

DRAMA AND POLITICS IN
THE ENGLISH CIVIL WAR

SUSAN WISEMAN



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Introduction: how the drama disappeared

‘STAGE PLAYES’ AND 1642

Whereas the distress and Estate of Ireland, steeped in her own Blood, and the distracted Estate of England, threatened with a Cloud of Blood by a Civill War, call for all possible Means to appease and avert the Wrath of God, appearing in these Judgements; among which, Fasting and Prayer have been tried to be very effectual . . . and are still enjoyed; and whereas Publike Sports do not well agree with Publike Calamities, nor Publike Stage-playes with the Seasons of Humiliation, this being an Exercise of sad and pious solemnity, and the other being Spectacles of Pleasure, too commonly expressing lascivious Mirth, and Levitie it is therefore thought fit, and Ordained, by the Lords and Commons in this Parliament Assembled, that while these sad Causes and set times of Humiliation doe continue, publike Stage-playes shall cease and be forborne, instead of which are recommended to the People of this land the profitable and seasonable considerations of Repentance, Reconciliation and Peace with God, which probably may produce outward Peace and Prosperity, and bring again Times of Joy and Gladness to these Nations.¹

This is the order which closed the playhouses on 2 September 1642. In an investigation of the relationship between drama and its political situations during the period 1642–1660, when the London theatres were – for the most part – closed, much depends on how we decide to interpret this document.

In the complex cultural history of British theatre this text is taken to mark the end of a period considered to be Renaissance drama.² It is usually found serving the purposes of periodicity in theatre history, which characterises 1642 to 1660 as a gap between two ‘national’ dramas.³ Often in studies of Renaissance and Restoration drama and theatre it *replaces* discussion of the period, standing by synecdoche for eighteen years of largely unacknowledged and uninvestigated but immensely diverse dramatic, and some theatrical, activity. Habitually, it is used to remind scholars,

students and general readers that the drama of the Civil War is not worthy of study or, as Alfred Harbage put it in his analysis of 'cavalier' drama, it is 'a body of literature which Time has justly submerged'.⁴

The interdisciplinary critical revisions which have reconfigured the canon of mid-seventeenth-century poetry and prose have, until relatively recently, eschewed engagement with the drama of the 1640s and 1650s, and the text which closed the theatres continues to have a ready-made meaning in cultural history: it signals the inauguration of a gap. Nevertheless, as I shall suggest, the idea of the eighteen empty years is invented and maintained by a particular reading of literary history and dramatic genre.

The very language of the ordinance makes it surprising that it has been allowed to stand in place of much investigation of the discursive developments of the theatre from 1642 to 1660. The wording makes clear that the context of the closure is immediate, urgent, and political as well as spiritual. It emphasises that appropriate manners at a time when the country was sliding into Civil War – indeed when war had just begun – could not include 'Publike Sports', nor 'lascivious Mirth': as an emergency measure, it strikes the note of moral reform, but additionally suggests a time of political crisis (the theatres were closed on 2 September and on 9 September Essex set off to join the parliamentary army). It calls for stage plays to be 'forborne' because of the 'sad Causes', but in its mode of address it assumes in its readers a corresponding sense of urgency and apprehension of the danger of the times. The producers of theatre but also the London 'public' in the very guise the authorities found most unruly – the theatre-going crowd – are 'enjoyed' that plays should be 'forborne' in a turning to prayer which might, ultimately, produce not only private but 'outward' peace and prosperity.⁵

The order of 1642 is unusual among the edicts against the stage throughout the 1640s. The order of the House of Lords of 16 October 1647 contrastingly emphasises suppression and punishment, giving the sheriffs and justices of Westminster, London, Surrey and Middlesex jurisdiction to arrest anyone proved 'to have acted or played in such Playhouses or Places abovesaid; and all Person and Persons so offending to commit to any common Gaol or Prison; there to remain until the next General Sessions of the Peace . . . there to be punished as Rogues, according to law'.⁶ This

demonstrates the imbrication of theatre in shifting political contexts. The earlier order presents the ban on theatre as a rapid response to a dangerous situation, rather than the fruition of a long parliamentary campaign against the theatres, as the latter appears to be.

