

LIBEL IN THE PROVINCES:

DISINFORMATION AND 'DISREPUTATION' IN EARLY MODERN ENGLAND

Such many prettie similes,

I could tell of his tragedies

*Chichester v. Symons (Melbury Osmond, Dorset, 1607)*¹

Abstract

By the early modern period, libelling a private individual had been legally redefined and was being tried at the court of Star Chamber, alongside cases relating to the monarch or government. This brought the ruination of individual reputations by spreading false rumours into the same realm as the circulation of nationally significant false news. Private libels typically took the form of verses, impersonations, mock ceremonies or visual symbols that were read, sung, posted, and published; they exploited the defamatory potential of fictional reconstructions of local disputes in order to exacerbate conflicts within provincial communities. This chapter argues that private libels provide evidence for a novel multimedia practice of circulating disinformation that blended fact and fiction amongst the social networks of early modern England. It examines two cases, one centred upon a libellous verse and the other on mock proclamations, to establish the significance of literary and performance techniques in libellous disinformation. The chapter also explores the significance of 'disreputation' for the categories of private and public. It argues that private

¹ The National Archives, London (hereafter TNA), STAC 8/89/15, m. 6.

libels were a crucial feature of the social backdrop to established forms of oral, print and manuscript communication, which impacted upon common perceptions of trustworthiness of information and public official figures.

In 1607, Philip Chichester, a gentleman of Melbury Osmond in Dorset, submitted a bill of complaint to the Star Chamber regarding the alleged circulation of a verse libel written in the form of a letter by Melbury's parish clerk, Henry Symons. The anonymous 'I' of this verse libel explicitly invokes the power of figurative language and literary or dramatic narrative, of 'prettie similes' and 'tragedies', in fictionalizing the private life of its target in order to defame them in the eyes of the local community. The libel's circulation amongst the social networks of the parish clerk is one example of the growing trend for libelling across late sixteenth and early seventeenth-century England. Such libels typically took the form of verses, impersonations, mock ceremonies or visual symbols that were read, sung, posted and published; they exploited the defamatory potential of fictional reconstructions of local events or disputes, often in order to exacerbate ongoing conflicts within provincial communities. By the early modern period, libelling a private individual had been redefined in legal terms and was being tried at the Star Chamber, one of the most high-profile, royal prerogative courts in England, whose judiciary predominantly consisted of privy councillors.² At the Star Chamber private libel cases were tried alongside cases relating to scandals of the monarch or government. This conflation and criminalization of private libel brought the ruination of

² Edward P. Cheyney, 'The Court of Star Chamber', *American Historical Review*, xviii (1913), 728.

individual reputations by spreading false rumours into the same realm as the circulation of nationally significant false news.

The Star Chamber's redefinition of libel shifted the relationship between defamatory content and the truth. Libels fell under the court's jurisdiction over breaches of the common peace, which meant that truth was no longer a defence, as it had been in common law courts.³ According to Star Chamber barrister and author of the authoritative treatise on the court William Hudson, a true libel was even more likely to lead to a breach of the peace than a false one.⁴ Based on practice at Star Chamber, Hudson reports that the form in which libellous content was presented and received was more significant than its truth or falsity: 'it hath ever been agreed, that it is not the matter but the manner which is punishable'.⁵ Sir Edward Coke, the prominent lawyer, legal writer and politician whose 1605 report on 'The Case *de Libellis Famosis*' shaped legal practice concerning libel, emphasized that even if there was just cause for grievance on the part of the libeller, or some truth to the content of

³ Cheyney, 'Court of Star Chamber', 733; W. S. Holdsworth, *A History of English Law*, 17 vols. (London, 1903–24), v, 210; Adam Fox, 'Ballads, Libels and Popular Ridicule in Jacobean England', *Past and Present*, cxlv (1994), 55.

⁴ William Hudson, 'A Treatise of the Court of Star Chamber', in *Collectanea Juridica*, ed. F. Hargrave, 2 vols. (London, 1791–2), ii, 102–3. See also TNA, STAC 12/1.

⁵ Hudson, 'Treatise of the Court of Star Chamber', in *Collectanea Juridica*, ed. Hargrave, ii, 102.

the libel, they should have sought reparation through accepted official means of social regulation, such as the courts, rather than taking matters into their own hands.⁶

Given this legal context and the nature of libel as malicious public attack, the content of private libels can be understood as disinformation — they were a blend of fact and fiction at best and if they contained grains of truth then the public libellous form they took was intentionally misleading to their public audience and their contents were publicized in order to cause harm. Much of the current scholarship on disinformation adopts the definition set out in the 2018 European Commission Report, defining disinformation as ‘all forms of false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or for profit’.⁷ Whilst the extent to which this contemporary definition can be applied to early modern sources is limited, the current definition points to two key aspects of the phenomenon of disinformation for the early modern period: the extent to which the information is misleading and the harm that it could do when publicly spread. For medieval and early modern contexts, such issues were most evident in the suppression of unfavourable ‘false news or Tales’ relating to the monarch or government, which, left unchecked, would

⁶ [Edward Coke], *The Selected Writings and Speeches of Sir Edward Coke*, ed. Steve Sheppard, 3 vols. (Indiana, 2003), i, 147. See also Debora Shuger, *Censorship and Cultural Sensibility: The Regulation of Language in Tudor-Stuart England* (Philadelphia, 2006), 139–70.

⁷ European Commission Report, *A Multi-dimensional Approach to Disinformation — Report of the Independent High-Level Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation* (2018), 3.

lead to civil unrest.⁸ This chapter will argue that private libels circulating or performed in the early modern provinces can be understood as a novel multimedia form, blending fact and fiction to intervene in social relations. The chapter therefore approaches private libel of the provinces as a form of early modern disinformation, social in nature but with implications for wider issues of hierarchy, power and governance.

Having first outlined the aspects of disinformation past and present of significance for the study of libel, the chapter focuses on two cases: the first is that of *Chichester v. Symons* with which this chapter opened; the second case features mock proclamations targeting the Vice-Admiral of Devon, Sir Richard Hawkins, in 1606. These two cases are significant in three major ways for the issues addressed here. Firstly, they adopt different mediums for libel with one centring upon a written text and the other focusing upon the performance of a mock proclamation. As the quotation at the beginning of this chapter demonstrates, written libels drew on a whole range of literary devices to create fictionalized iterations of their targets and local disputes. They also alluded to the vast range of print and manuscript material that made up early modern literate culture. However, it is vital that we also recognize the private libels of the provinces as functioning on a spectrum of performance, from the theatrical to the performative, with even the most textual or literary of verses acquiring new meaning from spatial context, orator identity, and audience interpretation when read aloud in public.⁹ These

⁸ David Ibbetson, 'Edward Coke, Roman Law, and the Law of Libel', in *The Oxford Handbook of English Law and Literature, 1500–1700*, ed. Lorna Hutson (Oxford, 2017), 490.

⁹ Clare Egan, 'Performing Early Modern Libel: Expanding the Boundaries of Performance', *Early Theatre*, xxiii (2020). See also Alastair Bellany, 'Singing Libel in Early Stuart England: The Case of the Staines Fiddlers, 1627', *Huntington Library Quarterly*, lxix (2006);

two cases therefore represent the range of cultural meaning invoked by libels that employed multiple forms of communication spanning oral, written and performed delivery. Secondly, whilst the complainants in these cases are high status gentlemen, the audiences for the libels against them included a much wider range of communal constituents. Similarly, although their libellous content alludes for example to the more educated realms of poetry and printed epistolary material as well as official royal proclamations, it is also informed and infused by what might be termed ‘popular’ culture, from gossip and ‘merrie’ tales to inversionary shaming rituals and carnivalesque disorder. For libellous disinformation and its reception, therefore, these cases demonstrate that the categories of elite and popular are not easily distinguished. Thirdly, these cases straddle the borders between public and private status — one target is a prominent private individual whilst the other is a public office-holder — in order to explore what Richard Cust has described as the ‘intertwined’ nature of these categories, which were ‘at the level of rhetoric . . . often fused together’.¹⁰ The chapter concludes with a consideration of the wider impacts of private libel for public office-holding and systems of governance.

Early modern libels have attracted a great deal of scholarly attention. Most notably, Adam Fox has established the overlap of oral and literate cultures in popular libels, particularly in

Adam Fox, *Oral and Literate Culture in England, 1500–1700* (Oxford, 2002); Andrew Gordon, ‘The Act of Libel: Conscripting Civic Space in Early Modern England’, *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, xxxii (2002).

¹⁰ Richard Cust, ‘Honour and Politics in Early Stuart England: The Case of Beaumont v. Hastings’, *Past and Present*, no. 149 (Nov. 1995), 92.

tracing the complex interplay of oral and written technologies they employed.¹¹ Fox reads libel as part of the ballad tradition and, with others including Andrew McRae and Alastair Bellany, highlights the connections between everyday gossip or rumour and early modern political news.¹² Extensive research has also established the literary and satirical methods of political libels and traced their circulation, publication and impact on early modern national politics.¹³ McRae importantly establishes that political libels about prominent court figures

¹¹ Fox, *Oral and Literate Culture in England*.

¹² Adam Fox, 'Rumour, News and Popular Political Opinion in Elizabethan and Early Stuart England', *Historical Journal*, xl (1997); Alastair Bellany, 'The Embarrassment of Libels: Perceptions and Representations of Verse Libelling in Early Stuart England', in Peter Lake and Steven Pincus (eds.), *The Politics of the Public Sphere in Early Modern England* (Manchester, 2007); Martin Ingram, 'Ridings, Rough Music and the "Reform of Popular Culture" in Early Modern England', *Past and Present*, no. 105 (Nov. 1984); Andrew McRae, 'The Verse Libel: Popular Satire in Early Modern England', in Dermot Cavanagh and Tim Kirk (eds.), *Subversion and Scurrility: Popular Discourse in Europe from 1500 to the Present* (Aldershot, 2000).

