EARLY MODERN ENGLISH HISTORIOGRAPHY: PROVIDENTIALISM VERSUS NEW HISTORY

Murat ÖĞÜTCÜ

Hacettepe University, Ankara
muratogutcu@hacettepe.edu.tr

Early Modern English historiography had a multi-layered bipolar constitution. Providentialism, which had dominated Medieval English thought, maintained that historical events processed according to God's divine plan. However, with the revival and reinterpretation of Classical texts, a new and quite opposite way of thinking emerged, which was defined by critics like Moody E. Prior as "[N]ew [H]istory." It maintained that history was rather the result of natural causes. Although in Early Modern English history writing these two conflicting sets of ideas had merged into each other, Providentialism was to dominate historiography. This was reflected in contemporary dramatic performances which made use of chronicles and histories. Until the early 1590s, history plays reflected the maxims of Providentialism where a monarch was tested with a shortcoming according to God's plan to improve himself and be a better monarch, which can be seen in Robert Greene's *James IV* (ca. 1590). This type of history telling reinforced the idea of the divine ordination of the monarch and that his/her wrongdoings should not be questioned but left to God's judgment. Towards the end of the reign of Elizabeth I, however, we see the rise of dissent to the regime. Under these circumstances, either because of audience reaction or aesthetic reconsiderations of the playwrights

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1 Moody E. Prior, *The Drama of Power: Studies in Shakespeare's History Plays*, Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 1973, p. 16. Publication details of all cited works will be provided in a footnote on first appearance; thereafter pagination will appear in parentheses in the text, with abbreviated titles where necessary.
themselves, we see the abandonment of plays that reflected pure Providentialist ideas. Rather, an ambiguous presentation of historical events that combined Providentialism with New History emerged. The reason for the use of ambiguity is based on the repressive censorship mechanism which necessitated equivocalness, which can be seen in the censored and not staged collaboratively written history play entitled Sir Thomas More (ca. 1593-1603). Therefore, this paper aims to analyse, compare and contrast the perceptions of history in Early Modern England and illustrate these with two history plays, namely James IV and Sir Thomas More.

Medieval and Early Modern history writing was not just a matter of the remote or immediate past but of the present. Although Providentialist historiography was based on suiting the selection of historical events to the precepts of the Chain of Being and the will of God1, it was actually shaped by the contemporary status quo. While the narration of positive aspects of the past like victory in war and neutral ones like dates of victory, birth and death did not pose any difficulty for the historiographer, negative matters like defeat and civil unrest posed difficulties in history writing. As Goy-Blanquet maintains, history “could be used as a mirror to project critical reflections on present realities”.2 The possibility of criticism towards a regime because of these negative matters within the constructed hierarchy of obedience to God and ruler was not only the main determiner in the selection of historical material, but also the dead end in theoretical discussions. Here, the image of the monarch as the just representative of God’s will on earth was used and abused to make him/her almost immune to human intervention. The main difficulty lied in the fact that a ruler who violated his/her power could not be acted against in Providentialism. Accordingly, God had “a plan of his own with which he will allow no man to interfere” which is why human intervention was understood to “make no difference to the course of history” (Collingwood 53, 55). Even though Christian political writings merged Providentialism with classical references to Plato’s Republic and Aristotle’s Politics, they could not help from falling back to the impossibility to act against ill government, seen when neither Salisbury in his Pollicraticus (ca. 1159) nor Aquinas in his De regiminis principium (1267) could solve the dilemma faced by obedient subjects ruled by a tyrant (Prior 123-4). Similarly, Smith in his De Republica Anglorum (ca. 1562-5) could not answer the question, “whether a good and upright man, and lover of his country ought to maintaine and obey them, or to seake by all meanes to abolishe them”.3 Smith’s rather equivocal answer to this question was to follow passive obedience as “it is always a doubtfull and hazardous matter to meddle with the chaunging of the lawes and governement, or to disobey the orders of the rule or governement, which a man doth finde alreadie established” (bk. 1, ch. 5, 13).

Bad governance was shown as the result of a divine plan which punished disobedient subjects with tyranny and tyrants with disobedient subjects. This divine plan functioned in direct proportion with the relationship of monarchs and subjects with sin. Bad governance was either a punishment for the sins of people or a trial for them (Collingwood 53). Thus, bad rule should not be opposed. Rather, God’s will should be waited for who might reform the wrongdoing monarch, which, generically speaking, is a comic resolution, or defeat the tyrant through some agent God may appoint, which, generically speaking, is a tragic resolution. Hence, “preachers turned to the composition of homilies on humility and obedience to superiors”. The propagation of social inertia had been re-emphasised from time to time like in the homily Against Disobedience and Wiffl Rebellion (1571) which stated that “the principal virtue of all virtues” was “obedience”; therefore, “rebels” are “the worst of all subject”, “worse than the worst prince, and rebellion worse than the worst government of the worst prince” (Griffiths 555), whereby “obedience” rendered a place the “similitude” of “heaven” and “rebellion” of “hell” (Griffiths 575). Thus, “both good and evil kings rule by God’s will. Evil rulers are just as legitimate as good ones, and can be understood as God’s punishment for the people’s sins”. Hence, the population was advocated not to question behaviours of their rulers because sin and virtue was divinely ordained.

Besides, this pressure on people not to question monarchs was related with the prescripts of social hierarchy not to question their betters and transgress social order. For instance, the Mirror for Magistrates (1559), an anthology of narrative poems on rulers and prominent subjects who were punished for some sort of deficiency, urged obedience to social hierarchy (Goy-Blanquet 63-4). As Elton maintains, “[e]ven evil rulers are for God to deal with, and not for man. Rebellion is the great political sin because it disturbs degree which is man’s only right condition”. Rather, people should wait for the superior of their betters, God, to punish their wrong-behaving monarch as referred in the Bible as “Vengeance is mine”. Consequently, social inertia and passive obedience were preached to the population who might not be satisfied with the way they were governed by their monarchs.

