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‘To all kinde of estates I meane for to trudge’: Making Room for the Commoners in *Cambises*

Thomas Preston’s Cambises combines the tale of a sixth-century Persian tyrant from Herodotus’s History with a series of low-born characters and comic interludes that derive from morality plays and mystery cycles. Despite the presence of elite and popular elements in the text, studies have focused chiefly on the nature of aristocratic resistance to the monarch. When considered in this context, Cambises’s accidental death at the play’s conclusion implies that an anointed ruler could only be removed through divine intervention; his subjects could reprimand him for his cruelty, but they could not depose him. I argue in this essay that the play’s commoners challenge the prevailing discourse of passive resistance by undermining Cambises’s military campaign in Egypt, calling on him to execute his corrupt deputy, and contemplating his death when he fails to meet their expectations. In doing so, they demonstrate that political protest is not limited to the nobility, but available for appropriation by ‘all estates’.

When Shakespeare’s pre-eminent clown Sir John Falstaff informs the denizens of an Eastcheap tavern that his performance of King Henry IV will be undertaken ‘in King Cambyses’ vein’, he bestows on Thomas Preston’s 1561 interlude a reputation for being ridiculous that has haunted it ever since (2.5.352).¹ Advertising ‘A lamentable tragedy mixed ful of pleasant mirth, conteyning the life of Cambises king of Percia’, the play’s title page does little to detract from *Cambises*’s status as an object of ridicule.² In keeping with this titular boast, the text combines characters from Herodotus’s *History* with allegorical figures from the morality plays and comic villains from the mystery cycles.³ But although this ‘mongrell Tragy-comedie’ draws on multiple genres, it is no testament to mixed modes.⁴ Instead, the play divides into a ‘serious’ plot that focuses on Cambises’s tyrannical execution of his counselor Praxaspes’s son, his brother, Smerdis, and his queen, and a ‘comic’ plot

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in which his low-born subjects voice their opinions on his reign. The only point of connection between the two narratives lies in the antics of the Vice, Ambidexter, who seeks to corrupt nobles and commoners alike. Despite the presence of elite and popular characters in the text, critics often treat the former as more important than the latter. Within this framework, the counsellors who seek to restrict Cambises's cruelty seem legitimate figures of resistance, whereas the commoners who complain of his misdeeds appear to be either ineffective or illegitimate in their opposition to his rule. This treatment is especially evident in the case of Ambidexter, whose habitual duplicity ostensibly disqualifies his criticism of the king.⁵ As a result, most scholarly arguments describe the commoners and the Vice as passive extensions of the aristocratic plot rather than autonomous commentators on it.

In this essay, I complicate the existing portrait of the commoners in *Cambises* by drawing attention to their roles as fomenters of social disorder, appellants for royal favour, and advocates of resistance to a tyrant. I contend that the soldiers Huf, Ruf, and Snuf undermine Cambises's war in Egypt by describing it as an opportunity for private profit; the allegorical figures Small Habilitie, Commons Cry, and Commons Complaint remind the king of their suffering during his absence in Egypt while the rustics Hob and Lob argue that Cambises should be killed for ignoring the needs of his subjects. In keeping with his penchant for double-dealing, Ambidexter both echoes and expands on the commoners' grievances against the king. He thus eggs on the soldiers' corruption, strengthens the appeals of the allegorical figures, and joins the peasants in their slandering of Cambises. Ambidexter also takes the peasants' threats against the monarch to their logical conclusion by fashioning himself as a potential regicide. As the trajectory of the commoners' appearances onstage indicates, their criticism of the king increases in tandem with his tyranny and ends with a call for his death. The lower orders thus contemplate Cambises's removal in ways that the play's aristocrats do not. In doing so, they demonstrate that representations of resistance were not confined to the nobility, but were available for appropriation by 'all estates'.

These images of lower-order dissent have rarely been the subject of sustained investigation. In his seminal study of *Cambises*, David Bevington classifies it as a 'tyrant play' that depicts 'an early Elizabethan debate on the limits of obedience to a potentially corrupt civil authority'.⁶ According to Bevington, the play encourages counsellors to question a despotic ruler but not to depose him since his removal was the legitimate purview of God rather than man. More to the point, he suggests that the aristocrats' stoic

acceptance of Cambises’s tyranny contrasts with the ‘wavering and irresponsible’ behaviour of the commons who ‘must learn to avoid the facile temptation of seditious talk’.⁷ In a more recent study, Eugene Hill argues that the play is a warning for future monarchs, rather than a set of guidelines for their counsellors. In his estimation, Cambises’s reign not only reflects the oppressive regimes of Henry VIII and Mary Tudor but also serves as a cautionary tale for the newly anointed Elizabeth I, before whom it was probably performed in 1561.⁸ Whereas Bevington views *Cambises* as enjoining obedience to the crown and Hill presents it as a warning about monarchical excess, neither critic examines the role of popular protest in the play.

