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Claudia Corti

Civic Disorder and Theatrical Order: Representations of Popular Rebellions in London at the End of the Sixteenth Century

1. *The Anxiety of the 1590s*

Between 1590 and 1593, Londoners could attend popular performances with the common theme of the representation of popular rebellion. The theme itself was undoubtedly popular, given the sort of fascinating horror for any form of civic disorder that most Elizabethans notoriously shared. The characters in these performances were popular in as far as they normally belonged to the lowest classes of the social hierarchy, while the ideological stance of their authors, supposedly belonging to the highest social classes ("University Wits" for example) was un- or a-popular. What goes without saying is the fact that these texts firmly condemn any form of popular subversion, and strongly approve of its energetic repression, contextually upholding "law and order". Although their homologous perspective leads one to believe in ample ideological agreement, nonetheless it is extremely difficult to identify the limits of this agreement, because addressees are audiences characterized by a greatly diversified social make-up, within which a Manichean representation of popular rebellion can be either favoured or rejected. What interests us nowadays is mostly the asset of images of the people that they present. These images teach us very little about the actual conditions of the people in early modern England; still less about the idea that the people might have of themselves. Conversely they teach us a lot about the terror that a popular rebellion could instigate both in cultivated and unlearned minds, and how these ideas were dramatized by authors who were generally hostile to the mob and devoted to social hegemonic values.

Fear of popular rebellion is a common trait of Renaissance Europe. In Henrician and Elizabethan England, popular subversion was systematically denounced as heresy by the Homelies supporting the Tudor conception of the divine origin of monarchic rule[1]. In a society where lawlessness and violence were never far from the surface, rebellion was seen as the worst of evils. The state had no standing army, nor even a proper police force, to deal with rebels, so that any local movement could very easily develop into a major threat. To prevent rebellion starting, the authorities had to rely on censorship and informers, and above all on the idea, which was tirelessly proclaimed from both the pulpits and the magistrates' benches, that it was wicked to oppose one's God-given rulers.

[1] See *Certaine Sermons or Homilies, appointed to be Read in Churches in the Time of Queen Elizabeth I (1547-1571*), a Facsimile Reproduction of the Edition of 1623, Gainesville (Fla.), Scholar Facsimiles and Reprints, 1968.

The "Pilgrimage of Grace" (1536) was in a way the archetypal protest movement of the century. One typical feature was the importance of local rumour, in an age when communication between regions, or between town and country, was extremely weak. Another aspect was the crucial leadership role of the gentry in the rebellion, but it is also significant that no great nobleman participated, though some of their close relations did. It was characteristic that few of the participants wanted to rebel against the king himself, combining a conservative loyalty to the established order with a hatred of Henry's "evil councillors". More relevant, however, were 16th century rebellions with economic roots. Throughout the century there were frequent small-scale outbreaks of popular discontent against price rises, rack-renting, or the famous enclosures[2], such riots being especially common in the mid-century, and again in the 1590s, both periods of economic dislocation, inflation, and war[3].

However, with the possible exception of Kett's rebellion of 1549, these popular upheavals were never serious enough to pose a real threat to the Tudor state. Considering the increase in the cost of living during the century, it is surprising that there was not more violence (and this reflects, I strongly believe, the intrinsically conservative outlook of Tudor society as a whole). Even the genuinely political rebellions in the second half of the century, of which Wyatt's perhaps came nearest to success, really managed to shake the government of the day. On the whole, sixteenth-century rebellions probably strengthened the authorities' hand, rather than causing them to alter course[4].

The government saw the greatest threat in popular dislike of taxation (the theme of the plays we are going to consider), expressed in sporadic outbreaks of violence against tax collectors. From 1490 to 1560 there were numerously recorded cases of assaults on tax collectors, concentrated around London and the south coast, and there were probably others which never reached the courts[5]. More common and more widely spread were the cases of the "forcible rescue of goods", seized by a tax commissioner from someone who had refused to pay. At least 112 cases are recorded, and not rarely resistance to taxation amounted to rebellion and was ruthlessly crushed[6]. The Yorkshire rebellion arose from the efforts of the Earl of Nurthumberland, Lieutenant General of the Middle and Eastern Marches, to collect a new levy which had been granted by Parliament to intervene on

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[2] Enclosure was the main target of agrarian protest in Tudor England. "It is not where a man doth enclose and hedge in his proper ground, where no man hath commons, but it is meant thereby, when any man hath taken away and enclosed any other mens commons, or hath pulled down houses of husbandry, and converted the lands from the tillage to pasture": John Hales (1548), in *Tudor Economic Documents*, ed. R.H. Tawny and E. Power, London, Longman, 1924, vol. I, p. 41.

