

THOMAS HOBBS ON THE POLITICAL THEORIST'S VOCATION*

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ABSTRACT. *Thomas Hobbes's Leviathan offers the fiercest modern indictment against pride. Yet seventeenth-century polemicists and contemporary historians of political theory agree that arrogance is one of Hobbes's stylistic signatures. Does Hobbes, the author, fail to practise the modesty which he preaches to political subjects? Against critical consensus, I argue that Hobbes devises protocols of literary self-presentation consistent with his arguments for modesty. I make this argument by way of a close reading of Hobbes's Latin verse autobiography. Although the autobiography is usually cited as evidence of Hobbes's vanity, I read it as Hobbes's perverse profession of modesty. In the autobiography, Hobbes shuns the role of hero, casting himself as a 'poor worm' whose endeavours are motivated by fear. Acute consciousness of mortality, rather than lust for renown, moves Hobbes to philosophize. With this account of the affective springs of his own philosophy, Hobbes redefines the political theorist's vocation. Breaking with traditions that define political theory as a vehicle for heroic self-display, Hobbes defines political theory as a vocation for ordinary mortals.*

Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan* features what is arguably the fiercest philosophical indictment of pride since Augustine's *City of God*. Indeed, Hobbes locates *Leviathan's* prime contribution and claim to posterity in its rebuke of arrogance. Toward the end of his life, Hobbes predicted that *Leviathan* would 'last to all Eternity' as a 'severe Reproof of those that Men Ambitious are (*ambitionis Elenchus*)'.¹ Scholars have confirmed Hobbes's prediction that *Leviathan* would be known as an antidote to pride. Following Leo Strauss, it is commonplace to insist that, '[a]s its very title expresses, it [*Leviathan*] is directed primarily against the passion of "pride"'.² With this gloss on Hobbes's title, Strauss foregrounds the role that arguments against pride, and for modesty, play in *Leviathan's* account of political obligation. In the state of nature, vainglory is foremost among the

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* I would like to thank to Victoria Kahn, Quentin Skinner, and two anonymous reviewers for comments on earlier versions of this article, and Antonia Syson for Latin expertise. I conducted preliminary research at the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, and I would like to thank the Library and the Center for Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Studies for funding.

¹ Thomas Hobbes, *The life of Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury* (London, 1680), p. 12.

² Leo Strauss, *The political philosophy of Hobbes*, trans. E. M. Sinclair (Chicago, 1963), p. 55.

passions that breed the conflicts that expose the need for absolute sovereignty.³ Because the vain crave approval and resort to force at the slightest affront:

Men have no pleasure, (but on the contrary a great deale of grieffe) in keeping company, where there is no power able to over-awe them all. For every man looketh that his companion should value him, at the same rate he sets upon himselfe: and upon all signes of contempt, or undervaluing, naturally endeavours, as far as he dares (which amongst them that have no common power, to keep them in quiet, is far enough to make them destroy each other,) to extort a greater value from his contemners, by damage; and from others, by the example.⁴

In the absence of a binding arbiter, disputes surrounding reputation escalate into mortal combat. However, in these battles, combatants experience one passion, fear of violent death, which pierces inflated egos, prompts rational deliberation, and inclines men⁵ to contract. In the story that Hobbes tells, chastening vanity is a prerequisite for establishing a commonwealth. Only the visceral experience of vulnerability inspires recognition that a ‘power able to over-awe them all’ is a necessary condition for peace. Moreover, modesty, or acknowledgement of equality, establishes the protocol for transition to peace – namely, an egalitarian transfer of rights.⁶ In *Leviathan*, Hobbes promises that chastened, modest individuals can create a ‘*Mortall God*’ by uniting to form a commonwealth.⁷

If *Leviathan* aims to deflate vanity and cultivate modesty, why is its author known as a conceited braggart, guilty of ‘magisterial haughtinesse’?⁸ Does Hobbes fail to practise the modesty that he preaches to political subjects? From the moment of *Leviathan*’s publication, critics have charged that Hobbes is not innocent of the passions he inveighs against. Although seventeenth-century critics reserve most of their censure for Hobbes’s purported atheism, his conduct during the civil war, and his mathematical incompetence, they also take exception to his

³ See Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* ed. C. B. MacPherson (New York, 1985), p. 185.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Throughout, I use male pronouns to refer to the generic political subject and the generic political theorist. I do so because I am persuaded by Carole Pateman’s argument that Hobbes’s original contract excludes women. See Carole Pateman, *The sexual contract* (Stanford, CA, 1988), pp. 44–50. However, I argue that the male subject of contract and the male political theorist are modest. Because modesty has historically been a female virtue, the question of the subject’s gender is more complicated than it first appears. Hobbes simultaneously upholds male privilege and redefines masculinity. For Hobbes, manliness is not synonymous with martial valour; indeed, manliness is consistent with modesty, cowardice, and fear. Harvey Mansfield has noted Hobbes’s redefinition of masculinity with chagrin. According to Mansfield, Hobbes debunks (salutary) manliness, and in so doing ushers in the (misguided) cult of the ‘sensitive man’. See Harvey Mansfield, ‘Virilité et libéralisme’, *Archives de Philosophie du Droit*, 41 (1997), pp. 25–42.

⁶ In *Leviathan*, Hobbes defines the normative practice of equality as a practice of modesty. In the ninth law of nature, ‘Against Pride’, Hobbes insists ‘*That every man acknowledge other for his Equall by Nature*. The breach of this Precept is *Pride*.’ The tenth law of nature, ‘Against Arrogance’, prohibits parties to the original contract from reserving rights that they would deny others. Hobbes explains, ‘the observers of this law, are those we call *Modest*, and the breakers *Arrogant* men’. See Hobbes, *Leviathan*, pp. 211–12.

⁷ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 227.

⁸ John Eachard, *Mr. Hobbs’s state of nature considered* (Cornhill [London], 1672).

bombast.⁹ Accusations of bombast first gained currency in polemics by the university scientists (Seth Ward and John Wallis), polemics spurred by *Leviathan's* instant notoriety. As Anglican ministers and university professors, Ward and Wallis took offence at *Leviathan's* patent anticlericalism, not to mention its attacks on university culture. More importantly, with Hobbes's growing notoriety, Ward and Wallis were eager to distance their own (non-scholastic, and so potentially controversial) approach to philosophy from Hobbes's (now compromised) approach.¹⁰ Accusations of vanity were one weapon in the campaign to immunize experimental philosophy against the Hobbist taint. Toward this end, Ward, Wallis, and their compatriots related damning anecdotes about Hobbes's purported irascibility and lack of philosophical hospitality. Hobbes's brusque rejoinders to philosophical challengers provided ammunition for charges of vanity, which Ward, Wallis, et al., deployed to burnish their own scientific and political bona fides.¹¹

For example, in *Hobbius heauton-timorumenos*, a 1662 polemic, Wallis rehearses the common charge that Hobbes overestimates his novelty and significance. Wallis dismisses *Leviathan* as a transparent gambit to curry favour with Oliver Cromwell. When Hobbes casts obligation as an obedience/protection exchange, Wallis argues, he justifies treasonous shifts in allegiance. But, on Wallis's view, Hobbes is not only self-interested – he is also self-aggrandizing.

He would be thought, of All that are, or ever *have been*, the onely *knowing* Man. And he doth not spare to professe, upon all occasions, How *incomparably* he thinks Himself to have *surpassed All*, Ancient, Modern, Schools, Academies, Persons, Societies, Philosophers, Divines, Heathens, Christians; How *Despicable* he thinks all Their writings, in comparison of His; and, what Hopes he hath, that, *by the Sovereign command of Some Absolute Prince, all other*

⁹ For the seventeenth-century anti-Hobbes polemic, see Samuel Mintz, *The hunting of Leviathan* (Cambridge, 1962). For accusations of pride in the seventeenth-century anti-Hobbes polemic, see Alex Rosse, *Leviathan drawn out with a hook* (London, 1655); *The recantation of Daniel Scargill* (n.p., 1669); and Edward earl of Clarendon, *A brief view and survey of the dangerous and pernicious errors to church and state, in Mr. Hobbes's book, entitled Leviathan* (Oxford, 1676). For an eighteenth-century accusation of vanity, see the anonymous biography that prefaces Thomas Hobbes, *The moral and political works of Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury* (London, 1750), pp. xviii and xix. The biographer contends that 'the old man's passion for applause ... was his greatest foible', and discerns 'a little stroke of vanity' in the old man's verse autobiography. See also the epigraph to Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer, *Leviathan and the air pump* (Princeton, 1985) which is taken from W. Dodd's *The beauties of history* (1796): 'What a blessing to mankind, in himself and his writings, was the ingenious, humble, and pious Mr. Boyle; what a common pest to society was the fallacious, proud, and impious Hobbes! Accordingly we find the former bad adieu to this world with utmost serenity, honour, and hope; while the other went out of it in the dark, with an odium on his name, as well as with terrible apprehensions of an unknown future.'

¹⁰ Siegmund Probst has argued that relations between Hobbes and Ward were initially cordial, but soured after *Leviathan's* publication, as Ward sought to protect himself from the Hobbist taint. See Siegmund Probst, 'Infinity and creation: the origin of the controversy between Thomas Hobbes and the Savilian Professors Seth Ward and John Wallis', *British Journal for the History of Science*, 26 (1993), pp. 271–9.

¹¹ For Hobbes's reputation for irascibility, see Walter Pope, *The life of Seth* (Oxford, 1961), pp. 28, 125–6; *Six lessons to the Savilian professors of mathematics*, in Thomas Hobbes, *The English works of Thomas Hobbes*, vii, ed. William Molesworth (Scientia Aalen, 1962), pp. 337–41; and John Aubrey, *Brief lives*, I, ed. Andrew Clark (Oxford, 1898), pp. 340, 373.

*Doctrines being exploded, his new Dictates should be peremptorily imposed, to be alone taught in all Schools, and Pulpits, and universally submitted to ... To recount All which he speaks, of Himself, Magnificently; and, Contemptuously, of all others; would fill a Volume. 'Twas a motion made by one (whom I will not name) That some idle person should read over all his Books; and collecting together his Arrogant, and Supercilious speeches, Applauding himself, and Despising all other men; set them forth in one Synopsis; with this Title, Hobbius de se. What a pretty piece of Pageantry this would make, I shall leave to your own thoughts.*¹²

Their ostensible subjects notwithstanding, all of Hobbes's texts are about their author, Wallis complains. Although Wallis writes with unusual vehemence, his characterization of Hobbes's motives is hardly anomalous. Although the scientific, political, and theological controversies that prompted Wallis's tirade have subsided, accusations of vanity remain a familiar trope in Hobbes scholarship. In the twentieth century, figures like Sheldon Wolin and Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer have argued – with more sophistication, and in more temperate language – that Hobbes treats philosophy as a pretext for 'self-advertisement'.¹³

At first glance, Hobbes seems vulnerable to these charges. After all, he does tout his accomplishments. In the Epistle Dedicatory to *De corpore*, Hobbes famously anoints himself the inventor of political science. 'Natural Philosophy is therefore but young; but Civil Philosophy yet much younger, as being no older (I say it provoked, and that my detractors may know how little they have wrought upon me) than my own book *De Cive*.'¹⁴ To most critics, this passage offers incontrovertible evidence of vanity. But on closer examination, the passage appears ambiguous. Too often, scholars cite Hobbes's 'boast' in truncated form, omitting the parenthetical aside ('(I say it provoked ...)').¹⁵ But the parenthesis contains a crucial qualification, which tempers Hobbes's bravado. Attacks by detractors (e.g. the university scientists and their allies) prompt Hobbes to retaliate in kind. When Hobbes explains that he speaks upon *provocation*, he turns an unrepentant boast into a defensive manoeuvre – and thereby absolves himself of vainglory. Here, Hobbes follows 'Vespasian's Law' – 'it is uncivil to give ill language first, but civil and lawful to return it' – a maxim which he invokes to justify the admittedly 'sharp' tone of his polemics.¹⁶ According to Vespasian's Law, Hobbes cannot justly be accused of boasting, because 'that which is truly said, and upon

¹² John Wallis, *Hobbius heauton-timorumenos, or a consideration of Mr. Hobbes his dialogues* (n.p., 1662), p. 3.

