

Introduction

“Ponder My Story in Awe”

The public execution of Rodrigo Calderón in October 1621 was, in the words of the newswriter Andrés de Almansa y Mendoza, “the most famous day this century has seen.” Almansa was not alone. Many other accounts confirm the awe that the event instilled in its contemporaries. An important noble, Calderón had for many years been secretary to King Philip III and a relevant figure at the Spanish Court. Accused of different crimes (embezzlement, murder, and conspiracy, among others), he had been sentenced to have his throat sliced open in Madrid’s main square, the Plaza Mayor. People of all ranks crowded the streets to witness the spectacle, which fit contemporary understandings of tragedies as stories of rise and fall—prosperous and adverse fortune. Nothing pleased Spaniards more than theater. Calderón’s performance that day (saintly, silent, self-possessed) exceeded all expectations.¹

Dramatic as it was, Don Rodrigo’s fate was anything but unexpected. He had been imprisoned since February 1619, and for more than two years the public had been closely following his story through the mixture of gossip, satire, and news that made up the Madrilenian public sphere. The popular image of the secretary had been dominated by a surge of clandestine, slanderous libels intent on perpetuating his reputation as a crooked minister, a serial embezzler, a king charmer, and a queen poisoner. Satirists demanded his head in the name of justice. This *décima* from 1620, attributed by some to Don Juan de Tassis, Count of Villamediana, is just one of many:

*Goodbye, title flying in the wind,
bogus gentleman of sham,*

*quintessence of evil charm;
I already smell you rot.
Write your testament, do, go.
Give all your wealth to the king
and your throat to the executioner,
and when nothing else is left
give up your corpse to the gallows
and your glory we will sing.²*

If the variants, circulation in newsletters, and number of preserved copies of these satires are indications of popularity, the public seemed eager to see Don Rodrigo die. King Philip III seemed to have protected his former secretary from this fate, but, when the king died, the new government, looking to gain the people's favor, pressed the judges to issue an exemplary, spectacular sentence. Events, however, took an unexpected turn on the day of the execution. Don Rodrigo's dramatic staging of Christian contrition and tragic acceptance served to instantly rehabilitate his image. Suddenly, the public sympathized with the scapegoat and turned against the new favorites, whose reputation would never recover.³ It was indeed a remarkable day.

Calderón's tragic fate and exemplary death was immediately memorialized in newsletters and poems. The Count of Villamediana summarized it, "Behold this man, who at the top of his fortune / could not restrain himself or his fate. / When alive, he seemed to deserve death. / When dying, he seemed to deserve life."⁴ This sudden turn of opinion compelled a fellow poet, Don Francisco de Quevedo, to compose an epitaph, reflecting on the power of satire. From the scaffold Don Rodrigo cautioned the new royal favorites—those responsible for his death—against "crocodile" poets who, like Villamediana, "shed tears for the death of those who they eat alive." Presciently, he warned the ministers that "every favorite will in the end meet his poet": "Those who enjoy the royal favor, / ponder my story in awe; / beware the poetry / that smoothly becomes law."⁵ The idea that satire could destroy someone's reputation was commonplace, but what Quevedo was reacting to was something new: the power of satire to dictate a government's actions, to "become law."

This book traces that power back to the emergence of a new political actor: the *vulgo novelero* (news crowd), or *vulgo* for short—the in-part physical, in-part virtual association of people who regularly consumed political information in the form of gossip, newsletters, satires, and other media.

Today we would have called it *the public*. With its central institution in the so-called *mentideros* (liars' walks) of downtown Madrid, the emergence of the vulgo novelero seriously disrupted political life, as we will see.⁶ But the vulgo was not a political community in the traditional sense. As Calderón's story shows, its political power was paradoxical: it resided not in its capacity for collective action but on spectatorship. It subjected authorities to scrutiny that they were not used to, looking under the ceremonial trappings of majesty for the less flattering reality of government. This spectatorship was, in addition, shared among members of different ranks, orders, and estates, compromising a political culture of communication that had no place for this sort of horizontal publicness (subjects were not supposed to share complaints about the government with other subjects).

Whereas other seventeenth-century European societies were famously engaged in more traditional conflicts concerning the limits of power and consent, Madrilenians saw themselves immersed in a new form of publicness in which the key matter of contention was the poetics of the political process: who controlled the narrative, how meaning was assigned to events, and what genre articulations dictated expectations. By studying popular reactions to satire and other media (newsletters, sermons, spectacles), *Beware the Poetry* shows how writers, the vulgo, and the government engaged in a novel public sphere that transformed poetry into a powerful and unpredictable political force. Madrilenians missed their seventeenth-century revolution, but, as a vulgo novelero, they transformed the political structure as much as the revolutionary crowds of London, Paris, Lisbon, or Barcelona.

THE GREAT STAGE OF THE WORLD: POETICS OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE

This study is based on an exhaustive series of more than four hundred satires written between 1595 and 1643 and collected from different historical sources: mostly *cancioneros* (manuscript collections of poetry) and miscellanies of *papeles curiosos* (political curios) but also newsletters and diplomatic documentation.⁷ I analyze these poems chronologically and side by side other media (newsletters, plays, sermons, pamphlets, and manifestos) and archival documents, situating them in their cultural, literary, and political context. Why satires interested the public, how and why that interest changed over time, how the public and the satirists influenced each other, and how that exchange affected political life are the central concerns of this book.