Robert Weimann addresses this oversight in his study of *Cambises*, where he argues that the commoners provide a comic ‘countervoice’ or ‘counter-vision’ that ‘complements or even inverts the serious (heroic or courtly) substance of the main plot’.⁹ The commoners and Ambidexter thus highlight Cambises’s growing cruelty towards his subjects, and his counsellors’ failure to curtail his tyranny. At the same time, Weimann suggests that ‘this function is restricted to a single scene or a series of comic variations and extrapolations of the main course of serious events’.¹⁰ Although Weimann offers a notable alternative to top-down studies of the play, he limits the commoners’ influence within it and fails to address the political dimensions of their characterization. Ineke Murakami offers a more sustained reading of popular politics in *Cambises* by contending that ‘the supposedly unrelated low episodes build on one another to articulate and refine a workable “amity” that enables all degrees of society to end the cycle of hostility and revenge threatening the realm’.¹¹ According to Murakami, the scenes featuring the soldiers and rustics come to a peaceful end due to the intervention of two female figures — Meretrix and Marian-May-Be-Good — who encourage the warring parties to engage in mutually beneficial forms of exchange instead. The citizens’ ability to resolve their conflicts thus serves as an important contrast to the fractious relations at court and demonstrates that they ‘think of themselves as public agents with a duty to share ideas and other resources’.¹² While I follow Murakami in viewing the commoners as important critics of the state, I depart from her by situating them in the context of mid-Tudor theories of resistance rather than in relation to the bourgeois public sphere. Of course, my study is not the only one that examines *Cambises* in relation to mid-Tudor theories of resistance. The play has often been juxtaposed with its contemporaries, *Gorboduc* (1561) and *Horestes* (1567), and explored in these terms. My examination of *Cambises* does, however, depart from existing scholarship

on the subject by positing that those at the bottom of the realm were just as capable of resisting the monarch as those at the top.

Crown and Commons

In Tudor and Stuart England, persistent tension marked the relationship between top and bottom, crown and commons. In periods of prosperity, this tension was held at bay as the two entities subscribed to their roles within the traditional hierarchy. Thus, the king and his advisors claimed to act in the best interests of the people and, in turn, expected the people to express loyalty and deference towards them.¹³ State-sponsored sermons and homilies reiterated this image, and expansive treason laws enforced it by punishing those who spoke or acted against the crown. Nonetheless, in a nation that lacked a comprehensive police force and standing army, officials could maintain order only with the support of the people, and the people could withdraw their support in times of crisis. When faced with poor harvests, war, or excessive taxation, the commons used a variety of methods — informal complaints, formal petitions, and in extreme cases, riot and rebellion — to express their dissatisfaction with those in power. In such cases, discontented commoners accused the king and his representatives of abandoning their duties and presented their actions as a necessary corrective.¹⁴ If the rulers used the pulpit and the courts to maintain order, the ruled relied on a combination of petitions and threats to express their disagreement with their social superiors.

Such disagreement became inconceivable in the Tudor-Stuart rhetoric of order, which defined the relationship between king and commons in strictly hierarchical terms.¹⁵ A series of official and unofficial documents published after the popular revolts of 1536 and 1549 reinforced this perspective. The 1570 *Homily against Disobedience and Willful Rebellion* enshrined such ideas, stating

For as long as in this first kingdome the subjects continued in due obedience to God their king, so long did God embrace all his subjects with his love, favour, and grace, which to enjoy is perfect felicity, whereby it is evident, that obedience is the principall vertue of all vertues, and indeed the very root of all vertues and the cause of all felicitie. But as all felicities and blessednesse should have continued with the continuance of obedience, so with the breach of obedience, and

breaking of rebellion, all vices and miseries did withal breake in, and overwhelme the world.¹⁶

The authors of the *Homily* pay homage to a vertical model of governance by linking the monarch with God and rebellious subjects with Lucifer, Adam, and Eve. Within this framework, all forms of protest become manifestations of original sin, and all articulations of dissent become signifiers of the rebel’s propensity for vice. As the authors posit, ‘he that nameth rebellion, nameth not a singular or one onely sinne, as is theft, robbery, murder, and such like, but he nameth the whole puddle and sinke of all sinnes against God and man’.¹⁷ In something of a tautology, the *Homily* presented rebels as inveterate criminals and treated all criminals, by virtue of their criminality, as potential rebels.

Texts like the *Homily*, however, attempted to maintain order in the face of extreme tension between the monarch and his subjects. More often than not, the relationship between the two groups required cooperation and compromise. In this environment, the king appeared as a fount of justice whom subjects could petition in times of need. As Richard Hoyle delineates, petitions were ‘one of the key mechanisms of interaction between popular politics and the state’, since they enabled subaltern groups to speak with the ‘common voice’ and avoid prosecution for doing so.¹⁸ Formal pleas allowed citizens to express their obedience to the king while advising him on matters of state, and this system enabled the king to portray his acquiescence to their demands as a benevolent act rather than a concession to the threat of force from below.

Nonetheless, as John Guy notes, once citizens had acquired some right to shape social policy, their petitions could morph into more radical forms of resistance.¹⁹ During periods of social disorder, subjects might eschew their dependence on elite favour in order to intervene directly in national politics. This intervention could take the form of riot or rebellion in those situations where the people perceived the king to be favouring private interests over the public good. In extreme cases, citizens who perceived the ruler to be a tyrant might even call for his or her deposition and death. These calls mushroomed under Mary Tudor, whose persecution of Protestants resulted in strong defences of tyrannicide by John Knox, John Ponet, and Christopher Goodman, among others. In particular, Ponet’s *A Short Treatise of Politique Power* (1556) and Goodman’s *How Superior Powers Ought To Be Obeyed* (1558) offered biblical and legal rationalizations for a subject’s right

to depose and even kill an anointed ruler. In a major departure from existing theories of resistance, which only countenanced force undertaken by a lawful magistrate — usually a member of the aristocracy — these authors argued that citizens could justifiably take up arms against a tyrant.²⁰ Unlike the literature of obedience, which vilified attempts to change the status quo, and formal petitions that made moderate changes to it, resistance theory called for a major reconstruction of the established order.²¹ Theory may have cast the relationship between crown and commons as a strictly hierarchical one, but in practice it was informed by elements of conflict, negotiation, and compromise.