[3] These problems have been treated by Anthony Fletcher and Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Tudor Rebellions*, London-New York, Longman, 1997, pp. 62-128.

[4] See Perez Zagorin, *Rebels and Rulers, 1500-1660*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1982, vol. I, *passim.*

[5] See Fletcher and MacCulloch, chapter 3.

[6] See I.M.W. Harvey, *The Jack Cade Rebellion of 1450*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1991, "Introduction", *passim.*

behalf of Brittany against the French crown. The Cornish rebellion was caused by new taxes imposed by Henry VIII for an army to deal with Perkin Warbeck. In order to pay for the king's grandiose foreign policy, Wolsey put before Parliament heavier financial demands than the commons had ever faced; the commons replied that the sum could not possibly be levied; it was at this moment that Wolsey sent out commissioners to collect what was named, with involuntary irony, the "Amicable Grant". Very soon resistance to this very unpopular tax changed from passive to active, and an impressive assembly of more than a thousand persons gathered in Suffolk. The Duke of Norfolk and the Earl of Essex reported "great danger of insurrection":

> And unto us cam the inhabitauntes of the towne of Lavenham and Brant Ely whiche were offenders to a great nombre. They cam all in theire shirtes and kneling before us with pitious crying for mercy shewed that they were the kinges most humble and faithefull subgiettes and soo wold contynu during theire lyves saying that this offence by them comitted was only for lack of worke soo that they knewe not howe to gett theire lyvinge. [...] We made a long rehersall the beste we coulde to agravate theire heynous offence deslaring the same to be highe treason and laying the soreste we could to theire charges as well of their evell demeanour againste the kinges highness as of theire rayling wordes. Finally we tryed out iiii of the pryncipall of the offenders[7].

The "Pilgrimage of Grace", the most formidable revolt the Tudor monarchy ever faced, mobilized primarily to resist Henry's break with Rome and other religious changes; nevertheless the final manifesto at Pontefract contained articles relating strictly to economic matters, while one of the five articles sent by the leaders to the mayor of York, specifically concerns taxation:

> The iiide article is that weyr your grace hath a a taxe or a quindeyne granted unto you by act of parliament payable the next year, the which is and hath been ever leveable of shepe and catals of yor subiects within the sayde shire are now at this instant tyme in manner utterly decayed and whereby your grace to take the sayde tax or quindeyne yor sayde subiects shalbe distrayned to paye iiiid for every beast and xiid for xxtie shepe, the which wold be an importunate charge to them considering the poverty that they be in all redye and losse which they have sutayned these ii years by past[8].

Also the riots and rebellions which occurred in the Western regions in the 1550' showed that more than just religion was involved; in fact, the demands of Devonshire and Cornwall rebels were fundamentally against the impact of rising inflation and intense taxation.

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[7] *Letters and Papers of Henry VIII*, London, Stationary Office, 2001, p. 18.
[8] *Letters and Papers of Henry VIII*, p. 49.

As a whole, agrarian and peasant rebellion during the course of the sixteenth-century was increasingly associated with urban risings, and led to wide mass participation, as paradigmatically demonstrated by Kett's rebellion. The effects of growth on rents and the so called "entry fines" (that is, payment on taking up a tenancy by inheritance or sale), repeated coinage debasements, price oscillation and inflation, the impact of enclosures, and chiefly heavy taxation provoked a flood of popular complaint and social criticism. Preachers and reformers vied in denouncing the greedy landlords who placed their private profit above the "commonweal". Robert Kett, who had land in Suffolk, took over as a leader, leading the insurgents to Norwich and gathering followers of up to 16.000 people. The principal targets of rebel anger were landlords and gentlemen, for economic strain had created acute conflicts between landlords and peasant communities, undermining the vertical, paternalistic system deeply rooted in society. Kett's rebels forced gentlemen to abandon their houses, captured noblemen were imprisoned and shown to the crowd. Still, Kett and his followers would not admit to being rebels; when offered a royal pardon if they submitted, they refused on the basis that they were not offenders or in need of pardon. Actually, they looked to the crown for redress, and Kett even issued his orders in the king's name.

