

**Frustration, Terror and Rage: The Politics of Dissent during the Reign of Henry VIII**

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*A tyrant's reward is wealth; a king's is that honour which comes from virtue. A tyrant's rule is marked by fear, deceit, and malicious cunning; a king governs through wisdom, truth, and goodwill. A tyrant wields his imperial power for his own ends; a king, for the state (Erasmus 7).*

Literature of the Henrician period is inherently reflective of the toxic political culture in which it was produced. Written predominantly by a class of people who were immersed within the culture of high politics but nevertheless felt powerless to engender any actual change or effective reforms under the increasingly unhinged rule of Henry VIII, Henrician literature often embodies the incomparable frustration, terror and rage of witnessing a nation's descent into tyranny. As Greg Walker states, 'a generation of writers educated to believe in the power of eloquence to move minds and shape events [suddenly came to the realisation] that it could no longer do so in conventional ways' and through navigating the pressures of censorship, such writers 'revolutionised writing in English' (3). Poetry, prose, and drama came to be the battlegrounds in which the 'struggle to reclaim Henry from tyranny' was fought (Walker 3). By the late 1530s, such a fight was becoming increasingly difficult to win in light of the suppressive terms of the Succession Act and the growing autocratic behaviour of Henry as a king. As such, much of the writing during this period does undoubtedly contain an acute sense of frustration, rage and terror, for it is often driven by the nigh-on-impossible task of reforming a tyrannical institution from within.

Although it is rare for Henrician writers to directly express dissent towards their king, it is common for them to be sceptical of the very notion of a totalitarian leader. In fact, tyranny, as a concept, remains to be the greatest source of terror for writers during this period. The work of Thomas More, one of Henry's closest political advisors and a principled political reformist, is particularly indicative of this dynamic. *The History of Richard III*, written three years before More joined Henry's court, is a text which foreshadows much of the jaded and politically-charged sentiment that would come to define English literature in the 1530s. Published almost thirty years after the Wars of the Roses had concluded, *Richard III* not only

serves as an indirect endorsement of the Tudor reign, but also acts as a cautionary meditation on the horrors of tyrannical rule. ‘Malicious, wrathful, envious, and from afore his birth, ever froward’, More’s portrayal of King Richard is a damning indictment of a restrictive, oppressive, and egotistical form of kingship (More, *Richard III* 10). Richard’s tyrannical tendencies are even reflected by his contorted physical appearance; he was, according to More, ‘little of stature, ill featured of limbs, crook-backed, [had] his left shoulder much higher than his right, hard favoured of visage, and such as in states called warly’ (*Richard III* 10). More even suggests that Richard was born into such a condition, ‘[coming] into the world with the feet forward, as men be born outward, and (as the fame runneth) also not untoothed’, implying that his autocratic personality was somehow naturally predetermined (*Richard III* 10). In the early years of Henry’s reign, More’s caricature of Richard’s persona presents the former king as a national villain, a haunting reminder of the darker times before Henry’s accession, as well as the antithesis of what it means to be a good and noble king. What is interesting about More’s *Richard III* is that tyranny is represented as a kind of vicious pathology, one that is inherited at birth and manifested through a ‘despitious and cruel’ character (*Richard III* 10). Elsewhere, the figure of the unhinged tyrant is presented in a similarly abominable manner by Desiderius Erasmus, a humanist like More. In *The Education of a Christian Prince*, a mirrors for princes which advocates for a style of kingship based on benevolence and wisdom, Erasmus describes ‘the picture of a tyrant’ as

...a terrifying, loathsome beast, formed of a dragon, wolf, lion, viper, bear, and suchlike creatures; with hundreds of eyes all over it, teeth everywhere, fearsome from all angles, with hooked claws, a never satisfied hunger, fattened on human entrails, drunk on human blood, an unsleeping threat to the fortunes and lives of all men,

dangerous to everyone, especially to the virtuous, a fatal scourge to the whole world, hated by all those who have the interests of the state at heart, which is an intolerable monster, and yet cannot be thrown out without destroying the city, because its hatred is protected by soldiers and money (7).

