Shakespeare and the Politics of Commoners

Digesting the New Social History

Edited by
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The Speaking Silence of Citizens in Shakespeare's Richard III

Hidden and Public Transcripts

Thomas Cartelli

Any argument claiming that the ideological efforts of ruling elites are directed at convincing subordinates that their subordination is just must confront a good deal of evidence suggesting that it often fails to achieve its purpose.1

I want to start with a few space-clearing gestures, the first involving the social group or 'class' I designate under the name of 'citizens'. As a group, London citizens were, in the sixteenth century, 'subordinate' in any number of ways to the aristocracy, on the one hand, and in status terms at least, to the gentry on the other—those who occupied a position to which the most prosperous citizens could realistically aspire. But in their own space within the City, citizens maintained a large and varied array of freedoms, not the least being a strong claim to, and practice of, self-governance.2 Many could also claim a considerable share of the city's wealth, which further distinguished them from the 'day laborers, poor husbandmen, and some retailers (which have no free land) who constituted the fourth and last sort of people', as broadly categorized by William Harrison in his Description of England (1577). This intermediate standing of the 'middling sort', especially its higher end—comprising not only of the most successful London merchants and high-ranking guildsmen but also of the more ambitious and aspiring London 'artificers'—has come to complicate the work of social historians accustomed to assuming a simple dichotomy between elite and popular as a model of early modern social structure, representing a fundamental challenge to the view that the essential division in early modern society lay between genteel and non-genteel status.4 Nominal rooted in the domain of the commons or 'the popular', the middling sort of London in particular were increasingly wealthy and able to exercise considerable local influence, increasingly literate and able to respond to key shifts in the cultural and mental world, and they enjoyed growing influence in the political nation. Yet for all that, even the more distinguished members of this group—like members of Harrison's fourth sort, who often enough were their country cousins—remained formally subordinate and deferential to their more elite, aristocratic superiors. But, I would add, subordinate and deferential in different ways, and different also in expressing their dissidence or disapproval when habits of deference were tested beyond the limits of patience or scruple.

Viewed either in the social depth of politics or against the backdrop of Elizabethan drama's differing representations of 'popular' risings, on the one hand, and citizen diffidence and deference, on the other, the interests of rural labourers, masterless men, and struggling artisans often clashed with the interests of London merchants, manufacturers, and shopkeepers. Such clashes are highlighted in plays like Shakespeare's 2 Henry VI (1590–2), Heywood's 1 Edward IV (1599), and the anonymous Life & Death of Jack Straw (1593–4), which more often than not aligned the City's interests with those of the reigning monarch that the citizens in question defend and protect. In such plays, representatives of the rebellious commons speak with loud, uncompromising voices, threatening to bring chaos and destruction to all and sundry, particularly to predatory aristocrats and their city enablers. Such representations are generally consistent with the impression held by the rulers of Tudor and early Stuart England that 'popular politics was...about noise, and in particular about threatening, anonymous, collective speech.' As Andy Wood observes:

The rulers of sixteenth-century England often represented both authority and its subversion in auditory terms: the former as 'quietude', the latter as threatening 'murmuring'. Such contemporary formulations were more than merely accidental. Rather, governors' attempts to impose silence upon their subordinates, like subordinates' attempts to resist that imposition, helped to constitute early modern power relations.5

5 Braddock and Waller, Negotiating Power, 'Introduction', 3.
6 As Ian Archer observes most of the City's rulers were first generation inhabitants recruited from relatively modest provincial backgrounds. The result was that members of the elite had relatives in the country of lower social status than themselves. The evidence of their wills suggests that the aldermen did not forget their obligations to their poorer kinsmen, and the knowledge of the lower circumstances from which they had emerged may have helped condition their paternalistic responses to the problems of their fellow citizens. (The Pursuit of Stability: Social Relations in Elizabethan London (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 51)
Thomas Carelli

Yet, as we discover in Thomas More’s History of King Richard III (1514–18) and in The Tragedy of King Richard III (1592–4) that Shakespeare liberally drew from it, disdains “murmuring”—either in the form of the ‘hidden transcript’ of ‘offstage’ commentary or the ‘public transcript’ of a collective whispering likened to the buzzing of ‘a swarm of bees’—could well become the resort of London citizens themselves, even when their consent was most insistently sought by one of the most powerful aristocratic contestants at large, the Duke of Buckingham, as it is in both texts in question. 10

In Shakespeare’s Richard III—a play keenly attuned to the questions of consent that surround both devotional and political practice in the public sphere—11—we witness two additional instances when actors performing the roles of citizens come forward, in the ‘public forum’ that is the stage, to ‘transcribe’ in the form of dialogue or direct address their critical responses to political changes that are in the process of being made without their approval or consent. These instances present themselves in quasi-choric formats in a colloquy of three representative citizens in 2.3 and in the shorter self-presentation of the Scrivener in 3.6. These scenes record and represent, in James C. Scott’s terms, ‘hidden transcripts’ that are publicly shared with an audience likely also to share the values, interests, and anxieties of the characters in question. As such, they could be said to constitute a discourse that takes place “offstage”, beyond direct observation by powerholders [consisting] of those offstage speeches, gestures, and practices that confirm, contradict, or inflect what appears in [what Scott calls] the public transcript. 12

Could be said, if we assume that the only ‘powerholders’ in question are the two conspiring dukes of Gloucester and Buckingham in Shakespeare’s play. Should we imagine the respective discourses being registered and recorded by ruling-class ‘powerholders’ in the Elizabethan playhouse audience, we might well envision a breach in the etiquette of power relations, that breaks an apparently calm surface of silence and consent 13 by generating “murmuring” in the playhouse itself. In the onstage world of Shakespeare’s Richard III, such a breach is pointedly recorded in the first half of the first scene referred to above, 3.7 in Richard III, which is largely devoted to the Duke of Buckingham’s vivid report of the contest of wits (and wills)


10 According to James C. Scott:
Every subordinate group creates, out of its own order, a ‘hidden transcript’ that represents a critique of power spoken behind the back of the dominant. The powerful, for their part, also develop a hidden transcript representing the practices and claims of their rule that cannot be openly aired. A comparison of the hidden transcript of the weak with that of the powerful and of both hidden transcripts to the public transcript of power relations offers a substantially new way of understanding resistance to domination. (Domination and the Arts of Resistance, xii)