In their vast majority, the *sátiras* that are the subject of this study were poems similar to those suffered by Don Rodrigo and about which Quevedo cautioned: brief, clandestine, slanderous epigrams directed against members of the government with the intention of damaging their reputation, influencing the public, and convincing the king to act against the current favorite. Some poems were longer, and a few satires were written in prose, but they all tended to be more scandalous than ingenious. Because of this, some contemporaries would call them *coplas*, *libelos*, or *pasquines* rather than *sátiras*. *Copla* was a term for popular poetry of various kinds, not necessarily slanderous, but because political satires were always very vulgar, the name seemed to fit them well. *Libelo* was a legal rather than literary term: the crime of publicly harming someone's honor in written form. *Pasquín* was a term borrowed from papal Rome, where it was used for the libelous writings regularly posted on a public statue popularly known as Pasquino. In Spain the word usually referred to a form of publication (a slanderous text posted in a public place) rather than a genre, but it sometimes was used as a synonym of libel. The term *sátira*, on the other hand, had classical connotations and was often reserved for articulate critiques of morality that followed classical models and reprehended abuses in general without targeting concrete individuals. Romans did not consider slanderous poetry *satúra* but *libelli famosi*. But because some classical satires did in fact name individuals and used vulgar, abusive language (for example, Juvenal), the difference between satires and poetic libels was tenuous. To many *satiric* was synonymous with *biting*, which made libelous poems satiric, if not satires proper. In this book I use the terms *satires* and *libels* interchangeably, unless I enter into more specialized discussions of poetic genre. The term *epigrams* (brief, witty poems) would technically fit this kind of literature as well, although contemporaries did not use it much for slanderous poems.⁸

The word *political*, on the other hand, had in the seventeenth-century different connotations than today, and perhaps we shouldn't call these poems *political* satires but, as contemporaries did, satires *against the government* (*contra el gobierno*), by which they often meant against *members* of the government.⁹ For the purpose of this book and to avoid repetition, I call them *political* or *antigovernment* indistinctly, *political* meaning that they attacked individuals with political authority, not that they exposed complex political ideologies. Their explicit business was vilification, not argumentation. Short poems served the purpose well. Longer ones usually just served to prolong the insults.

This literature was typically anonymous and clandestine. In a few cases we can ascertain authorship, either because other sources help determine the identity of the poet or because the text hints at its author's social provenance. Although these satires often adopted a low poetic style and claimed to be the voice of the people, it seems unlikely that any of the surviving examples were written by commoners of low extraction, with a few possible exceptions. Most, if not all, were written by members of the privileged classes (nobles and clergy) with a vested interest in courtly politics. Craftspeople, shopkeepers, soldiers, and servants certainly enjoyed antigovernment libels and participated in their circulation, but, if they engaged in the business of composing their own, as perhaps they did, their compositions seem to sadly have left no trace, except for a few doubtful exceptions.¹⁰

Political satires were sometimes posted at night as pasquinades in the most public spaces of the city (sometimes at the gates of the royal palace), on a few occasions accompanied by allegorical caricatures that, except for one, have not survived but of which there are some descriptions. Circulation, however, was mostly oral rather than written, thanks to the epigrammatic forms that it preferred, like the ten-line, octosyllabic *décima*, relatively easy to memorize and, we can assume, sing. The manuscript versions that have survived and that we can study today are just the final phase of circulation, when poetry aficionados decided to put the satire down in writing.¹¹

Because of their nature, their number, and the fact that they form a long, uninterrupted series, satires are a great window into the life of the Madrileñan public, but, on their own, the view they offer is partial. They need contextualization to understand their reception and circulation, their impact, and the way in which they responded to and interacted with events and other media. A source that in other cases has greatly illuminated the life of satire is police investigations of political libels.¹² In early modernity police authorities were in charge of curtailing seditious speech, a very serious crime against the sacred office of sovereignty. They had spies and reporters and persecuted antigovernment libels and their authors. In Madrid the job was in the hands of the Sala de Alcaldes (Hall of Justices), with jurisdiction over the royal court and its environment. Unfortunately, its documentation was sold as "old paper" in the early 1800s, leaving historians of early modern Madrid without the key source to reconstruct justice, policing, and crime in the city, including investigations and trials regarding seditious writings, with a few felicitous exceptions.¹³ Inquisition proceedings

do not contain much valuable information in this regard either, because inquisitors did not have jurisdiction over this kind of crime.

But other sources can help us contextualize the circulation of satires: a large number of newsletters (*avisos*) has survived, covering different periods. These letters reported the news of the court to people who resided elsewhere and wished to stay informed for social, professional, or political reasons or just out of curiosity. They were typically private, handwritten, and periodical. Because these *avisos* often took pride in commenting on not just political events but also gossip and the occasional satire, they are a key source to reconstruct the Madrilenian public sphere. Ambassadors also occasionally reported on rumors and popular opinions, although their main focus was on the court, not on the mentideros. Writers and intellectuals reflected on the new phenomenon of the vulgo novelero, as did the Count-Duke of Olivares, favorite and first minister to Philip IV and a keen observer and articulate thinker. Their writings serve us too to measure the effects that the emerging public had on political life.

Particularly important for this study are the shifts in satiric production (the styles, waves, and cycles of the genre) and the manner in which these shifts reflected, refracted, or helped to shape political events, cultural fashions, or public moods. This is a history of the writing and reading of satires and of the negotiations between satirists, the vulgo, and the government as they navigated the uncharted territory of a new culture of publicness. This book covers this development between approximately 1595, when political libels reemerged in the Spanish Court after more than one century of virtual absence, and 1643, when the Count-Duke of Olivares fell in the midst of a strong satirical campaign against him. This chronology allows us to trace the emergence of the genre and its relationship with the public sphere throughout two political crises: that of 1618–21 (the crisis of the Sandovals' regime) and that of 1640–43 (the crisis of Olivares's)—a full political cycle with many shifts and internal developments, crucial in the crystallization of the vulgo novelero as an important political factor.

