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THE BEDLAM ACADEMY

Royalist Oxford in civil war news culture

Lloyd Bowen

This article explores the polemical presentation of Oxford, the royalist capital between 1642 and 1646, in parliamentarian newsbooks. It argues that the novel seriality of the form offered opportunities for constructing political identities and identifying enemies through strategies of repetition and echoing within and across parliamentarian news media. Discussion of Oxford in these news titles suggests ways in which seriality helped establish and elaborate anti-royalist discourses by repeated reference to the corrupted centre of royalist politics. Sustained attention given to Oxford in weekly newsbooks built up a cumulative and complex picture of the city, and by extension royalism more broadly, as variously mired in Catholicism, subject to the damaging influence of female and foreign rule, riven by deviant sexualities, and possessed of a form of collective madness. The composite image of Oxford built up across parliamentarian news media helped construct a journalistic shorthand in which 'Oxford' came to denote a wealth of polemicised meanings readily accessible to comparatively humble readers. The article thus argues for a better recognition of the ways in which civil war news authors adopted the opportunities of serial publication for the elaboration of novel political stereotypes.

KEYWORDS period; early modern; topics; periodicals; royalism; stereotypes; King Charles I; Queen Henrietta Maria; parliamentarianism

This article examines the presentation of Oxford, the royalist capital during the first civil war, in parliamentarian news literature to explore the rhetorical strategies by which serial publications tried to shape public debate, score political points and fabricate and demarcate partisan political identities. It argues that consideration of Oxford's presence across a range of periodical news titles reveals how parliamentary polemicists made complex arguments about legitimacy and authority accessible to a general audience by incorporating into their discussions commonplaces from wider popular culture. Oxford became a byword for illegitimacy, corruption and deceit through its regular presentation within a rhetorical matrix that brought together polemicised discourses about learning, religion, foreignness, madness, infection, corruption and gender. These were familiar structuring ideas in the mental worlds of the majority who had been exposed to such discourses over the *longue durée* in debates about Reformation politics and the nature of political corruption. Part of the novelty in the 1640s, however, was the capacity to articulate and publicise these arguments through serial publication.

C. John Somerville argued for the importance of periodicity in early modern news publishing as helping create 'a new kind of reading public'. He was, however, rather discomfited by, indeed somewhat disdainful of, the ribald caricature and satire found in many civil war newsbooks, seeing such content as pandering to the lowest common denominator of 'plebeian' culture. Some newsbooks which traded heavily in such material were seen as having been serial only because 'the habit of periodicity had gone that far down the social scale'.¹ This article argues otherwise. It suggests that serial news publication was important not simply for understanding and contextualising events, but also for the elaboration and dissemination of rich political satires and stereotypes which were constructed over time. Serial publication afforded the opportunity to manufacture a vision of royalism through the accretion of repeated images, tropes and polemical languages within and across parliamentarian titles. An important focus of this was the royalist capital, and a complex picture of Oxford was built up through sustained albeit piecemeal discussion, offering the city to readers as a synecdoche for the wider corrupted royalist cause. Oxford came to operate as a shorthand for more prolix arguments against the royalists made in other print genres such as pamphlets, sermons and political treatises. It is likely, although very difficult to document, that newsbooks targeted and appealed to a more socially diverse readership than these costlier and lengthier texts.² This article, then, suggests the utility of civil war newsbooks for exploring the ways in which cultural norms were politicised and publicised for a socially variegated audience through a process of elaboration that relied, in part, on repetition through serial publication. Newsbooks offer a distinctive window on forms of argument and the construction of political identities as they operated through polemical accretion. The regular presentation of Oxford in parliamentarian newsbooks, while drawing on established norms and ideas, invoked, fashioned and consolidated a view of the court and the royalists in a novel generic mode: the serialised stereotype. Seriality thus allowed newsbook authors to build up a distinctive narrative of Oxford's role in the civil wars which was incremental and internally coherent. In 1644 the royalist divine Daniel Featley asked rhetorically of the parliamentarian newsbooks, 'what is your weekly imployment but to smother the cleare truth of all proceedings at Court?'³ This article interrogates the ways in which this regularised coverage, this 'weekly imployment', functioned to shape the image of Oxford royalism in the news culture of the first civil war.

This article speaks to several areas of enquiry which have received insufficient consideration in the scholarly literature. One of these is an attention to the language, rhetoric and structures of argument in contemporary news discourse.⁴ Scholars have mined newsbooks and news pamphlets for evidence relating to particular events, considered the dynamics of their production and distribution, and scrutinised their role in informing a wider public about processes at the political centre. However, consideration of the political languages and discourses contained within these publications remains underdeveloped.⁵ This article suggests that attention to these languages can make a significant contribution to our understanding of the ways in which contemporaries fashioned their political identities and those of their enemies in the creative politics of the first civil war.⁶ A case has also recently been made for considering the manner in which the serial nature of civil war news contributed to communicating ideas about government and politics beyond elite circles through a form of non-theorised narrative contextualisation.⁷ This article develops a cognate approach to examine a particular focus of political dispute, Oxford, within such

narrativised discourses within and across different news titles. This methodology reveals how layers of polemical associations could accrete around particular words, phrases and places in parliamentarian news discourse through reiteration and discursive contextualisation.

