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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, Simplesse, 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, Malebouché [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 conflations 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 village"¹⁴ (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 afterwarde 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 subjectie, mon ame assubjectie’: The Problematic (of) Subjectivity in Mary Stuart's Sonnets.”

Company" and "Though Some Say that Youth Rules Me," is that this power can be used for other, less benign, purposes as well.

This note of threat, so strangely foreign to conventional lyric verse, is amplified by the oddly discordant note in the ending:

In arms he hent [held]
That lady gent
In voiding care and moan.
The day they spent
To their intent
In wilderness, alone.

This seems like a traditionally comedic conclusion with the lovers in each others arms. Yet two points need to be made. First, the song only allows the pair one day of "voiding care and moan," implying that there will be more "care and moan" in the future. Second, Henry reinforces this implication by situating the ending "In wilderness." Stevens glosses this word as "the country" (398), yet the OED records no such use before 1644, and virtually all previous usages are some variation on "a tract of solitude and savageness" (1.b).³³ Assuming that both Henry and his audience would have had no trouble associating at some level Henry's lyrics with the court, this moment anticipates Wyatt's and Surrey's much later court satires, only this time it is Wyatt's "Caesar" and Surrey's "Sardanapalus" registering, however briefly and allusively, the dangers of courtly life.

This use of "wilderness" also imports a sense of sexuality's dangers, and perhaps also Henry's or his culture's distrust of women. The two themes come together again in "Whereto Should I Express," which begins with the royal speaker bemoaning his departure from his lady:

Whereto should I express
My inward heaviness?
No mirth can make me fain,
'Till that we meet again. (ll. 1-4)

This seemingly conventional lyric, however, strays toward the unconventional near the end. At first, the speaker (anticipating Donne's "A Valediction Forbidding Mourning") reverses conventional gender expectations and asserts that "You are not variable," ascribing to the woman, in other

³³ See also the definitions in the online Early Modern English Dictionary Database, <http://www.chass.utoronto.ca:8080/english/emed/patterweb.html>.

words, the fixedness more usually associated with masculinity. The next stanza, however, makes clear that the beloved's invariability is not due to any unusual merit on her part, but results instead from the royal speaker's act of will. "I make you fast and sure," the speaker sings. Even when admitting a degree of powerlessness, in other words (the speaker must leave even though he doesn't want to), the poem very firmly reminds the audience that the speaker, however much in the throes of love melancholy, remains very much in charge.

The speaker's monarchic position similarly manifests itself in several of the lyrics in which Henry defends himself. The first three lines of "Pastime with Good Company," sound, for example, like a mere declaration of high spirits:

Pastime with good company,
I love and shall until I die.
Grudge who likes, but none deny. (ll. 1-3)

In this text, Henry implicitly adopts the persona of Youth addressing the aged disdainers opposing his actions. According to convention, though, in the relationship of Youth and Old Age, it is Youth who is (putatively) subservient. However, when Henry invokes this convention, in effect he redefines it to endow Youth with the authority of his kingship. The fourth line — "So God be pleased, thus live will I," with manuscript variants also urging an equivalently possible reading of "So God be pleased, this life will I" — transforms the song into a vehicle through which Henry establishes his independence, "thus live [or "life"] will I" serving to remind one and all that these desires are the desires of the king.³⁴ The line, then, functions as a claim to power, to independence. It is not simply a declaration of high spirits; and no matter how frivolous the circumstances of performance, it would be hard for any courtier or lady mindful of the very few practical limitations on royal power to miss the overtone of threat vibrating in the last line of the burden:

For my pastance:
Hunt, sing, and dance.
My heart is set!
All goodly sport

³⁴ That "Grudge who likes" echoes the Burgundian motto *groigne qui groine* reinforces the regality of the statement.

For my comfort.
Who shall me *let*? (ll. 5-10; my emphasis)³⁵

Similarly, in "Lusty Youth Should Us Ensue [imitate]," Henry uses a song that superficially appears to be an *apologia* for sowing wild oats to emphasize once more his royal independence:

For they would have him his liberty refrain,
And all merry company for to disdain.
But I will not do whatsoever they say,
But follow his mind in all that we may. (ll. 5-8)

Who will stop me from doing whatever I choose to do?, the king warbles to the assembled company.

