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Henry VIII and the Poetry of Politics

Youth must have some dalliance,
Of good or ill some pastance.
[Henry VIII, "Pastime With Good Company"]

I'm 'Enery the 'Eighth I an
'Enery the Eighth I am I am
[Herman's Hermits]

IN THE SUMMER OF 1499, Desiderius Erasmus stayed at the Greenwich country house of his former pupil and present patron, William Blount, Lord Mountjoy. One day, Thomas More dropped by and invited his friend to take a walk to the nearby village of Eltham. Without first warning Erasmus, More led his friend to Eltham Palace, which served as the royal nursery. Because Prince Arthur happened to be in Wales, everyone's attention focused on the eight-year-old Prince Henry, Duke of York, who would soon be King Henry VIII. More, who had prepared for the occasion by bringing a small literary gift, bowed to the young prince and presented his offering. Erasmus, caught entirely unawares and not a little peeved at More for this surprise, mumbled his excuses and promised to remedy the omission another time. However, during the meal Erasmus received a note from Henry "challenging something from his pen," and the eminent humanist complied several days later with an exceedingly tedious panegyric

to the prince, the prince's father, England in general, and a great deal else besides.¹

This anecdote, recalled in a letter Erasmus wrote in 1523 to Johannes Botzheim, says a great deal about its author, about Thomas More, and about Henry VIII. It shows that the prince, doubtless encouraged by his tutor, John Skelton (who might have sparked the young prince's challenge), liked the company of the learned, thereby prefiguring his patronage of humanist endeavors. More ominously, this anecdote also shows how even as child, Henry injected an element of threat into his literary doings. It was not enough for the young prince merely to accept Erasmus's apologies and promises; instead, Henry imperiously challenges, that is to say, he *commands*, Erasmus to come up with something, and the flustered guest clearly understood the note as much more than a child's whim. Twenty years later, Erasmus interpreted the incident as a prediction of Henry's future glory, writing that even as a child Henry had "already something of royalty in his demeanor, in which there was a certain dignity combined with a singular courtesy." But by 1523, Erasmus depended on Henry for patronage, so it was politic of him to forget how he spent three days slaving over Henry's demand. Indeed, the event so traumatized him that he neither wrote nor read poetry again (which given his poem's dreariness may have been a good thing). Power, as we shall see, figures as an abiding concern in Henry's literary endeavors.

Many contemporary historians and literary historians, such as J. J. Scarisbrick, C. S. Lewis, and John Stevens, characterize the early Henrician court as obsessed by games, chivalric role-playing, and light allegory. As Scarisbrick puts it, the newly crowned Henry VIII "was a prodigy, a sun-king, a *stupor mundi*. He lived in, and crowned, a world of lavish allegory, mythology and romance."² A world in which, as Stevens says, "people acted out their aspirations to a leisured and gracious life, where Lady Courtesy led the dance and Beauty, Simplese, Swete-lokyng, Fraunchise, Mirth and Gladness danced with her" (152). This picture of the early Henrician court as a fundamentally innocent idyll has its roots in a misreading of Edward Hall's lengthy, detailed accounts of Henry's court and his very detailed accounts of the many spectacles.³ Hall's seemingly un-

¹ Carolly Erickson, *Great Harry* (New York: Summit Books, 1980), 27.

² J. J. Scarisbrick, *Henry VIII* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 20.

³ On Hall's initially implicit, but later very explicit, criticism of Henry VIII, see Peter C. Herman, "Henrician Historiography and the Voice of the People: The Cases of

critical tone in his early chapters on Henry VIII have led most later critics to assume that the chronicler entirely endorses the king's activities (which is not true) and to assume that Henry's lyrics emanate from the putatively untroubled atmosphere of festivity and chivalry marking the first decade or so of Henry's reign. Thus, the one critic (John Stevens) who deigned to note their existence dismisses them as light, after-dinner entertainment, as another element of the "game" of courtly love. While such literary historians as Sidney Anglo and W. R. Streitberger have done important archival work on the place and organization of the Henrician court's pageantry, for the most part they have preferred to stay away from analyzing Henry's literary activities and entertainments as ideological vehicles.⁴

