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Early Tudor Drama and the Arts of Resistance

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The study of early modern drama and history has been revolutionised in the last two decades, benefiting in equal measure from developments in historical and literary scholarship. The entrenchment of various forms of historicism at the heart of literary studies has made for fruitful synergies between the analysis of dramatic texts and historical contexts, while among early modern historians there has been a less obvious but nonetheless significant change in the ways that literary sources have been approached and understood. In particular, a greater appreciation of the role played by counsel as the organising principle of courtly culture has led to new ways of looking at political discourse, freer of the obvious dichotomies of “loyalty” or “opposition”, power or resistance, subversion or containment that constrained earlier debates. This has allowed Tudor historians, once mired in the “strong king” *versus* “plaything of faction” debate about Henry VIII—its protagonists being primarily George Bernard (*King’s Reformation*) and Peter Gwyn for the strong king, *versus* David Starkey, Eric Ives and Sir Geoffrey Elton (“King or Minister?”, *Reform and Reformation*) for the plaything of faction)—to think of individuals and groups as attempting to persuade a strong king rather than simply to “bounce” a weak one into decisions. They have thus begun to

think of poems, plays and prose tracts aimed at the king as political texts, worthy of attention alongside statutes, chronicles and correspondence as evidence of the political process. At the same time, the “historical turn” has allowed literary scholars to take seriously the espousals of principle and morality in courtly verse, to see neglected forms such as panegyric, eulogy and mirrors for princes as something more than simply prince-pleasing or ideological window-dressing for a Machiavellian monarchy. Hence there is a more general agreement among scholars that any text or performance that the king might witness, read, view or merely hear about may have had a bearing upon political conduct, and thus on the history of the reign.

New interpretations of Henry VIII’s personality and governmental style have also been conducive to fresh understandings of the role of literature and drama in the period. Historians such as Bernard and Gwyn have argued that Henry VIII was a primarily pragmatic ruler for much of the first half of the reign. Before 1530, at least, he was open to debate, and encouraged contrary counsels as both a political virtue and a pragmatic resource, a means both of keeping options open and of deflecting criticism of policy towards bad advice—“evil counsellors”—when the need arose. He was clear in his long-term strategic aims, but inclined to leave as many tactical options open as possible for as long as possible. Hence negotiations with the Pope over the “Great Matter” of annulling his marriage to Catherine of Aragon were not broken off until well into the 1530s, years after the concept of an independent “Imperial” sovereignty had first been articulated. More recently, Bernard has argued that Henry followed an essentially Erasmian path in religious reform, condemning the abuse of images and pilgrimage rather than the practices themselves, aspiring to create a church free from corruption and the “superstitious” accretions of centuries of lax practice rather than a doctrinal revolution along Lutheran or Zwinglian lines.¹ Taken together, these traits meant that, throughout the 1530s, advocates of orthodox religious positions or of reconciliation with Rome might continue to hope for policy to shift back in their favour, and work towards that end, trying to counsel and persuade the king towards moderation, even as evangelicals were seeking to prompt him towards further reform. And literature and drama had roles to play in that debate alongside more obvious forms of political lobbying.

1 See Bernard, *King’s Reformation*, *passim*.

Both the conventions of late medieval political theory and the particular personality of the king thus connived in these years to create a culture ripe for “counsel” in all its forms to flourish. And research has begun to reflect upon the significance of this fact for our understanding of literary texts. Appreciating how a broad range of literary and visual works and performances might contribute significantly to political debate and culture as examples of advice or lobbying has led to a rethinking of how those texts might be read, not as vehicles for propaganda or flattery, but as part of a more complex dialogue with power over policy and strategy. The ideal of good counsel thus created a kind of benevolently despotic literary culture in which the vocations of the writer, the poet or the scholar might be both sanctioned by the monarch and valued as a significant contribution to national well-being. Such a culture gave poets and playwrights a role in the state and created an environment in which subjects were empowered to speak and monarchs enjoined to listen, without the former seeming presumptuous or the latter losing dignity.² It was a subtle and flexible system, and when it worked, it worked well, offering something useful to each side in the conversation, and allowing the discussion of otherwise dangerous topics to take place in a controlled environment.

To cite an obvious example, celebrating Henry as a new King David, whether in portraiture, tapestries, book-dedications or psalmic paraphrase and translation, glorified the king, and so offered opportunities for royal propaganda, but it also potentially humbled him—opening up a discourse of sin, guilt, repentance and redemption through which writers and artists could address him more or less obviously in the bold terms of admonition used by the Prophet Nathan to his biblical forebear.³ King David was the slayer of the papal Goliath, the father of his people, the priest-king who offered Henry a model of sacerdotal imperial kingship, but he was also an adulterous sinner who sacrificed political virtue and sanctioned murder in pursuit of a desirable woman: aspects of a chequered career that opened up space for a covert discussion of issues central to the campaign for an annulment of Henry’s marriage to Catherine of Aragon and his pursuit of Anne Boleyn at a time when a more open discussion would have been unthinkable. The royal conscience—a notion intensely politicised by Henry’s public use of it in justifying the divorce,⁴ and fiercely contested by his critics abroad—might

2 See Walker, *Plays*, *passim*.

3 For the use of the “Story of David” in tapestries, see Campbell, especially at pp. 182–87 and 233–34.

4 See Pollito, p. 131, and Sharpe, pp. 70–71.

thus be, if not exactly “caught”, in Hamlet’s sense, then at least poked a little, and paraded in public by artists, poets and playwrights intent upon exposing the foundations of Imperial Kingship for discussion.