Yet Henry's assertions of authority in these texts also evince a substratum of genuine insecurity. Defenses imply the existence of attacks, and the very fact that Henry felt compelled to assert his right to choose strongly suggests the existence of an unignorable "they" who wanted to restrain the king's liberty. While, as we have noted, we cannot precisely connect a particular lyric with a particular event, it is nonetheless interesting that Henry wrote these songs at about the same time that he began to separate himself from his father's domestic policies through extravagant spending, lavish entertaining, seeming indifference to the minutiae of government, and, perhaps most importantly, the instigation of a belligerent foreign policy diametrically opposed to Henry VII's pacific aims. Even though Henry's accession was widely (and wildly) celebrated, Henry's policies and pastimes very quickly developed significant opposition from some members of the nobility, as well as from humanists. Although Henry ultimately prevailed, he could not have realized that then, and we need to situate Henry's seemingly apolitical lyrics within the real, if ultimately overcome, resistance to his policies and preferred modes of recreation.

Hall records that while many applauded the king's pastimes, such as his taking part in tournaments, the older members of the court disapproved because of the dangers posed to the king and therefore the country:

the ancient fathers much doubted [the prudence of Henry's hobby], considering the tender youth of the king, and divers chances of horses and armour: in so much that it was openly spoken, that

³⁵ Let = prevent.

steel was not so strong, but it might be broken, nor no horse could be so sure of foot, but he may fall. (520)

In addition, many of the old guard were particularly unhappy with the young King's desire to reverse his father's pacific policies and go to war for the sake of chivalric honor. Henry's reign may have begun with a grand sense of sweeping out the old and celebrating the new, yet a number of Henry VII's advisors retained their place on the council, and they resisted Henry's desire to involve England in a costly foreign venture.³⁶ But resistance emanated from more than a group of old spoilsports. Polydore Vergil reports that Henry's initial proposal to join Ferdinand in his campaign against the French in Italy met at first with considerable dissent:

King Henry then summoned to London a council of his nobles. When they were assembled there the good king, full of devotion to the church, publicly expained how he had been requested by both Pope Julius and King Ferdinand his father-in-law to take up arms in defence of the church. For this reason he had summoned his nobles, so that when asked they might speak their minds, whereby he could decide this weighty business from the general views of all. And to enable them to give their opinions, he questioned each separately. *After a long debate, many came to the conclusion on several grounds that there was no need to take up arms then;* because in the war against the French the pope had as allies King Ferdinand and the Venetians, whose support of the papal arms ought to be the more eager since it closely concerned their own interests; also because England was far distant from Italy, and her assistance could only with difficulty be sent there; finally because, if they entered the war, being so far removed from Italy and Spain, it might perhaps happen that, the French having been evicted from Italy, the whole burden of the war would fall on this country, which would thus be involved in war while its allies were enjoying peace. *This view seemed correct to many,* but nevertheless the king scarcely agreed with it, for, owing to his confidence in his own resolution, he considered it to be dishonourable to him if so great a war waged

³⁶ The three are Thomas Ruthall, royal secretary from 1500 to 1516, William Warham, Chancellor of Oxford from 1506 until his death, and Richard Fox, Keeper of the Privy seal. Dominic Baker-Smith, "'Inglorious glory': 1513 and the Humanist Attack on Chivalry," in *Chivalry in the Renaissance*, ed. Sydney Anglo (Woodbridge, England: Boydell, 1990), 131–32.

against the Roman church should come to an end before some efforts of his own had been employed to end it. Wherefore the religious and most valiant prince, not unmindful that it was his duty to seek fame by military skill, preferred so justifiable a war rather than peace.³⁷ (my emphasis)

