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Public Consumption and Contestation of News in Ben Jonson's *The Staple of News*

Over the first half of the seventeenth century news conveyed in ephemeral popular print genres played an important role in turning its growing print readership into a public aware of its political responsibilities and powers. News pamphlets taught individual readers to recognize their responsibilities to judge and then take action accordingly. New genres emerged over the century. The weekly newspaper, for example, adapted the format of the coranto popular on the Continent, and the gazette reporting international intelligence, to supply regular local political news. Hitherto drama had fulfilled the functions of circulating news, fashioning tales for public consumption, theorizing spectatorship and celebrating new modes of community afforded by the public theatres. In *The Staple of News* Ben Jonson registers the close and competitive relationship between news and drama. Although Jonson pitches the rampant commercial interests of the news mongers which lead them to flagrantly manipulate and refashion news against the poet or dramatist's commitment to truth and to telling stories with a moral purpose, the play does not stage a simple opposition between news and drama. Rather it presents both drama and news as products of an emerging information culture, and as instrumental in politicizing the public.

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"Shakespeare Without A Stage: Publication and Popularity, 1642-1660"

My project, "Shakespeare Without A Stage: Publication and Popularity, 1642-1660," addresses the unpopularity of Shakespeare during the theatre ban, both relative to other contemporary dramatists, as well as relative to his own stature before and after this period. I offer reasons for Shakespeare's unpopularity, but also qualify this critical commonplace, demonstrating how Shakespeare continued to be published and cited in ways that suggest he remained popular with Interregnum readers. In order to make such paradoxical claims about Shakespeare's simultaneous popularity and unpopularity, I must articulate a theory of the variable nature of early modern popularity, pinpointing the various factors that contribute to our sense that Shakespeare was "popular" (or not) in the mid-seventeenth century. These include (but aren't limited to) the publication rates of single-text playbooks, poetry and collected editions, references to pre-1642 performances of Shakespeare plays, as well as comments about Shakespeare's artistic merit, moral value, and/or linguistic usefulness. My project tracks fluctuations in these factors, asking how one affects another. For example, given the associations between popularity and vulgarity, did Shakespeare's mid-seventeenth century publication slump make him more palatable to elite readers? Did the theatre ban affect Shakespeare's visibility in print? If the stage was perceived as a downmarket art form, did the theatre closures somehow elevate Shakespeare's (along with his contemporaries') cultural cachet? And what is the relationship between cultural cachet and popularity?

Although the publication rates of Shakespearean playbooks dipped during the interregnum, Shakespeare maintained a commanding cultural presence in other printed forms. His plays were regularly excerpted in commonplace books, and his play titles were habitually advertised in booksellers' catalogues. Frequent allusions to Shakespeare in dramatic paratexts indicate later writers' preoccupation with him. Dramatic catalogues and title pages misattributed plays to Shakespeare, perhaps reflecting booksellers' attempts to sell more plays by linking them to a "popular" author. Judging from these other printed forms, Shakespeare's name and works had cachet in this period; my project will explore the nature of this cachet – whether commercial, literary or something else entirely.

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Early Modern Devil Plays: Popularity and Parody

Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* (1604, A Text) includes a scene with a knight who heckles Faustus' performance in front of Emperor Charles V. In retaliation, Faustus utterly humiliates the knight, making him a parody of anyone who might disapprove of Faustus' conjuring. In contrast, Ben Jonson's *The Devil Is an Ass* (1631) includes a character that is obsessed with devils and conjurors and is consistently mocked for it. Fitzdottrel even explains his plans to go see *The Devil Is an Ass,* and thus in a sense he becomes a stand-in for the audience itself. Any audience members attending the play because of its title and because of the popularity of devil plays would presumably see that the joke is on them.

Thus, Jonson seems to be mocking the popularity of devil plays and the public's interest in the demonic, while Marlowe, writing *Doctor Faustus* about 25 years earlier than Jonson wrote *The Devil Is an Ass*, uses his play to shame those who would disapprove of devils and conjurors on the stage. Nevertheless, both playwrights use humor and parody, and in particular a comedic representative of a type of playgoer, to shape their audience's responses to plays about devils. Though the publication dates of these two plays are only separated by about 25 years, we see a turning point with Jonson's play where the popularity of the genre itself is depicted as a problem rather than an advantage for a playwright. Jonson's play questions the sincerity and analytical abilities of those who would seek out demons on the stage, and aligns them with those who are blind to the

evils in their everyday lives. My paper will examine this shift in emphasis and look closely at Jonson's perspective on the problem of the popularity of stage devils.