¹³ Andrew McRae, *Literature, Satire and the Early Stuart State* (Cambridge, 2004); Alastair Bellany, "'Raylinge Rymes and Vaunting Verse": Libellous Politics in Early Stuart England, 1603–1628', in Kevin Sharpe and Peter Lake (eds.), *Culture and Politics in Early Stuart England* (London, 1994); Alastair Bellany and Andrew McRae (eds.), 'Early Stuart Libels: An Edition of Poetry from Manuscript Sources', *Early Modern Literary Studies*, Text Series I (2005) <<http://purl.oclc.org/emls/texts/libels/>> (accessed 11 July 2022); Thomas Cogswell, 'Underground Verse and the Transformation of Early Stuart Political Culture', *Huntington*

and notorious scandals of the early Stuart period were characterized by an ‘artful confusion of the categories of fact and fiction’.¹⁴ This chapter argues that examples of libel from the provinces targeting the reputation of private individuals similarly mastered and exploited early modern forms of disinformation. Furthermore, it attempts to bring these two realms of scholarship, literary political libels and historically framed provincial libels, together and extend them in its new approach to understanding private libels as multimedia disinformation, blending fact and fiction, circulating in the provinces of early modern England.

This chapter is also underpinned by two important methodological principles: the importance of engaging in literary and performance analysis when addressing historical questions; and the need to recognize more fully the significance of libel in the provinces both as sophisticated literary or dramatic products and as connected to the wider issues of politics and governance. In addressing the issue of historical disinformation, the libel cases considered here will demonstrate, for example, that verse libels exploited the potential of figurative language, complex syntax and poetic imagery in order to add fictional dimensions to public perceptions of their targets. The verse libel in the case of *Chichester v. Symons*, considered first in this chapter, employed a sophisticated blend of anonymity and specificity; it creates a vividly persuasive narrative persona who convincingly acts as a reliable guide in the ‘laborinth’ of oral and written information, whilst nevertheless retaining authorial anonymity and infiltrating local social networks via the letter’s addressee, Henry Symons. The written verse in this case also used the forms of the letter, pamphlet and printed

Library Quarterly, lx (1999); Pauline Croft, ‘Libels, Popular Literacy and Public Opinion in Early Modern England’, *Historical Research*, lxviii (1995).

¹⁴ McRae, *Literature, Satire and the Early Stuart State*, 35.

epistolary material to tie itself into recognized genres of early modern news communication. The second case considered here similarly used established genres of performance, the royal proclamation and the rituals of popular protest and shaming, in order to humiliate its target. It drew on the ways in which performance could use location, symbolic objects, speaker identity and gesture to make meaning by parodying performative genres. Without such literary and performance analyses, the subtleties of precisely how libels as a form of early modern disinformation made meaning could be overlooked. The fictionality of disinformation necessitates engagement with literary methods.

Placing these libel cases in their provincial contexts is also crucial to understanding more fully how they functioned as disinformation, as well as for recognizing and locating the pervasive presence of such disinformation in early modern England. Studies of disinformation emphasize not only the content but also the reception of such problematic communications. Libels of the early modern provinces were deliberately designed for active communal audiences or readers; each verse, impersonation, mock ceremony or symbol called upon its audience to judge the merits and veracity of its contents. Whilst legally, then, truth was less important to determining libellous material, when it came to provincial reception and circulation it was libels' blend of fact and fiction, as well as their multimedia form, that drove widespread dissemination. The two cases examined here demonstrate that by mimicking established forms of communication, such as proclamations, pamphlets and newsletters, libels tapped into the 'social rhetorics' or a 'recognized . . . scale of reliability, hierarchies of source and genre' associated with those forms in the public consciousness of provincial communities.¹⁵ Whilst there are important overlaps with the defamatory libels of London's

¹⁵ Nicolas Moon, "'This is Attested Truth': The Rhetoric of Truthfulness in Early Modern Broadside Ballads", in Simon Davies and Puck Fletcher (eds.), *News in Early Modern*

urban scene or the politic libels of court scandal, understanding the specific provincial contexts for each of the cases addressed here is crucial for viewing libels as early modern disinformation. Such specific provincial contexts range from the social networks of a parish clerk in Melbury Osmond to the power dynamics between the mayor, Justices of the Peace, the vice-admiral and those with a commission from the Admiralty court in Plymouth.

Finally, by looking at how modern social media functions to facilitate the spread of disinformation, we might newly understand the role of private libel in an early modern equivalent of today's disinformation order in 'disrupt[ing] rationality in the public mind'.¹⁶ The importance of the English gentry, with their roles in local positions of authority and their involvement in central, political affairs, as the conduits between issues of local and national significance has been well established.¹⁷ It is also evident from the number and impact of

Europe: Currents and Connections (Leiden, 2014), 232; Ian Atherton, 'The Itch Grown a Disease: Manuscript Transmission of News in the Seventeenth Century', *Prose Studies*, xxi (1998), 46.

¹⁶ David Cressy, *Dangerous Talk: Scandalous, Seditious, and Treasonable Speech in Pre-Modern England* (Oxford, 2010), 35; Margaret Van Heekeren, 'The Curative Effect of Social Media on Fake News: A Historical Re-evaluation', *Journalism Studies*, xxi (2019), 315. For studies connecting the personal and political, see Cogswell, 'Underground Verse and the Transformation of Early Stuart Political Culture'; Bellany, "'Raylinge Rymes and Vaunting Verse'".

¹⁷ Cust, 'Honour and Politics'; A. J. Fletcher, 'Honour, Reputation and Local Officeholding in Elizabethan and Stuart England', in Anthony Fletcher and John Stevenson (eds.), *Order*

high profile political scandals that the individual reputations of those in government were becoming important in new ways during the early seventeenth century, with anxieties over the corruption of individuals at court holding significant symbolic meaning for the state of the nation.¹⁸ Cust emphasizes the importance of local public office-holding in the establishment of honour for gentlemen and connects the private and public through the analogy frequently drawn between the household and the state: ‘men were held to account for the conduct of their wives, children and servants; and their public status and reputation was seen as resting in part on their performance of household duties’.¹⁹ Rather than the emphasis falling upon

and Disorder in Early Modern England (Cambridge, 1985); Noah Millstone, *Manuscript Circulation and the Invention of Politics in Early Stuart England* (Cambridge, 2016).

¹⁸ Bellany, “‘Raylinge Rymes and Vaunting Verse’”, 293–6; Cogswell, ‘Underground Verse and the Transformation of Early Stuart Political Culture’.

¹⁹ Cust, ‘Honour and Politics’, 81. There is undoubtedly a gendered dimension to this understanding of the significance of public reputation. The case studies here focus on the reputations of men in private and public life, for the gendered nature of slanderous insult and its impacts on women, see Susan D. Amussen and David Underdown, *Gender, Culture and Politics in England, 1560–1640: Turning the World Upside Down* (London, 2017); Bernard Capp, *When Gossips Meet: Women, Family and Neighbourhood in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 2003); Laura Gowing, *Domestic Dangers: Women, Words and Sex in Early Modern London* (Oxford, 1996); Laura Gowing, ‘Language, Power and the Law: Women’s Slander Litigation in Early Modern London’, in Jennifer Kermode and Garthine Walker (eds.), *Women, Crime and the Courts in Early Modern England* (London, 1994); Ina Habermann, *Staging Slander and Gender in Early Modern England* (Aldershot, 2003).

men's ability to control their household, this chapter argues that the increase in private libelling shifted many people's focus towards holding men to account for governing their own individual identity as a means of retaining a good reputation and as a crucial precursor to fitness for public office. The rise of innovative forms of defamation therefore changed the perceived danger of damaging private reputation due to the serious implications that 'disreputation' in a private capacity had for public office-holding. Private libels can be seen as a crucial feature of the social backdrop to established forms of oral, print and manuscript communication, which impacted upon common perceptions of the trustworthiness both of general information and public official figures.

I. Disinformation Past and Present: The Case of Libel

The existence of fake or false news and the perception of it as a danger to society is not new. As Margaret Van Heekeren argues, 'disinformation is a cyclical occurrence that manifests most during periods of broader social and political instability'.²⁰ Late medieval and early modern England have been seen as key moments in this cyclical concern over the regulation of false news and the spread of disinformation.²¹ The 1275 Statute of Westminster, which forbade the publication of 'false News or Tales whereby discord . . . or slander may grow

²⁰ Van Heekeren, 'Curative Effect of Social Media on Fake News', 315.

²¹ See, for example, David Coast, 'Misinformation and Disinformation in Late Jacobean Court Politics', *Journal of Early Modern History*, xvi (2012); C. S. L. Davies, 'Information, Disinformation and Political Knowledge under Henry VII and Early Henry VIII', *Historical Research*, lxxxv (2012); Christopher Fletcher, 'News, Noise, and the Nature of Politics in Late Medieval English Provincial Towns', *Journal of British Studies*, lvi (2017).

between the King and his People’, was reissued and then expanded across the sixteenth century.²² The Statute constituted the monarch’s suppression and punishment of unfavourable content in a manner not dissimilar to current political uses of the term ‘fake news’. In the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the emergence and proliferation of novel news media, which circulated in oral, print and manuscript forms, was followed by the collapse of press censorship during the civil war, leading particularly during the 1640s to campaigns centred upon the ‘political use of disinformation’.²³ The political instability of the late Elizabethan and early Jacobean periods is crucial in understanding how novel forms of disinformation, such as libels, proliferated and were taken seriously by those in authority.

Recent journalism and media studies contend that the digital age is suffering from a ‘crisis of public communication’ with social media seen as key in creating a ‘fragmented media ecosystem’.²⁴ Such research observes that ‘media consumers worldwide have in recent years become fascinated and dismayed by a constellation of media genres that includes “fake

²² Ibbetson, ‘Edward Coke, Roman Law, and the Law of Libel’, 490. See also Fox, ‘Rumour, News and Popular Political Opinion’, 599.

²³ William White, ‘Parliament, Print and the Politics of Disinformation, 1642–3’, *Historical Research*, xcii (2019), 720. See also Fox, *Oral and Literate Culture in England*.