Skiles Howard has demonstrated brilliantly how the masques and disguisings of the early Henrician court constituted "a privileged site for the production of hierarchy and gender difference,"⁵ to which we can add the production of political authority as well. Take, for example, the *Chateau Vert* spectacle produced by Wolsey for the amusement and benefit of the king by "certain noble men from the Emperor" on Shrovetide, 1522 (630).⁶ Recalling the passage in the *Roman de la Rose* in which the fortress containing the rose is under siege by the god of love and his followers [ll. 3267 ff.],⁷ as reported by Hall the dignitaries were ushered into a "great chamber" in which a castle had been constructed, and significantly, this castle is a monument to female power: "and on every Tower was a banner, one banner was of iii. rent hartes, the other was a ladies hand gripyng a mans harte, the third banner was a ladies hand turnyng a mannes hart" [631].) The women inhabiting this castle assumed the allegorical names of Beauty, Honor, Perseverance, Kindness, Constancy, Bounty, Mercy and

More and Hall," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 39: 3 (1997): 270-76.

⁴ Sydney Anglo, *Spectacle, Pageantry and Early Tudor Policy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969; repr. 1997) and W. R. Streitberger, *Court Revels, 1485-1559* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994).

⁵ Skiles Howard, "'Ascending the Riche Mount': Performing Hierarchy and Gender in the Henrician Masque," in Peter C. Herman, *Rethinking the Henrician Era: New Essays on Early Tudor Texts and Contexts* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 17.

⁶ Edward Hall, *Hall's Chronicle Containing the History of England during the Reign of Henry the Fourth and the Succeeding Monarchs to the End of the Reign of Henry the Eighth* [original title: *The Union of the Two Noble and Illustre Famelies of Lancastre & Yorke*], ed. Sir Henry Ellis (London: J. Johnson et al., 1809). All references are given parenthetically, and we have silently modernized the usages of *i/j* and *u/v*.

⁷ *Roman de la Rose*, trans. Charles Dahlberg (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971).

Pity, the feminine virtues, in other words, and they are guarded by other ladies named Danger, Disdain, Jealousy, Unkindness, Scorne, Malebouche [Bad Mouth or Speech], and Strangeness. (Hall also records that these ladies "were tired [attired] to women of Inde" [631] which ensures that the feminine enemies of the king's will are identified absolutely with the Other.) Then, men entered with the allegorical names of Morus, Nobleness, Youth, Attendance, Loyalty, Pleasure, Gentleness, and Liberty, the king, "the chief of this compaignie," adopting the disguise of Ardent Desire. Hall describes the action thus:

Ardent Desire . . . so moved the ladies to geve over the Castle, but *Scorne* and *Disdain* saied they would helde the place, then *Desire* saied the ladies should be wonne and came and encouraged the knightes, then the lordes ranne to the castle, (at whiche tyme out was shot a greate peale of gunnes) and the ladies defended the castle with Rose water and Comfittes, and the lordes threwe in Dates and Orenge, and other fruites made for pleasure, but at the last the place was wonne, but the Lady *Scorne* and her compaignie stubbernelly defended them with boows and balles, til they were driven out of the place and fled. Then the lordes toke the ladies of honor as prisoners by the handes, and brought them doune, and daunced together very pleasauntly, which much pleased the straungers. . . . (631)

Howard rightly sees in this production a paradigm for how dance constitutes a rehearsal for gender roles, yet we also need to remember that Wolsey produced the "assault on the *Chateau Vert*" for the benefit of the king and of Charles V's ambassadors (the "straungers" of Hall's report). In other words, alongside figuring gender, the evening of playacting also constituted a demonstration of the king's *political* authority.⁸ The king — conquering hero that he is — answers the challenge to his desires by asserting that "the ladies should be wonne" and encouraging his "knightes" to enact a "battle" that concludes with a mock rape. The reassertion of male dominance at the "battle's" conclusion emblemizes the reassertion of the king's dominance over the (literally feminized) enemies who dared to defy him; the king's sexual potency, in other words, symbolizes his political po-

