

EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



‘The art of known and feeling sorrows’: Rethinking Capitalist Transition, and the *Performance of Class Politics, in Shakespeare’s King Lear*

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By the late sixteenth century, the story goes, the authority of the feudal middle ages and its hereditary warrior nobility had become derisively subverted by the ambitious bourgeois individualism of emergent capitalism. Construal of capitalist transition along these lines has proven immensely influential in the interpretation of early modern drama. More insistently, perhaps, than with any other Shakespeare play, literary criticism has mapped *King Lear* onto that conflictual schema, which has dominated historical readings of the play from the 1930s onward. After tracing, however, that mediated critical tradition, prominent particularly in Marxist contextualisations, this essay will seek to terminate it. For modern scholarship, both Marxist and mainstream, has overthrown the historical model of an agonistic parturition to capitalism. Sketching the new historiographic paradigm, and the politico-economic circumstances it ascribes to commoners circa 1606, I shall proceed to argue that, while a form of class-antagonism does indeed structure *King Lear*, it is scarcely that of bourgeois against nobleman. A sharply different pattern of class-friction – the reciprocal hostility of paranoid authority and aggrieved populism – is to be found there. Shakespeare’s play, I will suggest, repeatedly protested against recent governmental initiatives, as is clear in the play’s treatment of bastardy and ‘strangering’.

Indictment of authority, however, risked intervention by the censor: and I will close, accordingly, by demonstrating how Shakespeare built three further instances of humane outcry against commons suffering into the drama’s original *performance* dimensions. Working by ‘stagecraft secrets’, I suggest, the popular politics of *King Lear* move beyond representing political issues into *practising* them within the wooden O. Ambushed by surprise turns of direct address, we shall find spectators variously pressured into moments of jubilant self-declaration, abrupt class division, and even shamed realignment. Staging

distress and exclusion in the clamorous amphitheatre, Shakespeare's triggering of interactional experience thereby exploits and extends the populism innate to the medium, rendering *Lear* a *popularly activated script*. That Shakespeare dramatized populist sympathies in *Lear* is often recognized: but demonstration that these values fashioned 'stagecraft secrets', invisible on the page, comprises, I think, a discovery.

Given substantial Tudor relocation of economic power – the House of Commons, it was claimed in 1628, had become wealthy enough to buy up the House of Lords three times over¹ – it is unsurprising that much nineteenth and twentieth century historiography interpreted the sixteenth century in terms of class contest. Classical Marxism construed a powerful bourgeoisie locked into ambitious contestation with the financially sinking magnates of a dissolving feudal economy. Engels defined Absolutism as a period where 'warring classes balance each other', antagonistic parity generating an involuntary equilibrium of forces, as prelude to the imminent hegemony of the class of capital.² 'The bourgeoisie' wrote Marx, in elegiac tones to prove widely echoed, 'wherever it has got the upper hand, has put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations. It has pitilessly torn asunder the motley feudal ties... and has left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous 'cash payment'. It has drowned the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervour, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of philistine sentimentalism, in the icy water of egotistical calculation.'³ Historical cartography of the political co-ordinates of Shakespearean drama, adducing *King Lear* as principle exemplum, has accordingly long positioned Lear, Kent and Edgar upon the terrain of residual feudal ideology – reverent of the traditions of personal fealty and hierarchic honour – whose boundaries are ruthlessly invaded by the bourgeois self-seeking of Edmund, Goneril and Regan, symptoms of the pitiless cynicism of primitive accumulation.

Let them anatomise Regan; see what breeds about her heart. Is there any cause in nature that makes these hard hearts?' (3.6.34-36)⁴

Textual representations of the feudal-bourgeois struggle have nonetheless proven variously interpreted. For Christopher Caudwell in 1937, imbricating Marx with Freud, the drive of fantasy within singular material environments is a critical dynamic of human evolution. 'In this [Shakespeare's] period of primitive accumulation the conditions for

¹ Christopher Hill, *The Century of Revolution 1603-1714* (Wokingham, Berkshire: Reinhold, 1980), p. 12.

² Perry Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (London: Verso, 1974) p. 15.

³ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, ed. by Eric Hobsbawm (London: Verso, 1998), p. 37.

⁴ References are to *The Tragedy of King Lear: the Folio Text in William Shakespeare: The Complete Works* ed. by Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988).

the growth of the bourgeois class are created lawlessly. To every bourgeois it seems as if his instincts – his “freedom” – are intolerably restricted by laws, rights and constraints’. By consequence ‘cyclonic’ and ‘intemperate will’ is idealised. Given its expansive, absolutist grandeur, kingliness paradoxically becomes, in this age of ‘unbounded self-realisation’, ‘the ideal type of human behaviour at this time’. ‘The contradiction which is the driving force of capitalism finds its expression in Shakespeare’s tragedies... In *King Lear* the hero wrecks himself against the equally untempered expression of his daughters’ will’.⁵

For Georg Lukács in *The Historical Novel* (also 1937), ‘In Shakespeare, especially, a whole set of the inner contradictions of feudalism, pointing inevitably to its dissolution, emerge with the greatest clarity’. Premising textual meaning upon historical crisis, Lukacs argues that what interested Shakespeare were ‘the human collisions which sprang necessarily and typically from the contradictions of this decline’.⁶ In ‘the great tragedies of his maturity’ (including *Lear*), Shakespeare ‘concentrate(s) certain social-moral problems of this transition crisis even more powerfully than was possible when tied to the events of English history’.⁷ ‘Shakespeare sees the triumph of humanism, but also foresees the rule of money in this advancing new world, the oppression and exploitation of the masses, a world of rampant egoism and ruthless greed’. Figures of nobility, however, are ‘inwardly still unproblematic and uncorrupted. (Shakespeare feels a keen, personal sympathy for this latter type, at times idealizes him, but as a great, clear-sighted poet regards his doom as inevitable.)’⁸

Writing from the perspective of a Christian rather than a Marxist in 1948, John Danby nonetheless frames *Lear* similarly as the struggle of insurgent acquisitive individualism, associated with Hobbes’ view of Nature as competitive amoralism, against the ordered medieval world, correlative with the Benignant Nature of Hooker and Bacon. ‘Edmund is the careerist on the make, the New Man laying a mine under the crumbling walls and patterned streets of an ageing society’. He ‘belongs to the new age of scientific inquiry and industrial development... the age of mining and merchant venturing, of Monopoly and Empire-making, the age of the sixteenth century and after... He hypostatizes those trends in man which guarantee success under the new conditions – one reason why his soliloquy is so full of what we recognize as common sense’. Edmund, however, ‘is not part of a playwright’s dream. He is a direct imaging of the times’.⁹ The point is echoed

⁵ Christopher Caudwell, *Illusion and Reality* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1937), pp. 85-87.

⁶ Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel* (1947; trans. H. And S. Mitchell: Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), p. 153.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 155.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 153.

⁹ John F. Danby, *Shakespeare’s Doctrine of Nature* (London: Faber, 1948), p. 46.

