

EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



‘Noble being Base’: Heads, Coins and Rebellion in *The Famous History of Sir Thomas Wyatt* (c. 1602)

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This article examines a lesser-known play, *The Famous History of Sir Thomas Wyatt*, which, in a trend initiated by David Bevington, and expanded upon by Judith D. Spikes and Julia Gasper, has been read primarily for its topical link to the Essex Rebellion.¹ It is the contention of this article that the play should instead be considered for its broader ruminations on the power of the monarchy and the ability of rebels to usurp royal authority through the metaphoric associations of coins and heads, both of which have prominent connection to the main setting of the play: the Tower of London.

Thomas Dekker and John Webster’s early Jacobean history play depicts the story of Lady Jane’s nine day reign, Mary’s succession to the throne, the Spanish marriage, and

Quotations from *The Famous History of Sir Thomas Wyatt* are taken from the following edition: *The Dramatic Works of Thomas Dekker*, ed. by Fredson Bowers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), Vol. 1. In the interest of readability, I have modernised the spelling and punctuation of all early modern texts, with the exception of the titles of primary texts listed in the notes. Those exceptions withstanding, the letters ‘u’, ‘v’, ‘i’ and ‘j’ have been silently normalised in accordance with modern usage. The use of capitalisation has also been silently normalised. The use of italics within the text has also been silently removed to provide clarity for the modern reader. By modernising the spelling and punctuation in *The Famous History of Sir Thomas Wyatt*, this paper aims to enable the play to undergo comfortable comparison with the fully modernised Arden Shakespeare editions.

¹ David Bevington, *Tudor Drama and Politics: A Critical Approach to Topical Meaning* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968), p. 292; Judith D. Spikes, ‘The Jacobean History Play and the Myth of the Elect Nation’, *Renaissance Drama*, ns. 8 (1977), 117-49 (p. 131); Julia Gasper, ‘*Sir Thomas Wyatt* and the Essex Rebellion’, in *The Dragon and the Dove: The Plays of Thomas Dekker* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1990), pp. 44-61.

the rebellion of Sir Thomas Wyatt.² This article will draw attention to one potentially incendiary aspect of the play: whereby the definitions of monarch and rebel become increasingly liminal, as it becomes progressively more difficult to distinguish those who are 'noble' from those are 'base' (5.2.10). In this play, the semiotics of the head

² The play-text of *The Famous History of Sir Thomas Wyatt* is dogged by a litany of problems surrounding its authorship and textual provenance. The extant text is certainly a collaborative effort. In October 1602, Henslowe paid Henry Chettle, Thomas Dekker, Thomas Heywood, Wentworth Smith and John Webster for 'a play called Lady Jane', see R. A. Foakes and R. T. Rickert (eds.), *Henslowe's Diary* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1961), p. 218. A second entry in Henslowe's diary later that month records the payment of Thomas Dekker for 'the 2 pte of Lady Jane'; this apparent sequel was either never completed or was lost (p. 219). *The Famous History of Sir Thomas Wyatt* was printed in 1607; the title page states that the play was performed by 'the Queens Majesties servants' and attributes the text solely to Thomas Dekker and John Webster, see *The Famous History [...]* (London: Printed by E. A. for Thomas Archer, 1607), sig. A1. Both Philip Shaw and W. L. Halstead have argued that the play-text, as we see it now, is most likely a compilation of several plays. Shaw contends that the 'extant play [...] is a shortened version of one or both of the two lost Lady Jane plays mentioned in Henslowe's account book in 1602', see 'Sir Thomas Wyat and the Scenario of Lady Jane', *Modern Language Quarterly* 13 (1952) 227-38 (p. 227). More recently, Julia Gasper has given support to this supposition, voicing the opinion that '[i]t is possible that the 1607 play was an abridgement by Dekker and Webster of the original plays: since Wyatt's rebellion chronologically followed the reign of Lady Jane Grey, it may be that only the second play, the sequel was concerned with Sir Thomas Wyatt', see 'Sir Thomas Wyatt and the Essex Rebellion', p. 46.