Other literary forms similarly provided Tudor writers with ways of thinking about—and vehicles for thinking through—social, cultural and political issues that other forms of writing or action could not offer. Sir Thomas Wyatt translated the satires of Alamanni and Horace and the psalms in the 1530s, not because they provided a useful metaphor for a series of already formulated political points that he wanted to publicise, but because those texts were for him, at that time and in that place, the readiest and most appropriate means by which he could apply his mind to the issues that concerned him and voice his thoughts among a circle of like-minded readers—his enforced marginality from court, his distress at the direction of current policies, and his frustrations with his own dilemmas over compliance or non-compliance, service or exile.⁵ These texts, and the range of subject-positions, stances and registers that they both sanctioned and structured, provided him with a means of struggling with the complexities and contradictions of his own position, as well as a vehicle through which to articulate (in both strong senses of the word) his views for his intended community of readers. His poems were thus not vehicles for propaganda but work in progress, a record of a process of internal debate and potentially of a new kind of subjectivity in the making. And court drama, I would argue, could work in much the same way. Producing interludes at court which mocked partisan claims for supremacy and lauded the virtues of reconciliation and toleration of difference provided John Heywood with a means of articulating anxieties about the drift into tyranny he was witnessing in the early 1530s in a form that cued his audiences to reflect upon conventional pieties about good government and the just society in a new and urgent context.⁶ But they also allowed him to explore both the potential advantages and disadvantages of increasing royal power at a time of national crisis, and perform that exploration before the king himself. The particular ways in which literature and drama operated in the late medieval and early modern royal courts (providing an invaluable dialogue with power in a culture in which such opportunities were rare and always circumscribed) thus

5 See Walker, *Writing*, pp. 279–376.

6 See Walker, *Writing*, pp. 110–19.

make these texts especially valuable for historians and amenable to interdisciplinary analysis.

In the exploration of literary texts as nuanced contributions to political discourse, scholars of the poetry and prose have so far rather led the field, with drama studies trailing a little in their wake. Prevailing historical accounts of the Henrician drama have still tended to try to fit it into an overly simplistic model in which plays might function as either propaganda—a message *from* the king to the political nation (or that proportion of it that was present to witness the performance, or who might read the printed script after the performance)—or protest—a message from “the people” to the king or the political nation, offering an alternative, oppositional view in a direct challenge to royal policies or the socio-political *status quo*. And, it is true, there is contemporary evidence of drama performing each of those roles—or aspiring to—in the Henrician period. A number of the plays that were performed at court before foreign ambassadors and dignitaries, especially those produced during celebrations marking a significant political event such as the negotiation of a marriage treaty or the sealing of an alliance, were indeed of a broadly propagandistic nature. But, as we shall see, this was at best only half of the story.

As William Streitberger has suggested, the period from 1516 to the mid 1520s was a particularly busy one in terms of major conferences and treaty negotiations on English soil, and Henry and his ministers were adept at using the accompanying revels, tournaments, disguisings and plays, “not only as a tactic of prestige diplomacy but also to advance his political positions” (Streitberger, p. 94). To this end, Streitberger suggests, “formal spectacles, which relied on visual allegory and which included sustained dramatic components were required” (p. 94). A play such as that devised by William Cornish and performed before the Emperor Charles V at Windsor on 16 June 1522, for example, in which a group of allegorical personifications representing Amity, Prudence, Might and (perhaps) Policy strove to bridle a wild horse, representing Francis I of France, would clearly fit this description. Designed to endorse the Anglo-Imperial alliance and promote Henry and Charles’s claims to be allying against Francis only to curb his aggression and bring him to a peaceable amity, the play evidently made its points with bold, simple, visually arresting gestures.⁷

7 See *Calendar of State Papers, Spanish*, II: 437; Hall, fols. lxxxxviii^r-lxxxxix^r; Streitberger, pp. 114-15; and Anglo, “William Cornish”, pp. 348-60.

The Latin play dubbed by Streitberger *Cardinalis Pacificus* performs a similar role. Performed at Greenwich before the French ambassadors on 10 November 1527, it was commissioned by Cardinal Wolsey to promote his mission to France to gain a temporary mandate to represent papal authority during Clement VII's incarceration by Imperial troops following the Sack of Rome (and, not incidentally, to use that mandate to settle Henry's Great Matter in the King's favour). It was evidently designed as a fairly straightforward articulation and celebration of Wolsey's aspirations, as Edward Hall's account of its contents suggests:

When the King and Queen were set [in their seats], there was played before them by children in the Latin tongue in manner of a tragedy, the effect wherefore was that the Pope was in captivity and the church brought under the foot, wherefore St Peter appeared and put the Cardinal in authority to bring the Pope to his liberty, and to set up the church again, and so the Cardinal made intercession to the King of England and of France that they took part together, and by their means the Pope was delivered. Then in came the French King's children and complained to the Cardinal how the Emperor kept them as hostages and would not come to no reasonable point with their father, wherefore they desired the Cardinal to help them for their deliverance, which wrought the Emperor to a peace and caused the two young princes to be delivered. (Hall, fol. clxvi)⁸

As Hall (admittedly, no friend to Wolsey and writing after his fall) suggests, however, the simplicity and audacity of such plays of “projection” (to borrow Streitberger's term) might not always have worked in their favour with more sophisticated audiences. “At this play”, Hall records, “wise men smiled and thought that it sounded more glorious to the Cardinal than true to the matter indeed” (Walker, *Plays*, pp. 17-19).

It was a very similar “projectional” use of drama that the reformer Richard Morrison recommended to Cromwell in the later 1530s, arguing that an effective way to promote religious reform in the wider nation would be to challenge the orthodox religious cycles of urban centres such as York, Chester and Coventry with reformist plays and pageants critical of catholic dogma and practice.⁹ And some attempts do seem to have been made to produce such plays, whether under Cromwell's direction, or independently by radical writers hoping for his patronage. We might include a number of John Bale's plays in this category, as

8 Even these seemingly straightforward plays might have addressed more than one overlapping agenda, however, as I have argued elsewhere (see Walker, *Plays*, pp. 17-19).