12 Scott, Domination and the Arts of Resistance, 4–5.
13 Scott, Domination and the Arts of Resistance, 8.

The Speaking Silence of Citizens

in which he engages with unconsenting citizens. In this report, in place of the whispering described by More, a large gathering of citizens is reduced to a stunned and sustained silence, which, in contemporary stagings, probably constituted as ‘dangerous’ a sound to the character representing Buckingham as would the mighty noise of a ‘complaining and murmuring’ common to aristocratic Elizabethan playgoers. Indeed, as Christina Luckey has documented, ‘silence in early modern England was an unstable and highly contested site’, which could function as ‘an antithetical space of resistance, inscrutable, unreadable and potentially unruly and chaotic’. 14

More’s History is, in all these instances, the ground on which Shakespeare builds his representation of citizen resistance (or disidence or ‘dissonance’), with More arguably serving not only as the foundational source for Shakespeare’s staging of Richard’s nefarious ascent to the throne but, arguably, as Shakespeare’s ideological forebear in advancing the point of view of what I have elsewhere referred to as citizen consciousness. 15 Just as his boldly moralized staging of Richard’s machinations has cast Shakespeare in the role of Tudor politician, More’s acerbic construction of Richard’s criminal career has cast More in the guise of Tudor propagandist. But the bluntness and incisiveness of More’s representations may also (or rather) be attributed to his investment in the burgeoning republican interests and values of his fellow London citizens, for whom ‘King’s games’, more often than not, proved the source and symptom of corruption, instability, and disorder. ‘Why else’, as Gerald Wegener writes, ‘does More refer habitually [as in his History of Richard III] to the aldermen of London as the “seate” of London, meeting in the forum of London where the Recorder is present to make decisions in full knowledge of the loyal? 16 Indebted as he was to More, Shakespeare, of course, was considerably more invested in writing and staging successful plays than he was in what Wegener terms ‘educating citizens for self-government’. And it is to that nexus—or collision—between Shakespeare’s generation of his play’s performance appeal and his development of opposing moral and political prompts and agendas that we now turn.

15 Annabel Pattersondeploy the same term to characterize the authorial perspective or point of view of Holinshed’s Chronicles: the Chronicles, especially when they deal with the sixteenth century, are an expression of citizen consciousness, though one that could imagine the entire nation as within the civil society ‘Reading Holinshed’s Chronicles’ (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), xii–xiii). I deploy it to characterize Shakespeare’s prevailing point of view in two essays on Shakespeare’s 2 Henry VI published nearly ten years apart. I use Patterson’s term in Suffolk and Norfolk, eds, A Blackwell Companion to Shakespeare, vol. 1 (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 325–43, and a close approximation to it in my earlier Jack Cade in the Garden: Class Consciousness and Class Conflict in 2 Henry VI, published the same year as Patterson’s book, in Richard Burt and John M. Archer, eds, Enclave Arts: Sexuality, Property and Culture in Early Modern England (Bloomington, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), 46–67.
16 Wegener adds: Yes, there is a corrupt mayor and the aldermen go along when they can do nothing else, but the courageous London citizens refuse to pand to Richard’s and Buckingham’s offers or to prostitute their freedoms for personal advantage (‘Thomas More’s History of King Richard III: Educating Citizens for Self-Government’, Thomas More Studies, 2 (2007), 41).
It no doubt seems counterintuitive to suggest that the effect on Elizabethan spectators of Richard of Gloucester’s swaggering presentation of himself in Shakespeare’s Richard III could be anything less than criminally compelling. But it becomes hard to maintain an unqualified sense of Richard’s performance appeal when the play itself indicates that the onstage witnesses of Richard’s coup d’état are rather more intimidated and coerced into submission than enthralled or seduced by Richard’s successive coups de théâtre. Perhaps one needs to assume that the dramatic or onstage world of Richard III operates within a different performance/reception dynamic from that of the presumed theatrical interchange between charismatic performer and pleasure-seeking audience. But I rather think that the one dynamic probably works to erode the second, and that this process starts as early as 1.3, when Queen Elizabeth incisively appraises the dangers of ‘Richard Gloucester’ (1.3.11–13), boldly analyzes Richard’s ‘childish-foolish’ pretensions, and is aggressively secondered upon the emergence of the irrepressible Queen Margaret. Shakespeare further bridges the distance between on- and offstage auditor by disarming Richard of his theatrical charisma as the play proceeds, arguably disenchancing the offstage audience of the purported hold Richard has on its imagination. The most obvious way that Shakespeare negotiates this process is by using the reported resistance of otherwise silent citizens and the few words spoken by their representatives onstage as prompts for the offstage audience to register the waning of Richard’s performance appeal, and thus rescue their own subjectivity from subjection within the space-time of the declining play.

This process of making ‘hidden transcripts’ public starts in 2.3 in a brief scene that is often cut in contemporary stage productions. True to the form of Shakespeare’s representation of citizens in other plays—who, as John Archer writes, often ‘appear anxious and inconsequential’—there is some inconsistency in the positions staked out by the three citizens who converse onstage. First Citizen fears that the death of King Edward promises ‘a troublous world’ (2.3.5). But when Third Citizen echoes his sentiment in line 9—‘Then, masters, look to see a troublous world’—First Citizen backtracks, and avers ‘No, no, by God’s good grace his son shall reign’ in line 10. While Third Citizen maintains his pessimistic stance throughout, Second Citizen stakes out and sustains what could be called the scene’s naïvely optimistic, Gonzalo position, discerning ‘hope of government’ in the young (and short-lived) Edward V, and further hope in the good counsel of ‘virtuous uncles’, concluding ‘all shall be well’. Second Citizen does so in the face of Third Citizen’s seemingly more informed assessment of prevailing power relations, discernible in his claim that ‘Better it were [those uncles] all came by the father’, which he immediately qualifies and elaborates on in developing a decidedly darker tack:

Or by the father there were none at all,
For emulation now who shall be nearest
Will touch us all too near, if God prevent not.
Oh, full of danger is the Duke of Gloucester,
And the Queen’s kind red angry and proud.
And were they to be ruled, and not to rule,
This sickly land might solace as before. (2.3.24–30)

Third Citizen’s analytic authority is, of course, confirmed as the plot of the play unfolds, as is the moral authority of his predictive claim—were they to be ruled, and not to rule, ‘This sickly land might solace as before’—which embeds the desire for a political transformation of ‘this sickly land’ that no currently licensed practitioner can promise.