I am not the first to study seventeenth-century political satires or to notice shifts in their production. In the 1970s Teófanés Egido described changes in the content, style, and tone of early modern Spanish libels, identifying different cycles and associating them to government changes. He explained the dramatic increase in satiric production in the early 1600s as a result of a gradual growth in the “weight of public opinion,” which he associated in turn to the emergence of the royal favorites: lacking institutional definition, these favorites “needed the support of the people as well as the

always precarious trust of the monarch."¹⁴ Stylistic changes were, according to Egido, a result of authorship: the Count of Villamediana marked the poetry directed against the Duke of Lerma, Rodrigo Calderón, and other ministers of Philip III, whereas Francisco de Quevedo lent his style to the campaign against the Count-Duke of Olivares (favorite to Philip IV). But focused more on the politics than the poetics of public opinion, Egido did not really pay much attention to stylistic changes or, in fact, to authorship itself. For example, although many collectors attributed numerous anti-government libels of the 1630s to Quevedo, he wrote just one (*La Hora de todos*, ca. 1635)—and this he took care not to make public.¹⁵ As shown in chapter 4, the credit for the flavor of the satires of the period 1627–45 must be given to the anonymous clergy who resorted to poetry in their campaign against Olivares.

Building on the pioneering work of Egido and other scholars, like Mercedes Etreros or, more recently, Shai Cohen, this study revisits themes like the content, style, authorship, and reception of antigovernment satire, adding a micro approach that examines not the genre as a whole but its inflections over time.¹⁶ Read diachronically, the evolving collection of satires reveals not just the opinions of the poets but something far more difficult to reconstruct: the shifting demands, interests, uncertainties, and worldviews of the audience—that is, the structure and dynamics of Madrid's emerging public sphere. The satiric production of the period can be divided into three distinct phases: 1595–1618, 1618–27, and 1627–43, which do not entirely coincide with Egido's cycles or with changes in government. The first cycle, which I study in chapter 2, coincides with a sudden increase in the number of satires. This shift can be attributed, as Egido noted, to the emergence of the figure of the favorite minister. But during those years satire did not have much presence in the public sphere. Only in 1618, with the fall of the Duke of Lerma, did libels become a significant phenomenon in terms of number, publicness, and political impact—which explains Quevedo's surprise about the power of satires in 1621. This shift had less to do with Villamediana's resentment against Lerma than with the vulgo's demand and the poetics of the public sphere. As chapters 2 and 3 demonstrate, satires began to play a significant role in the public sphere only when satirists were able to present their libels as part of the *comedia* that the political public of Madrid, constituted as a theatrical audience, perceived politics to be. After 1627, with the involvement of the church, the poetics of the public sphere became *satiric* and, ultimately, *carnivalesque*, as I analyze in chapters 4 through 7.

By “poetics of the public sphere” I refer to the narrative frameworks that underlay perceptions of political events and to the ways in which political utterances (such as satires) fit but also shift those frameworks. Then, as now, the public tended to perceive political events as part of larger stories that gave those events meaning. Those stories responded to narrative structures not dissimilar to those of contemporary literary genres. People who went to the theater or read novels or epics tended naturally to use the poetics of those genres to organize their perceptions of their everyday reality. This book takes seriously the imbrication between literature and reality that books like *Don Quixote* or plays like Calderón’s *The Great Stage of the World* posed as characteristic of their world. *Beware the Poetry* shows that to understand the nature of the public sphere in early modern Spain, it is important to attend to the poetics of culture and to the key role that antigovernment libels played.

“THEY SPEAK FREELY OF THE AFFAIRS OF THEIR GOVERNMENT”: THE
EARLY-MODERN PUBLIC SPHERE

In 1975 José Antonio Maravall noticed the importance of public opinion in seventeenth-century Spain. He described how “this concern for politics, which in the sixteenth century had been inherent in the conversations and writings of high bureaucrats, scholars, gentlemen, people of the court, and prominent persons, had become generalized, democratized, had come to be a common pastime. People spoke publicly and, considering themselves capable of doing so, critiqued the administration of those in control.”¹⁷ Influenced by the experience of Francoist authoritarian propaganda, for Maravall, baroque culture was a hegemonic construction whose goal was to suffocate this background of generalized political criticism.

But the debate about the historical nature of publicness to which this book is a contribution has become more complex in subsequent years. It is now generally agreed that the public sphere is historical and that we must not naturalize our modern assumptions about public opinion and project them back in time. People have always had thoughts about their rulers and made those opinions known to others and, frequently, to those in power as well. Authorities have in turn always been curious about what their subjects thought of them to ignore them, silence them, or respond to them. But the nature and articulation of all those exchanges vary greatly across time and do not necessarily follow the principles of our modern public sphere.

The book that started the conversation was Jürgen Habermas's *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962), which focuses on the historical conditions under which our modern practices regarding public opinion emerged and could function. According to Habermas, the public sphere, as we know it, appeared in late seventeenth-century England and somewhat later in other European countries. This modern public sphere was (and still is) the abstract space where members of civil society (subjects who, deprived of any official responsibility by the absolutist state, focused on their private businesses) discussed public matters and expressed political desires and opinions, thus acquiring a new form of political power alternative and complementary to that of the state. Habermas calls this kind of publicness "bourgeois," not, as some critics believe, because its members belong only to the bourgeoisie (it is clear to him that clergy and aristocrats also participated) but because he considers that the novel kind of subjectivity crucial to its emergence was related to mercantilism and different from that of clergy and nobles.

