UNQUIET THINGS

Secularism in the Romantic Age

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PART I

Reform

> I, Roger, abbot of the monastery of Furness, knowing the misorder and evil life both unto God and our Prince of the brethren of the said monastery, in discharging of my conscience do freely and wholly surrender, give, and grant unto the King's Highness, and to his heirs and assigns for evermore, all such interest and title as I have had, have, or may have, of and in the said monastery of Furness, and of and in the lands, rents, possessions, revenues, services both spiritual and temporal, and of and in all goods and chattels and all other thing whatsoever it be, belonging or in any wise appertaining to the said monastery and every part and parcel thereof, in as large and ample manner and form as ever I had or ought to have, of and in the same or any part or parcel thereof by any manner of means, title, interest, gift, grant, or otherwise, permitting and binding myself by these presents that from henceforth I shall at all times and in all places, whensoever I shall be called upon, be ready and glad to confirm, ratify, and establish this my deed, purpose, mind, and intent, as shall be devised by the learned Council of the King's said Highness, which cometh freely of myself and without any enforcement.
>
> —"Abbot Pyle's Surrender of Furness Abbey" (5 April 1537)

> Farewell, rewards and fairies.
>
> —Richard Corbet, "A Proper New Ballad" (1647)

Five hundred years ago, "belief" meant something rather different than it does now. The word's original sense implies passionate longing and relationship; its etymological ties to the German *belieben* (beloved), the Latin *libet* (it pleases) and *libido* (pleasure), and the Old English *leof* (dear) suggest as much. To "believe" in someone was to put your trust in that person, and therefore to presuppose a relationship and a certain posture or orientation—commitment, cherishing—toward that relationship, something partly captured in the Latin *credo*, also often translated as "believe." Consequently, to lose one's belief was a moral and emotional failing more than an epistemological one.[1] Today we sometimes try to capture this wider sense of belief with

the word "faith," understood to encompass a range of experiences, faculties, and dispositions, as well as cognitive "beliefs."

But in the early modern period, in line with the development of modern science, *belief* took on an increasingly epistemological charge. Religion began to be thought of as a set of propositions in which one professed belief. The relevant question became whether a particular mental state was *true*, and salvation turned increasingly on believing in the correct package of propositions—about the substance of the Eucharist, the possibility of miracles, the precise mechanisms of salvation, the nature of free will, and so on.[2] This epistemologizing of belief, as a body of information about where salvation was to be found, placed a different kind of burden on the individual, who now had to grasp precisely what it was he was professing to believe. "[T]he traditional view," writes Peter Harrison, "had been that in the process of revelation God reveals himself. Now God reveals saving knowledge." This was a new understanding of what it might mean to "believe" in God: instead of focusing on a relationship, belief now focused on *content*. Perhaps, with sufficient rigor, certain knowledge of God's will could be constructed on epistemological foundations, and systematic doubt could yield clear and distinct ideas: new, decontextualized foundations for a solid belief. Modern religion, writes Harrison, thus involves tests, theories, comparisons, "in short a whole set of rules which governed the manner in which the nascent concept was to be deployed"—much, indeed, like the modern scientific experiment.[3]

Robert Boyle became the most influential of the era's many experimenters through his effort to detach "matters of fact" from the histories, regimes, and norms in which they had been embedded. As Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer have famously argued, Boyle's air pump was a decontextualization machine: within the artificial environment of the laboratory it made "nature" appear whole and entire, a kernel of truth stripped of the husk of convention, creed, and ideology.[4] The early modern machinery of belief—creeds, confessions, inquisitions, and the like—might be considered the functional equivalent of Boyle's air pump, separating truth from its historical and ideological frames through a rigorous focus on fact and method. Meanwhile, other forms of knowledge could be refashioned or simply excluded by the search for rational certainty as a neutral base on which to build an experimental program.

