Chapter 13

Parliament, War and the “Public Sphere” in Late Medieval England

The Experience of Lancastrian Kent

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One of the more important recent trends among scholars of late medieval England has been the realization that politics and government were, above all, a public affair. While this understanding did not appear to have reached the makers of the BBC’s 2013 costume drama, The White Queen (where Edward IV and his nobles ran around like Mafia-style gangsters, surrounded only by their immediate families), historians and literary scholars are aware that politics engaged a wide audience. Historians, such as John Watts, and literary scholars, like Stephen Justice and David Aers, have drawn attention to the ways in which ordinary people shared a common political language with their social betters. Chris Dyer and others have pointed out the engagement with and involvement in the public business of the “state” that existed among even the poorest levels of village society.1 Traditionally, as Tony Pollard has recently reminded us, Parliament appeared to be the one area of public life that the “public” was deliberately excluded from. The business of Parliament, as Bishop Russell reiterated in 1483, was first and foremost the business of the Lords, while the Commons’ representatives in the Lower House appear to have been passive observers. Yet, it is clear that the business of Parliament engaged the commons (in both senses of the word) and that, for much of the fifteenth century they, both in the Parliament chamber and in the wider country, “begged to differ”: as Pollard observes, “They had a voice, and asserted the right to express that voice by mass petitioning if all else failed”.2 It is now apparent that the fifteenth-century


public knew a great deal about what happened in Parliament; they also knew a fair bit about parliamentary procedure and certainly enough to borrow the language and form of Parliament to give legitimacy to their own interventions in politics. Moreover, this knowledge and appropriation of Parliament by the public proved a growing concern for the crown as the century progressed.

Knowledge and discussion of Parliament was, of course, part of a much wider discourse and a nascent public sphere. The public sphere in late medieval England has recently begun to be appreciated in all its various forms, with medievalists drawing on the rich work done by their colleagues on the public sphere in early modern England. Yet locating where Parliament was discussed, where the various aspects of public life met and where parliamentary representation was re-presented and analysed is a difficult task for scholars of the fifteenth century. In many ways, it is a task that is easier for the sixteenth century, where the boundaries between Parliament and public, between elite and popular politics were more clearly drawn, than for the fifteenth century. If Richard Morison captured the mood of the rulers of early Tudor England when he reminded his readers in the 1530s that “it was no part of the people’s play to discuss acts made in parliament”, it was not a sentiment widely articulated a century earlier.

The emergence of the “public sphere” in late medieval England appears to have gathered pace in the second half of the fourteenth century. There were a number of reasons for this, but I’d like to draw attention to three important factors that transformed the nature of the public in late medieval England. First, since Edward I’s reign more and more of the king’s subjects had been drawn into the crown’s orbit through access to royal justice, by paying royal taxes and, through the mechanism of the commission of array, serving in royal armies.

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3 Peter Lake and Steven Pincus, eds., The Politics of the Public Sphere in Early Modern England (Manchester, 2007); Massimo Rospocher, ed., Beyond the Public Sphere: Opinions, Publics and Spaces in Early Modern Europe (Berlin, 2012). See also the seminal article by Peter Lake and Steven Pincus which revitalized the debate among early modernists: “Rethinking the Public Sphere in Early Modern England”, Journal of British Studies 45 (2006), pp. 270–92.