(with acknowledgment) by Arnold Kettle (1964): Edmund is ‘the private enterprise man... Marlowe’s aspiring hero taken to his extreme conclusion’.¹⁰

Supervening upon Danby’s antinomy of spiritual values, Paul Delany sought in 1977 to restore to assessment of *Lear* dialectical materialism’s explicit recognition that underlying the conflict of dramatis personae lay the violent structural collision of feudal and capitalist modes of production. Once again postulating dramatic sympathies to lie with a doomed aristocratic order, embodying generosity, fidelity, and grandeur, assaulted by a bourgeois individualist ambition criminalized in Edmund, Delany concludes that the play ‘embodies no hope of the future, but only the most destructive aspects of bourgeois transformation’. The ‘decline of feudal-heroic values’ is associated with a humanism ‘whose essence is nostalgia, whose glory is that of the setting sun’.¹¹

From Richard Halpern’s *The Poetics of Primitive Accumulation* (1991) came a brilliant revisionary reading, arguing (among a wealth of points) for an Edmund simultaneously capitalist and feudal, in a period entwining rather than opposing commercial forces and hereditary peerage. *King Lear*, he asserts, is a demystifying, anti-transcendental play, and Lear’s failure to disengage kingship from landownership embodies this materialist logic. Nevertheless, despite drawing on Perry Anderson’s historiography of economically hybridized Absolutism, Halpern posits the play as representing sympathetically a financial crisis of the aristocracy (as in Lawrence Stone) as a demilitarized class, entrapped by the vanished potential for wealth-expansion through military conquest within a ‘zero-sum economy’ (i.e. income limited to landownership rents alone). Unable to exercise real political power, the nobility can embody ascendancy only through ostentatious consumption. *Lear* escapes these tragic straits by retreating backwards into the middle ages: the plot reverts to a polity of militarized and decentralized baronial conflict. *Lear* thus offers militarist regeneration of aristocratic values, but ‘narrates the transition to capitalism through the perspective of ruling class ideology and, moreover, narrates it ‘backward’.¹² Thus Halpern, while rejecting tradition’s bellicist epochal schematic, resuscitates the conventionally threnodic *Lear*: a play, still, of yearning for the embrace of feudal greatness, its martial aristocracy tragically degraded by economic crisis.

Recent Left historiography, however, has with honesty and intellectual independence

¹⁰ Arnold Kettle, ‘From *Hamlet* to *Lear*’ in *Shakespeare in a Changing World* (New York: International Publishers, 1964), p. 161.

¹¹ Paul Delaney, ‘King Lear and the Decline of Feudalism’, *PMLA* 92 (1977), 429-40; cited from the reprint in *Materialist Shakespeare: A History*, ed. by Ivo Kamps (London: Verso, 1995), pp. 34 and 36.

¹² Richard Halpern, *The Poetics of Primitive Accumulation* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1991), p. 247.

nullified the venerable paradigm of epochal collision and fated aristocratism, underlying generations of literary criticism. ‘In the century after the dissolution of the monasteries’ notes Perry Anderson, ‘while the population of England doubled, the size of the nobility and gentry had trebled, and their share of national wealth increased more than proportionally, with a particularly notable climb in the early 17th century, when rent-rises overtook price increases, benefitting the whole landowning class: the net income of the gentry perhaps quadrupled in the century after 1530’.¹³ Moreover, far from generating a mutually vituperative struggle for dominance between demarcated classes, the period of Absolutism fused bourgeois and noble components in its key institutions: army, mercantilism, taxation, bureaucracy, diplomacy: ‘exotic, hybrid compositions whose surface “modernity” again and again betrays a subterranean archaism’.¹⁴ Class amity was structurally consolidated by an infrastructural ‘field of compatibility’: the commonality of the new, quiritary form of private property to both possessing classes.¹⁵ Robert Brenner concurs: ‘Over the early modern period, rather than bringing about the rise of a dynamic new bourgeois class alongside and in conflict with a declining feudal class, a profound process of economic change brought about the broad transformation of the landed class as a whole’. An expanded bloc, the ‘greater landed classes’, were able ‘to constitute themselves as an extraordinarily homogenous aristocracy. There were few sharp social or political distinctions between occupants of the top layer of the landed class... and those of the layers below it’, in this ‘socio-economically and politically unified landed class’.¹⁶

A recent work on *Lear*, Paul Cefalu’s chapter in *Revisionist Shakespeare*, has noted Brenner (though not Anderson) on the non-antagonism of bourgeois and lord, yet exited the realm of political reading, to construe the play’s conflicts in a potpourri of natural rights theories, Christian, Grotian, and Rawlsian, to which the feudal-capitalist transition is allegedly irrelevant.¹⁷ Laurie Shannon’s valuable essay in *The Accommodated Animal* likewise offers a relatively non-political understanding, placing *Lear*’s traumatic discovery on the heath of his abject material vulnerability in the tradition of the ‘happy beast’ discourse, Classical and Christian, which defined humanity, in zoological critique, as the planet’s singular misfit through the lack of natural pelt, habitat and nourishment, and in the anomalous proclivity to intra-species violence.¹⁸

But if feudal protagonists, laden with nostalgia, and doomed by the calculating

¹³ Anderson, *Lineages*, 138.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 29.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 41.

¹⁶ Robert Brenner, *Merchants and Revolution* (London: Verso, 2003), pp. 642-43.

¹⁷ Paul Cefalu, *Revisionist Shakespeare: Transitional Ideologies in Texts and Contexts* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 1-13, 111-44.

¹⁸ Laurie Shannon, *The Accommodated Animal: Cosmopolity in Shakespearean Locales* (Chicago University Press, 2013), pp. 127-73.

destructiveness of the 'new men', now disappear with the traditional socio-economic paradigm, what may we identify as the source of political critique in *Lear*? Whence Edmund's taunting scorn of 'the plague of custom' (1.2.3)? The new historiography of monied amity in capitalist transition does not – and this should not need saying – imply the disappearance of contemporary class angers. No-one has ever claimed there to have been just two classes in early modern Europe: though the anticommunist instincts of much literary criticism in the last six decades seem largely to have occluded concern for the third. Precipitated by the historical regrouping of traditional class relations, there developed indeed in late Elizabethan and early Jacobean England a dramatic new class antagonism, and this development did mediate a contumelious division of cultures, evidenced in Shakespearean drama. But the formidable powers of capital, enjoyed in Shakespeare's time by an emphatically *pre-revolutionary* bourgeoisie, unleashed their contemptuous antagonism not against feudal castle and hierarchic immobilism, against a mythic blockading of capital by late feudal hereditary authority. They unleashed their wrath, rather, against the adversary common to all in the closely articulated new landowning bloc – the increasingly pauperised, deracinated, and volatile masses of the lower classes. The 'many-headed monster'¹⁹ remained the projected and demonized foe of the neo-feudal state, just as it had been of feudalism proper. Shakespeare accordingly dramatizes an ideological conflict not of bourgeois against nobleman, but of embittered poorer commoners reacting to assault by the governance of the expanded propertied bloc. Hostile in equal, pessimistic measure to medieval polity and to the new world of primitive accumulation, *King Lear* unfolds as both exposé of feudalism – the showcase misgovernance of the opening scene which discloses tyranny as monarchy's immanence, followed by a Lear whose dereliction of political paternalism is literally terminal – and indictment of the new mentality of state and local government, which was actively demonising poverty.

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Scholars of 'the new social history' have emphasised late Tudor class division to have been driven by the contemptuous self-dissociation of the prosperous notables of town and village from their wider local communities. Men of 'the middling sort', 'the better sort' (often dubbed by historians 'the principal parishioners') had proven beneficiaries of Tudor inflation, cheap land, property exploitation, and improved educational standards to an extent that fostered ambitious self-redefinition. No longer identifying with fellow

¹⁹ See Christopher Hill, 'The many-headed monster' in *Change and Continuity in Seventeenth Century England* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1991), pp. 181-204.

commoners, they sought cultural incorporation into the respectable ranks of gentry and urban elite.²⁰ Self-conscious superiority of stature was motivated, too, by a new tightness of political coordination of local government with central: the latter blitzing parish officers with an unprecedented variety and number of directives, thereby involving prominent citizens across the nation in the fortunes of national policy. Hymning the salutary discipline of a harsh work-ethic, oligarchic secession imposed upon its lesser neighbours a new, penal severity of class-control: a policing relation to social inferiors, aggressively seeking to enforce, as a 'reformation of manners', values of industrious abstinence and righteous sobriety. Traditional folk recreations were driven from the streets and into the alehouse as anathematised 'disorder'.