Thomas Wolsey also initially balked at the king's warmongering, mainly because of the expense. In a report to Bishop Fox, Wolsey grouched about the malign influence of Sir Edward Howard, "by whose wanton means his Grace spendeth much money, and is more disposed to war than peace."³⁸ A French Papal diplomat noted that the king was a "youngling, car[ing] for nothing but girls and hunting, and wast[ing] his father's patrimony,"³⁹ and the Bishops of Durham and Winchester commented (a bit more charitably) that he "is young and does not care to occupy himself with anything but the pleasures of his age."⁴⁰

In 1512, Henry's youthful disregard for danger also ran into considerable resistance from his councilors. Henry announced that since "his English subjects were of such high spirits that they tended to fight less willingly and less successfully under any commander other than their king," the obvious course was for him to lead the troops personally.⁴¹ Significantly, Henry had to browbeat his nobles into agreeing with him:

Wherefore he again summoned a council of nobles and there was a general discussion concerning the newly proposed expedition. Many considered it too perilous that the king in the first flush of his youthful maturity in arms should expose himself to the danger of so great a war. They accordingly thought that a commander of the army should be appointed who would conduct the war according to the king's wishes. This view was thoroughly approved by many but not by the king, who held to his original opinion and argued that it behooved him to enter upon his first military experience in so important and difficult a war in order that he might, by a signal start to his mar-

³⁷ *The Anglica Historia* of Polydore Vergil, A.D. 1485–1537, ed. Denys Hay (London: Royal Historical Society, 1950; Camden Society, 3rd series, vol. 74), 161.

³⁸ Quoted in Baker-Smith, "‘Inglorious glory,’" 136.

³⁹ *Letters and Papers of Henry VIII*, vol. 2: 292.

⁴⁰ *Calendar of Letters, Despatches, and State Papers Relating to the Negotiations Between English and Spain*, ed. G. A. Bergenroth et al. (London: Longmans, 1862), vol. 1.2: 40–41.

⁴¹ *Anglica Historia*, 197.

tial knowledge, create such a fine opinion about his valour among all men that they would clearly understand that his ambition was not merely to equal but indeed to exceed the glorious deeds of his ancestors . . . [H]e persistently asserted that he wished with the approval of all to take charge of the matter himself; if this were conceded he was sure that at no point would he be deprived of divine assistance in undertaking so meritorious a war. When the nobles saw that the king, on account of the confidence he had in his own great valour, *they were unable not to agree with him.*⁴² (my emphasis)

Vergil indirectly implies his distance from Henry's glorious, yet politically irresponsible, desires through careful diction and irony. It is Henry's "confidence" — overconfidence? — that leads to their agreement, yet an agreement that is hedged by the double negative: "*non potuere non in eius tandem sententiam ire*" (198).

Henry eventually got his war, but only after King Louis refused peace, saying via Henry's ambassador that he "would not by any means agree to making peace on the terms which the pope demanded."⁴³ And even then Henry achieved permission for only a limited intervention as Ferdinand's ally. In addition, Henry could not have remained either ignorant or untouched by the humanist disapproval of war and chivalry expressed in such popular texts as More's *Utopia* and Erasmus' adage deconstructing the eagle as a noble creature, *Scarabeus Aquilam Querit*. The king might metaphorically twist Colet's arm after his impolitic sermon denouncing war, but others were less immediately pliable.⁴⁴

Then there is the matter of Thomas Wolsey. Vergil (like Hall and so many others) hated the Cardinal, but it is important that his rise also occasioned resistance among Henry's counselors:

Wolsey [conducted] all business at his own pleasure, since no one at all was of more value to the king. It was certainly as a result of this that several leading counselors, when they saw so much power coming into the hands of one man, withdrew gradually from the court. Canterbury and Winchester were among the first to leave, going into their dioceses. But before they left, *like truly responsible*

⁴² *Anglica Historia*, 199. See also Starkey's rather fanciful renarration of this incident in *The Reign of Henry VIII: Personalities and Politics* (London: George Philip, 1985), 49.

⁴³ *Anglica Historia*, 163. See also Starkey, *The Reign of Henry VIII*, 49.