It should be noted at the outset that although this article discusses ‘parliamentarian’ news culture, such a characterisation glosses over the complex factional differences which divided the parliamentary coalition and its published output.⁸ Different parliamentarian authors and editors promoted a variety of positions regarding the prosecution of the war, the reform of the Church, the nature of settlement to be sought with the king, and so on. Although these differences have some bearing on the polemical presentation of Oxford, it is argued here that the political commonplaces found *across* these titles in fact reveal some of the basic values and political positions around which most parliamentarian supporters could coalesce. In modern parlance, it reveals some of the core values and assumptions that constituted the party’s ‘base’. Examining Oxford’s presence in parliamentarian news culture, then, may help us recognise some of the essential bonds that held the parliamentarian coalition together as an ‘interpretative community’ between 1642 and 1646.⁹ Moreover, as this article focuses on parliamentarian discourse we need to be mindful that we are often concentrating on only one half of a conversation. Oxford was significant as the headquarters of the royal court in the civil wars, but it was also the site of the royalist press and particularly the newsbook *Mercurius Aulicus* which promoted Charles’s cause. Indeed, the parliamentarian title *Mercurius Britanicus* was established in August 1643 specifically to counter *Aulicus*, while another short-lived news title of early 1644 was named *Anti-Aulicus*.¹⁰ It is important to remember, then, that the parliamentarian propaganda effort was shaped implicitly and explicitly partly by the need to contest the authority of claims made by the Oxford-based *Aulicus*, and that this gave a particular quality to the city’s coverage in the parliamentary press. Part of the reason for Oxford’s prominence and representational complexity in these news titles, then, was because of the need to challenge and undermine the interpretative narrative woven weekly by *Aulicus*.

One of the central elements in the newsbooks’ view of royalist Oxford was that it was a ‘den of papists’ and a centre of Catholic corruption.¹¹ In newsbook after newsbook during the 1640s, Oxford was repeatedly presented as a centre of Catholic counsel and popish influence. As Somerville has observed, this recurrent refrain of royalist popery served the important purpose among the parliamentarian coalition of ‘maintain[ing] a superordinate loyalty among their diverse followers’.¹² Such views built upon long-standing ideas of the Court as riddled with crypto-Catholic counsellors from whom Charles needed to be liberated.¹³ Charles’s choice of Oxford as his headquarters in 1642–1643 amplified the plausibility of such allegations partly because of Archbishop William Laud’s controversial chancellorship of the university in the 1630s.¹⁴ Oxford’s enthusiastic support for the corrupt Stuart regime in the early 1640s appeared to many parliamentarians as confirmation of Laud and his acolytes’ continuing and nefarious influence in Oxford’s colleges and halls.

It was an easy task for parliamentarian news writers to combine the chancellorship of the hated Laud, the university’s fervent and early support for the king, and the atmosphere of ceremonialism and decorous devotion found in the city, into a potent cocktail of Catholic influence and misguided counsel directed towards the destruction of English

Protestantism. Such ideas were rehearsed in periodicals like Marchamont Nedham's newsbook *Mercurius Britanicus* which played continually on the railed-in altars at Oxford and the 'religion marrer[s]', or Oxford divines attending the Court. In Oxford, *Britanicus* observed in March 1644, 'your Protestant religion will resolve into popery, your episcopacy will resolve into cardinalls and popes'.¹⁵ Of course these were routine allegations against the royalist party which had provided a central foundation of parliament's cause. It helped, however, to have a focus for these attacks, and Laudian Oxford gave credence to the idea that the king remained seduced by counsellors bent on subverting the Protestant faith. Expanding on its comments about Oxford's corrupted religion of a few weeks previous, in late March 1644 *Britanicus* reminded its readers how 'the little sparke of Canterbury used to domineere and Lord it there [in Oxford]', taking degrees in tyranny from St John's College. It was 'gawdie catterpillers' like him who now lay 'so thicke about the royll branches' that they had 'almost consumed all the tender buddings and leaves of the Protestant religion'.¹⁶ Problems of counsel and allegations of crypto-popery had dogged Charles I ever since he came to the throne in 1625. There was a vibrant strand in English popular culture, as reflected in popular libels and songs, which saw the king either as an unwitting dupe of Catholic agents or as a more knowing avatar of popish designs. Oxford's recent history thus offered a fertile context within which the Court could be positioned before the popular gaze as religiously suspect, a context frequently repeated in newsbooks like *Britanicus*. Parliamentary polemic and broader currents of anti-popery thus aligned smoothly and in a mutually reinforcing manner in such titles.

Highlighting the problems of counsel in Oxford also brought into view a central culprit in the narrative constructed by the parliamentarian presses: Queen Henrietta Maria, who was at Oxford with her husband between July 1643 and April 1644. Her presence, of course, also reinforced the view of Oxford as a centre of Catholic intrigue and influence.¹⁷ She also introduces two other important elements in the public presentation of Oxford: that of unnatural female influence and the unhealthy presence of foreigners within the realm. Civil-War Oxford, like London, was often imagined in gendered terms within the public consciousness and this helped influence how its political reliability and military potency could be figured in popular media.¹⁸ The queen was central to feminising and enfeebling Oxford in 1640s public discourse as she, along with her Catholic associates like the duchess of Buckingham, helped shape understandings of the city as a place riven with aberrant feminine and Catholic rule.¹⁹

Drawing on well-established themes of inversion and gender transgression, the image of Oxford deployed in many pamphlets and newsheets was that of an emasculated political space under the sway of a shadowy cabal of female influence.²⁰ The newsbook *Mercurius Britanicus* argued that the women of London had influence only over their own sex but those at Oxford 'compell another sex, which is not so naturall, we know who can rule her husband at Oxford'.²¹ The queen was described in one pamphlet as 'the Supreme petticoate', who conducted herself 'so meritoriously manfull'.²² In this view of the city the king was a weak prisoner of his overbearing wife. The lesson was clear and also potentially deeply radical in its logic: should the country submit to the rule of a man who was himself ruled by a woman, and a Catholic woman at that?²³