Once again, the tyrannical temperament is associated with a monstrous and subhuman aesthetic form. Here, the tyrant is imagined as an exaggerated monstrosity, a hybrid 'beast' driven by terror and self-interest, and represents a 'fatal scourge to the whole world' (Erasmus 7). Of course, Erasmus' depiction of tyranny serves a similar purpose to More's portrayal of Richard III in that it functions as an example of what a young prince should aim not to be. Erasmus, in particular, presents the tyrant as the direct obverse of the "good king":

A tyrant's reward is wealth; a king's is that honour which comes from virtue. A tyrant's rule is marked by fear, deceit, and malicious cunning; a king governs through wisdom, truth, and goodwill. A tyrant wields his imperial power for his own ends; a king, for the state (7).

Even in a text such as Nicolo Machiavelli's *The Prince*, a mirror for princes that promotes a philosophy of pragmatism rather than compassionate humanism, anxieties over the excesses of tyrannical behaviour can still be detected. As Machiavelli writes, a prince should 'avoid those things which will make him hated or contemptible' and should rather 'endeavour to show in his actions greatness, courage, gravity, and fortitude' (23). As highlighted by the three texts previously mentioned, the thought of a nation state degrading into tyranny remained the primary lingering fear which pervaded much of the literature during this period. Writers such as More and Erasmus, in their role as kingly counsellors, were figures who held

a considerable degree of political influence, and yet their concerns over the subject of tyranny reflects the precarious nature of their positions as courtly advisors. Ultimately, in a political system which prioritises the absolute power of one individual, the prospects for reform and progress are greatly limited, a hard truth well-understood by the humanist movement. Acutely aware of the potential for their monarchical system to regress into tyrannical rule, Henrician writers, in particular, are continually seen to emphasise, to an almost hysterical degree, the many horrors and terrors of an out-of-control tyrant. Indeed, by 1534, such concerns began to possess a somewhat prophetic quality as the tyrannical sensibilities of Henry's 'despotic regime' (Walker 1) soon crystallised in the Treasons Act, which prohibited the expression of any sentiment that undermined the supremacy of the king. As such, when discussing the alarming trajectory of Henry's reign in the 1530s, we are therefore exploring a moment in which the deep-seated fears of the cultured intellectual elite were being realised before their very eyes, a moment in which the 'terrifying, loathsome beast' of tyranny had re-emerged (Erasmus 7). This traumatic development in English polity is undoubtedly the central cause behind the scarcely contained sense of terror at the heart of Henrician writing.

Of course, the frustrated political ambitions of those writers present within Henry's court are often overtly portrayed in their respective works. In More's *Utopia*, the discourse of kingly counsel is satirised through the conversation between the characters of More and Raphael Hythloday. Hythloday, representing the viewpoints of a principled idealist who regards the politics of the king's court with nothing but disdain, is contrasted with More, who rather espouses a more pragmatic worldview. Often viewed to represent opposing sides of More's political personality, the two characters' dialogue which constitutes Book One of *Utopia* directly reflects the particular frustrations of reforming an institution driven by a

fundamentally undemocratic set of structures and conventions. The sentiments of Hythloday, in particular, epitomise the fact that reformists such as More were ultimately fighting a losing battle during the Henrician period. As he purports, for the most part

...all princes have more delight in warlike matters and feats of chivalry (the knowledge whereof I neither have nor desire) than in the good feats of peace: and employ much more study, how by right or by wrong to enlarge their dominions, than how well and peaceably to rule and govern that they have already (More, *Utopia* 3).