The militant culture of discipline with its inculpatory assault of plebeian pleasure was not confined to Puritanism, occurring often 'where the influence of Puritanism was largely absent'.²¹ Its impetus seems rather to have derived, in the words of an authoritative recent study by Steve Hindle, from 'the extraordinary arrogance and anxiety of the authorities', local and central, as they confronted the immiserising 1590s, with its war-exhaustion, dearth and pauperization: it was 'orchestrated by a regime whose concern with order, and with the maintenance of its own authority, had reached almost paranoid levels'.²² Maypoles were sawn down, pregnant brides whipped, and drunkards hauled from ale-houses. In parliament, 'The rhetoric of the late Elizabethan Commons' debates on drunkenness was both hysterical and class-specific'.²³ 'The sheer *range* of personal conduct which was now subject to regulation seems particularly novel', observes Hindle. Further, 'the fines, penances and evictions which had been generally imposed in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries were now increasingly supplemented, or replaced, by scolds' bridles, ducking-stools, stocks, whipping posts and bridewells'.²⁴

Coupled with the whipping onslaughts and the discourse of demonization from their immediate social superiors, the poorer commoners of the period further suffered an intensity of economic hardship rarely noted in Shakespeare criticism. Thanks to inflation, during the 1590s, real wages sank on average 22 per cent lower than in the preceding decade.²⁵ Between 1594 and 1598, they were just 57 per cent of what they had been in

²⁰ Keith Wrightson and David Levine, *Poverty and Piety in an English Village: Terling 1525-1700*, 2nd edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), pp. 173-220; Keith Wrightson, *English Society 1580-1680*, 2nd edition (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003), pp. 191-236; Andy Wood, *The 1549 Rebellions and the Making of Early Modern England* (Cambridge University Press: 2007), pp. 187-202

²¹ Wrightson and Levine, *Poverty and Piety*, p. 204.

²² Steve Hindle, *The State and Social Change in Early Modern England: 1550-1640* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), chapter 7; quotations from pp. 177-78.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 177.

²⁵ Ian Archer, *The Pursuit of Stability: Social Relations in Elizabethan London* (Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 10.

the 1560s.²⁶ Taxes, conversely, shot to an unprecedented high. As Peter Ramsey observed, ‘the main victim of price changes was undoubtedly the urban labourer, producing none of his own food and perhaps suffering a fall in real wages of 50 per cent’.²⁷ C.S.L. Davies has suggested that the conditions of plague, war and famine inflicted in the 1590s ‘what may well have been the low point in the living standards of the mass of the European population, at any rate since the Black Death’.²⁸ James’ accession changed little. Subsistence migrants continued flocking to London’s outskirts, desperate to make a living by any means in an overcrowded city. London’s apprentices doubled in number between 1580-1600, rising to some 30,000 – two to three times the normal proportion – and the number of servants became possibly even greater.²⁹ To the authorities, such figures posed an alarming threat, particularly as London apprentices developed their own, rowdy subculture. In the Bridewell of 1602, 97% of the imprisoned were under twenty-one.³⁰ As Manning documents, there were 35 insurrections, riots and unlawful assemblies in London alone between 1581 and 1602, fourteen of them protesting maladministration of justice.³¹ Throughout the anxiety-racked 1590s and the following decade – in a realm characterised by Hindle as ‘a police state without police’³² – there prevailed, for subjects and for governors, a sense of foundational political emergency. A royal proclamation of 1602, deploring the influx of newcomers to London, feared ‘that such multitudes could hardly be governed by ordinary justice to serve God and obey her majesty without constituting an addition of more officers, and enlarging of authorities’.³³

Perry Anderson noted that ‘the state machine and juridical order of Absolutism’ was designed for ‘pinning down a non-servile peasantry into new forms of dependence and exploitation’; ‘The nobility could deposit power with the monarchy, and permit the enrichment of the bourgeoisie: the masses were still at its mercy’.³⁴ ‘What the greater landed classes of England now merely required’ observes Brenner, ‘was a state able to protect for them their absolute private property... from peasants seeking to conquer what they believed to be their customary rights to the land; ultimately, from landless squatters’.³⁵ The threat to noble power in the period of *King Lear* thus lay not with the

²⁶ Hindle, *State and Social Change*, p. 40.

²⁷ Peter Ramsey, *The Price Revolution in Sixteenth Century England* (London: Methuen, 1971), p. 14.

²⁸ C.S.L. Davies, ‘Popular Disorder’ in *The European Crisis of the 1590s* ed. Peter Clark (London: Allen and Unwin, 1985), p. 244.

²⁹ Roger Manning, *Village Revolts: Social Protest and Popular Disturbances in England 1509-1640* (Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 191-93.

³⁰ A. L. Beier, *Masterless Men: The Vagrancy Problem in England 1560-1640* (London: Methuen, 1985), p. 54.

³¹ See Manning, p. 328, table 8.1.

³² Hindle, *State and Social Change*, p. 67.

³³ ‘Prohibiting Further Building’ In *Tudor Royal Proclamations* ed. by Paul L. Hughes and James F. Larkin (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969), vol. 3, p. 245.

³⁴ Anderson, *Lineages*, pp. 20, 41.

³⁵ Brenner, *Merchants and Revolution*, p. 652.

prosperous bourgeoisie, but was evoked in Poor Tom, and all that he represented to the eyes of authority: the suffering, impoverished commoner, with his clandestine egalitarian state of nature, risen and defeated in 1381, defeated again in 1450 and 1549, but about to explode afresh in the Midlands Rising of 1607: the feudal outsider now haunting Absolutism.³⁶ And he was now to be found, exposed beneath the skies, standing in the groundling pit at the public theatres.

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Lear's populist *saeva indignatio* can be located not only in the pathos of Poor Tom and evocation of rural immiseration, but within a long-lost *theatrical experience* originally conferred.

Edmund's famous soliloquy, with which we may begin, is a *tour de force* of proffered plebeian oppositionality. 'Thou, Nature, art my goddess... Wherefore should I / Stand in the plague of custom..?' (1.2.1-3 ff). That the meaning of 'Nature' was currently in flux has often been ably discussed, and Tawney's words nearly a century ago can stand as a suggestive gloss: 'The law of nature had been invoked by medieval writers as a moral restraint upon economic self-interest. By the seventeenth century... "Nature" had come to connote, not divine ordinance, but human appetites, and natural rights were invoked by the individualism of the age as a reason why self-interest should be given free play'.³⁷

The demystifying appeal of Edmund's invocation gains heightened power, I suggest, from his pitching of the soliloquy to the groundling audience surrounding him. His comradely 'us' ('Why brand they us', 1.2.9-10) gathers the groundlings into a fellowship of spirited resentment: an alehouse kindling. Manifestly patrolling the stage edge – Robert Weimann's downstage *platea*, as distinct from the narrative fiction's upstage *locus*³⁸ – and establishing merriment of eye-contact there – 'Why brand they us / With "base"? With "baseness"? "Bastardy"? "Base"? "Base"?' – his language plainly launches out from the fiction to bond with his onlookers. The sustained, concussive alliteration of the 'b' sounds produce hilarious explosions of faux-naïf contempt; and from these he winningly modulates into sensual conspiracy, gloating over lechery. Concluding with cocky counter-contempt, his parodic fastidiousness in the iterated 'legitimate' – 'Fine

³⁶ See David Rollinson, *A Commonwealth of the People: Popular Politics and England's Long Revolution, 1066-1649* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

³⁷ R.H. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (revised ed. 1938; rpt. Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1980), p. 183.