Before the bourgeois public sphere, Habermas says, there had existed other regimes of political communication, although he cautions that the term *public sphere* might not be the best because, even if political communication could be considered a public affair, it was not organized in terms of a public. Habermas identifies and describes two of those regimes: the publicness of the ancient Greek polis and the publicness of European feudalism. The latter he calls, somewhat obscurely, "representative publicness" and characterizes it as fragmented in multiple overlapping spheres of lordship and jurisdiction. Early modern publicness is to him just an inflection of the feudal, representative regime, altered by the emergence of absolutism but still premodern. In the introduction to the second German edition of the book (unfortunately never translated into English), Habermas acknowledges at least one other form of publicness in medieval and early modern Europe: a "plebeian publicness" that, he states, is convincingly described in the works of Mikhail Bakhtin and E. P. Thompson.¹⁸ Habermas thus leaves the door open to the possibility of other kinds of historical forms of publicness, in the past, present, and future.

Beware the Poetry accepts Habermas's invitation and argues that seventeenth-century Madrilénians organized their publicness according to a different kind of regime, not bourgeois, feudal, or plebeian. "Public sphere" is not an inappropriate label because it was organized around *a* public—not what we call *the* public, but a political public nonetheless. Contemporaries referred to it as the *vulgo novelero*, meaning by *vulgo* not that its

members were lowborn (although some were) but that it was a disorderly association incapable of proper judgment. The vulgo novelero was a fluid association of people from different ranks: nobles, clergy, and commoners (women seem to have been excluded of this news sociability, though). What brought together this heterogeneous mass was a shared interest in news, gossip, and political information. As I elaborate in chapter 1, the news crowd was not unlike the theatrical vulgo—the hard-to-please audience of commercial theater, equally fluid, heterogeneous, and rowdy. The vulgo novelero met regularly in the mentideros of Madrid, loosely connected public spaces that received their name because, so went the joke, “the news preceded the events.”¹⁹

In this book the public sphere is local (Madrid). This might seem a departure from the convention that sees the public sphere as a national phenomenon. But before the newspaper and the printing press could really bring a national public together in the eighteenth century, the scene of public life was the town or the city. The publicness that I describe here was oral rather than written, depending much on face-to-face exchanges (the famous *corrillo*, or “huddle”). Although private newsletters transmitted the news between Madrid and other cities, like Seville, the core of the *tarabilla* (tittle-tattle) remained in the capital. The public that political satirists, for instance, aimed to reach was the Madrilenian one. The early modern public sphere was local before it became national.

The emergence of the vulgo novelero in Madrid was not an isolated phenomenon. Throughout Europe a new culture of publicness and political communication appeared during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. The international circulation of news grew exponentially, generating professionals, institutions, and audiences interested in local and foreign political life. Commenting on this phenomenon, Habermas remarks that it did not yet qualify as a structural change of publicness. According to him, only in the late seventeenth century, once bourgeois readership was in place, did newspapers become crucial to the transformation of the public sphere.²⁰ But a significant number of scholars have suggested that already in the decades around 1600 the conditions of political communication were changing significantly. A new culture of publicness was emerging that engaged not just the traditional elites but commoners as well. C. John Sommerville has spoken of a “news revolution.”²¹

Parallel to the news, the early 1600s saw a remarkable growth in the production and consumption of other media such as pamphlets, broadsheets, placards, satires, manifestos, and proclamations. Many circulated

in manuscript form not because they were intended for privacy (although they sometimes were) but because they were illegal. In the seventeenth century, manuscripts were still a common form of publication.²² Gossip and collective reading compensated for the limited number of copies, as attested by the circulation of political satires. Whereas the public sphere envisioned by enlightened philosophers in the 1700s relied on writing and the printing press as a means to restrict participation to the formally educated, the rowdier publicness of the early 1600s seemed to have valued the orality, conversation, and physical presence of the *mentideros*.²³

This drastic transformation of political communication, which can be dated to roughly the decades between 1580 and 1620, has prompted different interpretations. The simplest one argues that, contrary to what Habermas seems to maintain, there was in fact a public sphere since at least 1600. One problem with this argument is that Habermas, as we have seen, never denies the existence of publicness before the eighteenth century. What he claims is that its structure was entirely different from the bourgeois model, independent of its scale. Thus, merely pointing at the existence of political publicness in the early seventeenth century, no matter how vibrant it was, does not necessarily contradict Habermas, as long as the argument does not articulate a peculiar regime of communication and demonstrate that it was indeed “bourgeois,” or at least that it was neither “representative” nor “plebeian.” These historians, however, have tended to avoid theoretical elaboration, focusing instead on describing the phenomenon and emphasizing its scale.²⁴

Other scholars have accepted the theoretical debate. Of particular significance is the work of a group of historians of early Stuart England, spearheaded by people like Peter Lake, Thomas Cogswell, and, more recently, Alastair Bellany. Building on three decades of scholarship on political culture and communication, these authors have reconstructed the vibrant public sphere of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, where political and religious factions fought, negotiated, and defined their differences through the use of pamphlets, satires, sermons, news, and other media. This new regime of publicness transformed England by opening new arenas of political struggle and by drawing new actors and popular audiences into them. The consequence and climax of this “post-Reformation public sphere,” as Peter Lake and Steve Pincus label it, was the English Civil War—a war as much of armies as of pamphlets.²⁵ As they suggest, the model might be of use for other European cases, such as the explosion of contentious political publicity during the French Wars of Religion,

which continued under Louis XIII and—like in England—climaxed during the Frondes with that hodgepodge of satires, pamphlets, manifestos, and weaponized newsletters collectively known as *Mazarinades*.²⁶ The Holy Roman Empire and other societies with a similar level of post-Reformation conflict also seem to fit the model.