If "religion" was *essentially* about belief, then it was *not* essentially about a lot of other things. This is of course partly to make a point about the differentiation that characterizes modern life: the Westphalian model of the

modern nation-state created, at least in theory, a concept of a privatized, personal religion "without direct political relevance."[5] But it also imparted a distinct "feel" to a whole variety of human experiences simply by altering their relationship to the religious. For Thomas Aquinas, God revealed himself by revealing his plans and purposes, and the church was the corporate experience of that revelation. But as God withdrew from a world that ran more and more according to rules that did not seem to require divine attention, revelation came to seem like a violation of natural laws. Under the pressure of the quest for a knowledge purified of judgments of value, revelation acquired its more modern sense of *information* about the supernatural.[6] Thus when toward the end of the seventeenth century Locke famously defined the church as a voluntary association, he was building on a cognitive and explicitly voluntarist model of belief, and deliberately trying to imagine ways of bringing people together around a shared set of mental opinions rather than around a shared experience—of habit, space, posture, ritual, or bodily display—that tacitly infused all of life. In this sense the secular is not merely the lack of "religion"; rather, it inaugurates one sensory and emotional repertoire by displacing another one.

If the secular is a way of apprehending the world—imagining the future, feeling for the nation, picturing oneself as an agent, experiencing love, hatred, and desire—then it involves the act of perception itself. When Thomas Harding, professor of Hebrew at Oxford in the middle of the sixteenth century, worried that hearing the scripture in the vernacular rather than in Latin would change his parishioners' relationship to the Bible, he was certainly fighting a rearguard battle on behalf of tradition, but he was also recognizing the sensory power of language itself.[7] As Harding and many others realized, using everyday language in church would encourage a more analytic and cognitive relationship to religion—a more *secular* relationship, even if its topic remained religious.

What, then, is the phenomenology of the secular? What does it feel like? In order to grasp the secular at this level, we need not only a history of the state but also an account of how changes in official policy made new kinds of experiences possible. What are the attitudes toward time and space assumed by the secular? What new political forms does it make suddenly relevant?[8]

CHAPTER 1

The Power of the Prince: Henry VIII and *Henry VIII*

Thomas Cobb was a tenant of the archbishop of Canterbury. Elizabeth Barton was his servant. In 1525 she became severely ill with fits and a swollen throat. Soon thereafter she began to have visions, then mystical trances. She prophesied the imminent death of a local child and was able to tell onlookers of events taking place far away, particularly in other churches. In her trances, her throat would close up so that God's sweet voice would speak through her, apparently "within her belly."[1] Her body would contort, shake, and change color. Sometimes her legs gave way, and she flailed around on the floor, with her eyes protruding.[2] But her voice, when she spoke of the joys of heaven, sounded so sweet "that every man was ravished with the hearing therof."[3] Indeed, many of her prophecies and revelations poured forth in rhyme; William Tyndale, no friend to her notions, described her as a "goodly poetess."[4] The Holy Maid of Kent, as she came to be called, prophesied that she would be cured at the chapel of Court-at-Street on Annunciation Day, 1526. According to contemporary accounts, several thousand people witnessed her miraculous cure.

After some time, the Holy Maid revealed that it was God's will that she withdraw from the world and become a nun at St. Sepulchre's convent in Canterbury. There she named as her confessor and spiritual guide the monk Edward Bocking. William Warham, the archbishop of Canterbury, agreed to the arrangement after examining her and finding her to be orthodox. From St. Sepulchre's, the Holy Maid offered revelations and demonstrations of second sight; she encouraged her hearers toward orthodoxy, praised confession and the Mass, recommended pilgrimages and the worship of images, and warned her

audience against the errors of Lutheranism. She would also identify and denounce, in considerable detail, the sins and failings of her hearers, encouraging them to repent.[5] Edward Bocking read to the Holy Maid about earlier female mystics, particularly Saint Bridget and Saint Catherine of Siena. And he compiled an account of her prophecies and miracles, known as the "Nun's Book," which circulated in manuscript but does not survive.