Indeed, London in 1641–2 was in political turmoil in and out of parliament. As Anthony Fletcher tells us, after the Irish rising began in 1641 the coastal areas of England were rife with rumours of invasion.⁷ Christmas of 1641 was punctuated by riots in Whitehall and the breakdown of links between the king and London. Scurrilous political polemic was constantly printed, and both episcopacy and Ireland were topics of pamphlet controversy. On 10 January, after his attempt to impeach the five members of the Commons, the king left London – but the five members returned amid celebrations in the City and Westminster. The City was claiming political rights and a political voice, and so was the grouping around Pym in parliament. Escalating demands led to Sir John Hotham taking control of the garrison at Hull. All may have hoped for peace, but there was clearly an atmosphere of crisis and a political agitation which existed in the Commons and Lords and also in private houses, in public gatherings such as the theatre and, as the demonstrations prove, in the streets. The timing of the edict suppressing playhouses reinforces the sense of public disturbances echoing parliamentary crisis. Placed at the intersection of print and the cultural sphere of political discussion and the activities of the Commons, its emphasis on the need to fast and pray suggests common cause and feeling between public and parliament even as parliament attempts to regulate the demonstration of such feelings.⁸

As a locus for the articulation of popular issues the theatre of the 1630s and the early 1640s, though it contrasts with that of the 1620s, is far from evidencing the ‘decline’ claimed by some critics. Several incidents suggest that theatrical production and governmental responses to it were part of a larger pattern of social, political and religious conflict and controversy. In May 1639 a play called *The Cardinall’s Conspiracie* played at the Fortune, satirising the bishops and church ritual, and a news report tells of the arrest of the actors.⁹ Martin Butler’s suggestion that throughout 1641–2 short scurrilous afterpieces may have been acted is borne out by these incidents and by the survival of many short satires on the

episcopate such as *Canterbury His Change of Diot*, *The Bishops Potion* and *Lambeth Fair*, which might be by Richard Overton.¹⁰ In another incident in 1639 the players at the Red Bull had been reprimanded for slurs on aldermen and attacking proctors.¹¹ And William Davenant had been put in charge of the Cockpit (or Phoenix) when William Beeston was removed after one of the productions had glanced at the king's journey into Scotland.¹² The policing of political satire in the theatres suggests that drama and theatre participated in constructing a popular political discourse.¹³

Seen in the context of the interaction of City and Commons at a particular moment, the document closing the theatres seems to be in part an attempt to suppress controversy but also an appeal to public support in a time of crisis rather than a faction enforcing 'Puritan' measures against the stage.¹⁴ Just as the ultimatum constituted by the *Nineteen Propositions* in June and Henry Parker's theorisation of parliamentary sovereignty, *Observations Upon Some of His Majesties Late Answers and Expresses* in July appealed to a sense of the political power of parliament, so the document closing the theatres suggests the vital interrelationship of City and Commons at this moment.¹⁵

The ideological impetus which asserts the propriety of praying rather than playing in September 1642 is evidently part of a programme which involves the reform of values, as David Underdown has admirably shown in his study of county loyalties in the Civil War.¹⁶ However, the text does not suggest that at this point the closure of the theatres was a primary objective in the pursuit of such a policy: it appears to be contingent 'while these sad Causes and set times of Humiliation doe continue' and to an extent local in being addressed to London's institutionalised playhouses. At a time when, Fletcher tells us, it would be hard for contemporaries to imagine a war which would last for four years, can we think that anyone would have anticipated that these playhouses would be mostly closed for eighteen?

However, once the playhouses were closed the function of the edict against stage plays seems to have changed, and strictures against the stage recur at moments of political crisis throughout the Civil War and Commonwealth. The order which banned the theatre inevitably simultaneously foregrounded the role of theatre and drama as participating in constructing popular political

debate. As the studies which follow this introduction demonstrate, the closure of the theatres served to intensify the politicised status of dramatic discourse: Civil War drama was sharply aware of its politicisation as a genre and of a political readership.

