
MISTHINKING THE KING: THE THEATRICALS
OF CHRISTIAN RULE IN *HENRY VI, PART 3*¹

IF we were to trust *A Mirror for Magistrates*, Henry VI “him selfe was cause of the destruccion of many noble princes, being of all other most vnfortunate him selfe” (211). Or was he “king Henry the syxt a *vertuous* prince, [who] was after many other miseries cruelly murdered in the Tower of London” (211, my italics)? Who was murdered in the Tower, the “Henry the Sixt” in the 1559 table of contents or “The *vertuous* King, Henry the sixt” in the 1571 edition (524-25)? In each subsequent edition through 1587, that “*vertuous*” complements a poem rife with switchbacks. On the one hand, Henry VI presents himself like *imitator Christi*: “The solace of the soule my chieffest pleasure was, / Of worldly pompe, of fame, or game, I did not pas” (lines 65-66). On the other hand, we find him admitting to “sundry sinnes” (line 61), breaking an oath to marry Margaret being the most egregious. Henry is at once pious and responsible for a marriage that led to “many a slaughter” (line 96) — here, faith and virtue, there, sins of omission and political ineptitude. What makes this monarch hard to pigeonhole? Roger Ascham writes, “King Henry doth many divers miracles. *Divus Henricus non una miraculorum specie inclarescit*” (Wolffe 354).² And in 1577, Henry’s relics — the late king’s spurs and a chip from his bedstead, along with a stained glass likeness — still attracted worshippers to Windsor, no matter how Protestant jurist William Lambarde fumed (McKenna 76, 86). But when people compared James I to Henry VI, James called the Lancastrian a “sillie weake King” (Wolffe 351). For some reason, James the Peacemaker did not want to remind his subjects of Henry, who on the Rose stage in the early 1590s was a “timorous wretch” “famed for mildness, peace, and prayer” (*Henry VI, Part 3* 1.1.231, 2.1.155).

Shakespeare and his colleagues knew what vexed early modern England about Henry VI: Henry’s piety bears witness to the irresolvability of Christian rule.³ In *Henry VI, Part 3*, Henry undergoes a serious ordeal, a struggle to keep Christianity at the center of policy, to understand law in light of the Gospels, and to add the art of lamentation to a royal repertoire that typically calls for the rhetorical and martial arts. By engaging with religio-humanist discourse, *Part 3* ponders the Christian virtues demanded of royalty, the sort of royalty entailed by such virtues, and, noticeably, the gendering, not just of piety, but of sovereignty. The very proving grounds of manliness — the battlefield and the court — were potential sites of evil. Combat (or militant Protestantism) no less than *Realpolitik* (or Machia-

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

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

Literary critics have been too quick to dismiss Henry VI as simply naïve and hardly regal, too dismayed to wonder why he refuses to fight like a man. We would be hard pressed to find a major Shakespearean character who is categorically defined, if not dismissed, as quickly and as effortlessly as Henry VI. For R. V. Young, Henry VI is an "extreme embodiment of ineffectual piousness" and "a caricature" of Erasmian rule (94), as if there were a more nuanced, balanced Erasmus. Alexander Leggatt calls Henry's piety "irritating" (15). Taking Margaret's word for it that Henry's loves are "brazen images of canonized saints" (*Part 2*, 1.3.60-61), Jean Howard thinks that Henry's "iconically rendered" piety "fails to coexist with courage or skill in leading men," as it "so clearly substitute[s] for the tasks of rule to which his position as king has destined him" (203). He is a sovereign "who fails to rule, to be the head, either in the family or the state" — a "study in feckless masculinity" (202). Howard does not take seriously the ties between Henry's "devotional inclinations" and his "tasks of rule." She intimates that piety could coexist with sovereignty, but not how or in what form. Clearly, it has proved easier for critics than for Shakespeare to bypass crucial early modern questions about kingship: can Christian rule really be Christian, and can Christian rule "coexist with courage?" Is Henry VI a study in "feckless masculinity," or is he a study in the connections that bind passivity, piety, and rule in late Elizabethan England, connections that Christian humanism helped to tighten, connections that taxed audiences' political and religious convictions?