The problem is that the crown and the government could not accept any form whatever of popular complaint, immediately labelled as "sedition"; in any case of supposed "subversion" repression had to be heavy. Philosophical, sociological, political, economic and ethical justifications were promptly made ready:

When every man wyll rule, who shalt obeye? Nowe can there be any commune welthe, where he that is welthiest, is mooste lyke to come to woo? Who can there be ryche, where he that is rychest is in mooste daunger of poverty? No, no, take welthe by the hande, and say farewell welth, where lust is lyked, and lawe refused, where uppe is sette downe, and downe sette uppe[9].

What other fruit or end may hereof ensue unto you but devouring one another and an universal desolation of your own selves, besides the extreme peril of God's high wrath and indignation, besides the undoubted plague of mortality which (unless ye call for mercy in season) must needs light upon you by the severe rod of princely justice in our realm. [...] Your houses falle in ruin, your wives are ravished, your daughters defloured before your own faces, your goods that ye have many long years laboured for lost in an hour and spent upon vagabonds and idle loiterers[10].

[9] Richard Morison, *A Remedy for Sedition,* in *Letters and Papers of Henry VIII*, p. 56.
[10] *Philip Nichols's Answer to the Commoners of Devonshire and Cornwall*, quoted in Nicholas Pocock, "Troubles Connected with the Prayer Book of 1549", *The Camden Society*, new series, XXXVII, 1884, p. 145.

Compared to agrarian and peasant rebellions, disturbances in the towns were rare enough[11]. The worst civic disorder was the great London riot known as "evil Monday", which took place in 1517, when apprentices, shop keepers, artisans and women attacked foreign craftsmen and merchants, whose number, it was said, was so great "that the pore English artificers could skarce get any living"[12]. Troops mustered by the nobility quelled the disturbance with the help of municipal authorities. Before quiet was restored, however, over three hundred rioters had been arrested, and many were afterward executed on gallows set up all over the city as an example.

In Elizabeth's time, both popular economic distress and court intrigue produced rebellions. In 1569-70, riots in Yorkshire had contented themselves with destroying barns, crops and cattle. The bloodshed in the government's orgy of revenge was in marked contrast to the rebels' attitude: Elizabeth ordered that 700 of the rank and file should be executed under martial law. In Oxfordshire in 1596, a carpenter and two millers turned up on a hilltop to march on London, but were rounded up, tortured and executed. This extreme reaction to an event which was absurdly trivial shows just how nervous the authorities were about their situation. In the last decade of Elizabeth's life, there were plenty of reasons for her and her ministers to feel anxious. A run of disastrous harvests resulted in famine in many regions; the price of food nearly doubled, while the real value of wages declined. This was against a much higher government expenditure, and relatively much higher taxation. The queen pushed through a political, religious and social settlement which many of her subjects disliked. The prospects were gloomy, and there were plenty of continuing local troubles.

The oppressiveness of tax collectors and suppliers for both the army and the court provoked serious complaints about bribery and corruption. Many of the wealthy prospered, while the poor worsened, and this discrepancy was especially evident in London, where urban riots became more and more menacing. In 1591 William Hackett and his associates proclaimed their well known manifesto in Cheapside, announcing that Hackett, anointed by the Holy Ghost, should replace Elizabeth as monarch.

The government's reaction to these forms of "sedition" was very resolute; a royal order forbade "assemblies and routs compounded of sundry sorts of base people: some known apprentices such as were of base manual occupation [...] and some colouring their wandering by the name of soldiers returning from the wars"[13]. The crown, concerned above all with the maintenance of social stability, was particularly afraid of popular insurrections. Political alarm spread from the court to common society, and and it became ever more common to regard all popular demands, however

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[11] See *Crisis and Order in English Towns 1500-1700: Essays in Urban History*, eds. Peter Clark and Paul Slack, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972.

[12] The "evil Monday" is described by Edward Hall in his famous *Chronicle*, Menston, Scolar Press, pp. 143-9.

[13] *The London Chronicle*, transcribed from the Cotton manuscript in the British Library, in C.L. Kingsford, *Chronicles of London*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1905, p. 133.

moderate or legitimate, as a threat. Conservative polemists, government spokesmen, and clergymen as well, launched an integrated propaganda campaign against all modes of popular reformist movements. Apprehensions of revolutionary change became topical in the 1590s, and inevitably conditioned both the activity of playwrights and the reaction of playgoers toward the themes of popular discontent and political subversion.