²⁴ Deen Freelon and Chris Wells, ‘Disinformation as Political Communication’, *Political Communication*, xxxvii (2020), 145–8; Van Heekeren, ‘Curative Effect of Social Media on Fake News’, 308 and 313. See also Freelon and Wells, ‘Disinformation as Political Communication’, 149–50; Kate Starbird, Ahmer Arif and Tom Wilson, ‘Disinformation as Collaborative Work: Surfacing the Participatory Nature of Strategic Information Operations’, *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, iii (2019), 4.

news”, “misinformation”, “disinformation”, “media manipulation”, “coordinated inauthentic behavior”, and “propaganda””.²⁵ Understanding the role of this model of multimedia system and its unique communicative features in promoting disinformation can inform the study of how libels exploited a parallel information ecosystem in the early modern period. For example, modern social media shifts the emphasis onto the identity of the sharer and away from the originator of information, facilitating anonymity at the source of information, and as a form it enables the collapsing of different contexts, such as news and entertainment, together.²⁶ These particular features of modern social media are relevant for the following analysis of the practices of early modern libel: authorial anonymity was frequently exploited by libellers; the Star Chamber was as concerned with the *sharers* of libellous content as with its authors; and the ‘manner’ of libel — the various forms of song, verse, play, or symbol that it took — was perceived as more dangerous than its ‘matter’ or content.²⁷ Most significantly, however, the modern disinformation problem extends beyond discrete cases of fake news shared on social media; instead, the issue is ‘an accumulated cognizance of potentially fake and therefore untrustworthy information that disrupts rationality within the public mind’.²⁸

²⁵ Freelon and Wells, ‘Disinformation as Political Communication’, 145.

²⁶ Freelon and Wells, ‘Disinformation as Political Communication’, 147; Starbird, Arif and Wilson, ‘Disinformation as Collaborative Work’, 3.

²⁷ See n. 5 above on William Hudson’s statement relating to the ‘manner’ of libel.

²⁸ Van Heekeren, ‘Curative Effect of Social Media on Fake News’, 315. See also Freelon and Wells, ‘Disinformation as Political Communication’, 146; Starbird, Arif and Wilson, ‘Disinformation as Collaborative Work’, 4.

That modern disinformation research can refer to the ‘public mind’ is worth pausing over; the existence of a singular public consciousness cannot necessarily be taken for granted now, let alone when we consider the extensive critical debate concerning the emergence of a ‘public sphere’ or the formation of multiple ‘publics’ in the early modern period.²⁹ Jürgen Habermas’s concept of the emergence of the bourgeois public sphere during the Enlightenment has become ‘ubiquitous’, even if only as an ‘intellectual jumping-off point’, for critical studies of changes in public participation during the early modern period.³⁰ The two major revisions of Habermas’s theory as to when people without public office — private persons — came together publicly have been to move the date of emergence ever earlier, but most commonly to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and to contend that public opinion was not a single entity, but the simultaneous ‘undertakings’ of multiple ‘particular groupings of people’.³¹ Other important reconsiderations of the early modern ‘public sphere’ for this

²⁹ On early modern publics see, for example, Paula Backscheider and Timothy Dykstal (eds.), *The Intersections of the Public and Private Spheres in Early Modern England* (London, 1996); Peter Lake and Steven Pincus, ‘Rethinking the Public Sphere in Early Modern England’, *Journal of British Studies*, xlv (2006); Lake and Pincus (eds.), *Politics of the Public Sphere*; Bronwen Wilson and Paul Yachnin (eds.), *Making Publics in Early Modern Europe: People, Things, Forms of Knowledge* (Abingdon, 2010).

³⁰ Lake and Pincus, ‘Rethinking the Public Sphere’, 270; Eoin Price, ‘The Politics of Privacy and the Renaissance Public Stage’, *Literature Compass*, xii (2015), 312.

³¹ Paul Yachnin and Marlene Eberhart (eds.), *Forms of Association: Making Publics in Early Modern Europe* (Amherst and Boston, 2015), 6. See also Lake and Pincus, ‘Rethinking the Public Sphere’, 270–1; Price, ‘Politics of Privacy’, 312.

chapter include Lena Liapi's emphasis on different modes of communication, which make apparent the 'connection between publicizing (the process of spreading information) and the shaping of public opinion' and the wider move, driven forward by Eoin Price, towards 'the idea that the Renaissance theatre was a principal public making space'.³² With this scholarship suggesting we see the early modern period as a crucial moment for emerging senses of public consciousness (in the plural) via public performance and the communication of news media, might we understand an early modern disinformation problem, which parallels modern issues of fake news on social media, as interfering with a sense of public rationality at this formative stage of emergent publics?

The proliferation of political libel during the first decades of the seventeenth century is an important feature of an early modern culture of disinformation, which has been understood as connected to increasingly polarized and politicized publics.³³ However, the change made to defamation law in the late 1590s and early 1600s related to private libel.³⁴ From its thirteenth-

³² Lena Liapi, "'The Talke of the Towne": News, Crime and the Public Sphere in Seventeenth-Century London', *Cultural and Social History*, xiv (2017), 550–1; Price, 'Politics of Privacy', 315.

³³ McRae, *Literature, Satire and the Early Stuart State*, 24–5; Alastair Bellany, 'Libels in Action: Ritual, Subversion and the English Literary Underground, 1603–42', in Tim Harris (ed.) *The Politics of the Excluded, c.1500–1850* (London, 2001); Cogswell, 'Underground Verse and the Transformation of Early Stuart Political Culture', 303–4; Croft, 'Libels, Popular Literacy and Public Opinion'.

³⁴ Hudson, 'Treatise of the Court of Star Chamber', in *Collectanea Juridica*, ed. Hargrave, ii, 100; Ibbetson, 'Edward Coke, Roman Law, and the Law of Libel', 496.

century origins, the medieval offence of defamation consisted of two distinct forms: either a moral transgression against private individuals tried in local Church courts or, as *scandalum magnatum*, a criminal offence targeting the monarch or magnates.³⁵ Debates over Church government in the latter part of Elizabeth's reign saw increasing religious polemic and the publication of the Marprelate tracts, which sparked renewed discussion of what constituted libellous content.³⁶ A series of high-profile, precedential cases in the 1590s and Sir Edward Coke's 1605 report on 'The Case *de Libellis Famosis*' against Lewis Pickering for a verse placed on Archbishop Whitgift's hearse led to the criminalization of libel against a private individual.³⁷ David Ibbetson establishes that, despite the fact that the case against Lewis Pickering actually featured material against the Queen and Archbishop Whitgift making it a case of *scandalum magnatum*, Coke's influential report left this information out so that 'it could be seen as a case of a private libel'.³⁸

Private libel, of the kind predominantly occurring in the provinces, saw the details of personal scandals deliberately crafted into theatrical impersonations, verses, elaborate visual

³⁵ Ibbetson, 'Edward Coke, Roman Law, and the Law of Libel', 488–90; Cheyney, 'Court of Star Chamber', 727–50; R. H. Helmholz (ed.), *Select Cases on Defamation to 1600* (London, 1985); Holdsworth, *History of English Law*, v, 205–12; Shuger, *Censorship and Cultural Sensibility*.

³⁶ Alastair Bellany, 'A Poem on the Archbishop's Hearse: Puritanism, Libel and Sedition after the Hampton Court Conference', *Journal of British Studies*, xxxiv (1995), 151–2.

³⁷ Fox, 'Ballads, Libels and Popular Ridicule', 54–6; Bellany, 'A Poem on the Archbishop's Hearse', 137–64.

³⁸ Ibbetson, 'Edward Coke, Roman Law, and the Law of Libel', 496.

symbols, or mock ceremonies, such as proclamations and court summons. These libels were read aloud, performed and sung to large crowds of deliberately assembled communal audiences in marketplaces, shops, streets, churches and houses. Written or printed texts, drawings and symbols were posted up in prominent public places, such as market crosses, church gates and domestic doorways. Written copies were also scattered in highways to be discovered and circulated amongst existing social networks. The virtual world of modern social media features uncanny echoes of the physical and spatial practices of early modern libel; modern social media still involves ‘posting’ information on the ‘walls’ of ambiguously private yet public-facing ‘profiles’, which are then compiled into each viewer’s daily ‘newsfeed’. Modern social media defamation cases have occasioned debate over the inherent ambiguity of information where brief statements often rely on irony, allusion, satire, fictionalization or exaggeration for impact.³⁹ These disputes also grapple with the characteristic norms of social media as an ‘inherently informal’ communication medium, which nevertheless ‘unquestionably constitute[s] a “publication” to third parties’.⁴⁰ Early seventeenth-century private libels were similarly ambiguous, characterized by the simultaneous existence of, and indeed tension between, truth and falsity in the information they contained. As seemingly informal communications containing references to multiple kinds of established form, such libels sought to collapse or distort the social contexts of such recognizable vehicles for information.

³⁹ Matthew E. Kelley and Steven D. Zansberg, ‘140 Characters of Defamation: The Developing Law of Social Media Libel’, *Journal of Internet Law*, xviii (2014), 8 and 10.

⁴⁰ Kelley and Zansberg, ‘140 Characters of Defamation’, 8.

II. Libellous Verse

The first case explored in this chapter centres upon a written verse libel that takes the form of a private letter but terms itself a ‘pamphlett’ and refers directly to printed epistolary material in ridiculing the morality of its target. It therefore demonstrates some of the ways in which libels mimicked multiple forms of communication, both written and oral, collapsing different contexts together. Such distortion of form and frame of reference also plays a part in driving the libel’s circulation amongst both elite and middling networks as the veracity of its content becomes the subject of communal speculation. The verse is full of literary devices and presents its narrative persona guiding the reader through the ‘laborinth’ of communal information; in so doing the verse typifies the ambiguity, allusion and rhetorical strategies of disinformation in provincial settings, which exploited the tension between simultaneous possibilities of fact and fiction.