This predictive claim embeds an uncanny—and, if openly noted or registered, possibly even subversive—echo of the way William Harrison, in his Description of England, identifies that fourth sort of persons—who ‘have neither voice nor authority in the commonwealth’—as those who ‘are to be ruled and not to rule other[s].’ If discernible at all to a contemporary audience, the subversion would pointedly consist not of envisioning a world turned upside down, so that the last should become first, but of effectively displacing the ascrisive priority of those who rule by force of established position in favour of the merit-based, performative authority of ‘those’ who, for instance, ‘are free within the cities, and are of some likely substance to bear office in the same’, that is, England’s sober-minded, law-abiding citizen class. It is, after all, a conscientious citizen consulting with other dutiful subjects of the kingdom who diagnoses the disease and prescribes the cure that this ‘sickly land’ requires. By describing ‘the conduct, character and status they found so offensive in others’, Shakespeare’s third citizen might even be said to be reflecting ‘the birthpangs of a participatory democracy in which the middling sort came to exercise a degree of political choice’ or agency. However, a reverison to a series of practical maximns such as ‘When clouds are seen, wise men put on their cloaks’ (2.3.32), this hypothetical rupture in the social fabric is discursively elided, the hidden transcript put back in its box, and the political orthodoxy of the citizens recuperated, as Third Citizen concludes, ‘All may be well: but if God sort it so, ‘Tis more than we deserve or I expect’ (2.3.36–7), subsiding with ‘But leave it all to God’ (2.3.45).

Thus, 2.3 offers a fleeting, but microcosmally panoramic glimpse at how a representative sampling of citizens consider and construe—while looking through a glass darkly—events that are not in their power to alter or effectually resist, but that

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19 Harrison, Description, 118.
20 Harrison, Description, 115.
21 I am mixing here two related passages from ch. 3 of Steve Hindle’s The State and Social Change in Early Modern England, c. 1550–1640 (New York: St Martin’s Press, 2000), 226, 228.

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may well affect their collective lives and destinies. As James Siemon observes, they ‘discuss succession, pass judgment on limitation of Councillors, and precisely assess the politics and “emulation” that is evident among contending factions’, adding that they are thus represented as participating in a fundamental arena of Elizabethan public life where the powers of discourse and the eloquence of silence could claim authority of their own. But however incisive their intelligence or consciousness may be regarding the political transactions of princes, kings, and exultant aristocrats, the quietly censorious citizens are also compelled to play the roles of all but effectively silenced, whispering spectators. This effect of operating under compulsion is enforced in the even briefer scene (3.6) that follows hard upon the arrest and execution of Lord Hastings in 3.4, which was drawn and assembled from Thomas More’s commentary on the events and their aftermath, as later redacted with only minor alterations in the chronicle histories of Hall and Holinshed. I quote it in full:

Enter a SCRIVENER with a paper in his hand.

SCRIVENER This is the indictment of the good Lord Hastings, Which in a set hand fairely is engras’d. That it may be this day read over in Paul’s, And mark how well the sequel hangs together. Eleven hours I spent to write it over. The precedent was full as long a-doing, And yet within these five hours lived Lord Hastings: Untainted, unexamined, free, at liberty.

Here’s good world the while! Why, who’s so gross That sees not this palpable device? Yet who’s so bold but says he sees it not? Bad is the world, and all will come to naught When such bad dealing must be seen in thought. Exit. (3.6.1-14, my emphases)

22 Or not, as the tanner Hobs has it in Thomas Heywood’s later revisiting of an earlier shift in power relations, from Henry VI to Edward IV in his 1 Edward IV: Hobs’s response to the disguised Edward IV’s interrogations make the specificity of whoever possesses the crown appear irrelevant to the everyday life and concerns of the common man, who only feels the impact or import of sovereignty when he has to pay his taxes. Rather than appearing to be in any way central to Hobs’s understanding of himself or the nation to which he belongs, the king is entirely peripheral to Hobs, someone Hobs loves only as ‘poor folks love holidays: glad to have them now and then, since to have them come too often [would] undo them’. Why? ‘So, to see the King… every day would be beggarly’ (1 Edward IV:39-52). Hobs proves not at all unwilling to yield upwars of ‘half my store’ when asked by the disguised Edward IV whether he would lend the King money ‘if he should need’ (1 Edward IV:39-56). Indeed, he claims that he would even sell sole leather to help him to more’ (1 Edward IV:39-7). But the ‘him’ to whom he would freely lend makes no great difference to Hobs, be it King ‘Harry’ of the old house of Lancaster whose progeny Hobs professes to love, or King Edward of the house of York (1 Edward IV:40-5). To demonstrate the fidelity of his loyalty Hobs rather claims kinship here with ‘Sutton windmill’, confessing that he can grudge which so e’er the wind blow. If it be Harry, I can say “well fare Lancaster”; if it be Edward, I can sing “York, York, for my money” (1 Edward IV:40-7). See Richard Rowlands, ed., Thomas Heywood, The First and Second Parts of Edward IV (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005).


Performatively speaking, the two rhetorical questions the Scrivener asks seem directed at two different but overlapping audiences, the first reflexively representing the feelings and perceptions of the onstage citizens and subjects, the second extending itself as a kind of invitation resolutely (yet directly) offered to offstage citizens and subjects as well. As in the case of the Third Citizen’s ‘were they to be ruled, and not to rule’, the Scrivener’s ‘who’s so bold but says he sees it not’ carries a challenge to both the established order and the audience buried in the knowledge that no one is likely bold enough to respond to, much less mount, such a challenge. The potential agency of citizens to effect change or reform is thus reduced to ineffectual finger-pointing and moralizing: ‘Bad is the world, and all will come to naught’. When such bad dealing must be seen in thought.