The convening of the Oxford Parliament in early 1644 provided an opportunity for the parliamentarian media to dilate in a sustained manner on this theme of female

influence in the city. Newsbooks described the 'female incendiaries' resident at Court as a 'darke iunto, half a dozen in the Queens closet that unyeas all and unnayes all' the parliament did.²⁴ The Oxford assembly was said to be 'led about by the apron strings', directed by the Queen and the duchess of Buckingham, 'the sope and starch confederates of the laundrie'. It was claimed that the MPs there were afraid to 'speake without leave from hoods and petticoats'.²⁵ Nedham developed his accusations made the week previously that women had excessive influence in Oxford by rendering the parliament there simply as 'the female iunto'.²⁶ The following month he wrote of how he hoped to see the funeral of 'your Oxford duches and malignant countess, and to triumph over the graves of your female engineers, your plotters in petticoats and politicians in fardingdales'.²⁷ Nedham pointedly asked 'When shall the kingdome be restored to its masculine privileges? When will women leave wearing crowns and laying their hands upon sceptres?'²⁸ The sexualised comic imagery in this comment prefigures some of the ribald newsbooks of the royalist John Crouch, but also echoes the pornographic critiques of court policy found in early Stuart libels.²⁹ Through such populist languages, the Court and Oxford were rendered as illegitimate centres of authority because of the inversion of normative gender roles operating there. This was also, however, a campaign which worked by repeated reference in consecutive issues to the damaging role of women in royalist Oxford. Over the weeks, titles like *Britanicus* constructed a compelling architecture of vituperation built partly from their own earlier assertions and claims. Seriality helped shape the internally coherent and rhetorically consistent narrative of Oxfordian royalism in these titles such that the force of argument concerned its regularity and familiarity as well as its eloquence.

The disruptions of the body politic during the civil wars required a language in which these tumultuous events could be understood, interpreted and explained. The feminisation of Oxford was one way of construing and propagandising these divisions, but this also led to more radical ideas of transgression and aberrancy as the city was portrayed through monstrous images of hermaphroditism and sexual deviancy. In early modern culture, the hermaphrodite was a deeply disturbing figure blurring the divinely-appointed boundaries between the sexes and consequently the appropriate lines of secular authority on earth.³⁰ By extension, the political label of hermaphroditism undermined the royalists' claim to be representing patriarchal power and underscored the sexual and political chaos which flourished under Charles and had helped usher in the confusion of civil war. In October 1643, the royalist newsbook *Mercurius Aulicus* had charged parliament with having committees run by women, and this brought the sharp response that Oxford was a site of such degradation that, while all parliamentarians were male or female, 'you have all the Epicines at Oxford'.³¹ One affronted newsbook described the 'medley ... of sexes' at Oxford, 'so that their plots and devices are but so many devilish hermaphrodites of invention'.³² A satirical pamphlet even configured the Queen as a hermaphrodite 'who admits of both sexes', presumably because of her manly influence in policy, although the implication of deviant bisexual practices was also close to the surface.³³ One parliamentary newsheet spoke of 'his majesties hermaphrodite privy-council', intimating that it unnaturally mixed the political counsel of both women and men.³⁴ We can never uncover for certain the reasons why authors adopted such rhetorical tactics, but it seems highly likely that presenting political arguments about the king's incapacity to rule in Oxford through images of hermaphroditism and emasculation was an attempt to reach out through languages common to all social

classes.³⁵ The universal trope of the proper lines of masculine authority within household and state made these messages readily accessible to plebeian audiences as well as to more educated readers. The relatively demotic and serial nature of newsbooks meant that message was married to form and anticipated the interests and experiences of a socially diverse audience. This was not political argument through abstruse and erudite discussion, but it was political argument for all that, albeit figured in a manner which reached out to the growing constituencies of the literate and politically engaged in civil war England.

The familiar languages of sex and corruption were also used to good political effect by hostile observers of Oxford when they intimated that the city had become a place of sexual licence under the royalists. Such images were easily incorporated into the roistering stereotype of cavalierism which had been in circulation since late 1641, but also chimed with the long-standing idea of a sexually wanton and lustful Court.³⁶ *Mercurius Britanicus* maintained mischievously that the women of Oxford loved to be 'handled', while another claimed that those in the city who did not fraternise with courtesans were dubbed roundheads and traitors.³⁷ The Queen and her advisers were portrayed as lavishly painted fornicators with Rome, their 'one of the clocke consultations' allowing them to 'rule by night': sex, corruption, sartorial excess and illegitimate power were all an integral part of the same corrosive matrix found amidst the royalist colleges.³⁸ One newsbook asserted an Oxford college had been made into a brothel, adding that such things 'will be wheresoever the court comes'.³⁹ *The Scottish Dove* ruminated that the 'mankind ladies' of Oxford might enter into battle, adding, 'if they can use their hands as nimblly as their tongues and other parts, they'll doe much mischief'.⁴⁰

Homosexuality was also claimed to be a feature of royalist Oxford life in parliamentarian periodicals. One publication fused the city's religious and sexual corruptions in a report of July 1643, which described the 'lewd strumpets which goe under the name of parsons', one of whom 'goes most comely in mans apparell'. It was said that these would 'lie with the great commanders, sometimes with one and sometimes with other'. The author concluded plaintively 'if the wals of Saint Maries parish could speake, they would cry out to God for vengeance upon these and the like sodomitish actions'.⁴¹ These 'effeminate soouldiers' were said to have taken flight from Oxford in April 1643 upon hearing reports of the earl of Essex's advance.⁴² The widely acknowledged parallels between homosexuality and cowardice thus communicated political messages about royalism and Oxford in quotidian commonplaces which, presumably, catered for and were readily understood by the wide readerships which parliamentarian newsbooks targeted.

The sexualised and gendered language with which the news media discussed royalist Oxford in issue after issue made it clear that the king's cause was centred on a deviant site where licentious women assumed political authority. The Court's residence had spawned a monstrous hermaphrodite city within the kingdom's masculine structures of authority. Situated within an established framework of Tacitean stereotypes of court immorality, the weekly repetition of images of corruption and depravity in the printed news articulated and mobilised these ideas in a more pervasive, popular and narratively coherent manner than the earlier libelling tradition from which it drew a good deal of its force and imagery.⁴³ Although space does not permit the exploration of this theme here, it should be noted that recent scholarship has shown how libellous treatments of the Overbury murder, the career of the duke of Buckingham or the alleged killing of

James I, first rehearsed in the 1610s and 1620s, found new life in printed forms during the 1640s.⁴⁴ There may, then, be scope for future work to consider how the political languages of the anti-royalist periodical press drew upon and adapted a corpus of politicised imagery which circulated in manuscript and oral cultures earlier in the century.