The collaborative nature of its composition and the supposedly 'corrupt' nature of the play-text has sanctioned a series of unwarranted derogatory accounts of *The Famous History of Sir Thomas Wyatt*. Surveying the literary career of John Webster in 1986, Charles R. Forker poured scorn on the play, Webster's earliest surviving work, complaining of its 'flaccid and pedestrian' verse, its 'ragged style' and its 'mainly sentimental characterisation and conventional moralism'. Ascribing the text 'few aesthetic virtues', Forker concluded that the play 'stresses the familiar *de casibus* motifs of earthly instability and *contemptus mundi*', see *Skull Beneath the Skin: The Achievement of John Webster* (Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1986), pp. 67, 69, and 72. More often than not, however, the need to label the play-text as somehow 'corrupt' or 'bad' appears to be motivated purely by a zealous desire to diagnose memorial reconstruction. Describing the text as a 'bad quarto' because of its 'indifferent lining of verse, careless assignment of speeches, hiatuses in the plot' and the short 'length of the play', W. L. Halstead argues that the printed play is 'an actor's built version of a play (or two parts) shortened for performances in the Provinces', see 'Note on the Text of *The Famous History of Sir Thomas Wyatt*', *Modern Language Notes* 54 (1939), 585-89. Fredson Bowers agrees, judging the play to be 'a corrupt memorial reconstruction', see *The Dramatic Works of Thomas Dekker*, Vol. I, p. 399. However, as Laurie Maguire has demonstrated, textual errors are most commonly the result of the short-term memory failure of the compositor, as opposed to the sign of the long-term memory failure which would amount to proof of memorial reconstruction, see *Shakespearean Suspect Texts: The 'Bad' Quartos and their Contexts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 223. Furthermore, the supposedly 'corrupt' state of the text (the misaligning of the verse and a slight carelessness with the assignment of speeches, together with the fact that the text was not entered into the Stationers' Register), points to the text having been pirated and hastily printed, as opposed to being the result of a memorial reconstruction, see Gasper, 'Sir Thomas Wyatt and the Essex Rebellion', p. 47.

functions as the preeminent sign of political power and also powerlessness. Severed heads signify both the validity and illegitimacy of Mary and Jane's rival claims to the throne of England. The play offers two outcomes for these rival Queens, as defined by two kinds of severed head: one metaphorical, the other literal. The head of one of these Queens will grace the coinage of the kingdom, confirming her status as monarch and signifying their preeminent power and authority, the other's will be gruesomely 'severed' from their body, confirming her status as a rebel and signifying their ultimate defeat and powerlessness (5.2.186). Thus by the end of the play, Mary's 'stately head' becomes a synecdoche for her power and authority, while Jane and her followers end up 'loosing [their] head[s]' (3.1.9; 4.4.38). The term 'crown' experiences a similar slippage between its metaphorical and literal meaning throughout the play. The 'Crown of England' provides an obvious synecdoche for royal power but it also carries more problematic connotations (5.1.27). The term 'crown' is used to refer to the 'light crowns', the counterfeit coins in circulation during the mid-Tudor crisis, which ultimately undermined royal authority and, simultaneously, to the 'crowns that with blood are double guilt', referring to the brutal violence of armed rebellions (4.1.15). By examining the play in these terms, I hope to demonstrate more generally that many compelling arguments and critical opportunities emerge if we take *The Famous History of Sir Thomas Wyatt* seriously in terms of its use of setting, language and imagery, which theoretically is to insist that the work be read as a nuanced piece of political drama, as opposed to reading it via the simplistic minutiae of one-to-one political allegory.

The only serious academic study of early modern dramatic representations of the Tower of London is Kristen Dieter's *The Tower of London in English Renaissance Drama* (2008), which interprets the Tower as an unstable icon that can represent both royal power and non-royal resistance.³ But Dieter's new historicist stance, which proffers a rather dogmatic reading of Michel Foucault's work on the 'the new history', belies many of the complexities of early modern history. Dieter's account of *The Famous History of Sir Thomas Wyatt* focuses on the 'discourse' of 'death and physicality'. Offering a close analysis of the play, Dieter observes that Jane Grey and Guilford 'evoke the Dance of Death', as they reflect on their own mortality during their imprisonment in the Tower.⁴ Although the setting of the Tower, as a place of incarceration, does offer protagonists the opportunity to contemplate their own mortality

³ Kristen Dieter, *The Tower of London in English Renaissance Drama: Icon of Opposition* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 140 and 138.

and the fleeting nature of earthly pleasures and ambition, this is only one of the Tower's symbolic functions in the play.