The case of *Chichester v. Symons*, which took place in Melbury Osmond, Dorset, was brought to the Star Chamber in 1607. Philip Chichester, gentleman, accused Henry Symons, the parish clerk, of libelling him in verse. The verse was found by one William Collyns, a smith, in Melbury church, who discovered it there sealed in the form of a letter and addressed to ‘master parson of Melbury’, Henry Symons, to whom Collyns delivered it.⁴¹ The libellous letter was thereafter copied and circulated amongst the local community. The verse’s one hundred and forty-nine ‘cryptic’ lines accuse Chichester of deception, sexual misconduct with the wives and daughters of prominent local men, theft and greed in profiting by the

⁴¹ TNA, STAC 8/89/15, m. 6. The bill of complaint here, and occasionally elsewhere, misspells parson as ‘person’ where the sense dictates that ‘parson’ is the meaning – I have silently amended this to ‘parson’ throughout for clarity.

death of a gentleman he accompanied to France, and even murder.⁴² The libel begins with a declaration that immediately establishes a vivid voice for the verse's narrative persona — 'My pen is sett on a merrie pinn,/ with Phillips life I will begin' — and ends with a twenty-line 'l'envoy', which glosses the 'meaninge', 'decorum' and intended afterlife of the 'pamphlett'.⁴³

In content and style, the verse letter constitutes a clever blend of precise, specific information about the private matters of individuals on the one hand and an anonymous plurality of claims revealed publicly and demanding collective reaction on the other. Although Symons admits to receiving the letter, discussing it, allowing copies to be made and delivering the original to Sir John Strangways, esquire, he denies having written the letter himself. In content, the verse contains no identifying features of its writer and, at least in the premise it lays out, Symons is the recipient, not the composer. Despite being anonymous, the verse does create a forceful and vivid persona. Complex syntax emphasizing the first person pronoun of the 'letter-writer' feature frequently, such as 'What left is more then I haue saide' and 'Such many prettie similes,/ I could tell of his tragedies'.⁴⁴ These repetitions create the impression of a self-assured and eloquent individual guiding the reader through a proliferated maze of fact and fiction.

⁴² C. E. McGee, 'Pocky Queans and Hornèd Knaves: Gender Stereotypes in Libellous Poems', in Mary Ellen Lamb and Karen Bamford (eds.), *Oral Traditions and Gender in Early Modern Literary Texts* (London, 2008), 146.

⁴³ TNA, STAC 8/89/15, m. 6.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

The literary techniques of the verse ventriloquize Symons as one of its sources of information. In its closing envoi the letter addresses the recipient, Parson Symons: ‘I Praie good sir misconster not,/ this meaninge well of myne,/ subiect I will my sayinges all/ to you for to refine’.⁴⁵ It further urges him: ‘But praie in any case,/ Put malice from your stomacke when,/ this pamphlett You shewe/ and speake what iustified ys,/ thats bawdie all arowe’.⁴⁶ Symons is positioned as a refiner of the contents of the verse and one who will verify its justified contents *when* he shows and speaks them. The parson has the words of the verse put into his mouth by the literary mechanism of the envoi and the communicative premise of a letter.⁴⁷ The anonymous libel thereby infiltrates established social networks through the identifiable individual, Henry Symons, of moral standing in his role as parson. It is simultaneously ambiguously anonymous and associated with a verifiable individual. The letter exploits existing flows of information that place the weight of credibility with the identity of the sharer whilst obscuring the anonymous original source.

The letter also repeats the phrase ‘Mayse parson’, directly addressing the envisaged recipient three times.⁴⁸ First the verse warns: ‘Mayse parson you your tithes due,/ ought not by silence to eschewe’ the wrongdoing of Chichester; secondly, it exhorts ‘Mayse parson yow for that in truste,/ an eye thereto haue sure you must’ when revealing Chichester’s

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* My lineation here and throughout.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Gary Schneider, ‘Libelous Letters in Elizabethan and Early Stuart England’, *Modern Philology*, cv (2008).

⁴⁸ ‘Mayse’ is understood as a shortening of ‘master’ as in, for example, ‘Mas’, n.1’, *OED Online* (2021) (accessed with password or library card; accessed 17 May 2021).

alleged sexual indiscretions; and thirdly, it asks the parson ‘Mayse parson wishe your patron good,/ . . . To take heede of this more then mothe,/ that all good men beginn to lothe’.⁴⁹ In this third address to the parson the verse demands to be passed to Sir John Strangways, Symons’s lord and patron, to take heed of its warning. Strangways was a politician and would serve as a Justice of the Peace and become sheriff of Dorset in 1612.⁵⁰ Prior to requiring the parson to warn Strangways of Chichester’s deceptions, the verse claims, ‘When he [Chichester] heard Grace his mistrisse,/ shoulde married be vnto his Lorde,/ all to be wracke he did accorde’.⁵¹ Strangways had married Grace Trenchard sometime before 1607 so the verse also appears to insult Strangways more directly by implying previous dealings between Chichester and Strangways’s wife-to-be.⁵² The verse makes a literary feature of its direct address to the parson, but it also guides that recipient to a second readership implicated in the contents and one of higher status and public authority.

Furthermore, the verse implies a wider, communal audience by referring to the parson in the third person: ‘Before I put yow out of doubt,/ who is this wicked demy Loute,/ Phillip it is that towne bull sure,/ which Melburie Parson hath in cure’.⁵³ The ‘yow’ being put out of doubt is in fact a broader communal collective. Elsewhere the verse demands ‘Let everie man

⁴⁹ TNA, STAC 8/89/15, m. 6.

⁵⁰ David L. Smith, ‘Strangways, Sir John (1584–1666), politician’, in *Oxford DNB*, online edn, (2008) (accessed with password or library card; accessed 21 May 2021).

⁵¹ TNA, STAC 8/89/15, m. 6.

⁵² Smith, ‘Strangways, Sir John’, in *ODNB*.

⁵³ TNA, STAC 8/89/15, m. 6.

his dutie haue,/ aswell the priest as Lord and Knaue' and alleges 'Of honest men seane [seven] hundred knowe,/ howe he hath vsed them all a rowe'.⁵⁴ In these shifts of address from an individual letter's recipient to a figure of authority to the wider community, the libel moves between the conventions of private correspondence and the public communication of communal news or gossip in verse drawing on shared day-to-day experience.⁵⁵

The verse is intent on magnifying a sense of the existence of multiple sources. These sources are a mixture of literary forms we would categorize as fiction, such as the 'text' or 'prettie tale' that can be aesthetically embellished with 'prettie similes' or 'dilate[d]' upon by the speaker on one hand, and, on the other hand, information it represents as fact, the things it will 'tell yow true' of 'conscience' and 'destinie' known by all whose 'wittes be not deceived'.⁵⁶ In the verse's invocation of its own terms for fact and fiction, the categories are blurred in what can be understood as a deliberate strategy to collapse the two. Although the verse and the target's bill of complaint do not use the terms fact and fiction, the verse urges its own 'truth' whilst the bill repeatedly emphasizes its 'falsity' — the addition of aesthetically pleasing or 'prettie' embellishments to bare information enhances the fictional impact of the verse, making it more persuasive, but they are also what opens it to accusations of untruth. The verse's speaker reports past oral narrative exchanges and imagines future dialogue about the letter's textual account:

If I forgett not there was one,

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ For provincial news and gossip, see Fox, 'Rumour, News and Popular Political Opinion', esp. 601.

⁵⁶ TNA, STAC 8/89/15, m. 6.

a prettie tale that tolde me ones,
as if a knaue were for the nones,
Pickt out of hang mans budgett vile,
to gull himselfe he wrought a Wyle,
Vpon that text dilate I coulde,
durst I with betters to be boulde.⁵⁷

The accusation of the ‘tale’ is then given: allegedly, Chichester ‘to masters vncke wente,/ and scandall what betwene them sente,/ enough of frindes enimies to make’.⁵⁸ We have in this recollection of a reported tale many layers of figurative and fictional meaning: the tale told to the narrative persona in the past is compared via metaphor — ‘as if’ — to an imagined moralized scenario that sees the subject of the tale as a knave temporarily saved from the hangman’s vile lot in order to gull people. The narrative persona then imagines a future dilation, some kind of extemporized elaboration, on the text in performance amongst a group of betters and then the (dis)information, the accusation or claimed truth, is recounted in the written verse.

The multiple layers of figurative speech and fictionality here seem on the one hand designed to create the impression of fact; they invoke other sources of and audiences for information to give the alleged fact of transgression apparent veracity. On the other hand, they explicitly remind the reader of the existence of multiple forms of fictionality and figurative speech at play: the tale, the text to be dilated upon, the metaphor ‘as if’ and the

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

statement elsewhere of the possible ‘prettie similes’ the narrative persona could construct. Whilst we do not know the name or identity of this speaker, they appear to be fully conversant with multiple relevant sources of local information, including their potential for ambiguity and the varying perceptions of their social capital — there is a subtle shift between a pretty tale recalled and ‘dilat[ing]’ upon a text amongst betters if one dared. The impression of a persona with command over fact and fiction based on their ability to manipulate language is a striking feature of how early modern disinformation was constructed and how it was intended to be received.

The literary devices of libels, beyond figurative language, are often striking and whilst with this anonymous verse it is not possible to trace direct literary or stylistic influence with any certainty, it is clear that some of the pervasive tropes and devices of literary culture fed through into libellous verse. The verse invokes a powerful spatial metaphor for the network of layered fact and fiction it has conjured: ‘but Lord what did I meane so wide,/ in Laborinth so farr to glide,/ before I put yow out of doubte’.⁵⁹ In the verse’s own premise, the vivid, individualized narrative voice navigates the labyrinthine fictional and social networks of the locality to put the truth of the matter beyond doubt, even although this letter is anonymous. Ambiguity of interpretation and a multiplicity of sources are invoked and exploited to foreground the narrative persona as the reliable guide in the labyrinth of disinformation. Poetically, the labyrinth was a loaded literary trope for the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Mary Moore, building on the work of Penelope Reed Doob, has emphasized the labyrinth’s invocation as exploiting ‘two visual positions: inside and outside. Seen from inside, the labyrinth confuses the wanderer . . . seen from the outside . . . the

⁵⁹ TNA, STAC 8/89/15, m. 6.

labyrinth reveals its complexity and artistry'.⁶⁰ Moore emphasizes the significance of the labyrinth as symbol and style for Lady Mary Wroth, who inherited some aspects of the trope from her uncle, Sir Philip Sidney. Sidney 'associated the labyrinth with the poet's ethical role as guide'.⁶¹ The libel's invocation of the labyrinth as a spatial metaphor for the complex web of social interactions it navigates also manipulates the perspectives of inside and outside. It shifts from directly addressing the private letter's recipient to addressing a wider communal audience; its syntax is often complex and twisting; it positions the letter-writer's persona as at first gliding headlong into the labyrinth before turning into a moralizing guide in the maze by putting its reader 'out of doubt'; and it closes with a self-reflexive envoi conflating the inside and outside of the letter.