Government intervention offers evidence of repeated attempts to forestall institutional theatrical production throughout the 1640s, and the nature of the strictures can be seen to change in response to circumstances. Dramatic performances continued – as at the Oxford court’s Christmas in 1643 and in regiments.¹⁷ There were raids on playhouses, like those recorded in October 1643 and April 1645. Theatre became a central metaphor for vying political regimes; metaphors of tragedy and play-acting were two of the dominant ways in which contemporaries spoke of the war.¹⁸ While the satirical plays which Butler thinks were staged in the early 1640s implied popular support for Pym’s anti-episcopal policies and criticism of the king’s advisers, the measures again suppressing plays in 1647, 1648 and the attacks on players in 1649 all suggest that the government both continued to fear large gatherings and (as the popularity of successive governments waned) anticipated that such plays might well now satirise themselves. As soon as each order for closure expired, playing began again.¹⁹

This evidence suggests, then, that the edict of 1642 *turned into* a campaign as the wars went on. Thus, after complaints to parliament in October 1647 measures were taken to prosecute offending actors.²⁰ As Hotson notes, when these expired and there was no current set of penalties players began playing again, continuing even as the Commons drafted their new ordinance. The government responded with an order for the pulling-down of stages.²¹ These harsh measures were reinforced in July, but despite all this playing went on.²² Francis Bethan was put in charge of raids on theatres and on illegal publishing (which confirms that these were seen as linked cultural–political forces). In November 1648 the Commons demanded a progress report; and that winter newsbooks recorded raids on theatres. However, the theatres were not actually destroyed until seven years after the issuing of the edict usually taken as suppressing the stage: in March 1649 the Fortune, Cockpit and Salisbury Court lost their interiors.²³ At this point the controversy was so great that a clever parodist published *Mr William Prynne His Defence of Stage-Plays*, pretending that the great opponent of the pre-war theatre had now changed his mind.²⁴

Drolls – short playlets – continued at the Red Bull, as did illegal and private performances such as that of Thomas Killigrew's *Claricilla*, and pamphlets suggest that less formal street theatre also took place. On 1 January 1649, as Charles I was accused of treason, soldiers sported with the theatrical crown that had been used by players caught in the act.²⁵ However, that the republic was seen as potentially offering a new beginning for the reformed stage is indicated by the fact that at some point during the republic, perhaps in 1650 when debates about reform took place in and out of parliament, those 'heretofore the Actors and Black-friers and the Cock-Pit' petitioned parliament to be allowed to act 'onely such morall and harmless representations, as shall no way be distastefull to the Commonwealth or good manners'.²⁶ The later 1650s brought the renewed possibility of performances of both shows and plays, and with this came debate about the ethics of a potentially reformed stage for the new nation. General Monck ordered them to be closed yet again in April 1659.

Thus, in the 1640s and 1650s drama was understood as a genre crucial to political debate. But what does the term 'politics' imply in this context? Politics cannot be simply understood as political theory. Cultural politics and agency appear in the discussion of power relations in pamphlet drama, in the generic changes of Davenant's Interregnum operas, in the changed circumstances which enabled a woman to begin writing plays. As David Bevington suggests, politics needs to be considered widely and in relation to form, and his understanding of politics can be expanded to include, for example, gender relations.²⁷ For the purposes of this study 'politics' involves both what literary texts register in terms of the political sphere and specific circumstances, and how they intervene in debate in terms of polemic, genre, gender, trope, topos, intertextuality.

This wide definition of politics enables us to see that, although the battles of the wars were fought on binary lines, there were many, changing, divisions. Puritanism was diverse rather than monolithic and was not necessarily hostile to plays – though many Puritans were. The closure of the theatres in 1642 cannot be read as the takeover of a fanatical Puritan minority. Although many theatre historians continue to see it as exactly this, they do so by ignoring historical work on Puritanism.