Moreover, this form of containment was not only reinforced in political theory, but was reflected in historiography. For instance, the editors of Holinshed’s work showed the events of the past [as] episodes in the unfolding of God’s plan, and the destinies of individual men and nations are the working of divine retributive justice. As this general view of history was applied to the English past, the

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1 Also see Alexandra Walsham, Providence in Early Modern England, Oxford: OUP, 1999, p. 16.
6 The Holy Bible Contaying the Olde Testament and the Newe: Authorized and Appoynted to be Read in Churches, London: Christopher Barker, 1595, Romans 12:19.
political disasters and the wars of the fifteenth century were made to appear as punishments for the crimes and stupidities of certain kings and nobles and the disobedience of subjects, and the termination of these tumults through the emergence of a strong and prudent ruling dynasty became a manifestation of God’s benign plan for England. (Prior 14-5)

Therefore, the editors of Holinshed remained within the Providentialist doctrines of historiography (Tillyard 50-1). In particular, they argued that “the wicked sins and unthankfulness of the inhabitants towards God, [were] the chief occasions and causes of the transmutations of kingdoms”1 and “[t]here were many examples of the bad harvest reaped by evil actions” wherein monarchs were “deposed by God ‘for the foule deformities wherewith [their] life was deformed'”.2 Yet, rebels who led to the deposition of wicked kings were also “wicked” and “lewd” (Holinshed, Harrison and Hooker: 3:431), because they did not wait for God’s judgment and violated social order by taking matters into their own hands. Thus, Providentialism paralysed the society to take action against evil committed by monarch and/or subject, because taking action itself violated social order and was shown as an evil act. Consequently, the restrictive frame of order in Providentialism and Providentialist historiography could not analyse disorder so as to give answers to people how to actively and legitimately deal with them and hinder their re-occurrence apart from suppressing disorder within the dictums of sin.

On the other hand, New History maintained the analysis of history as a result of secondary causes. It differentiated itself from the Providentialist mode of historiography by its pseudo-scientific aspect of searching for an accurate representation of the past (Collingwood 57-8; Prior 16; Goy-Blanquet 62; Kastan 167). For instance, Polydore Vergil’s Anglica Historiae Libri XXVI (1534) rejecting “fictitious [...] stories of Brute and Arthur” and Thomas More’s Richard III with their “worldly attitude toward political activity, and [...] virtually total lack of reference to divine providence and justice” (Prior 17) are early examples of this new history trying to be as “accurate” as possible (Tillyard 32, 39; Kastan, 170-1).3 Similarly, Hall’s The Union of the Two Noble and Illustre Families of Lancastre and Yorke (1548) dismisses “follyh Prophesy”4 and uses an analytical approach (Hall ccxv) while comparing and contrasting several sources and personal figures (Hall xxxiii"-xxxiv", ccix"c") and shows why in a Providentialist way “Godly concorde” could not be achieved after having a look on the secondary causes of “the pride of the one parte, and the ambicion of the other, [which] letted concord, peace, and quietnes” in times of civil disorder (Hall cxxvi"-cxxxvii"). This was the reflection of what Goy-Blanquet called an

1 Raphael Holinshed, William Harrison and John Hooker, The First and second Volumes of Chronicles, Comprising 1 The Description and Historie of England, 2 The Description and Historie of Ireland, 3 The Description and Historie of Scotland, London: n. p., 1587, 3:A3°.
3 Also see Lily B. Campbell, Shakespeare’s Histories: Mirrors of Elizabethan Policy, San Marino, CA: Huntington, 1978, pp. 60-5
awareness “that the modern world called for more elaborate systems of explanation than the mystery of God’s plans for humanity” (65). Yet, it should be acknowledged that these early examples do make use of Providentialism. The providential mode and New History were used simultaneously by most of the historians because these were not rejected or polarised in favour of one to another in this early transitory stage of historiography. As Prior argues, “English historians usually regarded as providentialist, writing as they did during a time of intense political activity, often deal realistically and politically with individual episodes and characters. […] Even the acknowledged masters of the new history at times sound like providentialists.” (18). Thus, the early forms of Early Modern New History bear remnants of Medieval Providentialism.

However, with the gradual appearance and pre-eminence of secular humanism in England through the rise of Classical learning, we see that Classical models begin to have a great impact on the shaping of historiography in general as Greek and mainly Roman historians, philosophers and rhetoricians were used as modes of writing and references to serve for instructive purposes, especially through the lives of historical figures of the Classical Age which served as exempla (Campbell 18-27; Goy-Blanquet 58, 67-8; Collingwood 57). Therefore, “[t]he distinctive character of the new history came from its concern for causes construed not in terms of cosmic history and divine justice but in terms of the characters of men and the nature of polity and war, and from its bias in favor of instruction that was primarily political.” (Prior 16). Consequently, historiography based on New History became more and more secular in its vein and with its more analytical style distanced itself from Providentialism.

Furthermore, the critical analysis of historical figures and events according to secondary causes was used to analyse the present and find answers to contemporary questions. The idea of probability and the possible outcomes of certain action later in certain ways had been analysed by Providentialists, but it was in New History in which secondary causes were the focal point. As Prior argues

[a] theory of history functioned as a guide to the selection and ordering of the many events of the past, but in addition, if instruction was a primary aim, it also established a scale of probabilities of the possible outcome of certain kinds of actions, and the chances of success or failure. If God’s justice and providence are presumed to be everywhere manifest in history, then the consequences of certain acts—a broken oath, a usurpation, the killing of an anointed king, or any other act displeasing to God—may be predicted with some degree of accuracy. The new historians concern themselves primarily not with God’s ways to man but with second causes, and the past becomes understandable and the future less unpredictable by reference to human nature and the laws of polity and chance. (30)

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Hence, New History enabled historiographers to analyse contemporary political
deviances without falling back to the restrictions of writing about resistance faced by
Providentialists. For instance, the Marian exile Ponet in his *Short Treatise of Politick
Power* (1556) believed in the government determined by people, ruled by laws
against tyranny where he approved dissent if it was against tyrants and criticised the
Providentialist dictum of passive obedience as God created forms of government for the
welfare of people. According to Ribner, Ponet maintained that

God, therefore, conferred political authority upon the community to distribute
and to control as it saw fit. It is the community, and not God, which establishes
democracy or monarchy, and where there is monarchy, the king is responsible
to the community and the community is responsible to God. [...] If the ruler is
unworthy, the people may revoke the authority they have placed in him. It is a
rule of nature that evil princes must be deposed and tyrants punished by death.¹

While there had been a long tradition of theories concerning the analysis of history
as a form of resistance to the status quo, Neo-Taciteanism, which was one among many
branches of New History that emerged in the 1590s, differentiated itself from others as
the dominant theory on resistance towards ill-government in the Elizabethan Period.
Tacitus’s *Annals* translated by Saville in 1591 as *Solon his Follie, The Ende of Nero* and
another translation as *Sixe Bookes of Politickes or Civil Doctrine* (1589) were influential
works that shaped New History. As Hadfield argues “Tacitean history contributed to a
critical discourse that could examine and explain the faults and failings of contemporary
government” (Hadfield 47). Thus, New History in the 1590s enabled the Elizabethans to
analyse and explicate present social problems in a more analytical and systematic way.