The envoi also saw a resurgence in English verse of the 1590s, for example by Edmund Spenser and George Chapman, as well as featuring in extended word-play in Shakespeare's *Love's Labour's Lost*.⁶² More notably for this chapter, several poems ending in 'l'envoy' featured in the satirical pamphlet wars between Gabriel Harvey and Thomas

⁶⁰ Mary Moore, 'The Labyrinth as Style in Pamphilia to Amphilanthus', *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900*, xxxviii (1998), 111; Penelope Reed Doob, *The Idea of the Labyrinth from Classical Antiquity Through the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, 1990).

⁶¹ Moore, 'Labyrinth as Style in Pamphilia to Amphilanthus', 112. See also William Craft, *Labyrinth of Desire: Invention and Culture in the Work of Sir Philip Sidney* (Newark, 1994).

⁶² Philippa Berry, "'Salving the Mail": Perjury, Grace and the Disorder of Things in *Love's Labour's Lost*", in Ewan Fernie (ed.), *Spiritual Shakespeares* (London, 2005), 104.

Nashe.⁶³ Philippa Berry explains that the envoi was a ‘literary device through which the poet, in turning inwards and self-consciously commenting on his text, could also speak directly to his addressee or to other poets. This conflation of inside and outside, text and recipient, figuratively anticipated the process of the poem’s transmission in the world’.⁶⁴ The libel’s envoi ventriloquizes the parson and envisages him as the conduit for the verse’s transmission in the world; it also self-reflexively and playfully glosses the content of the letter: ‘Decorum sure I tell yow true,/ I kept haue as I ought,/ ffor to belie a bawdie squire,/ I sure was never tought,/ a sclanderous asse and a doultinge foole,/ I ever tooke the sott’.⁶⁵ The libel’s envoi thus serves a similar poetic role in conflating inner and outer, text and recipient, with the added play of form in pairing the envoi and the letter.

The libel’s overarching impact is to destabilize what its readers think they know by opening up multiple interpretations of information based on the shifting perspectives of teller, tale and audience. In this quality, the verse cleverly inverts what Lindsay Kaplan calls ‘the

⁶³ Three sonnets in Gabriel Harvey’s preface to *Pierces Supererogation* feature ‘l’envoy’, which he claims were written by a mysterious ‘gentlewoman’, in defence of him against Nashe. Harvey comments that the ‘gentlewoman’, whom Penny McCarthy argues could be Mary Sidney, has made Nashe’s *Strange News* (1593) ‘the cussionet of her needles, and pinnes’ (Penny McCarthy, “‘Milksop Muses’ or Why Not Mary?’, *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900*, xl (2000), 25). If a Mary Sidney connection to an exchange with a satirically cutting use of ‘l’envoy’ is possible then the libel’s reference to the labyrinth, a symbol invoked by Philip Sidney and Mary Wroth, is an interesting coincidence, as is the mention of the writer’s ‘pen . . . sett on a merrie pinn’ in the libel’s opening line.

⁶⁴ Berry, “‘Salving the Mail’”, 104.

⁶⁵ TNA, STAC 8/89/15, m.6.

paradox of slander’, in which infamy could mean both false allegations made against an underserving victim and the ‘true report’ of ‘ill-doing’ by a ‘deservedly exposed offender’: ‘the very problem with defamation is its ability to be believed and thus inflict damage on its victim. How is the listener to determine whether the accusation is true or false, if the victim is or is not deserving of ill repute?’⁶⁶ The libel verse explicitly invokes this dual possibility: it pictures Chichester, the target, as having ‘floorisht coninglie’, ‘as if conscience of oath he hadd,/ ah subtill craftie wilie Ladd,/ but conscience surelie he hath none’.⁶⁷ Whilst he appears to be an honourable and truthful member of the community, Chichester is actually a false ‘lyinge’ and ‘monstrous wighte’.⁶⁸ This possibility therefore means that whilst the verse may seem like a ‘merrie’ libel full of ‘malice’ it is actually a ‘justified’ revelation of deception.⁶⁹ Having first destabilized a reader’s sense of truth or falsity, the verse ultimately asserts that the onus lies with the communal audience to distinguish fact from fiction in the simultaneous tension between multiple possible interpretations of infamy. This strategy is strikingly similar to that being developed in early modern playhouse drama, where Lorna Hutson argues that plays increasingly experimented with the effects of ‘forensic rhetoric — of understanding speeches as attempts to prove a set of dubious “facts”, or to test one’s suspicions about the

⁶⁶ Lindsay Kaplan, *The Culture of Slander in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 1997), 13.

⁶⁷ TNA, STAC 8/89/15, m. 6.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

motives of others', which in turn reflected changes towards wider participation and evidence-based investigation in popular legal culture.⁷⁰

In addition to its usage of literary devices and rhetorical strategies, the libel also invokes early modern sources of news, thereby attempting to claim some of the social currency associated with such sources whilst also effectively becoming a form of false news, or disinformation, in the process. Although it is folded, addressed and discovered in the form of a private letter, the libel calls itself a 'pamphlett'.⁷¹ McRae argues that pamphlets were increasingly associated with 'popular political interaction' across a range of forms of cheap print during the early Stuart period, something this libel's use of the term exploits.⁷² The two forms exploited by this libel, the pamphlet and the letter, were increasingly important vehicles for the communication of news from the centre to the provinces during the early seventeenth century.⁷³

The rapidly developing world of printed material, alongside oral and manuscript forms of communication, already had social norms surrounding the reception and consumption of varying genres, which were also associated with the truth or falsity of

⁷⁰ Lorna Hutson, *The Invention of Suspicion: Law and Mimesis in Shakespeare and Renaissance Drama* (Oxford, 2007), 8.

⁷¹ TNA, STAC 8/89/15, m. 6.

⁷² McRae, *Literature, Satire and the Early Stuart State*, 8. See also Joad Raymond, *Pamphlets and Pamphleteering in Early Modern Britain* (Cambridge, 2003), 5–6.

⁷³ Joad Raymond, *Pamphlets and Pamphleteering*; Millstone, *Manuscript Circulation and the Invention of Politics*.

content. This was particularly so for the communication of news. Nicolas Moon argues that ‘any news text, whether newspaper or ballad, contains not only linguistic but paratextual and social rhetorics which attempt to establish its truthfulness’.⁷⁴ Similarly, although manuscript and printed forms of news were closely connected, Ian Atherton suggests that in the early seventeenth-century, manuscript news letters were seen as ‘more accurate, less censored, and . . . more authoritative’ than printed news.⁷⁵ Atherton further posits that ‘in their reading of the news, contemporaries recognized a scale of reliability, hierarchies of source and genre’.⁷⁶ All forms of news were thus negotiating a position in relation to the truth with their readership and jostling for position in the competition of forms for authoritative communication. The verse libel in *Chichester v. Symons* is written in the form of a private letter, and describes itself as a pamphlet, alluding to a form both in manuscript and print that was associated with news and political matters. In doing so, the libel invokes the existence of this hierarchy of reliability and genre in the mind of an active reader for the forms it mimics, exploiting the ‘social rhetorics’ of truthfulness and authority used by such forms of news.

The libel may well be using its allusions to pamphlets and newsletters knowingly and satirically as a tongue-in-cheek claim to be communicating important, authoritative news; many contemporary depictions of such news forms, especially ballads, appear to undermine rather than affirm their truthfulness. However, Moon emphasizes the differences between satirical depictions of ballad audiences and the reality of differing interpretations of their

⁷⁴ Moon, “‘This is Attested Truth’”, 231–2.

⁷⁵ Atherton, ‘Itch Grown a Disease’, 40.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 46–7.

truth claims.⁷⁷ Even though the writing of news was ridiculed as novel and ephemeral, Atherton reminds us that in reading the news ‘things more constant — truth, the divine will — might be sought’.⁷⁸ If we understand an active news reader to be closely engaged with discerning the truth, reliability and significance of the information being received, a libeller could use this experience in early modern consumers of information deliberately in order to mislead, making the libellous disinformation appear at least potentially credible. Equally the libel plays on contemporary perceptions that ridicule readers who fall for the truth claims of news forms — such perceptions may be part of the joke the libel is making at the expense of the various ladies, gentlemen and even an ‘Ambassadour’ whose ‘witt was surlie mocked’ when Chichester’s double dealings ensured that he ‘floorisht coninglie’.⁷⁹ The libel is challenging the reader’s perception of the contemporary information landscape and playing on the social rhetorics of communication, particularly those surrounding news forms, in order to be satirically effective. Crucially, though, the libel suggests not just one but multiple forms — ballad, pamphlet, newsletter and private correspondence. Libels relied not only on the existing social perceptions of those forms they appropriated but also on the combination and therefore distortion of distinct ‘social rhetorics’ so as also to collapse differences between modes.

In addition to its blending of news forms, the verse libel refers to the printed epistolary tradition for moralizing. Just before its envoi, the libel refers to the *Golden Epistles* of Antonio de Guevara, Bishop of Mondonnedo:

⁷⁷ Moon, “‘This is Attested Truth’”, 248–9.

⁷⁸ Atherton, ‘Itch Grown a Disease’, 46.