Although it is impossible to chart the effect these arguments had, it is clear that across the first civil war Oxford acquired a regular presence in popular news print that fused together several lines of attack against the royalist cause. The royalists presented Oxford as their new capital separated from the 'proud unthankfull city' of London, but in parliamentarian discourse it was only a capital of sin, vice and corruption.⁴⁵ Adopting the position of a regular reader of these newsbooks, and recent scholarship suggests that such a figure was not unusual, one encounters a developing narrative of Oxford which draws part of its potency from the well of common ideas in established political discourse, but also from the regularity with which these are presented. The frequent references to female influence and deviant sexual behaviour become part of the news landscape, a familiar feature with which to think about Oxford and its royalist masters as much as part of an accurate reporting of events there. As such, seriality helped structure the larger discursive framework within which developments were understood and interpreted. Moreover, given the general acknowledgement that newsbook publication was a commercial proposition which needed to be responsive to market forces, frequent repetition of such tropes within parliamentarian newsbooks suggests not only that these forms of argument were considered effective vehicles for political argument, but also that they struck a chord with a reading public who kept coming back for more.

Another notable strand in the rhetorical tapestry woven by periodical coverage of civil war Oxford was that the city had become a centre for foreigners rather than any legitimate alternative to the site of proper English authority in London. Since the Reformation polemics of John Foxe, strong connections had been established in the popular mind between Englishness, the reformed faith and legitimate political authority. A degree of xenophobia was always potentially present in discussions of the Protestant English polity which was popularly figured against real and potential enemies from the continent.⁴⁶ Moreover, Mark Stoyle's work has suggested ways in which the civil wars exacerbated racial and ethnic anxieties within the British state and helped sharpen and define a type of patriotic parliamentarianism which revolved around an exclusivist sense of Englishness.⁴⁷ The portrayal of Oxford in this period shows how some of these xenophobic discourses were regularly deployed in parliamentarian newsbooks to attack the king and the justness of his cause. Such concepts, of course, are intimately bound up with the idea of Catholicism as a continental, foreign disease corrupting the English state, and also the established idea of Charles's court as a site of unhealthy foreign influence, particularly when his French wife was in residence. It was claimed in one periodical, for example, that Oxford received gold directly from Madrid to maintain its unholy war against the parliament.⁴⁸ The newsbook, *The Spie*, which purported to bring the reader weekly intelligence from Oxford, observed in February 1644, when the Oxford Parliament was sitting, that 'a whole legion of spirits' ruled in the city, including 'a Spanish Spirit [and] a French spirit', while earlier in the same issue it described the 'Spanish luesuites' there, but then concluded 'all is Italian at Oxford'.⁴⁹ An individual consulting *Anti-Aulicus* in the same week would have encountered another claim that political divisions at Oxford were partly driven by a Spanish interest.⁵⁰

Oxford was thus said to represent a ‘confused medley of sexes and nations’, but the usual suspects of continental Catholics were not its only inhabitants to come in for criticism.⁵¹ ‘Seduced’ Welsh royalists had also flocked to Oxford, comprising a significant part of the royal forces there.⁵² The Welsh were viewed by many as a half-reformed nation of brutes whose administrative union with England had not been matched by progress in standards of civility.⁵³ Particular attention in the press, however, was paid to the Irish contingent who bolstered the king’s Oxford forces.⁵⁴ One pamphlet of 1643 claimed that rebels who had massacred Protestant women and children in the 1641 rebellion were in ‘great favour’ at Oxford, and quoted one source as claiming that ‘most of the Kings life-guard are Irish’.⁵⁵ Amongst a ‘rabble of jesuites’, one pamphlet of 1644 enumerated Oxford’s population as including ‘a century of Spanish, a millenary of Irish, a covey of French, a canon of Switzers and Wallones’ and a ‘whole pedigree of Welsh-pagan-Politicians’.⁵⁶ It was further asserted that two-thirds of the Oxford party could speak no English.⁵⁷

All this caused some to wonder whether Oxford was part of England at all. It was claimed that ‘there is hardly ever an English face’ present in the Oxford Parliament.⁵⁸ *The Spie* wondered how any of the Oxford Parliament ‘which have English hearts’ could sit in such company.⁵⁹ This newsbook made a particular case against the ‘foreign’ influence in Oxford’s parliament, offering regular editorial comment about the Spanish and French intriguing there, and, the week after questioning the ‘English hearts’ of its members, informed its readers that the body’s decisions were ‘invented stuppe ... concocted in so many forraigne countries’.⁶⁰ When the Oxford Parliament was in session again the following year, a prickly *Britanicus* responded to criticisms from the royalist newsbook *Mercurius Aulicus* regarding the parliamentarian alliance with the ‘foreign’ Scots with a telling outburst: ‘With what face can they object to us bringing in of forraigners, when themselves are building a Roman Babel with such a confusion of languages’.⁶¹ The physical space of Oxford had no place within the parliamentarian construction of England and Englishness. It was an outpost of continental luxuriance and wantonness, but also a bastard mixture of races and tongues. Such a place was difficult to accommodate within the exclusivist construction of the godly nation which fired men like Oliver Cromwell, but which also had a resonance among a readership long-disposed to think of theirs as a chosen and ‘peculiar’ people.⁶²

Oxford was, of course, principally known as a city of learning. Royalists, including the king himself, were disposed to describe England’s universities as the ‘eyes’ of the kingdom, institutions which offered perspicacity, wisdom and guidance.⁶³ However, Oxford’s close association with the king’s cause in the first civil war allowed hostile commentators to subvert the city’s traditional image. They suggested instead that its political affiliations demonstrated the degree to which the university had abandoned logic and judgement. Such discourses shaded into more biting accusations that all reason amongst the scholars and citizens was lost and that Oxford had taken leave of its senses. Madness and insanity thus became part of the popular explanatory framework accounting for Oxford’s hosting the king’s headquarters. This discourse of madness itself became part of a wider critique in parliamentarian newbooks of the city as a place of disease; royalism was thus rendered as a form of mental disorder or a polluting infection. Such ideas were commonly encountered in general culture. As Michael MacDonald has observed, in the seventeenth century ‘words and phrases about insanity were part of the common coinage of everyday speech and thought’, while politicised ideas about disease and malignancy were common to all

classes, having previously been attached to the Catholic Church, for example.⁶⁴ As such, this discourse constituted one avenue by which parliament's critique of royalism could be communicated and understood more widely in a language common to both domestic and political spheres.