In the popular imagination, the Tower has a reputation as a gloomy and forbidding fortress, a place of torture and execution. Yet this rather one-dimensional conception of the Tower, for the most part the invention of nineteenth-century historical fiction, belies many of the complexities of this cultural icon.⁵ First published in 1598, John Stow's *Survey of London* paints a very different image of the Tower. As well as being a 'prison of state for the most dangerous offenders', the Tower, Stow explains, also functions as a 'citadel to defend or command the city; a royal palace for assemblies or treatises', 'armoury for warlike provision; the treasury of the ornaments of the crown'; the home of the 'records of the king's courts of justice' and, perhaps most crucially for the purposes of this article, the location of the royal mint.⁶ During the early modern period, the Tower was a multi-faceted and complex cultural icon.⁷

Towards the latter half of the play, in his few remaining hours, Wyatt contemplates the prison in which he finds himself, becoming strangely comforted by the 'steadfast silence' which seems to 'possess the place' (5.2.9). The Tower, through *prosopopoeia*, emulates Wyatt's own emotions, as he imagines that the building 'jumps with the measure' (5.2.2) of his own heart. The Tower, just like the rebel within its walls 'is noble being base' (5.2.10); both the identity of the Tower and Wyatt are presented as paradoxical throughout the play. The Tower functions both as a site of 'coronation' (1.2.44), a place of 'ample state' (1.2.59) and as 'place of execution' (5.1.124): a 'prison' that will harbour 'dead men's skulls' (1.2.60). Wyatt's identity undergoes a similar transformation, as he moves from being one of 'the peoples factors' (1.6.97), from being loyal to 'the royalty of the crown of England' (5.1.27), to being a 'most famous arch-traitor' (4.2.28).

The changing fortunes of the play's protagonists seem dependent on their relationship with, or proximity to, the Tower of London. In the case of Lady Jane and her husband Guilford, who spend the majority of the play located within the Tower, the building reflects their changing status. Thus within the space of only one scene, '[t]he lady in the tower' (1.6.89) moves from having 'seizure of the Tower' (1.4.24), to being seized within the Tower. In Act One, Scene Six, Arundel, who had earlier promised to protect

⁵ William Harrison Ainsworth, *The Tower of London* (London: Collins, 1953).

⁶ John Stow, *A survey of London [...]* (London, 1598), p. 46.

⁷ For discussion on the relationship between the Tower and the adjoining urban fabric of London, see Ian Archer, *The Pursuit of Stability: Social Relations in Elizabethan London* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 36, 74-5.

the 'sacred person' (1.4.34) of Queen Jane, gives an order for her to be 'ke[pt] fast' within the Tower (1.6.106). After transforming the Tower from a place where Queens are made, to a place where traitors are kept, Arundel and the rest of the 'counsel' hastily decide to 'leave the Tower' (1.6.107). Thus the antitheses which structured the opening scenes are inverted:

Where she was proclaimed Queen,
Are now close prisoners, namely in the Tower. (2.2.40-1)

The Tower displays a paradoxical and subjective character, as the play's protagonists are transformed from rebels to monarchs or from monarchs to rebels. The Tower's dual function deconstructs the antithesis between the rebels and the forces of authority, by proving it to be radically unstable.

Alluding to the prospect of the Spanish marriage in Act Three, Scene One, Wyatt draws a comparison between the authority of Queen Mary's monarchical power and London's primary stronghold of power:

It boots not, when the chiefest Tower of all,
The key that opens unto all the land,
I mean our gracious sovereign, must be his. (3.1.112-4)

As we have established, the Tower can be seen to be a personification of Wyatt's crisis of identity of being paradoxically 'noble being base' (5.2.10), but as the antithesis between the definitions of monarch and rebel become increasingly liminal, it appears that the Tower could also symbolise the power of the monarch, who with both a body politic and a body natural is also 'noble being base' (5.2.10). In Act Three, Scene One, Queen Mary emphasises her dual identity as both a Queen and as a woman; she declares that she has inherited the throne '[b]y God's assistance and the power of heaven', whilst also seemingly acknowledging that she is a 'maid' who requires a husband (3.1.1,81). In his sermon preached at the King's coronation sermon on 25 July 1603, the Bishop of Winchester, Thomas Bilson, argued that monarchs 'are gods by office; ruling, judging, and punishing in God's stead' and yet 'Princes cannot be Gods by nature, being framed of the same metal, and [...] the same mould, that others are'.⁸ Crucially here, as in the play, the body politic metaphor cuts both ways; monarchs might claim to be stamped with God's authority but they are still made from the same metal as their subjects, thus

⁸ Thomas Bilson, *A Sermon preached at Westminster [...]* (London, 1603), p. 5.

their physical metal, their intrinsic character, is just as vulnerable to corruption or malign motivations as that of their people.