⁷⁹ TNA, STAC 8/89/15, m. 6.

ffull lernedlie Guevara writes,
of seyieans horse he noblie dytes
amongest his golden Pistles all,
he settes it for a memoriall.
howe vnluckie his masters three,
had most fowle ende for greedie fee,
this seyieans horse wishe him [Strangways] beware,
Lesse that he bringe him myckle care.⁸⁰

Two English translations of Guevara's moralizing correspondence were printed in London in 1574 and 1575.⁸¹ The moral of Sejanus' horse features in a letter warning that 'the destiny of this horse was so accursed: for all they that bred him, bought him, and did ride him, died miserable and infamed'.⁸² The story gives details of the five notorious historical figures who had owned the horse concluding that 'there arose . . . a common prouerbe, to saye vnto the

⁸⁰ TNA, STAC 8/89/15, m. 6.

⁸¹ Jeannette Fellheimer, 'Hellowes' and Fenton's Translations of Guevara's "Epistolas Familiares"', *Studies in Philology*, xlv (1947), 141.

⁸² Antonio de Guevara, *The familiar epistles of Sir Anthony of Gueuara, preacher, chronicler, and counseller to the Emperour Charles the fifth* (London, 1575)

<<https://www.proquest.com/eebo/docview/2240896060/pageLevelImage?imgSeq=1&imgSeq=1>> (accessed with password or library affiliation; accessed 17 May 2021), 131.

man that was vnhappy or vnfortunate, *That he had ridden upon Sayans horse*'.⁸³ Jeannette Fellheimer emphasizes the 'sententious, antithetical, aphoristic manner' of Guevara's text, which its contemporary translators hoped would operate as a guide for 'the right government of life', as 'moral instruction' for 'all estates'.⁸⁴ The libel's reference to it suggests that Guevara's moralizing aphorisms provided precisely the kind of pithy references required by a verse libel to sting those perceived as not following the 'right' government of life. The libel draws upon the authoritative weight of a printed text and the style of its proverbial truths to blend apparent proverbial truths with its accusations about Chichester.

In terms of its reception and circulation, the libel in *Chichester v. Symons* itself urges its addressee to share its contents with his lord and patron as a warning. In his deposition, Symons claimed that he was handed the libellous letter by one of his neighbours, William Collyns, a smith, who had found it sealed and addressed to the parson in the church. Given the appearance of the text as a letter, Symons claims that only upon reading it later did he realize it contained libellous material. About three or four days afterwards, Symons reports, he took the letter to Strangways, which he claims he did in as secret a manner as possible, in order that Strangways could find out who had written it and punish them accordingly.

Determining what to do with the libel was a collective decision. Symons claimed that he

Did . . . seuerally & a parte shewe vnto James Mabbe gent John Weeks gent

^Nicholas Peasley^ and to Thomas Cowper thelder this *Defendantes* father in lawe

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 133.

⁸⁴ Fellheimer, 'Hellowes' and Fenton's Translations of Guevara's "Epistolae Familiares"', 155–6.

and to . . . Thomas Cowper the younger his sonne ^& to John Culdish this
Defendants brother in law^ the *said* writinge, askinge of them . . . what this
Defendant were best to doe with the *said* writinge and whether . . . they thought it fitt
that he this *Defendant* should deliver the same writinge to John Strangwayes
Esquier.⁸⁵

Symons's reported deliberations and consultations over the libel also included copies being made amongst his familial and professional networks. Thomas Cowper, Symons's brother in law, took a copy 'least [Symons] . . . might be iniured in the originall' and another local clerk, Richard Giles, copied it in case it contained matter touching him.⁸⁶

According to Symons's account the libel circulated amongst the community precisely because of efforts to decipher the truth or falsity of its content. Although this could simply be part of his defence — he may have been spreading the verse as its author or someone with a hand in its construction if we believe Chichester — however, that Symons believes he can deploy a narrative of establishing truth or falsity as part of his defence demonstrates the perceived efficacy of such a construction. Symons further deposes that: '^since the takinge vp of the *said* writinge^ he hath had some speches with . . . Peasley & Cooke & some others . . . ^to this effect that they thought & knewe that^ some of the matters mencioned in the *said* writinge that touched or concerned the *said* Complainant was true'.⁸⁷ Symons later reiterates that he thinks Chichester is 'guilty of some of the crymes & misdemeanours sett forth in the

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, deposition book, fos. 1^v–2^r.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, fos. 2^r–^v.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, fos. 2^v–3^r.

said writinge'.⁸⁸ Both the status of the text as letter or libel and the truth or falsity of its claims mattered in driving its circulation. That some of its contents could be suspected as true was part of communal discussion — once it has entered established social networks, this anonymous disinformation is subject to crowd-driven flows of information based on the identity of the sharers and their judgement of the content.

This case provides an example of the multiple connections that libels made with a range of contemporary media. Each case has its own unique set of socio-cultural references, and it is therefore necessary to study each case in its own right, but, as a collective, they share this allusive and referential style in order to be effective as forms of disinformation. Furthermore, this case exemplifies the kinds of figurative language, rhetorical strategy and range of literary devices used by libels in the provinces to create persuasive narratives of seeming fact delivered by vividly realized fictional voices. Lastly, it highlights the crucial role of informed local audiences, from across the social hierarchy, required by libels to infer meaning, decipher contemporary references and act as witness to their unique communication of disinformation.

III. Libellous Proclamations

The crucial role played by an informed audience for libellous material moves us into the realm of performance. Whilst a written text relied on being read, it was often most impactfully disseminated by being read aloud to a group of spectators with differing emphasis depending on the orator and the make-up of the audience. Understanding the performance dynamics of such enactments reveals added layers of meaning, for example,

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, fo. 3^r.

through location, speaker identity, gesture, extemporized impersonation, props and a range of spectator reactions. Moreover, there are a significant proportion of libel cases where no written text exists but which nevertheless functioned as disinformation. The second case examined here, *Hawkins v. Jobson*, features a libel that enacts a mock proclamation, with no written component, thus emphasizing the multimedia nature of libellous communications. Libels that mimicked performed or performative genres also referred to multiple genres at once, both authoritative and popular, in order to operate in the realms of ambiguity, ensuring that an active spectator was challenged to distinguish truth from falsity amongst a blend of seeming fact and ceremonial fiction. Looking only at texts misses significant aspects of disinformation that relied on oral dissemination of news and the dynamic formulation of communal norms via performed and performative means.

Mock proclamations can be seen as an early modern equivalent of ‘fake news’ and in this case they are blended with the inversionary tropes of popular shaming rituals and disordered protest. The case therefore demonstrates that a broader socio-cultural scale and literary frame of reference was at play in the problem of libellous disinformation. The case of *Hawkins v. Jobson* further differs from that of *Chichester v. Symons* in that Hawkins was a public official. Hawkins’s libel case features similar strategies to those used by libellers targeting Philip Chichester and serves as an important example of Richard Cust’s argument that ‘the “public” and the “private” are, and were, constantly intertwined’.⁸⁹ By focusing on the touchpoints between defamation of people of private status and those holding public office, we see the interplay between the two; as well as looking at how the personal was made

⁸⁹ Cust, ‘Honour and Politics’, 61.

political during the early modern period, this libel case demonstrates how the political was made personal.⁹⁰

The events described in the case of *Hawkins v. Jobson* took place in Plymouth, Devon, in 1606. Sir Richard Hawkins, knight, the Vice-Admiral of Devon complained to the Star Chamber that Humphrey Jobson and Jasper Burrage, gentlemen, and Arthur Grymes, whose status is not specified, had launched a libellous campaign against him designed to bring about the loss of his vice-admiralship and damage his private reputation by branding him a ‘favorer & maintener of pyrattes’.⁹¹ The three men purported to be executing a commission from the High Court of Admiralty against Hawkins, which Hawkins claimed was part of a malicious campaign against him. In addition to their investigations surrounding the commission, Hawkins said that the three men targeted a chest of sugar that he had confiscated for suspected piracy the previous September. Hawkins had caused the sugar chest ‘to be putt into a howse at Orston’ under ‘locke and key’.⁹² Jobson, Grymes and Burrage, Hawkins claimed, went to Orston and made the constable of the town break open the door of the safe-house and ‘did . . . in . . . ryotous sorte take out of the sayd howse the sayd Chest of suger and carried the same away in a boate towardes Plymouth’.⁹³ The sugar chest and its riotous liberation were symbolically important for this libel: the chest represented the inversion of established power structures and its liberation invoked the disorder of popular shaming rituals.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁹¹ TNA, STAC 8/177.9, m. 3.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ *Ibid.*

Having symbolically taken the sugar chest, the defendants launched their disinformation campaign of mock proclamations. Hawkins heard that the sugar chest had been taken and took his own boat towards Orston. When he caught Burrage and Grymes, they refused to return the sugar and instead

Drew their swordes and *protested* to kill whoesoever should putt foote within their boate and therevppon divers *persons* to the number of ffower score or a hundred beinge gathered about them the sayd Burrage in very vndecent manner standinge on the sayd chest of sugar made a solemne oyes, (*which ys vsed before proclamacions made in your Majesties name*) *commaunding* all that were presente in *your Majestes* name to keepe silence and to be vncovered and to apprehend your sayd subiect and all his company sayinge that your sayd subiect was not Viceadmirall and had noe authoritye there and *yat* he himselfe was a Iustice there.⁹⁴

Hawkins alleged that these mock proclamations had also been given on departure from Orston, where James Bagge, the then Mayor of Plymouth, was declared vice-admiral, and on arrival at Plymouth, with Bagge present and the audience told to apprehend Hawkins.⁹⁵ This series of mock proclamations entailed subtle variations to messages, locations and audiences. Each iteration appropriated a slightly different aspect of local and regional power to displace and apprehend Hawkins, from installing local authority figures in his place, to the defendants claiming to be Justices, to ordering the violent capture of their target. In all iterations, the existing performative mechanisms for disseminating legitimate news are mimicked to enable the spread of disinformation.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

By imitating the form of the royal proclamation, the defendants attempted to add a legitimizing and authoritative dimension to their constructed piece of disinformation. For a legitimate proclamation, an authorized member of the community assembled its members at the designated location for proclamations, usually the market cross, had the audience remove their hats and stand in silence, cried out ‘Oye, Oye’ and declared the scripted words of the proclamation. This performative ritual communicated an act made by the monarch or government to the people, thereby constituting the monarch’s means of law-making control in the provinces; it was thus a familiar part of authoritative regulation in the provinces.⁹⁶ Crucially, Chris R. Kyle argues, ‘what proclamations also did was to disseminate the news, and in a very public and performative way’.⁹⁷ In ways that parallel the invocation of news forms in the case of *Chichester v. Symons*, the libel in *Hawkins v. Jobson* mimicked and exploited the public, performative elements of royal proclamations.⁹⁸ These imitation proclamations are the epitome of early modern false news — they converted established forms of ‘government-issued news’ into vehicles for public ridicule.⁹⁹

Hawkins’s bill of complaint narrates these as mock proclamations disseminating false and misleading information, however, contextual details show that they were closer to legitimacy than Hawkins would have us believe. Unlike other cases where those of lower status, vagrants or servants, were instructed to make mock proclamations, Jobson and

⁹⁶ Chris R. Kyle, ‘Monarch and Marketplace: Proclamations as News in Early Modern England’, *Huntington Library Quarterly*, lxxviii (2015), 775.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 776.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 777.