¹³ See Shapin and Schaffer, *Leviathan and the air pump*, and Sheldon S. Wolin, *Hobbes and the epic tradition of political theory* (Los Angeles, 1970), p. 17. Gabriella Slomp offers a more measured contemporary assessment, discerning 'no more than a healthy amount of self-esteem'. See Gabriella Slomp, *Thomas Hobbes and the political philosophy of glory* (New York, 2000), p. 32.

¹⁴ *De corpore*, in Thomas Hobbes, *The English works of Thomas Hobbes*, 1, ed. William Molesworth (Scientia Aalen, 1962), p. ix. This passage is not anomalous: Hobbes repeatedly lauds *De cive* in polemical essays. See *Considerations upon the reputation, loyalty, manners, and religion of Thomas Hobbes*, in Thomas Hobbes, *The English works of Thomas Hobbes*, iv, ed. William Molesworth (Scientia Aalen, 1962), pp. 415, 435, and 436–7.

¹⁵ For an example of the abbreviated form in which this passage is usually cited, see Slomp, *Hobbes the political philosophy of glory*, p. 2.

¹⁶ Hobbes, *Six lessons*, p. 356. Hobbes explains the classical allusion in Hobbes, *Six lessons*, pp. 331–2. For an alternative classical source for this ethos, see Hobbes, *Considerations*, pp. 438–9.

provocation, is not boasting, but defence'.¹⁷ Unlike his detractors, Hobbes appreciates the crucial distinction 'between that which is said upon provocation, and that which is said without provocation, from vain glory'.¹⁸ Thus, passages that smack of brash self-assertion are actually motivated by fear – they testify not to Hobbes's vanity, but to his vulnerability. When Hobbes's most notorious 'boasts' are dissected, the verdict they are usually cited to support appears questionable. It is harder to convict Hobbes of vanity than critics have realized.

Of course, one could easily dismiss Hobbes's defensive manoeuvres as flimsy pretexts for self-aggrandizement. Hobbes invokes Vespasian's Law in an effort to have his cake (he is immune to charges of vanity) and eat it, too (but still allowed to boast). This objection has force. Nevertheless, I want to bracket it for the purposes of this article, because I am convinced that we gain fresh insight into Hobbes's conception of political theory if we take his disclaimers seriously. Even readers who find these disclaimers unconvincing would concede that Hobbes postures defensively to fortify himself against charges of vanity. Thus, on some level, Hobbes *must* acknowledge that modesty is becoming, and vanity unbecoming, for a political theorist. But scholars have been too busy cataloguing Hobbes's boasts to notice his appreciation for authorial modesty. Indeed, Hobbes's texts contain passages that are hard to reconcile with the received portrait of Hobbes as unrepentant braggart. Hobbes explicitly professes modesty, and he does so in ways that transcend the perfunctory topoi of prefatory rhetoric.¹⁹ For example, in *Six lessons to the Savilian professors of mathematics*, Hobbes directly refutes charges of vanity, protesting, 'My acquaintance know that I am naturally of modest rather than of boasting speech.'²⁰ Hobbes insists that modesty suffuses his published works, as well as his private conversation. 'As for my self-conceit and ostentation, you shall find no such matter in my writings.'²¹ Indeed, desire to improve humanity's estate – not desire for reputation – motivates Hobbes's philosophical endeavours. Unlike his detractors, Hobbes 'never did write anything in philosophy to show my wit, but, as I thought at least, to benefit some part or other of mankind'.²²

¹⁷ Hobbes, *Six lessons*, p. 333.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 337.

¹⁹ Classical rhetoric dedicates the preface or exordium to the task of *captatio benevolentiae* – winning the reader's/listener's good will. Affected professions of modesty are a key element of this strategy. At the outset, the author primes his readers by apologizing for his literary deficits. See Ernst Robert Curtius, *European literature and the Latin middle ages*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, 1953), p. 83: 'Now the author protests his inadequacy in general, now bemoans his uneducated and rude speech.' Hobbes's professions of modesty do not repeat these topoi. Indeed, Hobbes never disparages his literary skills. Rather, Hobbes's modesty consists of acknowledgement of mortality – the recognition that he is no more, and no less, adequate than anyone else. It is precisely the egalitarian conviction that philosophical prowess cannot insulate him from death that qualifies Hobbes to philosophize. For the waning of classical modesty in the seventeenth century, with reference to Hobbes, see Kevin Dunn, *Pretexts of authority: the rhetoric of authorship in the renaissance preface* (Stanford, CA, 1994).

²⁰ Hobbes, *Six lessons*, p. 337. See also p. 336.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 332.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 335. See also Thomas Hobbes, *On the citizen (de cive)*, trans. Richard Tuck and Michael Silverthorne (Cambridge, 1998), p. 13. In the Epistle Dedicatory to *Leviathan*, Hobbes asserts that vanity discredits an author. Should the Godolphins, to whom *Leviathan* is dedicated, feel compelled to disavow

In this article, I take Hobbes at his word, and argue that modesty is one of his rhetorical signatures (although it is not his only rhetorical signature). I offer this contrarian reading less to acquit Hobbes of hypocrisy than to enrich our understanding of his approach to political theory. (Thus, I am more interested in recovering Hobbes's literary and philosophical aspirations, in terms of how he defines the political theorist's vocation, than in determining whether he successfully or consistently realizes these aspirations.) Deployment of geometric method does not exhaust Hobbes's theoretical innovations – Hobbes also innovates when he breaks with traditions that define political theory as a vehicle for heroic self-display. In various contexts, Hobbes warns that vanity threatens civil peace, and that philosophical texts can, regrettably, provide vehicles for vanity. 'The reason why authors often fail to keep their promises is that, first seeking glory, and esteeming truth only afterwards, they are competing for renown and for the applause of their hearers.'²³ Given these warnings about the abuse of publication, 'the relationship between text and author and the manner in which the text points to this "figure" that, at least in appearance, is outside it and antecedes it' is of central concern for Hobbes.²⁴ In this article, I offer new strategies for deciphering Hobbes's literary self-presentation, and argue that Hobbes's texts 'point to the author' in ways designed to discourage readers' veneration. Shunning the role of hero, Hobbes redefines political theory as a vocation for mere mortals.

To grasp the modesty of Hobbesian political theory, I analyse some of Hobbes's more modest works: polemics, letters, and autobiographical trifles. In the essay's first section, I detail Hobbes's reservations about epic theatricality, and argue that he develops resolutely non-heroic strategies of literary self-presentation. I devote the second section to a hagiographical poem by Henricus Bruno that accompanied Hobbes's portrait in a 1647 edition of *De cive* – a poem that Hobbes later suppressed. Although Bruno acknowledges that portraiture fails to capture the author's identity, he trusts that the self which eludes visual representation manifests clearly in Hobbes's texts. I contend that Bruno (and the critical tradition which he represents) is mistaken. In his posthumously published Latin verse autobiography (*Vita carmine expressa*), to which I devote the rest of the article, Hobbes disabuses readers of the notion that his texts are self-portraits. Although the autobiography is usually cited as evidence of Hobbes's vanity, I read it as

the work, they can easily do so, Hobbes explains, by accusing Hobbes of vanity and presumption. See Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 76: 'If notwithstanding this, you find my labour generally decryed, you may be pleased to excuse your selfe, and say I am a man that love my own opinions, and think true all I say, that I honoured your Brother, and honour you, and have presum'd on that.'

²³ Thomas Hobbes, *Thomas White's De mundo examined*, trans. Harold Whitmore Jones (London, 1976), p. 27. See also Hobbes, *De cive*, p. 23, where Hobbes describes vanity as an occupational hazard for philosophers. These warnings about the abuse of publication recall Hobbes's admonitions against laughter, which he reads as a supercilious (and therefore dangerous) expression of scorn and contempt. See 'Hobbes and the classical theory of laughter', in Quentin Skinner, *Visions of politics*, vol. 3 (Cambridge, 2002), pp. 142–76.

²⁴ Michel Foucault, 'What is an author?', in Paul Rabinow, ed., *The Foucault reader* (New York, 1984), p. 101.

a perverse profession of modesty. In the *Vita*, Hobbes identifies fear of death as the spur to his restless quest for ‘Power after power’.²⁵ Acute consciousness of mortality, rather than lust for renown, moves Hobbes to philosophize. As Hobbes conceives it, political theory is a modest pursuit grounded in recognition of human finitude.

I

Impressed by Hobbes’s decision to devote his declining years to translations of Homer, scholars have often assumed that Hobbes harbours epic pretensions. However, as Paul Davis has demonstrated, the ‘low’ diction of Hobbes’s translations systematically subverts conventions of Restoration epic, conventions that, Hobbes feared, bolstered (politically corrosive) priestcraft.²⁶ In what follows, I argue that Hobbes’s departures from epic convention not only advance a campaign against priestcraft, but also reflect Hobbes’s concern with political ramifications of literary personality. I develop this claim by engaging with Sheldon Wolin, who famously assimilates Hobbes to epic traditions of political theory.

In *Hobbes and the epic tradition of political theory*, Wolin deems Hobbes a glittering ‘ornament’ of a tradition that dates to ancient Greece – the epic tradition – in which lust for renown is the ‘informing intention’ governing political thought.²⁷ Not content to expand the scholarly corpus, achieve logical consistency, or intervene in local debates, epic theorists aspire to unprecedented levels of novelty, accomplishment, and acclaim. Unlike its more modest counterparts, *epic* theory ‘is inspired mainly by the hope of achieving a great and memorable deed through the medium of thought’ – the theorist’s goals are personal and aesthetic.²⁸ Consequently, epic texts do not invite readers ‘to pronounce upon the logical or factual merits of the words’; rather, they ‘compel admiration and awe for the magnitude of the achievement’.²⁹ Given that lust for glory is a defining trait of this tradition, the epic theorist tends to occupy a prominent position in his texts. Designed to elicit astonishment and veneration, epic texts configure their authors as compelling personalities. ‘Self-advertisement’ is the hallmark of a genre that ‘celebrates the theorist’.³⁰ Ideally, this celebration continues after the theorist’s death. Epic theorists crave the recognition of posterity more than the recognition of their ostensible ‘peers’. Indeed, Wolin models the epic theorist on the hero of epic poetry, ‘an agonal figure who is pictured as seeking immortality by going beyond the highest mark set by others’.³¹ Aggressive, ambitious, and competitive,

²⁵ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 161.

²⁶ See Paul Davis, ‘Thomas Hobbes’s translations of Homer: epic and anticlericalism in late seventeenth-century England’, *Seventeenth Century*, 12 (1997), pp. 231–55.