Cambises offers ample evidence of these views as it begins by condemning the king's disobedient subjects but ends by supporting their stance against him. In keeping with this framework, the play openly censures the first group of commoners to appear in the text, the soldiers Huf, Ruf, and Snuf, for undermining the king's war in Egypt. Their serio-comic punishment for theft and lies has affinities with the treatment meted out to rebels in state-sponsored writings on the topic and, as such, highlights the danger that unruly commoners could pose to the nation. Unlike the soldiers, the second group to arrive onstage, the allegorical figures Small Habilitie, Commons Cry, and Commons Complaint, ask Cambises to protect them against his corrupt deputy Sisamnes, and they see their pleas rewarded with Sisamnes's execution. The citizens' reliance on peaceful petitioning highlights the advantages of a cooperative relationship between rulers and ruled. The people's cooperation turns to criticism, however, after Cambises executes Praxaspes's son and Smerdis. The peasants Hob and Lob illustrate the commons' change of heart when they condemn the king's cruelty and call for his death. Ambidexter heightens their critique of Cambises by offering a strong defence of regicide at the end of the play. While they resemble the drama's aristocrats in favouring a balanced system of government over an imbalanced one, the commoners and Vice reject the nobility's belief in passive resistance and present the king's death as a positive alternative to his rule.²²

Thomas Preston and the Politics of Performance

Cambises's status as a dissident text begins with the conditions of its production and reception. The author designed this Tudor interlude — like similar plays of short or intermediate length — for performance by an itinerant troupe, usually at one end of a medieval hall or inn. The distance between

actor and spectator was minimal within this space, and lower-order characters, who inhabited the *platea*, or area closest to the audience ‘where ordinary folk went about their usually comic business’, reduced it even further.²³ Such figures thus occupied an ideal position to address the audience and evoke their sympathies. The Vice was especially suited to this position, since his character could ‘elide or obscure the differences between play and spectator’ and his part was always given to the leading actor in a company.²⁴ The process of doubling, moreover, weakened the divisions between ‘high’ and ‘low’ characters and themes and made it impossible to separate those characters authorized to discuss the king’s cruelty from those who were not. The lack of physical distance between actors and spectators, the Vice’s centrality to the plot, and the process of doubling all indicate that *Cambises* placed its low-born characters in an ideal position to influence the audience’s attitude towards the king.

The play at least partly alleviated the dangers of publicly criticizing a monarch, even a tyrannical one, through its comic framework. These dangers are evident in the Tudor proclamations of 1540, 1543, 1545, 1549, 1551, and 1559, which condemned interludes for spreading ‘seditious and false rumors’ on ‘matters of religion or of the governance of the estate of the commonweal’ and called for their suppression.²⁵ Under these circumstances, subaltern characters served as a useful instrument through which Tudor dramatists could voice dissent and avoid prosecution for doing so. Preston’s employment of these strategies becomes apparent if we examine three major reference points for the play: Richard Taverner’s *The Garden of Wisdom*, the primary source for *Cambises*; the ballad *A Lamentation from Rome* (1570), attributed to Preston; and the mention of Bishop Bonner, the sole contemporary figure referenced in the text. Taken together, these documents highlight Preston’s engagement with Tudor debates on resistance and his investment in using comic characters to represent them.

Preston’s most notable departure from his source lies in his addition of the commoners and Vice to *Cambises*. In *The Garden of Wisdom*, Taverner chronicles four major episodes in Cambises’s life in order to distinguish between his one positive deed — the killing of his corrupt counsellor, Sisamnes — and his three tyrannical acts — the executions of Praxaspes’s son, Smerdis, and his queen.²⁶ *Garden* uses these images of cruelty to advance the argument ‘thet god woll not longe suffer tyrants to reigne. For not longe after the deathe of Cyrus above the space of one yeare lyved Cambyses, neither lefte he any heire of hys kyngdome’.²⁷ Taverner portrays Cambises’s accidental

death as a sign of divine retribution, which renders individual attempts to overthrow him unnecessary. On the surface, Preston appears to follow Taverner's lead by claiming that the king's violence drew the wrath of 'mightie Jove' (Prologue 31). By including commoners in the narrative and endowing them with the power to parody, advise, and even slander the king, though, Preston opens the doctrine of passive resistance to question.

Preston's interest in combining lower-order characters with narratives of dissent is also evident in two ballads attributed to him: *A Geliflower of Swete Marygolde, Wherein the Frutes of Tyranny You May Beholde* (1569–70) and *A Lamentation from Rome* (1570).²⁸ Although the first text is now lost, the author's anti-tyrannical stance seems clear from its title and reiterations of similar ideas in his later work. In *A Lamentation*, which Preston wrote shortly after the rebellion of the northern earls, the narrator, Fabian Fly, perches in the Pope's nasal cavity and provides a gleeful account of the prelate's anger at the defeat of his Catholic allies in England. Rejoicing at the pope's failure, Fly states, 'He wept and wrong his hands / Yea worse and worse began to fret / Thus raging till he standes'.²⁹ Preston's portrayal of a cartoonish leader, whose mood shifts from extreme joy at the news of the rebels' actions to violence and madness when he hears of their failure, has close affinities with his representation of the mercurial and bloody-minded Cambises. In *A Lamentation*, Preston employs the risible to condemn papal overreach and praise those who oppose the pope's commands.

