MISTHINKING THE KING: THE THEATRICS OF CHRISTIAN RULE IN *HENRY VI*, *PART 3*[1]

If we were to trust *A M[illegible] M[illegible]*, Henry VI "him selfe was cause of the destruccion of many noble princes, being of all other most vnfortunate him selfe" (211). Or was he "king Henry the syxt a[illegible] prince, [who] was after many other miseries cruelly murdered in the Tower of London" (211, my italics)? Who was murdered in the Tower, the "Henry the Sixt" in the 1559 table of contents or "The[illegible] King, Henry the sixt" in the 1571 edition (524-25)? In each subsequent edition through 1587, that "vertuous" complements a poem rife with switchbacks. On the one hand, Henry VI presents himself like [illegible] *C[illegible]*: "The solace of the soule my chiefest pleasure was, / Of worldly pompe, of fame, or game, I did not pas" (lines 65-66). On the other hand, we find him admitting to "sundry sinnes" (line 61), breaking an oath to marry Margaret being the most egregious. Henry is at once pious and responsible for a marriage that led to "many a slaughter" (line 96) — here, faith and virtue, there, sins of omission and political ineptitude. What makes this monarch hard to pigeonhole? Roger Ascham writes, "King Henry doth many divers miracles. *D[illegible] H[illegible]*" (Wolffe 354).[2] And in 1577, Henry's relics — the late king's spurs and a chip from his bedstead, along with a stained glass likeness — still attracted worshippers to Windsor, no matter how Protestant jurist William Lambarde fumed (McKenna 76, 86). But when people compared James I to Henry VI, James called the Lancastrian a "sillie weake King" (Wolffe 351). For some reason, James the Peacemaker did not want to remind his

vellianism) might undermine a monarch's Christian identity. However, Christian pacifism might diminish sway. By reconstructing the troublesome reign of a pious Christian king, this play rehearses the early modern attempt to triangulate Christianity, sovereignty, and manhood. In so doing, it troubles the conjunction of kingship and Christianity.

Additionally, *P 3* tests the potential for success of a staged religious king. It thus stretches the limits of political drama. At once fascinating and horrifying, kings like Henry V and Macbeth were sure-fire crowd pleasers, but what sort of theater would a pious sovereign make? Could Henry VI's piety result in anything more than tepid drama and inept policy? Thomas Nashe called history plays "a rare exercise of vertue," a display of "our forefathers' valiant acts" meant as a "reproofe to these degenerate effeminate dayes of ours" (Cox and Rasmussen 1). "[F]resh bleeding" Talbot of *H VI, P 1* was up to the task, but where does a Christian king like Henry VI fit into this picture?[4] *P 3* contends again and again with the shortfalls of Christian kingship, all of the time struggling to discover its theatrical and political possibilities.

Literary critics have been too quick to dismiss Henry VI as simply naïve and hardly regal, too dismayed to wonder why he refuses to fight like a man. We would be hard pressed to find a major Shakespearean character who is categorically defined, if not dismissed, as quickly and as effort-

then we must acknowledge that his rule bears witness to an early modern religio-political dilemma. In what follows, I argue that this play speaks directly to a culture that found it difficult to balance Christianity and *R* [illegible]. Although *P* [illegible] *3* is mindful of Christian humanist and [illegible] *C*[illegible] traditions, it does not offer up either as a solution. Instead, it asks that we take Henry seriously even as it seems to wonder whether a king can be theatrical, virtuous, and politic when religion prescribes contemplation, disengagement, and passivity.