Similar to the development of English historiography, the English history play was
marked first by the pre-eminence of Providentialism and later New History tried its way
into the Elizabethan stage. There were several phases of the English history play which
were reflective of the development of the English stage, as well. For instance, Bale’s
*King Johan* (1538-60), Norton and Sackville’s *Gorbdouc* (1561) were early examples of
the history play in the form of “the English political-morality play, in which the subject
was tyranny or insurrection and the emphasis given to the health of the body politic”
which were affected by personal sin reflected in public “chaos”.² Legge’s *Richardus
tertius* (1580) presented a Senecan “tyrannical monster” (Prior 128) in line with the
prominence of Seneca on the early Elizabethan stage (Kernan 359),³ which was to be

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replaced by heroes of historical romances that did not lose their popularity until the early 1590s (Tillyard 98-9, 104).¹

Whether or not Robert Greene composed or edited *James IV* (ca. 1590),² it is a known fact that the plot, like many historical romances of the 1580s and early 1590s, is unhistorical (Hudson 652).³ Accordingly, it is assumed that the plot may derive from one section of Giambattista Giraldi’s novel *Ecatommiti* (1655) and his play *Arrenopia* (1583) (“Edward de Vere” 1; Hudson 663)⁴ which, however, does not have an English translation at the time of composition.⁵ The only historical background knowledge seems to be “the title” (Tillyard 98), the name of James IV of Scotland, his marriage to a daughter of the English King and the Anglo-Scottish war (Hall xlii-xliv).⁶ Neither Henry VII (d. 1509), who is dead by the time of Anglo-Scottish war in 1513, is mentioned by name, nor is his daughter Margaret named correctly and is rather referred to with a stock name, namely Dorothy/Doll.⁷ The other historical sources are about the depiction of the corruption of the Scottish court, such as George Buchanan’s *History of Scotland* (1582)⁸ and Raphael Holinshed’s *Chronicles* (1587) (2:297-302), whereto John Leslie’s *Historie of Scotland* (1578) could be set as pro-Jacobean history showing James IV’s virtues in peace and war (2:142-3, 2:147).

However, although *JIV* is unhistorical, it has been noted that the play was written in a period when the historical James VI was a hot topic to be spoken of. James VI’s marriage which made his chances to succeed to the throne again topical, along with

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⁷ Robert Greene, *The Scottish History of James the Fourth*, 1598, eds. Adriaan Ernst Hugo Swaen, W. W. Gré and Giambattista Cinzio Giraldi, London: OUP, 1921, 1.1.136, 1.1.141. The play will be abbreviated *JIV* and all references will be in act, scene and line numbers.
reports about “difficulties with powerful nobility”, “flattery” and favourism in his court, were known by the English audience in the late 1580s and early 1590s, whereby the “romantic” and the political stories would be appealing topics to be dealt on the stage (Hudson 655, 660-1). Greene might not have a political agenda in making references to the contemporary Scottish king but might have used and abused the former’s topical (un)popularity to promote the sales of his company (Hudson 659, 665-6). Whether we take the play as an unhistorical historical romance or a historicist historical romance, the overwhelming presence of Providentialism cannot be denied.

The play starts actually as a framed tale in which a disenchanted Scottish courtier, Bohan, abandons worldly life and lives in a tomb and uses the play as a “demonstration” (JIV Induction.108) for the fairy king Oberon why he abandoned worldly life. Yet, although Bohan and Oberon comment on the action at the end of almost each act, and make use of allegorical dumb shows to make allegorical reading of the plot for the present English condition without using direct criticism, as in the dumb show of two battles and many monarchs who lived in pomp but died in downfall to show that Bohan lives better in humility than monarchs in pomp (JIV 1.3.658-67), which result in a metatheatrical battle between “festive” Oberon and “satiric” Bohan (Gieskes “Staging” 61-3), these are the only innovative aspects of the play. Unfortunately, the rest of the whole play seem to be based on conventions and types in which characters are shaped according to their vices and virtues. Here, the central figure is the “erring king” who is like an everyman character. He has, however, internal conflicts like a tragic character as he fluctuates between the duties of wedlock and his sexual desires. These carnal desires, on the other hand, are used and abused by the Trickster figure Ateukin for his self-promotion. Ateukin has been noted as Greene’s most original character not found in the sources and has been claimed to be based on the historical alchemist John Damian who rose in power by abusing the historical James IV’s foible for astrology (McNeir 378-9, 381; Leslie 2:124-5). Along with this historical basis, Ateukin’s association with sin is linked with his association with Machiavellianism, seen in his “annocation upon Matchauell” mentioned by one of his servants in the play (JIV 3.2.1303). As for the ideal and virtuous characters, there are the chaste maid Ida, who is lusted for, and the English Queen of Scotland, who is depicted as the loyal wife of a womaniser, somehow in the fashion of “the patient wife, of the kind familiar in ballads and romances” like “Griselda or Constance”. The roles of ideal woman characters are functional for the unfolding of the plot, as they are not just objectified by male sexual lust but are set against the corrupt world and have an active force in its reformation, surely as vehicles for God’s

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glory on earth. For instance, Ida is against the “delights,” “pompe,” and “maiestie” of the world as “these are meanes to draw the minde / From perfect good” as she compares her needlework to God’s will doing and undoing the fortunes of people in the world: “God with a becke can change each worldly thing, / The poore to earth, the begger to the king” (JIV 2.1.730, 2.1.732-3, 2.1.753-4). Therefore, Ida does not fear a king’s will who is “a king of men and worldly pelfe” who “[y]et hath [no] power [to] rule and guide himselfe” (JIV 2.1.882-3). Similarly, the character of Dorothy, Queen of Scotland, is set as a foil against James IV, as the former loves and cherishes her husband and says that “the Princes loffe must be my death, / His grieve, my grieve: his mischief must be mine” (JIV 5.1.2029-30) even though the latter wants her death to fulfil his lust for the chaste Ida.

Although the main characters of the play are almost incarnations of vices and virtues, the historical romance does not just depict a psychomachia, but shows in line with the Providentialist mode of history writing that private vices, here sexual lust, affects public wellbeing, which is here in the form of the emergence of tyranny under arbitrary and unreasonable rule without law. Here, it is quite interesting that the theme of vice leading a country into demise is explicitly stated by James IV himself who does not care what happens to his country if he can woo and win Ida. He says,

**KING OF SCOTS. [...]**

Fond loue, vile luft, that thus milleads vs men,
To vowe our faithes, and fall to sin againe.
But Kings ftoype not to every common thought,
Ida is faire and wise, fit for a King:
And for faire Ida will I hazard life,
Venture my Kingdome, Country, and my Crowne:
Such fire hath loue to burne a kingdome downe.
[...] Nor earth nor heaven shall part my loue and I.
Yea they shall part vs, but we first must meet,
And wo[o], and win, and yet the world not [see it].
Yea ther’s the wound, & wounded with that tho[u]ght,
So let me die: for all my drift is naught. (JIV 1.1.294-300, 1.1.306-310)

