

R: Miscellaneous (1628-1640)

William Laud, Archbishop of Canterbury, was troubled by libels throughout much of his turbulent career, and his letters and speeches offer some of the most striking testimony on the effect of such works. Writing to Thomas Wentworth, Earl of Strafford, in 1637, he moaned: “What do you think will become of me, when I am thus used?” (*Works* 7.372; Cogswell, “Underground Verse” 277). Yet, in contrast to the wealth of surviving libels on other early Stuart public figures, it is immediately striking how few poems on Laud survive. Indeed this section, which gathers together miscellaneous manuscript libels from the 1630s (apart from those on the scandal surrounding Mervin Touchet, Earl of Castlehaven, which are gathered separately in Section Q), includes just four on Laud: two from the late 1620s, and two dating from roughly three years after his 1637 lament on his use at the hands of libellers. This begs the critical question of what happened to libelling in the 1630s. As the material in the present section demonstrates, the practices of the preceding decades appear to have changed considerably within the period of a few years, affecting both the quantity and characteristics of libels.

Libelling in the 1630s was informed by apparent changes in both literary and political cultures. In literary culture, the practice of circulating verse in manuscript form certainly continued; indeed a considerable number of surviving early Stuart verse miscellanies date from the early 1630s, and some of these represent our best sources for the present edition (Hobbs 148). But while miscellanists were busy collecting libels that were up to thirty years old, their volumes provide considerably less evidence of contemporary libelling. Perhaps this is in part due to the changing tastes of those men and women compiling miscellanies; newsletters, by comparison, continued to report the activities of libellers (e.g. BL Add. MS 11045, fol. 6v). Nonetheless, it is almost incontrovertible that poetry of the 1630s, at least as it is represented in verse miscellanies, rarely engaged with politics in the explicit manner that is familiar from a reading of earlier libels. Although literary historians have taught us to read political nuances in what might otherwise appear to be apolitical works (e.g. Sharpe, *Criticism and Compliment*; Marcus), there is little question that poets in this period tended to eschew the bold political statements of the preceding decades.

This shift aligns with changes in political culture. While it would be a huge overstatement to claim that there was no political conflict in the 1630s, it is less controversial to state that there were far fewer immediate occasions or contexts for libels than in previous decades. Notably, Charles I's Personal Rule (1629-1640) meant that there were no parliaments, and therefore no authorized fora for political debate. Moreover, the conditions of peace that prevailed throughout most of the decade made politics somewhat less fraught with controversy than had been the case in the 1620s. And finally, Laud's comments notwithstanding, the 1630s did not have a single dominant statesman, in the manner of Robert Cecil, Earl of Salisbury, or George Villiers, Duke of Buckingham. Arguably, in these conditions expressions of political disquiet assumed other forms, that the parameters of this edition do not encompass. For instance, some of Laud's most troubling critics were situated in provincial centres, and were focused on disputes that were primarily (though not entirely) local in character. A well-known Colchester libel on Laudian altar policy provides a good example of this (SP 16/229/123; Walter 171-75). Furthermore, criticism of English politics was undoubtedly a subtext of much comment on international events, as evidenced by the poems that circulated after the death of the Swedish King Gustavus Adolphus, who was perceived by many as a hero of militant Protestantism (e.g. King 77; Rous 74 and 75; Bodleian MS Rawl. Poet. 26, fols. 51r-57v).

Libels were also changing in character in the 1630s. In fact it is possible that the most damaging "libels" were assuming forms other than the familiar manuscript poems of earlier decades. The Puritan writers who troubled Laud more than any others, John Bastwick, Henry Burton and William Prynne, wrote in prose and chose illicit print circulation. Despite the inherent risks attendant upon this choice—the three men were severely punished after a notorious Star Chamber trial in 1637—it achieved for them a far greater political impact than any manuscript poem. Similarly, a number of political ballads were brought into print in these years, despite the strictures of censorship (e.g. Firth, "Ballads on the Bishops' Wars"). Other "libels" in this period may have circulated beyond the elite milieu of the verse miscellany. Laud, for instance, refers to a crude yet effective kind of cartoon; the Lord Mayor of London sent him:

a board hung upon the Standard in Cheap, and taken by the watch (the thing, I mean, not the man), a narrow board with my speech in the Star Chamber nailed at one end of it, and singed with fire, the

corners cut off instead of the ears, a pillory of ink with my name to look through it, a writing by—
'The man that put the saints of God into a pillory of wood, stands here in a pillory of ink' (*Works*
7.371).

Laud's speech in the Star Chamber trial of Bastwick, Burton and Prynne, printed at the "commaund" of the King (Laud, *Speech* t.p.), is here pilloried, in an act that is at once pointed in its intent and demotic in its intended audience. By comparison, those libels that did circulate in the established medium of the miscellany, and that we include in this section, tend to avoid such bold political statements. Some are local and occasional: such as the piece on the curious death of Fulke Greville, Lord Brooke ("Reader, Ile be sworne upon a booke"), or that lamenting England's military timidity ("Come arme thy self brave England"). Others have more in common with libels of the Restoration, with their salacious focus on the sexual lives of courtiers ("See what a love there is betweene"; "A health to my Lady Dutchess").

The final poems in the section date from 1640. While the reins of censorship were at this point on the verge of collapse, some poets were still writing for manuscript circulation, in ways that developed upon early Stuart poetic conventions. The poems below are included because they survive in manuscript sources. When set alongside printed polemic from the early 1640s, however, they represent merely the tip of an iceberg.