Recent debate on Puritanism in England has been particularly

interested in the twin radical and conservative potentials of Puritan ideology. Unhappy with Michael Walzer's model of the 'revolution of the saints', Patrick Collinson has argued cogently for a kind of mainstream Puritanism which emphasised obedience and in which the upholding of civic and church authority was interwoven.²⁸ However, as Collinson notes, 'the disposition of Calvinist magistrates and ministers to obedience carried a latent potential for disobedience. The desire to preserve the world as it was did not exclude the capacity to change it.'²⁹ As David Underdown suggests in his study of Puritan elites in the provinces, during the 1640s and 1650s the potential of a Puritan way of life both to inaugurate radical change (as it did in the army) and produce very conservative government (as it did in London) was realised.³⁰ There can be no singular 'Puritan' politics of theatre, and no pairing of Puritan and antitheatrical in contrast with royalist and pro-theatre. The ordinance of closure seems to be inhabited by competing discourses of contingency, ethical reform, politics: it cannot be read as totalitarian or as self-evidently effective. Like other texts from these wars it was open to dispute even as it occurred. What it did do, immediately, was to make drama self-consciously politicised. As will become clear, it has been the coincidence of historians' neglect of culture with literary critical assumptions that has transformed this complex situation into a twenty-year gap.

SEPARATE SPHERES? 'HISTORY', 'CULTURE',
AND THE ENGLISH CIVIL WAR

Peter Lake and Kevin Sharpe have noted that 'recent developments in the historical and literary scholarship on [the English Civil War] have rendered both "politics" and "culture" problematic categories'.³¹ Historians have concentrated firstly on the vigorously disputed question of political motivation in the Civil War (a highly politicised debate about historical method), and secondly on the question of the nature of evidence, where revisionists tend to prize manuscript sources rather than print. The controversial – even adversarial – relationship between historians who do and do not work on cultural and print sources is an indication of the central importance of the 1640s and 1650s as disputed methodological and political terrain. The debates Sharpe and Lake outline seem to draw boundaries between kinds of evidence

– print versus manuscript, ‘factual’ versus ‘imaginative’ – that at times seem as strange as the literary critical compulsion to endlessly reread the same canon of texts.

In terms of political agency, revisionist histories of the period rejected the claim that fundamental differences were explicit and theorised during the Civil War.³² J. C. D. Clark has even asserted that we should use the term ‘rebellion’ rather than ‘revolution’ to describe what happened in the mid-seventeenth-century crisis, in order ‘to disengage ourselves from the assumption that revolutions are always “forward-looking”, that they embody the progressive aspirations of “rising” social classes to speed up developments being impeded by “the forces of reaction”’. Rebellion is a concept more evidently devoid of such implications; it helps our appreciation that many conflicts (like the Civil War or 1688) can better be described as reactions against innovations.³³ This is the beginning of Clark’s attack on Marxist historiography, also taken up in a more detailed way by J. C. Davis.³⁴ Without wishing to sponsor a progressivist model of the 1640s, it does seem clear that Clark’s desire to replace the signifier ‘revolution’ with ‘rebellion’ is not the replacement of a resonant, Marxist term with a neutral one: rebellion is not a term ‘devoid of . . . implications’. On the contrary, the use of the term rebellion puts the initiative – and implicitly the controlling power – entirely with the aristocratic elite and within that specifically with the king in the Civil War, and sees popular protest as basically conservative.³⁵

Thus, revisionist historians like Clark reject the progressive account of the seventeenth century offered by the huge feat of ‘intellectual engineering’ that constituted S. R. Gardiner’s history of the seventeenth century in terms of the growth of political and religious tolerance.³⁶ However, Clark’s term ‘rebellion’ cannot satisfactorily account for the single document closing the theatres, let alone the theorisation of parliament’s position in documents like Parker’s *Observations* and popular printed debate in 1640–2. In this study of the crisis of the mid-seventeenth-century, a central assumption is that values and situations were mutually shaping and that the political events moulded the forms as well as the promulgated ‘values’ of different plays and playlets. It further assumes that, reciprocally, the way the issues and values were disputed in the drama (mainly printed but also performed) registered and therefore influenced political events.

