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This essay builds on arguments advanced in my earlier essay (Cartelli 1994), but moves beyond them to a broader consideration of how disorder is discursively and dramatically constructed in this play. Whereas scholars like Richard Wilson had detected nothing but “animus” in the Jack Cade episodes of 2 Henry VI that Wilson characterized as “one long orgy of scarological clowning, arson and homicide fuelled by an infantile hatred of literacy and law” (Wilson 1993: 27–8), I detected, instead, “a politically astute reckoning with a long list of social grievances whose inarticulate and violent expression does not invalidate their demand for resolution” (Cartelli 1994: 58). And I attributed “the astuteness of that reckoning to a playwright whose manifest literacy and identification with citizen values may actually have made possible his sympathetic appraisal of the people’s claims” (ibid). At the same time, I identified the point of view of the play itself not with Shakespeare the private subject or individual, but with that of “the literate, industrious, law-abiding citizen class,” which both in 1450 and 1590 could be held to remain “both stable and reliable in the face of wholesale social disorder,” and whose interests Shakespeare could be held to be “representing, as well as promoting” (ibid). The constellation of values associated with this point of view may also help explain Shakespeare’s provocative staging of an encounter that dramatically precedes Jack Cade’s reckoning with Alexander Iden in the latter’s garden, namely, the reckoning of the haughty Suffolk with the equally haughty “pirates” who capture him and in short order make him “shorter by the hedde” (Hall 1965: 207) in the first scene of what Wilson calls the play’s “venomous fourth act” (Wilson 1993: 26).¹

In his groundbreaking essay “Murdering Peasants,” Stephen Greenblatt explores the social complications of representations of the great and powerful triumphing over those held to be lowly and contemptible, complications Shakespeare elides somewhat in the contention between Cade and Iden by making Cade so rich a prize for the aspiring squire and also by transforming “status relations . . . before our eyes into property relations” (Greenblatt 1990: 125).² In my own commentary on this scene, I
acknowledged “the crucial role that property plays in this transaction,” while contending that “Cade’s braving of Iden with ‘saucy terms’ seems to arouse Iden more than does his mere transgression of freehold boundaries” and that “it is primarily Cade’s obstreperousness . . . that motivates the violent turn in this encounter” (Cartelli 1994: 51), hence, that “status relations” remains a crucial pivot around which their contention turns. The otherwise very different encounter between Suffolk and the pirates reads rather similarly, dramatizing as it does the confident assault of two commoners on an aristocrat who (like Iden) takes every opportunity to remind his opponents of how radically unequal they are. Apart from Tamburlaine’s assault on the astonished Persian king Cosroe in Marlowe’s Tamburlaine the Great, there is little in the drama of the period to explain the presumption of Walter Whitmore in particular, Suffolk’s self-styled scourge and executioner, even if we accept him at his word when he responds to Suffolk’s assertion, “I am a gentleman,” with “And so am I” (4.1.29, 31). As Peter Laslett notes, “the word gentleman . . . [marked] a grade amongst other grades in a carefully graduated system of social status and had a critically important use,” the term demarcating “the exact point at which the traditional social system divided up the population into two extremely unequal sections” (Laslett 1971: 27). Hence, it seems at first blush odd that a character acting the role of pirate or, at best, privateer, should so boldly claim this distinction. While lines like the following indicate that Shakespeare tried to underwrite Whitmore’s presumption with a legitimate claim to an elevated social standing — “Never yet did base dishonour blur our name / But with our sword we wiped away the blot” (4.1.39–41) — they may also be aligned with Jack Cade’s spurious claim to royal standing and with Cade’s refusal to be intimidated by anyone of discernibly higher rank. In the world that obtains in 2 Henry VI Whitmore’s claim to gentlemanly status may be construed as yet another symptom — similar to Suffolk’s aspiration to sovereign rule or to the Duchess of Gloucester’s deluded machinations — of disordered social relations. This is, for obvious reasons, the opinion of Suffolk, who styles his unthinkingly aggressive captors “paltry, servile, abject drudges” and “vile Bezonians.” But whether it is also the “opinion” (if we can use such a word) of Shakespeare is quite another thing and one of the questions I will be pursuing in the body of this essay.