9 See Streitberger, p. 146, and Anglo, “Early Tudor Programme”, pp. 176-79.

well as more obscure works such as the anti-Catholic plays of Thomas Whylley, the vicar of Yoxford (*A Reverend Receiving of the Sacrament as a Lenten Matter* and others, all now lost¹⁰), although even here, as we shall see, things are not quite as simple as the “propaganda” model might imply.

Alternatively, there were clearly instances of drama being used for oppositional, critical purposes—or at least of people in authority fearing that it was being so used—at various points in the reign. One might think of the well-known examples of John Roo’s play at Gray’s Inn in 1526–27, to which Cardinal Wolsey took such exception, or the “May game” concerning “a king how he should rule his realm”, played in East Anglia on May Day 1537, during which the actor playing the part of Husbandry seems, Hamlet-like, to have added a speech or two of his own devising (“many things more than was in the book of the play”) in criticism of gentlemen. These added speeches were obviously sufficiently incendiary in their implications to prompt the Duke of Suffolk to scour the countryside searching for the actor, who had seemingly gone into hiding after the performance.¹¹ (What Suffolk would have made of the opening speeches of *The Second Shepherd’s Play* from the Towneley manuscript, were he to have seen the pageant, is an interesting question, as they seem to do precisely the same thing, albeit with both a script and official civic sanction for their licence.)

The Gray’s Inn play offers a still more interesting example of the opportunities that drama offered for individuals and groups to contribute to political debates in and around the court, and of the problems that might arise in trying to interpret such interventions—for contemporaries and modern commentators alike. Performed by and before lawyers at one of the influential Inns of Court over Christmas 1526–27, the play, as Edward Hall (himself a Gray’s Inn man), describes it, seems to have been another relatively straightforward political allegory:

The effect of the play was that Lord Governance was ruled by Dissipation and Negligence, by whose misgovernance and evil order Lady Public Weal was put from governance, which caused Inward Grudge and Disdain of Wanton Sovereignty to rise with a great multitude to expel Negligence and Dissipation and to restore Public Weal again to her estate, which was so done. This play was so set forth with rich and costly apparel, with strange devices of masks

10 See *Calendar of Letters and Papers*, vol. XII, pt. i, item 529, and Streitberger, p. 146.

11 See *Calendar of Letters and Papers*, vol. XII, pt. i, item 1212.

and morrishes that it was highly praised of all men, saving the Cardinal, which imagined the play had been devised of him. (Hall, fol. cliii^v)¹²

Indeed, so “furious” was Wolsey that he summoned the producer, the sergeant-at-law, John Roo, “took from him his coif”, and sent him to the Fleet prison, along with one of the actors, Thomas Moyle.

Hall uses this story to illustrate what he claims was Wolsey’s paranoia: “This play sore displeased the Cardinal, and yet it was never meant to him . . . wherefore many wise men grudged to see him take it so heartily” (Hall, fol. cliii^v). Hall’s point is that the play could not have been intended as criticism of Wolsey because, as Roo claimed, he had “compiled” it “for the most part . . . twenty years past and long before the Cardinal had any authority”, so there was no cause to complain. But this is, of course, disingenuous. Revising an old play in new circumstances can have as powerful contemporary resonances as performing a new work commissioned for the purpose, as the Earl of Essex’s supporters understood when they prompted Shakespeare’s company to revive *Richard II* in 1601.¹³ Thus, even if Roo was speaking the truth when he said that his play had been originally devised two decades earlier, this would not rule out the possibility that it was performed in 1526–27 with mischievous political intentions. Any play that dealt with the corruption of governance by characters named Dissipation and Negligence, and which raised the spectre of popular insurrection, would always have a powerful political charge in an early modern monarchy. And this would have been still more the case in 1526–27, less than two years after the ignominious collapse of the Amicable Grant, a supposedly voluntary tax imposed on the nation to support a military assault against France, which the government had been forced hastily to withdraw after encountering widespread popular resistance. Indeed Hall’s own discussion of the Grant (whose burden “was so grievous that it was denied, and the commons in every place were so moved that it was like to have grown to a rebellion” [Hall, fol. cxxxix^v]) echoes with the very terms that inform his account of Roo’s play. When Wolsey failed to persuade the civic leaders of London that they had committed themselves to pledging their support for the Grant, Hall suggests, the citizens “departed . . . sore grudging at the

12 I have tried to tease out through capitalisation which of the qualities Hall describes seem to have been characters in the play. See also Streitberger, p. 136.

13 See Walker, *Plays*, pp. 33–35, for further discussion along these lines.

lying of the Cardinal and openly saying that he was the very cause and occasion of this demand, and would pluck the people's hearts from the King". Elsewhere, in Kent, the commons "in this grudge . . . evil entreated Sir Thomas Boleyn at Maidstone", while, in East Anglia, "men that had no work began to rage and assemble themselves into companies" and confronted the Duke of Norfolk, claiming that Poverty was their captain, "for he and his cousin Necessity hath brought us to this doing" (Hall, fols. cxl^v-cxli^r).

