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Dramatising Ideology: Monarch, State and People in Respublica and Ane Satyre of the Thrie Estaitis

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Christmas 1553 and August 1554 saw the productions of two highly topical political plays in England and in Scotland. *Respublica*, attributed to Nicholas Udall, was written for performance at the court of Mary Tudor in London; David Lyndsay's *Ane Satyre of the Thrie Estaitis* was played on the public playfield in Edinburgh before an audience which included the Queen Regent, Mary of Guise. In spite of a difference in scale, with *Respublica* a relatively brief interlude and the *Thrie Estaitis* a day-long production, in content, structure and many of their production circumstances, these two almost contemporaneous plays seem intimately similar. Both were performed close to and probably in direct association with the accession of a Roman Catholic female ruler to a nation troubled by political and religious controversy. The plays are both openly propagandist, addressing contemporary issues concerning national government and church reform. They share a common allegorical action of sixteenth-century political drama: in each a misgoverned state is oppressed by vices of political power disguised as virtues but is finally rescued, in part by divine intervention. Within this action, too, both plays present a particular triangle of personified figures: each includes characters representing the monarch, the state, and the common people.

This is to emphasise the undoubted similarities between the two plays. But equally interesting, in plays which initially seem so very like, are the differences that underlie or play through the surface resemblance. With the same structures, themes, theatrical traditions and conventional political vocabularies, the two plays nonetheless clearly address different political situations and audiences.¹ They also reveal rather different assumptions about the structures and dynamic of government. In part, these differences are openly articulated. The *Thrie Estaitis* is vehement and energetic in its criticism of the Church, while *Respublica*, supportive of the Church, steers away from explicit religious engagement and gives more eloquent attention to the problems of corruption and avarice on the part of government ministers. But equally, if not more, interesting are the more tacit differences that are expressed, not directly or verbally, but through the imaginative and theatrical creation of the dramatic personifications and their relationships. The ways in which the figures representing Monarchy and the State are imagined, the stage relationships they engage in with other characters, their roles in the material presentation of performance—visual, proxemic, kinesic roles—all these can be as semantically revealing as what these characters actually say, or what is said about them.

It is in these that we perhaps encounter the real ideologies expressed through the two plays. These are the implicit imaginative representations of the institutions of State; they reveal underlying assumptions, rather than reasoned arguments, about the relationships between monarch, state and people. The stated opinions and political views of the characters are clearly important; we might see them as carrying the primary purpose of each play. But the imaginatively theatrical representations of ideas present a powerful shaping of political consciousness. An audience can easily choose to agree or disagree with the explicit arguments put forward by a Lady Respublica or a John the Common-Weill; it is harder to evaluate and debate the political implications of the theatrical representation of these personifications as characters. It is the tacit ideology expressed in these images that this paper addresses. Most particularly, I will explore how the two plays dramatise the complex and overlapping triangular relationships between king, commonwealth and people.

1 For analysis of each play in its political context, see Bevington, Walker, Hunt, Rutledge, Edington and Graf.

It is worth first considering what the two plays share, since recognising their similarities not only is revealing in itself but gives a clearer basis for exploring difference. Detached from their specific contexts, they are both mainstream examples of what by the 1550s had become a traditional pattern of political morality drama.² In each, a realm is attacked by Vices understood as especially dangerous to good government: Avarice, Adulation, Insolence and Oppression in *Respublica*; in the *Thrie Estaitis*, Flattery, Falsehood and Deceit (later joined by Covetise and Public Oppression). In keeping with their natures, all these Vices disguise themselves as virtues, infiltrating unrecognised into roles of power; once there they act on principles of private profit and exploitation, enriching themselves at the expense of the good governance and prosperity of the country. After a period of disorder and suffering, the machinations of the Vices are finally exposed and overthrown, restoring good order and justice to the nation.