As C. E. Challis explains in *The Tudor Coinage* (1978), from ‘the accession of Henry VII to the death of Elizabeth I the royal mint in the Tower of London dominated the coinage of England and her overseas possessions’.⁹ The Tudor period saw the introduction of new coin designs, which frequently featured a lifelike portrait of the sovereign, which further emphasised the direct metaphorical link between coins and the power of the monarch.¹⁰ The Stuart monarchs later actively cultivated this iconography, by continuing the ceremonies called ‘the laying on of the hands’, to cure scrofula, (the King’s Evil).

As Stephen Deng explains, Henry VII inherited ‘a coinage that had suffered during the War of the Roses, whether just from general wear and tear or from illicit coin alterations and culling of good coins by the public’.¹¹ As a consequence, Henry enforced greater controls over the mint and standardised the purity of the coinage. During the early modern period, monetary conceptions shifted between intrinsic and extrinsic value theories, between the weight of the metal and the Royal signature, or stamp, which was hammered into the metal. Reflecting on the relationship between the sign and its referent in *The Order of Things* (1966), Michael Foucault offers various insights into the shifts in economic thought during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries:

The problem of monetary substance is that of the nature of the standard, of the price relation between the various metals employed [...] It possessed the power to signify because it was itself a real mark. [...] In order to represent prices, they themselves had to be precious [...] Moreover, all these qualities had to be stable if the mark they imprinted upon things was to be an authentic and universally legible signature.¹²

Coins had a value because they were made of a valuable commodity, and as long as the relationship between the value of the gold and the value of the stamp remained stable,

⁹ C. E. Challis, *The Tudor Coinage* (New York: Manchester University Press, 1978), p. 1.

¹⁰ Challis, pp. 1-9, 44-49, 129; *The Royal Mint: An Outline History* (London: Her Majesty’s Stationary Office, 1970), p. 8; John Craig, *The Mint: A History of the London Mint from AD. 287 to 1948* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958).

¹¹ Stephen Deng, *Coinage and State Foundation in Early Modern English Literature* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 56.

¹² Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: an Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London: Routledge, 2010), p. 183.

then the value of coins was fixed. But if an individual, be it a subject or even a monarch, altered this balance, meaning was destabilised. Thus a parallel can be drawn between the act of rebellion against a figure of authority and the act of counterfeiting coins.¹³ The act of counterfeiting coins involves using an unsatisfactory quality or quantity of gold to make coins. Counterfeiting destabilises the relationship between the stamp and the coin's intrinsic value and thereby metaphorically debases the authority of the monarch's stamp.¹⁴ Even the word 'counterfeit' points towards these two associations, meaning both to produce illegal money and to deceive and to defraud. The counterfeiting of coins constituted treason during this era and thus was punishable by death. In 1505, during Henry VII's centralisation of the minting process, one of the Tower's coiners was hanged for counterfeiting the King's image on base metal.¹⁵

After a series of expensive wars in France, the Mid-Tudor governments yielded to the temptation to debase the currency:

the object of the exercise was to maintain the coin at its face value but reduce the weight and / or the fineness completely independently of the prevailing international bullion prices or ratios, the difference between the intrinsic and face values of the coin representing the king's gross profit.¹⁶

Thus Henry VIII, Edward VI, and Mary Tudor were all guilty of defrauding their subjects by either producing debased coinage or, in the case of Mary, by allowing debased coins to continue circulating. But even more importantly they were also guilty of undermining their own authority, through the misuse of their stamp or signature on debased coins. Hence, monarchs became implicated in the fraudulent act of counterfeiting. Crucially, and as Valerie Forman has recognised, the quality of counterfeiting is already implicit in the state-sanctioned act of minting:

¹³ For further discussion of the symbolic significance of the term 'counterfeit' in early modern drama, see Forman, "'Marked Angels': Counterfeits, Commodities and *The Roaring Girl*", *Renaissance Quarterly* 54 (2001), 1531-1560; Michael Neill, 'Bastardy, Counterfeiting, and Misogyny in *The Revenger's Tragedy*', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 36 (1996), 397-416; Simon Wortham, 'Sovereign Counterfeits': The Trial of the Pyx', *Renaissance Quarterly* 49 (1996), 334-59; Linda Woodbridge (ed.), *Money and the Age of Shakespeare: Essays in New Economic Criticism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003). The most explicit discussion of the connection between counterfeiting and rebellion is in Deng's *Coinage and State Formation*, p. 128.

¹⁴ A more common act was clipping, see Deng, p. 10.

