

### **“For pure need”: Violence, Terror and the Common People in *Henry VI, Part 2*.**

Of all Shakespeare’s plays, *Henry VI, Part 2* contains the most serious and extended representations of common characters, many of whom are named and given a good deal of dramatic complexity. Jack Cade is, of course, chief among these characters, but many of his followers are also given substantial opportunity to voice their concerns. Additionally, other scenes contain interesting commoners such as Simon Simpcox and his wife, as well as Peter Thump and his fellow petitioners. Whilst all of the scenes in which these common characters appear contain aspects of both slapstick and burlesque, it is true to say that they also portray these individuals acting *in extremis*. Each of the scenes contains violence, often of an extreme nature, and each contains also some degree of what could be termed terror; namely, the constant threat of violence. Generally speaking, in the past these characters and the issues articulated in these scenes have been regarded as important negotiations of the more important characters and themes contained in the main plot concerning King Henry and the warring nobles. Thus, for example, the Peter Thump and Thomas Horner duel is regarded as burlesquing the chivalric code which is seen to be under threat in the conflict concerning the nobility. The Simon Simpcox episode is regarded as an ironic play on the notions of duplicity and blind ambition. And the Jack Cade scenes are perceived as demonstrating both comedic and ironic resonances with regard to the violent disorder that the warring noble factions are bringing to the nation at large.<sup>1</sup> While such interpretations are indeed convincing, it is true to say that the scenes and the common characters in them articulate something rather more than such merely

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<sup>1</sup> Such is indeed the pervasive nature of these views that it is true to say that all analyses of the play to date agree that the common characters are primarily present to ironically contrast the story of the aristocratic struggle for power. This being the case, it is impossible to list all of the critical works holding such views. For an exhaustive analysis of both this view and the tradition of criticism of the play see William Shakespeare, *King Henry VI Part Two*. ed. by Ronald Knowles, The Arden Shakespeare (London: Thomson, 2001). All quotations are taken from this edition.

structural concerns. By examining each common character, it becomes apparent that, taken together, these scenes demonstrate both the constant threat and the actual use of violence against the lower orders in the play. Moreover, by considering these characters in the context of the time in which the play was written, they can also be seen to demonstrate the constant threat and actual use of violence against the lower orders in Shakespeare's own time.<sup>2</sup> This being the case, it is the argument of this paper that this play dramatises both a past and a contemporary society which are defined by their nature as, at least as far as the common people are concerned, 'reigns of terror'. Such a conclusion is reached by specific reference to an abortive uprising which occurred in Oxfordshire in 1596, the consideration of which enables the perception that Shakespeare constructed such a violent world in the play not because of any ideological point he was trying to make, but rather because as a professional and popular playwright, he wished to portray a dramatically compelling world in which the audience could believe and to which it could relate due of its foundation in reality. This is most clearly demonstrated in the scenes featuring the rebellious Jack Cade and his followers. Before considering these scenes, it is necessary to examine

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<sup>2</sup> Although the precise dates of production are unknown, late–1589 to mid–1592 are the parameters agreed by most critics. Though not important in terms of this current study, these dates are spread over three years because the order in which the three *Henry VI* plays were written is unknown. The most thorough study of this subject has been undertaken by the Arden Shakespeare editors; *King Henry VI Part One, Part Two and Part Three*, ed. by Andrew S Cairncross, The Arden Shakespeare (London: Methuen, 1962–1969), and *King Henry VI Part One, Part Two and Part Three*, ed. by Ronald Knowles, The Arden Shakespeare (London: Thomson, 1999–2001), both of whom set these as the dates. Other important studies find mid-to-late 1592 most probable for the performance of *Part Two*; see Hanspeter Born, "The Date of 2, 3 *Henry VI*", *SQ* 25 (1974), 323–34. This particular essay enabled the placing of *2H6* in the context of the London Feltmakers' uprising in June and July 1592; see Richard Wilson, *Will Power: Essays on Shakespearean Authority* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester, 1993), pp. 22–44. For a rejection of this aspect of Wilson's argument, see Annabel Patterson, *Shakespeare and the Popular Voice* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1989), pp. 35–7. Evidence produced in a later essay suggests the plays were performed between late–1589 and mid–1591; see William Leahy, "'Thy hunger-starved men': Shakespeare's *Henry Plays* and the Contemporary of the Common Soldier", *Parergon: Journal of the Australian and New Zealand Association for Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 20.2 (July 2003), 119–134.

the episodes featuring the other, less significant common characters to understand their importance in this theatrical representation of a world of terror and violence.