Scholars have seen Shakespeare's Henry V, not Henry VI, as "the mirror of Christian kings" (*H*[illegible] *V* 2.0.6) in Elizabethan England.[5] Monmouth's aggressive faith — what Sir Philip Sidney might have called active virtue — meshes well with the militant Protestantism of the period.[6] Sidney insisted that knowledge is nothing if not actualized for the good of the commonwealth, and English militants in the 1590s concurred; they viewed peace as a warning of God's displeasure and a source of temptation (Jorgensen 170-207).[7] What Sidney calls an "[o]verfaint quietness" that strips "idle England's" virtue and honor (Worden 61) also softens England like "effeminate silkes" (*A L*[illegible] *L*[illegible]).[8] Essex lamented that England had become "bewitched with the delight of peace" (Wells 11).[9] Peace

> alone she endowed with laughter, the sign of merriment; man alone she endowed with tears, the symbol of mercy and pity. To him alone she also gave a voice which was not threatening and fierce as with the beasts, but friendly and caressing. ("Dulce," *T A* 320)

Erasmus correlates Christian humility and charity with soft manliness. In *T P F*, Erasmus relies on typical gender constructs to contrast old men ("rough features, coarse skin, bushy beards") with "foolish" women ("soft cheeks, a high voice, a delicate and smooth complexion") (29). Treble aside, Folly's feminine traits become manly in Erasmus's rhetoric of peace. Inverting a crucial component of the ideal masculine body, Erasmus weaves soft, vulnerable flesh into the very texture of manhood. Man's body is akin to woman's; its innate physiology confirms that stiff sinews and chafed skin are unmanly. True virtue for Erasmus takes the form of bodily effeminacy.

In contrast, the warrior-king is a beastly, unmanly tyrant. Erasmus commands each prince's tutor to "thrust before his pupil's eyes a terrible, loathsome beast: formed of a dragon, wolf, lion, bear, and similar monsters; having hundreds of eyes all over it, teeth everywhere, fearsome from all angles, and with hooked claws [. . .] This is the picture of a tyrant" (*E* 27). The bizarre, excessive elements of this monstrous body constitute weapons unbefitting a proper prince, whose "constant principle" should be "to harm nobody" (52). "It is the mark of a tyrant, and indeed of a woman, to follow an emotional impulse" (52).

This gendering foregrounds Erasmus's uncompromisingly Christian monarchical theory: "Let him become convinced of this, that what Christ teaches applies to no one more than to the prince" (*E* 13). Erasmus adjures Christian princes to "bear the image of Christ" (*C* 56), "to hear and read that you are the likeness of God , [and] not [to] swell with pride on this account, but rather let the fact make you all the more concerned to live up to that wonderful archetype of yours" (*E* 22, my italics). Christianity demands a humble, Christlike king; piety must reign over the ruler. Christ commends meekness of mind, brotherliness, and peace-seeking (*E* 24, *C* 38). By fighting, princes diminish their own manliness: "if [war] be a thing so far from holiness that it be a most pestilence of all godliness and religion [. . .], who shall believe these " (*C* 7, my italics). War is no longer the very font of masculine virtue; forgiveness makes a man and revenge enfeebles him.[11] Erasmus condemns and effeminizes the conventions of regal masculinity. Princes are subject to both natural and Christian law; their military victories corroborate charges of fratricide and diminish their manhood.

By masculinizing Christian virtues, Erasmus dismisses virtù, Machiavellian and Sidneian alike. We ought not to ignore Erasmus and [illegible] *C*[illegible] simply because they were at variance with 1590s *R*[illegible]. Richard Taverner recommends “Dulce” in his *P*[illegible]