What is more, the play depicts how one vice engenders other vices and the disruption of social hierarchy and order which are undermined through top-down and bottom up sinners. Violated through the sin of worldliness and materialism as the uncontrollable side of human nature in different forms, both the ruler and the ruled contribute to the moral and physical downfall of the whole Scottish nation. For instance, the sin of the ruler is his carnal desires, shutting his ear to good advice and favouring flatterers. Particularly, when Ateukan as the impersonation of vice uses hypocrisy to praise himself, which leads to dramatic irony, indirect criticism is made to the court, to flattery and the materialistic side of the patronage system under a king who is possessed by his sins:
ATEUKIN. Euen as I know the meanes,  
To worke your graces freedome and your loue:  
   Had I the mind as many Courtiers haue,  
To creepe into your bosome for your coyne,  
And beg rewards for every cap and knee,  
I then would say, if that your grace would giue  
This leafe, this manor, or this pattent feald,  
For this or that I would effect your loue:  
But Ateukin is no Parafite, O prince.  
I know your grace knows schollers are but poore,  
And therefore as I blushe to beg a fee,  
Your mightinelle is so magnificent  
You cannot chuse but cast some gift apart,  
To eafe my baflfull need that cannot beg,  
As for your loue, oh might I be imployd,  
How faithfully would Ateukin complaie it:  
But Princes rather truft a smoothing tongue,  
Then men of Art that can accept the time. (JIV 1.1.347-62)

The irony lies in the fact that through his understatement, Ateukin shows how effective flattery is in order to win the favour of the monarch by appealing to his interests and needs, no matter if they comply with common-sense or law. Hence, the primary motive of the king, to get whatever he desires, engenders the formation of parasites who strive for the fulfilment of those desires, which is seen in Ateukin's plans to win Ida for the king who promises to promote him: "Thou shalt haue gold, honor and wealth inough; / Winne my Loue, and I will make thee great." (JIV 1.1.397-8)

Although the nobility bewails the present corruption of the state ruled by a king who does not listen to advice and follows rather vice and turns the country to a "haplesse flocke" whose "guide is blinde" (JIV 2.2.940), they cannot "speake" against him as they "fear" unstable reaction to their goodwill (JIV 2.2.964, 2.2.959). Therefore, they remain silent, leave the court and "feare" the king's "ouerthrow" (JIV 2.2.996). Although the nobility gives for the last time the possible consequences of the king's sexual pursuits, like the estrangement of England as an ally, James IV does not care and the nobility turn to heaven for help: "Thou god of [heaven] preuent my countries fall" (JIV 2.2.1090). Although the distancing of the fictional James IV has been associated with James VI's distancing himself from his nobility after his marriage (Hudson 655), this type of passive aggressive resistance is rather in line with the Providentialist dilemma faced by subjects under the rule of a monarch who rules arbitrarily and whose punishment should and could not be taken into one's own hands but is left to God's divine plan.

However, leaving judgment to God's will emboldens the sinning monarch which is aggravated by his listening to flatterers who do not dissuade but rather encourage him to do further sins. For example, James IV continues to listen to Ateukin who persuades the king to kill the Queen and marry Ida whom he fashions to be not yielding because of
the king's marriage ties (*JIV* 2.2.1124-62). Although the king gives his consent for the murder of his wife, after a while he feels remorse for the Queen's fate, he is "[ravished] in conceit, / And yet deprest againe with earneft thoughts. / Me thinkes this [murder] foundeth in mine eare / A threatening noye of dire and sharp reuenge. / I am incensit with greefe, yet faine would [joy"] (*JIV* 4.5.1852-6). Yet, Ateukin uses and abuses the right of the kings to reassure him. Ateukin preaches in a very Machiavellian way to disregard his duties to his subjects and to God and maintains that

**ATEUKIN. [...] it is no [murder] in a King,**
   To end an others life to saue his owne,
   For you are not as common people bee.
   Who die and perill with a fewe mens teares,
   But if you faile, the state doth whole default,
   The Realme is rent in twaine in such [a loss],
   And Aristotle holdeth this for true,
   Of euills needs we must chafe the leafe,
   Then better were it, that a woman died,
   Then all the helpe of Scotland should be blent,
   Tis policie my liege, in euery state,
   To cut off members that disturbe the head.
   And by corruption generation growes.
   And contraries maintaine the world and state. (*JIV* 4.5.1858-71)

After being persuaded the king is no longer depressed by his conscience which he calls a "tyrant" (*JIV* 4.5.1874), although he himself is one, which he also shows in his repressive policies when he orders the suppression of any thought against his handlings. The sins of the subjects, on the other hand, are giving false advice and using flattery for social climbing which leads to a topsy turvy relationship of top down social hierarchy. Patrons turn into patronesses and not the subject serves for the king and the country but the country and the king serve for the subject. As Ateukin maintains

**ATEUKIN. [...] this becomes thee best,**
   Wealth, honour, eafe, and angelles in thy cheff:
   Now may I say, as many often sing,
   No fishing to the sea, nor seruice to a king.
   Unto this high promotions doth belong,
   Meanes to be talkt of in the thickest throng:
   [...] 
   For men of art, that rife by indirection,
   To honour and the fauour of their King,
   Muf[ use] all meanes to fave what they haue got,
   And win their fauours whom he neuer knew. (*JIV* 1.2.449-54, 1.2.461-4)

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Since the patron and patroness follow their vices, corruption within the system becomes a widespread phenomenon. Honesty gets out of fashion and bad qualities are more valued. For example, the parody of an able servant by Slipper’s letter of application for an office shows the frequency and promotion of corruption. Ateukin, who is to employ Slipper reads his letter which reads

**ATEUKIN.**

[...]

*If any gentleman, spirituall or temperall, will entertaine out of his seruice, a young friaiple of the age of 30. yeares, that can sleepe with the foundeft, eate with the hungriest, work with the fickleft, lye with the lowdefl, face with the proudefl, &c., that can wait in a Gentlemans chamber when his maifter is a myle of, kepe his flable when tis emplet, and his purfe when tis full, and hath many qualities worse than all thefe, let him write his name and goe his way, and attendance fhall be giuen.* (JIV 1.2.469-76)

Likewise, bribery turns into a norm in the petition system as favours are bestowed not on merit or law but on the amount of bribery received by the go-betweens in the patronage system. These go-betweens, that is in this case Ateukin, “liues by crafts, / And felles kings fauours for who will giue most, / Hath taken bribes of mee, yet courerly / Will fell away the thing pertaines to mee.” (JIV 3.1.1215-8).

Furthermore, as the patronage system is a continuous chain of patrons and patronesses with different levels of interest groups and influence (Stone 385, 402),¹ this type of egotism in the patroness of the king is projected to lower divisions of the patronage system. For example, Slipper who is the servant of Ateukin makes use of his patron’s influence and reach of material resources which he displays through his extravagant outfit. Through him, indirect criticism is directed at socially mobile people who want to display their wealth.