But what about those countries characterized by a lack of political and religious contentiousness or that did not experience generalized rebellions during the mid-seventeenth century? In Castile, for example, there never was a substantial Protestant movement, and, although constitutional struggles were far from absent, they didn't generate open conflict but were channeled through regular institutions. Famously missing its 1640s revolution, Castile's political contentions never led to the collapse of the political system.²⁷ Its publicness, however, experienced a substantial transformation equivalent to those of France or England during the early seventeenth century: Castilians of all ranks, no less than their French or English counterparts, developed an enormous appetite for news and antigovernment satires and loved to keep themselves up to date regarding courtly scandals and political developments—and to talk about it all.²⁸ Filippo De Vivo has vividly described another noncontentious society: Venice, equally transfixed by news and political gossip.²⁹ What should we do with those cases regarding early modern publicness?

In his study De Vivo suggests a different model for approaching the phenomenon. Rather than a single public sphere, he maintains that, when analyzing the circulation of political information in early modern societies, we should distinguish three circles: the government, the political arena, and the city. Although distinctively different, these three circles were neither isolated nor necessarily opposed but instead tightly interconnected in a sort of communication triangle.³⁰ The government was formed by those who actually enjoyed formal political power and participated directly in decision making. The political arena corresponded to political actors who, without formally being part of the government, were close to it in different capacities (public officials, influential people, diplomats, confidants, informers, servants, and spies)—close enough, that is, to obtain classified information and use it for their own agendas. The city was the rest, the common people who, while excluded from the government and its immediate circles, heard the news and partook in political gossip. De Vivo's model antagonizes Habermas's: instead of a single public sphere, we have a triangle; instead of binary opposition between the state and the public sphere, there were multilayered negotiations; instead

of “bourgeois,” Venice’s publicness was heterogeneous and inclusive (barbers were active members of this culture of publicness); and instead of rational and organized, it was boisterous and messy.

At any rate De Vivo’s book is a masterful description of one such model of publicness. Patricians, supposedly dedicated to maintaining harmony, leaked information as leverage in bitter partisan rivalries. The government, devoted to secrecy, issued significant amounts of propaganda, while spies ran up and down the halls and corners of the city, and ambassadors disseminated rumors. Secret police officers hunted down spies, leakers, gossipers, and news traffickers, and barbers and apothecaries transformed their shops into stable centers of news mongering. People of all backgrounds, high and low, met in squares, taverns, and marketplaces because, as a Polish Jew living in Venice said, “in such places they speak freely of the affairs of their government.”³¹ Scholars of the early seventeenth century can certainly recognize much of what De Vivo describes for Venice in other urban centers throughout Europe, be they contentious or noncontentious: it fits London as much as Madrid.

Beware the Poetry contributes to this debate with a different model of the early modern public sphere. I argue that the Madrilenian vulgo novelero did not correspond to Lake and Pincus’s post-Reformation public sphere, De Vivo’s communication triangle, or Habermas’s possible models for early modern publicness (bourgeois, representative, or plebeian). But although I depart from Habermas’s historical reconstruction, my book looks back to his work in its attention to something that other historians of early modern publicness have for the most part neglected: the importance of subjectivity.³² I analyze the unpredictable interactions between satires, news, plays, sermons, and other media and the effect this new “media ecology” had on the spectators’ understanding of themselves vis-à-vis other individuals. Just as Habermas considers the role that novels and art played in the emergence of the bourgeois public sphere, I pay attention to satire and political gossip as pleasurable, shared experiences and to the impact that this new culture of publicness had on political life.³³

“REJOICE IN THIS WORLD”: THE PLEASURE OF POLITICS

Despite the conflicts and factionalism underlying the republic’s pretended serenity, De Vivo acknowledges that Venetian politics were ultimately uncontentious. As in Madrid between 1600 and 1660, there were in Venice no major political riots.³⁴ This is in stark contrast to similar European

capitals like London and Paris (or, within the Spanish monarchy, Barcelona, Lisbon, or Naples), which during that period went aflame in revolution. De Vivo's triangular model is, however, no less focused on politics than the post-Reformation public sphere: in both information *is* politics. If, in the latter, information shapes and galvanizes collective action and large-scale conflict, the former focuses on granular politics: information matters for the practical value it possesses for individuals. The political use that information had for governments and patricians is easy to understand. Invested in actionable political agendas, information to them was crucial for action. In the case of English commoners, invited to religious and constitutional agitation, the news, satires and propaganda informed their allegiances and actions. But De Vivo insists that, despite Venetian commoners' formal lack of political power, information was for them too primarily of practical, political value.

Merchants, for example, needed information regarding wars to make their trade calculations. More surprisingly, De Vivo demonstrates in an analytical tour de force that barbers and apothecaries were professionally invested in news trafficking as a strategy to attract clients to their shops. The stereotype of barbershops as sites of popular "reason of State" was no myth at all. Given that their prices were set by the government, and they could not compete by lowering them, barbers and apothecaries opted for attracting potential customers to their shops by offering the hottest, most classified news. Although De Vivo acknowledges that not only utility but pleasure too mattered in political communication, particularly at the lower levels of the social scale, he dismisses the idea, widespread at the time, that leisure was what moved people without government responsibilities to engage in political gossip. According to De Vivo, this was a classist belief: rulers and patricians, portraying the common good as their monopoly, dismissed popular interest in politics as lazy, unproductive pleasure. Yet many of the Venetian *popolani* (commoners) interrogated by the Inquisition of State—in charge of investigating illicit traffic of governmental information—indicated that entertainment was a crucial aspect of engaging in news mongering. For instance, those who wanted to deny their involvement in political gossip emphasized that they took "no pleasure in the news," indicating indirectly that pleasure was in fact widely understood to be an important—even sufficient—motivation for political communication not only by those in power but by common citizens as well.³⁵