²⁷ Wolin, *Hobbes and the epic tradition*, p. 4.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

³¹ *Ibid.* Wolin is not the first to discern a desire for immortality on Hobbes’s part. In the seventeenth century, Hobbes’s astonishing longevity prompted contemporaries to accuse him of an impious

the epic theorist enters philosophical contest determined to make his name resound through the ages.

Although Wolin reads *Leviathan* as Hobbes's bid for glory, he concedes that the vehicle for Hobbes's ambition mounts a scathing attack on ambition. Wolin notes the apparent contradiction between Hobbes's ethics and his personal practice, and he takes this discrepancy as further evidence of Hobbes's epic pretensions. According to Wolin, Hobbes's paean to modesty, in *Leviathan*, is an artful gambit to eliminate rival claimants to glory. When Hobbes extols the virtues of 'modesty, equity, mercy, gratitude, and justice', he renders 'the political landscape of Leviathanland ... inhospitable to heroic achievement'.³² In an ideal commonwealth, social levelling puts a stop to heroic exploits and aristocratic excess. Consequently, the commonwealth is purged of subjects liable to outshine the one figure legitimately poised to reap glory, the theorist.³³ Flamboyant aristocrats are not the only persons humbled by Hobbes's ethos – Hobbes also eliminates the sovereign as a potential rival.³⁴ Indifferent to the officeholder's character, Hobbes simultaneously 'depersonalizes the sovereign' and personalizes theory.³⁵ Hobbes's masterful deployment of injunctions to modesty demonstrates his command of 'the central tenet of epic theory: when politics is treated as a medium whereby theory is translated into reality, political rulers are reduced to being members of a supporting cast in a play where the dominant figure is the playwright'.³⁶

Wolin's metaphor (the commonwealth as a theatre, Hobbes as player and playwright) reflects his genealogy of the epic tradition. The tradition that Wolin excavates, and for which he recruits Hobbes, originates 'in a particular kind of contest over intellectual mastery', namely, the fifth-century BCE contest between Greek philosophers, on the one hand, and poets and dramatists, on the other.³⁷ From the Homeric period onward, Wolin writes, poets and dramatists 'were the special guardians and interpreters' of the heroic ethos, and, consequently, the dominant figures in Greek culture.³⁸ Determined to secure a place for dialectic in an education consecrated to poetry, fifth-century philosophers challenged the poets' hegemony, but they did so by adopting 'poetic standards of scale and achievement'.³⁹ Thus, an *epic* tradition of political theory emerges when philosophers translate dramatic and poetic ideals into a philosophical idiom. When

aspiration toward immortality. For example, see the 1679 broadsheet, *Elegie upon Mr. Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury, lately deceased*.

³² Wolin, *Hobbes and the epic tradition*, p. 27.

³³ Admittedly, Wolin qualifies this assessment in the closing lines of his essay. See Wolin, *Hobbes and the epic tradition*, pp. 49–50. Hobbes is ultimately an anti-hero, according to Wolin, because his epic achievement involves creating a society in which there is no room for heroism on the part of subject or theorist – a society in which political agon has been effectively extinguished.

³⁴ In *Leviathan*, Hobbes repeatedly insists that the sovereign must maintain a position of unrivalled pre-eminence in the commonwealth. Toward that end, he censures subjects who court public esteem. See Hobbes, *Leviathan*, pp. 374 and 225.

³⁵ Wolin, *Hobbes and the epic tradition*, p. 28.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

Wolin casts Hobbes as both hero and playwright, he assimilates Hobbes to a tradition shaped by a very particular dramatic culture, the culture of Greek tragedy.

But the epic stage does not exhaust the definition of 'theatre'. In Wolin's lexicon, 'theatre' means a space in which heroes solicit approbation. By contrast, Hobbes defines the theatre as a space of opacity and concealment, as we learn when we turn to Chapter Sixteen of *Leviathan* ('Of persons, authors, and things personated'), where Hobbes uses theatrical metaphors to address questions of authorship. Here, Hobbes conceives of players and playwrights in resolutely non-heroic terms. Although designed to cement Hobbes's epic stature, Wolin's metaphor actually reveals the lack of continuity between Hobbes and the Greeks.

In Chapter Sixteen, Hobbes defines an author as the owner of authorized actions. 'Of Persons Artificiall, some have their words and actions *Owned* by those whom they represent. And then the Person is the *Actor*; and he that owneth his words and actions, is the *AUTHOR*: In which case the Actor acteth by Authority.'⁴⁰ On first glance, this definition seems to restrict artifice to those authorized to act. Artificial persons act, while natural persons own and author actions. But when Hobbes defines natural and artificial persons, he intimates that authorship (and natural personality more generally) is actually a role that one plays.

A Person, is he *whose words or actions are considered, either as his own, or as representing the words or actions of an other man, or of any other thing to whom they are attributed, whether Truly or by Fiction.* When they are considered as his owne, then is he called a *Naturall Person*: And when they are considered as representing the words and actions of an other, then is he a *Feigned or Artificiall person*.⁴¹

Read quickly, this definition seems to restrict artifice to those who act at another's behest. But on closer examination, we see that Hobbes blurs the distinction between natural and artificial persons when he explains that one is 'called a Naturall Person' if one's actions are 'considered' one's own. Hobbes chooses his words carefully. He never claims that the person in question is actually natural, or that he really owns his actions. Rather, Hobbes tells us that spectators *address* the 'natural' person as an owner, because they *consider* words and actions his possessions. In this passage, Hobbes locates the 'natural' person in an 'artificial' realm of appearance, performance, and interpretation.

Hobbes characterizes this realm as one of *theatricality* when he traces the etymology of the English word 'person'. According to Hobbes, 'person' derives from Latin. While Greek has a word 'which signifies the *Face*', the Latin equivalent, *persona*, 'signifies the *disguise, or outward appearance* of a man, counterfeited on the Stage; and somtines more particularly that part of it, which

⁴⁰ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 218.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 217.

disguiseth the face, as a Mask or Visard'.⁴² Where the Greeks see a natural visage, the Romans and the English see a mask that disguises the face. Writing in the latter tradition, Hobbes defines a person as someone who wears a disguise. Indeed, Hobbes equates personality with acting. 'So that a *Person*, is the same that an *Actor* is, both on the Stage and in common Conversation; and to *Personate*, is to *Act*, or *Represent* himselfe, or an other; and he that acteth another, is said to beare his *Person*, or act in his name.'⁴³ This passage confirms suspicions that the 'natural' person is an impersonator, just like his 'artificial' counterpart. Here, Hobbes includes those who act *in their own names* ('himselfe, or an other') in the category of performance. On this reading, all actions are theatrical.⁴⁴ The 'natural' person does not actually own his actions; rather, he performs the role of owner, just as an author performs accountability. Thus, Hobbes's performance of authorship is a masquerade – not an exhibitionist display. Wolin contends that Hobbes would personalize theory by humbling subjects and depersonalizing the sovereign. 'Hobbes, too, was concerned that the deed not overshadow the identity of the doer.'⁴⁵ But the author so personified remains a mere *persona*, a mask concealing his 'true' identity. Unlike the epic theorist, who strives 'to compel admiration and awe', Hobbes never drops the mask to bare his face for an appreciative audience.⁴⁶

Indeed, elsewhere Hobbes suggests that 'persons' don masks precisely because they lack a perceptible face. In a 1634 letter which anticipates the themes of personation and masquerade developed in *Leviathan*, Hobbes ponders a query posed by an unknown correspondent: '*Why a Man remembers lesse his owne Face, which he sees often in a Glasse, then the Face of a Friend, that he has not seene of a great Time?*'⁴⁷ Although Hobbes's response centres on 'scientific' issues surrounding memory and sensory perception, it also affords a glimpse of his vexed relationship to the human face.

My Opinion in generall is, that a Man remembers best those Faces whereof he has had the greatest impressions; & that the Impressions are the greater for the oftner seeing them, & the longer Staying upon the Sight of them. Now, you know, Men looke upon their owne Faces, but for short Fits; but, upon their Friends Faces, long Time together, whilst they discourse or converse together; so that a Man may receive a greater Impression from his Friends Face in a Day, then from his own in a Yere: And, according to this Impression, the Image will be fresher in his Mind. Besides, the Sight of ones Friends Face two Howres together, is of greater Force to imprint the Image of it, then the same Quantity of Time by Intermissions. For the Intermissions do easily deface that which is but lightly imprinted.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ For a more detailed exposition of this idea, see Hanna Pitkin, *The concept of representation* (Berkeley, CA, 1967); and Victoria Kahn, *Rhetoric, prudence, and skepticism in the Renaissance* (Ithaca, NY, 1985), p. 168. For another account of the significance of Hobbes's theatrical metaphors, see Jean-Christophe Agnew, *Worlds apart: the market and the theatre in Anglo-American thought, 1550–1750* (Cambridge, 1986), pp. 98–103.

⁴⁵ Wolin, *Hobbes and the epic tradition*, p. 17.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 5. Wolin's epic theorists solicit applause. See *ibid.*, p. 11.

⁴⁷ Thomas Hobbes, *The correspondence*, 1, ed. Noel Malcolm (Oxford, 1994), p. 22.

In generall, I thinke, that, That lasteth longer in the Memory, which hath been stronglier received by the Sense.⁴⁸

It might seem surprising that Hobbes agrees that few recognize their own faces, given his later claim that humans are naturally vainglorious. After all, ‘vanity’ connotes unseemly preoccupation with personal appearance, as well as inflated self-worth. But, unlike Narcissus, this letter’s generic individual spends little time (‘short Fits’) before the mirror; hence the ‘light’ impression which his face makes. Notwithstanding the brevity of the individual’s sojourns before the mirror, I consider the letter continuous with Hobbes’s later works. Here, Hobbes does not describe a man free of vanity, but rather a man with a face that is scarcely perceptible. A vain man could not indulge in narcissistic gazing even if he wanted to. When he looks in the mirror, the individual catches intermittent glimpses which never coalesce into a memorable visage, because he is in some sense ‘de-faced’. By contrast, the faces of interlocutors are memorable precisely because conversation transpires in the public sphere, where individuals sport masks that conceal their defacement.

Hobbes emphasizes the theatricality of personality and the elusiveness of the naked face to forestall (politically corrosive) exhibitionism on the part of theorist and subject. Wolin credits Hobbes with turning theory into a vehicle for ‘self-advertisement’. By contrast, I see Hobbes attempting to devise a style of theorizing consistent with his insights into the theatricality of personality. Hobbes goes out of his way to remind readers that his texts are not showcases – they neither provide unmediated access to his self, nor do they reveal his true identity. *Considerations upon the reputation, loyalty, manners, and religion of Thomas Hobbes* (1662), a sally in Hobbes’s campaign against John Wallis, offers a good example of the strategies Hobbes uses to frustrate readers’ desire to glimpse (and venerate) his naked face. In *Considerations*, Hobbes applauds Wallis’s facetious proposal, in *Hobbius heauton-timorumenos*, to publish an anthology of Hobbes’s boasts. ‘Thus say you: now says Mr. Hobbes, or I for him, let your idle person do it, and set down no more than he has written, as high praises as they be, I will promise you he shall acknowledge them under his hand, and be commended for it; and you scorned.’⁴⁹ Significantly, to own the ‘self-praise which most offends’ Wallis, Hobbes collapses the convention, upheld in the rest of the essay, of writing in the third person (‘Mr. Hobbes, or I for him’).⁵⁰ When Hobbes abandons the third person, he teases readers with the promise of direct access. Not only will Hobbes avow his boasts, he will do so in the first person, ‘under his own hand’. But Hobbes is playing a mischievous game here. The phrase ‘Mr. Hobbes, or I for him’ echoes *Leviathan*’s theory of representation. If, as the context implies, the ‘I’

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 22–3.