Among the first of the common characters to be introduced in the play is Peter Thump (1.3), one of “three or four petitioners”. These individuals wish to petition the Lord Protector, Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester, but are instead met by Queen Margaret and the scheming Marquess of Suffolk. Before Peter airs his grievance concerning his master, the armourer Thomas Horner, two of the petitioners state theirs regarding the suffering they have undergone due to the recent and widespread practice of enclosure in their neighbourhood. Indeed, one petitioner goes so far as to accuse “the Duke of Suffolk, for enclosing the commons of Melford” (1.3.20–21). Enclosure of arable land was, as is generally recognised, a major concern during the reign of Elizabeth and a matter of potential conflict particularly in the 1590s, the period in which the play was written and performed. Enclosure was seen to cause both rural destitution and urban overpopulation and crime, and was, indeed, the major underlying cause of the Oxfordshire uprising in 1596, an event to which we shall return.<sup>3</sup> Generally, the meeting of Suffolk and the petitioners is regarded as a theatrical device used by Shakespeare in order to cast the Marquess in a negative light. If this is the case, then Shakespeare must have predicted that his audience, or at least the majority of it, would have seen this event in such a light. As Jean Howard and Phyllis Rackin point out, in this confrontation, “Suffolk may have courtly graces, but he is unlikely to have

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<sup>3</sup> For many of the issues arising from enclosure in this period see the essays contained in Richard Burt and John Michael Archer, eds., *Enclosure Acts* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1994). See also W. C. Carroll, *Fat King, Lean Beggar: Representations of Poverty in the Age of Shakespeare* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1996). For the urban consequences of this policy see, for example, Steve Rappaport, *Worlds Within Worlds: Structures Of Life In Sixteenth-Century London* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Paul Slack, *Poverty And Policy In Tudor And Stuart England* (Harlow: Longman, 1988); A. L. Beier, *Masterless Men: The Vagrancy Problem In London 1560-1640* (London: Methuen, 1985); A. L. Beier and R Finlay, eds., *London, 1500-1700: The Making Of The Metropolis* (Harlow: Longman, 1986); Ian W. Archer, *The Pursuit Of Stability: Social Relations In Elizabethan London* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

been a sympathetic figure to the socially heterogeneous audience in Shakespeare's commercial theatre".<sup>4</sup> This being the case, the audience would regard both Suffolk's enclosure of land and his attitude to this petitioner's grievance negatively if the scene were to have the playwright's desired effect. This is not to say that Shakespeare either supported or opposed the policy of enclosure.<sup>5</sup> Merely, that for the scene to function in a dramatic sense he would have realised that enclosure was generally believed to be deeply unjust. Such a matter is alluded to in the scene in the final words of the Queen. After Peter Thump has presented his petition in which he accuses his master, Thomas Horner of committing treason in stating that the Duke of York was the rightful ruler, Suffolk instructs him to be taken with his master to testify before the King. As he turns once more to the two petitioners the Queen says "Suffolk, let them go" (1.3.43.). This suggests that, had he a mind to, he could have held and punished these two commoners for protesting their dire situation. Not only could he have done so; the law inscribed his natural right to punish them. Such is the first inkling that we are witnessing the functioning of a society in which one group, small in number, has a right over the lives and deaths of the vast majority of the population, a right which, as we shall see, is constantly used in an arbitrary fashion.

After a prolonged scene of angry altercation between the various factions of nobility in conflict, Peter and Horner are finally brought before the King. Peter repeats his accusation that Horner claimed the Duke of York was in fact the rightful king, to which his master unequivocally replies, "I never said nor thought any such matter" (1.3.188–9). Unable to decide who is telling the truth, Gloucester enacts the law and states that the matter should be decided by combat. Peter's fear – "I cannot fight"

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<sup>4</sup> Jean E. Howard and Phyllis Rackin, *Engendering a Nation: A Feminist Account of Shakespeare's English Histories* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 70.