Not only commoners emphasized entertainment as the main reason to stay abreast of gossip. At the time Rodrigo Calderón was in prison and

the Madrilenian mentideros thrived in news and satires, Don Luis Dávalos urged his Sevillian friend Don Juan de Vera to “rush and come [to Madrid] if you want to rejoice in this world, where people use to hear, see and talk with more liberty than ever before.”³⁶ Appealing to Vera’s desire to entertain himself with political scandals was thought as sufficient reason to make him change his residence. As we will see in chapter 4, Vera was a member of the “political arena” (ambitious and well connected), and yet he seems to have thought of gossip mostly as pleasure. Why then dismiss leisure and entertainment as central to the public sphere? Why just attend to the pragmatic side of politics as the post-Reformation model and De Vivo’s triangle do? The reason probably lies in a widespread assumption of politics as an inherently practical realm, where groups and individuals use information to strategize their actions. Places like the public sphere serve to acquire and deploy that information. This paradigm leaves little or no room to account for nonpragmatic actions, such as “mere” entertainment. Pleasure can at any rate be an appendix to the political substance of information, a surplus neither required nor necessary—and it certainly cannot be the main reason why people engage in political communication. It can be the coating of the pill, but what matters is the pill, not the coating. Thus, scholars tend to consider pleasurable news mongering as an irrational activity—exactly like those patricians that dismissed as lazy those plebeians they saw as wasting their time in unproductive gossip. The only difference is that scholars opt not to see plebeians as irrational and therefore invest them with pragmatic political interests, explaining away their love of news.

Media scholars, however, have long known that entertainment is a fundamental motivation in the audience’s engagement in daily news reading—for many, even more important than political utility.³⁷ As this book argues, the Madrilenian “news crowd” of the early 1600s was moved *primarily* by the pleasure political information gave them, not by the practical use they could find for it. The political public was thus very similar in attitude to the audiences of popular entertainment with which it overlapped: the theatrical vulgo or the readership of commercial fiction. The mentidero was seen as a perfect substitute for an afternoon at the playhouse—and equally entertaining.³⁸ This would explain why scandalous rumors and libels known to be exaggerations or downright falsehoods were equally newsworthy. The very name *walk of lies* did not seem to bother the public; on the contrary, they celebrated it as a matter of ironic pride—a motive for constant joking. The uncertain truthfulness of news added to

rather than detracted from their appeal, as we will see in chapter 1. This casts into doubt the utilitarian side of Madrid's popular news culture: no serious political actor would want to base their actions on potentially false information. People in the political arena knew well to avoid the *mentideros* when looking for veridical information, although seeding rumors and keeping abreast of popular opinions were certainly useful for political maneuvering.

During the 1630s the Tuscan embassy in Madrid divided their collecting and reporting of information. While the ambassador focused on the government and the political arena (courtiers, counselors, officials, other diplomats), his secretary, Bernardo Monanni, was to visit San Felipe and other *mentideros* and report on gossip. The weekly reports were consequentially divided: the ambassador wrote the traditional and formal *dispacci* (dispatches), while Monanni sent more relaxed and tongue-in-cheek *avvisi* (newsletters). *Dispacci* only rarely reported on popular gossip, satires, or scandals—just when they were significant enough to merit political attention.³⁹ In a world of statesmen for whom sovereignty operated under the principle of secrecy (*arcana imperii*, or “secret of the state”), popular opinions could be seen as politically irrelevant.⁴⁰ Monanni's *avvisi* were thus written to satisfy not the duke's pragmatic need for political information but his *curiosity*: “His highness [the grand duke] is very curious about *avvisi*, and he wants secretary Monanni to send a page with those of San Felipe every time that your illustrious signoria [the ambassador] write [the *dispacci*].”⁴¹

Contemporaries used the word *curiosity* (a term on the rise in seventeenth-century Europe) to refer, among other meanings, to a general interest in political gossip. Revealingly, curiosity also described the appeal of fictional literature. The curious reader (*lector curioso*) was also a leisurely reader (*lector ocioso*): interest in fiction was divorced from social or professional obligations (for example, merchants who loved chivalric romance or nobles fascinated by picaresque exploits).⁴² The politically curious (the typical reader of newsletters or the frequenter of the *mentideros* from which they originated) could thus be defined as someone whose interest in political information was in no way related to social or professional needs. It was a leisurely interest. We can thus aptly describe curiosity as an *aesthetic attitude*—a nonpragmatic, “disinterested” interest.⁴³ To many Madrilénians politics appeared as a spectacle, a drama, a subject of aesthetic judgment, and not as a utilitarian field of action or participation. We need to study the poetics rather than the politics of their

public sphere: by analyzing the poetic categories and structures (that is, the horizon of expectations) through which a political public apprehends the world, we are closer to understanding how their members think and feel and how their opinions are formed.⁴⁴

The concept of aesthetics is thus crucial to this book. By *aesthetic* I do not mean a synonym for art. The aesthetic is not a quality of an object but of the attitude with which a person considers that object. Art is very often approached, even if inadvertently, in a pragmatic manner. In those cases, such as games of social distinction, art cannot be considered aesthetic.⁴⁵ A piece of art becomes an aesthetic object only when seen non-pragmatically. By that same measure, any object can become aesthetic: a landscape, a storm, or even a battle can be appreciated as spectacles rather than as objects with social and material consequences. But equally important to the concept of aesthetics is the fact that it implies a particular kind of sociability. Aesthetics is not synonymous with individual taste. There is a difference between deriving individual pleasure from an experience and the notion that this experience must be a general one. When we say that something *is* beautiful or suspenseful, we are ascribing that experience to others as well (this must be beautiful or suspenseful to everyone). Unlike opinions of taste, aesthetic judgments thus require a notion of common sense; they can be subject to communication and debate and therefore presuppose a particular kind of sociability.⁴⁶ The aesthetic implies not just a particular kind of subjectivity but also a peculiar kind of intersubjectivity: the communication of our nonutilitarian judgments about objects to other subjects also considered in a nonutilitarian manner.⁴⁷ Aesthetics is thus as important a social force as interest or identity, although it operates in a different dimension. Just as interests and identities are the cement of communities, the aesthetic attitude is the social glue of publics.