⁴⁹ Hobbes, *Considerations*, p. 438.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* Significantly, in the passage in question, Hobbes insists that his boasts are necessitated by (and justified as) self-defence. See Hobbes, *Considerations*, p. 438: ‘Besides, you can have very little skill in morality, that cannot see the justice of commending a man’s self, as well as of anything else, in his own defence.’

who would speak for Hobbes is Hobbes himself, then Hobbes can be said ‘to *Act*, or *Represent* himselfe’ when he owns his boasts.⁵¹ With this allusion to *Leviathan*, Hobbes reminds readers that even when he writes in first person, they only glimpse a persona or mask, *not* a natural visage.

II

Although Hobbes first expounds his theory of representation in *Leviathan* (1651), his concern to avoid the appearance of vanity predates *Leviathan*’s publication. Indeed, Hobbes’s reservations regarding conventions of philosophical self-presentation surface early on, in correspondence about the format of *De cive*’s publication. Many of Hobbes’s contemporaries believed that philosophical texts should showcase their authors, and this commitment shaped conventions of scholarly publication. Take the case of Samuel Sorbière, a French scientist who supervised publication of the second and third editions of *De cive* and published his own French translation in 1649. In letters, a starstruck Sorbière repeatedly implored Hobbes to drop the mask and bare his naked face. In a characteristically obsequious letter, Sorbière hails Hobbes as a titan who merits ‘the worship with which I honour you and heroes like you’.⁵² Apparently, gazing upon Hobbes’s countenance formed a key element of Sorbière’s cult.⁵³ In a 1645 letter, Sorbière requested permission to acquire Hobbes’s portrait.

Since I fear that when I return to Holland I may start to despise all things human again excessively and neglect the cultivation of a good mind, I have asked de Martel to send me portraits of you (*Iconem tuam*), the great Gassendi, and the excellent Mersenne. I ask for this most earnestly, in the belief that you will approve and look favourably on the boldness of my request. For I am moved and impelled to be virtuous not only by writings but also by the faces of great men (*vultus virorum maximorum*); I feel, as it were, an emanation, a natural force (*vim insitam*) which radiates from them to me.⁵⁴

In a revealing turn of phrase, Sorbière justifies his request for Hobbes’s *portrait* with a claim about the moral suasion exerted by Hobbes’s *face*. Sorbière ignores the role that artifice and representation play in making Hobbes present before him – he treats Hobbes’s portrait more like a relic than a representation. Indeed, Hobbes’s portrait proves pedagogically useful, according to Sorbière, because it perfectly transmits the ‘natural’ aura of his naked face.⁵⁵

⁵¹ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 217.

⁵² Hobbes, *Correspondence*, p. 122. In his replies, Hobbes thanks Sorbière for praising his preface to the second edition of *De cive* – which praise helped convince the publisher that *De cive* would sell – but blushes at the exaggerated nature of Sorbière’s praise. See Hobbes, *Correspondence*, pp. 126–7, 143–4.

⁵³ Aubrey attempts to depict Hobbes’s face through the medium of language, but finds the project daunting. Given the fragmentary nature of Aubrey’s text, his eventual description of Hobbes’s face captures the experience, described in Hobbes’s letter, of glimpsing defacement in ‘short fits’. See Aubrey, *Brief lives*, pp. 347–8.

⁵⁴ Hobbes, *Correspondence*, pp. 122–3.

⁵⁵ Noel Malcolm confirms that Sorbière did, in fact, succeed in obtaining Hobbes’s portrait from de Martel. See Hobbes, *Correspondence*, p. 135. One wonders why Hobbes would allow Sorbière to obtain

Given Sorbière's belief that portraiture communicates the moral force of the natural face, it is not surprising that he inserted Hobbes's portrait in the editions of *De cive* whose publication he supervised. *De cive* was first published anonymously in Paris in 1642, 'and its authorship remained a well-kept secret for some years'.⁵⁶ By contrast, the second edition, published in Amsterdam in 1647, advertised the author's identity. At Sorbière's direction, the edition's prefatory material featured an engraved portrait of Hobbes.⁵⁷ Moreover, Sorbière commissioned Henricus Bruno,⁵⁸ 'a man steeped in fine literature, and one of your [Hobbes's] leading admirers', to compose a series of Latin epigrams on the topic of Hobbes's portrait.⁵⁹ The epigrams were published on pages two and three between the illustrated title page and the engraved portrait.

To Sorbière's chagrin, Hobbes did not 'look favourably on the boldness' of his reverential gesture. Hobbes's portrait and Bruno's poem only appeared in one printing of 1647.⁶⁰ When Hobbes received the proofs from Sorbière, he objected to the portrait's caption and the poem's contents, and demanded that they be removed from all remaining copies. 'We must get the Elseviers to do this, either by pleading with them or by paying them.'⁶¹ Fear for personal safety and political

his portrait, given that Sorbière was likely to violate Hobbes's strictures on the proper use of portraiture. For those strictures, see Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 677: 'I say not, that to draw a Picture after a fancy, is a Sin; but when it is drawn, to hold it for a Representation of God, is against the second Commandment; and can be of no use, but to worship. And the same may be said of the Images of Angels, and of men dead; unlesse as Monuments of friends, or of men worthy of remembrance: For such use of an Image, is not Worship of the Image; but a civill honoring of the Person, not that is, but that was: But when it is done to the Image which we make of a Saint, for no other reason, but that we think he heareth our prayers, and is pleased with the honour wee doe him, when dead, and without sense, wee attribute to him more than humane power; and therefore it is Idolatry.' Sorbière's veneration threatens to lapse into idolatry.

⁵⁶ Cornelis W. Schoneveld, 'Some features of the seventeenth-century editions of Hobbes's *De cive* printed in Holland and elsewhere', in J. G. van der Bend, *Thomas Hobbes: his view of man* (Amsterdam, 1982), p. 125.

⁵⁷ Hobbes did not object in principle to inclusion of his portrait, although he would have assigned it a place of lesser prominence. See Hobbes, *Correspondence*, p. 147.

⁵⁸ See *ibid.*, p. 135: According to Malcolm, the Dutch Bruno (d. 1664) was 'a prolific minor neo-Latin poet' who worked as a tutor in the household of Constantijn Huygens and as rector of the Latin school at Hoorn.

⁵⁹ Hobbes, *Correspondence*, pp. 134–5. According to Malcolm, there is some question as to whether the epigrams were written at the same time. There is also a question as to whether they were written expressly for inclusion in *De cive*. Malcolm holds that the first epigram was written earlier, to adorn the colour portrait that Sorbière acquired from de Martel. Sorbière sends this epigram to Hobbes in September 1646, with no mention of inclusion in *De cive*. Indeed, Sorbière only mentions inserting the epigrams in *De cive* in a letter from October 1646. Presumably, the second letter refers to all three poems. See Hobbes, *Correspondence*, p. 145. For Sorbière's commission to Bruno, see also Schoneveld, 'Some features', p. 128; and Horst Bredekamp *Thomas Hobbes visuelle strategien* (Berlin, 1999), p. 171. The epigrams appeared in Thomas Hobbes, *De cive* (1647) under the following title: *In Effigiem Viri Clarissimi Thomae Hobbii Britanni*.

⁶⁰ Elsevier issued three printings of *De cive* in 1647, only one of which contains both the engraved portrait and the poems by Bruno. See Hugh McDonald and Mary Hargreaves, *Thomas Hobbes: a bibliography* (London, 1952); and Schoneveld, 'Some features', pp. 129–30.

⁶¹ Hobbes, *Correspondence*, p. 158.

viability motivated Hobbes's objection to the portrait's caption, which identified him as 'Academic Tutor to his Serene Highness the Prince of Wales'.⁶² Given that *De cive* expounds 'a political theory which offends the opinions of almost everyone', Hobbes worries that enemies will take the advertised link with the Prince as a pretext 'to stir up popular ill feeling against the royal family', and the resulting scandal will 'be blamed on my carelessness and vanity (*vanae gloriae*), to my great dishonour'.⁶³ But Hobbes also anticipates trouble from another quarter, worried lest close association with the royal family prevent his eventual return to England. Hobbes's objections to the portrait's caption are largely prudential; but they also reflect characteristic scorn for, and desire to avoid accusations of, authorial vanity. Indeed, concerns about vanity come to the fore when Hobbes takes exception to Bruno's poem. According to Hobbes, lust for reputation, not deference, prompts Bruno to pen the sycophantic verses that adorn Sorbière's *De cive*.

I accept with extreme gratitude the kindness of M. Bruno, and my greatest prayer is that I might be able to become worthy of his kind service by doing him some service in return. However, at present I do not want any verses to be prefixed to my book which I have not seen in advance. Otherwise, I fear that something done cleverly and with a good intention might, in present circumstances, turn into something damaging to me; and I fear that his eagerness for fame (*aviditas gloriae*) might be used as evidence to suggest that I wanted that undeserved title of tutor to the Prince.⁶⁴

'Eagerness for fame' leads Bruno to celebrate Hobbes in verse. However, readers who mistakenly assume that Hobbes approved the epigrams will tax *him* (not Bruno) with ambition and vanity. Thus, Sorbière's prefatory materials are not only prejudicial to Hobbes's political viability, but also contravene his nascent views on authorial deportment – as analysis of Bruno's epigrams, to which I now turn, reveals.

Curiously, the poems commissioned for *De cive* reject the fervent belief in portraiture's transparency that guides Sorbière's editorial decisions (as reported in the correspondence). Writing to Hobbes, Sorbière insists that portraiture seamlessly conveys the philosopher's natural aura. The philosopher's *portrait* provides readers with access to the improving forces that emanate from the philosopher's naked *face*. However, the fact that Sorbière commissioned a poem to accompany Hobbes's portrait (and justify its inclusion?) suggests that, on some level, even he harboured doubts about the portrait's transparency and pedagogical efficacy. Doubts of this kind animate Bruno's epigrams, which question the relationship of Hobbes's portrait to the self it represents, and the text it adorns. In the first epigram, an apostrophe 'to the viewer', Bruno concedes limitations of artistic representation.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 157.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

The likeness of Hobbes, which should be distributed throughout the whole world,
Lies open on this canvas for the world to admire.
Those things which remain hidden, consider them better,
And do not suppose that colours can communicate a subject's inner depths in the same
way that they can reproduce a face (*faciem*).
Believe that to be Thomas' face (*faciem*), which the painter could paint:
What he could not paint, believe it to be Thomas himself.⁶⁵

Assuming the painter could accurately reproduce the lineaments of Hobbes's face, such a reproduction would still be an unsatisfactory vehicle for communicating the author's true self. Even the most accurate rendering of Hobbes's face conceals as much as it reveals, because the philosopher's character and identity are not legible on his face. Given that interior dispositions escape representation, a painter can never capture 'Thomas himself'.