¹⁵ Derek Wilson, *The Tower of London: a thousand years* (London: Alison and Basby, 1998), p. 65.

¹⁶ C.E. Challis, 'The Debasement of Coinage, 1542-1551', *The Economic History* 20 (1967), 441-66 (p. 443).

Money is like counterfeiting; it is already a force that disrupts the relation between sign and referent. Counterfeiting, then, mimics and reproduces a discrepancy that money itself generates.¹⁷

The liminal distinction between the legitimate and illegitimate coinage seems to have been widely acknowledged in early modern drama. Although the crime of counterfeiting was classified as treason from the reign of Edward III onwards, prosecuted counterfeiters frequently avoided a death sentence by putting their illicit skills to more lawful purposes, spending a life sentence producing legal tender in the Tower.¹⁸ Hence, in Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist*, Subtle fears that if his counterfeiting were 'to be suspected' the whole mischievous gang would 'be locked up, in the Tower, forever, / To make gold there (for th'state) never come out' (4.7.81-82).¹⁹ *The Famous History of Sir Thomas Wyatt* documents how coins, subjects and monarchs can become 'counterfeit' (4.1.95).

In Act Four, Scene One, Wyatt discovers that Sir George Harper, who had previously pledged his loyalty to Wyatt, has betrayed him and joined Mary's supporters. Wyatt compares him to a counterfeit coin, which has been made from 'base' metal (4.1.91):

I never thought better of a counterfeit,
His name was Harper, was it not? Let him go,
Henceforth all Harpers for his sake shall stand,
But plain nine pence, throughout the land. (4.1.95-8)

This sequence utilises a pun on the name 'Harper', which was a form of Irish currency minted under Elizabeth's reign that was considered to be of lower worth than the English shilling.²⁰ Sir Harper is termed 'a counterfeit' because although he may have promised Wyatt his loyalty, he has proven himself to be worthless because his actions are dictated by his own personal desire for self-preservation, rather than by an altruistic desire to further the aims of the rebellion. This example of counterfeiting is, however, only one of a series of debasements at the centre of this play, as the increasingly self-motivated behaviour of subjects and even monarchs begins to blur the distinctions between those who are loyal and those who are treacherous.

¹⁷ Valerie Forman, 'Marked Angels', 1539.

¹⁸ Deng, *Coinage and State Formation*, p. 127.

¹⁹ Ben Jonson, *The Alchemist*, ed. by Elizabeth Cook (London: New Mermaids, 2010).

²⁰ Anonymous, *The Fayre Mayde of the Exchange* (London, 1607): 'Your Shilling prov'd but a harper' (1.1.660). The harp was not technically a counterfeit. A shilling was worth 12d, the Irish harp was ¾ the value, see Deng, p. 90.

During the lengthy altercation with Winchester, Wyatt remains defiant, refusing to accept his status as a rebel:

Norfolk: Sir Thomas Wyatt.
Wyatt: That's my name indeed.
Winchester: You should say traitor.
Wyatt: Traitor and Wyatt's name,
Differ as far as Winchester and honour.
Winchester: I am a pillar of the mother church.
Wyatt: And what am I?
Winchester: One that subverts the state. (5.2.11-18)

Here both men, through *stichomythia* and *comparatio*, attempt to affirm their own identity through a process of negation. Winchester asserts that he is loyal because Wyatt is a 'traitor' (4.4.31). But this way of formulating identity is problematic as it can be constantly inverted and 'subvert[ed]'; it is subjective and thus fallible.

Yet at the end of the play it is Wyatt who stands accused of what he previously mocked Sir Harry for, being a 'a counterfeit' (4.1.95):

Avaunt thou traitor, thinks thou by forgery
To enter London with rebellious arms? (4.3.19-20)

Although Pembroke is primarily suggesting that Wyatt is deceptive; this comment, once again, links Wyatt with the act of 'forgery'. Wyatt is perceived to be a forger because although he claims to be acting on behalf of the Queen and the greater good of the kingdom, his actions are considered to be self-motivated, base and corrupt.

But Wyatt is not merely a rebel because he proves himself to be motivated by personal ambition; it is also because he has appropriated the sovereign's stamp and authority. At the beginning of Act Four, Scene One, Wyatt creates a series of juxtapositions which emphasise the associations between the motif of minting and acts of rebellion:

For soldiers are the masters of war's mint,
Blows are the stamps, they set upon with bullets,
And broken pates are when the brains lies spilt,
These light crowns, that with blood are double guilt (4.1.12-15).