At the same time, of course, the Scrivener manages not only to echo but elaborate on the sharpness of the Third Citizen’s perceptions, while indicating that no one is fooled—however much everyone may be cowed—by Richard’s machinations. Indeed, rather than be seduced by the cleverness of Richard’s designs, the Scrivener is moved to indignation by them, alerting the offstage audience to a breakdown in Richard’s command of his propaganda machine. He even could be said to be pointing beyond the confines of the play world itself to the space and moment of the play’s performance, to a consideration of what may become of the English nation—all will come to naught—when ‘bad dealing’ can only be ‘seen in thought’, and not be contested or combated openly in words and deeds: a statement that, in its modest way, anticipates Kant’s more consequential claim that ‘The external power that deprives man of the freedom to communicate his thought publicly, deprives him at the same time of his freedom to think’ since ‘the only guarantee for “the correctness” of our thinking lies in that “we think… in community with others”’.

It is on this same ground of communal thinking—and of thinking one’s thoughts loud—that Shakespeare’s stagecrafting of this dramatic intervention differs from its presumptive source in More’s anecdotal account of the event and its aftermath: Now was this proclamation made within two hours after he was beheaded, and it was so elaborately curiously endited and so fairly written in parchment in so well-a set hand, and therewith of itself so long a process, that every child might well perceive that it was prepared before. For all the time between his death and the proclaiming could scarce [scant] have sufficed unto the bare writing alone, although it had been

24 Hannah Arendt’s condensed translation of a passage (marked with her emphasis) from Immanuel Kant, ‘What Does It Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?’ in Hannah Arendt, Between Past and Future (New York: Penguin, 1977), 234-5. The paragraph in Kant’s essay in which this passage is embedded is worth quoting—and examining—in full:

The freedom to think is opposed first to civil compulsion. Of course it is said that the freedom to speak or to write could be taken from us by a superior power, but the freedom to think cannot be. Yet how much and how correctly would we think if we did not think as it were in community with others to whom we communicate our thoughts, and who communicate theirs with us? Thus one can very well say that this external power which welds away people’s freedom to communicate their thoughts also takes away from the freedom to think—that single gem remaining to us in the midst of all the burdens of civil life, through which alone we can devise means of overcoming all the evils of our condition. (Kant, ‘What Does It Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?’ in Religion and Rational Theology, trans. and ed. Allen W. Wood and George Di Giovanni, The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 16)
one's mind, often in situations in which it is dangerous to do so because of the power of one's interlocutor". 29 In the end, the Scrivener's indignation yields to, or rather merges with, a sadder note of resigned wonder or amazement in the stretched-out pauses of 'Untainted, unexamined, free, at liberty' that preface the more outspoken cadence of 'Here's a good world the while!' a knowing warning to auditors to be careful about where they seek their pleasure. Such a warning would be unlikely to fall on deaf ears given the proliferation of treason statutes (amounting to sixty-eight in all) issued in the sixteenth century by Tudor parliaments, the 'one' of which was 'draconian'. 30

The distinction the Scrivener goes on to draw between 'who's so gross' and 'who's so bold' also informs the speaking silence of citizens that Buckingham reports on in 3.7, a scene that draws on, but arguably comes short of equaling, the fuller account of Buckingham's failure to win the citizens' support for crowning Richard that More offers in his history. Buckingham's response to Richard's query—'How now, my lord, what say the citizens?—initiates the following exchange:

BUCKINGHAM The citizens are mum and speak not a word.

And when mine oratory grew to an end,
I bid them that did love their country's good
Cry 'God save Richard, England's royal King!'

GLOUCESTER Ah, and did they say?

BUCKINGHAM No, so God help me,
But like dumb beasts or breathing stones
Gazed each on other and looked deadly pale,
Which when I saw, I reprehended them;
And asked the Mayor what meant this wilful silence.
His answer was, the people were not wont
To be spoke to but by the Recorder.
Then he was urged to tell me one again:
'Thus saith the Duke; thus hath the Duke inferred,'
But nothing spake in warrant from himself.
When he had done, some followers of mine own
At the lower end of the hall hurled up their caps.
And some ten voices cried 'God save King Richard!'

29 Wood goes no farther than suggesting that 'Porheis ... may have had a function within early modern society, enabling communication up and down the social hierarchy within a policy that was otherwise supposed to be closed to the popular voice' (The 1554 Rebellion, 135-39). But one could well claim a similar function for porheis in Shakespearean drama, which repeatedly issues critical pronouncements on social injustice and inequality by characters ranging from bawds and porters to gravediggers and fishermen. For a fuller account of the rhetorical figure's history and its application in early modern English political, philosophic, and religious discourse, see David Colledge, Freedom of Speech in Early Stuart England (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), particularly the book's first chapter.

30 As an example of the 'draconian' tone of 'Tudor treason and sedition legislation', Andy Wood offers 'the preambles of the 1555 Treason Act', which 'laid down a hierarchy of punishments for speaking "false, seditious and scandalous news, rumours, spyings and tales" and concluded that "we are forbidden to think evil and much more to speak evil!". See Andy Wood, Riot, Rebellion and Popular Politics in Early Modern England (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 33-4.
"Thanks, loving citizens and friends," quoth I.  
"This general applause and loving shout  
Argues your wisdom and your love to Richard."  
And so brake off and came away.

GLOUCESTER What, tongueless blocks were they? Would they not speak? (3.7.1.3-16-36)

Particularly telling in Buckingham's account of the citizens' failure to register their approval of his bravura performance is his impression that the very opposite impression his speech had on citizens who, in his words, "like dumb statues or breathing stones / Gazed each on other and looked deadly pale." Misconstruing the citizens' speaking silence as 'this willful silence', Buckingham takes literally the Mayor's mitigating explanation that the people were not won / To be spoken to but by the Recorder—"who, upon his own rehearsal of Buckingham's speech, conscientiously distances himself from what both he and his fellow citizens clearly consider its treasonous, indeed, arguably sacrilegious intent.

