

“The King’s English” and the Language of the King: Shakespeare and the Linguistic Strategies of James I

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This paper takes a fresh look at the one Shakespearean instance of the trope of “the King’s English” in the Folio version of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, which, it argues, is a Jacobean version that thus ironically references the language of the new king from across the linguistic as well as political border with Scotland. The irony is, however, prudently ambivalent, as is the treatment of the ideal of linguistic plainness with which the trope was associated and which James advocated both publicly and privately. Consistently critiqued in Elizabethan plays, the claim to plainness – a class-inflected ideal associated by cultural reformers with the defining national character of the English – is advertised as a value in *King Lear* and asserted insistently by the eponymous ‘mirror’ for a king in the Folio version of *Henry V* which, again, I argue, is a Jacobean version. The staged humiliation (*Merry Wives*) and banishment (Henriad) of John Falstaff offered, moreover, a strategy for dealing with linguistically extravagant English courtiers for a king who sought to occupy the cultural centre of his new kingdom despite the exclusion of his language from ‘the King’s English’. However, the ambiguity with which the claim to plainness is treated in the Jacobean plays leaves open the interpretation of such a claim as a strategy of coercion, or a cover for malicious purposes, in particular the will to power.

Keywords: King’s English, Linguistic plainness, James I, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*

The phrase, or trope as I prefer to call it, of “the King’s English” features in just one place in the Shakespearean canon: the Folio version of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*¹.

Elsewhere I have discussed this instance in the context of the origin of the trope and other early instances, to argue that

¹ Editors tend merely to cite Dent without noting that “the King’s English” is among the idioms he acknowledges may not “legitimately” fall into the category of the proverbial (Dent 1981, 147, 263).

Shakespeare treats ironically the notion of a bounded normative linguistic centre it represents and exposes the social exclusions performed by its use (Tudeau-Clayton 2020, 46-71). Here I want to reconsider the Shakespearean instance in relation to the point made by Giorgio Melchiori that "the King's English" is one of several references to the national language which are absent from the 1602 Quarto, and which draw attention to the misuses and "abuses of the English tongue" (Shakespeare 2000b, 8, echoed in Magnusson 2012, 244n12). Why this focus on the national language in the Folio version? Among other reasons I want to propose "the unsettling novelty of a Scot ruling the English" (Ivic 2020, 17), the arrival, that is, of a king from across the political border with Scotland whose accession to the English throne in 1603 troubled the boundaries of the national language together with the national identities of both the English and the Scots, as Christopher Ivic has fully explored. My argument will thus bear out the claim made by Richard Dutton that the Folio reflects a Jacobean version of the play (Dutton 2016, 254). Specifically, the trope of "the King's English" acquires another level of ironic resonance in this context, although the irony is ambivalent, prudently so given the harsh punishment meted out to dramatists who overtly mocked the language of the king.

There is ambivalence too towards the ideal of linguistic 'plainness' with which the trope of "the King's English" was associated and which was explicitly espoused by James both publicly, in his first speech to the English parliament (published 1604) and his treatise on kingship, *Basilicon Doron* (published first in Edinburgh in 1599, then in revised form in Edinburgh and London in 1603 [King James VI and I 1994, xxx]), and privately, in his correspondence with Queen Elizabeth. I have argued elsewhere that Shakespearean drama after 1603 appears to turn towards James's publicly declared linguistic policy of plainness, but that, where plainness is overtly advertised as a value – notably in *King Lear* – it is also exposed to interrogation (Tudeau-Clayton 2020, 123-31). I take this up here in order to suggest more specifically that through this interrogation Shakespeare draws attention to the difficulty if not impossibility of the project of "plainnesse and sinceritie" publicly declared by James as the

defining qualities of his “Eloquence” (King James VI and I 1994, 146). The stakes of this declaration were especially high because English cultural reformers recurrently asserted a class-inflected notion of (citizen) plainness as proper to the English, thereby differentially defined from their continental neighbours, in particular the French. This is referenced, as I show, in a speech by the eponymous figure of Richard III whose claim to a ‘plain’ Englishness is exposed as a cover for manipulative malice – a critique that will then be explicitly voiced by Cornwall in *King Lear*. This leads me to a fresh consideration of the Henriad, especially the wooing scene in the Folio version of *Henry V* by the eponymous hero who lays claim to a defining English plainness differentiated not only from the French, but still more overtly from linguistically extravagant elite English males exemplified by the tacitly referenced figure of John Falstaff. Glancing at the declared linguistic policy of James, this added insistence on the plain speech of “the mirror of all Christian kings” (Shakespeare 1995, II.Chorus.6) bears out Dutton’s case for the Folio version as “broadly the version of the play performed at court in 1605” (Dutton 2016, 182n15). Offered a gratifying reflection of his declared linguistic policy in this ‘mirror’, the king may too have discerned in the banishment of Falstaff a strategy for dealing with linguistically pretentious English courtiers. However, like the glance at the language of the king in the Folio version of *Merry Wives*, the glance at the king’s publicly declared linguistic policy of ‘plainness’ in the Folio version of *Henry V* is ambivalent, leaving open the possibility that a claim to plainness may cover malicious purposes or serve as a strategy of coercion, as, I show in conclusion, it serves as a strategy of coercion for James in his correspondence with Elizabeth I.