Ghosts of ancient rebels were evoked by the establishment either to avoid the mentioning of contemporary outlaws (this would mean acknowledging their political status) or to project fear onto the perturbed population through the remembrance of their trials and executions. Thus Archibishop Whitgift and Secretary Cecil, in referring to various instances of political agitation, spoke depreciatively of "some Jack Cade or Jack Straw", also testifying to the popularity of these historical subjects for topical use.

2. Rebellion's Feats and Feasts

The Jack Cade rebellion of 1450 was notoriously used by Shakespeare in the second part of *Henry VI*. In its dramatization, Shakespeare incorporated a certain number of events belonging to a previous rebellion, which had occurred in 1381 during the reign of Richard II, and whose undisputed leader had been Jack Straw. In addition to this contamination, the demonstration of the origin of revolt is very complex, contemporarily being a Kentish rebellion and a threat to the city of London. Moreover, trouble begins among the aristocracy long before the people are aroused: when the retainers of Gloucester and Winchester repeatedly violate the peace, the citizens only desire civil quiet and show fundamental fear for the safety of their shops. With its grotesques excesses, the Cade rebellion appears as the inevitable result of oppression and lack of leadership in the ruling class; actually, it stems from a Yorkish plot to foment peasant unrest in order to overthrow the existing government. York, seizing the opportunity of the Irish uprising to levy his own army, boasts that he has "seduced a headstrong Kentishman, Jack Cade of Ashford, / To make commotion" (III, 1, 356-7), adding in an *aside*: "this devil here shall be my substitute" (III, 1, 371). So rebellion is primarily imputed to the ambitious aristocracy, although Cade's characterization wholly belongs to the traditional type of the popular leader: he is violent, cynical and immoral, and his quick mind and lively spirit are not sufficient to obliterate his ideologically utopian stupidity and communist clumsiness.

Slightly prior to Shakespeare's Jack Cade rebellion (only granted one Act in so long a play) are two stage shows entirely centred on the figure of Jack Straw. One is *The Device of the Pageant,* written in 1590 by a certain T. Nelson, and offered to the Lord Mayor of London by the

Company of Fishmongers[14]. The other is an anonymous drama in four acts, *The Life and Death of Jack Straw*[15], which was presented to the Stationers Register in 1593, but undoubtedly produced between 1587 and 1590-91, when the subject was fashionable. In fact the Lord Mayor of London, John Allot, was a fishmonger like his illustrious predecessor William Walworth, who had killed the rebellious Straw in 1381, receiving for that enterprise a knighthood which, at his own death, was bequeathed to his successors as London mayors. If the pageant utilizes the legendary core of the historical fact, pursuing more the model of morality than that of history drama, the play consistently relies on both Edward Hall's and Thomas Holinshed's *Chronicles*.

It is a fortuitous incident that launches the peasants' revolt. A tax collector, pretending to verify an artisan's daughter's capacity to pay an additional levy to support the war against France, has abused her. Her furious father violently opposes the government's agent, who kills him in retaliation. The taxman's misbehaviour provokes general indignation among the common people who were already upset by a run of tyrannical mistreatment. A revolt breaks out, so that an ever growing and multifaceted mass of artisans, merchants, farm workers, and "idle and vacabond persons as well" (according to Hall)[16], march on to the city of London. They do not admit to be rebels, declaring they are faithful subjects to the crown; their only demand is to be permitted to meet the king personally, in order to inform him about the scandalous manoeuvres of his attendants. Of course they demand social and economic reforms, but their primary target is the removal of the government's oppressive intermediaries. After the rebels have paused in Blackheath, an embassy arrives to learn about the motives of the insurrection, but the rebellious leaders insist on meeting the king. An army is sent by the Royal Council to stop the revolt, but the crowd advances threatening the whole city of London. Although their leaders apparently prompt the insurgents to discipline and respect (in order to gain the citizens' favour), the multitude give free course to their destructive and violent instincts. A new embassy is sent to win the rebels' resistance to the law; some obey, and the stubborn chiefs (Jack Straw and Wat Tyler) are captured and executed. Finally, the generous king pardons the more gullible than iniquitous throng.