⁸ On how Jonson's masques refigured the authority of the Stuart court, see Stephen Orgel, *The Illusion of Power: Political Theater in the English Renaissance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975).

tency. No doubt there was much laughter and good cheer at the actual event, but when Hall writes that the ladies were led "as prisoner by the handes," could anyone present at the scene not have understood that Wolsey also intended a lesson about masculine/royal authority for both the court and the Emperor's representatives?

The underlying politics of this playacting exemplifies the intertwining, if not the outright collapse, of the private and the public characterizing the early Henrician court,⁹ and we propose to investigate how Henry VIII's lyrics perform similar ideological work. If, as Seth Lerer posits, "[t]he literary products of [this] period expose confusions and confluences among poetry and drama, private letters and public performances,"¹⁰ Henry's literary products enact, if not initiate, precisely this confusion. Moreover, they not only constitute a site for the "confusion of personal and political power," as Foley describes Henry's miniatures,¹¹ they also blend together the construction of masculinity and political authority. Thus, in the "Assault on the Chateau Vert," Henry displays both his personal and his professional virility. Consequently, even though Henry's lyrics were (at some level) pure entertainment, describing and inventing a world of pastime with good company, as Lewis and Stevens have it, they are not merely light diversions. Like Henry's masques and disguisings, his lyrics also constitute vehicles for depicting the hierarchy of the court and for both defending and reinforcing the power of his monarchy. In no way do we claim that Henry VIII is as skillful a poet as Wyatt or even (in his own peculiar way) John Skelton. Instead, we claim that Henry VIII's lyrics become much more interesting than previously allowed when looked at as interventions in the cultural poetics of the early Tudor court.

Although no direct evidence unambiguously connects Henry's lyrics to specific situations and events, nonetheless it makes sense to situate these poems within the context of the early Henrician court. The *Ritson MS*, which contains "Pastime with Good Company," dates from around 1510, and the *Henry VIII MS* (the name arising from its containing the bulk of Henry's songs) from around 1522.¹² Several pointed and touching refer-

⁹ See David Starkey, "Intimacy and Innovation: the Rise of the Privy Chamber, 1485-1547," *The English Court: From the Wars of the Roses to the Civil War*, ed. David Starkey (London: Longman, 1987); Seth Lerer, *Courtly Letters in the Age of Henry VIII: Literary Culture and the Arts of Deceit* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

¹⁰ Lerer, *Courtly Letters*, 38.

¹¹ Stephen M. Foley, *Sir Thomas Wyatt* (Boston: Twayne, 1990), 36.

¹² On the dating of Henry's lyrics, see Ray G. Siemens, "New Evidence on Wyatt's

ences to Queen Katherine had to have been penned well before their marriage cooled in the early 1520s.¹³ Therefore, it is likely that Henry's writing dates from circa 1510 to 1515, and even likelier that he wrote some of them in the period just after he ascended to the Crown, and as we will see, Henry's lyrics not only engage the issues facing the new king, but they also reflect his somewhat tenuous hold on power at the start of his reign.

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Henry's lyrics can be grouped into two non-exclusive categories by the poetic personae adopted by their author: in the first group, the speaker expounds upon and defends the virtues of ostensibly youthful pastimes, and in the second group, the speaker prescribes or fulfills the proper actions of the courtly lover.

In the latter poems, Henry often adopts the role of the faithful lover. In "Oh, My Heart," for instance, the speaker mourns (in not very complex verse) his imminent (and reasonless) departure from his lady:

Oh, my heart and, oh, my heart,
My heart it is so sore,
Since I must from my love depart,
And know no cause wherefore.