I want to begin with the point made by J. K. Chambers and Peter Trudgill that the distinctions between national languages, dialects and varieties are frequently drawn not for linguistic but strategic political and cultural reasons (Chambers and Trudgill 1998, 3-12). This is illustrated by the dynastic rupture at the beginning of the fifteenth century when the English preferred by London citizens was privileged as the national vernacular by the Lancastrians, especially Henry V, over French, the other national

vernacular, as Ardis Butterfield calls it, which was preferred at court, a move made in part because Henry needed the support of wealthy London citizens to finance his war effort (Butterfield 2009; Tudeau-Clayton 2020, 59-61). It is in this move that the origin of the trope of "the King's English" is widely assumed to lie (Blank 1996, 172n38), even though the first recorded instance – in Thomas Wilson's hugely successful *Arte of Rhetorique* – dates only from 1553². This instance is nevertheless ideologically in line with the putative origin insofar as the trope is mobilised by Wilson to produce performatively the normative bounded national language it represents through exclusion of Latinate words, in particular "French Englishe" and "Englishe Italianated" imported by well-travelled elite men (Wilson 1982, 326). As in the move by the historical Henry, an English national language is preferred over Romance languages from which it is defined as distinct, a class-inflected distinction that implies defining differences of national character. This is illustrated by early instances of the trope, including the instance in the Folio version of *Merry Wives* in which the figure of a Frenchman, Dr Caius, is at once an habitué of the court as he informs us – "*Je m'en vais voir à la cour la grande affaire*" (Shakespeare 2000b, I.iv.46-47) – and the object of the exclusionary thrust of the trope of "the King's English" which is invoked at the opening of this same scene by his English housekeeper: "here will be an old abusing of God's patience and the King's English" (4-5)³. *Merry Wives* is of course set at a moment just prior to the reign of Henry V – in Q Falstaff evokes "the mad Prince of Wales [...] stealing his father's deer" (Shakespeare 2020, xviii.66) – as are the first two plays in the Henriad. The history plays and comedy are, moreover, connected, as the Quarto title pages advertise, through the figure of the linguistically extravagant English courtier Falstaff. His banishment by a self-declared plain speaking king finds an analogue in his humiliation by plain dressed, plain

² For discussion of the alternative suggestion that the origin lies in Chaucer's description of Richard II as "lord of this language", see Tudeau-Clayton 2020, 70-71.

³ For other early instances of the trope used to exclude French speakers, see Tudeau-Clayton 2020, 48-52, 64-69.

speaking citizens in the comedy even as it resonates with Wilson's requirement that, in order to achieve "one maner of language", "we must of necessitee, banishe al [...] affected Rhetorique" (Wilson 1982, 329) (see further below). It is in this treatment of the linguistically extravagant English courtier that James may have discerned a strategy for dealing with uppity, linguistically pretentious English courtiers in his ambition to occupy the cultural centre of his newly acquired kingdom, despite the obstacle of his language which, even when 'anglicised', lay at once inside and outside the boundaries of English, like the French with which it was associated.

For the point made by Chambers and Trudgill is illustrated still more egregiously by the dynastic rupture two hundred years after the Lancastrian coup when the arrival of a Stuart king from across the border with Scotland put pressure on the distinction between English and Scots and the definition of the national vernacular. The porousness of the distinction is exemplified by the first translation into verse of Virgil's *Aeneid* by the accomplished Scottish poet Gavin Douglas, which was completed in Scotland in 1513 and first published in London in 1553 by William Copland⁴. As I have shown, Douglas represents the language of his translation as drawn from proximate and related vernaculars with shifting and permeable boundaries, and the Scots and the English as neighbours rather than nations, anticipating supporters of the union under James (Ivic 2020, 115). The distinction between the vernaculars is, moreover, blurred by translation practices: Douglas's predilection for "anglicised forms" was noted by Priscilla Bawcutt (Bawcutt 1976, 145) and "his taste for Southern verb forms" by D. F. C. Coldwell who described the language of the translation as "a kind of English" that "did not prevent Londoners from reading him" (Douglas 1957-64, 1:111, 127)⁵. This is in line with Douglas's pro-English politics and his orientation towards London where he spent his last days, and where he is buried. More important is the cultural ambition, explicitly

⁴ See Tudeau-Clayton 1999, 515-17; Tudeau-Clayton 2009, 393-94.

⁵ See also Blank 1996, 154.

expressed in a "Conclusio", that his translation be read "[t]hrow owt the ile clepit Albion" (Douglas 1957-64, 4:187, line 11), that is, by a constituency of readers coterminous with the boundaries of a geographical totality that "conteyneth Englande and Scotlande", as "Albion", "the most auncient name of this Ile", is glossed by Thomas Cooper in his 1578 Latin-English dictionary (Cooper 1578).

Under James, "Albion" became interchangeable with "Great Britain", as on the facing title pages to Michael Drayton's 1612 edition of his *Poly-Olbion*: a poem "Upon the Frontispiece" calls upon readers "Through a Triumphant Arch, see Albion plas't", and under the engraved figure on the facing page to which this refers is written "Great Britain" (Drayton 1612). Britain is evoked too by Alexander Hume in the preface to his tellingly titled project for a national grammar dedicated to James: *Of the Orthographie and Congruitie of the Britan Tongue*, written probably around 1617 when James made his first (and only) visit to Scotland after acceding to the English throne, but not published until the nineteenth century (Hume 1865, v-xi). This project for a grammar of "the Britan tongue" clearly served to promote the closer political and cultural union of England and Scotland to which James aspired, notably through the adoption of the style of "Great Britain". As the Venetian secretary in England wrote to the Doge and the Senate on 17 April 1603, James was "disposed to abandon the titles of England and Scotland, and to call himself King of Great Britain" (Ivic 2020, 112), while James, announcing his accession as James I of England to his Scottish subjects, called upon the inhabitants of both realms "to obliterate" prior differences "and with ane universall unanimite of hartis conjoine thameselffis as ane natioun under his Majesteis autoritie" (141n3).