**SLIPPER.** Nowe what remaines? theres twentie Crownes for a houfe, three crownes for [household] fluffe, fix pence to [buy] a Conftables flaffe: nay, I will be the chiefe of my parish, there wants nothing but a wench, a cat, a dog, a wife and a feruant, to make an [w]hole familie, fhall I marrie with Alice, [Good-man] Grim-phaues daughter[?][...] but a wench must be had, [Master Slipper]. Yea, and shal be, [dear] friend.

(JIV 4.3.1713-8, 4.3.1721-2)

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Although when another servant with other men steal Slipper’s money creates a sense of poetic justice, the country has yet to face social chaos after it is misrepresented that the Queen is murdered, which triggers an English invasion (JIV 5.1.1991-3). The dialogues among a Merchant, Lawyer and Cleric, right after the news of the English invasion is heard, release social tensions which had been shaped but suppressed during the peace time of a corrupt society. Each member of these social groups accuses each other for the downfall of the country, which shows dissent in the society (JIV 5.4.2142-9). Social mobility (JIV 5.4.2151-8), the abuse of the poor by merchants through black marketeering and high inflation along with laws that support the mighty (JIV 5.4.2159-95), fragmentation of the society through sectarianism (JIV 5.4.2196-2232) and the disability of learned men to persuade the king for good behaviour (JIV 5.4.2233-49) are reasons for the downfall of the country where nobody can consent to anything anymore. Consequently, we see how like a snowball effect the vice of one person engenders other vices and leads a country into demise, which is in compliance with Providentialist historiography warning people from committing sins.

Nonetheless, although the play uses the Providentialist history mode, it follows also morality play conventions with its comic resolution. In particular, the Trickster is banished/punished after chaste Ida has married someone else and Ateukin realises his faults for which he is

ATEUKIN.

[...]

[Ashamed] to looke vpone my Prince againe,
[Ashamed] of my fuggetitions and aduise:
[Ashamed] of life: [ashamed] that I haue [erred]:
I’ll hide myself, expecting for my shame.
Thus God doth worke with those that purchase fame
By flattery, and make their Prince their gaine. (JIV 5.2.2088-93)

Similarly, the sinner king has a moment of internal conflict before his anagnorisis, remorse and reformation. James IV’s internal conflict is “Twixt loue and feare, [which are] continuall [at] warres: / The one affures me of my [Ida’s] loue, / The other moves me for my [murdered] Queene. / Thus finde I greefe of that whereon I [joy], / And doubt, in greatest hope, and death in weale” (JIV 5.6.2341-5). Yet, he recognises his fault to rely on flatterers and follow his lust and order the murder of his innocent wife whom he imagines as a “[ghost]” that will haunt him (JIV 5.6.2372). Yet, the innocents are saved as the manifestation of Divine Justice, the last of which proves the divine plan of God as an explanation for deviant behaviour in monarch and subject. Particularly, the outcome of the plot to murder the Queen in a quite coincidental way is seen as God’s miracle:

First, let the hidden mercie from aboue,
Confirm ye grace, fince by a wondrous meanes,
The practife of your daungers came to light:

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[...] (now marke the power of God)
I found this warrant feald among the rest,
To kill your grace, whom God long keepe alive.
Thus in effect, by wonder are you [saved],
Trifle not, then, [but] seeke a [speedy] flight,
God will conduct your fleppes and shield the right.

(JIV 3.3.1430-3, 3.3.1460-5)

When the king learns towards the end of the play that his wife is alive, he feels remorse and shame. The sinner who repents is a Providentialist theme as repentance brings pardon and reformation in the king as he promises to suppress flatterers and punish them so that the social hierarchy may be maintained without social climbers:

KING OF SCOTS. Guid Knight I graunt thy [suit], first I submit
And humble craue a pardon of your grace:
Next, courteous Queene, I pray thee by thy loutes,
Forgiue mine errors past, and pardon mee.
My Lords and Princes, if I have mifdone,
(As I haue wrongd indeed both you and yours)
Hereafter truft me, you are [dear] to me:
As for Auteukin [sic], who so findes the man,
Let him haue Martiall lawe, and ltraight be hangd,
As (all his vaine arbiters now are diuided)
And Anderfon our Treasurer shall pay,
Three thousand Markes for friendly recompence. (JIV 5.6.2555-66).

The play ends unrealistically in comos and feasting like a comedy (JIV 5.6.2579-88). Thus, all is well that ends well, which shows not only the unrealistic side of the plot but also the Providentialist tone of the play as the wicked are punished but the king is reformed and the country is saved by maintaining the system without changing it.

Although we may be dissatisfied with such Providentialist plays from the late 1580s and early 1590s, like Dickinson’s general criticism for Greene’s exploitation of “sensations” in his other history plays (lx) along with its frame almost marring the rest of the play¹ which Muir claimed “will hardly stand up to serious critical examination”,² these plays remained within the restrictive Providentialist mode of history presentation because they reflected the general satisfaction with the Elizabethan regime which had prospered economically in the 1570s and 1580s and had defeated the archenemy in 1588 adding national self-esteem to economic success and enhancing political stability (Haigh

¹ Steven C. Young, The Frame Structure in Tudor and Stuart Drama, Salzburg: University of Salzburg Press, 1974, p. 29.
Yet, after the relief from the threat of foreign invasion in the post-Armada period and several negative events that followed, we see that dissatisfaction with the ageing regime grew and was voiced more. The plague in 1593 (Williams 228), the Nine Years War with Ireland from 1594 to 1603 (Williams 357-9), the rise in inflation and protests against it from 1596 to 1597 (Williams 160-2, 203; Guy 317), crop failure from 1594 to 1597 (Williams 160, 360; Guy 264), the crisis about the succession and the subsequent “abortive” Essex coup (Williams 370-6) heightened social “dissatisfaction” in all walks of Elizabethan life (Williams 387-8; Guy 316). Censorship tried to suppress such dissatisfaction (Williams 412), which, however, augmented social criticism. As Weir maintains, “[f]or most of her reign Elizabeth was adept at keeping the peace [...] only in old age did she find it difficult to control” social tension.

Under such circumstances, criticism towards the regime through dramatic form was more problematic and difficult. Censorship measures under the office of the Master of Revels, created to protect English printing houses and control religious dissent (Williams 411), was expanded to suppress social criticism in general, particularly after the 1590s (Williams 412), which eventually resulted in the forbidding of satires in print and stage and the forbidding of the publication of unauthorised “[H]istory book[s]” after 1599 (Williams 412). Although Dutton argued against Chambers, Gildersleeve and Quincey’s claims about the effectiveness of censorship measures and was against the claim that they were determined by a totalising “doctrine”, even the presence of censorship created at least the need to use ambiguity and implicit language not to be punished either with a fine or with the suppression of an entire play. Although Tilney seems not hostile towards any play, because of the material gain he would get from the production and publication,


the fact that Sir Thomas More could not be played at all seems to prove the effectiveness of censorship mechanism.\(^1\) Therefore, a “habit of analogical thinking, itself often fed by the fear of censorship”\(^2\) emerged. Those playwrights who followed this indirect and ambiguous type of presentation could present their plays in playhouses. Those who used direct references were censored and their plays could not be presented on the stage. Consequently, although in the last years of Elizabethan period socio-economic problems emerged and social criticism became an inevitability, direct criticism towards it, in any form, was not tolerated.