³⁸ Robert Weimann, *Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition in the Theater* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), pp. 74, 79-80, 237-38.

word, legitimate! / Well, my legitimate, if this letter speed... Edmund the base / Shall top th'legitimate' (1.2.16-21) is again irresistibly spirited. Edmund's demagogic performance in the eager hubbub of the amphitheatre (as Andrew Gurr terms the public theatre) thus effects an earthy, exuberant cheerleading of underclass mutiny, channelling the festal-populist spirit of opposition ever to hand in the carnivalesque playhouse. Political contestation finds live eruption here in the plebeian playhouse: artistically effected through the redoubled populism of content and *medium*.

Acknowledgement of this scurrilous mentality occurs in Thomas Nashe, in *Pierce Penniless* (1592). Defending the moral value of theatre as moving thousands to tears by representing 'brave Talbot', Nashe proceeded to decry a contrary and disgraceful sensibility, apparently disposed to blowing raspberries at the staging of chivalric grandeur. "Aye, but" will they say, "what do we get by it?" Nashe fumed that these 'underminers of honour do envy any man that is not sprung up by base brokery like themselves. They care not if all the ancient houses were rooted out'. Such vile subalterns cared only for 'execrable lucre, and filthy, unquenchable avarice'. Nashe identified this iconoclastic mentality, conveniently and very vaguely, with anti-theatrical sentiments, held by 'any cullion, or club-fisted usurer'; but given his immediate context of discussion, and what we know of the boisterous tonality of the new amphitheatres, such plebeian anti-seigneurialism was clearly at home within the walls. Edmund's merry mutineering against a 'tribe of fops' and their 'plague of custom' heroizes precisely this levelling materialism, its aspirational horizons confined to a relishing of 'base brokery', which was clearly simmering as an oppositional ideology. It would be charismatically conjured elsewhere by such crowd-pleasers as Falstaff, Jack Cade, and the Iago of early *Othello*.

We should note just how sharply threatening was the form of underclass mutiny trumpeted in Edmund's self-positioning here. Bastards, like vagrants, comprised for parish authorities the ultimate scare-figure. Swelling in numbers between 1590s and the 1610s, bastardy's horror lay in threatening both godliness and personal cash, raising the spectre of paupers in swaddling bands grabbing shamelessly at parish pensions. The melancholy consequence, as Wrightson has shown, of the economic inability of couples to marry, the 'boomlet' in bastardy nevertheless generated considerable scandal.³⁹ The Fool's jingle 'The codpiece that will house / Before the head has any, / The head and he shall louse; / So beggars marry many' (3.2.26-30) seems to glance at this conjunction of premarital sex and disastrous homelessness. 'The extraordinary increase in illegitimacy in the 1590s forced magistrates to spend more of their time conducting bastardy

³⁹ Keith Wrightson and David Levine, 'The social context of illegitimacy in early modern England' in *Bastardy and its Comparative History*, ed. by Peter Laslett, K. Oosterveen and R. M. Smith (Cambridge: 1980), pp. 158-75.

examinations' notes Hindle. 'Lewdness was now considered a legitimate matter for secular concern'.⁴⁰ Edmund, a figure thus from the parochial heart of darkness, duly extols the superiority of lechery, its 'lustly stealth of nature' generating 'More composition and fierce quality / Than doth, within a dull, stale, tired bed, / Go to creating a tribe of fops' (1.2.11-14). Edmund is consequently less the figure of bourgeois enterprise for which generations have taken him than a calculated offense against bourgeois values. In the context of 'the explosion of bastardy',⁴¹ of a new and incensed conflict between customary sexual *mores* and emergent parish authoritarianism, Edmund whoops up contempt for 'the curiosity of nations' and its enervate tribe of fops, ridiculing the very concept of legitimacy. With his crescendo, 'Now gods stand up for bastards!' – almost a canonical riposte to the specious class-unity climax of Henry V's Crispin Crispian speech – deixis (audience address) has precipitated the groundings into jubilant insurgency.

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Another source of mutually embittering class-friction engaged by *King Lear* was homelessness. Tudor men, women and children displaced onto roadways by bankruptcy or enclosure, fire or disease, throughout the century were the casualties of industrial paralysis, callously inflated entry fines, or surplus population. Yet, undescribed by literary studies, a further and more immediate cause, driven by propertied will, lies in recent Elizabethan legislation. Parliamentary legislation of 1589 and 1598 precipitated a housing crisis, which savagely violated the ethos of community.

The ideal of neighbourliness exerted tremendous pressure in Shakespeare's England. In a relatively traditional, close-knit society, a 'communal cohesion, a system of social and economic mutuality'⁴² was expressed through the practical kindness of loans and credit, of support and services, of 'poor ales' and merry visits to the afflicted. In the words of Keith Wrightson, who pioneered the profound centrality of the concept as 'over and above kinship',⁴³ neighbourliness was 'in its positive dimension' a system founded on 'the obligation to render aid and support... a willingness to accept the neighbours as a reference group in matters of behaviour and to promote harmonious relations among them'.⁴⁴ John Walter writes of the power of shaming in a face-to-face society, as when Sir Thomas

⁴⁰ Steve Hindle, *On The Parish? The Micro-Politics of Poor Relief in Rural England c.1550-1750* (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 2004), pp. 185-88.

⁴¹ Hindle, *State and Social Change*, p. 160.

⁴² Hindle, *Parish?*, p. 81

⁴³ See *Remaking English Society*, ed. by Steve Hindle, Alexandra Shepard, and John Walter (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2013), a tribute to Keith Wrightson, p. 23, esp. note 92.

⁴⁴ Keith Wrightson, *English Society 1580-1680* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003), p. 62.

Tresham in Northamptonshire, notorious for enclosure and harsh practice to his tenants, found himself in 1603 unable to sell his sheep in local markets. The locals instead excoriated his behaviour, noting that his sheep had done much wrong in the commonwealth. Tresham sold only one sheep that day, to an outsider.⁴⁵

‘The introduction of parish relief’, however, introduced ‘a profound challenge to traditional notions of neighbourliness, solidarity, and belonging’.⁴⁶ The Statute of Cottagers, 1589, had decreed that no cottage be erected without four acres of land to sustain it: ‘a pious hope unrealizable in the social and economic reality of Tudor and Stuart England’.⁴⁷ It had further prohibited the taking of ‘inmates’: the cramming by poor tenants of poorer sub-tenants into their dwellings. But the act of 1598, making poor rates compulsory, required that cottages without four acres be pulled down, reiterated the restriction of one family per household, and ordered that vagrants be expelled. In consequence, parish officers, obliged to levy poor rates proportionate to their pauper population, comfortably ignored the act’s instruction to erect new buildings for the poor, yet set vigorously about evicting vagrants. The Act failed, however, to define what was meant by ‘vagrants’: and as R.A. Houston has argued, vagrants were not a self-evidently identifiable group. ‘The attributes of vagrancy’ he suggests – lack of formal family structure, drinking and loitering in alehouses, not attending church, proneness to stealing food and clothing, geographic mobility, – ‘were less those of a subculture than those of the popular culture itself’. ‘Vagrants were not cut off from a normal life. They were an integral part of it’.⁴⁸ In the absence of clear definition of vagrancy, and in violation of the law, officials seem to have expelled as many of the currently indigent as local employers could spare – along with others whose only offence was to be feared to be chargeable at some future point.