In his prefatory dedication to James, Hume recalls a scene in which the king addressed the need for an authoritative national language. First "reproving [his] courteoures" (presumably his English courtiers) who "on a new conceat of finnes sum tymes spilt (as they cal it) the king's language", James then declared that he "wald cause the universities mak an English grammar to repress the insolencies of sik green headed" (Hume 1865, 2). Hume may have invented the scene since this declaration is an

endorsement (indeed almost a commission) of his project, but it would no doubt have pleased his royal addressee since it corresponds to his aspiration to cultural as well as political authority. A double gesture is performed by James here: first, he rejects one idea of the normative centre represented by “the king’s language”, which, through the distancing parenthesis “as they call it”, is located among English courtiers; then, he projects a new centre of which he is the efficient “cause” or originating authority. This is comparable with a scene described by John Chamberlain in a letter of January 1608 in which James is told by the (again presumably English) “Lords” that it is “not the fashion” to have a play “on Christmas-night” as he desires, to which he retorts in irritation: “what do you tell me of the fashion? I will make yt a fashion” (Chamberlain 1939, 1:250). Both scenes testify to a will to refashion and occupy the centre whether of linguistic or cultural national habits in his new kingdom.

That the phrase “the king’s language” used by the courtiers in Hume’s scene circulated as a variant of the trope of “the King’s English” is borne out by my corpus of early instances (1553-1699) (Tudeau-Clayton 2020, 48-52). For, like the third variant “the Queen’s English”, to which I will return, “the king’s language” features twice, first in an Elizabethan drama performed in the 1560s, published in 1571, then in a university drama performed probably in the 1630s, published in 1654, thus both before and after the instance in Hume’s preface. This variant was clearly more appropriate than “the King’s English” for James as it was for Hume who sought to elide the difference of English and Scottish under the totality of “the Britan tongue” as James sought to elide England and Scotland under the style of “Great Britain”. Hume’s totality of “the Britan tongue” was of course very different from the “one maner of language” which the trope of “the King’s English” was mobilised to serve in the first recorded instance in Wilson’s *Arte of Rhetorique*. Nevertheless, the idea of a bounded normative authoritative centre which the trope represents is used in this scene, as it is by Wilson, as a disciplinary instrument, specifically to exercise control over linguistically pretentious elite males who are contemptuously put down by James as “green heads” (ignorant fools) – an instance, we might say, following

Urszula Kizelbach, of a strategic use of impoliteness to assert power (Kizelbach 2014, 173-88). Indeed, Wilson opens this passage in his *Arte* by advising against "sekyng to be over fine" (Wilson 1982, 325) as the English courtiers are motivated by "a new conceat of finnes" in the scene described by Hume. Wilson's call to banish affected rhetoric may then lie behind the scene as may the dramatisation of this call in the banishment of a linguistically extravagant English courtier in a play known as "Sir Iohn Falstaffe" which was performed at court some four years prior to James's trip to Scotland, as I take up below (Tudeau-Clayton 2010, 93; Shakespeare 1989, 37).

The passage in which Wilson introduces the trope of "the King's English" is glossed in the margin "Plaines what it is" (Wilson 1982, 325), an association of the normative centre with the value of plainness, which is prioritised by Wilson as it is not in his sources (notably Cicero). This valorisation of plainness finds echo in the first speech of James to the English parliament (published 1604), which closes with the declaration that "it becommeth a King [...] to vse no other Eloquence then plainnesse and sinceritie" and "this sort of Eloquence may you euer assuredly looke for at my hands" (King James VI and I 1994, 146). Leah S. Marcus, followed by Neil Rhodes, has argued that this "cultivation of a 'plain style'" was one of the ways James "sought to present his reign as a marked departure from the queen's" (Marcus 1988, 111; Rhodes 2004, 40)⁶. In another sense, however, it was no departure for James who had already laid claim to this style in his correspondence with Elizabeth, as we shall see, and urged it on his son Henry in *Basilicon Doron*, his guide to kingship composed in 1598, first published in Edinburgh in 1599 and revised for publication in 1603, first in Edinburgh, then in London. Here James advocates as appropriate to a king a "plaine, honest, naturall" language which he defines, like Wilson, by what is

⁶ James is perhaps also consciously defining his policy against the "[s]ystemic dissimulation" practised across Europe in line with the advice of Justus Lipsius: "Dissimulation was presented within a framework of political morality in which the end (stability and order) justified the means" (Greengrass 2014, 568).

excluded: on the one hand, “any rustically corrupt leide” and, on the other, “booke-language, and pen and inke-horne termes” and above all “mignard and effoeminate tearmes” (King James VI and I 1994, 53-54), such terms, that is, used by courtiers who seek to be fine – here gendered as effeminate, which implies the ‘masculine’ character of the recommended “plaine” style. Yet, if he espouses the value of plainness, James uses in this very passage a word, “leide” (a style of speech or writing), which was not current on the English side of the border and never would be. According to *A Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue (up to 1700)* (or *Scots Leid*), the word is derived from Old English “leden”, but it is used with the sense of a speech style as here by James, or of a national language, as in the dictionary title, only in Scotland from the fifteenth century on (https://www.dsl.ac.uk/entry/dost/lede_n_4). James had used it earlier, arguably in both senses, in a sonnet laying out the qualities required of “the perfyte poet” “to expres [...] / His full intention in his proper leid” ([James VI] 1584, sig. Kiiiiv), as Gavin Douglas had used it in his translation of the *Aeneid*. Though this is the anglicised edition of the *Basilicon Doron* published in London in 1603, it has not, as Christopher Highley claims, “eradicated all vestiges of the Scots vocabulary and forms” (Highley 2004, 54). There remain many words such as “leide” – a particularly resonant instance as it happens – that remain outside the boundaries of English. Perhaps James expected or hoped that, as the language of the king, his use of such words would bring them into the pale of the national language. Rather, as Highley has pointed out, the difference of his language, which was still more evident in “the unfamiliar idioms and accents” of his spoken language, “made claims about a community of language between England and Scotland ring hollow” (54). Community of language was asserted by James who in his speech to the English parliament evoked “Language, Religion, and similitude of maners” together with the geographical entity of “one Island” as the manifestations of God’s preordained will for the union of England and Scotland (King James VI and I 1994, 135). But the difference of his language was admitted even by enthusiastic English supporters: Robert Fletcher, for instance, described James as “Prince of our English Tribe” but recognised that, if not

alienated "from us" "by nature", he was "from our vulgar speache" if "not much" (Ivic 2020, 21).