Likewise, in *Cambises* the commoners serve as vocal and often ludic critics of the monarch and his substitutes. The play's anti-authoritarian tenor comes to the forefront in its final scene, when Ambidexter exclaims, 'What a King was he that hath used such tyranny? / He was a kin to Bishop Bonner, I think verily' (11.1141–2). In the only contemporary reference in the text, the play compares Cambises to Edmund Bonner, who served as bishop of London from 1553 to 1559 and was closely associated with the persecution of Protestants under Mary. Nicknamed 'Bloody Bonner' in John Foxe's *Acts and Monuments*, the prelate may have presided over roughly half of the 232 burnings that took place in the dioceses of London, Canterbury, Chichester, and Norwich between 1555 and 1558, and Elizabethan critiques of the Marian regime unequivocally condemned him for doing so.³⁰ By aligning Bonner with Cambises, Preston draws attention to the violence perpetrated under Mary and suggests that those seeking contemporary examples of tyranny did not have far to look.³¹ He signals his distaste for the Marian persecutions by adding commoners to Taverner's *Garden*, criticizing papal overreach in

A Lamentation, and alluding to Bishop Bonner in *Cambises*. Most importantly, by comparing Cambises's cruelty with the oppression of the previous regime, Preston insulates himself from accusations of slander against the current ruler.³²

Thieving Soldiers and Rebellious Commoners

Cambises does not begin, however, by criticizing the monarch. It instead uses the soldiers Huf, Ruf, and Snuf to illustrate the havoc that disobedient subjects could wreak on the nation. The scene that features them occurs immediately after Cambises announces his decision to invade Egypt and highlights their inappropriate response to his military campaign. Huf tells his companions

Gogs flesh and his wounds these warres rejoyce my hart:
By his wounds I hope to doo wel for my parte.
By Gogs hart the world shall go evil if I doo not shift:
At some olde Carles bouget I meane for to lift. (2.160–3)

Instead of viewing the war as a chance to serve king and country, Huf sees it as an opportunity to prey upon the bougets, or wallets, of the old and infirm.³³ His desire to 'come the richest soldier away' is amplified by Snuf's claim 'Let all men get what they can' (172, 174). Unlike Cambises, who depicts the upcoming battle as an occasion for winning the 'golden praise' that the people once showered upon his father, the soldiers view it as a source of profit (1.19). In doing so, they undermine the king's martial rhetoric and draw attention to his shaky control over the hearts and minds of his subjects.

It is important to note, though, that the scene does not condemn Cambises's reign as much as it does the soldiers' failure to do their duty. The description of their larcenous behaviour has close affinities with the portrayal of rebellious commoners in the Tudor-Stuart literature of order. In *The Hurt of Seditiōn*, Sir John Cheke likens defeated rebels to disbanded soldiers because of the damage that both groups do to the commonwealth:

For every man is easily and naturally brought, from labour to ease, from the beter to the worse, from diligence to slouthfulnesse, that a great number of those which went out honest, returne home againe like roisters, and as though they were burnt to the warres bottome, they have all their lyfe after an unsavery smack

thereof, and smell still toward daysleepers, pursepickers, highwayrobbers, quarrelmakers, ye and bloudsheders to.³⁴

According to Cheke, the aftermath of a rebellion is much like the end of a battle, since the proponents in both cases continue the habits of spoliation to which they have become accustomed. When they return to civil society, they express distaste for labour and engage in theft and murder instead. As Peter Lake points out in his study of early modern murder pamphlets, a similar system of equivalences was used to connect female infanticides and murderers, on the one hand, with rakes and masterless men, on the other: 'The key sign and cause of their slide down the slippery slope of demonic temptation and moral dissolution was their rebellion against or withdrawal from the supervening structures of social or patriarchal authority'.³⁵ These figures seemed united by their failure to fulfill traditional social and sexual roles, even though they had committed different crimes and faced different punishments. Like the characters in the murder pamphlets and the rebels in Cheke's text, Huf, Ruf, and Snuf, with their plan to derail Cambises's Egyptian campaign, signal their refusal to recognize his authority over them.

The soldiers' defiance is exacerbated when they appoint Ambidexter as their leader. A self-fashioned expert in the art of double-dealing, Ambidexter proves to be the ideal mentor for Huf, Ruf, and Snuf. As he boasts in his opening speech, 'My name is Ambidexter. I signify one / That with both hands finely can play' (2.24–5). Ambidexter augments his image by arguing that he 'can all men begile' and narrows the list of his devotees considerably by claiming that he is one 'who many souldiers doo love' (145, 214). Huf's admission after their meeting buttresses the idea of Ambidexter's popularity with the troops:

Gogs hart to have thy company needs we must prove
 We must play with bothe hands with our hostes and host:
 Play with bothe hands and score on the poste
 Now and then with our Captain for many a delay:
 We wil not stick with bothe hands to play. (215–17)

Ambidexter's presence motivates the soldiers to expand their range of larcenous activities to include the cheating of local innkeepers, their captain, and the prostitute Mistress Meretrix, whose sexual favours they wish to enjoy for free (252–3).