Operating within a tradition reaching back to the Ancients, the interpretative framework of madness and insanity tied together the idea that tumult, rebellion and disorder in the body politic stemmed from some imbalance within the body natural. The overthrow of reason ushered in the chaos of civil war.⁶⁵ The locus of this loss of reason was to be found in the very place where reason and logic should reign: the universities. *Mercurius Britanicus* wrote that

they are all out of their wits at Oxford. Aristotle is banish't thence with his logicke, ethickes and politikes, whereby they have lost all reason, good manners and government. No wonder then if you heare raving from the Bedlam Academy.⁶⁶

There was, he claimed in an issue soon after, a 'grand infirmity ... in the head at Oxford', which brought about the 'phantisies' of their victories in battle and caused them to defend the justness of their cause.⁶⁷ The very confines of the city seemed to breed derangement and disorder: 'I will tell you', *The Scottish Dove* wrote of the royalists in March 1645, 'Oxford hath made them mad'.⁶⁸ The semiotics of madness provided an especially forceful framework within which to critique the king's cause because of the emphasis in Renaissance thought on Oxford's role as one of the academies for instructing the gentry in the sober and just governance of the commonwealth. The fractured political nation made it clear that Oxford was not up to the task of producing a harmonious, godly, ruling order, and the chaos in the state was readily mapped onto the chaos in the minds of the royalists in their 'Bedlam Academy'.

The idea that Oxford had become polluted by ignorance and madness was often rendered through familiar tropes of corrupted streams or fountains which reached back to traditions of courtly criticism found in the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras. This suggested that the defiled fount of learning could infect the entire kingdom if it was not cleansed, and ideas of infection came to be key in the public presentation of Oxford and royalism.⁶⁹ *Mercurius Civicus* observed of Oxford in 1643 that 'this place which should have beene the welspring and fountaine of learning is now become the spring and fountaine of all profanesse and uncleannessse', while in April 1645 *Britanicus* mused that a reformation in the university was needed for the health of the body politic: 'the fountains being cleansed, the stremes must needs run abroad more cleare in the commonwealth'.⁷⁰ The Court at Oxford was described as 'so infectious a place', that when individuals experienced 'one weeks aire' in the city, this 'altered their constitutions immediately ... so ... that they left their wits, became raving mad and talkt idly against the parliament'.⁷¹ These kinds of discourses helped underwrite and legitimate the parliamentary visitation of the university in 1647 which was designed to purge the body of these malignant scholars. The politicisation of Oxford's environment was to be seen in repeated newsbook references to the defilement of its very air which was understood to carry disease.⁷² The Cornish turncoat, Sir Richard Grenville, who defected to the royalists in March 1644, was immediately branded by one publication as the kind of man who was 'well qualified for Oxford aire', and could flourish there.⁷³

This discourse of corruption was metonymically connected to a complementary set of ideas about royalism as a disease which flourished in the ‘infectious’ air of Oxford.⁷⁴ This was an ‘epidemicall malignant feaver’ which had dominion in the city; it was dangerously contagious, so that ‘one mouthfull of that malignant aire is enough to poyson a thousand with despaire’.⁷⁵ This contagion was dangerous as it could flow from Oxford and contaminate other parts of the body politic. At the end of the first sitting of the Oxford Parliament, for example, one newsbook noted that the ‘rotten members’ were ‘dispersed into severall counties to spawne the Oxford poyson’.⁷⁶ The same title shortly afterwards reminded its readers that this ‘malignant disease’ had ‘infected the university’ and required ‘skilfull physitians’ such as the parliamentarian commanders Essex, Fairfax and Cromwell to cure it.⁷⁷

News writers employed such discourses because of the close parallels contemporaries readily drew between the body natural and the body politic; notions which permeated popular as well as elite discourses about power and governance.⁷⁸ In a schema in which the body politic itself was fractured, it was one way of understanding and explaining the reasons for political division. It also added to the politicisation of space in civil war England, as the humoral conception of the realm as a functioning entity came to have individual parts, particular places which were understood to have become subject to disorder, disease and corruption, and this helped account for the sickness affecting the whole. Royalism could also function within the more avant garde Paracelsian interpretation of the body politic, where disease was attributed to exogenous causes. Here the body politic was reconfigured ideologically if not geographically; royalism was a foreign pathogen akin to Catholicism which needed to be treated for the better health of society.⁷⁹ In the parliamentarian view, then, Oxford could be imagined as a cancer within the kingdom or a site of miasmatic foreign infection which needed to be excised or purged for the restoration of political normalcy.