Historians have contended that “the circumstances of the duke of Suffolk’s death . . . caused such alarm in Kent as to turn discontent into open action” (Harvey 1991: 73), basing their claim on the first article of complaints issued by the rebels which reads: “it is openlie noised that Kent should be destroyed with a roiall power, and made a wild forrest for the death of the duke of Suffolk, of which the commons of Kent thereof were neuer guilte” (Holinshead 1807–8, III: 222). But Shakespeare appears to have preferred Holinshead’s judgment that “those that favored the duke of York and wished the crowne upon his head procured [the] commotion in Kent” (p. 220) that became Cade’s rebellion. I would like to take Shakespeare’s cue and construe the execution of Suffolk as an event that has more pertinence to the sustained focus on aristocratic corruption and misrule of the first movement of his play than it does to what follows in its wake. In so doing, I would also like to redirect our atten-
tion from Jack Cade’s effort to turn the world upside down in order to argue that the world of this play is upside down from the start, and that the disease of identity-distorting megalomania that afflicts Cade has not merely been transmitted by his tutor in disorder, Richard Duke of York, but has its root and source in a highly contagious aristocratic presumption that, quite literally, knows no bounds and affects virtually every character that steps onstage.

Much that is stiff, mannered, or rhetorically overblown in this play is chronically attributed to the earliness of its composition (the Shakespearean apprenticeship theory), the uncertainty of its authorship (the “other hands” theory), or factors related to the novelty of the chronicle genre itself, which had yet to evolve sufficiently to deliver characters and speeches of the conviction and quality we get in later plays like Richard II or 1 Henry IV. Thus when we see characters like Warwick punning crudely on the loss of Maine (1.1.206–10) or witness them credulously accede to the opportunistic logic that informs York’s tendentious assay at royal genealogy in 2.2, we understandably make allowances, and attribute the deficiency of the characters to a deficit in the art that creates them. Similarly, as we watch one character after another—from Queen Margaret and Suffolk on the one hand, to York and the Duchess Eleanor on the other—articulate their ambitions in the most self-deluding and blustering manner, and ride roughshod over the most obvious considerations of caution and restraint, it may seem that the world Shakespeare has summoned onstage in the first three acts is more residually Tamburlaine than it is proleptically “Shakespearean” (as the second tetralogy teaches us to understand that word). While I willingly admit all that is rough and residually imitative or emulative in Shakespeare’s stagecrafting of 2 Henry VI, I think we would do better to approach the parade of aristocratic presumption in the play’s first three acts as something much more carefully and exactly designed. As Brents Stirling long ago contended, “Elizabethan playwrights were very much concerned with disordered or ‘sick’ societies and built many of their plays around that concept to a degree not yet generally understood” (Stirling 1949: 12, n. 8). I take Stirling’s point as the most promising point of access to Shakespeare’s construction of aristocratic disorder in 2 Henry VI, which may be said to dramatize a crisis of legitimacy that in turn “produces” not only Cade’s rising and York’s subsequent campaign of usurpation, but Suffolk’s fatal encounter with his pirates.

Although this encounter is structurally and thematically tied to Cade’s rebellion, which dramatically commences the moment Suffolk’s body and head are removed from the stage, it is differently oriented in that it brings to a point of culmination or conclusion the play’s sustained study of aristocratic corruption and in that, as a culmination or conclusion, the scene is end-directed, the pirates seeking neither reward nor recognition nor promise of advancement from the actions they undertake. In the structural economy of this play the pirates function in relation to the overweening aristocrat Suffolk in much the way that Iden functions in relation to Cade: as surrogate executors of the nation’s will. Yet unlike Iden who, as I have elsewhere contended, seems more disingenuous than sincere when he claims he seeks “not to wax great by others’ waning” (4.10.20) but then seeks immediate recognition for the killing of
Cade (see Cartelli 1994: 49–52), the pirates conspicuously decline the rewards of their piracy by choosing to kill Suffolk rather than to ransom him and by releasing without fee one of the two gentlemen they had planned to ransom. It is, in short, the patriotically motivated disinterestedness of the pirates I am seeking to isolate here, which operates as the polar opposite of the entirely self-interested motivation of virtually every aristocratic persona in the play, apart, that is, from Duke Humphrey, whose public-spirited absence the pirates effectively fill.