<sup>5</sup> Shakespeare was an encloser, though much later in his life. As such, it would be unwise to second guess his views on the subject as a young, urban playwright in 1591–92.

(1.3.214) – is dismissed. Or rather, the threat of extreme violence is used against him by Gloucester: “Sirrah, or you must fight, or else be hanged” (1.3.218). Finally, a date is set for the duel – “the last of the next month” (1.3.220) – until which time, the King declares, the two must be imprisoned.

This short scene is revealing as it articulates in many ways the legal framework which enabled the rulers to, in effect, terrorise the common population. Firstly, there is the impulse to inform on those individuals with whom one has contact, an impulse common to, for example, a number of violent dictatorships existent in the twentieth century. As in those regimes, we see in Shakespeare’s play a dynamic in which the majority of the population is encouraged to police itself and to denounce those who appear to hold views other than those deemed appropriate by the group in power.<sup>6</sup> Secondly, despite the fact that, on the surface at least, one of the individuals involved in this denunciation is doing the bidding of the dominant powers, both the accused and the accuser are punished by imprisonment. Moreover, they are imprisoned for at least thirty one days.<sup>7</sup> Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly in the context of what later happens in the play, the fact that the matter will be decided by violence between accuser and accused, combined with the demand for denunciation, is written in law. Little wonder then that, in following scenes, Jack Cade and his followers in turn denounce literacy, writing and the law itself. Little wonder also that, given the situation of the other petitioners, they rail against a policy of enclosure which impoverishes them. Placed in the context of the example of Peter and the other two

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<sup>6</sup> One need merely look at the many Assize records to see the number of cases of denunciation. It is worth stating that the greatest knowledge that has been passed down to the present day concerning the common people of early modern Britain is contained in these Assize records. The importance of this lies in the fact that very little is known of the lives of the common people except through their punishment. See J. Cockburn, *Calendar of Assize Records: Home Circuit Indictments, Elizabeth I and James I* (London: HMSO, 1975–1980).

<sup>7</sup> Shakespeare probably found this episode in Gregory’s *Chronicle*, where it is noted that the duel took place “in Smethfylde the laste daye of Januer” in 1446: *The Chronicle of William Gregory*, Skinner, ed. by James Gardiner, *The Historical Collections of a Citizen of London in the Fifteenth Century*, Camden Society, New Series, 17 (1876), p. 187.

petitioners, Cade and his followers denounce a system which terrorises them in the sense that it takes away their livelihood and then punishes them for being hungry. Furthermore, it induces them to inform on others and then punishes them for doing so. In all cases, violence and the threat of violence are regarded as the appropriate means of government, the necessity of their use being inscribed in law.

Before we witness the comic scene of the duel between Peter and Horner there is a short interlude in which a common man, Simon Simpcox, claims that, though blind from birth, a miracle has occurred and his sight has been restored. It is generally agreed that Shakespeare included this scene, taken from Foxe though importantly altered, in order to demonstrate the naïve credulity of Henry and the wise perception and worldliness of Gloucester.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, being both blind and lame (this latter characteristic attributed to climbing a tree and apparently invented by Shakespeare) Simpcox is regarded as ironically emphasising the blindness of the warring nobility and the harm that will come to the country from (political) climbing and ambition. Gloucester immediately uncovers Simpcox's ruse, however, and orders that both the impostor and his wife "be whipped through every market town / Till they come to Berwick, from whence they came" (2.1.150–51). Importantly, this is Gloucester's direct reply to the wife of Simpcox when she states, "Alas, sir, we did it for pure need" (2.1.149).

It has been noted that Gloucester's call for Simpcox and his wife to be whipped back to where they came from relates to the various 'whipping campaigns' which characterised the latter years of Elizabeth's reign and specifically one which was in

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<sup>8</sup> *The Acts and Monuments of John Foxe*, ed. by Josiah Pratt, 8 vols. (1877), vol. 3, p. 713. Foxe has Gloucester seem incredulous to begin with. For the religious significance of this episode see E. Pearlman, "The Duke and the Beggar in Shakespeare's 2 *Henry VI*" *Criticism* 41.3 (Summer 1999), 309–21.

operation around the time of the play's production.<sup>9</sup> However, it is also important to realise that, both in the real, Elizabethan world and in the world of the play, the likes of Simpcox and his wife are punished for being poor and hungry. Violence is used in response to their attempt to find a way to eat and in their efforts not to resist but to negotiate the reign of terror in which they live. Thus, while it might well be true that the Simpcox scene appears as a dramatic device to emphasise elements in the main plot, it is important to note that the episode would succeed with a contemporary audience because it reflected the reality around them, a reality that was defined by its inequality, its arbitrariness and by the constant threat of violence. An explicit political point was not necessarily being made in this scene; merely effective dramatic practice being engaged in.