Both stage shows allow space to gratuitous violence on the part of the rebels, and both enthusiastically celebrate the monarch's clemency. Both impute to the insurgent mob the inner purpose of disarraying the state's political and social balance. Their leader's supposed loyalty to the crown is just a mode of hypocritical strategy meant to conceal the authentic subversive aims of the insurrection: to destroy aristocracy and abolish any political and social hierarchy. Very poor

[14] *The Device of the Pageant: Set forth by the Worshipfull Companie of the Fishmongers, for the right honorable Iohn Allot: established Lord Maior of London, an Maior of the Staple for this present yeere of our Lord 1590*, by T. Nelson, London, 1590.
[15] *The Life and Death of Iacke Straw, A notable Rebell in England: Who was kild in Smithfield by the Lord Maior of London*, Printed at London by Iohn Danter, 1593.
[16] Edward Hall, *Chronicle* p. 220.

information is given about the rebels' reasons, as if the dramatists were careful in taking their distance from the implicit anarchic assumptions of the insurgents. Heavy moral and social responsibilities are assigned to John Ball, an interdicted clergyman whose revolutionary ideology has furnished theoretical arguments to Jack Straw and his companions.

These performances appear to be aligned with the hegemonic and apologetic doctrine whose ideological ingredients are: obedience to the monarch's law, absolute submission to established power, total condemnation of popular subversion, energetic denunciation of popular violence, strong belief in the overthrow of any popular upheaval, solemnization of restored order. However, in as far as they give partial and censured voice to the rebels' reasons, they at least acknowledge their dramatic presence, letting the social tension dimmed by the political and religious propaganda become at least translucent.

3. Rebellion as Popular Entertainment: 'The Device of the Pageant'

This show transparently validates its popular origin, in as far as it had been commissioned by the common Company of Fishmongers, that is by a form of direct emanation of the world of work. The *Device,* written in 1590, is dedicated to the Lord Mayor of London John Allott, a fishmonger like the valiant William Walworth who, in Richard II's reign, defeated and killed the rebellious Jack Straw. The argument is meant to celebrate both the high honourable fishmongers' guild and its most illustrious exponents, both from the past and the present. The author, undoubtedly trained in *humanae litterae*, adopts scholarly blank verse; nevertheless, his audience is not required to have any particular literary or historical background. The text consists of a series of rhetorical entreaties pronounced by a group of allegorical figures, interspersed with brief appearances of Richard II, Jack Straw, and William Walworth. The historical material is reduced to a minimum: King Richard II seeks help against the rebels from Walworth, to whom, as a reward, he promises whatever he likes; Jack Straw and his accomplices Wat Tyler, Hob Carter and Tom Miller, who intended to dethrone the king, have been arrested and put to death; Straw is hanged; others, who have run away, later on die like traitors; Walworth is being honoured with the title of knight, together with many other more visible heraldic signs, which are abundantly shown within the allegoric procession that coincides with the drama itself.

The allegorical pageant totally conforms to the traditional genre it belongs to, consisting as it does of a succession of stereotypes of so wide a range that it appears meaningless to search for an identification of the nature of its precise didactic-political tenure, as well as the kind of audience it aims to appeal to. Conceptually, it a sequence of *bons principes*: the queen and her good magistrates

keep the nation in safety and prosperity; the state is supported by wisdom and correctness; the sole danger is civic disorder.

The procession is opened by "him that rideth on a Merman", "whose forme you see is monstruous, straunge and rare, / Before a manlike shape, behinde a fishes fell"[17]. The "strange" mix of man and fish symbolically alludes to people who do not respect the ecclesiastical law that imparts a distinction between meat days and fish days. Were all observing the rule of abstaining from eating meat in certain periods, meat would be less expensive, fish would always be abundant, England's reserves of butter and cheese would increase, and many who are now forced to beg would be able to find a decent job as fishmongers. The commonwealth is guaranteed by many categories which are personified in the pageant. Plenty comes before showing a golden fleece representing England like a country where biblically milk and honey are ever flowing, and more pragmatically where wealth is assured by a paramount production of raw materials and commodities:

> This famous fleece doth so adorne our land,
> which daily doth with milke and honie flow,
> that same doth make all nations understand,
> like peace and plentie neuer man did know,
> for wool and lead, for tin, corne, beere and beefe,
> of Christian nations England is the chiefe. (vv. 70-75, p. 5)

The golden fleece rests on a wool sack at the feet of Peace, because John Allot is contemporarily mayor of London and of the Staples, that is the place in Calais (*l'Etape de Calais*) where foreign merchants took possession of the wool meant for export: "worthie Iohn Allot for his place most meete / is Mayor of London and the Staple too, / And will performe in both what hee should doo" (vv. 79-81, p. 5).