Soon after the accession of the new king, the first English-English dictionary was produced by Robert Cawdrey, perhaps in part as a response to the unsettling effects on the national vernacular of the arrival of lexical strangers from the North. That Cawdrey viewed his lexicographical project as in line with, and furthering, Wilson's project to limit the arrival of lexical strangers – in Wilson's case from the South, especially France and Italy – is signalled by the preface which lifts almost verbatim and without acknowledgement Wilson's passage on the value of plainness, including the reference to the King's English and the call to "banish all affected Rhetorique, and vse altogether one manner of language" (Cawdrey 1604, sig. A3v). The two peoples from North and South respectively had long been associated as allies against the English, an alliance discussed in the opening of *Henry V* (Q and F) and recalled in the comic vignette of a Frenchman, Scotsman and Englishman in *The Merchant of Venice*, modified in the Folio version, probably to remove the offense to James: "the Scottish lord" who boxes the Englishman's ear and receives "surety" from the Frenchman becomes in F "the other lord" (Shakespeare 2010, I.ii.72-78). James himself had close family and diplomatic ties with France and, as Highley points out, some of the courtiers that accompanied him from Scotland "had been educated in France and would have spoken with French accents" (Highley 2004, 55). Such blending of the two languages would have rendered audible the old alliance between the two nations against which the English sought to differentiate and separate themselves linguistically as well as politically, Wilson through mobilisation of the trope of "the King's English", and Cawdrey through the drawing of boundaries of inclusion/exclusion in the first English-English dictionary.

In the November of the year that Cawdrey's dictionary was first published, Shakespeare's comedy *The Merry Wives of Windsor* was performed at court. For Dutton this "is very likely to have been the occasion for what we know as the folio version of the play, or something very like it" (Dutton 2016, 253). Crucial evidence for Dutton is the replacement of "council" by "King" in

Falstaff's first utterance: "Now, Master Shallow, you'll complain of me to the Council, I hear?" in Q (Shakespeare 2020, i.19) becomes in F "Now, Master Shallow, you'll complain of me to the King?" (Shakespeare 2000b, I.i.102-3). In his edition of the Quarto version, David Lindley too thinks this is possible evidence that the Folio "reflects a Jacobean version of the play" (Shakespeare 2020, i.19n), a likelihood that, for Dutton, is strengthened by the absence of references to either king or queen in the Quarto (Dutton 2016, 254), although he fails to notice Falstaff's reference to "the Prince of Wales" and his father the king (quoted above), which is not in the Folio version. As well as evoking the origin of the trope at the historical moment when English was preferred over French, the introduction of "the King's English" (which neither Dutton nor Lindley discuss) together with other references to the national language suggest that, like the introduction of "the King", it reflects the Jacobean context. This is all the more likely given that the third variant of the trope – "the Queen's English" – was first used in the 1590s, by Thomas Nashe in 1592 and Gervase Markham in 1598, who both use it exactly as "the King's English" was used – to assert performatively an authoritative centre through exclusion – thus acknowledging the queen's sovereign, implicitly 'masculine' cultural authority. This is confirmed by the absence of this variant in subsequent early instances (until 1700)⁷. It is surely this variant that would have been used if the trope had been included in the versions of the play performed, as the Quarto title page advertises, "by the right honourable my Lord Chamberlains Servants [...] before her Maiestie", however these versions may have varied from the version reproduced in the Quarto.

In the Quarto, Mistress Quickly comments of the French Doctor Caius merely "He is a parlous man" (Shakespeare 2020, iv.22). In the Folio version, she is more expansive: "here will be an old abusing of God's patience and the King's English" (Shakespeare 2000b, I.iv.4-5). As I have shown, this instance of the trope is unique among early instances inasmuch as it is used by an

⁷ See Tudeau-Clayton 2020, 48.

illiterate low born English female whose own language excludes her from the centre it represents, which is treated ironically even as the social exclusions performed by its use are highlighted⁸. Additional ironic significance accrues around the trope in the context of a new king whose 'leide' puts into question the boundaries of the national vernacular and troubles the notion of a normative authoritative centre, as his own attempts to occupy this centre indicate. The irony is, however, ambivalent with respect to its object: is it the language of the new king or the trope of "the King's English" that is the object of the irony? Or both? Does the idea of an authoritative normative centre seem still more absurd in the context of a new king who would be excluded from it by his language? Or is it the remoteness of the king's language from this centre that is highlighted? Are we invited to recognise that the language of the king is as remote from this hypothesised centre as the language of a Frenchman or indeed the language of an illiterate English female? Such ambivalence was prudent given the harsh response to explicit satire mentioned by Highley: in 1605, *Eastward Ho*, the comedy collaboratively produced by Jonson, Chapman and Marston, which mocked James's accent, "landed Jonson and Chapman in prison", and, in 1606, John Day's *The Isle of Gulls* had "all men's parts [...] acted of two diverse nations", according to a contemporary, that is, with accents to distinguish Scots from English, for which, as the account continues, "sundry were committed to Bridewell" (Highley 2004, 56).