This pattern of action had been established and explored in various plays since the beginning of the century. We see it crisply outlined in the account of the Gray's Inn Christmas interlude of 1526, supposedly attacking Cardinal Wolsey. The chronicler Edward Hall explains how John Roo, Sergeant at Arms, had compiled a play in which

Lord Governauce was ruled by Dissipacion and Negligence, by whose misgovernance and evil order, lady Publike Wele was put from governance: which caused Rumor Populi, Inward Grudge and Disdain of Wanton Sovereignete, to rise with a greate multitude, to expell Negligence and Dissipacion, and to restore Publike Welth again to her estate. (Hall, p. 719)

With some variations of emphasis and direction, this core of action is found in a range of political allegorical drama, plays such as Skelton's *Magnyfycence*, Bale's *Kynge Johan*, the anonymous *Albion Knight* and the lost play performed at Cambridge in 1553, *Anglia Deformata and Anglia Restituta*.³ At root it is derived from the earlier morality tradition, in which a generalised figure of Mankind is similarly attacked or seduced by vices until rescued and restored to virtue. It offered a fruitful, strongly narrative, deep structure, which could be adapted to numerous different political situations. But *Respublica* and *Thrie Estaitis* share more particular features of this common pattern. Both, like Roo's play, though not all examples of the form, include a personification of the nation or state itself: Roo's Lady

2 See Potter, pp. 78-104.

3 For *Anglia Deformata*, see Nelson, ed., p. 187. A non-dramatic parallel is found in Robert Crowley's *Philargyrie*.

Publike Wele is echoed in Lady Respublica and John the Common-Weill. These figures of the State champion personifications of the common people: People in *Respublica* and the Poor Man in *Thrie Estaitis*. In both plays, a character representing Truth is introduced in opposition to the Vices, working to expose their deceit. In both, a royal Virtue is sent directly from God to initiate reform in the abused commonwealth: Nemesis in *Respublica* and Divine Correction in *Thrie Estaitis*.

These parallels of form echo similarities in the production auspices of the two plays. *Respublica* was composed for performance at Christmas 1553, apparently at court, following Mary Tudor's coronation in September after the death of Edward VI in July.⁴ Mary had won popular support for her accession, in spite of the attempts of her Protestant brother and his chief minister, the Duke of Northumberland, to keep her from the throne, and had immediately begun moves to restore Roman Catholic practice in England. *Respublica* offers an attack on the corruption of the previous administration and a celebration of the new regime. In Scotland, Mary of Guise was invested as Regent for her young daughter Mary Stuart in April 1554, in succession to the Duke of Châtelherault, who was known as a Protestant sympathiser.⁵ On 12 August she attended a public performance of the *Thrie Estaitis* on the playfield in Edinburgh. The production was financed by the burgh council, who paid "for the making of the Quenis grace hous on the playfeild"; although it is not directly recorded as such, the performance may well have been associated with her assumption of the Regency.⁶ As well as their structural similarities, the two plays are both linked to the recent accession of female, Roman Catholic rulers who may well have been their chief spectators.

These are interesting and suggestive parallels; yet closer exploration of the similar dramatic forms and occasions also demonstrates differences in the conception of polity. In theatrical terms, it is perhaps most striking to look at the characters representing the State or Nation: the Lady Respublica and John the Common-Weill. Apart from anything these characters specifically say or do, they offer us a lively stage contrast in gender, in appearance, social class, manner and role. Respublica is a poor but noble widow, "our greate ground Ladie mother / Noble dame Respublica" (ll. 91-92), as the Vice Avarice (sardonically) refers to her

4 See Walker, pp. 168-72.

5 See Ritchie, pp. 90-95.

6 See *Works*, ed. Hamer, IV: 139-42. Records suggest a sudden increase in public drama in the months following Mary's assumption of the regency; see record evidence in Mill, pp. 180-83.

before we ever see her. She enters alone with a dignified soliloquy, speaking with educated eloquence; she presents a figure of suffering innocence who trusts to find good in all who approach her and cannot see through the machinations of the Vices. She is protective of her people, especially the poor, but seems to have no capacity to act on her own behalf. John the Common-Weill, on the other hand, bursts into the action of the play, pushing through the audience and leaping over (or into) a ditch, after a formal call for complainants to the Parliament. He is a rough and at first ragged masculine figure; although he is articulate, and respectful towards true royal authority, he is colloquial and assertive, critical and forthright in describing his troubles and identifying those who oppress him. He confidently and energetically proposes action to improve his own situation, and that of the Poor Man whose case he supports.

