Zaret (2000), 33. [29] See Corns (1992); Hammond (2014). [30] Willan (1658), a1v.