To forestall the complaints and prevent further civil unrest, the king backed down, and in a carefully stage-managed performance before a Great Council held in Westminster, he, appearing "sore moved", denied ever requesting so exacting a tax, and demanded which of his councillors had ordered it, saying that it touched his honour that they should have done so behind his back. When no one spoke, Wolsey stepped forward and conceded that, although the demand had been imposed with the consent of the whole council, yet "I am content to take it [the responsibility] on me; and to endure the fame and noise of the people for my good will toward the King and comfort of you, my lords, and other the King's councillors". With this the King pardoned the protestors and withdrew the tax. Nevertheless, Hall notes, this was "not an end of inward grudge and hatred that the commons bore to the Cardinal and to all gentlemen which vehemently set furth that commission and demand". And such grudges were only exacerbated the following December, when the king, fleeing an outbreak of the plague, kept a frugal Christmas at his house in Eltham, while Wolsey celebrated in quasi-regal style with plays and disguisings in the former royal palace at Richmond, "which sore grieved the people, and in especial the King's servants, to see him keep an open court and the King a secret one" (Hall, fols. cxli^v-cxlxx^v and cxlvi^r).

To perform a play such as Roo's so soon after these events, in which notions of "inward grudge", popular risings, governmental negligence and ministerial extravagance had been part of the political lexicon, and when the tax resisters themselves had employed the language and tropes of allegorical drama to justify their deeds, was clearly no innocent act, whatever Roo claimed to the contrary. Indeed, another surviving source for the story suggests that the actors knew very well that their production was likely to arouse official ire. John Foxe's account in his *Acts and Monuments*, although unreliable in some of its details, suggests a plausible narrative, in which none of the actors, aware that the play contained "partly matter against Cardinal Wolsey", "durst take upon them to play that

part which touched the said Cardinal”, until the young evangelical Simon Fish “took upon him to do it” (Foxe, IV: 657). Fish’s motives, Foxe implies, were precisely to embarrass Wolsey and so to advance the evangelical cause, and the first of these objectives, at least, he seems to have achieved.

But let us pursue the suggestion that the play was a revival of an earlier work a little further. Hall’s report of Roo’s claim that it was conceived “for the most part twenty years before” is sufficiently vague to allow for a number of readings; but it would seem to place the play’s conception in the latter years of Henry VIII’s father’s reign, or at the very beginning of his own, another period when high taxes and governmental demands would have given it very clear and particular political resonances. In the context of Henry VII’s notorious bonds, recognisances and other fiscal measures, imposed upon his principal subjects through the agency of his ministers Richard Empson and Edmund Dudley, the play’s use of two evil counsellor figures, Negligence and Dissipation, might have seemed particularly pointed. Had it been performed at Gray’s Inn, or conceived for performance there—Hall does not say that the play was actually *staged* in the earlier period—while Empson and Dudley were at the height of their influence, then the play would potentially have been very radical indeed in its implied critique of the regime. Had it been conceived a year or two later, at the advent of Henry VIII’s reign, then it would have been equally timely, albeit with a rather different political impact. At this time it would have found a ready place among those works, such as More’s eulogy for Henry VIII (“Carmen gratulatorium”) or Skelton’s “Laud and Praise” for the new king,¹⁴ that celebrated the virtues of the new monarch by contrasting them favourably with the rapacity and abuses of the old—abuses for which Empson and Dudley provided ready scapegoats. At such a moment, the play would have been still more obviously topical, but much less implicitly critical of the current regime. But even here the implication that governmental maladministration might provoke inward grudge and disdain of wanton sovereignty (secret disaffection among the political elites?) and popular rising, and that these things might even be in the best interests of the commonweal in the long term, would have been difficult for any monarch to regard with complete equanimity. If, then, Roo was indeed reviving an old production—or an old idea for an as-yet-unrealised production—he was reviving one with a clear power to address contemporary political conditions and with a pedigree as

14 “A Laud and Praise Made for our Sovereign Lord the King” (Scattergood, ed., pp. 110-12).

a vehicle for criticism of royal ministers. By reviving such a play, and inserting it into the sort of composite revels that Hall's account suggests (masques and "morrishes", disguisings and dances), he would surely have expected his audience to have drawn contemporary parallels from it of the kind which Wolsey himself drew from the event.

One can, then, find evidence of Henrician plays that exemplify both the "propaganda" and the "protest" models of political engagement. But these instances, striking and engaging though they are, do not account for all of the drama that survives from the period. Indeed, the model that allows only for propaganda or protest is probably incapable of accounting for the *majority* of plays that survive from the reign. Alongside the kind of highly symbolic, spectacular allegorical dramas described by Hall, there was (as the surviving texts attest) another tradition of less visually impressive, more argumentative, rhetorically sophisticated and playful comic interludes, played at court on less diplomatically pressured occasions. These plays took a far less reverent attitude to royal policies and aspirations, neither celebrating nor opposing them, but rather subjecting them to wry, often sceptical scrutiny and mockery. One thinks, perhaps naturally, of the kind of playful, provocative interludes that John Heywood produced at court throughout the period of Henry's Supremacy, from *Witty and Witless* of c. 1527 to *The Parts of Man*, performed before Archbishop Cranmer c. 1545-49. These were hardly works of propaganda: they were too ironic, interrogative and inconclusive for that. But neither were they exactly protests, although they often treated royal policies with seemingly mocking amusement, and advanced positions on tolerance of religious difference and support for the established church which did not accord readily with current governmental positions.¹⁵ Similarly, plays such as the anonymous *Godly Queen Hester*, *Hick Scornor*, or even Bale's *King Johan* also sit rather awkwardly in the "propaganda or protest" model, as we shall see. Any analysis of Henrician court drama thus needs to take account of this more playful, dialogic tradition, too—a tradition that seems to reveal the court as not so much "projecting" a concerted image of itself and its sovereign to visitors and the wider political nation, as talking (and arguing) self-reflexively to *itself* in, as it were, its spare time. What such plays suggest is that court drama was not always a strictly controlled tool of royal image-making, but rather that it, like the court itself, might (at times at least) offer an arena for the discursive

15 See Walker, *Politics*, pp. 76-116, and *Writing*, pp. 100-19.

exercise of a range of ideas, not all of which were officially endorsed or approved of, which might be aired in the spirit of good counsel, with the licence that this concept allowed the loyal subject to air controversial issues before the king.