P [illegible] *3* asks not just how drama can succeed [illegible] its king's piety, but whether it can succeed [illegible] of his piety. Because he looks to language for legitimacy, Henry the Christian humanist believes in the humane efficacy of words and countenance, and the play depends on their theatricality: "frowns, words and threats / Shall be the war that Henry means to use" (1.1.70-76), and "O Clifford, how thy words revive my heart!" (1.1.163). Unfortunately for Henry, but happily for the drama, others refuse to accept his Christian approach. When Henry calls for patience, Clifford declares, "Patience is for poltroons" (1.1.62). Before Henry disinherits his son in order to stop the civil war and to retain the crown (1.1.197-200), he predicts that "first shall war unpeople this my realm" if he were to abdicate the throne (1.1.123-26).[20] He naively supposes that his empty threats will force others to accept his claim to the throne: war's "colours [. . .] / Shall be my winding-sheet. Why faint you, lords? / My title's good, and better far than his" (1.1.126-129). Not even Clifford believes him ("King Henry, be thy title right or wrong" [159]). When Henry disinherits his son Prince Edward (an "unmanly deed" [1.1.186]), Margaret lambasts her husband: "Had I been there, which am a silly woman, / The soldiers should have tossed me on their pikes / Before I would have granted to that act. / But thou preferr'st thy life before thine honor" (1.1.243-46). Speaking at length about Henry's "foul disgrace" (253), she "shame[s] to hear thee speak." When he insists, his wife will not have it: "Thou has spoke too much already" (258). Henry's court rejects the governmental function of Christian humanism.

promiseth / Successful fortune, steel thy melting heart / To hold thine own and leave thine own with him" (39-42). Unpersuaded by this call to typical manliness, Henry rebuts Clifford's [illegible] contention:

> Full well hath Clifford played the orator,
> Inferring arguments of mighty force.
> But, Clifford, tell me, didst thou never hear
> That things ill got had ever bad success?
> And happy always was it for that son
> Whose father for his hoarding went to hell?
> I'll leave my son my virtuous deeds behind,
> And would my father had left me no more. (2.2.43-50)

Playing the orator himself, Henry condemns his "pecking" heritage in favor of "virtuous deeds." Clifford gives no response, and Margaret does not listen, either. "My lord, cheer up your spirits: our foes are nigh, / And this soft courage makes your followers faint" (2.2.56-57). Henry must knight his son: "Edward Plantagenet, arise a knight — / And learn this lesson, draw thy sword in right" (61-62). When Prince Edward responds — "My gracious father, by your kingly leave, / I'll draw it as apparent to the crown / And in that quarrel use it to the death" (62-65) — he never wonders if swordplay can be "in right," and the play gives us little time to ask. Clifford praises Edward ("that is spoken like a toward prince" [2.2.66]) and a messenger announces that York and Warwick's armies are in pursuit. There is no time to pause to decipher Henry's words: characters and audience alike are eager for battle, and for the moment, the theatrical and political effectiveness of Christian rule is put in doubt.

Like Hamlet, Henry is in the wrong play; maybe, if Stephen Orgel is correct, Henry is in the wrong place as well: "[t]here are many reasons for going to theatre, and very few of them have anything to do with the texts of the plays" (77). Henry's is an impassioned, textual, rhetorical stance, as if in an Erasmian dialogue in which characters are mere vehicles for arguments. Whatever Henry is made of, he is no stage warrior. His pious rule depends on a tactful preference for language.

Moreover, his perseverance suggests that playwrights in the early 1590s were still trying to arrive at the most effective dramatic ratios between speech and spectacle, tranquility and combat, prayer and sin, quietism and heroism; when, 37 lines into the play, York declares, "By words or blows here let us win our right" (1.1.37), we do not yet know for sure which of the two will fill up the succeeding two hours of traffic. Indeed, the start of the play establishes a tense interdependence between display and speech. Warwick begins the play bewildered — "I wonder how the King escaped our hands" (1.1.1), and York easily explains that Henry aban-

doned his men. But Warwick's surprise reminds us how often Henry works toward stasis and disputation, for an o/aural kingdom, an o/aural theater. He is hardly ever on the move. In *P ˛ 3*, his Christian pacifism textualizes, and in so doing it decelerates, the play of history. Replete with decapitated heads and pierced necks on the one hand, with Henry's Erasmian homilies on the other, the play indicates dramatists still uncertain about their own allegiances to spectacle and to words.