These two figures clearly make such very different impressions in performance that we might well ask whether they are intended to represent the same concept. We should not be distracted by the difference in name. The prologue of *Respublica* makes very clear from the start that the protagonist's Latin name is simply an educated form of the vernacular "common weal". The prologue explains:

the Name of our playe ys Respublica certaine
 oure meaninge ys

 To shewe that all Commen weales Ruin and decaye
 from tyme to tyme. (ll. 16-20)

Respublica herself makes the same identification in her introductory soliloquy. She points out that, without good governors,

Comon weales decaye, and all thinges do goe backe.
 what mervayle then yf I wanting a perfecte staigh
 From mooste flourishing welth be fallen in decaye? (ll. 456-58)

Finally, People makes the synonym comically clear: "Whares Rice pudding cake? .../... alese dictis [*alias dictus*] comonweale" (ll. 636-37). Like John in the *Thrie Estaitis*, Respublica is clearly defined as the *common weal*.

What, then, are the connotations of this idea of the commonweal in the 1550s? Discussion of the concept of commonweal was very active in the first half of the sixteenth century. Whitney Jones points out that

the concept of the commonwealth . . . was at the centre of the discussion of the social and economic, as well as the religious and political, problems of society which came to a climax in the disturbed middle decades of the sixteenth [century]. (p. 1)

The term was originally, as Jones says, used simply as “a synonym for ‘body politic’ or ‘realm’”; but in the developing debate it came, “far more significantly, to describe the welfare of the members of that body and to imply the duty of government to further that welfare” (pp. 1-2). Jones lists a substantial body of contemporary English texts which address and develop this notion of the common good and prosperity of the realm, perhaps most famously the *Discourse of the Common Weal of this Realm of England*, attributed to Thomas Smith and thought to have been written around 1549. Jones’s English examples are paralleled in Scotland in works such as David Lyndsay’s *The Dreme* or Robert Wedderburn’s *The Complaynt of Scotland*.

By the mid 1550s, the “commonweal”, then, referred to the prosperity or welfare of the realm as a whole. It was subject to complex political discussions, but a couple of dominant ideas shape and underlie the debate. Theoretical works tend to stress the inclusive nature of the commonweal. Early images or metaphors imagine it as a tree shading and protecting all around, as a garden or a ship, or, famously, as a body, the *body politic*, which is made up of mutually interdependent organs.⁷ Such images all express social inclusion. *The Discourse of the Common Weal* is set as a dialogue between five representatives of different classes, emphasising both the importance of their different kinds of wisdom in addressing the welfare of all, and what Smith asserts as the peculiarly human recognition that “we be not borne to our selves but partly to the use of oure countrie” (p. 14). As Latimer urged in a sermon of 1552, “consider that no one person is born into the world for his own sake, but for the commonwealth sake” (p. 156).⁸ *The Complaynte of Scotland* describes how the cloak of the personification of commonweal, in this case the afflicted Dame Scotia, is made up of the Three Estates of the realm. The central sense of the sixteenth-century concept of commonwealth, then, is this embracing of the realm as a whole and all of its members as one. This all suggests that *Respublica* and John the Common-Weill, different as they seem in specific characteristics, are both intended to be recognised as composite and universalis-

7 See, e.g., Dudley, *Tree of Commonwealth*, pp. 31-32; the image of the body is fully explored in Christine de Pisan’s *Body of Polycye*.

8 Cf. Boece, *Scotorum Historia*, Preface (1527), for a similar formulation.

ing figures for the nation. *Respublica* may appear on stage as a noble and educated virtuous lady, John as a forthright member of the common people. But we should not take them as representing or personifying these restricted social identities. They are offered as figures for a much broader sense of national identity, although their particular theatrical characterisations certainly tacitly enact varying assumptions by the authors about how such national identity might be characterised and understood.

Another dominant strand of sixteenth-century discussion of commonweal addresses the social and economic problems which beset society.⁹ The prosperity of the commonweal is envisaged importantly in economic terms, although these are generally understood as inseparable from moral and religious concerns. Issues of poverty, and those of productivity, trade and taxation dominated. Anxiety was directed not only toward the absolute poverty of the common people but to the relative depression of landowners, merchants and craftsmen, and to the consequent difficulties in supporting the functioning of the realm and the wealth and welfare of its inhabitants. In the mid-century there is increasing debate about social and economic processes, and the relative responsibilities of the crown, the nobility, the church and the merchants in promoting employment and prosperity and alleviating distress. Discussion of commonwealth is dominated by such social and economic concerns.