The central character is Peace ("I represent your peace and chiefest good", v. 46, p. 4), who is primarily supported by "Fame sounding a Trumpet":

> The blessed peace which England dothe possesse,
> and so hath done this thiertie two yeres space,
> I Fame am sent and charge to do no lesse,
> with trumpets sound, but spread it in each place.
> That all may with hearts which do not faine,
> our roiall peace in England still may raine. (vv. 40-5, p. 4)

[17] *The Device of the Pageant*, vv. 2-3, p. 3.

After Fame, other personages co-operate to assure England's commonwealth. First is Wisdom: "Wisedome supporteh still the public state, / Wisedome foreseeth ere it be too late" (vv. 52-3, p. 4). Next is Good Policy:

> Yea pollicie preuents each traiterous fact,
> and doth performe full many a famous act,
> both Pollicie and Wisedome will not cease,
> each night and daie for to preserue this peace. (vv. 54-7, pp. 4-5)

Loyalty and Concord highlight the civic responsibilities of honest and dutiful citizens:

> Faithfull and loyall are hir subiects seene,
> Concord unites them still in loyall bands,
> their tender hearts is linked to our Queene;
> and concord craues no other at their hands.
> Thus loyaltie and concord doth agree,
> that London still therein shall famous bee. (vv. 83-8, p. 5)

The text foregrounds the theme of peace, which is substantially connected to the paradigm of wealth, and this is fundamentally meant as alimentary welfare. Law, order and peace are the immediate guarantees of prosperity, to which Science and Labour also contribute: "Science and Labour still preserues mans health, / and are chiefe props of this our common wealth" (vv. 102-3, p. 6). It is ruthless ambition that causes disorder, lawlessness, civil war, and poverty (as the case of Jack Straw's rebellion demonstrates). This is told by Ambition himself:

> Ambition still pusht with hate and pride,
> doth dailie seeke to worke sweete Englands fall,
> he neuer rests, but seekes each time and tide,
> how Englands peace might soone be brought in thrall.
> And common wealth plunge into ciuill broiles,
> that forraine foes might triumph in our spoiles. (vv. 89-94, p. 6)

Against the dangers of foul ambition which challenges the commonwealth, the state has the full right to expel its ruinous opponents. As Commonwealth precisely affirms,

Our Senate graue and worthie magistrates,
shall still invention to maintaine our peace,
by banishing ambition from our gates,
and seeking meanes this peace may neuer cease:
Yea vertue so by him aduant shall be,
that vice shall flie and not be seene in me. (vv. 96- 101, p. 6)

The personage embodying Commonwealth is William Walworth himself, the leader of the Fishmongers' Company, who, in killing Straw, freed London from the destruction due to the Peasants' Rebellion of 1383 (and received from Richard II the title of knight):

Commononwealth:
I represent sir William Walworths place,
a fishmonger and Mayor of London twice,
I slew Jacke Straw, who sought my Kings disgrace,
and for my act reapt honors of great price,
first knight was I of London you may reade,
and since each Mayor gaines knighthood by my deede. (vv. 116-21, pp. 6-7)

A direct reference to the historical revolt is made by the allegorical figure which objectifies Jack Straw, who gives information about its disastrous solution:

Jacke Straw the rebell I present, Wat Tyler was my aide,
Hob Carter and Tom Miller, we all were not afraid,
for to depriue our soueraigne king, Richard the second namde,
Yet for our bad ambitions minded by Walworth we were tamde,
he being Mayor of London then, soone danted all our pride,
he slew me first, the rest fled, and then like traitors hide. (vv. 110-15, p. 6)

It is evident that no reason is allowed to the pre-determinations of the event, no mention is made of the poverty-stricken people. It is only personal ambition and will to power that causes Straw's insurrection against the legitimate, anointed monarch. And any form of political repression is salutary to the maintenance of both social peace and the nation's prosperity.

There is probably another motivation at the root of the show, and this is linked to the exercise of the fishmongers' profession. After the Peasants' Rebellion, in the years 1384-5, the fishmongers became a very popular theme in London, when the new mayor who had succeeded

heroic Walworth heavily attacked their Company (one of the most influent in town), accusing its members of commercial frauds and obtaining from Parliament an act which deprived them of the possibility to be mayors again. Only one year later a new Parliament annulled the previous deliberation, and the Company was reintegrated in its traditional privileges. Two hundred years having elapsed, apparently the Company was still prosperous, and it seemed to be advantageous enough to put a fishmonger at the head of municipal affairs.