Buckingham's insistence on licencing the citizens to 'dumb statues or breathing stones' is echoed in Richard's exasperated query, 'What, tongueless blocks were they?', suggesting that neither of these self-styled master practitioners of 'policy' has the least insight into the citizens' capacity to exercise common sense, much less critical thought, in response to such palpable fabrications. Nor do they seem capable of breaking through their own mirror of self-reflected glory to a more objective analysis of the reciprocal basis of the politics of power and consent.

As James C. Scott writes:

Given the usual power of dominan: elites to compel performances from others, the discourse of the public transcript is a decidedly lopsided discussion. While it is unlikely to be merely a sten of lies and misrepresentations, it is... a highly partisan and partial narrative... designed to be impressive, to affirm and naturalize the power of dominant elites, and to conceal or euphemize the dirty linen of their rule. If, however, this flattering self-portrait is to have any rhetorical force among subordinates, it necessarily involves some concessions to their presumed interests.

Applied to the present moment, 'flattering self-portrait' suggests the extent to which Buckingham and Richard remain invested in their own euphemizations and entranced by the presumed brilliance of their artistry. Their failed effort even to elicit the performance of consent takes precedence over the fact that their brutal exercise of power has, for all rights and purposes, already assured their success. But success on the ground, as it were, is not all that they are after. As Scott again pointedly notes:

If much of the purpose of the public transcript of domination is not to gain the agreement of subordinates but rather to use and intimidate them into a durable and expedient compliance, what effect does it have among the dominant themselves? It may well be that insofar as the public transcript represents an attempt to persuade or indoctrinate anyone, the dominant are the subject of its attentions. The public transcript as a kind

of self-hypnosis within ruling groups to buck up their courage, improve their cohesion, display their power, and convince themselves anew of their moral purpose? The possibility is not all that farfetched.33

In the event, what we—and, hypothetically, the Elizabethan audience—end up witnessing is a painstaking performance's reported (and repeated) failure to achieve any of its aims at susion or seduction of another audience whose normative values remain resistant, if not downright opposed, to that performance's appeal.

The incredulity of the performers at their own failure to mystify that audience with their fabrications notably turns into an attack on the obtuseness of the audience itself, which might rather be credited with retaining its own values of fair-dealing in the face of those values' usurpation. As Brian Walsh observes:

What is practically speaking a bad audience to the men on stage... is morally speaking a good audience from the perspective of the actual audience in the theatre. With historical perspective, audiences of Richard III can admire the citizens they hear described for their refusal to give assent to Buckingham's promotion of Richard.33

 Walsh adds that 'the flat response to Buckingham at Guildhall' may also 'remind audiences that they have power to withhold support, and that sometimes, especially in historically significant moments, they have witheld their power in that way'.34

One of these moments, which conceivably loomed large in collective citizen memory, if not consciousness, involved the outspoken defiance and refusal of thousands of overburdened taxpayers—ranging from citizens to artisans to day labourers—to submit to Cardinal Wolsey's disingenuously named Amicable Grant scheme of 1525, which was abandoned under pressure by King Henry himself. As Anthony Fletcher and Diarmid MacCulloch have observed, 'Tudor monarchs always found it needed discussion and concessions to obtain taxes from parliament. But [in] this occasion the government found itself proceeding from persuasion to concession in the face of extra-parliamentary opinion' (my emphasis).35

Approached from this

Scott, Dominaion and the Arts of Resistan, 18.


Walsh, 'New Directions', 104 (my emphasis).

Fletcher and MacCulloch, Tudor Rebellions (rev. 5th edn, London: Routledge, 2008), 51. For a more thoroughgoing analysis of the complexity and contradictions attending this controversy, see G. W. Bernard's book-length study, War, Taxation and Rebellion in Early Tudor England: Henry VIII, Wolsey and the Amicable Grants of 1525 (Brighton: Harvester Press, New York: St Martin's Press, 1980). See also Edward Hale's poignant account of a critical stage in this conflict when the Duke of Norfolk selected a 'well aged mane of fifty years and about' who was the captain of the ruffian common, and was answered both with his name as Power, for he and his coyns, Pomeroy, for the rest with the name of Dovvng (The Union of the Two Noble and Illustre Families of Lancaster and York (1548) (repr., New York: AMS Press, 1965)). Fletcher and MacCulloch observe that 'it may not be entirely irrelevant that Hall [also] noted in his chronicle for 1525 that "in this troublous season the uplandish men of Germany rose in great numbers, almost an hundred thousand and rebelled, against the princes of Germany": a narration that draws a provocative connection between England's "tax-paying classes", riotous German peasants, and, arguably, those "communitarian" German Anabaptists who, in less than ten years, would become the bogeyman that haunted both the sixteenth-century English citizen and ruling-class mind. See, e.g., Samuel Rowland's contemporaneous closer drama Hill's Broke Lene (London, 1605), which dramatizes in demonic terms John of Leyden's demagogic reign as self-styled king of Münster.
direction, a scene that in performance may be played largely for comic effect—with Richard's and Buckingham's successive displays of exasperation competing for audience amusement—becomes instead yet another marker of the proud heritage of citizen resistance to royal and aristocratic presumption and contempt.

Another crucial component of Buckingham's audience's response that seems opaque to Richard and Buckingham himself but requires noting is the descriptive phrase 'gazed on each other and looked deadly pale', which is appended to 'like dumb statues or breathing stones'. As James Siemon has noted, as a representation of how subjects may be rendered 'mute', silent, or dumbstruck by an exercise of tyrannical power, this description recalls William Camden's account of how contemporary lookers-on reacted when John Stubbs had his right hand 'cut off with a Cleaver driven thorough the wrist... upon a scaffold in the market place at Westminster' in 1579. According to Camden:

the multitude standing about, was altogether silent, either out of horror of this new and unwonted punishment, or else out of pity towards the man being of most honorable and unblameable report, or else out of hatred of [the Queen's bruited Spanish] marriage, which most men pressed would be the overthrow of Religion.56

Whereas Camden is alert to the variety of motives that possibly enforced the multitude's silence, Buckingham seems incapable of compassing the reason for, much less the depth of, his audience's apparent 'horror' at all that his speech portends for themselves and for the kingdom at large, discounting the extent to which his and Richard's attempt to abridge established laws of royal succession may also embrace—in the 'popular' mind—the consequent 'abridgement' of the lives of the two princes harboured in the Tower. Buckingham's incapacity to anticipate, or construe in any manner short of dismissiveness, his audience's immediate recoil at what he is broaching further evinces the moral gulf opened up between those who would rule and those being asked to approve and counterenance misrule. Indeed, more than a moral gulf is opened up by Buckingham's failure at 'impression management'; a distinct loss of face would be involved, especially for an individual of Buckingham's high social standing and political authority.57


I long ago discussed possible connections between the silent/silenced 'audience' attending Stubbs's mutilation and Elizabethan playwrights witnessing the performed horrors of Marlowe's Tamburlaine plays. See Marlowe, Shakespeare, and the Economy of Theatrical Experience (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), 91–3. I now follow the lead of Siemon, 'Sounding Silence', 128–32, in connecting the Stubbs witnesses with the off- and on-stage auditories of Buckingham's prosenium speeches on Richard's behalf described by More and Shakespeare, respectively.