If we are to retrieve Henry VI from marginalization and obscurity, and if we are to grasp the literary, theatrical, and cultural value of *Part 3*,

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

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

But in *Part 3*, Elizabethan militancy patently collides with *imitatio Christi* and Christian humanism. Shakespeare hardly walks in lockstep with the militants. He insists that audiences acknowledge worldly passivity, spiritual agency, and peace as alternatives to late sixteenth-century militancy. Henry VI recalls Thomas Rogers's often-reprinted version of Thomas à Kempis's *Of the Imitation of Christ*, where the only acceptable violence is self-inflicted: "Except thou offer violence vnto thy selfe, thou shall [. . .] neuer triumph ouer sinne" (Sig. e3^r).¹⁰ The time to "fight like a man" (Sig. d10^r) is when one is engaging in what John King has called "psychomachia warfare" (*Tudor* 118). Otherwise, humility, meekness, and charity are the defining qualities of Christian men (à Kempis b4^r-b6^r).

Although Rogers says nothing here about Christ and politics, Erasmus's adage "Dulce Bellum Inexpertis" (1515) had already reshaped *imitatio Christi* into an early modern political science. Most apparent in this and his other antiwar writings, Erasmus's position on Christian rule — radical, cohesive, and unwavering — takes a peculiar definition of man as its premise:

Man alone she [Nature] produced naked, weak, delicate, unarmed, with very soft flesh and a smooth skin. [. . .] She gave him friendly eyes, revealing the soul; she gave him arms that embrace; she gave him the kiss, an experience in which souls touch and unite. Man

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

Erasmus correlates Christian humility and charity with soft manliness. In *The Praise of Folly*, Erasmus relies on typical gender constructs to contrast old men (“rough features, coarse skin, bushy beards”) with “foolish” women (“soft cheeks, a high voice, a delicate and smooth complexion”) (29). Treble aside, Folly’s feminine traits become manly in Erasmus’s rhetoric of peace. Inverting a crucial component of the ideal masculine body, Erasmus weaves soft, vulnerable flesh into the very texture of manhood. Man’s body is akin to woman’s; its innate physiology confirms that stiff sinews and chafed skin are unmanly. True virtue for Erasmus takes the form of bodily effeminacy.

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

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

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By masculinizing Christian virtues, Erasmus dismisses virtù, Machiavellian and Sidneian alike. We ought not to ignore Erasmus and *imitatio Christi* simply because they were at variance with 1590s *Realpolitik*. Richard Taverner recommends “Dulce” in his *Proverbs or Adages*, an abridged collection of Erasmus’s adages printed five times between 1539 and 1569: “He that listeth to know more of this Prouerbe, let him go to Erasmus, which handleth in his Chiliades, this Prouerbe both right copiously, and also eloquent” (63).¹² In *The Book Called the Governor*, Thomas Elyot extols the only contemporary writing that it mentions, Erasmus’s *The Education of A Christian Prince*.

[F]or as all men may judge that have read that work of Erasmus, that there was never book written in Latin that in so little a portion contained of sentence, eloquence, and virtuous exhortation, a more compendious abundance. (40)¹³

An English translation of Erasmus’s *Enchiridion* was reprinted in 1576, reintroducing Erasmus’s guidebook on the art of spiritual warfare, in which prayer and knowledge are the weapons of choice, faith is armor, and Christ is captain (*Enchiridion* 42).¹⁴ English translations of Erasmus’s *Paraphrases of the Gospels and Acts* were also available, even during the heyday of Foxe’s *Actes and Monuments*. Royal injunctions under Edward VI and Elizabeth I ordered each church to set up a copy.¹⁵ In the *Paraphrases*, too, Erasmus condemns militancy.¹⁶ To dismiss passive Christianity, especially given the residues of Erasmian humanism in Elizabethan England, is to mistake a multifaceted religious culture for a straightforwardly militant one.