These issues are crucial in both of these plays. They are not presented as plays *about* social and economic hardship, but rather about wider-reaching issues of government, church and state. But poverty and social welfare are pointedly dramatised as providing an index of the state of the commonweal: the hardship suffered by the common people is vividly presented in both plays, through the tragicomic figures and complaints of *People* and the *Poor Man*. So, in *Respublica*, *People* complains of the exorbitant prices of basic commodities, while *Avarice* delights in his corrupt dealing with leases and rents, benefices and bribes, the appropriation of church property, sale of counterfeit goods and the export of “grayne, bell meattall, tynne and lead” (l. 877). Many of these were issues flagged up by Mary’s Privy Council at the beginning of her reign as requiring immediate attention.¹⁰ In the *Thrie Estaitis*, the *Poor Man*, supported by John the Commonweill, draws attention to the problem of work-refusers in all classes, the unequal

9 The following discussion draws on Jones, chaps. 1 and 2 (pp. 1-23).

10 See the “Remembraunce of thynges worthie examinacon for the quenes maiestie”; also Walker, pp. 172-84.

and corrupt administration of justice, and especially the unjust imposition of church dues and the real suffering caused by the sequestration of goods. While both *Respublica* and John the Common-Weill are clearly differentiated from the representatives of the poor, these topical issues of economic and fiscal management are singled out as threatening the characters' own political and spiritual, as well as material, welfare. This is materially and visually demonstrated in each play by the same device: both characters initially appear in poor and tattered clothing, which is replaced, when abuses are righted, by magnificent costume (*Respublica*, ll. 1425-26, 1482-83; Lindsay, *Thrie Estaitis*, ll. 2445, 3802).

Through their plays' attention to these central current ideas about the shaping of commonweal, *Respublica* and John the Common-Weill again clearly share an identity. But once more, differences in theatrical presentation suggest different ideologies of state underlying their common concerns. The two figures both suffer from and are damaged by the same problems. But *Respublica* does not herself understand or even fully recognise those problems. On stage, things are done to her by the deceiving Vices that she can neither perceive nor control: she accepts their false reassurances, their manipulations, telling Avarice, "I will putt miselfe whollye into your handes" (l. 499). People, for all his comic-yokel stage presence, is a shrewder observer of the political process she is subject to than she is herself. John the Common-Weill, on the other hand, presents an incisive diagnosis both of the problems that affect him and of their causes. Although he is not able to put these problems right himself, he recognises what needs to be done and inspires and insists on action from those with authority.

Respublica and John the Common-Weill are therefore shaped by shared and traditional formulations, but they embody contrasting political conceptions of the status and function of the commonweal. One is an entity we see acted upon, an image of innocent and passive suffering, the other a theatrically active agent in pursuit of its own well-being. This sense of difference in figuring the state is reinforced by equally, if not more, marked differences in the ways the two plays represent monarchy, and the relationship between monarchy and the commonweal. As with *Respublica* and John, it is not so much what is said by the personified characters involved, as what is seen and done in their action and gestures in performance that expresses the differing ideologies of kingship involved.

Respublica is quite explicit about its representation of monarchy. The play concludes with the triumphant intervention of the goddess Nemesis, who passes judgement on the Vices and leaves her "dearling *Respublica* . . . in tholde

goode eastate” (l. 1922). Before the action ever begins, the Prologue explains to the spectators:

Marye our Soueraigne and Quene
.....
She is oure most wise and most worthie Nemesis
Of whom our plaie meneth tamende that is amyssse. (ll. 49-54)

Mary I, newly crowned and sweeping away the corruption of her brother Edward’s government, is thus explicitly identified with the figure who, we are told, “hathe powre from godde all practise to repeale / which might bring Annoyaunce to ladie comonweale” (ll. 1786-87). Her authority is over the constituent parts of the commonweal: “tys hir powre to forbidde and punishe in all eastates / all presumptuous immoderate attemptates” (ll. 1790-91). But the stage presence of Nemesis is perhaps even more revealing of the nature and scope of her power than are these explanations. She is ceremonially brought in by the Four Daughters of God in the final scene of the play to judge the Vices and deliver them to restitution or punishment. The descriptions that precede her entrance make it clear that she is costumed as a highly emblematic personification:

hir cognisaunce therefore is a whele and wings to flye,
in token hir rewle extendeth ferre and nie.
A rudder eke she beareth in hyr other hande,
as directrie of all thinges in everye Lande. (ll. 1792-95)