57 Among many other gains, the new social history has emphasized the importance of battles for dignity and face in the administration of law and policy, and the potential catastrophe for authority's legitimacy in losing a battle of wits, before an audience of social and political inferiors. As Michael B raddock writes: 'Losing a battle of wits in front of an audience was a serious matter for a magistrate, for whom honour and reputation constituted an important part of their claim to authority' (171). See Braddock, Administrative Performance: The Representation of Political Authority in Early Modern England, in Braddock and Walter, Negotiating Power, 166–87.

Andy Wood notes that 'Within the elite mindset, quietude was synonymous with order, and plebeian silence equivalent to proper deference. In sermons, homilies, and prescriptive tracts, the lower orders were repeatedly told to remain silent in the face of authority.'58 But Buckingham's Guildhall audience is not particularly 'plebeian' and silence is designedly not Buckingham's preferred response to his sermon. As Annabel Patterson observes of Holinshed's replication of these passages from More, 'This absence of the popular voice generates a crisis' in conventional expectations of how an audience of commons would receive an official pronouncement made by a man of Buckingham's standing, so that the Duke 'demanded' an answer of his resistant auditory.59 What he gets instead, pace More, is that 'the people began to whisper among themselves secretly, so that the voice was neither loud nor distinct but, as it were, the sound of a swarm of bees'.60 This furtive whispering of the assembled commons would no doubt have proved even more unsettling to Buckingham had it not prompted 'a concealed group of the Duke's servants... and of others belonging to the Protector with some apprentices and lads... to cry out as loud as their throats would give' (King Richard! King Richard).61

The moral and dramatic divide opened up between would-be persuaders and their resistant citizen audience anticipates the possibility of a corresponding disenchantment of the offstage audience with Richard and Buckingham's manoeuvres as they play their next hand out in 3.7, the so-called piey scene. Shakespeare arguably courts this possibility by having his aristocratic role players engage in a second successive 'open rehearsal' (the first being their donning of 'roten armor' to beat back an imaginary assault in 3.5), acquainting the audience with their behind-the-scenes plans to fool the Mayor into crediting Richard's pious reluctance to assume the crown. This scene draws to a head when Buckingham's appeal—'Then, good my lord, take to your royal self! This proffered benefit of dignity' (3.7.176–7)—is seconded by the Lord Mayor in the role of cowed straight man and of Catesby as scripted petitioner in a dedicated performance of the ruling order's public script:

MAYOR: Do, good my lord, your citizens entreat you.

CATESBY: O make them joyful; grant their lawful suit. (3.7.182–3)

But although he plays 'the maid's part' (3.7.45) to the hilt—'Alas, why would you heap these cares on me? / I am unfit for state and dignity' (3.7.184–5)—'still answer[ing] may' before taking it, Richard's seizure of the crown takes place in a dramatic vacuum. As in the report of his reception at the Guildhall, Buckingham's

58 Wood, The 1549 Rebellions, 118.
59 Patterson, Reading Holinshed's Chronicles, 209.
60 More, NCE 142/4, Yeld 76.
61 More, NCE 142/4, Yeld 76. As Andy Wood writes:

There was... a powerful politics to speech and silence in Tudor England. But this politics was open to contestation. The verbal expression of authority required daily sustenance by its proponents and regular acceptance by inferiors. For all that modern rulers attempted to ensure popular political speech, their ears remained ever attuned to the sound of the plebeian 'murmuring' which they understood might lead to 'commotion'. (The 1549 Rebellions, 110–11)
'Long live Richard, England's royal king!' is pointedly unechoed, receiving only the Lord Mayor's toasting 'Amen' (3.7.220–1) in response before the scene ceremoniously closes.

Indeed, in the first Quarto publication of Richard III in 1597, the piety scene makes no express reference to citizens apart from the few who accompany the Mayor as witnesses to Richard's 'staged' entrance between two bishops, and to his sustained (also 'staged') dialogue with Buckingham. As Ramsay Targoff notes, 'in the first Quarto, the response to Buckingham is made by the Mayor alone, when the citizens remain stonily silent.' It is unlikely, therefore, that the text was designed to have those citizens manifest much apart from discomfort and bewilderment at the contrived proceedings around them. Had Shakespeare the wherewithal to assemble a larger collection of citizen actors, and to script their process of departure offstage after the exit of Richard and Buckingham, the Elizabethan audience might have seen and heard what is expressly described in More:

[And the people departed, talking diversely of the matter, every man as his fancy afforded [gave him]. But much they talked and marvelled at the manner of this dealing, that the matter was on both parts made so strange, as though neither had ever conferred [communed] with other before, when that themselves well knew there was no man so dull that heard them but he perceived well enough that all the matter was already made between them. Howbeit, some accused that again, and said all must be done in good order now. And men must sometimes for the master's sake not seem to know [be a knowing] what they know.