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Division and Inclusion:

Staging Justice in *Two Lamentable Tragedies*

In *Two Lamentable Tragedies* (1601), a tavernkeeper by the name of Thomas Merry murders his neighbor Thomas Beech, a chandler, on St. Bartholomew's Eve. Under the cover of night, Merry cuts the corpse into "peece-meale" chunks. He places the head and legs into a bag and the "the mangled rest" into another; he deposits one bag near Baynard's Castle and the other in a ditch near Paris Gardens (like many domestic tragedies, the play is full of forensic facts about time, place, and person). Before long, however, London residents discover the mangled body parts. A criminal investigation ensues and a group of unlikely heroes—a suave Gentleman, a deaf innkeeper, and a handful of neighbors—mount an investigation culminating in the arrest and execution of Merry and his accomplice.

This paper will investigate the political and aesthetic implications of popular crime narratives using *Two Lamentable Tragedies* as a test case. The imagined community in the play conforms a little too neatly to the legal-political ideal of English society. In reality, economic competition and scarcity strained social relations, yet that sense of crisis is covered up by the play's strict interpretation of

participatory justice. Homicide, the chorus-like presenter of the play, alludes to underemployment in "towne," but discontinues his potentially incendiary meditation on large-scale, systemic injustice once the action begins. Ultimately, the tragic action is attributed to the individual's moral turpitude: Merry's avarice and envy. An examination of the slippage between reality and fantasy in the play reveals the limits of this particular form of popular literature as a vehicle for social commentary, especially on the subject of justice.

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Puritan Playgoers

The notion that puritans were *en masse* fundamentally opposed to theater has persisted despite repeated debunkings. My purpose here is to refute the idea that puritan antitheatricalism was so widespread that it effectively removed godly people from theater culture; as well as to identify the underlying assumptions that keep this an intervention that must be repeated each time as if from scratch. The received narrative is that while earlier sixteenth century English reformers such as John Bale and John Foxe embraced playing as a means of spreading the gospel, their puritan successors from the 1570s onwards rejected theater. In part, the continued critical reluctance to imagine godly

people as participants in theater culture rests on the mischaracterization of puritans as outsiders and enemies of popular culture generally. They were neither. Some hot Protestants were indeed "iconophobic"; but generalized distrust of visual and material culture was far from standard among the godly. English Protestantism encompassed a range of positions on the role of the visual and material in religious worship that did not neatly correspond to particular attitudes to theater. It is a mistake to think that people who strongly rejected popery in the English Church therefore also held an aversion to plays. Early modern London was not split between Prayer-Book Protestants whose moderate views on ceremony enabled the uncomplicated enjoyment of dramatic spectacle, and precise extremists whose zealous commitment to reformed worship precluded theatrical pleasure. In fact, it was possible for godly people to separate the negative association between theater and popery from their attitude toward actual plays.

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The Theater, Actors, and Playwrights of the Children of Paul's: Rethinking "Elite"

When Hamlet's learns of the traveling players' impending arrival to Elsinore he asks, "Do they hold the same estimation they did when I was in the city? Are they so followed?" Rosencrantz responds that "they are not," and explains that the boy theater companies, "an eyrie of children," have become "the fashion," while their playwrights' chief focus is satirizing gallants (those "wearing rapiers are afraid of goose quills"), who avoid the theater altogether. Largely on the basis of this moment in *Hamlet*, an imaginative text, generations of scholars have understood the children's companies to be in a contentious relationship with the adult companies due to the deleterious

financial and social effects the boy companies had on the adult troupes. Shakespeare's generalization of "children" also has caused us to assume that both the Children of Paul's and those of the Chapel Royal were part of a conspiratorial nest of indistinguishable baby hawks. Further, the audience for which the children performed has been understood to be highly educated and wealthy, and the playwrights uninterested in attracting a wider viewing public..