Here through a number of double entendres, Wyatt draws parallels between the imagery of beheading or smashing people's 'pates', with the practice of minting, whereby the heads of kings are hammered into metal. This comparison between the violence of rebel forces and minting is emphasised through the use of *paronomasia* in the word 'stamps', which not only refers to a forcible downward blow with the foot, but also to a 'stamp' that would be used during the process of minting. Similarly, the word 'crowns' has a number of different associations, as it can refer both to the crown of a person's head and to a coin which bears the image of a king. Thus Wyatt seems to be asserting his ability, as a rebel, to achieve with violence what minting achieves symbolically: the coining of kings. It is as if by being a rebel, by appropriating the right to kill, and particularly to behead, whoever he chooses, he is symbolically mirroring the act of minting, as he assumes for himself God's authority to decide who lives and who dies. A similar metaphorical spillage occurs in Shakespeare's history play, *1 Henry IV*. In Act Two, Hotspur quips to his wife:

We must have bloody noses and cracked crowns,
And pass them current, too - (2.3.89-90).²¹

Here Hotspur jests that rather than exchanging coins, subjects must now exchange broken body parts. With the debasement of the coin, the extrinsic value of the coin, the stamp of the monarch, was overextended. According to Hotspur, Henry IV is guilty of much the same crime: he has overextended his authority. Guilty of the debasing the crown of England, Henry's body politic begins to assume the frail attributes of the body natural and thus the King becomes as vulnerable to violence as any other man.²²

A similar association can be seen in Act Two of *Henry V*, when Henry discovers that the King of France has brought the loyalty of three of his nobles with 'treacherous crowns' (*H5*. 2.0.23). Cambridge, Scroop and Grey had, it appears, promised that 'by their hands' (*H5*. 2.0.28) they would repay the King of France with Henry's head:

That almost mightst have coined me into gold

²¹ William Shakespeare, *King Henry IV, Part 1*, ed. by David Scott Kastan (London: The Arden Shakespeare, 2004); Hotspur's reference to 'bloody noses' could likewise allude to Henry VIII's testoon, which depicted the King in profile, with a large nose. When the silver on the coin wore off, the King appeared to have a red nose, see Deng 94; Sandra K. Fischer, *Econolingua: A Glossary of Coins and Economic Language in Renaissance Drama* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1985).

²² Jesse M. Lander, 'Crack'd Crowns' and Counterfeit Sovereigns: The Crisis of Value in *1 Henry IV*', *Shakespeare Studies* 30 (2002), 131-161.

Wouldst thou have practised on me for thy use? (*H5*. 2.2.98-9).²³

It is as if by accepting the French ‘crowns’ or coins, that these English nobles have metaphorically transformed Henry into nothing more than metal which ‘they mightst have coined’. Faith in Henry’s divinity – as God’s deputy on earth – has been superseded by the realisation that a king is no more than his physical body whose authority, like a piece of gold, can be reshaped, stamped or destroyed at the whim of his subjects. But when Henry reasserts his authority, he inverts this process. The rebels are led away to be executed, no doubt to be beheaded, thus the rebels are transformed into nothing more than severed heads; they have no more significance than their physical person, a substance which the King now has the power to reshape, stamp or destroy, just like base metal. Both acts of rebellion and acts of beheading illustrate how individuals can usurp God’s authority, or stamp, to reshape another human being’s physical person to suit their own will.

Equally, both Northumberland and Suffolk appropriate the authority of God by ignoring ‘God’s will’ (1.1.30); they attempt to control the appointment of the next monarch, asserting their own ‘will’, and stating that: ‘We in ourselves / Are power sufficient’ (1.1.66-7). This appropriation of authority is illustrated, metaphorically, when Northumberland and Suffolk physically appropriate the iconography of Kingship, when they enter ‘*with the purse and the mace*’ (1.2). As instruments of coronation, both the purse and the mace were kept in the Tower of London.²⁴ The purse, as a symbol of the national treasury, symbolises the King’s power over the exchequer and the mint; whereas the mace, as a ceremonial weapon consisting of a heavy club with a metal head, is metaphorically linked to the Tower, as a place of execution. This latter association is made clear at the end of the play when Guilford compares the executioner’s sword to a ‘killing mace’ (5.2.105). Similarly in *Henry VI Part 2*, Cade decides to enter the city carrying ‘heads’ upon poles ‘instead of maces’ (2*H6*. 4.7.130).²⁵ Cade and his men have transformed the symbol of the King’s divine authority into an object which maintains its authority through violence. *The Famous History of Sir Thomas Wyatt*, like *Henry VI Part 2*, thus tracks the symbolic transformation of the authority of the King. As the purse and the mace lose their divine

²³ William Shakespeare, *King Henry V*, ed. by T.W. Craik (London: The Arden Shakespeare, 2002).