This suggests a visually dominating and elaborate figure, but a static one unlikely to engage in kinetic action. In fact, we are even alerted to her choreographed stance and gesture, which reinforce the impression of an almost otherworldly, greater-than-human quality: “than pranketh she hir elbowse owte vnder hir side, / to keape backe the headie and to temper their pride” (ll. 1796-97). Through the identification of Mary with Nemesis, monarchy is seen to function as the *deus ex machina* who emerges to right wrongs and to distribute absolute judgement sanctioned by—indeed almost identified with—the power of God himself.

Monarchy is a far more contested notion in the *Thrie Estaitis*. As Greg Walker has pointed out (pp. 140-43), the play abounds with figures of kingship: King Humanitie and Divine Correction are both characterised as kings, the Poor Man usurps the image of kingship by climbing into the empty throne, and he and John the Common-Weill himself frequently appropriate the role with their

repeated statement, “War I ane king . . .” (ll. 2592, 2846, 2961, 3015). Not only are the audience presented with these apparently multiple sources of royal authority, but the exercise of government in the play is itself diffracted. King Humanitie is ruled by Divine Correction, the two of them staging a twin model of kingship; John the Common-Weill greets the pair: “Gude day, gud day, grit God saif baith your Graces. / Wallie, wallie, fall thay twa weill fairde faces!” (ll. 2440-41). These twinned kings proceed to operate not directly but through a parliament, in consultation with the Three Estates, advised by Gude Counsall and receptive to the complaints of Common-Weill. So the position, role and power of the monarch, his relationship to the institutions of government and to the state of the commonweal itself are complex and composite. This power relationship between the various bodies is not discussed or commented upon directly, but the theatrical presentation and choreography of the place-and-scaffold staging we find in this 1554 production demonstrate the conciliar and interactive process of government. Power relations can be made sharply apparent in proxemic groupings, as characters move between scaffolds; for example, there is a revealing stage direction during the final judgements of the parliament on the Vices: “Heir sal the Kings and the Temporal Stait round [whisper] togider” (l. 3734). The audience see how the next royal judgement emerges from this silent consultation between King Humanitie, Divine Correction and Temporality. The single, static, almost superhuman figure of Nemesis is replaced by this diffuse, partial, interactive performance of royal power.

Other aspects of the action of the two plays reinforce this contrast. The Vices in each play represent political shortcomings, the moral failings of the administrators of government which damage *Respublica* and John the Common-Weill. In *Respublica* these Vices attack and deceive *Respublica* herself, and it is with her that we watch them interact. The monarch, Nemesis, encounters the Vices / ministers only to deliver ultimate judgement and control. In the *Thrie Estaitis*, however, it is King Humanitie who is seen to be attacked by the Vices; he is manipulated first by the follies of youth, who tempt him into the arms of Sensuality, and then by the more serious agents of political corruption. It is John the Common-Weill who, like *Respublica*, is shown to suffer the evil effects of these political Vices; but in the stage action, the audience watch them manipulating not him but King Humanitie. The two figures of monarchy thus have contrasting stage interactions with the Vices, suggesting different kinds of engagement with the processes of government. This difference is heightened by the monarchs’ relationships to

the agents of God's judgement. In the *Thrie Estaitis*, Divine Correction is sent by God as a superior King to awaken King Humanitie to his shortcomings and then to support him in his rule. But Nemesis, the "goddesse of correccion" (l. 1782) in *Respublica*, is identified with the queen herself, with the effect of emphasising the role of the monarch as God's representative on earth. These conceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of the monarch, the powers and limitations of kingship, are not openly discussed, but they are embodied and performed as markedly different in each play.