Grymes were gentlemen claiming a commission from the Admiralty court and invoking the powers of Justices and the Mayor of Plymouth.¹⁰⁰ If this was true then their proclamations became legitimate, rather than vehicles for disinformation. Exploration beyond Hawkins's Star Chamber case reveals that Hawkins was, in fact, part of a notorious seafaring family and manifestly corrupt, lending credence to Jobson and Grymes's allegations of piracy. Hawkins had led an unsuccessful naval venture in Spain and returned to Plymouth in 1602 having been held as a prisoner of war for seven years. On his return, Hawkins took up official positions as the Mayor of Plymouth (1603–4), Member of Parliament for the town, and Vice-Admiral of Devon, but he appears to have used these offices 'to enrich himself and pervert the course of justice', to the extent that he can be described as having 'had dealings with almost every pirate of note who set foot in the west country'.¹⁰¹ There was also an ongoing animosity between Hawkins and James Bagge, a servant of the Lord Admiral and Mayor of Plymouth in 1606, including Hawkins having had Bagge arrested for piracy and Bagge denouncing Hawkins to the Privy Council in 1605.¹⁰² A combination of local issues and Hawkins's meddling in international affairs by looting foreign vessels meant that the Lord Admiral, the

¹⁰⁰ For vagrants making a proclamation, see Egan, 'Performing Early Modern Libel', 161–2.

¹⁰¹ Michael Lewis, *The Hawkins Dynasty: Three Generations of a Tudor Family* (London, 1969), 168–220; David Loades, 'Hawkins [Hawkyns], Sir Richard (c.1560–1622), naval officer', *Oxford DNB*, online edn (2009) (accessed with password or library card; accessed 28 November 2019); Clive Senior, *A Nation of Pirates: English Piracy in its Heyday* (Newton Abbot, 1976), 131.

¹⁰² A. L. Rowse, 'Sir Richard Hawkins: Last of a Dynasty', *History Today*, xxx (1980), 27; Loades, 'Hawkins [Hawkyns], Sir Richard'.

Earl of Nottingham, was in fact forced to send Humphrey Jobson, his secretary, to Plymouth to investigate Hawkins in the name of the Admiralty court.¹⁰³ In August of 1606, Hawkins was fined, suspended from office, and briefly imprisoned as a result of the investigation; the accusations of Jobson, Burrage and Grymes (on behalf of the admiral) as to Hawkins's misuse of the office of vice-admiral for private profit were, then, evidently true.¹⁰⁴

This is crucial in analyzing libels as a type of disinformation because it shows the importance of form and meaning derived from cultural context, as well as the simultaneity of truth and falsity, in early modern perceptions of damaging content. Curiously, Hawkins's criminal conviction 'did not seem to damage his reputation': he was soon released from prison and in April 1607 was restored to his post as Vice-Admiral of Devon.¹⁰⁵ David Loades attributes Hawkins's reinstatement to his 'sufficient local influence' and 'friends at court' who had been 'mainly concerned to save his honour'.¹⁰⁶ Hawkins's libel suit does not feature in the scholarly accounts of his remarkable retention of his offices after conviction, but it sheds new light on them. The case was entered at court in November of 1606 shortly before Hawkins was restored to his post. That Hawkins seems to have emerged from being found guilty of corruption with his honour saved and his positions of authority intact would strongly suggest that the libel case played an important role in rehabilitating his reputation. Legally, it did not matter that calling Hawkins a pirate was manifestly true — it was the way in which

¹⁰³ Loades, 'Hawkins [Hawkyns], Sir Richard'.

¹⁰⁴ Loades, 'Hawkins [Hawkyns], Sir Richard'; Rowse, 'Sir Richard Hawkins', 27.

¹⁰⁵ Rowse, 'Sir Richard Hawkins', 27; Loades, 'Hawkins [Hawkyns], Sir Richard'.

¹⁰⁶ Loades, 'Hawkins [Hawkyns], Sir Richard'.

Jobson, Grymes, and Burrage publicly communicated this message, via unofficial proclamations, that was criminal.

What distinguished these mock proclamations from legitimate ones, aside from the biased perspective of the report we have, was their location, mobility and the presence of the chest of sugar. These proclamations were made on boats and as part of a quasi-ceremonial journey between Orston and Plymouth harbours rather than at the town's market cross, where proclamations would be expected. The chest of sugar, which the bill of complaint asserts was present or stood upon to make the 'Oyes', represented Hawkins's power to confiscate goods on suspicion of piracy — its liberation was a symbolic reversal of Hawkins's powers. If Hawkins was a legitimate public official he confiscated the goods legitimately, however, if as his detractors alleged he was corrupt, then the sugar became a potent symbol of his private profiteering through public office.

The liberation of the piratical sugar chest and its procession by boat from a safe house back to the harbour of Plymouth, done in 'ryotous' and 'vndecent manner', echo the socially subversive and inversionary tropes of shaming rituals associated with popular culture. The stolen chest of sugar signalled a deliberate transgression of the power structures that the libellers are attempting to appropriate for themselves. Furthermore, the libellers' proclamations are made on their carnivalesque procession of piratical goods from Orston to Plymouth, the locations in which Hawkins performed his reputation on a daily basis. The mocking procession of the popular 'riding' was designed to shame cuckolded or scolded men in order to reinforce the social norms of early modern marital relations. The libellers confront and deny Hawkins's authority directly with weapons and force, reinforcing the verbal and physical aggression of popular protest.¹⁰⁷ Burrage then proceeds to make the proclamations

¹⁰⁷ TNA, STAC 8/177.9, m. 3.

whilst standing on the symbolic marker of the inversion of Hawkins's high status and power. Standing on the chest physically uses a symbol of low, piratical culture to provide a platform for the imitation of a respected official form of ceremonial law enactment.

In its combination of multiple performative forms, carnivalesque shaming protest *and* an official royal proclamation, this libel robs Hawkins both of his official public position as vice-admiral and his private reputation as an individual. Libels' use of the tropes of ridings, rough music and 'rituals of shaming and social protest' have long been established.¹⁰⁸ Martin Ingram, Bellany and McRae point to the carnivalesque nature of such rituals and their social functions when used in libels as forms of 'popular justice'.¹⁰⁹ However, the blend of carnivalesque popular justice and performative official forms in this case is distinctive. The pairing of these two major forms opens the event to multiple spectator interpretations: a serious and official transfer of local power from Hawkins to Bagge via the Admiralty court's representatives, or a humorous undermining of Hawkins's reputation by aggressive confrontation and popular shaming ritual. In fact, the juxtaposition of these two different forms of justice — official and national compared to social and local — and the tension between the two when each is simultaneously possible as a legitimate interpretation of the information may be precisely where the humour, or libellous message, lies. Spectators are confronted with the shifts between the solemnity and silence of a proclamation and the laughter and excitement of a riotous, carnivalesque protest to liberate the chest of sugar.

¹⁰⁸ McRae, 'Verse Libel', 59; Ingram, 'Ridings, Rough Music and the "Reform of Popular Culture"'; Bellany, 'A Poem on the Archbishop's Hearse', 140 and 'Libels in Action: Ritual, Subversion and the English Literary Underground, 1603–42'.

¹⁰⁹ McRae, 'Verse Libel', 59.

As with written texts, performed and performative mediums for libel carried with them echoes of multiple forms with their associated ‘social rhetorics’ for an informed and active spectator. The libel took place in a significant space for ceremonial constructions of Plymouth’s civic identity. Plymouth’s early civic tradition included boat journeys incorporated into their St Matthew’s Day or Freedom Day (21 September) perambulations, as well as bringing civic officials, and even the maypole, ceremonially into the town by boat.¹¹⁰ From as early as 1494, Plymouth had maintained a ‘pycture’ of ‘the Gyaunt’ named ‘Gogmagog’ on Plymouth Hoe, the city’s waterfront, establishing a strong visual connection between the civic and festive identity of the city and its water boundary.¹¹¹ During the Freedom Day walks when the mayor delineated the city’s limits, the water part of the boundary was traversed by boys in boats so that the mayor ‘retained his dignity on land’.¹¹² Whereas when the Lord Chief Justice visited Plymouth in 1530–1 a large-scale civic entry was made on boats, demonstrating that this method of conveyance did not always detract from dignity.¹¹³

The libellous proclamations on boats at the entrance to and exit from harbours around Plymouth in 1606 may also have held more personal resonance for Hawkins. In 1593, Hawkins had made his own ceremonial departure from Plymouth when he left on a voyage

¹¹⁰ *The Records of Early English Drama: Devon*, ed. John Wasson (Toronto, 1986), 224, 262, and 450–1.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 212–29.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 451.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 224.

into the south sea, his written account of which was published shortly after his death in 1622.