This created a homelessness crisis for the poor which was virtually a Catch-22 predicament. Finding their shacks demolished, and prohibited cheap rental as inmates, they were then liable, as destitutes, to an expulsion from the parish: which would then see them criminalized, as vagrants, for not having a home, and accordingly further treated to a flogging and branding. Cecil scolded the Parliament of 1601: ‘yf the poore beinge thruste out of their howses goe to dwell with others, streght we ketch them with the statute of inmates; yf they wander abroad and be stubborne, they are within the danger of

⁴⁵ John Walter, *Crowds and Popular Politics in Early Modern England* (Manchester University Press, 2006), p. 213.

⁴⁶ Hindle, *Parish?*, p. 300.

⁴⁷ Buchanan Sharp, *In Contempt of All Authority: Rural Artisans and Riot in the West of England, 1586-1660* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980), p. 158.

⁴⁸ R. A. Houston, ‘Vagrants and society in early modern England’ in *Cambridge Anthropology* (1980), p. 25.

roagues; yf they be more humble and vagrant beggars, then are they within the statute of the poore to be whipte and tormented'.⁴⁹

Not even Cecil could prevail against the new climate, as the wretched and helpless were often shunted over the parish line to become another community's problem: and sometimes shipped straight back. As Wrightson observes, ejection of poor cottagers as outsiders to the parish was sometimes retrospective, assigned when paupers could no longer provide cheap labour.⁵⁰ The result was a 'parochial exclusion crisis', and a 'pathology of the parish',⁵¹ as the new conditions generated both barbed suspicion of poorer neighbours and angry hostility to strangers. 'Systematic programmes to police immigration were not unusual'.⁵² Whole families, Hindle notes, were sometimes found dead from exposure in church porches, where they had huddled 'to publicize their plight'. Accordingly, some parishes would rail off the church porch.⁵³ In 1605, 'City magistrates took action against masterless men spending the night in sheep-pens in West Smithfield' records Beier. 'God's poor lived not only like animals, but *with* them'.⁵⁴ Strategies of exclusion were not always successful, proving complicated, among other things, by 'the extraordinary seasonality of harvest work'.⁵⁵ Yet the poor themselves would now often absorb the intensified 'parochial xenophobia',⁵⁶ developing defensive hostility to immigrants who, unable to pay the rent and drifting from cottage to cottage, would prove competitors for the crumbs for which they were struggling.⁵⁷

King Lear, I suggest, evokes this fresh offensive of the hardened heart, the scandal of refused hospitality, of neighbours expelled, of unnatural 'strangering': the door bolted fast against a familiar face, the dogs set to bark at the newly outcast, the horror of familiar acquaintance seeking chilled refuge in barns and straw, all courtesy scanted, and the winds beginning to howl. Lear not only revokes 'paternal care' for Cordelia but further decrees her 'a *stranger* to my heart and me' (1.1.113, 115). Cordelia, he tells Burgundy, is '*strangered* with our oath' (1.1.203, emphasis mine). Like the poorest subjects officially dislocated by the state ruling of 1598, her fate is to be 'Unfriended, new adopted to our hate', and consequently 'turned . . . to foreign casualties': turned out, that is, to hazards beyond the realm of home and kin (1.1.202; scene 17.44-45 in the Quarto). 'The

⁴⁹ Cit., Hindle, *Parish?*, pp. 300, 301.

⁵⁰ Keith Wrightson, *Earthly Necessities: Economic Lives in Early Modern Britain* (Yale University Press, 2000), p. 219.

⁵¹ Hindle, *Parish?*, pp. 326, 360.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 318.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p.320.

⁵⁴ Beier, *Masterless Men*, 84-85.

⁵⁵ Hindle, *Parish?*, pp. 354, 358.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 305.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 77, 326, 300-360; also Hindle, *State and Social Change*, pp. 153-62; Manning, *Village Revolts*, pp. 170-78.

barbarous Scythian' Lear rages, summoning the language of the traditional ideal, '...shall to my bosom / Be as well *neighbour'd, pitied and relieved*' (1.1.116-18, emphases mine). 'The gods to their dear shelter take thee, maid', prays Kent (181).

Yet drenched upon the heath, Lear himself not 'neighbour'd, pitied and relieved', will learn and exalt the preciousness of these terms, which composed the beleaguered logic of traditional humane community. Pitying his Fool's shivering, Lear seeks action – 'Where is this straw, my fellow?' (3.2.69) – and in so doing, he enters the strange world of 'making shift'. Paupers lived by the art of 'the shift', historians tell us: in 'a subculture of survival' at 'the margins of subsistence', they had to 'shift' for themselves.⁵⁸ Cordelia will lament what staged action might have shown, that the king, in his shifts, 'was fain' to 'hovel... in short and musty straw' (4.6.31, 33). 'The art of our necessities is strange' exclaims the exploratory Lear (3.2.70-71), 'and can make vile things precious'. Relearning the world in terms of raw expediencies, the art of the provisional stay against the bite of wind or chill, Lear is discovering the plebeian underworld of the 'makeshift economy'.

Repeatedly we encounter the motif of monstrous debarring. 'Tis not in thee', Lear naively tells Regan, 'to oppose the bolt / Against my coming in' (2.2.346, 349-50). 'Shut up your doors', Regan tells Gloucester. 'Shut up your doors, my lord', Cornwall echoes her (2.2.476, 480). 'This hard house', fumes Kent, 'More harder than the stones whereof 'tis raised... Denied me to come in' (3.2.63-64, 66). Gloucester offers Lear lodging in defiance of Cornwall and Regan's legalistically phrased prohibition: 'Though their injunction be to bar my doors' (3.4.140). 'If wolves had at thy gate howled that stern time' Gloucester recriminates to Cornwall, 'Thou should'st have said 'Good porter, turn the key; / All cruels I'll subscribe' (3.7.61-63). 'Mine enemy's dog', reflects Cordelia wonderingly, 'Though he had bit me, should have stood that night / Against my fire' (4.6.30-31). 'Fortune, that arrant whore' sings the Fool, 'Ne'er turns the key to the poor' (2.2.227-28). In vain will Kent deplore 'scanted courtesy' (3.2.67), and bound Gloucester protest to his captors his 'hospitable favours' (3.7.39). Quitting him to join Lear's troops, Edgar must bid the expelled and wandering Gloucester 'take the shadow of this tree / For your good host' (5.2.1-2).

Tellingly, nowhere in the drama is Lear's unhoused condition rhetorically anomalised through contrasting the prerogative of high regal deserving – 'The sword, the mace, the crown imperial, / The intertissued robe of gold and pearl, / The farced title running fore the king... the tide of pomp' (*Henry V*, 4.1.258-61). Shakespeare instead universalizes

⁵⁸ Hindle, *Parish?*, p. 94; see also chapter 1.

the homelessness theme, unfolding the horror of exposure for any member of the species. Flinging away from his daughters, Lear will rather 'choose / To be a comrade with the wolf and owl, / To wage against the enmity o'the air' (2.2.381-83). Slipping into disguise, Edgar says he will 'with presented nakedness out-face / The winds and persecutions of the sky. / The country gives me proof and precedent' (2.2.174-76). 'The tyranny of the open night's too rough / For *nature* to endure' warns Kent (3.4.2-3; italics mine); 'Man's nature cannot carry / Th'affliction' (3.2.48-49). '[T]his contentious storm / Invades us to the skin' concedes Lear (3.4.6-7). 'Thou wert better in a grave than to answer with thy uncovered body this extremity of the skies' he warns his Fool (lines 95-96). The shivering Fool likewise sings to him 'He that has a house to put's head in has a good head-piece' (3.2.26). 'Was this a face' asks Cordelia (not 'Was this our Crown') 'To be opposed against the warring winds? ... And wast thou fain, poor father, / To hovel thee with swine and rogues forlorn / In short and musty straw?' (4.6.28-29, 31-33). The climax is Lear's torn cry 'Thou art the thing itself. Unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art' (3.100-3).