Other poems reiterate the speaker's ostensibly rock-solid devotion. In "Green Grows the Holly," Henry asserts that just:

As the holly grows green
And never changes hue,
So I am — ever have been —
unto my lady true. (ll. 5-8)

And in "Without Discord," the speaker pleads for reconciliation:

'Ah robyn,' in British Library Additional MS 31, 922," *Notes and Queries* n.s. 46.2 (1999): 189-91, and Siemens, "Thomas Wyatt, Anne Boleyn, and Henry VIII's Lyric 'Pastime with Good Company,'" *Notes and Queries* n.s. 44 (1997): 26-27.

¹³ E.g., I hurt no man, I do no wrong, / I love true where I did marry ("Though Some Say that Youth Rules Me") and The daisy delectable, / The violet waning and blue, / You are not variable — / I love you and no more ("Whereto Should I Express"). All references to Henry's poems are to this volume.

Without discord,
 And both accord,
 Now let us be.
 Both hearts, alone,
 To set in one
 Best seems me.
 For when one, sole,
 Is in the dole
 Of love's pain,
 Then help must have
 Himself to save
 And love to obtain. (ll. 1-12)

Taken as a whole, many of Henry's poems overlap especially in their defense of pastime, constituting a rebuttal and defense of the activities of the Lover. "If Love Now Reigned as it Has Been" asserts that, despite its pains, "Noble men then would surely ensearch / All ways whereby they might it reach" (ll. 2-3) — love being the obvious province of the noble, the aristocratic. Henry reiterates this point in "Though That Men Do Call it Dotage": "Love maintains all noble courage; / Who love disdains is all of the village¹⁴" (ll. 13-14).

These lyrics seem like trifles until we remember that, unlike the lyrics of later Henrician poet-courtiers such as Wyatt or the various contributors to such miscellanies as the *Devonshire Manuscript*, there was nothing private about Henry's literary amusements. Instead, Henry's lyrics constituted public performances — even more specifically, monarchic performances — with accompaniment of at least two other singers (as evidenced by the settings in the manuscript that is the sole witness to the majority of his lyrics) for the whole court, which would also include ambassadorial retinues. Moreover, Henry's lyrics constitute monarchic performances in a number of ways.

The first of these is found in an examination of some of the ways Henry's adopting the persona of the courtly lover might intervene in the politics of the early Henrician court. As noted, according to the politicized poetics of the 1510s and 1520s, the allegorical figures of the Lover and the Warrior are inextricably tied together, both being expressions of Henry's masculinity; at the same time that Henry constructs himself as the Lover,

¹⁴ Viillage = villainage, peasantry.

he is also restarting the Hundred Years War with plans to re-invade France. And Henry's construction of himself as a chivalric lover reflects his overall absorption in neo-chivalric pastimes, such as jousting and tilts, that will culminate in his trying to act out a chivalric fantasy by invading France. As Hall, our most detailed source for this period, writes at the start of his chapter on Henry's second year:

[The king exercised] hym self daily in shotyng, singing dau[n]syng, wrastelyng, casting of the barre, plaiying at the recorders, flute, virginal, and in setting of songes, makyng of balettes, & dyd set. ii. goodly masses, every of them fyve partes, whiche were songe oftentimes in hys chapel, and afterwardes in diverse other places. And whan he came to Okyng, there were kept both Justes and Turneys: the rest of thys progresse was spent in huntyng, hawkyng and shotyng. (515)

While it may appear that Henry is merely recreating himself on this progress, the setting of songs and making of ballads — presumably including the type of compositions represented in the *Henry VIII MS* — are part of Henry's fashioning himself as a figure from a chivalric romance. To take one step further Lerer's insight that Henry's masques and disguisings "exemplify his understanding of the theatrical nature of both love and politics: his recognition that the court remains a world of masks,"¹⁵ Henry's adoption of the persona of the Lover reflects his intuition that play is also a way of *doing* politics. Henry's love songs enact, in other words, precisely the conflation of "sexual and political potency, virility and kingship," that marks Holbein's much later portrait of Henry VIII commemorating the birth of Edward, in which the king's phallus, his ability to conceive, is the central focus.¹⁶

The expressions of faithfulness, and the desire to dispel "discord" and achieve "accord" are, no doubt, generic traits of the courtly lyric, but they take on further resonance when we remember that at the time Henry probably composed these lyrics, he was anything but faithful to Katherine of Aragon, his wife. The author of *Youth*, the interlude in which a young Henry VIII is depicted, portrays its protagonist as a regular frequenter of brothels, and associates him with Lady Lechery; in representing a King,

¹⁵ Lerer, *Courtly Letters*, 41.