The discursive repertoire of parliamentarian newsbooks drew on and politicised numerous strands in popular culture to figure the royalists and their capital as deviant. The political discourses and representations at play here operated rather differently to the tracts and pamphlets most usually studied by civil war scholars, partly because of their seriality. Ideas and images were repeated within and between news titles in a manner that offered a developing and internally consistent political narrative of Oxford and its royalist masters which critiqued but also explained their misconceived actions. It is difficult to know how these newsbooks were read and received, but it is worth considering for a moment the role which seriality might have played in generating meaning. As Joad Raymond has observed, ‘seriality shaped appetites and expectations’, and the newsbook coverage of Oxford during the first civil war suggests how the dense associative field of royalist tropes offered an explanatory framework for sympathetic readers which was constructed by the weekly reproduction of familiar themes.⁸⁰ While Michael Braddick has argued that such cheap print does ‘not reflect what ordinary people thought so much as what the better-educated believed they should think’, the combination of seriality and market-responsiveness can nuance this somewhat, suggesting ways in which publications had to speak in languages which appealed to their audience in order to survive.⁸¹ Modes of readership are thus implied within the serial images of Oxford and royalism under review here, and comments such as those of the parliamentarian Sir Samuel

Luke who recorded that he sought ‘printed diurnalls as they come out’, as well as surviving runs of consecutive news titles indicate that the ‘serial reader’ was an important phenomenon of this period.⁸²

The newsbooks themselves operated with a degree of self-referencing and anticipation of future copy which suggests the ways in which the anti-Oxfordian images and arguments were developed partly through accumulated reading. One edition of *The Parliament Scout*, for example, mentioned the camp fever afflicting the royalists leaving the garrison reduced, adding ‘we told you before it was left a den of papists & c.’, while *The Scottish Dove* alluded to its earlier coverage of the gender confusion in the city, including the reader in its editorialising comment ‘we know Oxford ladies wear the breeches’.⁸³ Such modes of address helped generate the idea of an authoritative account advising a familiar reader, as in *The Spie*’s report expressing the hope that Oxford’s male royalists would forego sexual favours with boys, adding, ‘Do not wonder at this reader, for all is Italian at Oxford’.⁸⁴ This was a common feature in *Mercurius Britanicus* which regularly addressed the reader as an intimate companion familiar with the thick web of intrigue, corruption and perversion it had detailed in earlier editions.

The sorts of impressions readers might have gained by regular exposure to these forms of polemic can be suggested in *Britanicus*’ coverage of the Oxford Parliament which sat between January and April 1644. It began by reporting a design to set up an ‘Antick-Parliament’ at Oxford, drawing on its own earlier allusions to the madness reigning there. The problems of naming this assembly, set up in contradistinction to the real seat of authority in Westminster, then becomes the subject of play across several editions. Initially it is described as ‘the forgery of a parliament’, but the next issue wrestles with the problem of

the what you call it, the thing of Lord and Commons ... for it is not yet named ... a parliament, or a great counsel, or a juncto, or an assembly, or a meeting, or a sessions, or an assist, or a conclave, or a conciliable, or a conventicler, or a parliament junior, or a senate minor.

Assuming the regular reader was familiar with this line of attack, the following edition attempted to capture the nullity of the assembly’s authority with the title the ‘New-Nothing of Lords and Commons at Oxford’. Future editions again played on this thread, returning to the ‘thing in Oxford nick-named Lords and Commons’. The theme of sexual confusion was raised in the edition of 5–12 February which mentioned the Cornish royalist MP Joseph Jane ‘an hermaphrodite, halfe a man and halfe a women’, a pun which was again picked up, presumably to greater effect for the regular reader, three weeks later when *Britanicus* mentioned the illegitimacy of the assembly composed of ‘all the Josephs and Janes’.⁸⁵ These kinds of repeated tropes, puns and images had a polemical force which functioned through regular reading and serial publication but which probably had added force as they were echoed in other news titles. The projected reader of such texts, then, was ‘in on the joke’ and became part of an ‘interpretative community’ of anti-royalists who shared a political lexicon shaped in part by regular exposure to such imagery.

The views of Oxford which circulated in parliamentarian newsheets thus obtained their force from the constant repetition of familiar images of political and moral corruption.

Drawing upon a set of cultural assumptions relating to gender inversion, sexual corruption, disease and religious impurity common to all social classes, newsbook writers produced an explanation for the kingdom's woes that was simultaneously spatialised, historicised and politicised. These commentators focused on the centre of the nation's ills at Oxford, and in so doing arrived at a convenient shorthand for invoking a complex of ideas by the simple prefixes 'Oxford', or, 'Oxonian'. Thus we encounter 'Oxonian religion', 'Oxford designs', 'Oxford honesty', 'Oxford logick', 'Oxford courage', 'an Oxford deception', 'the Oxford catechisme', 'a malignant Oxford papisticall trick', 'an Oxonian invention', 'this smells too much of Oxford', and so on. Such examples demonstrate how the repetition of tropes, arguments and images within a broadly agreed framework of anti-royalist discourse helped the parliamentarian news media fashion something of a new political language in the 1640s. The novelty and ubiquity of this language made it ripe for lampooning, and one royalist, John Taylor, produced such a satire in 1645: *Oxford Besieged*. This parodied the style and rhetorical tactics of parliamentarian propagandists, knowingly describing Oxford as 'the treasury of refractory obstinacy, and the store-house of our mischiefs' requiring a purgation to 'let out her malevolent and contagious corruptions'.⁸⁶ The fact that he felt it worth moving into print to ridicule these tactics suggests that they had gained a wider currency and a degree of purchase in the popular imagination.