4. Rebellion as Hegemonic Show: 'The Life and Death of Jack Straw'

This play was printed in 1593, but many references in the text move its composition to some years before. The theme of rebellion had particular relevance after the insurrection of apprentices in 1586; pressure of taxes and unrest in the countryside over them around 1588-89 is manifested in a few letters from Burghley to Walsingham; finally, in 1590 a member of the Fishmongers' Company was again Lord Mayor of London[18]. The text is short (four acts and one thousand lines) and looks often very suspicious; some conjectures have been made about George Peele's authorship, but everything remains uncertain[19]. It appears to have been written for a city pageant, and continues in the morality play tradition, starting with the basic purpose of teaching a political lesson, which is the evils of popular rebellion.

Jack Straw makes the same choice as a typical morality play hero, and undergoes the same consequences. Faced with the tyranny of severe taxation and the tax collector's outrage to his daughter, he chooses the worst way, unrighteous rebellion, thus pursuing fatal destruction. The evil force that leads Straw astray is the Parson, John Ball, who from his very first appearance speaks the conventional arguments for rebellion:

> England is growne to such a passe of late,
> That rich men triumph to see the poore beg at their gate.
> But I am able by good scripture before you to proue,
> that God doth not this dealing allow nor loue,
> But when Adam delued and Eve span
> Who was then a Gentleman.
> […]
> The Rich haue all, the poore liue in miserie:
> But follow the counsell of John Ball,

[18] See Irving Ribner, *The English History Play in the Age of Shakespeare*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1957, pp. 74-5.
[19] See Samuel Schoenbaum, *Internal Evidence and Elizabethan Dramatic Authorship*, Evanston (Ill.), Northwestern University Press, 1966, p. 176.

(I promise you I loue yee all):
And make diuision equally
Of each mans goods indifferently,
And rightly may you follow Armes,
To rid you from these ciuill harmes (Act I, lines 47-79)

Although the *incipit* offers some justification for the rebels' reasons, very soon their indignation turns against them. They ravish and kill, without any apparent motivation. They rebel without any general provocation from their superiors; unlike the Duke of York and other scheming noblemen in Shakespeare's *Henry VI*, no aristocrat here hopes to gain power by the insurrection. However deplorable the original incident involving the tax collector and the hapless Jack, this wrongdoing is an isolated abuse. In many ways this play is "almost hysterically anti-plebeian", as one of the very few critics who have dealt with this text puts it[20].Taxation is lawful and necessary; the king, Richard II, betrays none of the weaknesses abundantly attributed to him by Holinshed. The text absolves both the king and the nobility of all blame, ascribing the revolt to the simple communist aspirations of the poor. The author's one-sided defence of the administration is plainly analogous in character, vindicating Elizabeth's policies of taxation in answer to the increasingly outspoken criticism of the late 1580s and early 1590s.

This drama, in attempting to stress its disapproval of peasant uprisings, deprives a historical movement of any meaningful causality. Rebellion is uniquely a lower-class reaction, kindled not by general social injustice but by aggressive wrath and desperate exploitation of a random occasion for preconceived ambitions: the rebels want to be kings and nobles, and refuse to work and earn their bread because they are convinced they can share the aristocrats' social dignity. At the same time, they are greedy and envious of each other.

An interfering comic viewpoint at once reduces such claims to intended absurdity. John Ball, who is to be found "in a pulpit but twice in the year" and "forty times in the ale house testing beer", believes in perfect communal ownership, but he will himself be Archbishop of Canterbury and Chancellor. All lower-class spokesman are either totally depraved, or, like Nobs, aware of the rebels' sinful delusion. Nobs, a sort of conventional morality Vice, comments upon the action as a kind of chorus. Although he is one of the rebels, he is fully conscious of the evil of rebellion, and in this he is unlike Jack Straw who, involved as he is in the sin of revolt, is at least at the beginning under the illusion of seeking justice. Nobs is lucid about the nature of the rebellion, and cynical concerning its disastrous destiny:

[20] David Bevington, *Tudor Drama and Politics: A Critical Approach to Topical Meaning*, Cambridge (Mass.), Harvard University Press, 1968, p. 233.