On 12 June 1593, Hawkins recalled:

I loost neere the shore, to giue my farewell to all the Inhabitants of the Towne . . . gathered together vpon the Howe . . . first with my noyse of Trumpets, after with my waytes, and then with my other Musicke, and lastly, with the Artillery of my Shippes, I made the best signification I could of a kinde farewell. This they answered with the Waytes of the Towne, and the Ordinance on the shore, and with shouting of voyces.¹¹⁴

Hawkins's ceremonial departure from Plymouth harbour, which echoes Plymouth's long-established tradition of waterborne civic festivity, makes the later semi-ceremonial procession of the reclaimed sugar and accompanying mock proclamations a much more pointed undermining of Hawkins's personal and official authority. McRae has suggested that libels engaging in shaming rituals can be seen as a 'distinctive mode . . . which appeals to a notion of local community, even as it threatens to divide that community'.¹¹⁵ The case of *Hawkins v. Jobson* demonstrates that such libels were blending official and civic performative forms with popular ritual to influence communal relations.

Hawkins's Star Chamber suit, and indeed perhaps his posthumously published account of his voyages, can be understood as a way of performatively restoring his damaged reputation.¹¹⁶ Libellous disinformation that blended fact and fiction through multimedia

¹¹⁴ Richard Hawkins, *The Observations of Sir Richard Hawkins Knight, in his Voiage into the South Sea. Anno Domini 1593*, (London, 1622).

¹¹⁵ McRae, 'Verse Libel', 68.

¹¹⁶ Cust, 'Honour and Politics', 88.

performance was a potent tool for damaging reputation, just as a printed narrative (re)constructing a lifetime of maritime adventure could rehabilitate one's honour. This brings us back to the slightly puzzling local and national context for this case: whilst Hawkins was by all accounts corrupt and was officially punished for abuse of office, he was restored to his post because 'his friends had been . . . concerned to save his honour'.¹¹⁷ Hawkins's public role and his Star Chamber suit raise bigger questions about the boundaries between private and public as legal statuses as conceived via defamation legislation in the Jacobean period. Libellous disinformation, with its fictional and dramatic elaborations of possible fact, was especially dangerous because it disrupted the established relationship between private and public reputation.

IV. Conclusion: The Problem of 'Disreputation'

For the early modern period, it was increasingly difficult to separate the libel of a private individual from defamation against those in public positions. Analyzing libels as a form of multimedia disinformation demonstrates that governance of self, as an individual, was a crucial prerequisite to public office-holding. The complex dynamics between private reputation and acting in public official capacities highlighted by provincial libels place emphasis on public and private as categories of legal status. Perhaps these are more apt distinctions in libelling cultures than political versus popular, especially given that the legal innovation of the 1590s and early Jacobean period was the redefinition of *private* libel and its movement to the court of Star Chamber.

¹¹⁷ Loades, 'Hawkins [Hawkyns], Sir Richard'.

Libellous disinformation was clearly of concern during this period for the potential damage it could do to individual honour and reputation, but crucially a state of ‘disreputation’ or infamy prevented a private individual from taking up public office.¹¹⁸ Uses of the term ‘disreputation’ in libel cases demonstrate the recurring problem of the ‘paradox of slander’; private libel itself creates disreputation in the local community for targets but being tried as a libeller at Star Chamber also placed the offender in a state of disrepute and if this involved public officials then it branded them unfit for office.¹¹⁹ If the pervasive presence of disinformation cumulatively had the power to erode rationality in public consciousness, we might understand the newly prevalent concept of a state of disreputation as a consequence which heralded the erosion of trust in public officials. The creation, circulation and regulation of libels had the power to make interventions in local and national mechanisms of government in early modern England; anyone adept at crafting libellous disinformation could potentially disqualify their enemy from a position of power. Both locally and in the wider early modern state, the presence of disinformation moved personal and political relationships

¹¹⁸ ‘Disreputation, n.’, *OED Online* (2021) (accessed with password or library card; accessed 18 May 2021). The *OED* gives 1601 as the earliest use of the term, exactly the period in which the phenomenon of private libel exploded.

¹¹⁹ See *Roll v. Vosse*, TNA, STAC 8/246/14, m. 2, for libels casting ‘disreputation’ upon complainants. See also *Letter of Earl of Hertford to Lord Chancellor Ellesmere, 1609* (*The Records of Early English Drama: Somerset*, ed. James Stokes and Robert J. Alexander, 2 vols. (Toronto, 1996), i, 359), where the Earl of Hertford requests leniency from Ellesmere for magistrates of Wells, tried as defendants in *Hole v. White*, so that ‘no disreputation may fall upon them nor ye other Magistrates’ of Wells.

into the realms of conflict, faction and division where the *public perception* of one's private reputation came before all else.

William Hudson was at pains to point out that the scandal of magnates had always been severely punished at Star Chamber because anything that criticized them was a criticism of the monarch by association.¹²⁰ However, if an individual was unfit in his private reputation this prevented him from holding public office. Ferdinando Pulton, whose treatise on 'the Great and Generall Offences of the Realme' opens with libelling, explains the damage that infamous public officials did to perceptions of government:

If it be against a publike magistrat, it is a great scandall & offence to the king, his chief magistrats, & the whole gouernment of the realm, to assigne such an officer to rule and gouerne others, who himselfe is void of gouernme[n]t, and shall deserue to be impeached with such crimes as he shalbe taxed with, or shalbe imputed vnto him by such an infamous libell.¹²¹

In Pulton's explanation the problem with libelling an official was that it signalled firstly, that the official was not sufficiently responsible as a private person in 'govern[ing]' himself, his own identity and conduct, and so was not fit to govern others in a role of public responsibility. Secondly, this caused scandal to the king and government because it signalled

¹²⁰ Hudson, 'Treatise of the Court of Star Chamber', in *Collectanea Juridica*, ed. Hargrave', ii, 100.

¹²¹ Ferdinando Pulton, *De Pace Regis et Regni, viz. A Treatise Declaring which be the Great and Generall Offences of the Realme* (London, 1610), fo. 2.

that existing government officials had not been good enough judges of the libel target as a private person to see that he was not fit to be assigned to a public role. As Coke explained:

What greater scandal of government can there be than to have corrupt or wicked Magistrates to be appointed and constituted by the King to govern his Subjects under him? And greater imputation to the State cannot be, than to suffer such corrupt men to sit in the sacred seat of Justice.¹²²

In this understanding, every private person was in effect responsible for governing his own identity first and foremost; only if he could responsibly maintain his private reputation could he hold public office. In turn, public officials were not necessarily corrupt by association, but shown as bad judges of character in their fellow officials. As a nuance to Cust's argument that governance of private household was seen as analogous to governance of state, this perspective sees regulation of the private self, as an individual, as analogous to regulation of others' conduct in public office.¹²³ The holding of public office, then, did not erase or override the functioning of each man as a private individual; rather, every public man was also simultaneously perceived as a private person of sound reputation and this was a fundamental qualifier to his role as public official. With the idea of personal corruption seen as signifying an inability to govern more usually dated to the eighteenth century, this emphasis on regulation of the private self in the early seventeenth century might prompt a reassessment of critical assumptions in this area.¹²⁴ If private reputation was so crucial to a

¹²² [Coke], *Selected Writings and Speeches of Sir Edward Coke*, ed. Sheppard, i, 146.

¹²³ Cust, 'Honour and Politics', 81–2.

¹²⁴ See for example, Mark Latham, "'The City Has Been Wronged and Abused!': Institutional Corruption in the Eighteenth Century', *Economic History Review*, lxxviii, (2015).

public role, how were such conceptions made manifest in the eyes of the ‘masses’, the provincial communal audiences for libel? Perhaps the shift in popular consciousness of the early Jacobean period is as much about the privatization of public, political actors and their spheres as it is about the popularization of public and political matters.¹²⁵

Alastair Bellany notes that for Charles I, political libels on the Duke of Buckingham ‘were means ‘whereby through the sides of a Peer of this Realm, they wound the honour of their Sovereigns’’.¹²⁶ Significantly, James I made a similar, yet crucially distinct, statement when referring to court involvement in cases that related to the monarch. When James I delivered a speech at Star Chamber in 1616, he explicitly warned of the dangers in circumstances of public and private reputation. He told the judges of the court to ‘giue me no more right in my priuate prerogatiue, then you giue to any subiect’, but when it came to his royal prerogative or ‘mystery of state’ he admonished them to ‘deale not with it . . . for so may you wound the King through the sides of a priuate person’.¹²⁷ Whereas Charles spoke of wounding the sovereign’s honour through the bodies of his elite peers, James positioned himself as simultaneously private and public, specifically invoking the legal category of the private person. From libel disputes across the provinces to the King’s prerogative, the legal status of the private person was crucial to conceptions of identity in early modern England —

¹²⁵ For modern equivalents see Yini Zhang *et al.*, ‘Attention and Amplification in the Hybrid Media System: The Composition and Activity of Donald Trump’s Twitter Following During the 2016 Presidential Election’, *New Media and Society*, xx (2018).

¹²⁶ Bellany, “‘Raylinge Rymes and Vaunting Verse’”, 293–4.

¹²⁷ *The Political Works of James I*, ed. Charles Howard McIlwain (New York, 1965), 332–3.

the spread on novel forms of multimedia disinformation therefore threatened both individual disreputation and the collective undermining of public trust.

This chapter has demonstrated that libels performed or circulating in the provinces of early modern England exploited multiple forms and fictional strategies effectively to misrepresent information with implications for perceptions of individual status, communal relations and the functioning of wider power structures. This demonstrates the fundamental importance of engaging with literary and performance analysis for understanding how disinformation shaped the early modern world; where fact and fiction are blended in novel forms to further provincial conflict, we miss a range of cultural meaning if we overlook the impacts of such elements as figurative language, literary devices, anonymity, parodic performativity and the social rhetorics associated with particular forms of public information whether they are literary, performed or factual. Analyzing libels as disinformation further reveals the importance of paying sustained attention to the information landscapes of the provinces without separating them from consideration of wider national and political issues. Moreover, just as the private and public were interconnected in complex ways for the early modern period, so were the products of what might be termed elite and popular cultures — through libellous disinformation we see that private and public, elite and popular, provincial and national, fact and fiction were often held simultaneously and in tension for collective scrutiny.

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