Recently, Edel Lamb and Roslyn Knutson have both questioned the narrative that pits the children playing companies against the adult companies in an aesthetic and commercial rivalry, elite vs. popular. This paper aims to build on their work to further suggest that the private theaters did not in fact detract from the "popularity" of the "public" companies, but rather had their own specific material and aesthetic conditions that calls this into question. In particular, I will discuss the Children of St. Paul's Cathedral at the turn of the seventeenth century to show that the unique spatial and financial context of Paul's Boys rendered it distinct from any theater company in London. They were engaged with topics and language that would have been appealing and indeed popular for its particular audience, students at the Inns of Court, but also men and women drawn form St. Paul's precinct as well as merchants who lived and work is the surrounding areas. The rehearsal, playing, and living space in the cathedral precinct—likely sandwiched between the dean and chapter's official meeting house and the "little south door" to the nave, through which so much secular and commercial traffic flowed—spatially announces the double role that the boys played: choristers for the cathedral and only occasionally actors. I will look at John Marston's plays for the boys (*Jack Drum's Entertainment,* the *Antonio* plays, and *What You Will*, c. 1600-1601) to demonstrate that Marston's interest in the specific talents of Paul's Boys and the unique playing context in the cathedral precinct allowed him to write plays that appealed to a wider audience than has been largely acknowledged. A key question this papers engages with, then, is, one our seminar leader asks: "what constitutes popularity in the realm of theatre?"

My work in this paper builds on recent historical cultural geography and studies of London that attend to the specificity of the urban milieu (and a deep understanding of precise urban areas) to 1) bring a more complex understanding of the role of Paul's Children to early modern theater history as a whole, but also 2) to gain a more complete sense of the cultural geography of London's cathedral church and its precinct.

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What Malvolio knew: the popularity of political knowledge

Most of us in this seminar would agree that the stage was crucial to the political culture and the political imagination of the early 17th century, but we rarely consider one of the plays' most basic political functions, namely, that they helped large audiences to understand *what politics was*. Plays about the realm of politics represented intricate political situations, the complications resulting from the delegation of power, from negotiations and back-channeling, from intelligence gathering and the interception of communication. In doing so, plays allowed paying audiences a glimpse behind the public façades of power, into the world of diplomats and secretaries, of factional conflicts and loyalties, and also provided them with a vocabulary necessary to talk about this world. They gave virtual access to the body of knowledge that defined a profession of high cultural prestige: the emerging quasi-profession of political work. My paper will try to discern an alternative to the dominant mode of understanding the role of drama in the public sphere, and see it as something other than a medium for adversarial arguments and opinions, for factional position-taking, or for the mediation of rational critical discussion.

Whether plays devalued sovereign majesty by demystifying it, or confirmed royal power through making the audience complicit in its production, the price of a theater ticket certainly promised to "make greatness familiar," and such familiarity had not until then been offered by any medium to such a wide audience. The *arcana imperii* plays rehearsed (or as it often happened, withheld) in various degrees of verisimilitude were not merely the secrets of rule: they were also understood as the trade secrets of political work, and their appeal had to do with the aura of court

employment, of access, and with the cultural capital they were promising or offering. I realize that this topic diverges from the seminar's central concern, but I think the logic of revelation and disclosure underlying it has close connections and analogies with the orchestration of popularity through the release of polemics and information into a nascent public sphere.

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Commoner's Meter:

Popularity, Metrical Psalmody, and Shakespeare's Comedies

In 1765, Joseph Priestly (1733 1804), scientist and theologian, published the first biographical timeline in English. *A Chart of Biography* spanned three thousand years, beginning in 1200 BCE and including the eighteenth century. Priestly's primary criterion for inclusion in the *Chart* is "*renown* and not *merit*; acquired fame, and not deserved reputation: so that a person who had made a great noise in the world, though he were known by nothing but the devastation he had made in it, was more acceptable to me than one who had deserved ever so well of it […] without being much known." Of some two thousand historical figures on the chart, thirteen represent English poetry: Chaucer, Gower, Sternhold, Spenser, Shakespeare, Waller, Butler, Cowley, Dryden, Watts, Gay, Pope, and Churchill. Thus, in 1765, in terms of fame, the first post-medieval English poet is not Wyatt, nor Surrey, the two usual suspects for the origins of "modern English poetry," but someone whom most literary historians would not count among the poets at all. It is Thomas Sternhold, psalm paraphrast, whose fame among the English public earned him a place on Priestley's *Chart* alongside Spenser and Shakespeare as the totems of sixteenth-century English poetry.