To marginalize Shakespeare’s Henry VI and his piety is to make a comparable mistake. Christian monarchy was not supposed to be entirely absent piety. This could help to explain why the early modern intelligensia worked hard to dado and rabbet Christianity with sovereignty, and why Shakespeare inspected, dismantled, and sometimes refurbished their handiwork in the person of Henry VI, who wants his piety to matter to his subjects:

. . . My meed hath got me fame.
I have not stopped mine ears to their demands,
Nor posted off their suits with slow delays.
My pity hath been balm to heal their wounds.
My mildness hath allayed their swelling griefs.
My mercy dried their water-flowing tears.
I have not been desirous of their wealth
Nor much oppressed them with great subsidies,
Nor forward of revenge, though they much erred.

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Then why should they love Edward more than me?
No, Exeter, these graces challenge grace,
And when the lion fawns upon the lamb,
The lamb will never cease to follow him. (4.8.38-50)

Ticking off items in his Christian humanist handbook, Henry declares that the will to pi(e)ty is the only political ethos suitable for a Christian monarch. He summons the *Gospel of John* and *Isaiah* in lines 48 and 49 on his own behalf, but his clemency has somehow propelled his adversary, Edward, to the fore.¹⁷ “Seize on the shamefaced Henry” (52), Edward commands, reinforcing Westmoreland’s earlier characterization: “[b]ase, fearful and despairing Henry,” that “faint-hearted and degenerate King, / In whose cold blood no spark of honour bides” (1.1.180, 183-84). Henry’s “cold blood” — a “womanly” humor — both manufactures and contaminates the palliatives that he has administered to his realm.¹⁸ Edward and Westmoreland respond to Henry’s rule not with mere ingratitude, but with disgust and embarrassment because what they consider Henry’s effeminized and effeminizing regality — his almost maternal approach to sovereignty and his aversion to revenge — comport with a bedside or prie-dieu, not with a traditionally masculine throne or with the sort of masculinizing dramaturgy that Nashe advocated. In short, they fail to recognize the Christian humanism that Henry strives to decree and the alternative masculinity that he works to realize.

Later, Warwick reassesses Henry’s “coldness,” as if Erasmian masculinity and Christian humanism has merit:

whether ‘twas the coldness of the King,
Who looked full gently on his warlike Queen,
That robbed *my* soldiers of their heated spleen,
Or whether ‘twas report of her success,
Or more than common fear of Clifford’s rigour,
Who thunders to his captives blood and death,
I cannot judge [. . .]. (2.1.121-127, italics added)¹⁹

Warwick indicates that Henry’s “coldness” could overwhelm the Yorkists, whose weapons “like the night-owl’s lazy flight, / Or like an idle thresher with a flail, / Fell gently down as if they struck their friends” (129-31). Henry’s “coldness” might do more than Clifford and Margaret’s Jovian weapons, “like to lightning” (128). That Warwick indexes Henry’s gentleness above Clifford’s rage validates Henry’s pious rule. If Henry can cool the rage of war with his gentleness and pity, then Henry’s Christian humanism may have some political and theatrical sway after all. Perhaps his piety can serve sovereignty.

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

In 1.1, the audience gets to sympathize with, perhaps even support, Henry at the same time that it shares everyone else's exasperation with him. Henry's words may fail politically, but they matter theatrically. Or do they? Clifford's interruption in 2.2 is poignant, because it begins as if he were ready to engage in conversation with his sovereign:

To whom do lions cast their gentle looks?
Not to the beast that would usurp their den.
Whose hand is that the forest bear doth lick?
Not his that spoils her young before her face.
Who scapes the lurking serpent's mortal sting?
Not he that sets his foot upon her back.
The smallest worm will turn, being trodden on,
And doves will peck in safeguard of their brood. (2.2.11-18)

