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Shakespeare's Mad, Unruly Mob: Petition, Popular Revolt, and Political Participation in *King Henry VI*, *Part 2*

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In the fourth act of *King Henry VI, Part 2* a messenger appears onstage reporting the open rebellion of Jack Cade and his followers to the king. He declares:

The rebels are in Southwark; fly, my lord!

[...]

His army is a ragged multitude

Of hinds and peasants, rude and merciless. (4.4.26-32)¹

The messenger's report is filled with contempt for the lower orders. They are a "ragged multitude," the "rude and merciless" masses, risen in uproar against the authorities. As Christopher Hill has demonstrated, the topos surrounding sixteenth-century elite perceptions of popular uprising was of a "many-headed monster," characterized as being "mad" or "rude," and whose actions were ruled by their anger and irrationality (327-37). For many sixteenth-century commentators, popular rebellion was dangerous and a threat to the government, which existed to sustain social and political stability.

While early modern perceptions of popular revolt as monstrous made it difficult to comprehend rebellion as anything but seditious, Andy Wood contends that England had a long tradition of popular revolt. Many of these rebellions shared common characteristics, including a consistency of political language and similar causes of rebellion (Wood 1). Rebellion arose from the principle of the commonwealth, where governments were supposed to work for the common good. The tradition of popular protest stems from the conflict between the ideal existence of the paternalist model of government where authority figures govern for the people's well-being, and its fragmentary existence in the real world of politics (Shugar 218-220).² As Michael Bush posits, "the essential purpose of a rising of the commons was to denote that the body politic was out of joint" (113). Wood extends this analysis and sees rebellion as "performing a function, restoring the balance to the polity and calling rulers to their proper roles" (3).

This political function of popular protest aligns Shakespeare's representation of rebellion with the paradigms of counsel. The political

purpose of counsel in the Sixteenth Century was to help a ruler maintain a balanced government aimed at the interests of all members of the state. This paper analyzes Shakespeare's dramatization of the Jack Cade Uprising of 1450 in *King Henry VI, Part 2*, illustrating how the play represents the dichotomy between early modern perceptions of popular rebellion as a mad, unruly mob, and the conciliar function of rebellion to restore balance to the polity. I argue that rebellion is a type of plebian counsel, where the rebels voice grievances to the authorities and seek redress. Shakespeare's dramatization critiques the ability of paternalist ideals to serve the needs of all members of the commonwealth and represents the necessity for a space in the public sphere for the plebian voice.

A reading that is attuned to plebian counsel must take into consideration that the Jack Cade scenes are comedic, and that the registering of social grievances was an acceptable part of comedy. However, critics have read the comedy of the Jack Cade scenes in various ways. For some, clowning prevents the ability for the commons to voice social complaint. For example, Phyllis Rackin argues that plebian characters "can rebel against their oppression, but they can never finally transcend the conventions of comic representation that keep them in their social place and mark their separation from the serious historical world of their betters" (221). Likewise, Chris Holcomb sees comedic scenes as blurring social class distinctions, and Stephen Greenblatt believes the peasants often violate the generic tradition of comedy in its application to epic. For others, clowning opens up the possibility of voicing social complaint. For example, Maya Mathur demonstrates that Cade's rhetoric and ruthless violence work together to formulate a figure of satire, one who is both able to "invoke laughter and register complaint," in ways that promote him as the "natural spokesman for the rural community" (35-7). Chris Fitter compares Shakespeare's representation of the Jack Cade Uprising to the contemporary rebellion of William Hacket, arguing that in "Hacketizing" Cade, Shakespeare emphasizes the complaints of this London uprising.

This paper begins with an analysis of Jack Cade as a clownish figure and Shakespeare's use of comedy to convey critical comment as plebian counsel. While comedy allows for social critique, the rebels' violence overshadows their expression of grievances. I analyze how the comedy's

degeneration into violence silences plebian counsel and excludes it from the political sphere. In focusing on plebian counsel and the play's representation of the plebian voice within the political sphere, this paper argues that Shakespeare's dramatization of national events couches the medieval world of the play with the sixteenth-century rhetoric of counsel. It especially examines Shakespeare's representation of the political sphere, and contends that while works such as political tracts and advice manuals are limited to prescribing an ideal, the nature of drama depicts events in ways that enact the fractures within competing ideologies, fissures in the political system, and absences of institutional devices that contribute to the political break-down.