¹⁶ Louis A. Montrose, "Elizabethan Subject and the Spenserian Text," *Literary Theory/Renaissance Texts* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 315.

however, one assumes the author would take great care to avoid such a negative representation, especially if it were not true.¹⁷ But there is evidence to confirm his extra-marital exploits. Henry had an affair with a Belgian woman while on the continent in 1513 and, "had clad himself and his court in mourning" because he had to leave her.¹⁸ Though Hall records "a louing metyng" between Henry, who rushed home ahead of his troops, and Katherine upon his return (567), Peter Martyr notes the following year that Henry had "boasted of and cast in [Katherine's] face the fact of his own infidelity."¹⁹ In that year as well, Henry was secretly inquiring about a divorce from Katherine, with the hope of marrying another, the daughter of the French Duke of Bourbon.²⁰ He also first met Elizabeth Blount in 1514.²¹ Henry, a "freshe youth . . . in the chaynes of loue" (Hall 703), fell for her and, in 1519, she bore him a child;²² interestingly, it was her excellence in singing, dancing, and other pastimes which Henry enjoyed that attracted him to her (Hall 703).

In addition, as the correspondence of the Spanish ambassador, Luis Carroz, illustrates, the private life and indiscretions of the King (as well as the state of the Queen's reproductive organs) were not only public, but the subject of intense observation and speculation. Despite the ambassador's report on 25 May 1510 that the King and Katherine "adore" each other,

¹⁷ We know that Henry, disguised as one of his yeomen of the guard, visited the King's Head Tavern in Cheapside to see the watch on a midsummer's night, 1510 (Roman Dyboski, *Songs, Carols, and other Miscellaneous Poems* [London: Early English Text Society, 1907], 156). In the interlude, Youth is introduced by Riot and Pride to Lady Lechery (ll. 387 ff.) on the way to a tavern, and Youth and Lechery exchange vows to meet again (ll. 464-70). Similarly, Youth is characterized as someone who spends much time in the Stews, a brothel quarter (ll. 701-2, and notes (*Two Tudor Interludes: The Interludes of Youth and Hick Scorer*, ed. Ian Lancashire [Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1980]).

¹⁸ *Calender of State Papers and Manuscripts, Relating to English Affairs, Existing in the Archives and Collections of Venice and in other Libraries of Northern Italy*, ed. Rawdon Brown (London: Longmans, Green, Reader & Dyer, 1867), vol. 2: 152.

¹⁹ *Calender of State Papers, Venice*, vol. 2: 152.

²⁰ See the letter from Vettor Lippomano (*Calendar of State Papers, Venice* 1: 188), and Betty Behrens, "A Note on Henry VIII's Divorce Project of 1514," *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research* 11 (1933-34): 163-64.

²¹ Scarisbrick, *Henry VIII*, 147.

²² Later, Henry had Anne Boleyn's sister, Mary, as mistress. It has also been suggested that Henry was involved with Mary and Anne's mother (*Letters and Papers of Henry VIII*, vol. 4: 329); when confronted with a rumour of these affairs, Henry denied the affair with the mother, and Cromwell immediately denied the affair with Mary. See Paul Friedmann, *Anne Boleyn* (London: MacMillan, 1884), appendix B.

in his next letter, dated 29 May 1510, Carroz informs Ferdinand of the king's sexual adventuring:²³

What lately has happened is that two sisters of the Duke of Buckingham, both married, lived in the palace. The one of them is the favorite of the Queen, and the other, it is said, is very much liked by the King, who went after her [y andava tras ella]. Another version is that the love intrigues were not of the King, but of a young man, his favourite, of the name of Conton [Compton], who had been the late King's butler. This Conton carried on the love intrigue, as it is said, for the King, and that is the more credible version, for the King has shown great displeasure at which I am going to tell.