Theorising the Culture of Counsel

How might we begin to theorise such a nuanced, flexible form of political engagement? One possible model is offered by the work of the political anthropologist James C. Scott, whose notions of the “hidden transcript” and “everyday forms of resistance”, explored in two seminal studies written in the 1980s, *Weapons of the Weak* and *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, seem to offer a helpful way into understanding the range of political roles performed by literary and dramatic productions in the early Tudor period.

In *Weapons of the Weak*, a close study of the behaviour of peasant rice-farmers in a modern Malaysian village, Scott suggests how evidence of class and community conflict and political resistance to the interests of the local landowners might be found, not in overt forms of protest or violent opposition (of which there seemed to be very few), but in what he calls “everyday forms of resistance”:

Here I have in mind the ordinary weapons of relatively powerless groups: foot dragging, dissimulation, desertion, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage, and so on. These Brechtian—or Schweikian—forms of class struggle have certain features in common. They require little or no coordination or planning; they make use of implicit understandings and informal networks; they often represent a form of individual self-help; they typically avoid any direct, symbolic confrontation with authority. (Scott, *Weapons*, p. xvi)

Now, there is obviously a good deal here that is specific to the kind of rural, agrarian, economic and class-based social situations peculiar to Scott’s chosen case study. But, as a number of early modern historians have suggested,¹⁶ there is also much that is transferable about his general model of a form of resistance that avoids direct confrontation and so often fails to register *as* resistance in the minds of those historians looking for more direct modes of political activity. And, for our purposes, it does seem to have a degree of applicability to the courtly cultures of the early sixteenth century, another period for which the relative lack of evidence of outright opposition to political pressure and change has troubled scholars.

16 See Braddick and Walters, *passim*.

Among Tudor historians, there has been a tendency to assume that, if the majority of English men and women, from counsellors, courtiers and ministers, poets and playwrights at court to rural landlords and their tenants in the provinces, failed to articulate their resistance to the demands of Tudor royal power in ways that modern scholars can recognise as oppositional, then this must be because they were effectively reduced to consenting (however unwillingly) to the crown's hegemonic control of ideology. Scott summarises this essentially Gramscian position:

By creating and disseminating a universe of discourse and the concepts to go with it ... [elites] build a symbolic climate that prevents subordinate classes from thinking their way free. (*Weapons*, p. 39)

But Scott's model of "everyday" resistance neatly reverses the classic New Historicist reformulation of Gramsci—that apparent resistance is always already contained by the power it seems to resist—arguing instead that apparent consent need not always imply the absence of resistance. Indeed, apparent consent is often the mode by which real resistance registers itself and achieves its ends. What one needs to do, Scott argues, is thus to read beyond what he terms the "public transcript" of compliance to uncover the "hidden transcript" that is almost invariably kept offstage (his frequent use of theatrical metaphors is, for our purposes, surely significant) by both sides in any negotiation. "The fact is", he argues,

that power-laden situations are nearly always inauthentic: the exercise of power nearly always drives a portion of the full transcript underground. Allowing always for the exceptional moments of uncontrolled anger or desperation, the *normal* tendency will be for the dependent individual to reveal only that part of his or her full transcript in encounters with the powerful that it is both sage and appropriate to reveal. (Scott, p. 286)

Because open defiance would almost certainly provoke a violent response from those in power and minimise the chances of winning any "real" gains they might be seeking, Scott argues, subordinate groups will frequently strive to exercise resistance in ways that mimic or imply conformity rather than seek "to contest the formal definitions of hierarchy and power" (*Weapons*, p. 33). Meanwhile, those in positions of authority also have a vested interest in minimising the acknowledgement of resistance, as to do otherwise would reveal their own unpopularity and potential weakness. Thus the public transcript of landlord-tenant relations

(like that of courtier-sovereign relations, perhaps) tends to display “a kind of complicitous silence that all but expunges everyday forms of resistance from the historical record” (*Weapons*, p. 36).

Behind and beneath this self-interested silence, however, conflicts of interest are negotiated as passionately as ever, not as struggles between rival symbolic orders and definitions of virtue and legitimacy, but over the ability to define aspects of a single, agreed definition of those things. Thus, as Scott observes, in Malaysian village life, one sees a struggle not about “work, property rights, grain and cash”, but

over the appropriation of symbols, a struggle over how the past and present should be understood and labelled, a struggle to identify causes and assess blame, a contentious effort to give partisan meaning to local history. (*Weapons*, p. xvii)

Thus, to take one of Scott’s best examples, no one openly contests the image of the good landowner as a figure of legitimate authority, a fount of liberality and employment; rather, what is contested are the implications of that ideal for the conduct of given individuals in particular circumstances:

Because the poor tenant knows that the rich farmer considers offers of work and/or loans as aspects of his liberality—“gifts”, help, assistance, or charity [rather than obligations or the “rights” of the poor]—the poor man uses this knowledge to pursue his concrete ends: he approaches [the landowner], using all the appropriate linguistic forms of deference and politeness, and requests his “help” and “assistance”. In other words, he appeals to the self-interested description that ... [the landowner] would give to his own acts to place them in the most advantageous light. ... If he wins, he achieves his desired objective (work or a loan) and in the process he contributes, willy-nilly, to the public legitimacy of the principles to which he strategically appealed. Just who is manipulating whom in this petty enterprise is no simple matter to decide. It is best seen, perhaps, as a reciprocal manipulation of the symbols of euphemization. (*Weapons*, p. 309)

To reduce the idea to its simplest form, then, when someone says, “Yes sir!”, for example, they need not mean either “yes” or “sir”; we need to appreciate the tone, the timing, the context and the consequent events, if we are to understand the cultural work that these words might be doing in that particular situation.