The playwrights' metatheatrical concerns surface in Warwick's frustration in 2.3:

> Why stand we like soft-hearted women here,
> Wailing our losses whiles the foe doth rage,
> And look upon, as if the tragedy
> Were played in jest by counterfeiting actors?
> Here on my knee I vow to God above:
> I'll never pause again, never stand still. (2.3.25-30)

Were there a way to expel Henry from his own play, it would move along easily from battle to gory battle, execution to harrowing execution. In fact, Prince Edward gives "fearful" men like his father "leave to go away," as if it were St. Crispian's Day:

> For did I but suspect a fearful man,
> He should have leave to go away betimes,
> Lest in our need he might infect another
> And make him of like spirit to himself.
> If any such be here, as God forbid,
> Let him depart before we need his help. (5.4.44-49)

Of course, Oxford approves ("O brave young Prince, thy famous grandfather / Doth live again in thee" [52-53]). And for his part, Somerset hopes that the "fearful man" will "[g]o home to bed, and like the owl by day, / If he arise, be mocked and wondered at" (56-57). But Shakespeare and company are not quite so easily convinced. They seem willing to risk using (Henry's) language to slow *P ˛ 3* to the point of stasis. They want to see what happens to England, and to a history play, when its king forgoes forceful, militaristic action not only for the stage laments one would expect from a "soft-hearted woman," but also for the ethics that one might require from a Christian sovereign.

Like Oxford and Somerset, Margaret wants a king who "defies" his enemies

RENASCENCE

MORETTI

Yet neither conqueror nor conquered:
So is the equal poise of this fell war.
Here on this molehill will I sit me down.
To whom God will, there be the victory.

RENASCENCE

> Whither the Queen intends. Forward, away! (137-39)

"Not that I fear to stay" — who fears to stay? The other characters, the author, the playwright(s)? Should we believe in Henry's courage here? Henry resolves not to "expostulate," as if to avoid further strain under the weight of what seems like an untenable Christian crown. To linger would be to revisit the bleak incompatibility between Christianity and rule. To follow Margaret would be to let her chart the course of the play, to let her fight a war without the torment and the angst that accompany Henry's musings.

Although the King returns in 3.1 to expostulate with "prayer book" in hand, his words have little of the theatrical drive on display in 2.5:

> No bending knee will call thee Caesar now
> No humble suitors press to speak for right,
> No, not a man comes for redress of thee.
> For how can I help them, an not myself?" (3.1.18-20)

In another metatheatrical moment, two keepers recognize "the quondam king" (23), but rather than "seize upon him," they "[f]orbear awhile" to "hear a little more" (27). The keepers eventually apprehend him in the name of King Edward, but consider their willingness to listen. Henry's words matter, but what we get has nothing like the devastating tenor of "Misthink the King." He admits that his royal "balm" can evanesce — a shocking revelation that feeds into tragedies like *R*[illegible] *II* — but he does not expose the faultline between Christianity and kingship (16-17). The keepers supplant one king (Henry) for another (Edward), but they do not "Misthink the King." In 3.1, Henry saves the appearance of Christian rule because he does not mourn its untenability. "In God's name lead," he orders the keepers. "Your King's name be obeyed, / And what God will, that let your King perform; / And what he will, I humbly yield unto" (98-100). Let Edward reign as God intends, as if Christianity and monarchy are still inextricable and interdependent, as if the Christian King can still shepherd his subjects, defeat his enemies with "coldness," and "satisfy" his audiences.