There are some obvious contextual reasons for these striking differences in the performed portrayal of royal power. The plays are designed for very different audiences. *Respublica* seems to be a Christmas court performance by a boys' company, probably drawn from the Chapel Royal. The public Edinburgh production of the *Thrie Estaitis* played to an audience which drew together court and burgh, ranging across all classes. It is hardly surprising that the view of royal power in the Edinburgh performance is more complicated and qualified than the more univocal celebration and reverence of the London court. Beyond their overt similarities as newly invested Roman Catholic female rulers, the different positions of the two queens are also influential. Mary Tudor came to the throne on a wave of popular support as the rightful heir, with a clear personal commitment to restore Roman Catholic practice to a country that was technically Protestant. Mary of Guise had won the regency from the Earl of Arran only after long and careful negotiation, and was reigning as proxy for an absent child monarch, in a country where religious reform was not yet official and shades of opinion were divided and often unclear.

But arguably, what we see embodied in the two performances is not just these specific contextual circumstances, but what had become broader formulations of ideologies of monarchy in the two countries. Fifteenth- and sixteenth-century discussions of kingship shared many conventional positions about the powers and responsibilities of the monarch in relation to God and to the State. Traditionally, the prime duties of the king were to protect the realm, to administer justice and to govern for the good of his people. His allegiance should be to God, from whom he derived his power, but he should accept the importance of good counsel. During the first half of the sixteenth century these basic tenets remained central, but they came to be rather differently inflected in England and in Scotland. In England, largely in response to the personal and constitutional strategies of Henry VIII, increased emphasis was placed on the primary

and undisputed power of the king over Church, State and subjects. Images and ideas of royal supremacy and sovereign right were increasingly developed and promulgated.¹¹ In Scotland, alternatively, there is evidence of developing theories of “contractual” kingship. Roger Mason (pp. 1-7 *et passim*) reminds us how sixteenth-century Scottish writers from John Mair (1521) to George Buchanan (1579) argued for the accountability of monarchs to their people, and the right to resist tyranny. The *Thrie Estaitis* does not itself explicitly present or support such a radical position. But its enactment of the qualified power of kingship, the forceful role of the commonweal, and the latter’s relative equality with the king in stage encounters is revealing of an underlying ideology that seems very different from the unquestioning reverence accorded to the monarch in *Respublica*.

The two plays appear to offer us very similar fables of national recovery, in which personifications of parallel political and constitutional qualities act on and with each other in comparable ways. But if we look at the visual stage action, the embodied characterisation and the tone, style and gesture of performed encounters, we come away with very different imaginative conceptions of the relationship between monarch and state. *Respublica* presents the State as the feminine, passive recipient of the grace of a supreme monarch, protected and nurtured by an absolute and quasi-divine power. John the Common-Weill represents the State as an active and equal partner who provokes the monarch to action. In a graphic bit of stage action, he is finally drawn into the centre of government: “*Heir sal thay claith Johne the Common-weil gorgeouslie and set him down amang them in the Parliament*” (l. 3802). We might argue that of the two definitions of “commonweal” cited earlier—the body politic itself, and the welfare of that body politic—*Respublica* is closer to the first and John to the second. She is the nation in which the audience live and to which they owe their duty; he is the state of common and mutual prosperity to which the audience aspire.

It is clear that in both these plays ideology is projected not just through the spoken text, but through the experience of performance. Ideas about government, kingship, the state and the people are all tacitly but vividly asserted through stage image and action. But the theatrical experience does not just enact differing ideologies of state and kingship. Spectators are prompted to very different theatrical responses to these performed characters, and through these responses are led to understand their own relationship to the commonweal,

11 See, *e.g.*, essays by Mayer, Hoak and King.

their own position as subjects and as citizens, rather differently. The courtly audience watching *Respublica* is invited to respond with admiration, but also with anxious tenderness, to the suffering Lady Respublica, and with awe and reverence to the spectacular Nemesis. The mixed audience of the *Thrie Estaitis* is drawn into humorous but spirited comradeship with John the Common-Weill, and broadly respectful but critical evaluation of King Humanitie and his parliament's proposed solutions. By engaging their audiences in different experiences of spectatorship, the plays also offer them different roles as subjects and citizens. In the end, it is differing ideologies not only of kingship and commonweal, but also of citizenship itself, that are performed; and they are performed in both theatrical and political senses, not only embodied on the stage but also brought into being beyond it.

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