An analysis of the Jack Cade's Uprising and its relation to plebian counsel must take into account that under Shakespeare's hand the scenes underwent an elaborate compositional process. Shakespeare changes the characterization of the rebel leader that occurs in the chronicles, which describe Cade as "a young man of goodly stature and pregnant wit" (Hall 220), and narrate that the lords found him "sober in talk" and "wise in reasoning" (Holinshed 3.224). Shakespeare turns this serious protester into a buffoonish renegade, leading an angry mob to the greatest possible disorder. From the very onset of the Cade sequence, the festive disruption of the carnivalesque dominates the tone of the scenes, with Cade as the Lord of Misrule. For example, Cade declares that under his rule:

There shall be in England seven half-penny loaves sold for a penny; the three-hooped pot shall have ten hoops, and I will make it felony to drink small beer. (4.2.60-63)

The play renders the serious motivations of Cade and his followers that appear in the chronicles as irrational and their articles reflect a ridiculous utopian vision of a complete reversal of economics.

Significantly, Shakespeare's depiction of Cade as the Lord of Misrule does not undermine the populace's social and economic condition. Rather, clowning sets up Cade as a critic of the aristocracy's abuses of the people. Edgar J. Fripp argues that the role of Cade was probably performed by the playing company's leading clown, Will Kemp (227). The relationship between Cade's characterization to clowning is significant, because in the theatrical tradition clowns aped their betters,

scoffed at ranks and orders, indulged in chop-logic, and mocked gentility, learning, and law. The rebellion's carnivalesque depiction has produced a discrepancy in literary criticism. For critics such as M. M. Reese, Shakespeare explores "what happens when authority passes to the uninstructed multitude" (126). Similarly, for Richard Helgerson, Shakespeare's "mockery of Jack Cade...is open and unmistakable" (212). Yet, criticism on the play is not univocal, and other critics argue that Shakespeare uses the comedy to convey critical comment. Paloa Pugliatti asserts that Shakespeare's comedy produces a "double perspective" (453), where the words and actions of the low-life characters are not to be viewed with ridicule, but rather the comedic mode generates an "added significance that provides a critical perspective on the historical events" (455). I concur with Pugliatti, and in my view, the dialectic between the inversion of the Lord of Misrule and the conventions of comedy give the Cade scenes a unique perspective on plebian counsel.

Shakespeare uses the carnivalesque world of misrule, especially the characters' chop-logic, to turn language upside down. Several critics have noted that the commoner's language makes their complaints difficult to understand. However, Ellen Caldwell's extensive analysis of their grievances argues that while the comedy makes the rebels' language "ambiguous," it also "mediate[s] the conditions of late Elizabethan England: the fluidity of social status, unstable prices [...] or in general, access to and control of resources" (50-1). For example, while Cade's promises of free-flowing bread and ale are on the verge of sheer farce, the substance of his political agenda is in sympathy with popular wishes of material subsistence for all. Cade's program of cheaper bread is rooted in the economic measurements of the Assize of Bread and Ale, which directed the size of a loaf of bread that would be sold for six shillings. Decreasing the weight of a loaf of bread was an effective form of rationing, since many of the nation's poor could not afford to buy more bread when the size of a loaf decreased (Davis 470). Cade's utopian dream is not the typical festive laughter of the Lord of Misrule, but a poignant moralistic laughter revealing the very real hardships and deprivation of the poor.

The comedic language constitutes a powerful rhetoric of commonwealth ideals, where the government works to maintain a balanced body politic. Even before spectators and readers encounter Cade, two commoners foreground England's economic crisis by playing on

a pun that associates Cade's work as a tailor with his dream of political restoration:

GEORGE. I tell thee, Jack Cade the clothier means to dress the commonwealth, and turn it, and set a new nap upon it.

NICK. So he had need, for 'tis threadbare. Well, I say it was never merry world in England since gentlemen came up. (4.2.4-8)

The commoners' rhetoric characterizes them as capable of understanding both the underlying ideals constructing paternalism, and the exploitation of power that suppresses them. For Cade's followers a "merry world" is one where the ruling class cares for the poor, and since "gentlemen came up," the social arrangements inherent within paternalist constructions of society are not working properly. Moreover, Cade's followers make clear the cultural tensions between the commoners and the aristocracy, and voice the shortcomings of England's government to maintain a proper commonwealth, where the economic interests of all men are protected regardless of rank. This class resentment is made explicit when George complains, "Virtue is not regarded in handicraftsmen" (4.2.9-10), and muses, "the King's Council are no good workmen" (4.2.12-13). George sees a difference between the virtuous work of handicraftsmen, and the nobility and gentry who, as "no good workmen," are not skilled at governing the commonwealth. The commoners' complaints suggest an understanding that good government depends upon commonwealth ideals, where a sense of community trumps economic self-interest.