But Bruno questions whether the painter can even depict Hobbes's face accurately. In the epigram's final couplet, Bruno instructs the viewer to 'believe' in and credit the painter's accuracy – voluntary assent is required to secure the image's verisimilitude. Thus, Bruno concedes that viewers must learn to read the portrait before it can effect moral improvement – an effect which Sorbière initially described as 'natural'. Like the subjects, in Chapter Sixteen of *Leviathan*, whose 'consideration' determines whether peers are classed as natural or artificial persons, viewers must perform skilled acts of interpretation in order to read the engraving as a realistic representation and thereby absorb its 'natural force'. The portrait only works if viewers (educated by Bruno, courtesy of Sorbière) agree to 'consider' it a realistic representation of Hobbes's face, and then imagine the 'inner depths' which the face conceals.

Thus, Bruno's first epigram offers a strikingly Hobbesian account of personality and its construction. A recognizable face only coalesces through interpretation, and the face so constructed does not exhaust the subject's identity. However, Bruno fails to derive a Hobbesian conclusion from this analysis of portraiture's limitations – because personality is a masquerade, the self cannot be rendered transparent in any medium. In the second epigram, Bruno compares the representational skills of the painter to those of the

⁶⁵ Hobbes, *De cive* (1647). The translation is my own. For an alternative translation of the verses, and a discussion of their publication history, see Thomas Hobbes, *De cive: the Latin version*, ed. Howard Warrender (Oxford, 1983), Appendix A.

Ad Spectatorem.
Effigies Hobbi, totum mittenda per orbem,
Hac orbi tabula suspicienda patet.
Quae lateant, meliora puta, neque crede colores,
Ut faciem referunt, interiora dare.
Crede Thomae faciem, potuit quam pingere pictor:
Pingere quod nequit, crede fuisse Thomam.

philosopher, and concludes that hope is not lost for readers who crave a direct view of Hobbes.

Here we have a remarkable portrait of Hobbes writing about the citizen,
 Lofty virtue gives him her appearance (*faciem*).
 Great wisdom resides in his mind, but modest learning:
 This book bears the likenesses (*effigies*) of his wisdom and his learning.
 Painter, lift up your hands from the canvas,
 Even though, with the help of art, you could equal Apelles' hands.
 In letters and a learned volume, Hobbes reproduced his own countenance (*vultum*) with
 greater dexterity.⁶⁶

Although a portrait cannot capture Hobbes's wisdom, this failure does not reflect the self's opacity; rather, it reflects limitations of the artist's chosen medium. Other media are more accommodating. Bruno promises that readers will glimpse Hobbes's true self when they turn the page and begin *De cive*, which offers a more revealing portrait of Hobbes than any painting. For Bruno, political theory is personal, a medium through which Hobbes unveils himself to admiring readers.

Hobbes's objections to Bruno's poem reflect discomfort with this definition of political theory. Hobbes suppressed Sorbière's prefatory materials not only because they compromised his political viability, but also because they configured him as a celebrity whose countenance shines forth in his texts. Hobbes understood that Sorbière's *De cive* was liable to provoke accusations of vanity – accusations whose justice he would concede, for, in subsequent works, he insists that texts of political theory cannot, and should not, function as self-portraits.

III

If texts which merit the designation 'philosophy' do not showcase their authors' identities, what is the proper relationship between author and text, according to Hobbes, and what, other than lust for renown, could motivate one to philosophize? To answer these questions, I turn to an unlikely source, Hobbes's posthumously published Latin verse autobiography (often referred to as *Vita carmine expressa*).⁶⁷ The *Vita* is an unlikely source for an argument about authorial

⁶⁶ Hobbes, *De cive*.

Talis adest Hobbi civem scribentis imago,
 Cui faciem virtus induit alta suam.
 Pectore grande Sophos habitat, doctrina modesta:
 Hic liber effigies hujus & hujus habet.
 Tolle manum tabula, posses licet arte magistra,
 Pictor, Apellaeas aequiparare manus.
 Hobbibus in chartis doctoque volumine vultum
 Majori retulit dexteritate suum.

⁶⁷ In what follows, English citations from the *Vita* are taken from Thomas Hobbes, *The life of Mr. Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury* (London, 1680), an anonymous translation, and Latin citations taken from

modesty precisely because it is an autobiography. After all, if Hobbes were determined to dispel the assumption that texts are tacit self-portraits, why would he write (more than one) autobiography? (Similarly, why did Hobbes sit for multiple portraits if he rejected the cult of the philosopher's face?⁶⁸) The conventions of autobiography presuppose the self's legibility; further, the autobiographer betrays something like vanity with the assumption that his or her life merits attention. Admittedly, the conviction that autobiography is a token of distinction surfaces in one of Hobbes's autobiographical texts, *The prose life*. This brief autobiography in Latin prose belongs to the tradition of eminent lives. In *The prose life*, Hobbes trusts that 'learned men as yet unborn, and that posterity, will be grateful for this transmission of the text of his life', given his 'singular' scientific

Thomas Hobbes, *Thomae Hobbesii Malmesburiensis vita, auctore seipso* (London, 1679). The *Vita* has a convoluted publication history, and there is some dispute about which edition is most authoritative. Hobbes wrote the *Vita* in 1672, and it was first published in an unauthorized edition in 1679 (the edition to which I refer), immediately following Hobbes's death. In 1681 and 1682, Richard Blackburne included a version of the *Vita* in a volume (*Thomae Hobbes angli Malmesburiensis philosophi vita*) that contained two additional accounts of Hobbes's life: a Latin prose biography attributed to Hobbes and a Latin biography attributed to Blackburne, which is largely a translation from Aubrey's *Brief lives*. By his admission, Blackburne altered the text of the *Vita* to correct misprints, grammatical mistakes, and metrical problems. In some cases, Blackburne takes metrical lapses as pretexts for editorial licence; for example, Blackburne changed the poem's final couplet. See Aubrey, *Brief lives*, p. 363: 'These two last verses Dr. Blackburne altered (because of qua in quatuor, long) in the copie printed with Mr. Hobbes's life in Latine, and some other alterations he made, but me thinks the sense is not so brisque.' As Aubrey notes, Blackburne's alterations dilute the sense and force of the original. Blackburne seems determined to recuperate Hobbes for the pantheon of philosophical heroes by muting the motif of fear that runs through the *Vita*. Toward this end, Blackburne removes the reference to fear in Hobbes's final couplet, and he prefaces the *Vita* (1681) with a tag from Virgil's *Georgics* which implies that, through philosophy, Hobbes has vanquished fear ('Foelix qui potuit rerum cognoscere Caussas./ Atque metum omnes & inexorable Fatum/Subiecit pedibus, Strepitumque Acherontis avari'). William Molesworth reproduces the text of Blackburne's *Vita* in the first volume of Thomas Hobbes, *Thomae Hobbes Malmesburiensis opera philosophica quae Latine scripsit omnia*, ed. William Molesworth (Scientia Aalen, 1961). In personal correspondence (Aug. 2002), Quentin Skinner confirmed that the unauthorized 1679 edition was typeset from a manuscript of the *Vita* in James Wheldon's hand with corrections by Hobbes (Chatsworth: Hobbes MS A.6: Untitled), and is therefore the best printed text of the *Vita* (that is, the edition which most closely reflects what Hobbes originally wrote). For that reason, I cite from the 1679 edition, rather than from Molesworth. Although based on the 1679 edition, the 1680 English translation from which I cite is quite loose, and, at key points, departs from the literal sense of the Latin. (For deficits of this translation, see the prefatory note to the reprint edition, Thomas Hobbes, *The life of Mr. Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury and Thomae Hobbesii Malmesburiensis vita* (Exeter, 1979). For its publication history, see Anthony Wood, *Athenae Oxonienses* (London, 1692), p. 481.) Nevertheless, I have decided to cite from it (including the original Latin when the translation fails to capture connotations of the original) for two reasons: First, this translation has been in circulation since Hobbes's death, and has therefore played an influential role in shaping Hobbes's public persona. Second, the translation is reproduced in Thomas Hobbes, *Human nature and De corpore politico* (Oxford, 1994), and so is widely available to contemporary readers. For an alternative translation of the *Vita*, see Thomas Hobbes, 'The autobiography of Thomas Hobbes', trans. Benjamin Farrington, *The rationalist annual* (1958), pp. 22–31.

⁶⁸ Aubrey catalogues Hobbes's portraits. See Aubrey, *Brief lives*, p. 354. Hobbes offers a similar catalogue in *The prose life*. See Hobbes, *Human nature*, p. 252. Hobbes is not opposed to portraiture in principle, although he does place strictures on its proper use.

accomplishments.⁶⁹ By contrast, I contend that the *Vita*, which scholars often cite as evidence of Hobbes's vanity, carefully subverts conventions of autobiography. In the *Vita*, Hobbes beseeches readers to view his texts as testaments not to his distinction, but to his finitude. Acute consciousness of mortality – rather than lust for immortality – moves Hobbes to philosophize.

The *Vita* demonstrates the contribution of fear to the shaping of Hobbes's philosophical and political projects. Hobbes, whose birth coincides with the Anglo-Spanish war, opens with a lament for 'Th'ill Times, and Ills born with me' – foremost among them, fear.⁷⁰ As Hobbes famously relates, the threat of invasion by the Spanish Armada spooked his pregnant mother, prompting her to deliver a pair of twins. 'For Fame had rumour'd, that a Fleet at Sea,/Wou'd cause our Nations Catastrophe;/And hereupon it was my Mother Dear/Did bring forth Twins at once, both Me, and Fear.'⁷¹ (The Latin original emphasizes the generative power of Armada-inspired fear. The Armada's approach strikes such terror in Hobbes's mother that she actually conceives, and gives birth to, fear. 'Atq; metum tantum concepit tunc mea mater,/Ut paretet geminos, meque metumque simul.'⁷²) Significantly, Hobbes's birth occasions meditation upon life's fragility, rather than its potential for novelty and renewal. For Hobbes, birth signifies mortality and the imminent threat of death – not natality. The theme of doubling further demonstrates Hobbes's resistance to tropes of natality. Although Hobbes neglects to tell us whether his twin (fear) is fraternal or identical, he does deny that a unique individual was ushered into the world at his birth. As a double, Hobbes cannot take the inauspicious circumstances of his birth as a token of distinction.

Moreover, with this opening scenario, Hobbes invites readers to interpret his life using the theoretical framework provided in *Leviathan*, a framework that enables men 'truly to read one another'.⁷³ Readers initiated into the cult of philosophical celebrity will doubtless be tempted to impose an epic frame on Hobbes's story. To counter this tendency, Hobbes narrates his life using figures that echo his earlier, philosophical works.⁷⁴ Although the fear that seizes Hobbes's mother remains unnamed, the perilous circumstances of her labour clue readers in to the fact that Hobbes's twin is not a generic fear. Rather, it is *fear of violent death* at the

⁶⁹ Thomas Hobbes, *The prose life*, in Hobbes, *Human nature*, p. 250: 'Therefore, I do not write and publish the life of a man in terms of his business, or his involvement in matters of peace and war, but rather in terms of his excellence and virtual singularity in all branches of science. When his abilities became known (as has already been demonstrated), innumerable men gathered about him, both from our own country and from foreign parts, and amongst those who came were the emissaries of princes, as well as others of the highest nobility. It may reasonably be supposed that learned man as yet unborn, and that posterity, will be grateful for this transmission of the text of his life. They will first wish to understand his involvement in the sciences, and then something of the nature of his life.'

⁷⁰ Hobbes, *The life of Thomas Hobbes*, p. 2.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² Hobbes, *Thomae Hobbesii*, p. 2.