²⁴ In *Henry VIII*, the ‘purse’ and ‘mace’ are used in Anne’s coronation procession, see *King Henry VIII*, ed. Gordon McMullan (London: The Arden Shakespeare, 2000), 4.1.36.4.

²⁵ William Shakespeare, *King Henry VI, part 2*, ed. by A.S. Cairncross, in *The Arden Shakespeare Complete Works*, ed. by Richard Proudfoot, Ann Thompson and David Scott Kastan (Walton-on-Thames: Thomas Nelson, 1998).

significance, so does the monarchy which they authenticate; it is now violence and money which authenticate power, not divine providence.

Although they never meet on stage, the figures of Mary and Jane are inseparably interlinked; the play constantly calls upon the audience to draw parallels as well as contrasts between the two rival Queens. Just like the slippage of definition which occurs between Winchester, the 'pillar' (5.2.16) of authority, and Wyatt, the 'traitor' (5.2.13), the terms 'Queen' (4.3.17) and 'rebel' (3.1.37) in the Jane and Mary plot line are interchangeable. It is, therefore, far from coincidental that the two women mirror one another in their choice of rhetoric. As Lady Jane Grey is led away to the Tower to be crowned, she formulates an antithesis to summarise her predicament:

How can we fare well, to keep our court:
Where prisoners keep their cave? (1.2.67-8)

Jane's exit from the stage is immediately juxtaposed with Mary's entrance on stage, the latter then proceeds to describe the 'house of stone' in which she is now 'environed' (1.3.3). Both women face a bleak architectural setting, yet while Jane's observation brings with it a sense of foreboding that her place of coronation will shortly become her prison; Mary's 'mansion [...] all ruinate' (1.3.5) will soon be the setting for Sir Henry Beningfield to 'salute' her 'with the high stile of Queen' (1.3.17). Jane and Mary, like inverted mirror images of each other, are both crowned during the play, but only at the expense of the other. One's success is the other's peril; Mary's coronation ensures Lady Jane Grey's execution.

Lady Jane Grey, who for the majority of the play functions as a mere pawn to the ambitions of her father, finally manages to assert her own autonomy, as she stands in the dock to answer the charge of 'capital and high treason' (5.1.23). She, like Wyatt, demonstrates the liminal nature of the rebel/monarch antithesis, as she defiantly replies to Norfolk's question, 'are you guilty of these crimes or no?', with the words, 'I am and I am not' (5.1.44-5). Jane's ambiguous statement echoes Mary's earlier sarcastic comment: '[t]he Queen-like rebel, mean you not Queen Jane?' (3.1.37). Ironically, Lady Jane Grey's conduct during her trial could be described as nothing other than 'Queen-like' with her convincing display of dignity and composure. Even in her brief discussion with 'the headsman' she demonstrates a capacity for mercy, when she gives him her 'pardon' for enacting her 'death' (5.2.114-5,112). The audience is, no doubt, expected to draw a comparison between this sequence and the 'pardon' that Mary thought suitable for one 'of noble parentage' (5.1.132), when Jane and Guilford were tormented by the prospect of the Queen's 'mercy' (5.1.128), only to realise that this merely

involved Jane being spared the flames and being beheaded instead. During the trial scene, this allows Jane and Guilford to invert the definition of the word ‘treachery’ (5.1.72) in order to pass judgement on their judges. Thus the entire scene is interlaced with antithesis and *chiasmus*:

Who cried so loud as you, God save Queen Jane?
And come you now your sovereign to arraign?
Come down, come down, here at a prisoner’s bar,
Better do so, then judge yourselves amiss:
For look what sentence, on our heads you lay,
Upon your own, may light another day. (5.1.87-92)

Here Guilford inverts the judge and the prisoner antithesis by rhetorically inverting the symbolism of height. The final two lines of this sequence use rhyming couplets and *chiasmus* to blur the boundaries between the binary oppositions of the judge and the prisoner, because both of these rhetorical tropes underline the similarity between the two roles. Thereby the trial scene makes any antithesis between the figures of authority and rebels seem artificial and highly subjective.