It becomes clear when considering each of the scenes involving the common people that, as in many of his plays, Shakespeare's common characters are as much of his own time as they are of the period in which the play is set. As well as reflecting the speech patterns of early modern commoners, these characters voice the concerns which dominated the everyday lives of their class. As Ellen Caldwell says, these characters "mediate the conditions of late Elizabethan England: the fluidity of social status, unstable prices, and struggles with foreign powers; or, in general, access to and control of resources and power".<sup>10</sup> Such is the case particularly when consideration of the later scenes in featuring Walter Whitmore and Jack Cade are also contemplated. Indeed, events occurring almost simultaneously to the play's performance have often been regarded as having influenced the portrayal of these characters, as in the fact that

<sup>9</sup> A law of 1576 which was used particularly in times of social unrest ruled that vagrants were encouraged to return to their home towns initially by the threat, and subsequently by the implementation of such a punishment. See, for example, Beier (1985), pp. 107–23.

<sup>10</sup> Ellen C. Caldwell, "Jack Cade and Shakespeare's *Henry VI, Part 2*", *Studies in Philology* 92 (1995), 50. Much the same is said of his common characters in *Julius Caesar* and *Coriolanus* and, in a different sense, of those in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

many disbanded and disgruntled soldiers and sailors were causing enormous problems for the authorities in both London and Kent around this time. The fact that Cade, for example, is a recently disbanded Kentish soldier in the world of the play has a certain resonance in the context of such real social disruption.<sup>11</sup> Alternatively, the Cade scenes are regarded as representations of a riot by felt-makers in London around the time of the play's production.<sup>12</sup> In terms of this current study, however, it is the presence and actions of Cade and his followers and the nature of their demands rather than immediate events surrounding the production itself that are of the greatest relevance.

Much has been written about the Cade episodes in the play, mostly in terms of the ideological position being adopted by Shakespeare in his portrayal of this rebellious character. Traditionally, Cade has been seen as a grotesque construction, a laughable tyrant making ridiculous demands and regarded as a figure of fun by his own followers. This view bears the ideological weight of Shakespeare's perceived desire to ridicule Cade because of his own abhorrence of popular rebellion.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, this view of a 'conservative Shakespeare' continues to exert a good deal of influence, Stephen Greenblatt writing, for example, that Cade's rebellion is "a grotesque and sinister force, the archetypal lower class revolt both in its motives and in its ludicrousness."<sup>14</sup> Greenblatt sees Shakespeare portraying Cade and his followers as "buffoons" and as acting out of nothing more than mischievousness. More recently, a 'populist Shakespeare' has been discovered by some critics who regard the playwright as

<sup>11</sup> See Leahy (2003), 119–134.

<sup>12</sup> See Wilson (1993), pp. 22–44.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, E. M. W. Tillyard, *Shakespeare's History Plays* (1944; London: Chatto and Windus, 1966); Lily B. Campbell, *Shakespeare's 'Histories': Mirrors of Elizabethan Policy* (1947; London: Methuen & Co, 1977); John Wilders, *The Lost Garden: A View of Shakespeare's English and Roman History Plays* (Totowa, New Jersey: Rowman & Littlefield, 1978); Richard Helgerson, *Forms of Nationhood: The Elizabethan Writing of England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992). See also Carroll (1996) and Wilson (1993).