Humanity's 'accommodation', of course, implies here an entire ethical and aesthetic order of material need and social dignity, whose provision defines civilisation and elevates the species above animal existence. Yet homelessness in rags is the climactic expression of its disfiguring denial: and thanks to the *fin-de-siècle* legislation, which 'strangered' by decree, this figuration of ultimate disprivilege is an urgent contemporaneity, protested insistently across the drama.

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Shakespeare's social protest culminates in extraordinary stage-effects. Concealed but powerful, the activation of these 'stagecraft secrets' is prudentially tailored to the conditions of the public playhouse: rendered invisible, since demographically and spatially unactualisable, in any court performance.

Shakespeare criticism has recently executed 'a turn' to the audience, eager to chart what Allison Hobgood's recent book calls 'vibrant affective interplay between theatergoers and the English Renaissance stage'. (She appears to have in mind the outdoor, public theatres.) But while Hobgood's book supplies a useful bibliography of the new focus, when it allegedly 'uncovers an emotional collaboration and reciprocity between world and stage', her analyses of Shakespeare merely recount fundamentals of the plot to posit self-evident audience response. Thus the presentation of fear in *Macbeth* 'irradiates' fear into the audience; the hilarious shaming of Malvolio's social fantasies in *Twelfth Night*

delights spectators, then induces some possible guilt when the steward shrieks in pain at the close.⁵⁹

Shakespeare was compelled, by both genius and censorship, to greater subtlety than this. Three examples follow of a surprise stagecraft, two of them operating by deixis: working, that is, by a startling outbreak from the fiction into auditorium address, unanticipated within the narrative, and hitherto unperceived by scholars. The deictic swerve is a favourite trick of Shakespeare's, its sudden intrusions into the spectators' own space variously applied to launch seditious political solicitation in *2 Henry VI*, spring transvaluation of character in *As You Like It*, and abruptly alienate popular regard of monarchy in *1 Henry IV*.⁶⁰ *Lear* renews this invasive tradition to fresh purpose.

Just before the heath scene, Shakespeare had lightly initiated a set of architectural metaphors for clothing. 'I am much more than my out-wall', Kent advised the Gentleman (3.1.22-23). The Fool sang 'He that has a house to put's head in has a good head-piece' (3.2.25). Near the play's close, Regan will ecstatically cry to her lover 'Dispose of them, of me. The walls is thine' (5.3.69). Upon the heath, *Lear* gives astounding climax to the trope.

First, he dismisses the Fool: 'In, boy; go first' (3.4.26). To pray, he then clambers down upon his knees. (Line 40 confirms this: 'Give me thy hand', Kent will bid him, after the panicked exit from the hovel.) 'You houseless poverty' *Lear* begins, but breaks off to command the Fool away to refuge a second time. He then remains either alone on the stage, or possibly with the silent Kent (though he has likewise just bidden Kent 'Prithee, go in thyself'). His language is then borne upon a sequence of *vocatives*:

Poor naked wretches, wheresoe'er you are,
That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,
How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,
Your looped and windowed raggedness, defend you
From seasons such as these? O, I have ta'en
Too little care of this! (3.4.28-33)

As contemporary staged action would make clear, the heads that are 'houseless' here are, of course, the *groundlings*' heads: exposed to the pitiless elements, in visible contrast to

⁵⁹ Allison Hobgood, *Passionate Playgoing in Early Modern England* (Cambridge University Press, 2014).

⁶⁰ Chris Fitter, *Radical Shakespeare: Politics and Stagecraft in the Early Career* (New York: Routledge, 2012); "'The Devil take such cozeners!': Radical Shakespeare in *1 Henry IV*" in *Henry IV: A Critical Guide*, ed. by Stephen Longstaffe (London and New York: Continuum, 2011), pp. 99-121.

the galleried pates above them, protected by roofed booths. There they stand, ‘looped and windowed’ by the (roughly) circular theatre, through whose windows blows the cold wind on their raggedness. Even the ‘unfed sides’ may evoke the poorly nourished flanking the apron stage to left and right. Whatever weather conditions prevailed at a particular performance, regular playgoers will have experienced, in England’s famously wet climate, any number of occasions when the poorest members of the audience suffered a sustained exposure to rainfall, against which both the better-off and the actors were ‘housed’. Shockingly, it is these social inferiors, these public sufferers, of houseless heads and windowed raggedness – the auditorial unaccommodated man – that the king’s compassion is addressing.

Concealed from censorship in the code of deixis, it is hard to imagine a more radical scene, in an age of aspiring absolute monarchy and of hearts hardened against pauperdom, than this in *Lear*: of a king, already ‘unbonneted’ (Quarto, scene 8.13), now gone down himself upon his knees: and apologising, specifically, to the poorest members of a plebeian theatre audience.

Within what *Henry V*’s Prologue had described as ‘the girdle of these walls’, Lear then breaks from grieving guilt, gazing out on his knees across the level groundling sea, into an anger that flashes diagonally upward, scanning the galleried privilege of the relatively prosperous – those in ‘the high upreared and abutting fronts’ – to snap out the command to generosity to those aloft.⁶¹ ‘Take physic, pomp, / Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel, / That thou mayst shake the superflux to them’ (3.4.33-35). The deictic shock is accordingly doubled.

Such stagecraft secrets inflict a foretaste of sharp compassionate surprise such as the transvaluation of Poor Tom will soon deliver in simpler narrative fashion. They are also a forerunner, we shall now see, of the divisive audience incrimination of the Dover Cliff scene.

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For another major instance of political deixis, again unperceived, is the Dover Cliff episode (4.6): a classic puzzle of the play. Where Jonathan Goldberg thought its pictorial virtuosity showcased ‘Shakespeare’s knowledge of Albertian perspective’, the bizarre scene has recently been accounted for by Bruster and Weimann as merely ‘diversional’:

⁶¹ *Henry V*, Prologue 19, 21.

one of a gallimaufry of antics deployed to destabilise our sense of reality and erode textual determinacy through actor-autonomy in clowning display.⁶² Wilson Knight, writing in 1930, seems to me nearer to the mark in registering that here ‘the grotesque merged into the ridiculous reaches a consummation’.⁶³ And it is the role of the *audience* that proves pivotal.

The scene opens with Gloucester’s terrible vulnerability, evoked both by his blindness (‘When shall I come to th’ top of that same hill?’, 4.5.1) and the adamant duping by Edgar (‘your other senses grow imperfect / By your eyes’ anguish’). Yet as they cross the stage, Edgar sets up an enormous joke. Moving downstage towards the pit, he jests at auditorial reality: ‘Horrible steep!’ As they near the lapping expanse of playgoers he jokes ‘Do you hear the sea?’ Arrived at stage-edge (‘Come on, sir, here’s the place. Stand still’), and gazing down on the restive sea of heads, he mock-taunts the groundlings: ‘How fearful / And dizzy ’tis to cast one’s eyes so low!’ (lines 11-12). As Poor Tom then evokes for his father the precipitous drop before them, his language continues to conscript the spectators into mocking complicity in his trick.