The crucial difference between More's account and Shakespeare's staging is that the conclusion More's citizens arrive at is already presented as shared knowledge by Shakespeare, that is, knowledge shared between the conspiring Richard and Buckingham and their witnessing onstage audience, who are thereby cast in the role of accomplices and hence arguably engaged in a process of complicity with the entertaining evil-doers. The process presumably elides the distance between an audience of subjects and citizens or the one hand and of plebeian actors performing the roles of high and mighty aristocrats on the other, an elision such an audience would presumably find delightfully thrilling and transgressive. As James Scott writes, in another remarkably pertinent formulation:

The theatrical imperatives that normally prevail in situations of domination produce a public transcript in close conformity with how the dominant group would wish to have things appear. The dominant never control the stage absolutely, but their wishes normally prevail. In the short run, it is in the interest of the subordinate to produce a more or less credible performance, speaking the lines and making the gestures he

Targoff adds that 'in both texts, however, the utterance that is used to confer legitimacy upon Richard is the simple, and here unmistakably divine, term 'Amen' ("Divine Amen", 73).

More, NCE 145/150 80 (my emphasis). According to Anthony Parascandola: "There could scarcely be a better witness against the modern doctrine that ordinary citizens exist within a sealed dome of ideology immune to their cognitive penetration; a witness all the more persuasive by way of its insistence on the diversity of public opinion, some decrying the hypocrisy of the scene... but others excusing it as typical of public rituals and the workings of hegemony."

(Reading Holinshed's Chronicles, 289–10)

Roughly, from the transparently pre-emptive effort taken to rationalize the execution of Hastings, Richard and Buckingham have been fooling no one, possibly apart from the credulous, though more likely cowardly, Lord Mayor. All further efforts in kind have been exercises in political (and theatrical) redundancy (as opposed to expediency), which are unlikely to enlist the imaginative allegiance of an audience not only allowed to see all, but more aware than the staged aristocrats can be of how brief their dominance of the stage (and political history) will be. The historical consciousness of citizen playgoers, that they - or rather, their kind - have outlived (and will continue to outline) the doomed machinations of such actors, which I attribute to them here, resembles the knowledge that More attributes to 'poor men' that 'be but the lookers on' as they gaze on 'Kings' games' in the celebrated passage with which he closes his account of Richard and Buckingham's apparent triumph. The More passage delivers not just — or only — the brilliant perceptions that accompany More's musings on so many events, but conveys an uncommon understanding that More attributes to common men themselves, in the roles they play as silent witnesses to the pastimes of the great: roles that require of them a silence that the great themselves take for approval but which more likely signifies profound estrangement and coerced submission — possibly even the more principled stand of 'non-compliance' Siemon assigns them — as if these are affairs that citizens have no stake in countenancing or approving. Let us pick up More where we just left off:

And in a stage play all the people know right well that he that plays the Sultan is perchance a shoemaker. Yet if one should know so little, to show out of season what acquaintance he has with him and call him by his own name while he stands in his majesty, one of his tormentors might hap to break his head, and rightly [worthy] for marring of the play. And so they said that these matters be Kings' games, as if it were stage plays, and for the more part played on scaffolds, in which poor men be but lookers on. And they that wise be, will meddle no farther. For they that sometimes step up and play with them, when they cannot play their parts, they disorder the play and do themselves no good.

To apply this model to the play at hand possibly requires an unmediated leap from one unscientific account of events (More's) to another (mine) as well as confirmation of the presumed likeness of 'Kings' games' and 'stage plays', the citizen lookers-on of the one and the citizen spectators of the other. But it turns on the notion that Shakespeare got considerably more than prefabricated set

44 Scott, Domination and the Arts of Resistance, 4.
45 Siemon, 'Sounding Silences', 136.
46 More, NCE 145/Yale 80–1.
The Speaking Silence of Citizens

The percussive beat of Richard's rhetorical drum—"What sayest thou? Speak suddenly; be brief"—sounds an aggressive charge on Buckingham's senses, compelling him to beg off making a decision—"Give me some breath, some little pause, my lord, / Before I positively speak herein"—when Richard asks, "Say, have I thy consent that they shall die?" (4.2.22-24). There is something revealing in the need Richard evinces here for Buckingham's continued companionship, which the offstage audience may in a better position to notice than the audience onstage, insulated as they are by the dialogue's taking the form of a sustained aside. Why, after all, does this ethos of consent continue to obtain for Richard when Buckingham's consent could hardly help legitimate so illicit a crime? Possibly, the very structure of consent is a kind of institutional hangover for a character too drunk on the realization of his ambitions to notice its newly constituted irrelevance. As such, it becomes a deformed echo of the already degraded poetry of consent Buckingham pretended to record at the Guildhall on the basis of rehearsed cheers and a few caps tossed in the air by his partisans. At this point, just as the hidden transcript of criminal intent conclusively overwrites the public transcript of Richard and Buckingham's performance of consent, Shakespeare chooses to have the unregenerate Catesby direct the eyes of onstage and offstage audience alike to the achieved implication of Richard's project: "The King is angry: see, he gnaws his lip" (4.2.26). This is not, of course, the literal end of King Richard any more than it is the end of Richard III. But it signals the end of Richard's mutually hypnotizing accord with Buckingham, and the start of Richard's willed isolation—"None are for me! That look into me with considerate eyes" (4.2.28-9): a formula for estrangement that discounts the thousands of disenfranchised eyes interrogating the now nakedly anxious sovereign at the very moment he utters this statement. This is also, uncoididentally, the moment when the hidden script of the strong, which the Scrivener challenges the audience to acknowledge in 3.6, becomes instantly legible to all.

Richard III brings to conclusion what has come to be called the first tetralogy. Notwithstanding their plots' concern with fifteenth-century upheavals, these four plays also complete a composite picture of the embattled politics of commoners in the late Tudor period. Yet where 2 Henry VI depicts the volatility of poorer plebeians, who are quick to rebel, Richard III contrasts these with the citizen class which, though ideologically penetrating, is at once resistant but resolutely reserved. Shakespeare heightens the differentiation by establishing that the worried London 'neighbours' of Act 2 scene 3, and the sceptical auditors of Richard's wiles, relayed through Buckingham in 3.7, are specifically identified as 'citizens' rather than being more broadly termed, as in More, 'the people'. Where More's account had set delivery of the bastardy accusations first at Paul's Cross, preached to 'a great number', and then at the Guildhall before 'all the commons of the city' (where More describes the audience as 'the people' no fewer than seven times), Shakespeare transforms these

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hearners of the bastardy allegations into 'citizens'. He then appends the 'piety scene' to
this same Guildhall audience, of 'Lords Mayor and citizens', cancelling More's loca-
tion of it at Baynard's Castle in a subsequent ceremonial gathering, where the chief
commoners of the city in their best 'manner appareled' mingled with great noble-
men. Shakespeare thus reworked More to make clear that it is the citizen class—not
London's commoners at large—who listen, suffer, and feel disbelief, then allow
themselves to be overthrown by Buckingham and Catesby.