<sup>14</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, "Murdering Peasants: Status, Genre, and the Representation of Rebellion", *Representations* 1.1 (February 1983), 23.

sympathetic to Cade despite his obvious ambiguity and the scenes in which he features as a “sympathetic appraisal of the people’s claims”.<sup>15</sup> A third modern and hugely influential perspective on the character of Cade is that first formulated by Annabel Patterson in which she perceives an act of ‘ventriloquism’ in play. According to this view, the “ventriloquial voice is that of an author who, in representing a class to which he or she may feel antipathetic, nevertheless gives it a voice, at least by report”.<sup>16</sup> Thus a conservative Shakespeare, in his desire to ridicule Cade gives him a voice through which to articulate his populist demands, thereby surrendering control over his intended meanings and enabling any audience to interpret the words and actions of Cade in their own, perhaps oppositional ways. While this last view does begin to focus on what is articulated rather than upon the (unknown) ideological standpoint of the author, it still fails to prioritise dramatic practice over a (perceived) political agenda. This current study wishes to propose that, in this case, the political viewpoint of the author is of little or no importance, particularly as this is something which can never be determined. Rather, it is Cade’s dramatic characterisation as a common product of a reign of terror that is of greater significance and is something which can be analysed without a resort to mere supposition.

For many, Cade is the bringer of disorder and anarchy into the world of the play, order only being re-established when he is killed by Alexander Iden.<sup>17</sup> This view bears very little scrutiny, however, given that the action of the play up to Cade’s

<sup>15</sup> Thomas Cartelli, “Jack Cade in the Garden: Class Consciousness and Class Conflict in 2 *Henry VI*” in Burt and Archer, eds., (1994), p. 58. See also, for example, Michael Bristol, *Carnival And Theatre: Plebeian Culture And The Structure Of Authority In Renaissance England* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1985); Michael Hattaway, ed., *The Second Part of King Henry VI*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Chris Fitter, “‘Your Captain is Brave and Vows Reformation’: Jack Cade, the Hacket Rising, and Shakespeare’s Vision of Popular Rebellion in 2 *Henry VI*”, *Shakespeare Studies*, Vol. 32 (2004), 173–219.

<sup>16</sup> Knowles (2001), pp. 65–66. See Patterson, (1989), pp. 47–51. For more on this approach see Stephen Longstaffe, “‘A short report and not otherwise’: Jack Cade in 2 *Henry VI*” in Ronald Knowles ed., *Shakespeare and Carnival: After Bakhtin*, (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), pp. 13–35.

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, works cited in note 13 above.

entrance has been a series of scenes of conflict, threat and counter-threat amongst the nobles. Moreover, the way in which the play continues after Cade's death can hardly be termed a return to stability and unity.<sup>18</sup> Rather, Cade is the result of social and political disorder, although of a kind which is not solely due to the fact that the various factions of the nobility are effectively at war with each other. Cade is the product rather, as he himself articulates very clearly in the play, of the disorder brought about by the privileging of one select group in society above all others and the fact that this privilege is set in a legal framework constructed by this same, select group. The disorder comes therefore not because the noble factions are at war with each other but rather because they are at constant war with the common people of their own society. Such is made clear in the demands made by the commoners in Act 4 of the play.

Though the demands that Cade and his followers make are many in the various scenes in which they appear, their grievances essentially fall into two main categories. These could be termed foreign and domestic, the failings of which Cade aims at the misuse the nobility has made of its power. The first of these categories, the foreign, relates to the loss of the French territories, which he demands be returned and the individuals who caused their loss held responsible. In this sense, Cade is shown to be a patriot, rather like Talbot in *Henry VI, Part 1*, a characteristic which would have been celebrated by all of Shakespeare's audience for the play, irrespective of class or social status. It is worth pointing out that Cade must appear as a patriot in the play as he simply would not have had any followers were he not. Shakespeare is therefore realistically portraying (the historical) Cade in order that he be a compelling (in the sense of believable) dramatic character. The more problematic category of demands

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<sup>18</sup> Such a perception is strengthened if the play is read as the second part of a trilogy. Disorder and disunity are the norm in the world of the plays – Cade has no influence on this one way or the other.