Here the analogy with the early modern poet or playwright addressing or performing before the sovereign seems most obvious and useful. The fact that almost all of the courtly writing in this period—indeed, almost all overtly politically engaged writing produced from within the political nation—tended to fall

into the modes of praise or loyal counsel has led critics to condemn it as, at worst exercises in sycophantic prince-pleasing, at best the result of ideological complicity or entrapment. But this is to ignore the degree to which its own symbolic economy might be read as a series of degrees of euphemisation. What Scott's work suggests is how we might understand the literature and drama of good counsel as signalling not only compliance but also disagreement, criticism or resistance, and in ways that were tacitly understood by all parties, while any sense of open resistance was kept out of the public transcript of history, leaving the dominant ideological architecture and symbolic order apparently unscathed. (To return to my earlier example: everyone agrees that Henry VIII can be addressed legitimately as another David, but they are free to pursue different agendas over what that might mean in practice for his current and future behaviour.)

The "crucial point", as Scott discusses it, lies in the fact that

the very process of attempting to legitimate a social order by idealising it *always* provides its subjects with the means, the symbolic tools, the very ideas for a critique that operates within the hegemony. For most purposes, then, it is not at all necessary for subordinate classes to set foot outside the confines of the ruling ideals in order to formulate a critique of power. . . . The dominant ideology can be turned against its privileged beneficiaries not only because subordinate groups develop their own interpretations, understandings and readings of its ambiguous terms, but also because of the promises that the dominant classes must make in order to propagate it in the first place. (*Weapons*, p. 338)

So, in a Tudor context, the way was laid open by the very terms in which justifications of monarchy were couched for critics of any given monarch to insist that he or she live up to the high ideals to which those justifications appeal. And the more extravagant the claims that apologists of monarchy made, the greater were the opportunities for such appeals. Hence, as Erasmus noted, the peculiar applicability and power of the panegyric as a literary form in this period, as it laid before the sovereign precisely that challenge to live up to those ideals for which he was being praised.¹⁷

17 "Those who believe panegyrics are nothing but flattery seem to be unaware of the purpose and aim of the extremely far-sighted men who invented this kind of composition, which consists in presenting princes with a pattern of goodness, in such a way as to reform bad rulers, improve the good, educate the boorish, reprove the erring, arouse the indolent, and cause even the hopelessly vicious to feel some inward stirrings of shame. . . . [They] exhort rulers to honourable actions under cover of compliment" (Erasmus, p. 81).

In Scott's terms, then, "good counsel" was the means by which the subject and sovereign might tacitly lay out their rival claims within a euphemistic discourse of collaborative hierarchy—the lubricant that allowed a potentially unstable and intractable machine to run smoothly. It was, in Scott's phrase, the public transcript—the language in which each speaker could speak as near to honestly as the system allowed them, without either threatening the hegemonic position of the king or surrendering the capacity of the subject to register an alternative view. Thus a playwright such as Heywood might offer his critiques of current royal policy as entertainment for the king and his court, thereby implying that Henry was magnanimous enough to patronise such plays and to watch them with a tolerant, self-critical mind. In so doing, the playwright was contributing to the public transcript that celebrated royal maturity and affability, even as he tacitly warned Henry against what he saw as the king's increasing foolishness and partisanship. In return, the king tacitly undertook to behave affably, to listen to the play and the implied criticism it contained, and receive it in the spirit of well-intended good counsel from a valued member of his extended *familia*.

The Limits of the Public Transcript

Scott offers, then, a useful way of thinking about—and thinking into—the subtle ways in which plays and other literary texts might contribute to political debates at the Henrician court. One problem with his model of artful resistance, however, at least in so far as it might be applied in a Tudor context, lies, predictably, in its inability to address the fine detail of the courtly political situation. It relies, it must be said, upon a rather monolithic notion of the sources and operation of power, drawn as they are from behaviour in a fairly simple rural society dominated by a single landowning elite. Scott, and those historians who have adopted his model for work in the early modern period—notably those published in Michael Braddick and John Walters' collection, *Negotiating Power in Early Modern Society*—have thus tended to look at dialogues between the powerful and the powerless in very sharply defined, binary terms, rather than acknowledging the complexity of the negotiations between *and among* those with differing degrees of power and influence that characterised early modern courtly culture.

The very idea of *resistance*, indeed, while it helpfully complicates the simplifying implications of the less helpful word, *opposition*, still does not do full justice to the variety and shades of "powerful" behaviour evident in Tudor political cul-

ture or to the degrees of drag, slide, curve or spin that might be put on political force by those who are variously subjected to it. Indeed, the idea of “power” itself, like the institutions with which it is usually associated—the State, Crown, Court or Government—misleads if it suggests a simple, unified authority with a clear will and agenda of its own. The political Centre (another quasi-institution usually granted an initial capital letter) was in reality an amalgam of constituent institutions: the monarch himself, his Council, his less formal circle(s) of counsellors and advisors, the various members of the royal household, the fluctuating body of courtiers, the secretariat and the myriad other, often rival, administrative offices, which were themselves multiple and complex, each a distinct and to a degree internally conflicted entity. In the Tudor body politic, the left hand very rarely knew exactly what the right was doing, and even when it did could not always be relied upon to approve of it or wholeheartedly promote its initiatives. Thus the idea of a completely loyal, obedient, political class, which either selflessly or through fear carried out the sovereign’s wishes without objection or qualification seems untenable.