The collaboratively written\(^3\) Sir Thomas More (ca. 1593-1603) is reflective of the circumstances of the turmoil of the last decade of the reign of Elizabeth I and, thus, shows a quite different approach towards historical matter presented on stage. It does not purely follow the Providentialist mode but tries to use the pseudo-scientific inquiry used in New History. The authors of the play try to distance themselves from Providentialist restrictions on the commentary of resistance towards the regime and understand the motives and reasons behind social reaction. Hence, contrary to Greene’s play, Sir Thomas More has historical figures as characters that show more introspection about issues surrounding their everyday life. Thus, the primary aim of the play seems to be the enabling of the voicing of dissent and dissatisfaction of the subject in a given historical moment.

However, we see that direct reference to topical issues and historical matter concerning issues against the status quo result in the interference of the Master of Revels. Although the authors try to follow the mode of New History in the shaping of the play, censorship puts pressure on the authors to write in line with the Providentialist understanding. Therefore, matters against the status quo are suppressed and the authors are forced to use ambiguity in presenting non-conformist ideas. For instance, different from JIV, the play has a historical plot which depicts the II May Day (1517) and the Oath of Succession (1534), which serve as the starting and final point of Sir Thomas More’s career as privy councillor. The problem of the disobedient subject, along with the clash of differences in nationalities and denominations, is the crux of the play, wherein the centralisation of Sir Thomas More as the main character further problematises it. The polarisation of the good Humanist versus the bad Catholic has not only theatrical effects (Woods 4-5, 26) but is reflective of the paradox, created by the Tudors, of the obedient English Catholic (Woods 6-10). Through the Papal Bull of 1569-70, foreign originated plots to Elizabeth I’s life and the overwhelming presence of the Spanish Armada (1588), English Catholics were alienated from the center based on Elizabethan Anglicanism

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and were considered as “traitors” who were in line with foreign Catholics (Woods 6-7; Williams 468; Williamson 300-10). The exclusion of Catholics from public presence is reflected in the omission or absence presence of Sir Thomas More’s Catholicism (Woods 4-6, 9, 12-3, 20). Yet, when the void created through the omission of Catholic content is tried to be filled by the presence of xenophobic rioters, the line between obedience/disobedience, natives/foreigners, and inclusion/exclusion becomes blurred. Thus, it should be noted that direct reference to these controversial historical events are censored and what remains are implicit references, as in the case of the use of pronouns and the word “King” instead of the name of King Henry VIII. Hence, although it is assumed that the authors of the Original Text, Munday and Chettle, started writing the play around 1590s or 1600s and Chettle, Dekker, Heywood and Shakespeare revised it for several years afterwards (Jowett 17-25), the play remained in manuscript form and could not be put on stage because many parts of the play were censored.

Whether or not Munday wrote or copied STM in order to provoke reaction from pro-Catholic sentiments to use these to accuse the Lord Strange and his Men as anti-establishment clique in 1593 (Merriam 548-52, 559, 563-7, 579-81) or the “biographical play” (Melchiori “Revision” 308) simply showed “citizen virtue” (Schütting 51) of absent present excluded Catholics who tried to remain obedient within the Elizabethan rule, the play was definitely not about the “folly” but possibility of “disobedience” especially through More’s behaviours (Merriam 543) which posed several limitations on theatrical representation. STM’s matter is mainly based Holinshed’s Providentialist account (Holinshed, Harrison and Hooker 3:840-4, 3:938-9; Jowett 32-5) along with the Catholic Harpsfield’s polemical life of More circulated in manuscript form (Woods 4), but the manner was related to the forms of New History as the play tried to look and represent directly the secondary causes of popular unrest and civil disobedience. For example, right in the beginning of the manuscript the whole scene depicting the insurrection is annotated by Tilney to be revised. He says

2 Anthony Munday et al., Sir Thomas More, ed. John Jowett, London: Methuen, 2011, 3.9-18. The play will be abbreviated STM and all references will be in scene and line numbers.

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Leave out the insurrection wholly and the cause thereof, and begin with Sir Thomas More at the Mayor’s sessions, with a report afterwards of his good service done being Sherriff of London upon a mutiny against the Lombards—only by a short report, and not otherwise, at your own perils.

E. Tilney[,] (STM 1-6, page 139)

The sensitivity of the Master of Revels is based on several scenes in the play. For instance, people justify the insurrection on their claim that the laws fail to protect the just from the unjust. “It is not our lack of courage in the cause, but / the strict obedience that we are bound to. I am the / goldsmith whose wrongs you talked of; but how to / redress yours and mine own is a matter beyond all our abilities” (STM 1.84-8).

Similarly, the details of possible results of insurrection are censored, as well. Especially, the depiction of privy councillors being afraid of the commoners seems for Tilney a dangerous matter the authors meddle with. In particular, the Earl of Shrewsbury is shown afraid of the “frowning vulgar brow” of “the displeased commons of the City” (STM 3.4, 3.8).

Likewise, the presentation of privy councillors musing on possible outcomes of insurrection, ideas that once it starts it becomes difficult to suppress and that the insurrection may threaten the Mayor, and criticism towards privy councillors, are deleted by Tilney (STM 3.57-76).

However, apart from concerns about transgressions of hierarchical relations in general, another important reason behind the censorship is the topicality of the issues depicted in the play. The authors’ original plan for performance has been claimed to be around 1595 when there were complaints against foreigners who “only seek their own private Lucre without any Christian regard of the native born of our Country” (qtd. in Jowett 43). Likewise, it has been claimed that the frequency of xenophobia to the high amounts of immigrants in London especially in the years of economic decline after the 1590s (qtd. in Jowett 44) made “xenophobic” references popular (Woods 10). This, however, posed not only a threat to the local community but also to the export and import of many goods to the continent through the French on which a considerable proportion of the Elizabethan economy relied.