The one and only character thus far to use humanist discourse against Henry, Clifford remarks that if Henry wishes to be a dove, he can still "raise his issue like a loving sire" and "peck" on behalf of his son's birthright against York. Henry should "[l]ook on the boy, and let his manly face, which

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Like Oxford and Somerset, Margaret wants a king who "defies" his enemies (2.2.118). To her, manliness means little else. Consider how she directs the action during the scourging of York. When vengeful Clifford resolves not to "bandy" York "word for word / But buckler with thee blows twice two for one" (1.4.49-50), Margaret commands, "Hold, valiant Clif-

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ford, for a thousand causes / I would prolong the traitor's life" (1.4.51-2). One reason is to see him "stamp, rave, and fret, that I may sing and dance" (1.4.91); another is to "hear the orisons he makes" (110): "She-wolf of France, but worse than wolves of France, / Whose tongue more poisons than the adder's tooth!" (111-12). Are not these the type of invectives that Margaret demands from Henry? She intimates that stageworthy "orisons" are profanations, that prayers have a place on stage only when they are not prayers at all, that kingly language evokes blood lust. But Henry defies Margaret: "I prithe, give no limits to my tongue: / I am a king and privileged to speak" (2.2.119-20). He could do as York does, avoid categorization with "soft, mild, pitiful and flexible" women and compete with the "stern, obdurate, flinty, rough, remorseless" Margaret (141-42):

Bidd'st thou me rage? Why, now thou hast thy wish.
Wouldst have me weep? Why, now hast thy will
For raging wind blows up incessant showers,
And when the rage allays, the rain begins:
These tears are my sweet Rutland's obsequies,
And every drop cries vengeance for his death
'Gainst thee, fell Clifford, and thee, false Frenchwoman!
(1.4.143-49)

Henry never uses such masculinizing prosopopoeia because his Christian rule suggests a gender inversion similar to Erasmus's. When he speaks at length, it is to grieve unabashedly for a realm torn and lawless.

The play insists that we take Henry's rule and theatricality seriously, even if other characters shun him. With his pious detachment, bookish inclinations, and elegiac commentaries, Henry bears upon this play's dramaturgy. His "cold" theatrics are unspectacular, unheroic, and static, yet provocative and disturbing. Henry's molehill in 2.5 is not York's in 1.4, just as the king's soliloquy has none of York's curses. He refuses to accept Margaret's belief that "wise men ne'er sit and wail their loss" (5.4.1).

This battle fares like to the morning's war,
When dying clouds contend with growing light,
What time the shepherd, blowing of his nails,
Can neither call it perfect day nor night.
Now sways it this way, like a mighty sea
Forced by the tide to combat with the wind.
Now sways it that way, like the selfsame sea
Forced to retire by fury of the wind.
Sometime the flood prevails, and then the wind;
Now one the better, then another best,
Both tugging to be victors, breast to breast,

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Yet neither conqueror nor conquered:
So is the equal poise of this fell war.
Here on this molehill will I sit me down.
To whom God will, there be the victory.
For Margaret, my Queen, and Clifford too,
Have chid me from the battle, swearing both
They prosper best of all when I am thence.
Would I were dead, if God's good will were so.
For what is in this world but grief and woe? (2.5.1-20)

With pallid, but almost epic language, his speech translates war into an innocent daybreak. Rather than lead the vanguard, Henry chooses obscurity and self-pity. Relegating parleys and combat to the wings, *Part 3* wagers its success here on its pious king's theatrics. To lament the realities of civil war is to challenge the dramatic impetus of *virtù* and *Realpolitik*.