for most critics is that of a domestic nature in which Cade articulates the shortcomings of the existing social and political systems which not only fail to provide a viable existence for the majority of the population, but additionally punish that majority for actually failing them. Perhaps the clearest example of this is contained in the various demands articulated in his first speech (4.2.59–70) in which Cade declares that when he rules there shall be, firstly, enough food and drink: “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 a felony to drink small beer” (4.2.60–63). While it is true, of course, that this speech is defined by its carnivalesque utopianism, it is important to note that Cade does not claim there will be an excess of these essentials, merely that there will be sufficient. And what there is will be affordable. This naturally refers back to the case of Simpcox and his wife who were hungry and punished for attempting to alleviate their situation. Cade then goes on to state that, in order to rid the nation of class difference – and thus the privileging of one group over another and the consequent ability of that group to both starve and punish the oppressed at will – both money and differential clothing will be prohibited.<sup>19</sup> The depth of Cade’s analysis is then cleverly portrayed through his inverted claims of nobility and his knighting of himself (4.2.112–15) which demonstrate a deconstruction of aristocratic genealogy and empowering aristocratic ritual, thus demystifying the constructed and artificial nature of a political system based upon inheritance and the arbitrary distribution of privilege. And finally, Cade articulates his disgust at the law regarding the ‘benefit of

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<sup>19</sup> A law passed by Elizabeth in 1588 demanded that clothing had to represent one’s trade and, therefore, marked one’s social class. This law was met with a good deal of resistance in the following years; see Bristol (1985), p. 89 and Wilson (1993), pp. 31–2.

clergy', a law under which the common people suffered and which clearly demonstrated the inequality written into the legal system (4.7.37–42).<sup>20</sup>

As stated earlier, for many analysts the combination of Cade's violence and the fact that he is ridiculed by his own followers signal Shakespeare's intentions in his construction of this character. While this may or may not be the case, the force of Cade's presence does enable one to ponder the effect the demands and accusations he articulates would have had on Shakespeare's audience, given the fact that many of them suffered under the same or similar conditions. It does not require a great leap of imagination to suppose that many would indeed have found Cade a sympathetic character to some extent. This kind of perception is again deepened when one considers the relationship between audience and author in another, related light.

Shakespeare was a working playwright writing popular drama. As such, it is probably more apt, as in the earlier examples in which common characters appear, to regard his construction of Cade in dramatic rather than political terms. Cade is an ambiguous character precisely because such would have been a realistic representation of this historical figure. He is violent, angry and forceful as well as being articulate, rational and charismatic, precisely because this would represent a believable character to Shakespeare's audience, dramatically sound in the world of the play. If Cade were either purely ridiculous or purely virtuous he would be, in dramatic terms, wooden and ineffective. As it is, he exists in three dimensions given the nature of the culture which has produced him. He is a violent and desperate man because such is exactly what the system of terror would have produced – a terrorised, desperate but politicised member of the uneducated common people. As such, Cade is not a political or

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<sup>20</sup> "Originally the *privilegium clericale* had exempted clerks in holy orders from criminal trial before secular judges, but eventually it was extended to all male felons who could establish their clerical status by showing themselves able to read the 'neck verse', traditionally the first or fourteenth verse of Psalm 51" (Francis Barker, *The Culture of Violence: Essays on Tragedy and History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993, p. 187).

ideological construct (or not chiefly) on Shakespeare's part; he is a hugely effective dramatic construct. In Cade, Shakespeare produced a character which the contemporary audience could believe in, a view which becomes particularly evident if space is given to a brief consideration of the failed Oxfordshire Uprising of 1596 and the character of its leader, Bartholomew Steere.<sup>21</sup> My interest in this consideration is not, as has been previously done, to connect the action of the play to specific political events surrounding it. Rather, it is to show that by examining records of this event we can come to perceive both the extraordinarily complex and accurate dramatisation of the common people and their worldview that Shakespeare achieves in the play and confirmation that Shakespeare's England was indeed a society ruled by the constant threat and practice of violence. Rather than providing us with a conservative or populist playwright, this consideration will show us a gifted dramatist articulating the situation and perceptions of a large section of the population living in and suffering under a reign of terror.