Like the introduction of "the King", the introduction of the trope of "the King's English" into the Folio version of *Merry Wives* illustrates how the change of regime impacted down to details the work of the in-house dramatist of the company rapidly renamed "the King's Men" in another act of cultural appropriation by James. This impact is of course apparent everywhere, as many scholars have discussed. It is perhaps most prominently marked linguistically as well as thematically by the turn from "England"

⁸ As I point out, there is only one other instance (from 1639) in which the trope is used by a female speaker and she is a sober citizen wife more like Mrs Page and Mrs Ford than Mrs Quickly (Tudeau-Clayton 2020, 67).

to “Britain”. As Hugh Craig observes: “There are 159 instances of the word ‘England’ in the sole-author plays performed before 1603, compared to three in the plays from the later period, and there are just twelve mentions of ‘Britain’ in the early plays compared to thirty-four in the later ones” (Craig 2018, 83-84). At the level of genre, the relatively new and still malleable form of the history play is reshaped, on the one hand, as tragicomedy (or what is later called romance), in *Cymbeline* and *Henry VIII*, which both ostensibly promote the politics of reconciliation sought by James within Christendom as well as within Britain⁹, and, on the other hand, as tragedy, in the so-called Scottish play *Macbeth* which “was determined by James’s accession to the English throne” (Ivic 2020, 41n8). Drawing on Holinshed for its plot, like the history plays of the 1590s, *Macbeth* raises the figure of a Scot to the stature of a tragic hero, as others have pointed out, in contrast to the prior tendency to represent the Scots as what A. R. Braunmuller describes as “a comical, alien, dangerous, and uncivilised people” (Shakespeare 1997b, 9). Tellingly, the Scotticisms in the play are negligible, as Highley notes (Highley 2004, 57). There is rather a community of language between the Scottish and English speakers, which is in telling contrast to the plays by fellow dramatists mentioned above, as well as to the lived experience of both Scots and English in London, but in accordance with James’s view of a common language as one of the manifest signs of the predestined unity of the two nations (quoted above). The treatment of the king’s ‘leide’ in the tragedy exhibits thus as much if not more prudence than the ambivalent glance at it through the trope of “the King’s English” in the Jacobean version of *Merry Wives*.

If the impact of the new king on Shakespeare’s work has been thoroughly explored, there has been no discussion of the turn to plainness as a value which, as we have seen, is promoted by Thomas Wilson and advocated by James as the style proper to a king, both in *Basilicon Doron* and in his first speech to the English

⁹ On the “vision of harmonious internationalism and accommodation that mirrors James’s own policy” in *Cymbeline*, see Marcus 1988, 122.

parliament. I have discussed elsewhere how the change of regime is retrospectively mythologised as marking a cultural turn away from sartorial as well as linguistic extravagance in the university play *Lingua* (Tudeau-Clayton 2020, 127). The turn is also dramatised in the Jacobean comedy *All's Well That Ends Well* (by Shakespeare with input from Thomas Middleton), which stages the violent exclusion of a figure of such extravagance, tellingly named Monsieur Paroles¹⁰. What is more, the value of 'plain' speech is asserted through the figure of the virtuous Diana in her chastisement of the seducer Bertram, who is under the influence of this figure of (French) cultural extravagance. But the turn is most evident in the history play cum tragedy of Britain, *King Lear*, which has other links with the concerns of the new king dramatising as it does "the perils of dividing the kingdom" to which, as Rhodes points out, James draws attention in a passage in *Basilicon Doron* that Shakespeare may recall (Rhodes 2004, 49-50). Plainness is most evidently promoted as a value in the opening scene when Lear puts his daughters to the test and rejects the honest Cordelia whose plainness is set in contrast and opposition to the extravagant flattery of her hypocritical sisters¹¹. The value of plainness is, however, subsequently complicated in a self-conscious reprise of the opening opposition in an exchange between Reagan's husband the Duke of Cornwall and the Duke of Kent in his disguise as Caius. In this corrosive exchange, which is in both Q and F, each of the discursive modes – of plainness and of flattery – is mockingly mimicked. Thus, in response to the bluntness of Kent as Caius, Cornwall mimics the plain speaking truth-teller: "He cannot flatter, he; / An honest mind and plain, he must speak truth; / An they will take it, so; if not, he's plain" (Shakespeare 1997a, II.ii.96-98). He then proceeds to assume the role of truth-teller himself giving voice to a critique of the claim to plainness as a cover for vicious purposes: "These kind of knaves [...] in this plainness / Harbour [...] craft" (99-100) – a very exact

¹⁰ French for "words", comparable to Mistress Quickly's description of Caius in Q as "a parlous man" (discussed above). See Tudeau-Clayton 2020, 128-31.

¹¹ I draw on and develop here the argument in Tudeau-Clayton 2020, 126-28.

gloss on earlier figures such as Iago and Richard III, as I take up below. Kent disguised as Caius responds by mimicking the speech style of the flatterer opening, in verse, with a Latinate variation of the claim to truth-telling – “Sir, in good faith, or in sincere verity” (103) – and then linguistically debasing himself in a hyperbolic representation of the “great aspect” (104) of Cornwall which he likens to “the wreath of radiant fire / On flickering Phoebus’ front” (105-6). Called on by Cornwall to explain himself, Kent/Caius, in prose, sets what he calls his habitual “dialect” of plainness against the “flatterer” and denounces “[h]e that beguiled you in a plain accent” as “a plain knave” (107-9). The opposition between plain speech and flattery, respectively associated with prose and verse, is thus turned as an opposition between imitable “dialects” or “manner[s] of speech”, as “dialect” is glossed by Cawdrey (Cawdrey 1604, sig. D2v), which might be assumed to cover (vicious or virtuous) purposes – a point ironically underscored for spectators by Kent’s disguise as Caius. If Cornwall’s critique of the claim to plainness is discredited by his self-evident viciousness, the proliferating ironies of this exchange cast a shadow over the opening advertisement of the value of the “plainnesse and sinceritie” which James had publicly announced as the defining qualities of his “Eloquence” (quoted above). Indeed, against James’s definition of plainness here – “Speeches [...] so cleare and voyd of all ambiguitie, that they may not be throwne, nor rent asunder in contrary sences” (King James VI and I 1994, 146) – Shakespeare sets the ambiguity from which no utterance is exempt, including plain speech, which may be interpreted as it may be used “in contrary sences”. The opening advertisement of plainness as a value is, moreover, in contradictory tension with the dense complexity of the language actually practised by characters – whether vicious or virtuous – not only in *King Lear* but also more generally in Shakespeare’s Jacobean plays, including the Scottish tragedy which is notorious for the opacity of the language of its characters.