By shifting their allegiance to Ambidexter, Huf, Ruf, and Snuf come to resemble those rebels who placed a false leader above their true king. In *The Hurt of Sedition*, Cheke upbraids this group for their propensity to ‘to disobey your betters, and to obey your tanners, to change your obedience from a King to a Ket, to submit your selves to Traytours and breake your faith to your true kinge and Lordes’.³⁶ According to Cheke, rebels compounded their crimes when they eschewed traditional status distinctions and followed a commoner instead of an anointed magistrate. Huf, Ruf, and Snuf commit a similar offense by elevating Ambidexter to the position occupied by rebel leaders like Jack Straw, Jack Cade, and Robert Kett in the literature of obedience. The soldiers decide to follow Ambidexter only after they have defeated him in a brawl. The scene in which they meet concludes with the soldiers’ and Ambidexter’s beating at the hands of Mistress Meretrix. This revelation of their collective cowardice and incompetence mitigates any threat that they might pose to king and country. At the same time, Huf, Ruf, and Snuf’s defeat does not expunge their boast that they will sustain themselves with theft, nor does it nullify their defiance of the king. Their presence instead validates elite anxieties about the harm that disobedient subjects could inflict upon the nation.

Petitions and Peaceful Protest

If the soldiers speak to the flaws in the king’s foreign campaign, then the allegorical figures Small Habilitie, Commons Cry, and Commons Complaint demonstrate the adverse effects of war on the domestic front. They call on Cambises after his return from Egypt and ask him to punish Sisamnes, the corrupt judge who ruled Persia in his absence. Early modern commoners often used such petitions to seek redress from those in power. According to Richard Hoyle, petitions served as a form of ‘political communication’ through which the people could articulate their complaints against the state and seek extra-judicial solutions for their problems.³⁷ In a 1549 sermon that he preached before Edward VI, the Protestant preacher Hugh Latimer uses the Cambises story to make just such an appeal for clemency. Latimer praises Cambises for listening to his people’s complaints, as he informs his audience

The cry of the poor widow came to the emperor’s ear, and caused him to flay the judge quick, and laid his skin in his chair of judgment, that all judges that should give judgment afterward should sit in the same skin. Surely it was a goodly sign,

a goodly monument, the sign of the judge's skin. I pray God we may once see the sign of the skin in England!³⁸

The sermon portrays Cambises as a just ruler who responds to the pleas of a 'poore widowe' by ordering that her oppressor be flayed alive. By invoking the tale, Latimer not only asks Edward to display similar compassion towards his subjects but also champions their right to demand concessions from him.³⁹ Petitions thus opened up a path by which commoners could call for change without threatening the status quo.

Small Habilitie and Commons Complaint take a similar stance when they demand that Sisamnes be punished for persecuting the people in Cambises's absence. Small Habilitie registers his protest directly by telling Sisamnes, 'The right you sell unto the wrong, your private gain to win / You violate the simple man and count it for no sin' (3.330–3). While the judge ignores his accusations, cautioning him to 'Hold thy tongue', they gain resonance when Commons Complaint echoes these ideas, informing the king that 'by taking bribes and gifts, the poor he doth oppress / Taking relief from infants young, widows, and fatherless' (4.389–90). Through their speeches, the allegorical figures forge a bond with the monarch that allows them to upbraid his deputy for failing to 'obay the Kings constitute' (3.339–40). By indicting Sisamnes for placing private gain over the public good, the commoners emphasize that the king and council must act in the best interest of the people.

Their appeal strengthens when Ambidexter shifts from denouncing their arguments to supporting their claims. In keeping with his duplicitous character, the Vice initially encourages Sisamnes's corruption on the grounds that the people are too weak to oppose him, stating, 'What is he that of you dare make exclamation / Of your wrong dealing to make explication' (3.319–20). Ambidexter, however, changes his tune upon the king's return and agrees with Small Habilitie's complaint that the judge's greed has driven him 'good Lawes to pollute' (337). Ambidexter's support for the commoners places him in the unlikely position of upholding constitutional authority in the face of those magistrates who seek to distort it. The Vice thus sheds the rebellious persona that he adopted with the soldiers and acknowledges the people's right to demand redress when those in power abuse them.

In their refusal to be silenced by Sisamnes, their address to the king, and their conversion of Ambidexter to their cause, Small Habilitie, Commons Cry, and Commons Complaint demonstrate that petitions could be useful tools for negotiating with those in power. The commoners' importance only

grows when we consider that Taverner’s *Garden of Wisdom* has an unnamed source rather than three allegorical characters inform the king of his deputy’s avarice.⁴⁰ The commoners’ presence in the text highlights the dangers of royal misgovernment and upholds the people’s right to intervene in matters of state. At the same time, Sisamnes’s punishment testifies to Cambises’s compassion as much as to the strength of the popular campaign against him. The encounter between the commoners and the king thus demonstrates that petitions could help remedy specific social ills but posed no threat to the established order. The allegorical figures succeed in condemning Sisamnes for his avarice, but they stop short of offering a direct critique of Cambises’s reign.