Shakespeare was, in all this, arguably bringing political demographics up to
date. I opened this chapter by noting that the citizenry of Shakespeare's London
had become a wealthy and distinguished grouping. From around 1580, however,
their flourishing generated a regrouping of social classes, for the urban elite began
to identify with the gentry, and concomitantly, often contemptuously, to disassociate
themselves from the wicker commonalty. Where, up to 1549, the most
substantial parishesmen had provided elite organizational skill in rebellions, by
the late sixteenth century they had become too eagerly incorporated for insurrec-
tion.¶¶ They feared not only the ubiquity of spies—'Pitchers have ears' (2.4.37)—but the
stirrings of mutiny among their own servants and apprentices, the terror of agitat-
ing the many-headed monster. Shakespeare's tetralogy depicts both the shrewd
mental independence of the citizens, yet also in the enforced passivity of the
citizen bloc, the disappearance of a united commons. Had Elizabeth I lived just
four years more, her reign would have closed not with outward national peace
but with the bloodbath of another nauseating plebeian uprising, the Midlands
Rising of 1607—a mass insurrection in which the anguished rural poor gained no sup-
port from the middling sort.

The political stature of the metropolitan citizenry necessitated that they be wooed
and their ratification won, nominally at least, for a monarch to hope for any security:
Richard does not send Buckingham to win over servants or the peasantry. Yet a
commoner remained, to the elite, merely a commoner, whatever the political
resonance of his amassed guild wealth. Richard had sneered at the climate of social
mobility: 'Since every jack became a gentleman / There's many a gentleman made
a jack' (1.3.72–3); and Richmond, with Richard safely destroyed, smoothly resumes
the anti-populist perspective: 'What men of name are slain on either side . . . inter
their bodies as become their births' (5.5.12, 15). It is hard to see this detail being lost
on audiences in so competitive and aspiring a society.

The disintegration of the commons' political unity would not be overcome until
1642, when two decades of Stuart cross-class provocation activated the entire city
to resistance. On 5 January, the day after Charles sent some eighty armed men to
arrest five Members of Parliament and failed, 'The leaders of the Commons had
thrown themselves upon the mercy of the City of London . . . all the shops were
shut and the citizens stood in the streets with their arms'. The king's coach was
surrounded and jostled as a 'rude multitude' shouted 'Privileges of Parliament!
Thousands of commoners filled the streets next day, bearing 'halberds, swords,
clubs and such weapons as they could lay their hands on'. The king fled from


London on 10 January.¶¶ Provocatively, Shakespeare in Richard III had set up the
royal mystique as the last refuge of a deluded scoundrel: '[T]he King's name is
tower of strength / Which they upon the adverse faction want', he makes
Richard III brag (5.3.12–13). The drama then proves him wrong, proceeding to
valorize armed resistance to the Crown by an invading peer: 'If you do swear to put
a tyrant down,' declares Richmond, 'you sleep in peace, the tyrant being slain'
(5.3.254–5). When England came likewise to demolish the tower of royal supremacy,
it's arraignment of kingship may have owed something to the demystifications of
royal criminality exhibited, and resisted, in so many Shakespeare plays.

In closing, I would like briefly to apply my findings to Mark Rylance's recent
There we discover—no surprise here—that the spoken citizen exchange in 2.7 has
been suppressed, as has the powerful oppositional presence of Queen Margaret,
whose absence allows Richard's seduction of the audience to proceed with little
direct qualification or resistance until (abetted by a vigorous Duchess of York)
Queen Elizabeth again rises to the occasion in 4.4. Missing the presence and
agency of the three citizens and Queen Margaret, I had assumed that the Scrivener
would likewise go missing, particularly because any interruption in Richard's dra-
matic momentum would seem inconsistent with the aims and pacing of Tim
Carroll's directorial designs. And indeed, inconsistency is exactly what I discerned
when the Scrivener seemed to arrive from nowhere to offer his indignant indict-
ment of 'bad dealing'. Lacking the ground to stand upon that both the Citizens
and Queen Margaret had prepared in the uncut play text, the Scrivener now
seemed 'to disorder the play', serving as an unwelcome encumbrance weighing
down our pleasure, in much the way the Guildhall's citizen auditory is made to
seem when Buckingham and Richard liken them to 'dumb statues', 'breathing
stones', and 'tongueless blocks'. In this Richard III, not playing along with Richard's
and Buckingham's plans looks less like bad faith than bad humour, the priggish
reluctance to take part in a practical joke. Cr looks this way until Queen Elizabeth
arrives in 4.4 and boldly takes Richard's place and defends apart, letting him (and
possibly his audience) think he has won—though we all should have known the jig
was up in 4.2 when, following the rules of playing and Catesby's prompt, we are
directed to watch how the 'angry' king 'graws his lip' (4.2.26).

Rylance adopts throughout a broadly buffoonish presentation of Richard, even
finding a way of having him speak with a semi-stutter that is made to seem symp-
tomatic of his physical deformity. This Richard ad-libs, makes faces, plays to the
audience, and even at one point cradles Hastings's head as if it is a much-loved
basketball. And he is licensed to do all this because, though Rylance's 'original

practices' commitments make allowances for cutting excess text that cannot sustain itself in performance, the cuts he makes take the heart out of Richard's opposition, permitting Richard sustained access to a contemporary audience sufficiently unconversant with the play text (and English history) to notice or to care. That audience, of course, also has considerably less stake in what is being transacted onstage than did Shakespeare's citizen auditor, and, moreover, has long been conditioned to consider the American political equivalent of 'kings' games' a blood sport presided over by corporate gants in which the commons takes only a rooting interest from a far removed grandstand. But I could not help feeling amid the thunderous applause that Rylance had cheated both the play and his audience by effectively choosing to perform the theatrical equivalent of tennis without a net.

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