In 1596, approximately four years after the first performance of *Henry VI, Part 2*, a number of dependants and servants of various Oxfordshire nobles, led by Bartholomew Steere, a carpenter at the Rycote estate of Lord Norris, combined to lead an uprising. This uprising failed miserably and the participants were quickly apprehended and interrogated. According to the records of this interrogation, Steere said that "when they were up [...] they would murder Mr Power, as also Mr Berry and his daughter, and spoil Rabone, the yeoman, Geo. Whilton, Sir Hen. Lee, Sir Wm. Spencer, Mr Frere, and Lord Norris [...]"<sup>22</sup> This proposed rebellion was set off by the third consecutive harvest failure, the blame for which was laid, by the participants of

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<sup>21</sup> A certain resonance between Shakespeare's Jack Cade and Bartholomew Steere has been noticed before but has been dealt with very briefly. See Cartelli (1993), p. 54 and Buchanan Sharp, *In Contempt of All Authority: Artisans and Riot in the West of England, 1586-1640* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), pp. 38-9.

<sup>22</sup> *Calendar of State Papers (Domestic) (1595-1597)*, p. 345.

the rebellion, on the likes of Sir Henry Lee and Lord Norris, two of Oxfordshire's most aggressive enclosers. It seems that in the autumn of 1596, forty to sixty men went to Rycote to see Lord Norris and "petitioned [him] for some corn to relieve their distress, and for the putting down [of] enclosures".<sup>23</sup> Despite much remonstration Norris failed to respond, and Steere began plotting as he "meant to have risen to help his poor friends, and other poor people who lived in misery".<sup>24</sup> He believed "that the servants of Lord Norris and other Oxfordshire gentry could be persuaded to join a rising because 'they were kept like dogges'".<sup>25</sup> Steere seems to have been right in his judgement, as "he subverted several of Lord Norris's servants and those of other gentry who visited Rycote".<sup>26</sup> Lord Norris could not believe that Steere had begun plotting whilst in his employ, his reaction to which was a desire for revenge, taking charge of the interrogation of the rebels. Unable to extract any names from the prisoners however, they were taken to London "their hands pinioned, and their legs bound under their horses' bellies".<sup>27</sup> They were led there by Sir Henry Norris, the son of Lord Norris and were examined and tortured at Bridewell Prison, where a full confession was extracted from Steere. Indeed, Steere, it would seem, was tortured to death, while two other rebels, Richard Bradshaw and Robert Burton, were later executed on Enslow Hill, the initial meeting place of the rebels. The individuals responsible for their torture and execution were a number of Oxfordshire landholders. The hardship that these and other common people daily encountered is apparent in the extended records of this process of torture at the hands of the authorities. The very first sentence uttered in the "Examination, in answer to interrogatories, of

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<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*, p. 343.

<sup>24</sup> *CSP (1595–1597)*, p. 343.

<sup>25</sup> Roger B Manning, *Village Revolts: Social Protest And Popular Disturbance In England 1509–1640* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), p. 221.

<sup>26</sup> *ibid.*, p. 221.

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.*, p. 226.

Bartholomew Steere”,<sup>28</sup> demonstrates this, as under torture in Bridewell, Steere’s fellow conspirators describe the reasons for their uprising. The first to answer questions regarding the uprising, Bradshaw, states that they “had threatened to pull down the hedges [...] if they could not have remedy”.<sup>29</sup> He goes on to say that many people had “petitioned for some corn to relieve their distress, and for putting down enclosures [...]”.<sup>30</sup> The other conspirators echo these concerns, a baker named William stating that “corn would not be cheaper until the hedges were thrown down [...].”<sup>31</sup> John Ibill tells of how Steere said “that there would be a rising of the people [...] when they would pull down the enclosures, whereby the ways were stopped, and arable lands enclosed, and lay them open again [...]”.<sup>32</sup> The common people involved in this particular example of discontentment therefore clearly equated enclosure with both poverty and hunger. And there would seem to be a great deal of sense in their belief, as not only was much of the enclosure of land undertaken by the likes of Sir Henry Lee and Lord Norris illegal, many villages in the area had become deserted as a direct consequence of their policy of enclosure of land in their possession.<sup>33</sup> The “great sheep-master” Lee enclosed enormous areas of land around the villages of Ditchley and Woodstock and effectively contributed to the depopulation of the entire area.<sup>34</sup> Norris was also “loathed by the people”,<sup>35</sup> not least because his policy of enclosure was also the reason for local depopulation. The opposition of Steere and his co-conspirators was not enclosure *per se*, however. Rather, like Jack Cade and his

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<sup>28</sup> *CSP (1595–1597)*, p. 342.

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 342–43.

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.*, p. 343.

<sup>31</sup> *ibid.*, p. 344.