⁴⁴ Baker-Smith, " 'Inglorious glory,' " 138–40.

statesmen, they earnestly urged the king not to suffer any servant to be greater than his master: they borrowed this saying from Christ, who, in the gospel according to St. John, says to his disciples, "Verily, verily, I say unto you, the servant is not greater than his lord." Aware at all events that these remarks were directed at Wolsey, Henry replied to them that he would make it his first business diligently to ensure that any servant of his was obedient and not autocratic. Then Thomas duke of Norfolk retired to his estates; and afterwards even Charles [Brandon] duke of Suffolk followed the others.⁴⁵

The implication of the last sentence is that despite Henry's assurances, Wolsey continued on his autocratic path. Furthermore, if Canterbury and Winchester act as "truly responsible statesmen" by warning Henry, then Henry by implication acts irresponsibly by not heeding their advice.

Consequently, the curious defensiveness radiating from a number of Henry's lyrics becomes more understandable. It would have been clear to Henry that not only his elders, but also the humanists whose favor he courted, as well as a certain amount of public opinion, disapproved of his chivalric role-playing and his warmongering. Henry thus uses the persona of Youth to pre-empt or answer criticism of how he chooses to conduct his life, but goes against the generic expectations of Youth by asserting his royal right to do exactly as he pleases. Henry concludes "Pastime," for example, by assuring his audience that "The best ensue. / The worst eschew. / My mind shall be. / Virtue to use. / Vice to refuse. / Thus shall I use me!" (ll. 25-30). Similarly, in "The Time of Youth is to Be Spent," Henry explicitly takes on his critics and defends his chivalric games as encouraging virtue:

The time of youth is to be spent,
But vice in it should be forfent. [forbidden]
Pastimes there be I note truly
Which one may use and vice deny.
And they be pleasant to God and man:
Those should we covet [desire] when we can.
As feats of arms, and such other
Whereby activeness one may utter.
Comparisons in them may lawfully be set,

⁴⁵ *Anglica Historica*, 231-33.

For, thereby, courage is surely out fet. [gained]
 Virtue it is, then, youth for to spend
 In good disports which it does fend.

In "Lusty Youth Should Us Ensue," Henry once again defends himself, this time against all "disdainers." It is possible, however, that Henry uses this lyric to react explicitly against the breaking up of his group of "minions" in the reorganization of the court. When Henry first came to power, he brought with him a cohort of friends, "young gentlemen," as Hall calls them (581), who — with Henry — acted in a manner that the king's counsel found utterly inimical to the dignity of their position and the king's person. In what must have seemed like a classic example of Old Age restraining Youth, the counsel met secretly to put a stop to this state of affairs. As Hall reports:

the kynges counsaill secretly communed together of the kynges gentrenes & liberalitee to all persones: by the whiche they perceived that certain young men in his privie chamber not regardingyng his estate nor degree, were so familier and homely with hum, and plaied such light touches with hym that they forgot thmeselves: . . . yet the kinges counsaill thought it not mete to be suffred for the kynges honor, & therfor thei altogethertogether came to the king, beseching him al these enormities and lightnes to redres. To whom the kung answered, that he had chosen them of his counsaill, both for the maintenaunce of his honor, & for the defence of all thyng that might blemishe thesame: wherefore it they sawe any about hym misuse themselves, he committed it to their reformacion. (598)

The result was that "the kynges minions" were banished and "fourre sad and auncient knightes, put into the kynges privie chamber" (598).⁴⁶ While Henry appears to have acquiesced to the replacement of his partners in male bonding and youthful exuberance with what must have seemed like chaperones, "Lusty Youth Should Us Ensue" offers a slightly different view on this:

Lusty Youth should us ensue.
 His merry heart shall sure all [i.e., disdainers] rue.
 For whatsoever they do him tell
 It is not for him, we know it well.

⁴⁶ Lerer, *Courtly Letters*, 42–43; Starkey, "Intimacy and Innovation," 80–81.

