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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.