Deeply ambivalent, then, the plays of the in-house dramatist of the King’s Men nevertheless mark an ostensible turn towards plainness as a value following (in both senses) the king’s declaration of plainness and sincerity as his official linguistic

policy. This is a turn away from the Elizabethan plays which, I have argued, tend rather to critique the claim to plainness, whether as an illusion, in comedies (most prominently *Love's Labour's Lost*), or as a cover for a will to power, in tragedies and histories (Tudeau-Clayton 2020, 120-22). Most important here is the figure of the king in waiting, the eponymous Richard III who, early in the play, complains about those who "complai[n]" to the king that he is "stern", plaintively generalising his case as that of "a plain man" who "cannot flatter" and whose "simple truth" is "abused" by "silken, sly, insinuating jacks" (Shakespeare 2009, I.iii.43-53). Without precedent in any of the sources, this speech, in particular its reference to the "French nods and apish courtesy" (49) practised by sly flatterers, evokes, I have argued, the discourses of Protestant cultural reformers who denounce the tendency of English elite males apishly to imitate foreign cultures and languages, especially French and Italian, and who assert plainness as the self-differentiating (class-inflected) value of the Protestant English (Tudeau-Clayton 2020, 123-24). Most egregiously, William Harrison, in his *Description of England* (1587), denounces not only the English who seek apishly to imitate foreign cultures, especially the French (Harrison 1994, 145-48), but also the tendency of the French to dissimulate evil purposes under courteous language, a practice he contrasts with the defining English Protestant "virtue" of dealing "with singleness of mind, sincerely and plainly" (447) – exactly as James will promise to deal with his English subjects. For spectators to a self-evident dissimulation, Richard's mimicking of the discourse of English Protestant cultural reformers carries a critical thrust in its suggestion that the claim to plainness may serve as a cover like the sly flattery to which it is opposed, anticipating the explicit critique by Cornwall (discussed above). Indeed, plain speech is still more "insinuating" (to use Richard's word) because of its power to 'beguile' – the verb used by Kent when he denounces the dissembling "plain knave" who "beguiled" Cornwall. For as well as an idea of deception, this verb, frequently in Shakespeare as well as more generally, carries an idea of seductive charm. The claim to plainness carries, that is, an insidious power to disarm precisely because of its apparent lack of guile. To this beguiling

power of the plain speaking English man Richard adds that of victim, casting himself as an object of injustice to solicit sympathy for the “wrong” (Shakespeare 2009, I.iii.42) done to him. Like and with the claim to English plainness, this claim dissimulates the manipulation it seeks to effect.

Between the evidently vicious Richard and the evidently virtuous Cordelia/Kent there are morally ambiguous figures that lay claim to plain speech, notably Prince Hal and King Henry V in the Henriad. Both lay claim to plain language in opposition to the same figure of linguistic extravagance, the English courtier Sir John Falstaff. Falstaff is, moreover, the most prominent link between the Henriad and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, as the Quarto title pages advertise, a link erased in the 1623 Folio, which puts them into different categories and gives the history plays new titles. It is perhaps for this reason that modern critics have tended to look for differences rather than likenesses, a tendency that reached its apogee in the claim that “Shakespeare conceived the Falstaff who turns up in Windsor as a direct antithesis to the character he created for the history plays” (Gajowski and Rackin 2015, 7). Against this perilous hypothesis of authorial conception we may set the advertised continuities on the Quarto title pages, even if these may be primarily a printer’s selling strategy – precisely advertisements. These continue into *Henry V*, though the figure through which continuity is advertised is no longer Falstaff (who is present only in the narrative of his sickness and death told by others) but “Auncient Pistoll”, as he is named on the title page of the Quarto of *Merry Wives* echoed on the title page of the Quarto of *Henry V*: “The Cronicle History of Henry the fift, With his battell fought at Agin Court in France. Together with Auntient Pistoll”. As David Lindley points out, the epithet “ancient” is never used of Pistol in the comedy, but it is used repeatedly in the second part of *Henry IV* and in *Henry V* to which an advertised connection is thus made by Thomas Creede who printed the Quarto of *Henry V* in 1600 and the Quarto of *Merry Wives* in 1602 (Shakespeare 2020, 31n).

At the level of plot, the comedy (in both Quarto and Folio) stages the humiliation of the linguistically extravagant Falstaff by English citizens who espouse plainness of language and dress,

while the *Henry IV* plays (again in both Quarto and Folio) stage first his humiliation, then his banishment by a prince turned king with decidedly citizen values, including the claim to an English plainness of language (Tudeau-Clayton 2020, 76-77). In the first *Henry IV* play, Prince Hal provokes the proliferation of Falstaff's increasingly ludicrous fictions, then puts a stop to them with "[m]ark now how a plain tale shall put you down" (Shakespeare 2002, II.iv.247-48), a tactic comparable to that of the two wives who lead Falstaff into ever more grotesque performances before finally putting him down¹². More specifically, Mrs Ford puts a stop to Falstaff's extravagant wooing – preferring her "plain kerchief" (Shakespeare 2000b, III.iii.53) to the elaborate Venetian headgear in which he imagines her dressed. Falstaff is, moreover, associated with the parable of the prodigal son in both the *Henry* plays and the comedy. In the comedy, his chamber is described by the Host of the Inn as "painted about with the story of the Prodigal" (IV.v.6-7), while in the first *Henry IV* play Falstaff himself alludes to the parable (Shakespeare 2002, IV.ii.33-35) and, in the second, proposes "the story of the prodigal" as a theme for the interior decoration of the tavern (Shakespeare 2016, II.i.143-44), perhaps to match his chamber in the comedy¹³. Prodigal or, as I prefer, extravagant is how the linguistic habits of both Falstaffs might be described, notably as illustrated by his predilection for "synonymia", or "the Figure of Store" as it is Englished by George Puttenham (Puttenham 2007, 299), through which he disseminates even as he displays his linguistic capital. In the comedy, Falstaff varies terms of dismissal when Pistol and Nim refuse to carry his love letters, comically delaying the action he calls for: "Hence,

¹² Compare too the moment in *The Merchant of Venice* – a comedy contemporary with the history play which follows it in the *New Oxford* edition – when the bourgeois master Lorenzo seeks to curtail the proliferating wordplay of the servant clown Lancelet Gobbo by asserting: "I pray thee, understand a plain man in his plain meaning" (Shakespeare 2010, III.v.51-52). In both cases, the assertion of plain speaking dissimulates a master's will to control the extravagant – wandering and prolific – language of a social other.