For they would have him his liberty refrain,
 And all merry company for to disdain.
 But I will not do whatsoever they say,
 But follow his mind in all that we may.
 (ll. 1-8; my emphasis)

The next two stanzas constitute a *defense* of not just Youth's "pastance," but of Henry's "merry company":

How should youth himself best use
 But all disdainers for to refuse?
 Youth has as chief assurance
 Honest mirth with virtue's pastance.

 For in them consists great honour,
 Though that disdainers would therein put error.
 For they do sue to get them grace,
 All only riches to purchase. (ll. 9-16)

And yet, for the rest of the song, Henry, perhaps bowing to the inevitable, grants that the disdainers have a point, and that he will work towards balance:

With good order, counsel, and equity,
 Good Lord grant us our mansion to be.
 For without their good guidance
 Youth should fall in great mischance.

 For Youth is frail and prompt to do
 As well vices as virtues to ensue.
 Wherefore by these he must be guided,
 And virtue's pastance must therein be used.

 Now unto God this prayer we make,
 That this rude play may well betake
 And that we may our faults amend
 And bliss obtain at our last end. Amen. (ll. 17-28)

Whether or not one finds the final turn to religion convincing, this lyric offers a masterful diplomatic performance. Henry must have felt humiliated by the actions of his elders, although he clearly believed that he had no choice but to submit. Henry's actions before his elders, as recorded by Hall and in his lyric, demonstrate Henry's trying to turn this successful affront to his authority to his advantage by essentially arguing both sides of the

issue. That is to say, Henry initially rebuts his elders by calling them "disdainers" and by asserting once more his royal will ("I will not . . ."). Yet (assuming the king penned this lyric after the counsel's actions), Henry turns, admits that youth is indeed frail and in need of guidance. Hence the final turn to religion, which makes Henry the originator of his merry company's banishment. The lyric concludes, in other words, with Henry turning a corrosion of royal authority into a strengthening of it.

It is "Though Some Say That Youth Rules Me," however, that is the most interesting because it is the most overt example of Henry using a parlor song as a vehicle for simultaneously rebutting and reassuring his elders. The song begins in a seemingly defensive, if not apologetic, mood:

Though some say that youth rules me,
I trust in age to tarry.
God and my right, and my duty,
From them shall I never vary,
Though some say that youth rules me. (ll. 1-5)

Yet Henry's incorporation of his royal motto, "Dieu et mon droit," in the third line both reassures his audience that the king is mindful of his royal position and also reminds them of the power invested in the crown. In the next stanza, Henry furthers his offensive by asking his critics how they acted in their youth: "I pray you all that aged be / How well did you *your* youth carry?" (ll. 6-7; my emphasis). Henry ends this lyric with a strategically placed revelation of the author's name and, most importantly, his title:

Then soon discuss that hence we must
Pray we to God and Saint Mary
That all amend, and here an end.
Thus says the King, the eighth Harry,
Though some say that youth rules me. (ll. 16-20)

More than "Pastime with Good Company," this song deserves the title of "The King's Ballad" because it would be inconceivable for anyone other than Henry VIII to perform it. And, for this reason, this lyric is the most deeply political of Henry's efforts. What begins as a somewhat sheepish defense hearkening back to the conventional Youth-Age debates of medieval poetry becomes an overt assertion of royal power and royal prerogative. It is the *king* — and the eighth of that name to sit on England's throne, a position which gives him the collective authority of the previous seven

(not the least being Henry V) — who issues this defense of his life; and by including this self-referential allusion to his position and his name's history, Henry VIII forcefully reminds his listeners that if youth rules the king, it is the king who rules everyone else.

In conclusion, Henry's lyrics are not just the remnants of an early Tudor parlor game. Instead, they directly respond to the anxieties caused by the crowning of a new king whose policies and personality differ radically from the previous monarch's. Henry VIII has the (admittedly unlikely) distinction of being the first English king to use vernacular courtly verse as a device for both talking about and actually *doing* politics; specifically, Henry used his lyrics as vehicles for establishing his independence from Henry VII's policies, if not from Henry VII himself, and for articulating as forcefully as possible that he, and only he, rules the land. Henry VIII's lyrics thus constitute an unrecognized watershed in the history of Renaissance the lyric.

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