⁷³ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Introduction, p. 82.

⁷⁴ I have argued that Hobbes invites readers to interpret the *Vita* through constant reference to *Leviathan*. Quentin Skinner identifies a different intertext for the *Vita*: Ovid's autobiography. See Quentin Skinner, *Reason and rhetoric in the philosophy of Hobbes* (Cambridge, 1996), p. 233.

hands of invading Spaniards. Thus, Hobbes's twin is also a twin to the 'Feare of Death' that deflates vanity, and inclines men to peace, in *Leviathan's* state of nature.⁷⁵ (And, in its materialism and appeal to self-interest, the fear of violent death is itself a consciously deflated double of the lofty religious notion of human finitude.⁷⁶) The *Vita's* opening vignette depicts Hobbes as someone alive to, and properly chastened by, the horrors of war. Like a dutiful subject in the *Leviathan* state, Hobbes learns the right lesson when he reasons about his fears – he learns to cultivate peace. 'For this, My Countries Foes I e'r did hate,/With calm Peace and my muse associate.'⁷⁷ At the outset, Hobbes resists a heroic narrative, casting himself in the modest role of 'poor worm (*Vermiculus*)' – that is, in the role of an ideal political subject.⁷⁸

Nevertheless, readers aware of Hobbes's reputation for bombast may wonder whether Hobbes and his twin were separated at birth. Does Hobbes really remain in character as the 'poor worm' throughout the entirety of the *Vita*? Or does he forsake this humble role for something more spectacular? For the most part, the *Vita* portrays Hobbes as a frantic bundle of energy, constantly anxious, constantly in motion.⁷⁹ However, in passages devoted to philosophical controversy, Hobbes dons a bellicose guise that seems inconsistent with the modest demeanour we expect from one who avows 'timorousnes'.⁸⁰ Admittedly, Hobbes wears multiple masks in the *Vita*, some timid and modest, others brazen and proud. How does Hobbes deploy the various masks at his disposal, and to what end?

Perhaps the best way to fathom these divergent personae is to examine how war functions as a backdrop for, and a metaphor within, the *Vita*. Hobbes offers diametrically opposed evaluations of war. Although he laments the violence of recent English history, he relishes the violence of philosophical combat. When describing the military conflicts (the Anglo-Spanish war, the English civil war) that provide the unfortunate backdrop to his life, Hobbes mingles horror with indignation. By his admission, Hobbes abhors, fears, and flees from the 'horrid

⁷⁵ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 188.

⁷⁶ I thank Victoria Kahn for this insight.

⁷⁷ Hobbes, *The life of Thomas Hobbes*, p. 2.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

⁷⁹ For an example of Hobbes as an antic character, constantly in motion, never at rest, see Hobbes, *The life of Thomas Hobbes*, p. 6: 'Whether on Horse, in Coach, or Ship, still I/Was most intent on my Philosophy./One only thing I'th' World seem'd true to me,/Tho' several ways that Falsified be./One only True Thing, the Basis of all/Those Things whereby we any Thing do call./How Sleep does fly away, and what things still/By Opticks I can Multiply at will./Phancie's Internal, th'Issue of our Brain./Th'internal parts only Motion contain:/And he that studies Physicks first must know/What Motion is, and what Motion can do. /To Matter, Motion, I my self apply.'

⁸⁰ See Aubrey, *Brief lives*, p. 390: 'His extraordinary timorousnes which he himself in his Latine poem doth very ingeniously confess and attributes it to the influence of his mother's dread of the Spanish invasion in 88, she being then with child of him.' However, Aubrey goes out of his way to dispel the notion that Hobbes's fears were superstitious. See Aubrey, *Brief lives*, p. 353: 'For instance, one (common) [slander against Hobbes] was that he was afraid to lye alone at night in his chamber, I have often heard him say he was not afraid of sprights, but afraid of being knockt on the head for five or ten pounds, which rogues might think he had in his chamber.' Hobbes also takes pains to rebut this slander in Hobbes, *The life of Thomas Hobbes*, p. 4 – 'My Slumbers pleasant in Nights darkest Shade' – and Hobbes, *Prose life*, in Hobbes, *Human nature*, p. 251.

War' that breaks out in the 1640s.⁸¹ 'The War's now hot, I dread to see it so,/ Therefore to *Paris* well-belov'd, I go.'⁸² When confronted with the chaos and carnage of war, Hobbes's first concern is self-preservation. While some would consider flight cowardly, Hobbes vaunts his 'cowardice' as a testament to his rationality. Reason teaches that '*every man, ought to endeavour Peace, as farre as he has hope of obtaining it*'.⁸³ As in the *Vita*'s opening vignette, Hobbes's conduct during the civil war demonstrates fealty to *Leviathan*'s political precepts. 'My Life and Writings speak one Congruous Sense.'⁸⁴

But even though Hobbes (rightly) disdains the heroic ethos during the civil war, he is not entirely innocent of martial pretensions. Toward the middle of the *Vita*, Hobbes boasts of martial prowess as a geometer. War, which previously inspired fear, is recuperated as a metaphor for exhilarating philosophical controversy. As Hobbes relates, the publication of *De corpore* set off a 'constant War', which provided myriad opportunities for display of valour.⁸⁵ For the most part, Hobbes's skirmishes with 'the Barb'rous, Bloody Enemy' yield public acclaim.⁸⁶ For example, with the publication of *De principiis*, Hobbes scores a triumph at his critics' expense.

Another Book of Principles I Print,
Nothing cou'd be more clear than what was in't.
Whereby the Nature of Proportion is
Explain'd so fully, none can say amiss.
Upon this Subject most agreed that I
Of every one had gain'd the Victory;
Others seem in it to find Errors store,
But they are crazy grown, and I the more
Press upon them; then do ascend the high
And lofty Summit of Geometry.⁸⁷

(In the Latin original, the martial metaphor is more explicit, and the critics' defeat more ignominious. Vanquished critics rush to conceal wounds which Hobbes has inflicted. 'Dissimulant aliis vulnera magna locis,/Deficientibus insto/Culminaque inscendo summa Geometriae.'⁸⁸) Similarly, the publication of *Rosetum geometricum* elicits a new volley of criticism ('Wallis opposes, and I lost the day,/As both *Divines* and *Algebrists* do say'), but once Hobbes warms to the battle, he manages to rout and scatter his foes.⁸⁹ In a stunning reversal, Hobbes, who once cowered at the outbreak of battle, now inspires fear in lesser men. By his admission ('Liking the combat'), the mature Hobbes is a zealous warrior.⁹⁰

⁸¹ Hobbes, *The life of Thomas Hobbes*, p. 7.

⁸² Ibid. Here, Hobbes implicitly numbers himself among the 'men of feminine courage' for whom allowances should be made in wartime. See Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 270.

⁸³ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 190.

⁸⁴ Hobbes, *The life of Thomas Hobbes*, p. 18.

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 12.

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 15.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Hobbes, *Thomae Hobbesii*, p. 12.

⁸⁹ Hobbes, *The life of Thomas Hobbes*, p. 16.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

Waxing triumphant, Hobbes seems to have dispelled the ominous portents that shadowed his birth. In the theatre of philosophical combat, Hobbes overcomes cowardice and becomes a formidable opponent. Moreover, as we learn in one of the *Vita*'s most dramatic anecdotes, Hobbes appears to have vanquished his menacing twin, the fear of violent death. As Hobbes relates, he fell prey to grave illness while in Paris. At death's approach, Hobbes stands resolute and forces his opponent (death) to desert the field of battle (like the vanquished geometers in the passages cited above). 'Then for six Months was sick; but yet at length,/Though very weak, I did recover strength.'⁹¹ (The theme of flight and desertion is more explicit in the Latin. 'Dein per sex menses morbo decumbo, propinqua/Accinctus Morti; nec fugio, illa fugit.'⁹²) This face off with death is perhaps the ultimate demonstration of Hobbes's valour. The mature Hobbes displays so much bravado that he can even rout death, the force that dutiful subjects should rightfully fear.

How does this martial rhetoric shape Hobbes's persona in the *Vita*? For many readers, the recapitulation of Hobbes's 'wars' is the most telling passage in the *Vita*, the passage that reveals Hobbes's true motives for philosophizing. On this view, the valiant hero is the 'authentic' Hobbes (not the timid little worm). Although the opening scenario raises expectations that Hobbes will affect a modest demeanour, the unabashed bravado of these passages forces readers to concede that Hobbes and his twin were separated at birth. The *Vita* is not, ultimately, a profession of modesty, the text in which Hobbes vaunts fitness for political subjection. Rather, the *Vita* is Hobbes's bid for glory, the text in which he flaunts exemption from his own strictures against ambition. Sheldon Wolin argues along these lines when he glosses the passages cited above. Although Wolin appreciates the irony of Hobbes's self-presentation, he insists that Hobbes's martial posturing reveals the dominant 'impulse' behind his political theory.

Despite the mock-heroic tone and the abundant fantasies, it is easy to see an impulse to mastery which could not be satisfied with small triumphs but hungered for a measure of immortality. This suggests the possibility that his conception of theory had been formed by heroic intentions and that, sensitive as he was to the structure and nature of literary epics, strong traces of and resemblances to epic poetry might be found in his political theory.⁹³

By contrast, I would place greater emphasis on Hobbes's *mockery* of epic convention. Hobbes plays dress-up in a hero's mantle, going out of his way to remind readers that his laurels are costume. Nevertheless, certain passages support Wolin's claim that lust for celebrity moves Hobbes to theorize. For example, Hobbes touts the warm reception that *De cive* received amongst scholars. 'My book *de Cive*; the new Matter in't/Gratifi'd Learned Men, which was the Cause/It was Translated, and with great Applause/By several Nations, and great Scholars read,/So that my Name was Famous, and far spread (*late nomine notus*

⁹¹ Hobbes, *The life of Thomas Hobbes*, p. 9.

⁹³ Wolin, *Hobbes and the epic tradition*, p. 16.

⁹² Hobbes, *Thomae Hobbesii*, p. 8.

eram).⁹⁴ Although Hobbes never admits that he writes *in order* to solicit praise, he does embrace renown as a testament to his worth.

Wolin's interpretation has the virtue of intuitive plausibility. However, a careful reading recommends an alternative interpretation of Hobbes's self-presentation in the *Vita*. How can we construe Hobbes's martial posturing as something other than a bid for philosophical immortality? First, recall Vespasian's Law, which licenses polemic in the service of self-defence. 'It is uncivil to give ill language first, but civil and lawful to return it.' Although never invoked by name, this maxim informs Hobbes's rhetorical choices. In passages devoted to political controversy and philosophical contest, Hobbes never hesitates to admit the ferocity of his opponents' attacks (e.g. 'I lost the day,/As both *Divines* and *Algebrists* do say').⁹⁵ At first blush, this candour seems odd. When Hobbes concedes that his texts fail to persuade, he risks ignominy. But on closer inspection, it appears that Hobbes is willing to run this risk in order to dramatize the precariousness of his standing within philosophical circles. If considerations of self-defence motivate Hobbes's bravado, then, according to Vespasian's Law, Hobbes's boasts express vulnerability, rather than vanity. As Hobbes asserts, in response to Wallis's aspersions, 'But this I am sure is false, that either he or any man living did ever hear me brag of my Science, or praise my self, but when my defence required it.'⁹⁶

More importantly, the *Vita*'s narrative structure undermines the plausibility of a heroic reading. Although Hobbes claims that, upon cessation of philosophical hostilities, he has nothing left to relate ('These were my Wars (*bella mea*); what more have I to say?'⁹⁷), his story does not end with triumph in the theatre of geometrical combat. Rather, the *Vita* features a concluding coda that tallies Hobbes's income and acknowledges death's imminence. In the coda, Hobbes descends from the lofty summit of geometry to the mundane world of domestic accounting.