Critics have traditionally turned to publisher Richard Tottel's *Songes and Sonettes* (1557), containing Wyatt and Surrey's lyrics, as the first step in the regularization of modern English lyric metrics. However, Sternhold's version of the metrical psalms first appeared a decade before *Tottel's*, and the influence of Tottel, while important for the development of a theory of literary poetics, does not begin to compare with the scope of influence of *Al Such Psalmes of Dauid as T. Sternholde Didde in his Life Time Drawe into English Metre*, which outsold all other books in early modern England. This title declares what makes it poetically radical: it is the Psalter in "*English meter.*" Traditionally "professionally" chanted in verses of varying length, psalms would now be sung by everyone, in church and at home, as hymns with musically and metrically identical stanzas. The popularization of psalm-singing meant that metrics, far from being the abstruse concern of literary theorists, became central to the performance of the most well-known "English" poems—poems that according to the Church of England liturgy should be performed monthly, *in toto*.

In this moment psalms, rather than ballads, are clearly associated with a specific metrical form, a predictable "ballad meter" resulting from the incredible popularity of the regularized common meter of psalms. When Mistress Ford proclaims that Falstaff's disposition and words "doe no more adhere and keep place together, then the hundred Psalms to the tune of Greensleeues" (II.i.62-3), playgoers understand the figure because they all remember the common meter of the "hundred Psalms"—the Hundredth Psalm. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Quince dubs this "eight and six," the appropriate meter for the play's prologue; Bottom, ever the butt of jokes, demonstrates his ignorance by insisting instead on "eight and eight" (III.i.23-26). This paper traces these and other instances of this most popular meter in Shakespeare's comedies, contending that references to the psalms by middle and lower-class characters serve as evidence that a notion of measure—of meter—tied to psalm-singing was part of Tudor English vernacular.

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'O heavenly mingle': The myth of Hermaphroditus and Political Popularity in

Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*

In Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* (c. 1606), Philo remarks in the play's opening lines that "this dotage of [Antony's] / Overflows the measure" (1.1.1-2). Just as Philo's words overflow the poetic line, so does Antony's desire for Cleopatra overflow the physical boundaries between lovers and political boundaries between nations. When Cleopatra declares that her "oblivion is a very Antony" (1.3.90) and then proclaims her relationship with him to be a "heavenly mingle" (1.5.61), the play invites audiences, as critics have noted, to connect those images to Ovid's myth of Salmacis and Hermaphroditus. In this reading, I focus on the play's attention to the suicidal and political underpinnings of Ovid's myth whereby two bodies melt in erotic union. This union is a kind of suicide, and suicide is itself a political act. Furthermore, early modern re-tellings of Ovid's myth are, I argue, particularly alert to the implications of Hermaphroditus's travel across geographical boundaries. When Antony states "Let Rome in Tiber melt" (1.1.33) as he renounces his attachment to Rome for the sake of Cleopatra's love, he discloses the potential for political friction within the discourse of hermaphroditic union and foreshadows, perhaps, the lovers' own self-willed deaths. By attending to the play's rhetoric of melting, overflowing, and fluidity, I aim to elucidate the links between erotic desire, suicide, and Antony's and Cleopatra's wavering political popularity in Rome and Egypt.

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What's at Stake in *Twelfth Night*

Like the "*popular* breeches" Ben Jonson mentions in *Cynthia's Revels,* a play to which *Twelfth Night* alludes, the Elizabethan Earl of Leicester was "not content to be generally noted in court" but did "press forth on common stages and brokers' stalls to the public view of the world." The period's premier patron of arts and letters, Leicester circulated his image quite literally in "broker's stalls." The

Dudley bear and ragged staff badge—the type of "insignia" that Jürgen Habermas associates with the "representative" publicity of pre-print cultures—signaled the earl's imprimatur in books ranging from Golding's translations of Ovid to Stow's *Chronicles*. These books granted access to material, including images of the earl and of his badge, previously reserved to elites—with unintended results. According to Camden, "evill speakers tooke occasion to tugge and tear at [the earl] continually." As this baiting metaphor indicates, the earl's critics habitually played on the ubiquitous bear badge to ridicule the earl.

Although scholars have viewed *Twelfth Night's* prominent references to bearbaitings in terms of the "nearly identical cultural situations" of the theater and the bloodsport as popular entertainments, I argue that these show Shakespeare's interest in the effect that "th'unmuzzled thoughts" (3.2.118) of satirists have on public discourses instead. Indeed, the "sport royal" (2.4.173) of *Twelfth Night* recalls the participants in "Cynthia's sports" attacked by satirists—especially Leicester, who was closely associated with the dream of election by a regal woman that haunts *Twelfth Night*. Preoccupied with the fact that "what great ones do, the less will prattle of" (1.3.33), *Twelfth Night* participates in the discursive processes it examines, while recording its misgivings about doing so, and calling our attention to the deforming effect of topical satire on all involved.

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