And in the differences of principle and practice that distinguish and separate *power* from *authority*, and the subtle divergences of agenda between king, court, counsel, government, law, parliament, nobility and gentry, lie all-important distinctions of personnel, attitude, competency and ultimate aim. Thus *resistance*, in all its possible forms, from active sabotage to the indifferent, slipshod implementation of a policy or action, might occur at the source of an initiative, as well as at the point of delivery. Even propaganda of the sort advocated by Morrison and practised under the patronage of Wolsey or Cromwell was the product of a variety of different processes, institutions, agencies and individuals, each of which might have their own subtly different take on the ostensibly shared agenda. The ideological ball thus frequently left the monarch’s hand already spinning, and not always towards its intended target.

Kevin Sharpe’s magisterial study, *Selling the Tudor Monarchy*—a dazzling examination of the performance and representation of royalty across a range of forms from portraits, frontispieces, coins, seals, and medals, to statutes, proclamations, speeches and literary exercises—suggests that Henry VIII was a consummate publiciser of his own royal person, who “from the beginning of his reign . . . displayed a recognition of the power of the word and of print in a determination to deploy publication as a medium of sovereign utterance” (Sharpe, pp. 83–84). But, as Sharpe acknowledges, this claim risks affording the king too great a degree

of control over the words spoken and written and the likenesses circulated in his name. It is always important to ask precisely who it is we are really hearing when Henry VIII speaks, whether *ex cathedra* or seemingly in person.¹⁸ The words of counsellors, advisors, secretaries, even scribes have a role to play in accenting and articulating the royal voice—as Thomas More’s input into “Henry’s” *Assertio septem sacramentorum*, Edward Foxe and his team’s into *A Glass of The Truth*, or Thomas Cranmer’s into the Bishops’ Book and King’s Book testify.¹⁹ Thus it is perhaps safer to say, burlesquing the oft-cited verse of Ecclesiastes (8:4), that “Where the Word of the King is, there is . . .”, not “power”, but more frequently a committee, a dialogue, a *process*. As Louis Montrose has recently argued of Elizabeth (Montrose, *passim*), Henry was probably as much the creature of the Henrician image as he was its creator, as rival counsellors jockeyed to persuade him that their version, their vision of the monarch was the one that he should adopt as his public persona.

And drama had a variety of roles to play in this complex, fragmented political ecosystem that was the Henrician court. A courtly interlude was in reality the work of many hands, and thus of many potentially distinct initiatives, needs and agendas. It was commissioned ultimately by the crown, but was actually initiated by one of the king’s officers or companions and overseen in practice by others. In the early part of the reign, for example, the role of the overall supervisor or master of the revels was frequently played by Henry Guildford, the Comptroller of the royal household, while the practical arrangements were overseen by Richard Gibson, the one-time tailor of the Great Wardrobe, who was an officer in the Office of the Tents.²⁰ Plays and interludes formed only one part of the complex, multiform events that constituted the royal revels, and might well be sub-contracted to writers and performers either within the household (members of the King’s Players or of the Chapel Royal) or beyond it (the children of St. Paul’s School or any number of visiting companies), and were funded and provisioned by departments as various as the Council, the Chamber, the Greater or Standing Wardrobe or the Office of the Tents, with possibly only limited scrutiny and supervision from the major court officers or the monarch himself.²¹ Thus a

18 See Sharpe, pp. 87 and 127, and Walker, “Henry VIII”, pp. 72–98.

19 See Sharpe, pp. 103–7, and Bernard, *King’s Reformation*, pp. 476–88.

20 See Streitberger, pp. 69–73.

21 Streitberger (pp. 7 and 47) argues for close scrutiny of the preparations for plays and revels, either by the king himself or those who knew his mind, but the available evidence suggests that it was almost always masques and disguisings in which he himself would play a part rather than plays he might watch that interested Henry in their preparatory stages.

play like Heywood's *Weather* might represent—and need to reflect—a number of overlapping but distinct agendas in the way it addressed and represented royal policy and the attitudes and person of the king. By associating current royal policies with the divine figure of Jupiter, it contributed to a public transcript which identified Henry as a new Jove, a figure of judgemental wisdom and authority above the petty divisions and jealousies of his subjects, able to intervene decisively to end their disputes and restore the realm to harmonious and productive order.²² Thus far it reflected Henry's own claims to be able to determine religious policy in his own realm. But by presenting its particular representation of the god-king as a distinctly pompous and ambivalent figure, and his crucial intervention into mortal disputes as a deliberate sleight of hand designed to leave matters exactly as they always have been (as the Vice figure, Merry Report, declares, "Sirs, now shall ye have the weather even as it was" [*Weather*, l. 1240]), the play also contrives both gently to mock Henry's newfound claims to Imperial authority and to suggest that radical religious and social reform are not what is needed to end the disputes opened up by the Reformation Parliament and the advent of the Royal Supremacy.²³ It thus uses the language of reform and supremacy to cast doubt on those same ideas, in practice raising questions about things that it seemed to be asserting as truths.

Indeed the play's very form, as a comic interlude played at court, effectively challenged Henry's claim to novel and elevated royal status. By tacitly asserting the right to laugh with Henry at the hollow boasts of a player god-king—who was probably played by a child actor and so provided a self-evidently risible example of quasi-divine authority—Heywood and his actors subtly suggested a playful temporary affinity with the king that itself resisted royal claims to absolute exclusivity. As Scott, quoting Alexander Herzen, claims, "laughter contains something revolutionary", something that denies the distinctions on which hierarchies are based; hence,

The serfs are deprived of the right to smile in the presence of the landowners. Only equals may laugh. If inferiors are permitted to laugh in front of their superiors, and if they cannot suppress their hilarity, this would mean farewell to respect. (Scott, *Domination*, p. 172; source of quotation not given)

22 For the association of Henry himself with Jupiter, see Skelton, *Speke Parott*, ll. 399 and 405-10.

23 See Walker, *Writing*, pp. 100-19.

By inviting the court and king to laugh at the preposterousness of Jupiter's pretensions, and those of the actor attempting to represent them, Heywood, while remaining abundantly respectful, pushed the boundaries of political toleration to enter an objection to current policies into the public transcript of the reign.