<sup>32</sup> *ibid.*, p. 345.

<sup>33</sup> K. J. Allison, *The Deserted Villages of Oxfordshire* (Leicester: Dept. of Eng. Local History Occasional Papers 17, 1965), pp. 36–45.

<sup>34</sup> E. K. Chambers, *Sir Henry Lee: An Elizabethan Portrait*, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1936), pp. 92–3. See also A. Ballard, *Chronicles of the Royal Borough of Woodstock* (Oxford: Alden & Co, 1896), pp. 25–6.

<sup>35</sup> John Walter, “A ‘Rising Of The People?’ The Oxfordshire Rising Of 1596”, *Past And Present* 107 (May 1985), 114.

followers in Shakespeare's play, it was the hunger and poverty which such enclosure produced and under which they had to suffer. Thus, Roger Symonds (under torture) reports Steere as telling of instances "when he went to market [and] he commonly heard the poor people say that they were ready to famish for want of corn", and that he knew of "a farmer who had 80 quarters of corn, and that poor men could not have a bushel under 4s.2d., and their want of 2d. was often the occasion of their not having any [...]"<sup>36</sup> Steere's observations seem to comply with contemporary evidence, both local and national, which shows 1596 to have been a particularly hard year for the rural poor, and particularly in this part of Oxfordshire.<sup>37</sup>

Considering the uprising in this kind of detail produces a number of resonant comparisons with the ways in which Shakespeare constructed both Cade and his followers in the play. The reasons why the commoners of Oxford felt they had no choice but to rebel are some of those articulated by Cade and his followers or the petitioners who appear earlier in the play. In Oxfordshire in 1596, as in the earlier play, hungry and desperate commoners appeal to the landowners to alleviate their situation. The response to this appeal is for them to be ignored and disparaged. The commoners therefore target the cause of their suffering, the landowners and their policy of enclosure. The written law is used against the rebels first through the threat of violence (Norris's interrogation) and then through the actual use of violence (torture and execution). The parallels between the dramatised uprising and the real one are indeed clear.

While the demands of Cade and his followers are more complex than those of the Oxfordshire men and their uprising much more serious, the apparent resonance which exists between them applies also to the ways in which the demands of the two groups

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<sup>36</sup> *CSP (1595–1597)*, p. 344.

<sup>37</sup> See for example *Acts of the Privy Council (1596–97)*, pp. 88–9, pp. 94–6 and pp. 112–3; Walter (1985), pp. 108–19.

of rebels are articulated. As well as the examples already given, Steere, for example, is reported as having said that the rebels should “care not for work, for we shall have a merrier world shortly” and that “it would never be well until the gentry were knocked down”.<sup>38</sup> Cade in turn talks of “putting down kings and princes” (4.2.32), says he “will not leave one lord, one gentleman” (4.2.173), and one of his followers states that “it was never merry world in England since gentlemen came up” (4.2.7-8). In these parallels, it would seem that, as Cartelli says, “Shakespeare was appropriating [...] expressions[s] that would have been familiar to many well before the Oxfordshire rising and the initial performance of *2 Henry VI*.<sup>39</sup> The reasons for doing so on Shakespeare’s part were, I have been suggesting, dramatic rather than political. In many ways, the Oxfordshire uprising is a microcosm of that in the play and Shakespeare demonstrates an extraordinary ability in his construction of compelling and vital commoners and their grievances. If the records of the Oxfordshire uprising are considered, we can see the concise articulation of common issues and perceptions that Shakespeare captures and the evident construction of a state in which the majority of the population is terrorised by the minority. England appears as such a reign of terror in the play, however, not because of a need to take sides on the part of the playwright. Rather, it appears as such in order for the play to work dramatically in a way which would indeed make it compelling, convincing and, therefore, popular. The common people of the play are subjected to terror and violence and respond in like manner not because of a desire to either praise or undermine either side in this conflict. Rather, this dramatisation of historical events appears as it does, defined by its uses of terror and violence, because it was written by a gifted, working, popular

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<sup>38</sup> *CSP (1595–1597)*, pp. 343–5.

<sup>39</sup> Cartelli (1994), p. 54.

playwright who wished to dramatically convince his audience. One assumes they were, indeed, convinced.