We are meant to concede the validity of this challenge when Henry wishes

To be no better than a homely swain
To sit upon a hill, as I do now,
To carve out dials quaintly, point by point,
Thereby to see the minutes how they run:
How many makes the hour full complete,
How many hours brings about the day,
How many days will finish up the year,
How many years a mortal man may live. (2.5.21-29)

Part humanist fantasy, part Christian musing, Henry's georgic literalizes an overwrought early modern trope: kings are shepherds of their subjects, herding them toward salvation. What happens though, to "[t]he trembling lamb environed with wolves" (1.1.242)? An analgesic for Henry's distress, this pastoral dream signals an apparent failure of regal *imitatio Christi*; Henry may imitate Christ the Shepherd and Christ the Lamb, but he despairs at the futility of Christian kingship. This scene undercuts the Christian rule that may have led to the Yorkist retreat in 2.1 and that should inspire fealty in 4.8. At stake here is not just Henry's psyche, nor even the stability of the English body politic, but the play's success and the Christian underpinnings of early modern monarchy in general.

When Henry vexes audiences with this despair, the play promotes Henry's theatrics in the process. When a son kills his father, and a father, his son, Henry's lamentations become more troubling. The son admits, "I knew not what I did" (2.5.69), and the King empathizes: "I'll aid thee tear for tear, / And let our hearts and eyes, like civil war, / Be blind with tears and break o'ercharged with grief" (76-78). Henry succumbs to pity, egre-

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gious when set against the son and father's outcries. "Much is your sorrow; mine, ten times so much," he exclaims to the father and the son (112), and as they exit the stage, Henry declares, "Sad-hearted men, much overgone with care, / Here sits a king more woeful than you are" (123-24). Rather than have this tragedy support his pacifism, Henry uses the spectacle to hyperbolize his plight.

At the same time, Henry envisions a catastrophe that looms over kingship itself.

SON

How will my mother for a father's death
Take on with me, and ne'er be satisfied!

FATHER

How will my wife for slaughter of my son
Shed seas of tears, and ne'er be satisfied!

KING HENRY

How will the country for these woeful chances
Misthink the King, and not be satisfied! (2.5.103-7)

Will audiences and readers "Misthink" kingship as separate from, and not subject to, Christianity? Do kings incite war when it suits them, rather than wish their "death would stay these ruthless deeds!" (95)? Henry worries as much, as if England's quandary parallels the mother's and the wife's. According to Elyot and Erasmus, a king should suffer anxiety and doubt precisely because so much hinges on his rule: "[Princes] shall not think how much honour they receive, but how much care and burden" (*The Governor* 97). "[The prince] torments himself with constant anxieties so that his subjects may enjoy peace of mind" (*Education* 27).²¹ Such is it with Henry. Henry strives to harmonize sovereignty and Christian values; he finds time and again nothing but evidence of incompatibility. He at once deems proper, pious rule salvific and agonizes over the fate of a disillusioned realm, as if on his shoulders is the foundation of Christian rule, as if his failure can only mean a rupture in Christian government and dissatisfaction in the theater.

When Henry cannot listen to himself anymore, Shakespeare seems to have had enough with him, too. Prince Edward interrupts the scene and orders his father to fly. Exeter warns, "stay not to expostulate, make speed" (2.5.135). In past scenes, Henry stayed, refusing to act; suddenly, there is a remarkable shift:

Nay, take me with thee, good sweet Exeter:
Not that I fear to stay, but love to go

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

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

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

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

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

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

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office to cheat Fortune (“That I may conquer Fortune’s spite” [20]) and stabilize Christian monarchy. This idealism, devoid of his earlier despair, does not subjugate the Yorkists, but initially it sits well with Warwick and Clarence (26-32).²² By accepting this plan, they tacitly decide that Henry’s method of rule is worth salvaging, that Christian piety can contribute to proper governance. Henry joins their hands and dubs them co-Protectors, “[t]hat no dissension hinder government” (40). Yet, this brave new deal alters traditional monarchical theory. Henry, who “entreats, for I command no more” (59), ushers in a peculiar sovereignty that explains Warwick’s awkward search for precise terminology: “We’ll yoke together, like a double shadow / To Henry’s body, and supply his place, / I mean, in bearing weight of his government” (49-51). Henry has discovered terrain that Warwick cannot quite define or demarcate: something about the body politic, something about shadow / player-kings. Unfortunately, *Part 3* affords little time for inquiry here — Edward usurps the throne and Henry again is in the tower with clipped wings — but it momentarily entertains the possibility of a limited, Christian humanist monarchy.