In a very different vein, John Bale's *King Johan*, first performed in 1538, offers a similarly marked contribution to the public transcript of Henrician politics. As I have argued elsewhere, the play suggests, in its narrative of papal usurpation of royal prerogatives and the triumphant appearance of the figure of Imperial Majesty, a supportive contribution to Henry's self-promotion as a reforming monarch purging the realm of popish superstition. Similarly, its representation of the papacy as Usurped Power and its vices as traditional Roman clerics added weight to the governmental campaign of anti-papal vilification that followed the Royal Supremacy and the break with Rome. By performing aspects of the Roman rite and Catholic practices on-stage in parodic fashion, it seemingly endorsed the warnings against idle superstition contained in official pronouncements such as the Ten Articles of 1536, the Bishops' Book of 1537 and the Articles and Injunctions of 1538, while its repeated identification of monks, nuns and friars with financial and sexual abuses and sedition furthered the contemporary royal campaign to purge—and ultimately dissolve—the monasteries.²⁴ Yet in doing so it also advanced an agenda of its own, associating Imperial Power with evangelical reforms in some cases distinctly more advanced than those the king himself had sanctioned, and suggesting that Roman religion and orthodox practices were so intertwined with theatricality, performance and deceit that they could never be successfully purged of their “idolatrous” elements and hence needed to be extinguished entirely, along with the class of “juggling” clergy who had made them their own.²⁵ Thus, while contributing vocally to the public celebration of Henry as a reforming monarch, Bale's drama was nonetheless attending to the hidden transcript of evangelical disappointment at the king's failure to embrace

24 See, e.g., ll. 186–88 (“I am Sedition plain: / In every religious and monkish sect I reign, / Having you princes in scorn, hate and disdain”) and 256–59:

King John. Look where I find thee, that place will I put down.

Sedition. What if you do chance to find me in every town

Where as is founded any sect monastical?

King John. I pray God I sink if I destroy them not all!

See also ll. 334–37, 516–17. (All quotations from the play are taken from Happé, ed., with spelling modernised by the present author.)

25 See Walker, *Plays*, pp. 169–221.

a fully reformed liturgy on Continental lines, and was seeking to push him further in that direction though its association of traditional beliefs and practices with the Vice-figures Dissimulation, Treason and Seditious—a symbolic vocabulary that played explicitly upon Henry’s own notorious doubts about the loyalty of “his” clergy.

Culture, Counsel and Crisis

The early modern culture of counsel thus licensed a forum in which playwrights like Heywood and Bale might use their work to lobby, at times quite forcefully, for changes of policy or political emphasis, while remaining studiously deferential to royal authority and supportive of the careful balance of courtly decorum. It similarly allowed monarchs to listen to the suggestions and criticisms of their subjects within a framework that did not require them to respond to those criticisms either immediately or directly, and so neutralised the potential for confrontation that such implied criticisms might otherwise present.

Like all finely calibrated systems based upon the delicate balance of interests, nuance, inference and indirection, however, the culture of counsel only worked well when the path ahead was smooth, when the monarch was alert to the signals—the twitching in the web of cultural allusion—and willing to respond to them in the same spirit in which they were offered. The difficulty arose, of course, when the king became so convinced of the rightness of what he was doing that he refused to listen to counsel, however subtly it was coded or however loyally it was intended, as Henry did once he became settled on the Great Matter of his divorce. What happened in those circumstances was a wholly different story. I have recently been exploring the literature of this period in which the limits of the model of literature as counsel were most powerfully felt. In *Writing Under Tyranny* I tried to chart the temporary collapse of the culture of counsel—and of the dispensation it supported—and the roles for writers it encouraged, justified and licensed. In a culture in which the conventional course for an author wishing to address the state of the realm was to contribute to the public transcript, offering a work of supplication or counsel to the monarch, how did they react to the realisation that the public transcript was no longer shared or negotiable, that the king was not just unsympathetic to their complaints but actually the source of the problem? In Heywood’s case, the answer was that he kept writing, performing and counselling, well after the point when,

in retrospect, the cause seemed clearly to have been lost. His commitment to his self-image as a court entertainer, part of the same community as the sovereign he criticised, was perhaps too ingrained for him to do otherwise. His sense of his duty as a member of civil society to use humour to expose the hypocrisies of Henrician rule and the anxious divisions opened up by the king's actions kept him within the bounds of civil discourse, writing and laughing *with* as well as *at* the immoderation of the reign, contributing conspicuously to the public transcript of monarchy while quietly pursuing the hidden script of criticism.

Heywood's story suggests, perhaps, both the flexibility and potency of the culture of good counsel and its limitations. It suggests the flexibility of continuing to contribute to the public transcript of courtly good humour in the face of tyranny—its capacity to accommodate itself to power's demands, yet always with an ironic acknowledgment of its own collaboration, which exposes those demands to mocking scrutiny.²⁶ But, conversely, it also suggests the limits of upholding the public transcript in the absence of royal reciprocity, the inability of the good counsellor to do more than beat a graceful retreat before the advancing tyrant, scorching the earth as he goes to highlight the nature and direction of the monster's advance. In the end, of course, Heywood lost: the Royal Supremacy was not employed to restore traditional practices and civil order, and the reformation was not reversed. Toleration was not adopted as the way of diffusing political and religious tensions. But in his own way Heywood nonetheless exposed the brutalities, the hypocrisies and idiocies of Henrician tyranny to public scrutiny, and through his courageous refusal to join or sanction the growing intolerance of the reign, registered his resistance to it in ways which we should acknowledge and, while acknowledging their limitations, perhaps even celebrate.

26 See Walker, "Folly".

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