Therefore, patriotism, along with xenophobic references to the French, is censored. For example, the word “stranger” and “Frenchman” is substituted by Tilney by the word Lombard (STM 3.49, 3.53) which were done “to avoid provoking the current French ambassador or the large Huguenot population. Lombards were a small and more fully assimilated minority; the French

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1 STM 1.63-106 are crossed to be omitted from the play by Tilney (Jowett 139).
2 STM 3.1-8 are crossed to be deleted from the play by Tilney as this describes the popular unrest (Jowett 162). On 3.5 there is Tilney’s note of “Mend this” which shows that Tilney did not demand deletion but invited alteration whereof, however, the revisers took no action (Jowett 163).
3 STM 3.57-76 are crossed to be deleted from the play by Tilney as this describes the popular unrest (Jowett 166-7).
and other recent immigrants could be targets of citizen hostility" (Jowett 166) which is understandable in the light of the many xenophobic examples in the play. For instance, it is claimed that the economy based on foreign trade makes the English poor, which is delivered in the form of a petition, which reads

-To you all the worshipful lords and masters of this city, that will take compassion over the poor people your neighbours, and also of the great importable hurts, losses, and hindrances whereof proceedeth extreme poverty to all the King's subjects that inhabit within this city and suburbs of the same. For so it is that aliens and strangers eaten the bread from the fatherless children, and take the living from all the artificers and the intercourse from all merchants, whereby poverty is so much increased that every man bewaileth the misery of other; for craftsmen be brought to beggary, and merchants to neediness. Wherefore, the premises considered, the redress must be of the commons knit and united to one part. And as the hurt and damage grieveth all men, so must all men see to their willing power for remedy, and not suffer the said aliens in their wealth, and the natural-born men of this region to come to confusion. (STM 1.118-34, original italics)\(^1\)

Here, the foreigners are not just presented as scapegoats for a bad economy but are shown as literally taking the belongings of the English, from their wares to their wives as one citizen laments "What, one stranger take thy / food from thee, and another thy wife? By'r Lady, flesh / and blood, I think, can hardly brook that." (STM 1.34-6).\(^2\) What is more, the foreigners who violate the law seem to be embolden by the presence of their ambassador in the city and the present macroeconomic policies making the English economy bound to them, as one claims

**BARDE.** What art thou that talkest of revenge? My Lord Ambassador shall once more make your Mayor have a check if he punish thee not for this saucy presumption.

[...]

[...] Mend it thou or he if ye can or dare. I tell thee, fellow, an she were the Mayor of London's wife, had I her once in my possession, I would keep her in spite of him that durst say nay. (STM 1.41-4, 1.52-5)\(^3\)

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1 STM 1.118-53 are crossed to be omitted from the play by Tilney (Jowett 139).
2 STM 1.34-6 are crossed to be omitted from the play by Tilney (Jowett 139).
3 STM 1.34-51, 52-5 are crossed to be omitted from the play by Tilney (Jowett 139).
Compared to former historical romances, the sexual aspect in this play mentioned above is not just a matter of courtly love but is related immediately to the characters with whom the audience can empathise, which triggers action within the play, in the form of the insurrection, and without the play, in the form of creating an awareness in the audience for these problems. This awareness is achieved especially when the man winks from action and a woman takes matters into her own hands and says “Hands off, proud stranger, or [by] Him that / bought me, if men’s milky hearts dare not strike a / stranger, yet women will beat them down ere they bear / these abuses.” (STM 1.63-6, square brackets original).1 Woman are not just ideal objects who wait for God’s judgment but are active who can be seen as foils against the ineffective laws which do not prevent the occurrence of injustice. Therefore, since “husbands must be bridled / by law, and forced to bear your wrongs, their wives / will be a little lawless, and soundly beat ye.” (STM 1.72-6, square brackets original).2 The reversal of active and passive roles designed for the sexes is quite interesting if considered retrospectively, both in the past written Medieval and Early Modern chronicles and its representation in history plays, as the heroic past were free Englishmen beat foreigners in their homes is reversed in the present where now Englishmen are beaten in their own homes by these foreigners (STM 1.79-83).3 Yet, it should be reemphasised that all of these references are crossed by Tilney to be omitted as the plot unfolds in such a way in which the foreigners threaten to “complain” to the “Ambassador” (STM 1.77-8).4 The omissions are mainly related to the “motivations” of the rioters (Woods 11), which are in line with the analytical representation of events in New History but problematise the presentation of controversial issues.

Besides, the presentation of the means and procedures of the rebels, like using letters in the organisation of the uprising (STM 1.141), organising people, such as the “prentices” who use “cudgels” to remain in the streets against the orders to go back to “their masters’ houses” (STM 5.1-8),5 and their breaking of prisons before they march to assault foreigners (STM 5.11-26), are all marked for censorship as the topicality of issues makes words “dangerous” which may have no significance in other contexts. Hence, references to “troubles times” (STM 7.17) and anti-rioting proclamations (STM 7.21-5) are deleted because of making the depiction too topical and life-like, that is, easily to be imitated. In particular, the anti-rioting proclamations in STM are almost identical to real life proclamations. For instance, A Proclamation Against Unlawful Assemblies, proclaimed on the 4th of July 1595, decreed that “householders” should make their “servants or guests” stay at home and not “go out into the streets in the evening” and that no one should “write or be privy to seditious bills” or help rioters.6 In STM, the Sheriff’s orders about the repetition of proclamations are even reminiscent of the wording of real life proclamations:

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1 STM 1.63-106 are crossed to be omitted from the play by Tilney (Jowett 139).
2 STM 1.63-106 are crossed to be omitted from the play by Tilney (Jowett 139).
3 STM 1.63-106 are crossed to be omitted from the play by Tilney (Jowett 139).
4 STM 1.63-106 are crossed to be omitted from the play by Tilney (Jowett 139).
5 Marked for omission (Jowett 177).
SHERIFF. That's well said, fellows. Now you do your duty.
    God for his pity help these troublous times!
The streets stopped up with gazing multitudes,
Command our armed officers with halberds
Make way for entrance of the prisoners.
Let proclamation once again be made
That every householder, on pained of death,
Keep in his prentices, and every man
Stand with a weapon ready at his door,
As he will answer to the contrary.
1 OFFICER. I'll see it done, sir. Exit.
Enter another Officer.
SHERIFF. Bring them away to execution.
The writ is come above two hours since.
The City will be fined for this neglect. (STM 7.16-25)\footnote{STM 7.17-25 are marked to be deleted from the play by Tilney as this passage describes measures against rioting (Jowett 205).}

The mimetic closeness to the topicality of matters related to “troublous times” becomes problematic in Elizabethan historical drama, which is why this type of direct reference is marked for omission.