As if at work to search the archives for guidance or alternatives, Henry is reading in prison when Richard of Gloucester enters. The play’s tension between types of speech and types of action, between humanist Christianity and *Realpolitik*, between opposing versions of masculinity, between Henry’s theatrics and the spectacular theater of war culminates in Henry and Richard’s ensuing confrontation. “Good day, my lord,” Gloucester begins. “What, at your book so hard?” (5.6.1). Until now, nothing has been “hard” about Henry, but this scene pins its theatrical success in part on Henry’s intricate language. Bandyng terms like “bush” and “bird,” Henry and Richard retaliate against one another with proverbs (5.6.7-17). Henry asks Richard, “What scene of death hath Roscius now to act?” (5.6.10). Richard’s turns out to be a scene not spectacular, but poetic and semantic. When he calls Henry’s son a “peevisish fool,” an Icarus, Henry exclaims, “Ah, kill me with thy weapon, not with words! / My breast can better brook thy dagger’s point / Than can my ears that tragic history” (18, 26-28), only to counter with words of his own:

And thus I prophesy — that many a thousand
Which now mistrust no parcel of my fear,
And many an old man’s sigh, and many a widow’s,
And many an orphan’s water-standing eye,
Men for their sons, wives for their husbands,
Orphans for their parents’ timeless death,
Shall rue the hour that ever thou wast born.
The owl shrieked at thy birth, an evil sign;

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

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

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

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

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

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grace. But neither prayer nor gender matter to Richard. Although divine love resides in all “*men* like one another,” the beastly Richard does not need to challenge Erasmian gendering to discount Erasmian ethics. The play has used Henry to try to reconcile Christianity to masculinity, and vice versa. Richard lets the play off the hook; if he is like no brother, like no man — if he is himself alone — then he can effectively disengage from the Christian rule paradox, rendering it irrelevant. A skilled rhetorician, Richard defines whatever he must to disprove the premise that challenges his philosophy. In this case, to undercut Henry’s Christian humanism — indeed, to rethink the King — he defines himself. The play’s best solution to the problem of Christian rule is its most worrisome: a well-versed tyrant.

With Henry’s theatrics, Richard has effectively cast off his own predisposition toward spectacular action. That his language convinces us of his villainy is nothing new; he spoke of delimiting himself much earlier in the play in his attempt to “vex” Clifford “with eager words” (2.6.68, 2.6.82-3). But he also used spectacle to communicate: “Speak thou for me,” he bids the decapitated head of Somerset, “and tell them what I did” (1.1.16). Novel is his acknowledgment of the fact that language alone — even when it is like Henry’s — has theatrical and political power. Establishing himself as one of the most provocative and alluring villains to conquer the stage, Richard accepts Henry’s intimation that words supersede physical actions, that textual, o/aural theater is not simply possible, but an improvement. Richard’s words effect no decapitations or dismemberment for the rest of the play. Language supplants spectacle. When he kisses Edward’s newborn in a moment of domesticity, his words — “To say the truth, so Judas kissed his master” (5.7.33) — suggest a force in language that Henry had recognized. Henry’s prophecy in 5.6 catalyzes this shift, thus calling us to reevaluate how much the play’s success (and its ambiguities) pivots on Henry’s language and method of rule.