In parliamentarian discourse 'Oxford' became a polyvalent appellation, a malleable stereotype comprehending a variety of moral, religious and political meanings which could be communicated with immediacy and often with humour. For the reader exposed to these arguments on a weekly basis, Oxford became metonymically linked to a world of illegitimacy, excess, popery, foreignness and madness. Behind the idea of 'Oxford' in parliamentarian news publications lay a reiterative succession of corrosive images about the king, the Court and the royalist cause. The city ultimately came to stand as 'the seat, or rather the sinke of abominable villanies, the very mint and magazine ... of manifold wickednesses and mischievous machinations against God and his most innocent cause'.⁸⁷ Its ubiquity in the print media of the 1640s has perhaps obscured our view of how the stereotypes discussed in this article were constructed and deployed; how simple phrases came to convey a dense web of meanings to a comparatively humble readership.⁸⁸

Exploring the representations of Oxford in parliamentarian news culture is thus useful for expanding our awareness of how polemicists constructed their arguments for easy reception and interpretation. However, we should note that many of the elements of feminisation, inversion, foreignness, sexual profligacy and madness which informed the composite stereotype of royalist Oxford, were appropriated by royalist commentators in the later 1640s and early Restoration eras.⁸⁹ This was not an exclusively parliamentarian/puritan language, then, but rather a set of demotic discourses which had their roots in late Elizabethan and early Stuart satire traditions. Examining the use of these languages in particular contexts and with a particular focus such as royalist Oxford, however, brings together an analysis of civil war popular polemic, rhetorical form, and the serial repetition across a number of titles. Charting the impact of such strategies in terms of popular politics and the mechanics of mobilisation is difficult, but it is telling that topical authors from a range of publications adopted and adapted these discourses to their purposes.⁹⁰ While the forms in which Oxford was presented may appear on first glance puerile or infantile,

their messages were not. Rather these topical works encouraged thinking about questions of political practice, accountability, the nature of legitimate authority and the proper modes of governance. That they did so in ways very different to those employed by polemicists like Henry Parker does not, however, make them any less political or less influential.⁹¹

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Notes

1. Somerville, *News Revolution*, 55.
2. For some discussion of newsbook readership, see Raymond, *The Invention of the Newspaper*, chap. 5; Peacey, *Print and Public Politics*, chaps. 1–3.
3. Featley, *Sacra Nemesis*, 2–3.
4. Raymond, “Networks, Communication, Practice”.
5. Although see McElligott, “The Politics of Sexual Libel”; Peacey, “Hot and Eager in Courtship”; Leng, “The Meanings of ‘Malignancy’”; Leng, “‘Citizens at the Door.’”
6. Braddick, “Mobilisation, Anxiety and Creativity”; Leng, “The Meanings of ‘Malignancy’”; Leng, “‘Citizens at the Door.’”
7. Rivett, “English Newsbooks, Storytelling and Political Criticism.”
8. Peacey, *Politicians and Pamphleteers*.
9. For the idea of print organising ‘interpretative communities’, see Braddick, “England and Wales.”
10. Peacey, “The Struggle for *Mercurius Britanicus*.”
11. *The Parliament Scout* 59, 1–8 Aug. 1644, 474.
12. Somerville, *News Revolution*, 53.
13. The potency of this discourse in earlier court scandals is ably demonstrated in Bellany, *Politics of Court Scandal*, esp. chaps. 3–4.
14. Sharpe, “Archbishop Laud and the University of Oxford”; Boran, “Malignancy and the Reform of the University of Oxford.”
15. *Mercurius Britanicus* 5, 19–26 Sept. 1643, 33; 7, 3–7 Oct. 1643, 55; 15, 30 Nov.–7 Dec. 1643, 115; 25, 26 Feb.–6 Mar. 1644, 193.
16. *Mercurius Britanicus* 27, 18–25 Mar. 1644, 209.
17. *The Spie* 16, 8–15 May 1644, 121.
18. Manley, “From Matron to Monster”; Bailey and Hentschell, “Introduction: Gendered Geographies of Vice.”
19. White, *Henrietta Maria and the English Civil Wars*, chap. 5; Purkiss, *Literature, Gender and Politics*, 70–97; Peacey, “Hot and Eager in Courtship,” # 28; Hughes, *Gender and the English Revolution*, 61–6.
20. On popular critiques of political authority through the medium of sex and gender in the civil war era, see Underdown, *A Freeborn People*; Turner, *Libertines and Radicals in Early Modern London*, 74–117; McElligott, “The Politics of Sexual Libel.”
21. *Mercurius Britanicus* 6, 26 Sept.- 3 Oct. 1643, 41–2.

22. *The Character of an Oxford-Incendiary*, 6, 5.
23. On this, see Macadam, "Mercurius Britanicus on Charles I."
24. *The Spie* 13, 19–26 Apr. 1644, 98; *Mercurius Britanicus* 25, 26 Feb.–3 Mar. 1644, 196. See also *Counter-Votes*, 2.
25. *Mercurius Britanicus* 28, 18–25 Mar. 1644, 219; *The Spie* 14, 26 Apr.–1 May 1644, 109.
26. *Mercurius Britanicus* 29, 25 Mar.–1 Apr. 1644, 224.
27. A farthingale was a frame that supported the skirts of women's dresses.
28. *Mercurius Britanicus* 30, 1–8 Apr. 1644, 232–3.
29. Underdown, *A Freeborn People*, 90–111; McElligott, "The Politics of Sexual Libel"; McRae, *Literature, Satire and the Early Stuart State*; Bellany, "Railing Rhymes Revisited," and sources cited.
30. Purkiss, *Literature, Gender and Politics*, 163–4.
31. *Mercurius Britanicus* 11, 2–9 Nov. 1643, 84.
32. *The Spie* 12, 12–19 Apr. 1644, 92.
33. *Character of an Oxford-Incendiary*, 5.
34. *Mercurius Britanicus* 70, 10–17 Feb. 1645, 551. See also ibid., 32, 15–22 Apr. 1644, 247.
35. On such ideas, see Amussen, *An Ordered Society*.
36. On the construction of the idea of the cavalier, see Roebuck, "Cavalier"; de Groot, *Royalist Identities*; and Stoyle, "The Cannibal Cavalier." Cf. Bellany, *The Politics of Court Scandal*, 153–6, 164–5.
37. *Mercurius Britanicus* 8, 10–17 Oct. 1643, 62; *The Scottish Dove* 30, 3–10 May 1644, 239.
38. *The Spie* 14, 26 Apr.–1 May 1644, 109; 13, 19–26 Apr. 1644, 98; *Mercurius Britanicus* 77, 31 Mar.–7 Apr. 1645, 706–7. On the discourse of fashion, licentiousness and corruption, see Bellany, "Mistress Turner's Deadly Sins."
39. *Mercurius Britanicus* 109, 8–15 Dec. 1645, 962.
40. *The Scottish Dove* 84, 23–30 May 1645, 662.
41. *Mercurius Civicus* 7, 6–13 July 1643, 53.
42. *The Scottish Dove* 27, 12–19 Apr. 1644, 214.
43. See sources in n. 29. above. On the Tacitean tradition of courtly criticism, see Worden, "Ben Jonson among the Historians"; Smuts, "Court-centred Politics"; and Bradford, "Stuart Absolutism."
44. Bellany and Cogswell, *The Murder of King James I*.
45. Roy, "'This Proud Unthankefull City.'"
46. Birchwood and Dimmock, "Popular Xenophobia."
47. Stoyle, *Soldiers and Strangers*.
48. *The Spie* 3, 5–13 Feb. 1644, 21 (mispaginated for 31).
49. *The Spie* 3, 5–13 Feb. 1644, 29, 28.
50. *Anti-Aulicus* 1, 6 Feb. 1644, 4.
51. *The Spie* 12, 11–19 Apr. 1644, 93.
52. *Mercurius Britanicus* 71, 17–24 Feb. 1645, 572.
53. Bowen, "Representations of Wales and the Welsh."
54. On views of the Irish, see Stoyle, *Soldiers and Strangers*, 53–72; Shagan, "Constructing Discord"; Noonan, "'The Cruell Pressure of an Enraged Barbarous People'"; Cope, *England and the 1641 Irish Rebellion*.