Shakespeare's introduction to Jack Cade and his followers establishes that within the world of the play there exists a break-down in the natural order of society, where the role of social superiors to protect the well-being of the people was not being upheld. The commoner's complaints reflect two important ideals for Tudor society -- the commonwealth ideal, which espoused that all members of the body politic worked in cooperation for the welfare of the whole, and paternalism, the system of governing relations by which the social superior protected the interests of subordinates. These two ideals held particular resonances for

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the Elizabethans, because by the early 1590s they had defined social relations for over fifty years.

The Tudor commonwealth writers preached against the covetousness of the landed gentry and the emerging merchant class and warned of the detriment that their avarice posed for the poor. Hugh Latimer argued that the “rich men” were responsible for the privation of the poor, for they “causest such dearth, that the poor men, which live of their labour, cannot with the sweat of their face have a living, all and of victual is so dear” (84). These writers saw that economic self-interest was especially problematic in the emerging capitalist market of the Sixteenth Century. They urged the aristocracy, landowners, and government administrators to return to the ideals of paternalism, the keystone of which was the domestic authority of the adult male. Just as obligation bound the male head of household to care for the women, children, and servants of his household, so too were the magistrates to care for the needs of those they ruled. In speaking against economic oppression, Robert Crowley voices the break-down that occurs in the natural order of society in terms of Christian charity and the proper role of social superiors as God’s stewards:

Learn to know the estate that God hath called you unto, and to live according to your profession; know that you are all ministers in the common weal, and that the portion which you are born unto, or that your prince giveth you, is your estate; know that your office is to distribute, and not scrape together on heaps. God has not set you to survey his lands, but to play the steward on his household of this world and to see that your poor fellow servants lack not their necessaries.

Crowley uses biblical allusion to define the social role of the wealthy to care for the needs of the poor. That Crowley’s text was specifically addressed to Parliament shows an understanding that the government’s role was to serve the people economically.

Yet paternalist conceptions of society conceived of reciprocity in terms of unequal relations, with the subordinates’ needs already provided for, and thus precluding any recognition of their expressions of economic need. The rhetoric of Cade and his followers reflects writers such as

Latimer and Crowley, using commonwealth ideals to illustrate the plight of the poor. The social obligation to speak for the common good creates a space for plebian counsel, and for Cade and his followers to voice their grievances within the political system. Paradoxically, rebellion becomes a means to voice counsel, defend the populace, and right the order of English society.

Although Shakespeare's commoners have genuine grievances against their social and economic condition, the play also demonstrates the problems that occur when people take matters into their own hands. The rebels' degeneration into the violent mob undermines their plebian counsel, and equates their voice with disobedience. Critics such as Craig Bernthal and Thomas Cartelli have demonstrated that the commoners' attack on writing holds legal language responsible for agrarian dispossession and corrupt legal systems. For instance, Cade orders that they "burn all the records of the realm" (4.7.11). His motives for burning the records are dramatized as part of his reign as the Lord of Misrule, where the illiterate take revenge on the written word. In an even more violent depiction of rebellion against the written word, a clerk falls victim to the rebels because he can write his name. Cade pronounces that an innocent clerk shall be hung "with his pen and inkhorn about his neck" (4.2.100-101). The scene demonstrates the rebels' anger against "neck verse," whereby an educated person accused of a crime could read four lines of Latin and claim the benefit of the clergy (Cressy 16). The reversal of "neck-verse," where literacy condemns the clerk to death rather than saving him, alludes to the dangers of literacy within the court system for the unlearned. Their revenge on written records critiques how the advantages taken by the learned of the uneducated often lead to serious legal abuses, thereby negating the ideals of justice that were the foundation of society's paternalist visions.

Shakespeare illustrates the class separation between the educated and the illiterate by depicting Cade and his followers as holding literacy and learning accountable for their oppression. While the rebels understand the social breakdown that oppresses them, they also know they hold no voice within the political system, and no means to speak their counsel. In the Tudor period education was seen as preparing young men to become active participants in society. Richard Mulcaster, the first master of the Merchant Taylors' School, insisted that the aim of education

was to train boys to become “profitable in publik, and prove so in the end, theie chefelie consider the principall and subaltern magistrates” (B3r). Mulcaster’s description of the humanist education program and its concomitant notion of active citizenship and governmental participation demonstrates that education and literacy separated those who were seen as active participants in government, and those who were subjected to their authority.