Resistance Theory and Regicide

That task of critique falls to the peasants Hob and Lob, who are vocal in their disapproval of the king. In keeping with his role in the play, Ambidexter both amplifies their abuse of Cambises and threatens to inform the authorities of their transgression. In their critique of the king and their harassment by Ambidexter, Hob and Lob come to resemble those early modern subjects who were put on trial for slander. As John Bellamy has shown, prosecutions for treason grew exponentially after Henry VIII’s passage of new legislation in 1534. Under the new law, ‘To wish or attempt bodily harm to the king, queen or the royal heir or to try to deprive the king of his title by malicious deeds, writings, and spoken words, was now laid down as treason, as was pronouncing the king a heretic, schismatic, tyrant, infidel or usurper of the crown.’⁴¹ The law expanded upon its predecessors by making treason a matter of words as well as deeds; imagining treason could now be just as dangerous as enacting it. The state’s heightened vigilance in this regard shaped proclamations like the one from May 1553 that calls for the punishment of those citizens who ‘cease not to invent, spread, and publish many false, untrue, and vain rumours and bruits, rashly discoursing upon the great and most weighty affairs touching the Queen’s highness’ royal person and state of the realm.’⁴² Such proclamations were invariably accompanied by the request that the queen’s ‘loving subjects’ notify the authorities about any threats uttered against her. These documents highlight the alacrity with which Tudor officials dealt with threats from below and hint at the people’s readiness to comply with their demands.

At the same time, the legal records from the period demonstrate that individual subjects were willing to challenge the law and voice their discontentment with the existing regime. On 22 November 1553, Robert Tayler, Edmonde Cole, and Thomas Wood were prosecuted 'for their lewde reports towching that the late King shulde be yet on live'.⁴³ Likewise, on 2 December 1553 the Council ordered the imprisonment of William Smythe, of Maydeston 'for his seditious moving of the inhabitauntes there to the framing of a Supplication for the reteyning still of their newe religion'.⁴⁴ In these documents, Mary's subjects show that they were able to defy legal strictures in order to champion the religious and social policies of her predecessor.⁴⁵ The official position on treason faced a similar challenge on the Elizabethan and Jacobean stage. According to Rebecca Lemon, 'The very act of staging multiple definitions of treason within a play has the effect of weakening the state's unilateral position on the crime'.⁴⁶ In the theatre, ordinary citizens could defy the government's edicts and claim that they were empowered to do so by their conscience and divine mandate. *Cambises* both enforces and challenges the Tudor laws against seditious speech in its representation of Hob and Lob and through their encounter with Ambidexter.

On the surface, Hob and Lob hew more closely to the image of ignorant farmers than defiant subjects. But despite their rustic accents and simple manner, the peasants go much further than their predecessors in seeking to reshape the realm from below. Frustrated by Cambises's authoritarian behaviour, Lob comments, 'Bum vay, maister king is a zhrode lad / Zo God help me and holidam, I think the vool be mad' (8.770–1). Lob effectively erases the social divisions between king and commoner by describing Cambises as a 'zhrode lad' and 'vool'. His propensity for social levelling intensifies in response to Ambidexter's provoking claim that Cambises 'is a King moste vile and parnitious' (778). Lob answers in kind, stating 'It were a good deed zome body would breke his hed', a belief that Hob amplifies with his suggestion, 'Bum vay Naybor Lob, I chould he were dead' (780, 781). Ambidexter's words embolden Hob and Lob's critique of Cambises so that they turn from describing his cruelty to contemplating his death. Unlike their lower-order brethren, whose appearance precedes Cambises's worst acts of violence, Hob and Lob arrive onstage immediately after Cambises has executed Smerdis, his brother and heir. They are thus in a much better position to condemn the king and propose regicide as a solution for his tyranny.

Their arguments would not have been amiss during Mary's reign, when theories of resistance gained ground among Protestant exiles on the continent.

The best known treatises on the subject — John Ponet’s *A Short Treatise of Politique Power* and Christopher Goodman’s *How Superior Powers Ought to Be Obeyed* — provide strong defences of the people’s right to kill a tyrant.⁴⁷ In *Short Treatise*, Ponet argues that a kingdom ‘may live when the head is cut off, and may put on a new head that is, make them a new Governour, when they see their old head seek too much his own will, and not the wealth of the whole body’.⁴⁸ In such circumstances, Ponet maintains, individual citizens may be inspired by ‘some special inward commandment, or surely proved motion of God . . . or permitted by common authority upon just occasion and common necessity to kill’.⁴⁹ In *Superior Powers*, Goodman likewise posits that ‘if it be not done by the consent and ayed of the superiours, it is lawfull for the people, yea it is their duetie to do it them selves as well upon their owne rulers and Magistrat, as upon other of their brethren having the worde of God for their warrant’.⁵⁰ While their contemporaries relegated the task of deposing a tyrant to God or inferior magistrates, Ponet and Goodman held that private citizens were duty-bound to take up arms on the basis of their conscience and love of the commonwealth.