Stock'd with five hundred pounds of Coin before
I did desert, or leave my Native Shore;
To these two hundred added, but withal,
A Weighty Lasting Grief did me befall.
(Thou'rt Dead, *Godolphin*, who lov'dst Reason, true
Justice and Peace, Soldier Belov'd, Adieu)
Twice forty pounds, a yearly Pension, then
I from my own Country receiv'd; and when

⁹⁴ Hobbes, *The life of Thomas Hobbes*, p. 8. See Skinner, *Reason and rhetoric*, pp. 243–4.

⁹⁵ See also Hobbes, *The life of Thomas Hobbes*, p. 13: 'And in Six Dialogues I do Inveigh/Against that new and Geometrick way,/But to no purpose, Great Men it doth please,/And thus the Med'cine yields to the Disease.' On Hobbes, *The life of Thomas Hobbes*, p. 11, Hobbes admits the ferocity of attacks on his political conduct: 'When that Book [*Leviathan*] was perus'd by knowing Men,/The Gates of *Janus* Temple opened then;/And they accus'd me to the King, that I/Seem'd to approve *Cromwel*'s Impiety,/And Countenance the worst of Wickedness:/This was believ'd.' For a different interpretation of Hobbes's willingness to acknowledge his enemies' ferocity, see Skinner, *Reason and rhetoric*, pp. 350–1.

⁹⁶ Hobbes, *Six lessons*, p. 336.

⁹⁷ Hobbes, *The life of Thomas Hobbes*, p. 16.

King *Charles* restored was, a hundred more
 Was allow'd me out of his private Store.
 A Noble Gift.⁹⁸

Although Hobbes disavows greed ('Content with this, desire no more Pelf'), his accounting provides a surprisingly petty conclusion to what appeared, for a moment, like an epic life.⁹⁹ Would a warrior bent on immortality obsess over his pension? With this account, Hobbes disrupts the 'mock-heroic' narrative of the triumphant warrior, and replaces it with an emphatically worldly narrative. Of course, readers could worry that financial security breeds complacency inimical to political subjection, the rationality of which is most evident to the insecure. Hobbes shares these worries. On more than one occasion, he voices doubts regarding the bourgeois' fitness for political subjection. 'Man is then most troublesome, when he is most at ease: for then it is that he loves to shew his Wisdome, and controule the Actions of them that governe the Commonwealth.'¹⁰⁰ With this accounting, Hobbes anticipates and defuses charges that 'commodious living' has inured him to death's sting: for he reintroduces the spectre of mortality.¹⁰¹ Death, which purportedly fled the scene after Hobbes's recovery in Paris, returns to interrupt his tally. Mid-count, Hobbes mourns the death of Sidney Godolphin, a patron whose demise provided occasion for his enrichment (in the form of a bequest). Thus, Hobbes's accounting disrupts a heroic reading in two ways. First, Hobbes deflates his earlier, martial rhetoric. Second, he disarms those who would accuse him of bourgeois complacency by acknowledging death's inevitability.

Indeed, the veneer of bourgeois self-satisfaction grows increasingly ironic if we read the accounting as an allusion to Hobbes's favourite biblical text, Job. Although Hobbes names two texts, *Leviathan* and *Behemoth*, after fearsome creatures from the book of Job, his explicit remarks on Job are scant. Nowhere in Hobbes's corpus do we find a full-fledged interpretation of Job. However, on the basis of this scant evidence, we can surmise that Hobbes considers Job the most authoritative biblical antidote to pride.¹⁰² Job appeals to Hobbes as a story of

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 17. For a more modest assessment of Hobbes's finances, see Hobbes, *Prose life*, in Hobbes, *Human nature*, p. 253.

⁹⁹ Hobbes, *The life of Thomas Hobbes*, p. 18.

¹⁰⁰ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 226. For another critique of bourgeois complacency, see *ibid.*, p. 677. Here, I take issue with critics, like C. B. MacPherson, who anoint Hobbes the apostle of a new bourgeois ethos. See C. B. MacPherson, *The political theory of possessive individualism* (Oxford, 1964). MacPherson fails to discern the threat bourgeois contentment poses to political stability; material comforts threaten to render subjects oblivious to existential insecurity, and the need for absolute sovereignty. See Strauss, *The political philosophy*, p. 122: 'Hobbes "prefers" these terrors of the state of nature because only on awareness of these terrors can a true and permanent society rest. The bourgeois existence which no longer experiences these terrors will endure only as long as it remembers them.' If commodious living fosters complacency, and complacency conduces to pride, Hobbes must identify a discourse that recalls even the most prosperous subjects to their finitude.

¹⁰¹ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 188.

¹⁰² Hobbes does explain that *Leviathan's* title alludes to difficulties of governing proud men, difficulties diagnosed in the book of Job. See Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 362: 'Hitherto I have set forth the nature of Man, (whose pride and other Passions have compelled him to submit himselfe to

salutary chastening. In the book of Job, God lets Satan torment a man who ‘was perfect and upright, and one that feared God, and eschewed evil’.¹⁰³ Suffering Job gains notoriety for both the depths of his misery, and the length at which he laments his fate. The equally long-winded arguments of Job’s friends fail either to illuminate his predicament or to alleviate his suffering. Only the full display of divine might chastens Job. When confronted with God’s unfathomable power, Job acknowledges his insignificance and adopts a posture commensurate with human finitude (and appropriate to political subjection). ‘Wherefore I abhor *myself*, and repent in dust and ashes.’¹⁰⁴ Job not only professes his finitude, he also performs it by remaining silent throughout the book’s conclusion, which details the restoration of his estate. ‘So the Lord blessed the latter end of Job more than his beginning: for he had fourteen thousand sheep, and six thousand camels, and a thousand yoke of oxen, and a thousand she asses. He also had seven sons and three daughters.’¹⁰⁵ Hobbes’s tally, at the end of the *Vita*, should be read as an allusion to the accounting that concludes the book of Job. Unlike the bourgeois of whom Hobbes is justly suspicious, Job maintains chastened silence even when showered with bounty. Like Job, Hobbes remains cognizant of finitude even though circumstances threaten to render him smug and complacent.

The *Vita*’s final couplet further confirms suspicions that vanity is not the passion that motivates Hobbes’s philosophical endeavour. The *Vita* concludes with the same passion with which it began: fear. ‘I’ve now Completed my Eighty fourth year,/And Death approaching, prompts me not to fear.’¹⁰⁶ With this acknowledgement of death’s imminence, Hobbes invites readers to reevaluate previous assessments of his demeanour and motivation. Death can only inform Hobbes that the time for fear has passed if Hobbes has, in fact, been fearful all along. Thus, the final couplet retrospectively lends a tincture of anxiety to Hobbes’s most outlandish boasts. His bravado notwithstanding, Hobbes is fearful even when he scales the summits of geometry. Indeed, Hobbes’s word choice, in the original Latin, underscores fear’s tenacity. ‘Et prope stans dictat mors mihi, Ne metue.’¹⁰⁷ The verb ‘*dicto*’, which Hobbes uses to describe death’s admonition, is the frequentative form of the verb ‘*dico*’ (to say). As a frequentative, ‘*dicto*’ connotes repeated action: to say over and over again. Hobbes uses the frequentative to convey the depths of his fear. Death must repeat the admonition ‘Do not fear’ because Hobbes’s fears are not easily assuaged. This claim to perpetual fear is consistent with the psychology outlined in *Leviathan*, which deems fear an ineradicable element of human life. ‘For there is no such thing as perpetuall Tranquility of mind, while we live here; because Life it selfe is but Motion, and

Government;) together with the great power of his Governour, whom I compared to *Leviathan*, taking that comparison out of the two last verses of the one and fortieth of *Job*; where God having set forth the great power of *Leviathan*, called him King of the Proud. *There is nothing*, saith he, *on earth, to be compared with him. He is made so as not to be afraid. He seeth every high thing below him; and is King of all the children of pride.*’

¹⁰³ Job 1: 1.

¹⁰⁴ Job 42: 6.

¹⁰⁵ Job 42: 12–13.

¹⁰⁶ Hobbes, *The life of Thomas Hobbes*, p. 18. Hobbes lived to the age of ninety-one.

¹⁰⁷ Hobbes, *Thomae Hobbesii*, p. 14.

can never be without Desire, nor without Feare, no more than without Sense.¹⁰⁸ As Michael Oakshott explains, ‘The great fear, the fear of death, is permanent and unassuaged. Life is a dream which no knowledge that mankind can acquire is able to dissipate.’¹⁰⁹ Triumph in the theatre of philosophical combat does not assuage Hobbes’s fear, because philosophical celebrity cannot insulate him from death. Indeed, in a world where fear is a necessary condition of life, death emerges as a perverse consolation, the only possible relief from anxiety, given that the ‘perpetuall and restlesse desire of Power after power ... ceaseth onely in death’.¹¹⁰ With death lurking around the corner, Hobbes finally anticipates relieve from the fear that has dogged him since birth.

If fear of death is the passion that dominates Hobbes’s life, then heightened sensitivity to mortality, rather than lust for immortality, animates Hobbes’s philosophical escapades. The *Vita* is not, as most have argued, a bid for celebrity on the part of a distinguished philosopher – it is the testament of an ordinary mortal. Of course, for Hobbes, being an ordinary mortal is not inconsistent with the political theorist’s vocation. Indeed, Hobbes credits his success as a philosopher to his modest acknowledgement of finitude. In the *Vita*, fear of death spurs restless philosophical activity. As in *Leviathan*’s state of nature, fear moves humans to assert power. In *Leviathan*, Hobbes warns that death is imminent, but hopes this warning will inspire readers to develop skills requisite to political association – skills which allow humans to create a ‘*Mortall God*’.¹¹¹ Similarly, in the *Vita*, awareness of death’s imminence inspires Hobbes to devise schemes for human security. In Hobbes’s world, the fearful seek to alleviate human misery, although they renounce presumptuous plans to extinguish human vulnerability. In this sense, Hobbes’s professed modesty is consistent with theoretical audacity. Hobbes is a deft philosophical combatant precisely because he appreciates life’s fragility.

The reciprocal relationship between fear of death and philosophical creativity is manifest in a widely circulated anecdote about the elderly Hobbes’s attitude toward and plans for death. Although an eighty-four-year-old Hobbes awaits death at the end of the *Vita*, he lived for seven years after the text’s completion. In *Memoirs of the family of Cavendish* (1708), White Kennett, a partisan of Hobbes’s employers (but a critic of Hobbes), reports that Hobbes would amuse himself in the latter years by composing imaginary epitaphs. ‘He would suffer some Friends to dictate an Epitaphe, among which he was best pleas’d with this Humour, *This is the true Philosopher’s Stone*; which indeed would have had as much religion in it, as that which now remains.’¹¹² We can best appreciate the

¹⁰⁸ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, pp. 129–30.

¹⁰⁹ Michael Oakshott, *Hobbes on civil association* (Indianapolis, IN, 1975), p. 153.