Significantly, the chop-logic and carnivalesque violence of Cade and his followers makes the rebels’ plebian counsel confusing and difficult to comprehend. Rather than the worthy poor seeking to voice grievances against an injustice, the violence portrays the insurgents as an unruly mob that needs to be suppressed. Shakespeare augments the rebels violence, juxtaposing accounts of the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381 into his depiction of the Jack Cade Uprising, turning the rebels into a mad, insane mob. These scenes include the rebels’ destruction of the Savoy Palace, the Inner Temple, and all official governmental records. Shakespeare also adds the beheadings of Lord Saye and his son-in-law James Crowmer, where the rebels place the head upon spikes, carry them through London, and “at every corner have them kiss” (4.7.128). The rebels’ physical violence of governmental structures and murder of political emissaries closes down their intervention in the sociopolitical process, turning the festive nature the Lord of Misrule and the dramatic tradition of clowning into a tragic defeat and endorsement of class differentiation and absence of the plebian voice in the commonwealth. While the legitimate grievances of the insurgents suggest a need for a political identity for even the lowest orders of society, Shakespeare takes a very traditional view that rebellion, whatever its cause, is invariably considered a troublesome event to be kept in check and suffocated.

English society was not devoid of an institutional means for people to speak their grievances. The petition, which dated back to feudal society, was addressed to a particular nobleman and was the acceptable means for people to bring grievances to someone in authority in hopes of finding redress (Patterson 57). Petitions often accompanied rebellions, where the participants used the acceptable institutional device to voice grievances, and to communicate the motivations and causes of the rebellion to the authorities.³ Overwhelmingly, the articles submitted to the monarch asked that the gentry and nobility be true to the commons and fulfill their

obligation to protect the commons' interests by providing proper leadership.

Cade and his followers deliver King Henry a written formal document of their grievances. At first, Henry responds sympathetically to the commoners, attempting to play his role as the distributor of justice and redress their ills. After reading the rebels' supplication he proclaims, "I myself,/ Rather than bloody war shall cut them short,/ Will parley with Jack Cade their general" (4.4.10-12). Henry's decision to "parley" with the rioters, indicates that popular assembly enforces an awareness of their grievances and the causes of the political break-down, and the need to quell the rebellion produces an answerability to the commons. However, rebellion as a form of plebian counsel is not a peaceful, humble petition. Rather, Henry's interest in social justice quickly dissolves into a predictable anxiety about the threat that rebellion posed for the social order. It was precisely this type of rebellion that was most feared by the Tudor administration, and the typical response was to send in a provost marshal, an officer of armed forces who served as a type of military police. However, *King Henry VI, Part 2* is a play, not a political tract or homily on obedience, and under Shakespeare's artistry, the depiction of using military force to quell the rebellion illustrates how silence defined the relations between the Crown and the commons in ways that prevent, rather than promote, plebian counsel.

The suppression of the rebellion by Lord Clifford, the king's envoy best demonstrates the silencing of plebian counsel. Shakespeare depicts an oratorical duel between Clifford and Cade that results in a slapstick comedy of rebels running to and fro in show of their alliance. The commoners are faced with either continuing to fight with Cade for their "ancient freedom" (4.8.26), or accepting "free pardon to them all/ That will forsake [Cade] and go home in peace" (4.8.9-10). Clifford promises them the king's pardon:

Will ye relent,
And yield to mercy whilst 'tis offered you?
Or let a rebel lead you to your deaths?
Who loves the King and will embrace his pardon,
Fling up his cap, and say "God save his majesty!" (4.8.11-15)

Clifford's rhetoric of pardon and mercy converts the commoners back to passive obedience. That the commoners give up their fight for their ancient freedom for the king's pardon disheartens Cade, who manages to escape. The commoners' acceptance of Clifford's pardon allows for a suppression of plebian counsel and for the causes of the rebellion to be ignored.

Clifford's suppression of the rebellion is followed by a vision of governmental polity that was closed to the popular voice. The stage direction states that Clifford enters the king's court chauffeuring in the "multitudes with halters about their necks" (4.9). The rebels appear at Henry's court asking forgiveness, and the halters signify their submission to Henry's authority. Henry's pardon and his submission of the rebels to their "prince and country" (4.9.16) exemplifies that when plebian counsel is concealed behind the roar of rebellion, it becomes condemned as civil disturbance rather than expressing plebian counsel. Shakespeare thus creates a dramatic tableau of plebian obedience as synonymous with silence. Yet, while the suppression of the rebellion is conservative and essentially authoritarian in its depiction, the closing of the scene hints that Henry understands that the rebellion results from a breakdown in government. As he takes his leave he requests, "Come wife, let's in, and learn to govern better;/ For yet may England curse my wretched reign" (4.10.48-9). Henry implies that political strife is caused by poor government, and that he still has much to learn about how to govern his people. His final words leave a note of hope that the plebian voice must find some space within the political sphere if government is to function properly.