The exchange between Hob, Lob, and Ambidexter has important affinities with Ponet’s and Goodman’s calls for resistance. These affinities become evident in Ambidexter’s slippery response to the peasants, where he shifts from commiserating with their grievances to threatening them with prosecution for their seditious words:

Hob and Lob, ah ye cuntry Patches:
 Ah ye fooles ye have made wrong matches.
 Ye have spoken treason against the kings grace
 For it I wil accuse ye before his face
 Then for the same ye shalbe martered:
 At the least ye shall be hangd, drawn and quartered. (8.790–3)

In his accusation, Ambidexter plays the part of a government informer who, having incited the peasants to rebel, accuses them of treason. But he also qualifies his accusation by claiming that the rustics’ punishment will result in their martyrdom, inadvertently lionizing their behaviour in the very act of condemning it. His suggestion that Hob and Lob’s deaths will result in martyrdom echoes Ponet and Goodman’s calls for individual citizens to sacrifice their lives in the fight against tyranny.⁵¹ The peasants thus come to resemble those Protestants persecuted for heresy under Mary whose lives were memorialized in Foxe’s *Acts and Monuments*. Although heretics were

traditionally burnt at the stake and traitors were drawn and quartered, the emphasis on Cambises's tyranny, the reference to Bishop Bonner (one of the chief villains in Foxe's text), and the praise for Queen Elizabeth in the drama's epilogue heighten the parallels between Hob and Lob and poor Marian Protestants.⁵²

Hob and Lob manage to stave off martyrdom by offering Ambidexter 'two Pearepyes' and a 'vat Goose' for his silence (8.794–5). Their ludic offer mitigates the effect of their treasonous words. In a similar vein, Ambidexter's threat to prosecute Hob and Lob appears to be motivated by greed rather than patriotic longing to serve the state. His interest in exposing them has parallels with the behaviour of early modern promoters, professional informers who brought legal actions against citizens for violating social and economic statutes and collected a fee for their part in the process. The promoters' tendency to accept bribes in exchange for discontinuing legal action provoked street protests against them in May 1566 and led to the introduction of a bill to suppress their office in 1571.⁵³ Ambidexter's association with corrupt informants seems even clearer if we consider that the earliest appearance of his name in the *OED* refers to 'one who takes bribes from both sides'.⁵⁴ Their comic exchange with Ambidexter may reduce the subversive import of Hob and Lob's words, but the encounter between them also highlights the penalties that could be imposed on individual subjects for speaking against a tyrant.

Ambidexter takes the peasants' outspokenness one step further when he sets himself up as a potential regicide, but his newfound resistance does not involve a major change in character. He instead remains true to form by provoking one of Cambises's worst acts of cruelty — the execution of his brother — and censuring him for it. He begins his campaign by supplying the king with false tales about Smerdis: 'And if it please your grace (O king) I herd him say: / For your death unto the God, day and night he did pray' (6.676–7). Ambidexter unsurprisingly reverses his stance after Smerdis's execution and declares, 'If the King use this geer stil, he cannot long thrive' (8.750–3). His interest in Cambises's removal increases after the queen's death. Upon hearing the news, Ambidexter informs the audience, 'Hear ye? I wil lay twentie thousand pound: / That the king him self dooth dye by some wound / He hath shed so much blood that his wil be shed' (11.1149–51). In suggesting that the monarch will 'dye by some wound', Ambidexter accurately foresees the circumstances of Cambises's death from an accidental wound in the thigh (1160). He also makes a hurried departure

after the king's demise, arguing that, 'Like I did say, so is it come to pass / I will be gone. If I should be found heer / that I should kil him it would appeer' (1173–5). Despite his boast, Ambidexter plays no direct part in Cambises's death, which can be interpreted as the result of his 'lechery and drunkennes' and as a sign of divine retribution for tyranny (4.345). In this context, Ambidexter's fear that he will be arrested for killing the king is little more than a form of ludic self-aggrandizement by a noted coward. Nonetheless, when situated alongside his prediction of Cambises's death, Ambidexter's boast signals his willingness to imagine and take credit for regicide, even if he fails to enact it. While the comic framework in which they are cast mutes the radical import of his words, it cannot erase their impact altogether.

Cambises begins with a conventional prologue on the 'ignomy and bitter shame' that result from a monarch's abuse of power and ends with a traditional epilogue calling for Queen Elizabeth and her council 'To practice justice and defend her grace each day' (14, 17). The play thus emphasizes the dangers that tyrants could pose to the state and advises the reigning monarch on how to avoid the fate of its titular character. But although the epilogue counsels the sovereign to fulfill her duty to the commonwealth, it does not provide any alternative framework for governance if she should fail to do so. *Cambises* counters this top-down image of rule through a series of subaltern characters who highlight the king's misgovernment and offer their own solutions for restoring order to the state. These include Huf, Ruf, and Snuf, who undermine Cambises's Egyptian campaign; Small Habilitie, Commons Cry, and Commons Complaint, who petition for social change; and Hob and Lob, who call for the king's demise. Ambidexter aids their resistance to the status quo by heightening the soldiers' duplicity, supporting the commoners' appeals, and provoking the peasants' threats before he takes such ideas to their logical conclusion by boasting that he had a hand in Cambises's death, a move that would certainly have elicited the approval of the mid-Tudor resistance theorists. In their behaviour towards the king, the commoners and the Vice echo the mixture of tension and cooperation that marked the relationship between rulers and ruled.

The commoners' inclusion in *Cambises* also highlights Preston's interest in contemporary debates about the nature and limitations of monarchical authority. His concern with these debates seems evident from his use of the allegorical figure Fabian Fly in *A Lamentation from Rome* as well as his deviations from Richard Taverner's *The Garden of Wisdom* and his reference to Bishop Bonner in *Cambises*. By combining lower-order characters and

comic forms, Preston questions the extent to which individual citizens were required to follow a tyrant and suggests that they were under no obligation to do so, all without incurring the wrath of the authorities. The interlude's political dimensions become apparent when we study it in relation to 'all estates' instead of focusing on the aristocracy. When seen from this perspective, *Cambises* may endorse the people's right to resist a despotic ruler as much as their responsibility to obey him.