Views such as Clark's have been challenged. In a cogent rethinking of the historiography of the Civil War period Richard Cust and Ann Hughes acknowledge revisionist insights into the multiplicity of political positions at the outbreak of Civil War. Moreover, they agree that a simple binary model of early Stuart society in which 'opposition' is set against 'government', or 'court' simplistically opposed to 'country', does not adequately describe the nuanced positions of various groups. But they rightly assert that the 'potential for conflict' did exist in early (pre-war) seventeenth-century society and they note the importance of issues of principle and value when they say that 'early Stuart England' was 'seriously divided over entwined, fundamental questions of religion and politics'.³⁷ The position adopted by Cust and Hughes is that divisions in mid-seventeenth-century English society were multiple though nonetheless serious, changing during the twenty-year period, and these differences were a motivational force for contemporaries. Their rejection of binary models, but contrasting maintenance of a sense of political agency and multiple spheres of political activity, provide a productive context for work in the literary as well as the historical field.

The second historiographical controversy affecting this study is the fraught question of the status of culture in the shaping and interpretation of politics, events and structures of feeling. Recent historians, revisionist and otherwise, have largely neglected the cultural aspects of the 1640s – by which I mean not only literary texts but also celebrations, shows, ceremonies.³⁸ With their emphasis on manuscript sources and records, most revisionist historians have paid virtually no attention to the cultural sphere, and when they do so they tend to assume that it was royalist. For example, Anthony Fletcher's immensely valuable detailed reassessment of 1642 is an instance of the revisionist rejection of the relationship between and importance of agency and the socio-cultural sphere. Accordingly, his study is masterly and illuminating in its attention to detail yet neglects the symbolic aspects of culture. In *The Outbreak of the English Civil War* Fletcher notes that in 1641–2 the streets of London were full of libels, but does not link this to any extended political consciousness, describing anti-episcopal London rioters of 27–9 December 1641 as obviously ignorant and panic-stricken.³⁹ Nor does he connect it to contemporary arguments conducted in the literary-cultural sphere.

Fletcher's assumption that there was no socially widespread understanding of or argument about political issues in late Caroline England is not borne out by activity in the literary sphere; from court masques to polemical afterpieces on the public stage and from scurrilous dialogues to poems on the war, literary texts were imbued with political significances. Furthermore, the reactions of the courts to satire on the bishops (the case of *The Cardinall's Conspiracie* was tried by the 'high Commission Court' leading to fines and imprisonment) reinforce my assumption that the theatre was shaping and disseminating ideas central to the crisis of 1642. The evidence suggests that the theatre at this moment, far from being morally or aesthetically bankrupt, participated in some of the debates which in the official political sphere led to such potentially radical reforms as the Root and Branch bill, which would have redistributed church power to parliament and crown.⁴⁰

For many historians symbolic networks and representation remains, apparently, highly problematic evidence. However, recent work bridging the separation of social and political history of the Civil War has also paid attention to the cultural spheres occupied by the elites and the middling sort. Amongst others Cust, Hill, Hughes and Lake bring together analyses of politics and cultural forms. Johann Sommerville, too, has argued for the importance of the pamphlet debate in the Civil War, reading it as evidence of a critical public sphere in which, I would argue, dramatic texts also participate.⁴¹ Kevin Sharpe, too, has written extensively on the politics of court culture in the 1630s. If the borders between social and political history are increasingly permeable, so, too, are the imagined borders between 'culture' and 'evidence'.

'WHICH TIME HAS JUSTLY SUBMERGED': POLITICS,
AESTHETICS, LITERARY CRITICISM

If many historians remain chary about discussing the politics of culture and revisionist historians have denied the wide circulation of political debate in the 1640s and 1650s, historians nevertheless recognise that 'few periods in English history deserve the label "discordant" more than the seventeenth century'. The historical debate over the seventeenth century has remained controversial because understood as pertinent.⁴² Literary criticism, though, has until recently produced a contrastingly monolithic account of the

period, habitually associating most Civil War cultural production with royalism. Since the Restoration, in a triumph of winner's history, Civil War drama particularly has been consistently understood as either totally suppressed in 1642 or repeatedly naturalised as a self-evidently royalist mode.⁴³ Restoration claims have set the terms of subsequent accounts, such as James Wright's assertion that 'when the Stage was put down and the Rebellion raised' most players 'went into the King's Army and like good Men and true, serv'd their Old Master'. Such assertions from the post-war era have been taken as truth by many subsequent theatre historians.⁴⁴