Carroz's gossip concerns how the King got found out and his displeasure at having his infidelities revealed. Henry's bedhopping, of course, lends an ironic air to his pleadings for reconciliation and his assertions of eternal truth and fidelity. Yet in addition to the domestic comedy (everyone in the court probably knowing that even as the king swears eternal fealty, he is carrying on a "love intrigue"), there might be a more serious, diplomatic overtone to Henry's adoption of this persona before the court.

At the same time that Henry is either chasing other women or having his friends act for him, he was also assiduously attempting to enlist his father-in-law as an ally in his planned wars. Immediately upon his accession, he wrote to Ferdinand asking if he would be willing to attack France (Ferdinand evidently told Henry to restrain himself), and he tried three times between 1510 and 1512 to carry on a military adventure of one type or another with him. In each case, however, Ferdinand pulled out without bothering to tell Henry first.²⁴ The probable connections to Henry's lyrics are twofold. Like the jousts and tourneys, Henry's songs are part of his attempt to construct his image as the ideal chivalric king who is both lover and warrior, as we have seen. The songs, in other words, are directed at both the court *and* the foreign ambassadors, and of course help symbolize and project his masculinity. But also, having his infidelities broadcast surely would not help Henry enlist his father-in-law's aid in going

²³ *Supplement to Volume I and Volume II of Letters, Dispatches, and State Papers Related to the Negotiations between England and Spain*, ed. G. A. Bergenroth (London: Public Record Office, 1868), 35, 39.

²⁴ Scarisbrick, *Henry VIII*, 24–34.

to war. Without meaning to underestimate the extent of masculine privilege or Ferdinand's paternal affections, when Henry swears "So I am — ever have been — / unto my lady true," it is distinctly possible that he also has Katherine's father — whose approval Henry clearly desired — in mind as his audience. The love songs could, therefore, be construed as a form of poetic diplomacy, using verse not only to enhance Henry's masculine image, but also to create the public illusion of marital bliss for the purpose of reassuring his father-in-law that he is indeed treating his daughter well and therefore should be trusted in other endeavors as well.²⁵ In other words, Henry is drawing upon and manipulating the generic conventions of the courtly love lyric to provide an acceptable face for marital relations, which themselves are suggestive of national political strength, stability, and Henry's ability to deal with political discord.

Alongside the diplomatic overtones, Henry's songs also reveal their monarchic perspective by the way in which the poems deal with the issue of power. From the Provençal poets onward, power conventionally is delegated to the female object of desire. The male (at least superficially)²⁶ continuously begs the woman for grace in language that could just as easily describe the quest for the monarch's or the lord's patronage of favor. "Love lyrics," as Marotti writes, "could express figuratively the realities of suit, service, and recompense with which ambitious men were insistently concerned as well as the frustrations and disappointments experienced on socially competitive environments."²⁷ Hence the parallel between political and erotic experience that Wyatt, his contemporaries, and his followers found so productive.²⁸

Henry's "Alac! Alac! What Shall I Do?" (Alac! Alac! What shall I do?

²⁵ It is also possible, if these songs were composed after Ferdinand's repeated abandonments of Henry's forces, that they have an ironic counterpoint, i.e., that I am faithful, and you are not.

²⁶ See Nancy J. Vickers, "Diana Described: Scattered Woman and Scattered Rhyme," *Critical Inquiry* 8 (1981): 265–79, and Maureen Quilligan, "Sidney and his Queen," in *The Historical Renaissance: New Essays on Tudor and Stuart Literature and Culture*, ed. Heather Dubrow and Richard Strier (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 171–96.

²⁷ Marotti, "Love is Not Love," 398.