Notes

I would like to thank Ben LaBreche, Marisa Cull, and the reviewers from *Early Theatre* for their valuable feedback on my work.

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- 2 All quotations from *Cambises* from R.C.A. Johnson (ed.), *A Critical Edition of Thomas Preston's 'Cambises'* (Salzburg, 1975).
- 3 On *Cambises* as a 'hybrid morality', see David Bevington, *From Mankind to Marlowe: Growth of Structure in Popular Drama of Tudor England* (Oxford, 1962), 10.
- 4 Sir Philip Sidney, 'Defence of Poesie', Elizabeth Porges Watson (ed.), *Defence of Poesie, Astrophil and Stella and Other Writings* (London, 1999), 122.
- 5 Karl P. Wentersdorf, 'The Allegorical Role of the Vice in Preston's *Cambises*', *Modern Language Studies* 11.2 (1982), 54.
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- 7 Ibid, 158, 160.
- 8 Eugene Hill, 'The First Elizabethan Tragedy: A Contextual Reading of *Cambises*', *Studies in Philology* 89 (1992), 426, 430.
- 9 Robert Weimann, *Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition in the Theater: Studies in the Social Dimension of Dramatic Form and Function*, ed. Robert Schwartz (Baltimore, 1978), 158.
- 10 Ibid, 159. For an expanded study of *Ambidexter*, see Robert Weimann, 'Moralize Two Meanings in One Play: Contrariety on the Tudor Stage', Robert Weimann and Douglas Bruster (eds), *Shakespeare and the Power of Performance: Stage and Page in the Elizabethan Theatre* (Cambridge, 2008), 39.

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- 12 Ibid, 99.
- 13 John Guy, 'Tudor Monarchy and its Critiques', *The Tudor Monarchy* (New York, 1997), 78.
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- 25 P.L. Hughes and J.F. Larkin (eds), *Tudor Royal Proclamations* (New Haven, 1969), 2.390, 458.
- 26 On historical sources for *Cambises*, see D.C. Allen, 'A Source for *Cambises*', *Modern Language Notes* 49 (1934), 386; William Armstrong, 'The Background and Sources of Preston's *Cambises*', *English Studies* 31 (1950), 135.
- 27 Richard Taverner, *The Second Booke of the Garden of Wysedome* (London, 1539; STC 23711a), C5r.

- 28 E.K. Chambers, *The Elizabethan Stage* (Oxford, 1951), 3.469.
- 29 Thomas Preston, *A Lamentation from Rome* (London, 1570; STC 20289).
- 30 Kenneth Carleton, 'Edmund Bonner', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004), 6.555; John Foxe, *Acts and Monuments* (New York, 1965), 8.512.
- 31 For Preston's Protestant sympathies, see Hill, 'The First Elizabethan Tragedy', 412–13.
- 32 Greg Walker locates a similar example of lower-order complaint in Nicholas Udall's *Respublica* in *The Politics of Performance in Early Renaissance Drama* (Cambridge, 2006), 191.
- 33 The word bouget or budget originally signified a leather pouch for carrying water and signified a pouch, bag, or wallet in the sixteenth century, *OED*.
- 34 Sir John, Cheke, *The Hurt of Sedition* (London, 1569; STC 5110), H2v–H3r.
- 35 Peter Lake, *The Antichrist's Lewd Hat: Protestants, Papists, Players in Post-Reformation England* (New Haven, 2002), 77.
- 36 Cheke, *Hurt of Sedition*, B2r.
- 37 Hoyle, 'Petitioning as Popular Politics', 365.
- 38 Hugh Latimer, 'The Third Sermon of M. Hugh Latimer, preached before King Edward, March 22, 1549', Rev. George Elwes Corrie (ed.), *Sermons by Hugh Latimer* (Cambridge, 1844), 146.
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- 40 Taverner, *The Second Booke of the Garden of Wysedome*, Cv.
- 41 John Bellamy, *The Tudor Law of Treason* (London, 1979), 31.
- 42 Hughes and Larkin (eds), *Tudor Royal Proclamations*, 2.389. For further examples, see in the same volume 410, 446, 650, and 688.
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- 44 *Ibid*, 375.
- 45 For records of seditious speech as indicators of popular opinion, see Andy Wood, "'Poore men woll speke one daye": Plebeian Languages of Deference and Defiance in England, c.1520–1640', Tim Harris (ed.), *The Politics of the Excluded, c.1500–1850* (New York, 2001), 81.
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48 John Ponet, *A Short Treatise of Politique Power* (Strasbourg, 1556; stc 20178), 28.

49 Ibid, 52.

50 Christopher Goodman, *How Superior Powers Ought To Be Obeyed* (Geneva, 1558; stc 12020), 189–90.

51 Ibid, 68.

52 While heresy and treason were not typically conflated, John Bellamy notes that authorities levelled both charges against Thomas Cromwell under Henry VIII's new treason legislation; *Tudor Law of Treason*, 42.

53 D.R. Lidington, 'Parliament and the Enforcement of the Penal Statutes: The History of the Act "In Restraint of Common Promoters"', *Parliamentary History* 8 (1989), 309–11.

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