Popular prophets had been known to cause political unrest, and so the realigning of the Holy Maid's enthusiastic and charismatic voice with the masculine structures and hierarchies of the church—her withdrawal to the convent, her recommendation of confession, mass, and pilgrimage—might have seemed the end of the threat she embodied.[6] Such things were not unknown in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Yet England was about to undergo a momentous religious change, in which this illiterate young woman would play a small but significant role. For in 1526 King Henry VIII fell in love with Anne Boleyn, and approached Pope Clement VII about a divorce from Catherine of Aragon. Through Clement's ambassadors, the Holy Maid of Kent wrote letters to Rome, revealing that God would send plagues if Clement supported Henry.[7] She told Archbishop Warham and Cardinal Wolsey that God would punish them if they backed the king. An angel told the Holy Maid to go to the king and command him to change his life; if he married Anne Boleyn, she said, God's vengeance would plague him, and he would "die a villain's death."[8] (Alas, there are no eyewitness accounts of the Maid's two meetings with Henry.) In another vision the Maid saw Anne Boleyn and her father talking with the devil. Once, she was magically transported to Calais in order to prevent Henry's taking Communion there: she snatched the Host just before it got to his mouth. And she reported that she had seen the exact spot prepared for Henry in hell; he was "abominable in sight of God," she said.[9]

By 1531 the group gathered around the Holy Maid of Kent included some of King Henry VIII's most powerful opponents: John Fisher, bishop of Rochester, chancellor of Cambridge University, and the spiritual leader of the resistance to Henry's divorce; Archbishop Warham; the Marquis and Marchioness of Exeter, concerned that the rise of the Boleyn faction would lessen their influence with the king; the countess of Salisbury; and Agnes Jordon, abbess of Syon Abbey. The clerics who circulated the Maid's messages also preached her piety and connected her to these powerful people. This combination of popular and elite support clearly concerned the Crown: Joan of Arc, too, had been a "popular peasant visionary" with powerful clerical supporters.[10]

And so in September 1533 Henry sent his attorney general Christopher Hales down to Canterbury to investigate. In an exceptional show of judicial procedure, Hales spent several months gathering evidence. He searched chapels and monks' cells; he imprisoned and interrogated those who had special charge over the Holy Maid. Finally, on November 12, the Crown arrested the Maid and several of her associates.

Remarkably, Henry spent three days meeting with the bishops of the realm, the nobles, and all the principal judges of the kingdom before determining Elizabeth Barton's fate. On 23 November 1533, she was made to undergo public penance, together with Bocking, Henry Gold (a parson accused of putting her in contact with the papal ambassadors), and six others. According to the statute of attainder that had authorized her arrest, Barton had "infected a great number" of the people with her "false and feigned hypocrisy."[11] John Salcot, bishop-elect of Bangor, followed up this line of attack, denouncing Barton for her "false miracles, false visions and revelations" in a fiery sermon at the public penance.[12] Salcot claimed that Barton had greatly impeded the king's long-desired marriage—not because an illiterate servant girl had foiled the monarch of all England, but because she had in fact been manipulated by a scheming cabal of opposition to the king led by Fisher and Exeter, whose ground troops were Bocking, Gold, and the clerics and monks who preached up her piety, spread her messages, circulated the manuscript of the treasonous "Nun's Book" and introduced her to the most powerful of Henry's opponents. Under interrogation, Salcot said, Barton admitted that she had made the whole thing up and had been manipulated by the "learned men" around her, who found her useful for their political scheming. Bocking, her spiritual director, would taunt her if she did not produce a new vision daily. A letter that the Holy Maid had received from Mary Magdalene turned out to be written by a monk named William Hawkhurst. Barton claimed to be visited nightly by the devil, but she actually used a "paper full of brimstone, arcefetida, and other stinking gums and powders" to make "great stinking smokes . . . at such times as she feigned the devil to have been with her in her cell."[13] Actually, Salcot added, this was just a ploy to keep the other nuns in their cells so that she could meet Bocking for sex. She had "never had vision in all her life," wrote Thomas Cranmer, Henry's new archbishop of Canterbury, several years later.[14]

Yet the king was not content to stop here, for Elizabeth Barton would be useful to him one last time. By now Henry was married to Anne Boleyn, and the time had come to cement his hold over conservative resistance and

put Catherine of Aragon away once and for all. This would be formalized in the Act of Succession of April 1534, which reduced Catherine's rank, bastardized her daughter Mary, and required all adult male subjects to take an oath of loyalty to the new dynastic settlement. And so on 20 April 1534, Elizabeth Barton and five associates were hanged at Tyburn and then decapitated. Their heads were set on the gates of the city.[15] That very same day, the good citizens of London were presented with the Act of Succession and required to swear an oath to it. There was little resistance.