After Henry's despair and flight in 2.5 and his capture in 3.1, he reappears in 4.6, once again tantalizing spectators with the viability of Christian sovereignty. When Henry regains the crown, his first act is to reinstitute Christian humanism as a radical alternative to absolutism. But like King Lear, Henry would rather have the crown without its burdens. So, he "resigns" his "government" to both Warwick and Clarence, even though his "head still wear the crown" (4.6.24-25). Henry institutes a ceremonial

office to cheat Fortune ("That I may conquer Fortune's spite" [20]) and stabilize Christian monarchy. This idealism, devoid of his earlier despair, does not subjugate the Yorkists, but initially it sits well with Warwick and Clarence (26-32).[22] By accepting this plan, they tacitly decide that Henry's method of rule is worth salvaging, that Christian piety can contribute to proper governance. Henry joins their hands and dubs them co-Protectors, "[t]hat no dissension hinder government" (40). Yet, this brave new deal alters traditional monarchical theory. Henry, who "entreats, for I command no more" (59), ushers in a peculiar sovereignty that explains Warwick's awkward search for precise terminology: "We'll yoke together, like a double shadow / To Henry's body, and supply his place, / I mean, in bearing weight of his government" (49-51). Henry has discovered terrain that Warwick cannot quite define or demarcate: something about the body politic, something

> The night-crow cried, aboding luckless time;
> Dogs howled; and hideous tempests shook down trees;
> The raven rooked her on the chimney's top;
> And chatt'ring pies in dismal discords sung.
> Thy mother felt more than a mother's pain,
> And yet brought forth less than a mother's hope:
> To wit, an undigested and deformed lump,
> Not like the fruit of such a goodly tree.
> Teeth hadst thou in thy head when thou was born
> To signify thou cam'st to bite the world.
> And if the rest be true, which I have heard,
> Thou cam'st — (5.6.37-56)

Forcing Richard's hand ("I'll hear no more! Die prophet, in thy speech" (5.6.57)), this prophecy all at once provokes tragedy, theatricality, and spectacle.[23]

When Richard continues the speech that he abruptly interrupted, he effectively downplays the recent regicide. He would rather spend his time on stage exploiting Henry's humanism:

> I that have neither pity, love nor fear.
> Indeed, 'tis true that Henry told me of,
> For I have often heard my mother say
> I came into the world with my legs forward.
> Had I not reason, think ye, to make haste,
> And seek their ruin that usurped our right?
> The midwife wondered and the women cried,
> "O, Jesus bless us, he is born with teeth!'
> And so I was, which plainly signified
> That I should snarl, and bite and play the dog.
> Then, since the heavens have shaped my body so,
> Let hell make crook'd my mind to answer it.
> I have no brother; I am like no brother.
> And this word 'love', which greybeards call divine,
> Be resident in men like one another
> And not in me: I am myself alone. (68-83)

By conceding his socially alienating bestiality, Richard subsumes himself within Henry's Erasmian typology. He will "play the dog" because he is not among "men like one another." Although he references his deformed body, it is his language that deanthropomorphizes him. "I have no brother; I am like no brother" utterly dissociates Richard from Christian humanist strictures even as it bears witness to both Henry's Christian humanism and Henry's dismay over the fratricidal War of the Roses. "O, Jesus bless us" is as much a plea against bestialization as it is a quick, [illegible] prayer for

when he attempts to lead" (74).[24] This presumes consistent characterization, but the language itself does not reflect Henry's Christian humanist idioms. Perhaps the attribution of line 6 is a printing mishap; as Johnson asserted, it makes more sense to give the line to Warwick. If so, then what of the Hector reference? That the lines do not exist in the 1595 octavo tells us nothing, since Henry's mole-hill speech is truncated there as well. So how do we reconcile Henry's stratagem here to his passivity everywhere

Notes

1) I would like to extend my gratitude to Ted Leinwand, whose insight, diligence, and goodwill contributed to what succeeds in this essay. I also thank Kim Coles, Theresa Coletti, Donna Hamilton, Kent Cartwright, Kate Barker, and Jody Lawton for their sound advice.

2) Cited from Ascham, Roger. *T S* [illegible]. Ed. J. Upton. London: 1711. 128.

3) Brian Vickers is among many who attribute the *H* [illegible] *VI* plays to collaboration. Also see Cox and Rasmussen's introduction to *P* [illegible] *3* (49). While I may refer to Shakespeare for the sake of brevity, I do not reject co-authorship.