In 4.8, before Henry speaks of his “meed,” Warwick wants to strategize an effective retaliation against Edward, who marches toward London. Henry the meek shepherd offers the first option: “Let’s levy men and beat him back again” (4.8.6). Warwick resolves to muster “true-hearted friends” in Warwickshire (9), and has his king’s blessing: “Farewell, my Hector, and my Troy’s true hope” (25). Why is Henry suddenly playing Priam? Henry the Christian humanist, most effective when he laments, here follows military protocols. Cox and Rasmussen have added to Samuel Johnson’s conclusion that “line [6] expresses a spirit of war so unsuitable to the character of Henry, that I would give the first *cold* speech to the King, and the brisk answer to Warwick” (Cox and Rasmussen 65, my italics); line 6 “could as easily be understood (and performed) as an instance of Henry’s ineptitude

when he attempts to lead" (74).²⁴ This presumes consistent characterization, but the language itself does not reflect Henry's Christian humanist idioms. Perhaps the attribution of line 6 is a printing mishap; as Johnson asserted, it makes more sense to give the line to Warwick. If so, then what of the Hector reference? That the lines do not exist in the 1595 octavo tells us nothing, since Henry's mole-hill speech is truncated there as well. So how do we reconcile Henry's stratagem here to his passivity everywhere else? Did the playwright(s) mean to fulfill audience expectations by giving the king of England a voice that fit the scenario? This will not do, since the play refuses to give Henry a militant voice elsewhere. Is there a character shift? Hardly, if we remember that Henry commends his own "meed" in this scene. Scholarly inattention to the extent of this problem bears witness to a prejudice against Henry VI and may reveal how his language elsewhere has been underevaluated. To dismiss Henry is to invalidate the inquiries in this play, to ignore the vexing task that his Christian rule assigns to its audiences and readers, and to mishandle (dare I say misthink) this play's dramaturgy.

Through this sometimes equivocal, sometimes consistent king, *Part 3* utilizes the gendering tendencies of Christian humanism to augment the problem of Christian rule, and it highlights Henry's implicitly Erasmian definitions of manliness to transpose the gender distinction that underwrote Nashe's defense of theater. This drama gives pious rule theatrical drive, makes it unexpectedly provocative and penetrating, and allows it to outdo the spectacles of war. Here, at least, is a stage on which playwrights' language is central.

Those who have analyzed Shakespeare's hand in the *Henry VI* plays do so with the understanding that he was a novice playwright — not a hack, necessarily, or even an "upstart crow," but certainly not mature and hardly for all time. They point to the lack of character interiority, structural inconsistencies, and collaboration. What they have neglected are the intricacies of pious rule on the early modern English stage. *Henry VI* positions audiences squarely on the collision course where Christian humanism and manly rule meet, a route charted nowhere else in Shakespeare's canon, even in *Henry V*. Is inattention to this major early modern predicament a sign that such political and theatrical quandaries are no longer ours? More urgent, how do we explain the preference for staged war heroes like Henry V, who threatens the town of Harfleur with rape and infanticide (*Henry V* 3.3.110-18), or Talbot, who promises to "play on the lute" like Nero, "beholding the towns burn" (*Henry VI, Part 1*, 3.2.94-95)?

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Notes

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

2) Cited from Ascham, Roger. *The Schoolmaster*. Ed. J. Upton. London: 1711. 128.

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

4) For "fresh bleeding" Talbot, see *Pierce Penilesse his Supplication to the Divell*, cited in Howard and Rackin 18.

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

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

7) Cf. Marx 60, 63-64.

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

9) Quoted from Devereux, Robert, 2nd Earl of Essex. *An Apologie of the Early of Essex*. London, 1603. Sig. E^v.

10) Replacing the popular 1560s Edward Hake edition, Rogers's version of *Imitatio Christi* was reprinted at least ten times between 1580 and 1605.

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

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

13) Cf. Elyot 191.

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

15) John Craig's research suggests that the *Paraphrases* were still widely available through Elizabeth's reign.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

24) Cox and Rasmussen quote Johnson from *Johnson on Shakespeare. The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson*. Vol. 8. Ed. Arthur Cherbo. New Haven: Yale UP, 1968. 608.

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