55. *A Declaration of the Commons ... Concerning the Rise and Progresse of the Grand Rebellion in Ireland*. See also *Mercurius Civicus* 9, 20–28 July 1643, 69–70.
56. *A Recantation of Mercurius Aulicus*, 1–2.
57. *The Spie* 9, 19–26 Mar. 1644, 70.
58. *Mercurius Britanicus* 73, 3–10 Mar. 1645, 585.
59. *The Spie* 11, 4–11 Apr. 1644, 88.
60. *The Spie* 12, 12–19 Apr. 1644, 91.
61. *Mercurius Britanicus* 70, 10–17 Feb. 1645, 553.
62. Hastings, *The Construction of Nationhood*.
63. Cleveland, *The Character of a London Diurnall*, 8; *Petition of the Vniversity and City of Oxford*, 6.
64. MacDonald, *Mystical Bedlam*, 123; Leng, "The Meanings of 'Malignancy,'" 839–40.
65. Porter, *A Social History of Madness*, 39–40. For a penetrating discussion of the relationship between insanity and religio-political positions in an earlier context, see Walsham, "'Frantick Hacket.'" Also relevant to the present discussion is Hughes, "A 'Lunatick Revolter from Loyalty.'"
66. *Mercurius Britanicus* 81, 28 Apr.–5 May 1645, 737.
67. *Mercurius Britanicus* 83, 5–12 May 1645, 755.
68. *The Scottish Dove* 74, 14–21 Mar. 1645, 582.
69. Bellany, *The Politics of Court Scandal*, chap. 1.
70. *Mercurius Civicus* 7, 6–13 July 1643, 53; *Mercurius Britanicus*, 79, 14–21 Apr. 1645, 724.
71. *Mercurius Britanicus* 115, 19–26 Jan. 1646, 1010.
72. On the politicisation of the air and environment in a different context, see Jenner, "The Politics of London Air"; Cavert, *The Smoke of London*.
73. *The Spie* 7, 5–13 Mar. 1644, 52.
74. *Mercurius Britanicus* 69, 3–10 Feb. 1645, 543.
75. *The Spie* 1, 23–30 Jan. 1644, 2. See also *Peace, and No Peace: Or, a Pleasant Dialogue betweene Phil-Eirenuſ ... and Philo Polemuſ* (London, 1643), sig. A2.
76. *The Scottish Dove*, 30, 3–10 May 1644, 239.
77. *The Scottish Dove*, 38, 28 June–5 July 1644, 299.
78. See, for example, the libel against the duke of Buckingham, 'England was sick, a plewresie posest her', or that of late 1640 which began 'the state was sicke, very sicke': Bellany and McRae, "Early Stuart Libels," Libel Pi8; Anon., "A Satyre upon the State of Thinges this Parliament."
79. Harris, *Foreign Bodies and the Body Politic*; Healy, *Fictions of Disease*.
80. Raymond, "News," 396.
81. Braddick, "England and Wales," 25.
82. *Luke Letter Books*, p. 23.
83. *Parliament Scout* 59, 1–8 Aug. 1644, 474; *Scottish Dove* 29, 26 Apr.–3 May 1644, 231.
84. *The Spie* 4, 3–20 Feb. 1644, 28.
85. *Mercurius Britanicus* 19, 28 Dec. 1643–4 Jan. 1644, 149; 20, 4–11 Jan. 1644, 155; 21, 29 Jan.–5 Feb. 1644, 167; 22, 5–12 Feb. 1644, 169, 173; 25, 26 Feb.–6 Mar. 1644, 191.
86. Taylor, *Oxford Besieged*, 1–2.
87. Vicars, *The Looking-glasse for Malignants, Enlarged*, C4v.
88. Cf. Leng, "The Meanings of 'Malignancy.'"

89. Underdown, *A Freeborn People*, 90–111; McElligott, “The Politics of Sexual Libel”; Jenner, “The Roasting of the Rump”; Smith, *Literature and Revolution*, chap. 9; Sawday, “‘Mysteriously Divided.’”
90. Significantly, echoes of these discourses turn up in correspondence such as Sir Anthony Weldon’s reference in March 1644 to ‘that Sodom Oxford’: British Library, Stowe MS 184, fo. 73.
91. On this point, see Raymond, “Networks, Communication, Practice.”

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Lloyd Bowen, School of History, Archaeology and Religion, Cardiff University, Cardiff, UK.
E-mail: BowenL@cardiff.ac.uk