Until very recently the only theatre historian to discuss the theatrical production of the period at length was Leslie Hotson who traces theatrical legislation and performance throughout the period.⁴⁵ Hotson's brilliantly researched study is shifted away from engagement with the politics of the theatrical genre in the Interregnum by his assumption, shared with many other critics, that 'we are not to think of Parliament's first ordinance against stage plays . . . as a blight which suddenly struck a flower in full bloom', suggesting that the theatres were already weakened by repeated closure in the face of plague.⁴⁶ In making this suggestion he follows a well-established critical line which saw the closure of the theatres in 1642 as in some way a product of 'declining' theatrical conditions intrinsic to English stage culture in the 1630s.⁴⁷

Such arguments have been countered by Martin Butler but, as we shall see, the twin ideas that the closure of 1642 was a Puritan plot and that it was an inevitable result of decline have determined the nature of critical debate on Civil War theatre and drama.⁴⁸ Theatre critics continue to assume that the closure of the theatres meant that either there were no dramatic and theatrical texts between 1642 and the Restoration, or that such texts tell us nothing significant about the culture and society of the times, being either the productions of a 'coterie' or 'closet drama'.⁴⁹

What is the investment of literary criticism, and theatre criticism in particular, in constructing the 1640s as a gap? It is easy to see why James Wright in the Restoration wrote that the stage was royalist, but the extent to which twentieth-century criticism has so wholeheartedly endorsed royalist readings is extraordinary. David Norbrook points to the early and mid-twentieth century notion shared by Eliot and Leavis that 'the poet's true function was to transcend politics', rightly associating this with the explicit rejection and marginalisation of 'the explicitly public forms of epic and

political allegory'.⁵⁰ This depoliticised way of reading, endorsed by generic preferences and underpinned by the presentation of 'great' literature as transcending politics, has allowed the politics to be read out of some plays kept in the canon, and led to the neglect of more obviously 'public' or politicised texts. The drama of the Interregnum has disappeared almost completely.

Thus the title of Alfred Harbage's book on a tradition which links the pre- and post-war stages underscores the status of the 'Interregnum' plays as small anti-Puritan punctuations in a void: it is called, *Cavalier Drama: An Historical and Critical Supplement to the Study of the Elizabethan and Restoration Stage*, indicating that he considers drama as self-evidently royalist. Moreover, writing in the 1930s, the drama which Harbage traces through the 1650s is that of courtly gentlemen and aspirant courtiers who he sees as producing a tradition which survived the Civil War and which had courtliness (implicitly and explicitly royalist, for Harbage) as its central value. Harbage's argument relies on placing Davenant and Killigrew in the same category as 'royalist', which is problematic, as chapter 6 indicates. Even more questionable is his assertion that 'cavalier drama' is the only tradition to survive the Civil War: he justifies ignoring what he calls the 'popular stage' on the grounds that the gentry and aristocratic writers had usurped the innovative positions and those 'active in the Caroline court and on the Royal side in the Civil Wars' were the ones who were producing 'serious' drama. This assertion is maintained by a refusal to consider precisely those genres which were heirs of a non-aristocratic stage and which came to prominence as polemical pamphlet drama in the 1640s and 1650s.⁵¹ Harbage maintains a rigidly pre-war definition of what drama or theatre must be, and follows the course of particular aristocratic or aspirant-aristocratic authors. This is the drama of the Interregnum as he sees it:

The same class of authors who gave us our Cavalier lyrics wrote also a number of plays, and these plays, although long banished into the realm of half-forgotten things, form an important link in the chain of dramatic history . . . That neither 1642 nor 1660 is selected as a terminal date will also seem natural. Each was a year of political more than of literary change, and each affected the public performance of plays rather than the English love of plays and inherited aptitude for creating particular kinds. Elizabethan drama did not foresee that at such and such a time, a Parliamentary resolution would close the theatres, and was not willing to cease evolving after the days of Shakespeare, or the days of Fletcher,