This issue, as with the polarity between justice and mercy, questions whether kings and judges can assume God’s authority in order to sit in judgement over other human beings. During Lady Jane’s trial, Winchester attempts to blur the lines between a subject’s duty to God and a subject’s duty to a sovereign, when he calls Jane and Guilford ‘heretics’ (5.1.111). Jane’s reply to this accusation embodies a characteristically Elizabethan sentiment:

We are Christians, leave our conscience to ourselves:
We stand not here about religious causes
But are accused of capital treason. (5.1.112-4)

She argues that treason against God and treason against the state are completely separate and that therefore Winchester has no authority to judge her intrinsic value in the eyes of God.

Jane’s execution provides the final dénouement of the play. While the vast majority of the nobility convicted of treason were beheaded on Tower Hill, a short distance from the Tower, a small number of ‘private’ executions were conducted within the walls of the Tower. Along with two other Tudor Queens, Anne Boleyn (1536) and Catherine Howard (1542), Lady Jane was beheaded on Tower Green. But rather than allowing

Jane to disappear quietly offstage, as Wyatt had done only a moment earlier, Dekker and Webster diverge from the accounts of both Foxe and Holinshed, by having Jane die before her husband. This reordering of events ensures that Guilford is present to see the gruesome spectacle of the headsman returning onstage ‘with Jane’s head’ (5.2).²⁶ But this scene provides far more than mere shock and sensation; Dekker and Webster have specifically chosen to display Jane’s severed head for metaphorical purposes. Metaphors are gruesomely literalised; Jane, the previous ‘head of state’ has metamorphosed into a physical piece of stage property, a severed head. Directing the audience to ‘[b]ehold her head’, Guilford tries to manipulate the audience’s response, as the severed head becomes a focus for evaluation and judgement (5.2.158). Just as at the end of *Macbeth* when we are confronted with the sight of ‘[t]h’usurper’s cursed head’, the audience is called upon to judge the value of a protagonist with whom we have empathised, if not sympathised, during the play (*Mac.* 5.9.21).²⁷ Guilford asserts that ‘[h]er innocence, has given her this look’ (5.2.167). According to Guilford, Jane’s intrinsic character is ‘purer than the maiden orient pearl’, her eyes are ‘clear reflecting’; her execution has ensured her status as a martyr (5.2.165,4). Thus Jane escapes the judge’s attempt to ‘besmear / [t]he fairest brow with stile of treachery’ (5.1.47-8). If we take Guilford at his word, Jane is not the traitor that Mary deemed her to be; she has been vindicated as a great Protestant martyr.

The Famous History of Sir Thomas Wyatt forms a dialectic through the political and ideological contradictions stemming from the play’s use of language. As this examination of the play’s motifs and imagery has demonstrated, *The Famous History of Sir Thomas Wyatt* is more than just an oblique commentary on the Essex Rebellion. *The Famous History of Sir Thomas Wyatt* is a politically incendiary play, which seems to actively encourage its audience to align itself with Wyatt and Jane, the ‘innocent creatures’ (5.1.106), who have committed treason, rather than support Mary, ‘the true heir’ (1.3.33), who has the most legitimate claim to the throne.

But ultimately, this play’s political significance supersedes any specific historical crisis by offering a provocative account of monarchical authority, which envisages monarchs and rebels as frequently indistinguishable from one another. This liminality between the roles of monarch and rebel is a direct consequence of the complexities and ambiguities of the body politic metaphor. On numerous occasions throughout the play, Mary’s body politic seems to assume a physical vulnerability and human frailty, while Jane, Guilford

²⁶ Fiona Martin, “‘O die a rare example’: Beheading the Body on the Jacobean Stage’, *Early Modern Studies* 19 (2009), 1-24.

²⁷ William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, ed. Kenneth Muir (London: The Arden Shakespeare, 2003).

and Wyatt profess to have attained immortality through their fame and martyrdom, despite the fleeting nature of their physical existence.²⁸ *The Famous History of Sir Thomas Wyatt* is an intellectually sophisticated play which recognises and exploits this slippage between metaphorical and physical bodies, between the disembodied heads which grace the coinage of the kingdom and the severed heads which decorate Tower Bridge. Indeed, the play offers two possible – and worryingly interchangeable – outcomes for its protagonists as defined by two kinds of severed head: one, a metaphor, the other, a metaphor gruesomely literalized.

²⁸ On the relationship between the body politic and the body natural, see Gillian Murray Kendall, 'Overkill in Shakespeare' in *Shakespearean Power and Punishment*, ed. by Gillian Murray Kendall (London: Associated University Presses, 1998), pp. 173-96.