Evoking shocking verticality, he describes ‘crows and choughs’ (13): terms of contemporary slang, the *OED* reveals, which could be used (though unremarked by all *Lear* editors) to disparage commoners. Hamlet derided Osric as a ‘chuff’ [5.2.89], glossed in Harold Jenkins’s Arden edition as a ‘rustic’ or ‘churl’.⁶⁴ ‘Chough’ also signified, notes the *OED*, a ‘chatterer or prater’: in *The Tempest*, Gonzalo will be scorned as ‘a chough of... deep chat’ (2.1.271; compare *Winter’s Tale* 4.4.618). In *2 Return from Parnassus*, ‘chuffes’ means ‘churls’.⁶⁵ The word as slang usage could thus be referencing the ensuing audience animation and chatter as Edgar’s roving finger points at them: a swelling of sound picked up again in ‘murmuring surge’ (20). As to ‘crows’, this bird was widely interwoven with slang and proverbial speech: Shakespeare, of course, had been derided for his lowly origins ‘an upstart crow.’ That ‘crow’ designated urban dwellers of some type is confirmed by G. Daniel’s usage of 1649: ‘The Citty Crowes Assemble, and Resolve they would keep out his ragged rout’. Though the slang meaning in 1606 of ‘crow’ as a noun currently seems lost, the verb to ‘crow’ was of course in widespread usage, dating, as *OED* records, from the fourteenth century onward to mean ‘to utter a loud inarticulate sound of joy or exultation’, or ‘to exult loudly, boast, swagger’. Shakespeare uses this verb frequently. (‘My lungs began to crow like Chanticleer’

⁶² Jonathan Goldberg, ‘Perspectives: Dover Cliff and the conditions of representation’ in *Shakespeare and Deconstruction*, ed. by David Bergeron and G. D. Atkins (Peter Lang, 1988); Robert Weimann and Douglas Bruster, *Shakespeare and the Power of Performance* (Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 203.

⁶³ G. Wilson Knight, *The Wheel of Fire* (Oxford University Press, 1930), p. 187.

⁶⁴ See also his Long Note on the term, in *Hamlet* (London: Methuen, 1982), p. 559

⁶⁵ Additional Notes to *The Tempest*, ed. Frank Kermode (London: Arden, 1962), p. 168.

declares Jaques in *As You Like It*, 2.7.30.) Whether or not by Shakespeare's hand, the verb has here, I suggest, become a substantive: a common process in early modern English. As to the birds themselves, 'the improbability of the crows flying halfway up Dover cliffs' has twice been noted in ornithological corrective; and 'crow' and 'chough' were used interchangeably by contemporaries.⁶⁶ When Edgar mock-fearfully casts his eyes 'so low', and spies 'crows and choughs', he thus humourously indicates an indecorous knot of notably joyous and noisy plebeian spectators – who doubtless babble the louder for the ludic spotlight.⁶⁷

Below these crows and choughs are fishermen: a likely component of any audience, for the Thames, draped with 'weirs' or fishing nets, was fished both for food and pleasure;⁶⁸ and about a year later *Pericles* (1607-08) will feature the 'honest mirth' of three, distinctly English fishermen (Scene 5 line 137). Yet at the foot of Edgar's 'cliff', these men appear strangely like 'mice': and 'mouse' was contemporary slang for a darling, 'a term of sexual endearment.'⁶⁹ (Accusing her husband of being a womaniser, or even a whoremonger, Lady Capulet scolded 'Ay, you have been a mouse-hunt in your time.')⁷⁰ It may not be irrelevant that 'fish' carried erotic overtones,⁷¹ and that 'fishmonger' was slang for a pimp.⁷² Accordingly, it sounds either as if working men below have been cosyng up to ladyfriends, or the professional anglers are actually mice from local brothels.

Clinching the argument for deixis, the 'murmuring surge', according to the Quarto, chafes not 'pebbles' but 'unnumbered idle peeble' (scene 20 line 21). 'Peeble', of course, sounded very much like 'people' in this period (variant forms of the latter included 'peple', 'pepule', 'pople', records *OED*); and unnumbered idle people were the familiar target of antitheatrical tracts. (Prince Henry disparaged 'the unyoked humour of your idleness' in *1 Henry IV*.) Edgar's recoil from stage edge – 'I'll look no more, / Lest my brain turn' – thus completes a comic multiplicity of double entendres in his winking survey of the auditorium.

I'm unsure how to gloss 'yon tall anchoring barque' (18), though an upward gaze to the highest gallery seems clear, and her 'buoy [boy] / Almost too small for sight' is straightforward. Leaning out from a middle gallery, apparently 'Hangs one that gathers

⁶⁶ Richard Kerridge, 'An ecocritic's *Macbeth*' in *Ecocritical Shakespeare*, ed. by L. Bruckner and D. Brayton (Ashgate, 2011), pp. 199, 206.

⁶⁷ There is also the possibility, given mixed metropolitan dialects, that 'crow' and 'crowd' could have been homophones: a possibility suggested to me by Professor J. T. Barbarese.

⁶⁸ Liza Picard, *Elizabeth's London* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2003), pp. 17-18

⁶⁹ Eric Partridge, *Shakespeare's Bawdy* (New York: Dutton, 1969), p. 150.

⁷⁰ *Romeo and Juliet*, 4.4.11.

⁷¹ Partridge, *Shakespeare's Bawdy*, p. 106.

⁷² See Harold Jenkins; Long Note to his Arden edition of *Hamlet* 2.2.174 (1982), pp. 464-65.

sampire – dreadful trade!’ (15). Quarto and Folio both state gathering of ‘sampire’, not the eighteenth century emendation of ‘Samphire’. Spoken onstage, ‘sampire’ is very close to ‘sapper’, a lowly grade of soldier. This might conceivably be a joke at press-ganging, the officer leaning out to spy possible prey: though some lost sexual slang seems more probable. On the other hand, when mad Lear enters five minutes later, almost his first moment of audience address is ‘There’s your press-money’ (4.5.86). Moving on to indicate some new target of choice standing close against the stage edge, Edgar’s exclamation ‘Methinks *he* seems no bigger than his head!’ (16) hilariously captures the optical illusion received by the actor on the platform.

The play of tones here is complex. There are undoubtable elements of poignance, evident in Edgar’s half-explanation: ‘Why I do trifle thus with his despair / Is done to cure it’ (33): a line which confirms direct audience address here. Yet through this process Edgar is clearly bonding with the surrounding spectators at his feet and on high, establishing a teasing rapport, which effectually positions the watching community in comedic externality to Gloucester’s predicament. Unwittingly, Gloucester himself furthers the humour, establishing his status as the butt of the joke, as, kneeling before thousands, he cries ‘O ye mighty gods!’, thus ennobling the masses, and continues ‘This world I do renounce, and, in your sights, / Shake patiently my great affliction off’ (35-36). The noun ‘world’ in Shakespeare often designates the playhouse itself – ‘the Globe’ – as *As You Like It* made clear (‘All the world’s a stage’); and the unusual pluralisation of ‘sight’ into ‘your sights’ underscores the multiplicity of viewers.

It is a puzzle indeed why Shakespeare has done this. Other critics may derive different conclusions, but to my own mind, it seems that the crucial design begins to take shape with the sudden reversal of tone, seconds later. For everything changes when the kneeling Gloucester falls. It is a pratfall, grotesquely comical, as his nose hits the boards only a foot or two below him. But thereafter he does not move. Edgar then breaks into no less than four lines of anxiety, as the titters die slowly away, on recognising that the old man may yet have killed himself. This is followed by attempt after attempt – five successively – to awaken what may be a corpse, all of them failing: ‘Ho! You, sir! Friend! Hear you, sir? Speak!’ Edgar reiterates the now credible fear, ‘Thus he might pass indeed’ (46-47).