¹¹⁰ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 161.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 227.

¹¹² White Kennett, *Memoirs of the family of Cavendish* (London, 1708), p. 17. For Hobbes’s actual epitaph, see Aubrey, *Brief lives*, p. 386: ‘Condita hic sunt ossa Thomae Hobbes/Qui per multos annos servivit duobus comitibus Devoniae (patri et filio)./Vir probus, et fama eruditionis./Domi foris que bene cognitus/Obiit Anno Domini 1679, mensis Dec die 4, Aetatis suae 91.’

force of Hobbes's witticism if we look at another text that invokes the legend of the philosopher's stone, the 'Author's Epistle to the Reader' from *De corpore*. Hobbes writes,

Think not, Courteous Reader, that the philosophy, the elements whereof I am going to set in order, is that which makes philosophers' stones, nor that which is found in the metaphysic codes; but that it is the natural reason of man, busily flying up and down among the creatures, and bringing back a true report of their order, causes, and effects. Philosophy, therefore, the child of the world and your own mind, is within yourself.¹¹³

Here, Hobbes distinguishes his method from the metaphysical extravagances of his predecessors. When philosophers replace metaphysics with method, the tombstone emerges as the true philosopher's stone. That is, once we renounce outmoded aspirations to philosophical transcendence, bodies – their limitations as well as their power – take centre stage as the proper object of philosophical inquiry. Hobbes's mock epitaph reflects a novel conception of philosophy's affective springs, and its ultimate purpose. Philosophy springs from obsession with (bodily) death, and aims to remind readers of their finitude (*memento mori*).

For Hobbes, as for Socrates, philosophy is preparation for death. However, Hobbes invokes this adage to signal rejection of traditional philosophy (and the Christian theology which emerges in its wake) – specifically, to signal rejection of dualism and the attendant promise of an immortal soul. In the *Phaedo*, Socrates lectures friends assembled at his deathbed on the deep affinity between philosophy and death. To his friends' great perplexity, Socrates maintains equanimity in the face of death. Socrates explains that true philosophers 'have actually been looking forward to death', or the separation of the soul from the body, 'all their lives'.¹¹⁴ 'Ordinary people seem not to realize that those who really apply themselves in the right way to philosophy are directly and of their own accord preparing themselves for dying and death.'¹¹⁵ Philosophy is preparation for death, according to Socrates, because the philosopher disdains the body and its needs. On Socrates's view, embodiment impedes pursuit of wisdom – the senses mislead us, and desires distract us. Philosophers try to bracket the body's claims, but they cannot escape the body altogether. We can only achieve true knowledge, therefore, in death, when the immortal soul is freed from the body's fetters. As a staunch materialist, Hobbes rejects Socrates's and Plato's claims for an immaterial soul, and this rejection leads him to a new conception of the philosopher's vocation. Unlike the Socratic philosopher, who *welcomes* death, the Hobbesian philosopher *fears* death. Platonism promises immortality to the philosopher who meets death with equanimity, rejoicing in the soul's imminent liberation. By contrast, Hobbes withdraws the promise of immortality.¹¹⁶ Consequently, death becomes an object of obsessive fear, a fear which philosophy works to intensify.

¹¹³ Hobbes, *De corpore*, p. xii.

¹¹⁴ *Phaedo*, in Plato, *The last days of Socrates*, trans. Hugh Tredennick and Harold Tarrant (New York, 1993), p. 116.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ For Hobbes's critique of the doctrine of an immortal soul, see Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 483.

Hobbesian philosophy is preparation for death, then, because it exposes the brute fact of vulnerability, a fact that too many overlook, blinded by vainglory and pride. Philosophy is not the vehicle by means of which Hobbes would escape death's clutches. Rather, philosophy is a discipline by means of which Hobbes affirms death's humbling inevitability (and utter finality).¹¹⁷

IV

I have questioned whether Hobbes's reputation for arrogance is deserved, arguing, against critical consensus, that modesty is one of his rhetorical signatures. In the texts that I have discussed, Hobbes resists the efforts of critics and admirers to make him a philosophical celebrity. Casting himself in the role of ordinary mortal, Hobbes develops a style of self-presentation consistent with his claims for the theatricality of personality, and humans' equal vulnerability to death. Hobbes hopes to achieve two goals by crafting this literary persona. First, Hobbes attests his fitness for political subjection. Deflating pretensions to immortality, Hobbes affirms his finitude, which affirmation is a prelude to affirming the rationality of subjection. Further, when Hobbes shuns celebrity, he refuses to usurp the glory that is the sovereign's prerogative. Hobbes is keenly aware that celebrity culture undermines the sovereign's power.

Also, the Popularity of a potent Subject, (unless the Common-wealth have very good caution of his fidelity,) is a dangerous Disease; because the people (which should receive their motion from the Authority of the Sovereign,) by the flattery, and by the reputation of an ambitious man, are drawn away from their obedience to the Lawes, to follow a man, of whose vertues, and designs they have no knowledge.¹¹⁸

Second, when Hobbes defaces himself, he ensures that his texts are classed as works of philosophy, 'the nature whereof dependeth not on Authors', but on rational (that is, impersonal) assent.¹¹⁹ Hobbes hopes to develop a style of philosophy whose authority derives not from the promise of access to a distinguished author, but from impersonal canons of method.¹²⁰ As Hobbes conceives it, political theory is a vocation for mortals, not epic heroes.

¹¹⁷ Although see *ibid.*, p. 162, where Hobbes ascribes ethical force to the desire for immortality: 'Desire of Praise, disposeth to laudable actions, such as please them whose judgement they value; for of those men whom we contemn, we contemn also the Praises. Desire of Fame after Death does the same. And though after death, there be no sense of the praise given us on Earth, as being joyes, that are either swallowed up in the unspeakable joyes of Heaven, or extinguished in the extreme torments of Hell: yet is not such Fame vain; because men have a present delight therein, from the foresight of it, and of the benefit that may rebound thereby to their posterity: which though they now see not, yet they imagine; and any thing that is pleasure in the sense, the same also is pleasure in the imagination.'

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 374.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 688. See also Aubrey, *Brief lives*, p. 348 – 'He desired not the reputation of his wisdom to be taken from the cutt of his beard, but from his reason' – and Hobbes, *De cive*, p. 6.

¹²⁰ The desire for impersonal authority places Hobbes in the mainstream of seventeenth-century science, as described by Foucault. See Foucault, 'What is an author?', p. 109. In the seventeenth century, 'scientific discourses began to be received for themselves, in the anonymity of an established

Although Hobbes's efforts were valiant, he failed to redefine radically the political theorist's vocation. In his lifetime, Hobbes garnered fame, fortune (as the *Vita* attests), and notoriety as a result of his new philosophical method. Moreover, the judgement of posterity has conferred something akin to immortality on Hobbes. (Wallis would be dismayed to learn that his predictions have proved false. 'But what *Posterity* may do, who can tell? For, though he be *Despised*, while he is *Alive*; yet who knows but that, when he is *Dead*, he may be – forgotten.'¹²¹) How can we account for Hobbes's failure to escape the cult of celebrity? Perhaps the most obvious explanation lies in the motley of Hobbes's persona, and the coyness of his professions. Admittedly, Hobbes mingles declarations of modesty with statements that read like boasts; casual readers cannot be expected to untangle the intricacies of his self-presentation. Further, Hobbes does not perfectly embody his own recommendations. On some occasions, Hobbes fails to achieve a modest demeanour, and on other occasions, he appears to disregard his own pleas for modesty altogether.¹²²

A less obvious, but more revealing, explanation lies in Hobbes's relationship to traditions of Anglo-American liberalism. Historians of political theory often trace the advent of liberal individualism back to Hobbes. On this view, Hobbes paves the way for liberal models of subjectivity when he asserts the artificiality of politics, endorses formal equality under law, vindicates pursuit of self-interest, and subverts traditional theology. The genealogy that places Hobbes at the origins of liberal individualism captures much of what is influential in Hobbes's political theory. Yet note the absence of modesty from the list of Hobbes's legacies to liberalism. Hobbes's liberal heirs do not share his conviction that modesty is a constituent of individuality. Indeed, as liberalism consolidates, so does the view that self-esteem is a testament to individuation, and a precondition for agency. In Anglo-American traditions, liberals replace the aristocratic cult of glory, which meets its demise at Hobbes's hands, with the cult of dignity and self-esteem. With liberalism's triumph, vainglorious self-assertion has been recuperated as an

or always redemonstrable truth; their membership in a systematic ensemble, and not the reference to the individual who produced them, stood as their guarantee'. However, the fact that Hobbes failed to resist incorporation into the culture of celebrity suggests that seventeenth-century attitudes are more fluid than Foucault allows. Although Hobbes subscribed to ideals of anonymous philosophy, many of his readers did not, and their commitments helped determine his authorial persona. Thus, the vagaries of Hobbes's reception suggest that the ideal of anonymous philosophy was already embattled in the seventeenth century. In this sense, Hobbes belongs rather to the period described in Foucault, 'What is an author?', p. 101: the moment when 'we began to recount the lives of authors rather than of heroes'.

¹²¹ Wallis, *Hobbius*, p. 5.

¹²² For example, see Book Four of *Leviathan*, where Hobbes indulges in sarcasm, glory, and contempt at the expense of scholastic philosophers and other opponents. However, Quentin Skinner notes that Hobbes excised the most haughty and contemptuous passages from Book Four when he republished *Leviathan* in Latin in the 1660s. See Skinner, *Reason and rhetoric*, p. 395. The decision to suppress scornful passages would support my claim that, for the most part, Hobbes was concerned to avoid the appearance of vanity.

expression of individual freedom, and ‘self-respect (or self-esteem)’ elevated to the status of ‘most important primary good’.¹²³

Given the pervasiveness of liberal assumptions, the project of recovering a modest Hobbes grows increasingly difficult – but, for that reason, increasingly imperative. From the dominant, liberal perspective, Hobbes’s modesty is either invisible – as a progenitor of liberal individualism, Hobbes must exhibit robust self-assertion (hence the fixation on his boasts) – or it betrays Hobbes’s failure to effect a complete break from a pre-modern, theological worldview. As I have argued, neither approach captures the complexion of Hobbes’s literary self-presentation. From a historical perspective, it is imperative to appreciate nuances of Hobbes’s self-presentation, because neglect of Hobbes’s modesty obscures the complexity of early modern individualism. Recovering Hobbes’s contrarian views on the political theorist’s vocation can help us to acknowledge that modern individualism is more diverse, and more contested, than liberal histories of political theory allow. From a political perspective, deciphering Hobbes’s persona is imperative because neglect of Hobbes’s modesty impoverishes theoretical accounts of the springs of agency. It is no accident that Hobbes’s modest demeanour bears little resemblance to that of a humble believer, for, on Hobbes’s view, acknowledgement of finitude does not preclude, but actually facilitates, bold exercise of human agency. Unlike his pious forebears and his liberal heirs, Hobbes appreciates modesty’s power as a spur to political creativity and – equally important in this context – theoretical audacity. As the *Vita* attests, affecting a modest demeanour does not doom Hobbes to present correspondingly modest theoretical insights.

¹²³ John Rawls, *A theory of justice* (Cambridge, 1971), p. 440. For the liberal recuperation of self-assertion, see John Stuart Mill, *On liberty and other essays* (Oxford, 1991), p. 69. I thank Victoria Kahn for helping me to formulate the conclusion.