However, apart from explicit references to what is censored in the play, what is not censored is also important to understand the rationale behind censoring matters that are related to New History. Either as answers to the feedbacks by Tilney, aesthetic or audience-oriented reconsiderations, the insurrection scenes marked for omission are followed by scenes that echo Providentialism. Yet, it should be understood that the general spirit of the play follows New History while making use of Providentialist techniques to overcome measures of censorship. For example, implicit and indirect criticism is used, especially as commentary on the handling of popular unrest and disobedience. Indirect criticism towards violent means to suppress an insurrection is directed at authorities in general and the use of mercy, persuasion and amendment of problems is shown to be valued. For instance, Thomas More, who is employed to stop the uprising, proposes to the nobility to use non-violent persuasion to halt the insurrection because of the advantages “to calm our private foes / With breath of gravity, not dangerous blows” (STM 5.50-1). The consequences of a contrary approach, that is, the use of sheer violence, is shown in the scene when a Sergeant looks down upon the rebels as “simple” people, which angers them. They attack the Sergeant, which shows how a mob can be easily manipulated by bad management spurring them to violence (STM 6.27-31). Therefore, although More gives the status quo explanation of obedience as God’s rule, he uses a humanistic approach by trying to persuade the rebels rather than using sheer violence reminding them that the rebels would only appease their appetites by removing the strangers yet enabling the rule of chaos and disorder which could one day afflict them in the same manner (STM
6.60-138). More gives reasons of other possible outcomes like banishment so that they may become strangers if they are lucky because no one would accept them in Europe and whether they would like to be treated while being strangers as they treat strangers here in England by killing them, after which the citizens give up and ask More to procure their pardon (STM 6.138-65). The rebels are persuaded and they go to prisons and all praise More for using words rather than violence to suppress the insurrection (STM 6.166-255). Consequently, this is an indirect criticism of how an insurrection should be handled as a foil against the real measures of authorities which is represented in Sergeant Downes actions.

Moreover, the use of Providentialism and black humour become functional both for the presentation of indirect criticism and the development of the latter part of the play about the career of Sir Thomas More who is knighted and made privy councillor and Lord Chancellor after his mastery in the handling of the insurrection (STM 6.251-5). As the annotations in the first part of the manuscript show, there seems to be no possibility of presentation of direct references to disobedience on the Elizabethan stage, which is seen again in the mark for deletion of the scene where Rochester openly refuses to obey the king’s command and More resigns his post (STM 10.80-104) and the subsequent scene when the same is not censored as the “Error[s]” (STM 10.109) of Rochester and More are just implicitly narrated by the Earls of Surrey and Shrewsbury and hoped to be corrected (STM 10.104-9). Thus, using the modes of Providentialism, like passive obedience against infliction and leaving judgment to God’s will, enable the authors to set the situation of Sir Thomas More as an able and well learned privy councillor mistreated by the arbitrary desires of his king that leads to his downfall to the analysis of the audience. Here, the depiction of dreams and omens (STM 11.1-83) contributing to the tragic resolution of the play show Sir Thomas More bearing his downfall with humility, which is not censored as dissent is not voiced directly. Sir Thomas More was aware that he was God’s “instrument” in the suppression of the insurrection (STM 6.207), that he climbed in the social ladder because of God’s grace and that his office brings the potential of downfall if he is not careful (STM 8.1-21). After he retreats to his country house, he waits for the king’s decision and God’s judgment which he bears in a very light-hearted way, as he is sure of his conscience. For instance, when More’s wife fears that More will be killed, More simply replies that it would be a good reward by the king to sent him to the king of heavens (STM 13.84-91).

The idealisation of More’s humility shown in his “submissive” behaviour when arrested (STM 13.175) is not just related to depict a hagiography, which is represented as a hagiography in progress seen in the huge crowd before the Tower of London who lament his fate and want his release (STM 14.1-70), but to show him indirectly as a foil to contemporary men of state. In particular, in the scene when the verdict of execution is narrated by his servants, More is depicted by the same as good patron and master of servants whose goodness is shown when he gives his servants a high sum of money, that is thirty nobles, to redress their future grievances when they are left without a master after his death (STM 15.1-60). Similarly, in the scene when the Lieutenant cannot believe that More had been “the poorest chancellor / That ever was in England” (STM 16.46-7),
the Lieutenant’s disbelief enables to back up the portrayal of More shown in the former scenes as an ideal patron who did not make himself rich (STM 16.33-65) and criticise in an indirect way contemporary statesmen that are materially rich (MacCaffrey 117).  

Furthermore, although there are several attempts to make More comply with the king’s demands, he remains strong-willed and does only comply with God’s law, while he says that he complies with the state by submitting himself to his execution (STM 16.76-129). Therefore, contrary to Woods, More’s “active obedience” and “passive disobedience” (12), which juxtaposed seem “strange” (14), are not at odds with each other according to the Providentialist frame of mind because they are in line with his obedience to both God and monarch. More remains to obey God by refusing an order against his religious understanding and by obeying the king not resisting against his punishment. Hence, this ambiguous obedience and refusal to dissent to God and ruler alike is in line with the Providentialist understanding of representation of past events as they remain within the orders of hierarchy and subordination. At the execution he submits himself in a merry way to God (STM 17.9-25), jesting about the advantages of bloodletting against headache which he will have no more (STM 17.85-8) and he leaves the stage like a tragic actor:

MORE. Then to the east.  
We go to sigh; that o’er, to sleep in rest.  
Here More forsakes all mirth. Good reason why:  
The fool of flesh must, with her frail life, die.  
No eye salute my trunk with a sad tear.  
Our birth to heaven should be thus: void of fear. (STM 17.119-24)

However, the last instance of the use of ambiguity at the very end of the play right after the execution of More enables the authors of the play to make an obscure criticism that could have been censored if voiced directly.

SURREY. A very learned worthy gentleman  
Seals error with his blood. Come, we’ll to Court.  
Let’s sadly hence to perfect unknown fates,  
Whilst he tendeth progress to the state of states. (STM 17.125-8)

Apart from the fact that the last words of the Earl of Surrey are like a summary of

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play, the use of pronouns, used hitherto as a means to avoid censorship, leads to polysemy about whose “error” it was that More was executed. The absence of Henry VIII throughout the play through the use of pronouns has magnified that absence by pointing out the parallels of the absence of real justice and presence of arbitrariness in the late pardon of one rioter, Lincoln, early in the play, and More’s execution at the very end, both of which become “strange” (STM 7.70-1, 7.134-5, 17.121; Woods 27) and disturbing. Therefore, the question whether the appearance of disobedience was More’s or Henry VIII’s “error” becomes obscure and if set historically it becomes very ironic when the Earl of Surrey will also be executed by the king for the error of whomsoever, which illustrates the problematic constitution of the play trying to look into the causes of events related to disobedience analytically within the overwhelming presence of the Providentialist frame of ideas and restricting insistence of obedience in late Elizabethan England.

In conclusion, the English history play was reflective of the multi-layered bipolar constitution of Early Modern English historiography consisting of Providentialism and New History. While Robert Greene’s James IV depicts a sinning monarch and his reformation, Sir Thomas More shows disobedience in an analytical way and tries to circumvent the repressive censorship mechanism with the use of ambiguity, which, however, could not hinder it to remain in manuscript form. Yet, neither of these plays should be taken as true reflections of history but analysed according to their own historicity as the former reflects the relative ease of the late 1580s and early 1590s, whereas the latter is a product of the troublesome last decade of the Elizabethan rule.
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