Here's euen worke towards for the Hangman, did you ever
see such a crue,
After so bad a beginning, whats like to insue?
Faith euen the common reward for Rebels,
swingledome, swangledome, you know as well as I.
But what care they, yee heare them say they owe
God a death, and they can but die:
Tis dishonour for such as they to dye in their bed,
And credit to caper under the Gallowes all saue the head:
And yet by my fay the beginning of this Riot
May chaunce cost many a mans life before all be at quiet:
And I saith, Ile be amongst them as forward as the best.
And if ought fall out but wel, I shall shift amongst the rest,
And being but a boy, may hide me in the throng. (Act I, lines 105-16)

Tom Miller is another Vice-like figure who joins Nobs in scenes of garish comedy, entirely in the manner of the late moralities. Nevertheless, the most authentic substance of the play's comic effects lies elsewhere: in the spread between what the rebels say and what they do; between their respectable declaration of principles and the vulgar practice of their behaviour; between their malicious naiveté and their ludicrous arrogance.

The popular scenes that exhibit the rebels' moral lowliness are interspersed with ethically exemplary dramatic sequences that show the noble and generous behaviour of the administration. Faced with the insurgents' audacity, the king is encouraged by his unceasingly watchful aristocracy to uphold his just principles. Richard represents the best of divine right; he taxes only by "general consent of either house" to conduct wars in France"; he is a "true-succeeding prince" who has won the esteem of both the people and Parliament "with reason and regard". He is the soul of the commonwealth to whom all parts contribute:

The noble and the slave and all
Do live but for a commonweal
Which commonweal, in other terms, is the king (Act III, lines 209-211),

In dealing with the rebels the king ignores danger to his person, is far more clement than his advisers would have been, and is consistent in his promises. Only with the greatest reluctance does he approve the execution of the two leaders Parson Ball and Wat Tyler (Jack Straw has already

been killed by the courageous Mayor). He acts not from considerations of prudence and policy (as in Holinshed) but from inborn clemency. This manifest departure from the source is the clearest indication of the author's motive, that is his desire to glorify Elizabeth's merciful handling of both her political opponents and the discontented peasantry. The nobles' irreprehensibility always contrasts with the rebels' unworthiness, where again the lowliness of their feelings is equated with the lowliness of their birth, of which it is a natural consequence: they are designated as *villains, bastards, slaves, base, common*…

In conclusion, *The Life and Death of Jack Straw* is a vigorously propagandistic apology for social and political hierarchy; in its favourable analogy between Richard II and Elizabeth it manifests a strong conservative bias. However, the play's viewpoint is not exclusively that of the rulers. It is written for the London public stage, and appeals to the Londoners' fear of Kentish rioters who will pillage and then burn shops in the city. Ideologically it homologates the interests of the queen - the head of state – with those of the mayor, the head of London's people. The mayor offers resistance as much to the murdering of nobles in their palaces as to the looting and wrecking in the streets. Many citizens are perhaps too prosperous to be enchanted by Tyler's demagogically tantalizing offers of "wealth and liberty". Other plays at the public theatres – including *2Henry VI* – correspondingly entail the conservatism of London's people in contrasting agrarian movements. Still, *Jack Straw* proposes a relevant difference. In representing the king and the government as entirely free from blame, it purposely eschews the political problem of social injustice under monarchical government. It simply echoes the policies and strategies of the Tudor regime.

5. Guilty Victims

The plays we have examined represent the fundamental, traditional tripartite scheme of medieval society, composed of clerics, warriors and labourers: the lower bourgeoisie, that is the very basis of modern England, appears to be excluded from the social structure. Precisely this exclusion highlights the opposition between hegemonic power and common people. As moral and social worthiness is associated with noble birth, the opposition between good citizens and rebellious subjects also tends to be confused with that existing between higher and lower classes. Which, in turn, incorporates the allegorical polarity Good/Evil.

Rebellion is evil by nature, and its very intention is illegitimate and lawless: that is why its motivations are never given a hearing. To rebel means to break common laws and natural rules. Insurgents are judged as war criminals, as manifested by the spectacular deployment of the royal banner signifying royal rights. And if the very intention of revolt is iniquitous, the authors of these

plays appear very careful in avoiding thematic complicity: in keeping their distance from the rebels' reasons they vouch for their honesty, respect for order, and loyalty to the crown.

These authors presumably do not belong to the ruling class themselves, but are very respectful of its prerogatives, by which their art and jobs can survive. So they intentionally submit to the ideological and cultural imperatives of hegemonic power. Unlike Shakespeare, who argues against lower-class rebellion while frankly examining the painful reasons for its existence.

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