Finally, Gloucester rouses (‘Away, and let me die’). The long suspense, growing gradually agonizing as the abused old man remains prone, has surely transformed audience perspective. Edgar’s playful manipulation turns out to have been reckless endangerment. And hereafter arrives no more deixis, to restore delicious play or re-ingratiate Edgar. To the contrary, Edgar’s trick is now monstrously extended, heightened with a torrent of bare-faced lies about the fall and the fiend. The scene terminates in

Edgar's triumphant precept, 'Bear free and patient thoughts': which is at once violated by Edgar himself upon the entry of Lear in lunacy. 'O thou side-piercing sight' (85), cries Edgar, as though he had become Christ upon the cross.

Edgar's treatment of his broken-spirited father, its callous merriment, near backfiring, and escalation into a steep duplicity denuded of protective merriment, renders his doctrine of pious patience an ugly fanaticism. Edgar's own and immediate loss of 'free and patient thoughts' exhibits the customary Shakespearean perception that as soon as the suffering becomes one's own, moral slogans cease to suffice. The crucial contemporary point, I suggest, is that Edgar's telos, the ideal of patient submissiveness, of uncomplaining, holy passivity in abjection, was precisely the goal of the parish officers and Overseers of the Poor. Steve Hindle recounts how, in their 'discretionary calculus of eligibility', Overseers inculcated 'the fear of God', and withheld any possible relief from those deemed impious. Church attendance was monitored by provision of new seats in a differentiated area, with 'For the Poore' sometimes painted in red upon them.⁷³ Conversely, 'Postures of humility found their reward'.⁷⁴ State ideology instructed beggars, in the words of Robert Crowley, 'beare thou thy crosse patientlie'.⁷⁵ This scene's climax in righteous high-mindedness cruelly inculcating patience thus subjects a hated article of contemporary dominant ideology to appalled audience recoil.

Yet why the interlude of deixis? The scene opens with the pathos of blind Gloucester, and reverts to it, as emotional centrepiece, mere minutes later: then closes on a not dissimilar tone with the old man's abject duping. Why did Shakespeare interpose the excursus into jesting? When Edgar with his witticisms gathered the audience into his joke – 'How fearful / And dizzy 'tis to cast one's eyes so low' – the pathos of Gloucester had become walled out behind the steady flow of comedy. But as the fallen old man lies motionless, lying perhaps quite dead among the snickering, amongst the catcalls of the choughs and crows, the audience comes gradually to incriminate itself. Inexorably, the silent form of the abused blind man comes slowly, horribly, to repudiate that comfortable, collective closure against the stricken outsider. Miming the contemporary parish xenophobia we have examined, Shakespeare's scene has given us in microcosm the exclusion, by contemporary settled community, engrossed in its own lively business, of the disregarded, eccentric figure of the suffering stranger. As the fear grows onstage that the elder may be a corpse, the slow-gathering of compassion must burst *through* that indifference: must actively sunder the bond of amity with its compelling social leader, Edgar, to *revolt*

⁷³ Hindle, *Parish?*, pp. 381-82.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

⁷⁵ Robert Crowley, *The Voyce of the Laste Trumpet* line 62 in *The Select Works of Robert Crowley* ed. by J. M. Cowper (Early English Text Society, 1872), p. 58.

against passive social unity into the terrible primacy of compassion. That breakthrough to pity, shattering an imposed social barrier, comprises a political movement in miniature: it provokes and valorises a dissidence, a surprise ethical awakening that indignantly rejects the stage leader's interpellation of their role.

The broken joke thus enacts a kind of rupture into compassion, a humane revulsion against a former state of communal unfeeling: precisely the theme on which the drama of *King Lear* insists. The prosperous man, the Earl had remarked, 'will not see, because he does not feel' (4.1.62-63). Shakespeare's stagecraft, creating that initially callous in-crowd, then compelling resistance to that script, leaves his spectators 'by the art of known and feeling sorrows... / pregnant to good pity' (4.5.221-22).

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The ghastly final breakdown of Lear across the last seventy lines of the play, beginning with his entrance bearing murdered Cordelia, has been rightly, inevitably, comprehended in terms of violent singularity. It thwarts crafted expectation, dislocates the story's well-known pattern, forcing an agony of surprise. Cordelia lynched imposes the atrocity of godlessness.

Yet there is more to this scene than the power of the discrepant. The finale is patterned also upon echo and reprise. Language and stage action establish insistently a politically eloquent *déjà vu*.

The entry of Lear as a figure who bears, with some strain, a slumped and motionless body, sets up a visual echo from the harrowing kingdom of poverty established at the play's centre. At the close of the heath scenes, the slumbering Lear had likewise been borne supine, at the demand of very insistent directions, ('Good friend, I prithee take him in thy arms... Take up thy master... Take up, take up', 3.6.46, 50, 53), across the stage and out in the arms of Kent. Similarly, Lear's bellowing anger, 'Howl, howl, howl', with its deictic-looking imprecation ('O, you are men of stones! Had I your tongues and eyes...') recall Lear the thunderer of vocative wrath at the onset of the heath scenes, just as his adjuration of apocalypse ('I'd use them so / That heaven's vault should crack', 5.3.233-34) force remembrance of his raging appeal for universal annihilation there ('Blow winds and crack your cheeks' etc, 3.2.1ff). His inability to recognise or care for his loyal followers ('He knows not what he says and vain is it / That we present us to him') reenact his lurching in and out of reality, and his apparent failure to recognise Gloucester, in the dementing scene outside the hovel (3.4). The creatures of Lear's terrible outcry, 'Why

should a dog, a horse, a rat have life, / And thou no breath at all?' (282-83), likewise come thronging, as the figuration of violated human dignity, from his outcast experience: the dog barking, and obeyed in office, or warming at the fire when Lear may not; the bay trotting-horse ridden by Poor Tom before his witlessness; the rat swallowed with the ditch-dog in the vagrant's inhuman diet. Finally, Lear's penultimate words in the Folio (save only the ecstatic cry to behold Cordelia's lips) are 'Pray you undo this button. Thank you, sir': a clear reiteration of his suddenly impotent response to Poor Tom ('Come, unbutton here', 3.4.103). Suffering once more 'the mother', he is again the needy geriatric, thwarted in palsied clumsiness by scrabbling fingers.

Laid over Lear's private agony is thus a lattice-work of reminders of miseries encountered in the public realm. The play's closure in structured reminiscence at one level supplements that social horror with ontological. The experience of atrocity has swollen to cosmic scale, confronting a universe as pitilessly indifferent to mortal pain as prosperity's response to human poverty. Yet the effect, I suggest – easily rendered impossible to miss through basic visual echo in performance – moves beyond intensification of grief into a kind of palimpsestic impugment of royal political oblivion. The replay of the heath scenes over Lear's last actions – the prompted recollection of abandonment, hunger, despair, and lunacy, of human beings cast below animal existence – systematically overlay his own pathos with what, self-engulfed as ever, he has terribly forgotten. Restored to 'absolute power' (276), he will still not make pomp take physic, nor recall the sufferings of poor naked wretches.

Throughout the profoundly beautiful scenes of reunion and imprisonment with Cordelia, then right through the unspeakable finale of utter brokenness, there seems in the Lear rapt in private love no reprise (beyond possibly 'you are men of stones') of audience communing or address. The king remains politically amnesiac: recessed, on both narrative and dramaturgic levels, into a closed mutuality of the private life. So much has been learned; nothing is remembered. No distribution will undo excess. Heightened through brilliantly politicized stagecraft, Shakespearean tutelage in distrust of authority – feudal and early capitalist alike – is complete.