¹³ Horbury argues that it is less Hal (as critics frequently assert) than Falstaff that is cast as the prodigal and that, as such, he is "sacrificially excised" in *Merry Wives* as well as in the *Henry* plays (Horbury 2018, 313, 318).

slaves, avaunt! Vanish like hailstones, go!" in Q (Shakespeare 2020, iii.53) is expanded in F to "Rogues, hence, avaunt! Vanish like hailstones, go! / Trudge, plod away o'th' hoof, seek shelter, pack!" (Shakespeare 2000b, I.iii.78-79). In the second *Henry IV* play, Falstaff varies two sets of terms in a comparison of Hal's psychological inheritance to "lean, sterile and bare land" which he has "manured, husbanded and tilled" with the help of "good store of fertile sherris" (Shakespeare 2016, IV.ii.117-20, emphasis mine), which self-consciously references the figure "of Store". This practice of "synonymia" carries, I have argued, an idea of the national language as open, expanding and inclusive, which, in the Folio version of the comedy, is figured in "the gallimaufry" Falstaff is said to love (Shakespeare 2000b, II.i.104), in contrast and in opposition to "the King's English" (I.iv.5), which, as we have seen, carries for cultural reformers such as Thomas Wilson an idea of the national language as an authoritative bounded centre of 'plainness' produced by exclusion of Latinate and Romance word forms imported by well-travelled elite males (such as Falstaff).

It is as a variation of the (recurrent) nation- and class-inflected opposition of speech styles – the insincere Latinate language of elite/foreign flatterers and the sincere language of true English plain speakers – that we might describe the elaboration of Henry's speeches in his wooing of the French princess Katherine in the Folio version of *Henry V*, a scene which is more than three times the length of the equivalent scenes in both the Quarto version and the *Famous Victories* (1598), the source on which Robert Smith has argued the Quarto version of this scene closely draws (Smith 1998). In the Quarto version, Henry introduces himself as a "blunt wooer" and calls on Kate to tell him "in plain terms" if she loves him (Shakespeare 2000a, xix.23, 51), echoing very precisely the "tell me in plaine termes" of the source, as Smith observes (Smith 1998, 61; Anon. 2007, 46). He does not comment, however, on the national difference immediately observed in the source by Henry who claims he "cannot do as these Countries do" in their prolix wooing (46). Traces of this nationally inflected contrast may be heard in Q, in the "false French" used by Kate of Henry's attempt at speaking her language (Shakespeare 2000a, xix.49), and more clearly in F, in Henry's juxtaposition of his "false French" with his

"true English" (Shakespeare 1995, V.ii.218-19) and his praise of the Princess as "the better Englishwoman" for her distrust of deceptive male flattery (122). More prominent in F, however, if linked to the national distinction, is the class-inflected contrast developed by Henry who asserts in prose the plainness of his character and language: "I speak to thee plain soldier" (149-50), "a fellow of plain and uncoined constancy" (154). Reiterating the association of prose with sincere plainness and verse with insincere flattery (discussed above), Henry sets his plainness against those who "look greenly" and "gasp out [their] eloquence" (143-44), "fellows of infinite tongue that can rhyme themselves into ladies' favours" but that prove untrue (156-58). If, as I have argued, this may glance at the insincere flattery of Mrs Ford by the extravagant English courtier Falstaff (Tudeau-Clayton 2020, 77-78), the insistence on plainness glances rather at the official linguistic policy declared by James in the speech to parliament (1604), an addition which would thus support Dutton's argument that the Folio version follows rather than precedes the Quarto version and is "broadly the version of the play performed at court in 1605" (Dutton 2016, 182n15). It would doubtless have pleased James to see the figure described as "the mirror of all Christian kings" (Shakespeare 1995, II.Chorus.6) lay claim to his officially preferred speech style, especially in contrast to the insincere elaborate style of English elite males. He would too have been pleased by Henry's assertion, developed from Q's "we'll break that custom" (Shakespeare 2000a, xix.73) to "nice customs curtsy to great kings [who] cannot be confined within the weak list of a country's fashion. We are the makers of manners" (Shakespeare 1995, V.ii.266-69). Perhaps he recalled this two years later when he declared his will to break custom at the English court and "make yt a fashion" to have a play on Christmas night (see above). Certainly, it furnishes support for his will to occupy the cultural centre.

In both Q and F, Kate is shown to be sensibly suspicious of male wooing tactics. But Henry's assertion of plainness may also 'beguile' her – as Kent in *Lear* suggests plain speakers may do (see above). As a character Henry has indeed tended to beguile rather than arouse suspicions until relatively recently when he has come

to be viewed more sceptically. Karen Newman (among others) has argued that the claim to plainness is a cover for a will to mastery over the female and foreign other (Newman 2009, 91), while P. K. Ayers has suggested that the description of the insincere fellows of infinite tongue might be applied to Henry himself who changes rhetorical styles to suit his purposes and who specifically “chooses the medium of plain speech to create a part for himself”, whether “that of a common man among men” or as a plain English man in his courtship of the French Kate (Ayers 1994, 260). The opposition of plainness to affected eloquence thus tends to collapse as plainness is exposed as itself an instrument – “a kind of polite cover”, as Ayers puts it, “for the naked reality of his demands” (254), a strategy, that is, of coercion.