Cade's death also depicts the conflict between humanist concepts of the elite's duty to work in service to the well-being of the lower orders and the reality that court politics were often characterized by self-interest. Whereas Iden, the man who kills Cade, identifies himself as a landowner of a "small inheritance" (4.10.18), Cade embodies the rural poor, admitting to Iden that "I have eat no meat these five days" (4.10. 37-38). Cade sees Iden not as a gentlemen with a social obligation to the poor, but a member of the established authority who he has fought against in the rebellion. He responds not with humility, but with opposition, calling Iden "lord of the soil" (4.10. 24), and saying that he believes Iden will "wilt betray me, and get a thousand crowns of the King by carrying my head to

him” (4.10.26-27). Rather than acting out of Christian charity, Iden quickly assumes a defense of his property rights, and he reproaches Cade for trespassing on his lands:

Is't not enough to break into my garden
 And like a thief to come to rob my grounds,
 Climbing my walls in spite of me the owner,
 But thou wilt brave me with these saucy terms? (4.10.32-35)

As Thomas Cartelli contends, “Iden’s garden is enclosed private property, and Iden objects to Cade’s refusal to maintain a habit of servility” (43). Iden’s antipaternalist approach to land stewardship thus places onstage the class conflicts between the starving commoner and the pretentious landowner that have haunted the Jack Cade scenes.

Moreover, Cade’s status as a “monstrous traitor” (4.10.65) allows Iden to use Cade’s body to his social and political advantage. Iden indeed carries Cade’s head to the king, where he is rewarded and “created knight for his good services” (5.1.76). Cade’s death and Iden’s advancement thereby demonstrate the opposing political structures that surrounded Tudor monarchy. Whereas humanist commonwealth ideals preached the duty of service to the poor, this philosophy often worked in conflict with the politics of intimacy, where service to the king and reciprocal reward defined wealth and political status. In Cade’s death, Shakespeare presents an astute political awareness of the decay of hospitality and mutual responsibility that defined paternalist ideals. Iden’s success over Cade reinforces the idea that power and political voice stem from land ownership and socio-economic status. Cade’s death at the hands of this oppressive, elite class signifies that while the commoners may be able to resist such power structures, the acts of plebian political participation and counsel could not restructure the relations between crown and subject or between gentry and commons in ways that would have included the plebian voice within the political sphere.

In conclusion, the play’s depiction of the rebellion as mad and irrational reveals that the plebian voice only has strength when it is aligned with the wishes of the ruling class. The play uncovers a longing for a functioning paternalism, but is ever aware of the changing economic and political constitution of society that required an accumulation of wealth.

King Henry VI, Part 2 plays out, in quite complex ways, the obstacles to establishing an effective, orderly structure for political participation of the commons and bringing the people's concerns before the Crown. In doing so, it reveals that paternalism as a model of government is a workable, but flawed, system, and that the recognition of another's interests is essential for the preservation of the commonwealth. The play depicts a particular moment of popular political action, but yet the commoners' complaints emphasize both that the people could not rely on the virtue of kingship to maintain social and economic justice, and that they had no reliable means to express their grievances. The play thus works within the public political sphere, conversing with other texts on counsel and citizenship. While Shakespeare uncovers the lack of a workable institutional apparatus for incorporating the people into the public sphere, he also substantiates the need for plebian counsel for a workable conception of the commonwealth. What is at stake in representations of peasant rebellions such as Shakespeare's *King Henry VI, Part 2* is a conception of Thomas Starkey's the "very and true commonwealth" that incorporates all of its members into society (194). It is the dream of a state secured from the top with government officials who understand their social obligation to all members of the commonwealth, and from the bottom, with a public space for the commons to articulate popular complaint in ways that can effect change.

Notes

- 1 I quote from the Arden Shakespeare 3rd Series.
- 2 I differentiate between patriarchy, which was the supremacy of the adult male in society, and paternalism, which was a system of governing relations by which the social superior would protect the subordinate, which also defined the relations between rulers and ruled.
- 3 For a good resource of the documents of petition that were written and presented to the authorities during rebellions that occurred in the Tudor Period see Anthony Fletcher and Diarmid MacCulloch 129-151.

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