THE VULGO NOVELERO: A POLITICAL PUBLIC

Beware the Poetry poses that Madrid's vulgo novelero of the early 1600s was a public and behaved like one. According to Michael Warner, "publics are queer creatures. You cannot point to them. . . . You also cannot easily avoid them." I argue that one way of understanding publics is as associations situated between two kinds of collectives easier to pinpoint: audiences (groups of disconnected people who individually consume a given cultural product) and communities (groups bonded together by a collective identity). Examples of an audience would be readers of the same book that never talk to

one another or moviegoers who watch their movie in silence and then go home. Examples of communities would be social or political movements, churches, or nations. Publics share elements with both but are ultimately different. Like audiences, publics are groups of people with a common interest in a cultural good (a book, a genre, a performance), but, unlike audiences and like communities, members are connected to one another: they talk and share their experiences. Unlike communities, though, the connection among them is not cemented in identity. Examples of publics are book clubs, science-fiction aficionados chatting over the internet, random people at a bar enjoying a televised football match together—associations that do not extend beyond the object of their interest and that are neither born from nor crystalize into a strong collective identity. Publics could be aptly described as transient communities of strangers.⁴⁸

The relationship between publics and communities is complex. Under what conditions one type of association can turn into the other or how exactly publics and communities interact with each other are topics for future research. For the purpose of this book, suffice to say, although certainly overlapping and interconnected, they are different kinds of human associations, operate under different logics, and have different social functions. *Beware the Poetry* focuses on a public that did not, for the period under consideration, become a community.

Paul Yachnin and the scholars that he brought together in 2005 under the Making Publics: Media, Markets, and Association in Early Modern Europe project (MaPs) have convincingly argued that publics were “transformative . . . of the cultural and social life of early modern Europe,” when “public making was enabled by new media and new cultural forms and was nested in an emerging market in cultural goods.”⁴⁹ The project has focused mostly on literary, theatrical, artistic, and intellectual publics. *Beware the Poetry*’s contribution is to add politics to that list by describing and theorizing a new kind of public: political publics.

Unlike literature, theater, or art, considering politics, a realm of action and praxis, from the perspective of making publics might be counterintuitive. But let’s remember that it is not the object itself but the attitude toward it that makes the public. The same good, let’s say, chivalric romances, can be the focus of an audience (readers of the romances who experience their pleasure in private and do not talk to one another about it); a community (the nobility, for whom chivalric literature was seen from the pragmatic perspective of its role in the ideological reproduction of the class); or a public (a rural gentleman, a priest, and a barber discussing the pleasures

of romances or a group of harvesters, an innkeeper, his wife and daughter, and random travelers together envisioning the imaginary worlds that chivalric adventures open for them).⁵⁰ What makes the public is not the interest in romances per se but the shared, aesthetic, nonpragmatic attitude with which a group of readers considers both the romances and their fellow readers. That attitude is not a given and might be the result of the social, physical, and cultural contexts in which the good is consumed; the circumstances of the individual readers; or the particular craft of the good itself. It follows that when the attitude is there, *any* cultural product can be conducive to making publics. This book argues that, under the peculiar circumstances of Madrid in the early decades of the seventeenth century, politics became such a product, and people developed a shared aesthetic attitude toward political life and so became a public: the *ulgo novelero*.

A political public is an association of people who share an aesthetic attitude toward political life. Politics appear to the members of that public primarily as a spectacle. It is therefore different from a political community, for whom politics is a pragmatic realm in which to defend views, interests, and identity. Thus, whereas political communities actively participate in politics, political publics do not. To them politics is open to judgment and criticism but closed to collective action. Publics, as such, do not stage demonstrations, riots, or revolutions. Theirs is “poetic world making,” not political.⁵¹ When the police show up, communities stand their ground, whereas publics disband—to reappear somewhere else. This might explain why Madrilenians did not revolt in the 1630s and 1640s when political discontent was great and the circumstances seemed propitious, whereas Londoners or Barcelonians did, under similar circumstances. The latter constituted communities, the former a public.

Political satires in this book are thus seen as components of the aestheticizing of Madrilenian politics rather than as the companion of rebellion, as contemporary observers and modern scholars suggest.⁵² Political mobilization does not automatically follow opinion. It requires the pre-existence of a political community that can mediate between individual opinion and collective action. And, as I will argue, although satire as a genre can reinforce preexisting communities, it is ill-suited to generate collective identification and therefore communities. It is good, however, at making publics.

But to analyze the Madrid news crowd as a public is not to downplay their political relevance or to present Madrilenians as politically stagnant. While publics are not active political collectives, their individual

members can actively participate in politics as part of other communities. The Madrilenian public was constituted by nobles, clergy, merchants, and craftspeople who had their own communities and political institutions through which they could participate in the political process. On the other hand, and perhaps more important, publics do what communities can't: whereas communities reproduce themselves, publics reimagine the world. Political publics might not collectively participate in political life, but they impact it indirectly, as associations of critical spectators who recreate politics. By emphasizing the aesthetic foundations of the Madrilenian vulgo novelero in the early seventeenth century, I hope to show how, in an indirect, mediated, nonutilitarian manner, a new kind of early modern publicness transformed the social and political order in a more substantive way perhaps than rebellions and straightforward political activities ever could. According to the ghost of Rodrigo Calderón, poetry, not revolution, was the fate of Spanish favorites. But between the poets and the government stood the public, as arbiter of the duel. Scrutiny is tough for politicians (and communities) to reckon with. Never again would Spanish sovereigns escape either the whip of the satirists or the intense, constant, uncomfortable gaze of the vulgo novelero. If they were to survive, they would have to adapt. And as this book shows, when they failed, they suffered.