For Hythloday, princes, due to their absolute authority, will inevitably act in their own self-interest over the good of their country, surrounding themselves with those counsellors who are most flattering towards their kingship. Although More seemingly sides with the philosophy of his namesake, given that, as Daniel Burns argues, More ‘accepted the necessary imperfections of political life while still fighting to improve it to the best of [his] ability’ (102), it must be said that Hythloday, despite being represented as somewhat of a ‘devastating caricature’ (Burns 91), perhaps remains the more prophetic of the two thinkers. By 1534, More himself was experiencing the ultimate failure of his own humanist project after he was indicted for treason under the jurisdiction of an autocratic king. Even under persecution, More still attempted to play the role of the “good counsellor”, citing himself as Henry’s ‘true beadsman’ as late as March 1534 (7). In many ways, More’s execution not only remains the most provocative symbol of England’s descent into tyranny, it also highlights the many political limitations inherent to the notion of good counsel. Through his own persecution, More would have witnessed the values he held so close to his heart be crudely degraded and undermined by a king who had once embraced his guidance. In *Utopia*, More nevertheless hints at his frustrations towards the plainly corrupt political system he was a part

of through the character of Hytholoday and his cynical attitude towards the idea of incremental reform. Even though his creator may have disagreed with his overriding philosophy, Hytholoday's disparaging view of princes and their character foreshadow More's own demise at the hands of Henry VIII.

Similarly, John Skelton, another key figure within the Henrician court at this time, expresses his dissatisfaction with court politics in the poem 'Speak Parrot' written in 1521. At the beginning of the poem, Skelton's persona introduces himself as a 'bird of Paradise' contained within 'a cage curiously carven, with silver pin' ('Parrot' 6-7:1-9). Parrot is a self-described 'minion to wait upon a queen' as well as a 'pretty little fool' (Skelton, 'Parrot' 7:19-20). The particular characterisation of Parrot is symbolic of Skelton's own status within court politics. Described as no more than an exuberant accessory of the elite, a 'pretty popagay' with 'feathers fresh as is the em'rald green' and dressed with a 'rich ruby' circlet (Skelton, 'Parrot' 7: 14-17), Parrot takes on an inherently submissive role, supplying unadulterated praise to the kingship:

'Christ save King Henry the VIII, our royal king,

The red rose in honour to flourish and spring.

With Katherine incomparable, our royal queen also,

That peerless pomegranate, Christ save her noble grace!' (Skelton, 'Parrot' 7: 34-37).

Deeply satirical, the perspective of Speak Parrot serves as a useful poetic device through which Skelton may vent his frustrations towards the inherent elitism of Henrician political culture. In contrast to More's more diplomatic engagement with the imperfections of

England's system of governance, Skelton rather reflects his dissent through the means of parodic absurdity with the often nonsensical 'Speak Parrot' acting as a scathing commentary on the direction Henry's reign was taking under the guidance of Thomas Wolsey. Later in the poem, Parrot even desecrates Wolsey's coat-of-arms (his 'fleckled pie') while reiterating his own 'liberty to speak' (Skelton, 'Parrot' 12: 204-210):

For Parrot is no churlish chough, nor no flecked pie,  
Parrot is no pendugum, that men call a carling,  
Parrot is no woodcock, nor no butterfly,  
Parrot is no stammering stare, that men call a starling;  
But Parrot is my own dear heart and my dear darling;  
Melpomene, that fair maid, she burnished his beak:  
I pray you, let Parrot have liberty to speak (Skelton, *Parrot* 12: 204-210).

Of course, Skelton's 'Speak Parrot' fundamentally reflects the frustrations of a cultured elite who were beginning to see their own power and influence slip away. In many ways, characters such as Hytholoday and Speak Parrot are projections of More's and Skelton's inhibited political ambitions, reflecting the lack of accountability at the heart of English politics during the Henrician period.

Furthermore, in witnessing the gradual degeneration of Henry's reign into tyranny, literature of the period also became a vehicle to express a sense of rage towards the most corrupt elements of English high society. For instance, in Simon Fish's provocative text, *Supplication for the Beggars*, members of the clerical establishment are derided as greedy and self-serving, an 'idle, ravenous sort' which continue to expunge the wealth of the nation

for their own good (2). For Fish, this development in English polity represents a crude attack against the nation's reputation and is depicted as an invasion of sorts within the text:

And this most pestilent mischief is come upon your said poor bead-men by the reason that there is, in the times of your noble predecessors past, craftily crept into this your realm another sort (not of impotent but) of strong, puissant, and counterfeit holy and idle beggars and vagabonds, which, since the time of their first entry, by all the craft and wiliness of Satan are now increased under your sight not only in great number, but also into a kingdom (Fish 2).