4) For "fresh bleeding" Talbot, see *P* [illegible] *P* [illegible] *S* [illegible] *D* [illegible], cited in Howard and Rackin 18.

5) For example, see Rackin 29-30, 164 and Marx 65-66.

6) Blair Worden gives a concise synopsis of Sidney's rejection of passivity (23-37). Worden also distinguishes Sidney's definition of virtue from Machiavelli's: "Good ends cannot justify bad means" (27).

7) Cf. Marx 60, 63-64.

8) Quoted from Jorgensen 171. This play, owned by the Lord Chamberlain's men, was entered in the Stationer's registrar in 1600 and was printed in 1602. The play may have been performed as early as 1594 (Shuger 124).

9) Quoted from Devereux, Robert, 2nd Earl of Essex. *A A* [illegible] *E* [illegible] *E* [illegible]. London, 1603. Sig. E[v].

10) Replacing the popular 1560s Edward Hake edition, Rogers's version of *I* [illegible] *C* [illegible] was reprinted at least ten times between 1580 and 1605.

11) For manly forgiveness, see *E* [illegible] 148: "who so ever can overcomme his owne hert who so ever can wyl them good, whiche doth hym harme praye for them, whiche curse hyme: to this man is due the propre name of a bolde and stronge man, and of an excellent mynde." For revenge, see 201: "Thou woldest be counted a man of great stomacke and therfore thou suffrest not injury to be unavenged: but in conclusyon by this meanes thou utterest thy childishness sayinge thou canst not rule thyne owne mynde, whiche is the very property and offyce of a man."

12) Taverner's selective compendium appeared in 1539, 1545, 1550, 1552, and 1569. The last known English translation of "Dulce" was in 1534, but Taverner's commendation suggests its continued availability.

13) Cf. Elyot 191.

14) For a complete list of sixteenth-century English translations, see Anne M. O'Donnell's introduction to the *E* [illegible] (xxvi-xlix).

15) John Craig's research suggests that the *P* [illegible] were still widely available through Elizabeth's reign.

16) Rejecting literal interpretations of Luke 22:36 which allow for violence, Erasmus dwells on a metaphorical, if not anagogical, meaning — the sword is of the Spirit (*P* [illegible] 195-96).

17) John 1:16 and Isaiah 11:6, respectively (Shaheen 70).

18) Many literary scholars have studied gender and early modern humoral physiology. A sampling includes Breitenberg, Paster, and Smith.

19) Since Henry discouraged his own side in Hall and Holinshed, Cox and Rasmussen call Warwick's inference "odd" (228).

20) Raymond Utterback sees a further logic in Henry's action: "He proposes to entail the crown to York on the conditions of remaining King for life and receiving York's loyalty. York accepts the arrangement with alacrity, but obviously he does not reflect on the positions implicitly admitted. If York can become Henry VI's heir by 'adoptive' process (and with Henry under military duress), then Henry IV was Richard II's legal heir, and his descendant Henry VI has the superior right. Further, the mere acceptance of the position of heir presupposes the validity of Henry's title, since no man can bequeath to an heir what he does not possess" (51).

21) Cf. *E* 24: "When you assume the office of prince, do not think how much honor is bestowed upon you, but rather how great a burden and how much anxiety you have taken on."

22) Later, Clarence reneges so that he may fight for his family (5.1.81-102).

23) I disagree with Maurice Hunt's claim that Henry's final words simply reveal an unnatural king: "Henry pays the ultimate price for mirroring the unnaturalness of his slayer, the unnaturalness that in a fainter image has been his all along" ("Unnaturalness" 164).

24) Cox and Rasmussen quote Johnson from *J S . T Y E W S J* . Vol. 8. Ed. Arthur Cherbo. New Haven: Yale UP, 1968. 608.

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