That Henry’s wooing style is strategic is a view that readers/spectators of the *Famous Victories* are invited to adopt by two monologues which frame the scene of wooing. In the first, Henry “*Speakes to himself*” about the “face” he should assume “to gaine her love” (Anon. 2007, 46); in the second, he declares he will take her whether or not he obtains her father’s consent, if necessary by force (47). There are no such revelations in either version of Shakespeare’s play. In the case of the Folio version, readers/spectators are left to decide for themselves what to make of the king’s insistence on his plainness. Shakespeare allows, that is, for ambiguity, which, according to James, plainness is by definition without (see above).

Shakespeare was no doubt unaware that James himself had used a claim to plainness as a strategy of coercion in his correspondence with Elizabeth I, notably in a letter of January 1587 in which he made a final desperate attempt to prevent the execution of his mother Mary Queen of Scots (which would take place a couple of weeks later). The stakes could not have been higher since James sought to secure not only a reprieve for his mother (for political more than for affective reasons), but also his own position as Elizabeth’s successor. He begins by summoning the manifold political “straits” he would be “driven unto” by the “thing itself” (as he refers to the execution), appealing to her to “pity my case” (King James VI and I 1984, 81-82). Projecting himself as an object of pity, he then proceeds to introduce his case

against the execution by a circuitous apology for his "plainness" which has previously caused offense:

I doubt greatly in what fashion to write in [this] purpose, for ye have already taken so evil with my plainness as I fe[ar if] I shall persist in that course ye shall rather be exasperated to passio[ns in rea]lding the words than by the plainness thereof be persuaded to consider r[ightly] the simple truth. (82)

Hardly a model of plainness, this seeks to pre-empt a hostile reaction to his case by suggesting it would spring from exasperation at the plainness of the words, which would prevent Elizabeth from being "persuaded" of "the simple truth" such plainness conveys. Not unlike the plain speaking truth-teller mimicked by Cornwall, he then turns with a "yet" to assert that (despite this), preferring "the duty of an honest f[riend]", he has "resolved in a few words and plain to give y[ou my] friendly and best advice appealing to your ripest judgement to discern t[here]upon" (82) – a judgement he has already sought to determine by suggesting any reaction other than agreement with the "simple truth" of his "plain" words would be motivated by "passions". Proceeding to argue that the execution of his mother would be a violation of the divine right of kings, he warns of the disastrous consequences for Elizabeth of the act, which would provoke "the universal (almost) misliking of you" across Europe and imperil her "person and estate" (82-83). These are plain words indeed – direct, outspoken and unambiguous – which might well have provoked the queen's anger, a response James seeks to prevent by the apology for his plainness which, whether consciously or not, he uses as a strategy of coercion. James did not of course succeed in persuading Elizabeth who herself deployed an assertion of honesty when, after the fact, she wrote to him in February to claim her innocence of the "accident", as she calls the execution, which, though "deserved", was not "meant" by her – a claim she bolsters by asserting: "as not to disguise fits most a king, so will I never dissemble my actions but cause them show even as I meant them" (Elizabeth I 2000, 296). This rhetorical 'cover up' is followed by assurances of her friendship and support for James

which hint at the pay off if he accepts her claim to innocence, which he does, if grudgingly, in late February, calling on her for “full satisfaction” with regard to his political aspirations to “unite this isle”, to secure, that is, his position as her successor (King James VI and I 1984, 84-85).

If Shakespeare did not have access to this correspondence, he shows from early in his career how the claim to plainness could be used as a strategy of manipulation as well as a cover by a king in waiting (Richard III) and, later, how even an exemplary English king might make strategic use of such a claim. Following the accession of James in 1603, I have argued, Shakespeare’s treatment of the claim to plain speech is less unequivocally critical than it is in the 1590s, asserted as it is, if ambiguously, by this exemplary king in the Jacobean *Henry V* and advertised as a value in *King Lear*. Both plays reflect the declared espousal of plainness and sincerity by James in published texts to which Shakespeare did have access – *Basilicon Doron* (1603) and the first speech to parliament (1604). In turn, I have suggested the king may have taken note of how the exemplary plain speaking king deals with a linguistically extravagant English courtier. My case that the king and dramatist paid mutual attention to their treatments of the language and linguistic strategies of a king bears out the arguments made by others for a mutual shaping influence between James’s writing and Shakespeare’s Henriad. Neil Rhodes, for instance, has pointed out parallels between *Basilicon Doron* and the Henriad, especially *Henry V* (Rhodes 2004, 45-46), while Jane Rickard has suggested a likeness between the scene in the second *Henry IV* play when the prince takes the crown from the bedside of his sick father and the *Meditation upon St Matthew* written by James in 1620 and dedicated to his son Charles as a preparation for his job as king (Rickard 2015, 244-47). To these we may add the argument made by Urszula Kizelbach that Shakespeare’s history plays offered a practical guide for princes like *Basilicon Doron* (Kizelbach 2014). In *King Lear* as in the Jacobean version of *Henry V*, Shakespeare holds a mirror up to the king’s declared linguistic policy of plainness but also exposes it to interrogation showing that it may be as ambiguous as the ornate eloquence to which it is opposed and likewise serve as a cover for a will to power. In this

respect, the claim to plain speech was like the trope of "the King's English" with which it was associated. As the Jacobean version of *Merry Wives* hints, the new king from across the border would ironically be excluded by his language from the normative centre the trope represents, despite his official espousal of the plainness with which it was associated and despite his attempts to occupy the cultural centre of his new kingdom. The implicit advice to the king is then perhaps not to be 'beguiled' by cultural authority any more than by claims to plainness – his own as well as that of others – but to remain vigilant as to the purposes they may dissimulate, above all, the will to power.

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