²⁸ On the use of private miscellanies as forms of social protest, see Paul G. Remley, "Mary Shelton and Her Tudor Literary Milieu," in Herman, *Rethinking the Henrician Era*, 40–77.

/ For care is cast in to my heart / And true love locked thereto')²⁹ — and its companion, “Hey Nonny Nonny, Nonny Nonny No!” — provide an example of this. The two lyrics, taken together, provide one of the rare instances of male poets writing in a female voice.³⁰ In “Hey Nonny,” the speaker hears a maid “Right piteously complain” and then rehearses what he hears:

She said, alas,
 Without trespass,
 Her dear heart was untrue.
 In every place,
 I know he has
 Forsaken me for a new. (ll. 9-14)

The inversion of the conventional assumption of male fidelity and female lability (as Wyatt puts it, “continuously seeking with a continual change”) is interesting enough, and we will return to it. Right now, however, we want to note that the lyric also inverts the language conventionally used to describe the power relations between the desirer and the desired. The female voice complains:

And now I may,
 In no manner away,
 Obtain that I do sue.
 So ever and aye
 Without deny [deny]
 My own sweet heart, adieu. (ll. 21-26)

To state the obvious, Henry-as-king is the object of everyone’s desire. He is the person sued, not the person suing, for favor. Nowhere is this made more evident than in “If Love Now Reigned as it Has Been,” where Henry offers a riddle to his audience: “To lovers I put now sure this case: / Which of their loves does get them grace?” One must remember that Henry’s audience would have known this question came from their monarch, and just as the lady must “sue” the male, so now the elder disdainers must sue the youthful, regal lover for political and amorous “grace,” the two

²⁹ On the relationship between these two poems, see note 13 of Siemens’s selection of Henry’s poems in this volume.

³⁰ See Elizabeth Harvey, *Ventriloquized Voices: Feminist Theory and Renaissance Texts* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

being conflated. If, in the court of love, the choice lady offers the best grace to her suitor, in the court itself it is the king who offers grace, thus this lyric combines Henry's literary personae and his actual position.

Actions associated with grace in Henry's lyrics include what we expect of courtiers — suing, purchasing, and so forth³¹ — not of a monarch, except in the guise of the courtly lover; here, likely as narrator, Henry is not the subservient lover, and the erotic story is adjusted accordingly. The *lady*, not the male lover, is now the one complaining that she cannot “In no manner away, / Obtain that I do sue” (ll. 22–23). It would have been impossible for Henry to constitute himself as a desiring subject for the simple reason that Henry is *not* a subject (even to the Pope, as the Reformation will later make clear).³² Consequently, Henry alters the conventions of erotic verse so that they not only accord with his own position at the top of the hierarchy, but also reminds everyone, through the fact of public performance, that he is indeed the king, and kings do not sue, even in matters of the heart.

Yet the story ends happily. After overhearing the Lady complain, the royal speaker suddenly, almost miraculously, appears and makes everything better, though of course without apologizing for his previous indiscretions:

She had not said
 But, at abraid, [suddenly]
 Her dear heart was full near
 And said good maid,
 Be not dismayed,
 My love, my darling dear. (ll. 45–50)

In addition, the song also suggests the culture of surveillance that is beginning to develop in Henry's court. One has a sense that the royal speaker can observe his desiring subject(s) without revealing his presence, and then, through an act of will, of power, suddenly make things better. The underlying implication, one that will be developed in “Pastime with Good

³¹ Consider Henry's “Though That Men Do Call it Dotage” (l. 17), his “Who So That Wyll for Grace Sue” (l. 1), his “Without Discord” (ll. 19–20), and his “Lusty Youth Should us Ensue” (in which “disdainers . . . sue to get them grace” [ll. 14–15]).

³² On the conflict between erotic and political subjectivity in Mary Stuart's verse, see Peter C. Herman's essay in this volume, “‘mes subjectz, mon ame assubjectie’: The Problematic (of) Subjectivity in Mary Stuart's Sonnets.”