The clergy are nothing more than 'thieves' whose greed has created an 'unequal burden' at the heart of an 'oppressed' nation (Fish 3). Indeed, a similarly disparaging view of the clergy is also put forward by Skelton in the poem, 'Colin Clout'. Ventriloquising the voice of a layman, Skelton indirectly relays a series of anti-clerical sentiments through the 'tattered and jagged' verse ('Clout' 22:54) of Colin Clout who translates the mood of the lower classes. Once again, the economic disparity between the clergy and the bottom half of society is condemned, though here it is symbolised as the plucking of a flock's collective 'wool' ('Clout' 23:79):

Laymen say, indeed,  
How they take no heed  
Their sely sheep to feed,  
But pluck away and pull  
Their fleeces of wool (Skelton, 'Clout' 23: 75-79).

Dissent of this sort is inherently reflective of a political culture that was becoming increasingly insular and divisive in light of the Reformation. In both texts, it is interesting that our writers profess on behalf of the common man as a means to legitimise their concerns. Yet, it would be misjudged to assume Skelton's and Fish's respective arguments are motivated by an underlying sense of solidarity towards the lower classes, for even Fish seems to dismiss such people as a 'foul unhappy sort of lepers' (1-2); instead, their incessant remarks highlight their own ostracisation from the mainstream of Henrician politics. Of course, this is particularly true in regard to Simon Fish who, like More, became a target of persecution. The fact that *Supplication* was written while Fish was abroad in the Netherlands seemingly granted him with a greater degree of freedom to be especially volatile in his arguments, though the enraged nature of his sentiments nevertheless highlight the extent to which Henry's reign was becoming increasingly suppressive and tyrannical by the mid 1500s. Ultimately, as displayed by the anti-clerical works of Skelton and Fish, the outpouring of rage as it often manifests in Henrician literature is directly suggestive of elements of the cultured elite's growing disillusionment with the direction of Henry's reign, particularly during the Reformation.

One of the reasons Henrician literature remains so fascinating is that its tone matches that of the period's toxic and unpredictable political climate. Henrician writers, many of whom harboured radical political intentions of their own, utilised their work as a platform to express dissenting and often treasonous views, with figures such as More, Fish and Skelton acting as the vanguard against Henry's gradual descent into tyranny. As Greg Walker argues, such writers were 'intensely implicated in and compromised by the political events they witnessed' and thereby felt 'compelled' to comment upon the developing political situation they were witnessing (2). As Henry's rule became increasingly autocratic and authoritarian by the

mid-1500s, disappointing initial hopes for 'a new age of magnanimous, open kingship' (Walker 1), the freedom in which Henrician writers were able to influence the king was being greatly restricted. Accordingly, writing of this period becomes a locus of politically-fuelled frustration, terror, and outrage. The prevailing sense of frustration is most prevalent in texts such as More's *Utopia* and Skelton's 'Speak Parrot' which can be seen to bemoan the imperfections of court politics as well as the inherent difficulties in attempting to reform an undemocratic system from within. On the other hand, in anti-clerical texts such as Fish's *Supplication for the Beggars* and Skelton's 'Colin Clout', rage and anger are rather the primary emotions invoked to express political dissent, with the clergy being represented as corrupt, self-interested and exploitative. Of course, underlying the frustrated attitudes of Henrician writers was the overwhelming fear of tyrannical rule, a theme which is perhaps most prominently explored through the mirrors for princes genre. For humanist writers such as Erasmus, in particular, the prospect of tyranny represents something horrific and terrifying in nature. Ultimately, in the sixteenth century, many Henrician writers found themselves in a precarious situation, not only living under the constant threat of persecution but also witnessing the emergence of the one thing they had always feared: a tyrannical king. The literature they produced is acutely reflective of the many obstacles they faced as political and artistic agents— it is a literature of satire, dissent and rigorous opposition, one that no doubt centres around a scarcely contained amount of frustration, terror and rage.

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