Beware the Poetry is divided in two parts, according to the poetics of Madrilenian politics—a theatrical phase first, until 1627, and then a carnivalesque one. Chapter 1 proposes that the court's settlement in Madrid in 1561 erased the town's political community and presents the emergence of the vulgo novelero as a reaction to the government's attempt to shape Madrilenians into the court's ritual audience. I argue that the news vulgo modeled itself after the theatrical vulgo (the public of commercial theaters), both being undisciplined forms of spectatorship. Filling the void left by the collapse of the old civic identity, the vulgo became a substitute political embodiment of Madrid. The chapter studies its central institutions (the mentideros), its constituents, and the vibrant, unruly news culture that crystallized around them.

Chapter 2 studies the origins of antigovernment libels and the genre's development in the early 1600s. I show that, although political satires became instruments of courtly rivalries during the emergence of the royal favorites, during the first two decades of the century they were not meant for publication in the mentideros, thus questioning the idea that libels were born as instruments of public opinion. Sermons, for instance, were much

more relevant than libels as political media. It was only in 1618, after the downfall of the Duke of Lerma, favorite to Philip III, that satires became a public phenomenon. The cause for this sudden change was not political, however, but rather a shift in the satires themselves and, more important, in the way in which satirists in general (and the Count of Villamediana in particular) were able to tap into the theatrical poetics under which the Madrilenian public operated. A rare contemporary investigation into the earliest of these new satires illuminates the public appeal of the libels and the way in which they connected courtly circles and the larger vulgo of the mentideros, dramatically changing the outlook of the public sphere.

Chapter 3 covers the period 1618 to 1621, focusing on the interplay between news, gossip, and satires and the arrest, trial, and execution of Don Rodrigo Calderón. I analyze the role of satires vis-à-vis the theatrical horizon of expectations against which the public read them. I reconstruct, for instance, the culture of suspense that vertebrated dramatic temporality and how the libels exploited it and the ways in which satirists mimicked the function and speech of the theatrical *gracioso* (comic servant). I also study the uneasy negotiation between satirists, the public, and the government regarding the fate of Don Rodrigo and the way in which savvy political actors exploited that tension.

The book's second part studies the transformation of the theatrical poetics of the public sphere into a new configuration in which satire itself as a genre became the dominant force. It then traces this poetics in its evolution into a carnivalesque horizon of expectations. Chapter 4 analyzes the stylistic transformation of antigovernment satires in 1627 from a tongue-in-cheek tone akin to the poetics of the theatrical *gracioso* to a far darker and grotesque style that painted the Count-Duke of Olivares, favorite to Philip IV, as a demoniacal entity. I argue that the reason for this shift was a change in authorship, when anonymous friars began to write antigovernment libels as part of a larger ecclesiastical campaign against Olivares. The chapter also explores the authorities' growing concern with political publicity and their understanding of the phenomenon. I analyze the strategies that the government used to contain the vulgo novelero, such as repression, as well as those it rejected, like counterpropaganda, as exemplified in its reaction toward the progovernment pamphlet *El chitón de las tarabillas* (Hush to the tittle-tattle).

Chapter 5 argues that, following the tonal shift of satire in the late 1620s, a dialogue ensued in the early 1630s between preachers and ecclesiastical satirists on one hand and the public on the other. Although preachers pushed them in one direction, the public produced their own readings of

both sermons and satires. Rather than accepting a Deuteronomic poetics that presented the political crisis as a biblical conflict between a divinely chosen people and their anti-Christian government, the vulgo focused on the playful and ironic elements of satire, reading the political catastrophe presented by the clergy as a source of satiric pleasure. Ignoring the church's call to indignation and militance (to popular rebellion, that is), the public maintained a detached and voyeuristic attitude, governed by a satirical poetics of the political process.

Chapter 6 argues that the satirical framework evolved into a carnivalesque horizon of expectations, in which the pessimistic outlook gave way to a cyclical temporality, as Quevedo's Menippean satire *La Hora de todos* exemplifies. The carnival festivities of 1637 in Madrid offer an example of the interaction between politics and the carnivalesque: when the vulgo novelero perceived the political crisis as a carnival, they felt invited to participate not as political actors but as the festive crowd of a celebration. The world was upside down, ruled by the grotesque figure of Olivares, but this was seen as a reason to laugh irreverently rather than to stage a violent rebellion—to revel, not to rebel. The final sections of the chapter focus on the political crisis created by the rebellions of Catalonia and Portugal in 1640 and argue that satires were key to maintaining the carnival by providing a poetics of farce that helped explain the political catastrophe to the public.

Finally, chapter 7 analyzes Olivares's last year in office from the point of view of the public and argues that Madrilenians experienced it as a long carnival. The public ridiculed the king's campaign against the Catalan rebels, transforming the official epic propaganda into a festive and grotesque masquerade. The spirit of sarcasm spread through different media and became so prevalent that the history of the count-duke itself began to be codified in the form of Menippean satire, as shown by *La cueva de Meliso*, an influential poem that provided a grotesque archive of Olivares's actions through the years. The chapter closes with an analysis of Olivares's downfall in terms of the poetics of carnival and Lent. When Madrilenians of all ranks flooded the royal palace in January 1643, it was not as a revolutionary crowd but as a public eager to witness and celebrate the downfall of a king of fools. The long carnival ended only with the arrival of Lent in February 1643, which brought the sudden silence of the satirists. To the eyes of the news crowd, Lent restored order, although its victory would be temporary, only until the next political carnival turned the world upside down once again.