Disjecta Membra Poetae

Elizabeth Barton was one piece of a long political campaign that aimed at nothing less than remaking the monarchy itself. The Act of Succession, imposed with the help of Barton's severed head, was itself part of the run-up to the Act of Supremacy of November 1534, which gave Henry the new title of "Supreme Head of the Church of England." The Act subordinated canon law to common law, placed the ecclesiastical courts in a state of limbo, and implicitly declared that divine law would be henceforth revealed by scripture rather than the church. If the church had spent the Middle Ages dictating to the monarchy, that relationship now reversed; henceforth, power flowed toward the central monarch and his unprecedented claim that within his realm he was both temporal and spiritual head.[16]

Political prophecy of the sort practiced by Elizabeth Barton tends to emerge at moments of historical crisis, and England in the early 1530s certainly fits that description. But Henry's extraordinary reaction to her—"suggestive of a government bent on denouncing a plot for which it had little hard evidence" according to one historian—also changed the landscape in which such political prophecies could emerge.[17] Because the Henrician revolution was promulgated in a series of acts of state, each one designed to increase the power, wealth, influence, and prestige of the Crown, it pressed with particular force on forms of populist and lay piety. Its technique, repeated at various levels, was to expose hypocrisy, and thereby to demystify or disenchant the world to which popular devotion stubbornly clung.

Those historians who have written about the Holy Maid of Kent often speculate about the degree to which she was or was not a tool for factional forces.[18] Discussions of modern sovereignty and state power, meanwhile, have focused largely on Lockean individualism and the liberal state. This chapter,

by contrast, traces a history of sovereignty that could be said to "begin" in the clash between Elizabeth Barton and Henry VIII.

Consider John Donne's poem "An Anatomy of the World" (1611), whose speaker bemoans a world breaking apart some eighty years later:

> 'Tis all in pieces, all coherence gone;
> All just supply, and all relation.[19]

Donne is speaking here of the Copernican revolution (a "new philosophy" that "calls all in doubt"), but he does so by describing a world slowly breaking up into its constituent pieces (or "atomies," as he calls them). According to the poem's conceit, Elizabeth Drury, the fourteen-year-old girl in whose honor it is written, might have put the world back together again, but her death removes all possibility of "coherence." The speaker finally takes refuge in the thought that the world is only a "carcase" (line 439) anyway; if its vital coherence is gone, that is only because it can now be found more completely in heaven. In this way the bits and pieces of the world, like Elizabeth Drury's own body and like the severed, floating head of Orpheus in Milton's "Lycidas" (1638), "Whom universal nature did lament," mark the passing away of a world in which nature is enchanted and spirit-infused.[20] Now there are simply material bodies whose spirits flee to heaven. Not coincidentally, the passage between these different thought-worlds is littered with the torn bodies of poets and figures for poets, to whose ranks we can perhaps add the dismembered limbs of the "goodly poetess" otherwise known as the Holy Maid of Kent, otherwise known as Elizabeth Barton, an illiterate servant girl who for a brief time commanded the attention of powerful people.

Sensory Politics

The Henrician revolution was a constitutional revolution, but Henry also set out to remake the religious lives of his subjects. Various elements of lay piety were immediate objects of reform. The 1532 Act reducing feast days and holy days, for example, took aim at the parish-based ritual year, its multiple local festivals, and the opportunities for camaraderie and mischief such days offered.[21] Fewer feast days meant a more regular calendar and a more productive work week; rather than the punctuated chronologies of festivals and feasts, time became more uniform and predictable. Visuals and rituals had