Who, then, are these men Suffolk (and no one else onstage) calls “pirates” and likens to the “vile Bezonians” that slew Tully, Caesar, and Pompey the Great? Who is the Lieutenant who opens 4.1 with such portentous, and obviously learned, language?

The gaudy, blabbing and remorseful day
Is crept into the bosom of the sea;
And now loud-howling wolves arouse the jades
That drag the melancholy night,
Who with their drowsy, slow and flagging wings
Clip dead men’s graves and from their misty jaws
Breathe foul contagious darkness in the air. (4.1.1–7)

And who is Walter Whitmore who, along with the Lieutenant, turns Suffolk’s Tamburlainean vaunts back against him in the key of a self-styled junior Tamburlaine?

Suffolk. Jove sometimes went disguised, and why not I?
Lieutenant. But Jove was never slain as thou shalt be.
Suffolk. Obscure and lowly swain, King Henry’s blood,
The honourable blood of Lancaster,
Must not be shed by such a jaded groom.
Hast thou not kissed thy hand and held my stirrup?
And bare-head plodded by my foot-cloth mule,
And thought thee happy when I shook my head?
How often hast thou waited at my cup,
Fed from my trencher, kneeled down at the board
When I have feasted with Queen Margaret?
Remember it, and let it make thee crestfallen,
Ay, and allay this thy abortive pride.
And duly waited for my coming forth?
This hand of mine hath writ in thy behalf
And therefore shall it charm thy riotous tongue.
Whitmore. Speak, Captain, shall I stab the forlorn swain?
Lieutenant. First let my words stab him, as he hath me. (4.1.48–66)

Suffolk himself can be of some help to us in identifying the Lieutenant whom he confidently recognizes as a former servant who has even solicited and been rewarded at some point with Suffolk’s written recommendation. Although the Lieutenant never
responds specifically to Suffolk's claim of recognition, he is clearly provoked ("let my word stab him, as he hath me") by Suffolk's efforts to bring him back to a full consciousness of his inferiority ("Remember it, and let it make thee crestfallen"), which the Duke apparently believes will prove disabling. Of particular interest here is how Suffolk concludes his inventory of the Lieutenant's inferior parts with the claim that the same hand that "writ in thy behalf" shall "charm thy riotous tongue," giving a legalistic name to the radical social inversion the speech acts of a man who has "plodded by my foot-cloth mule" and "fed from my trencher" perform. That the Lieutenant responds to Suffolk's effort to "charm" him with the peremptory order to "Convey him hence, and on our longboat's side / Strike off his head" suggests a rather different understanding of established social protocols than Suffolk possesses. But even more striking is the 33-line speech Shakespeare next gives to this character who has no basis for this address in any of the sources we assume the playwright consulted, but whose words effectively reproduce the charges leveled against Suffolk by the formally assembled Commons in those very same sources.

Shakespeare's effort to establish Suffolk as the play's prevailing enemy of the people is telescoped by the unprofitable and self-advantaging marriage Suffolk negotiates for the King, which is dramatized in the play's first scene, but is given sustained dramatic treatment in the petitioners scene, 1.3. This scene seems directly modeled on the petitioners scene found at the beginning of Marlowe's Edward II, but works in very different ways. Whereas Marlowe's staging of the scene works against the grain of its formal structure as dramatic exemplum in a manner that privileges Gaveston's aestheticized opportunism at the expense of the three poor men who petition him for sponsorship (see Cartelli 1991: 123–30), Shakespeare uses his scene to paint a graphic picture of Margaret and Suffolk's predatory plans for the kingdom. Mistaking Suffolk for his ethical opposite, Humphrey Duke of Gloucester, the second petitioner, who holds in his hands a writ Against the Duke of Suffolk, for enclosing the commons of Melford and identifies himself as "but a poor petitioner of our whole township" (1.3.23–4), conveys in small space the larger crimes against the commonweal that Suffolk and his cohorts have been perpetrating. The speech that Margaret delivers after tearing the supplication and dismissing these "base cullions" is particularly revealing insofar as it negatively contrasts the English habit of allowing the commons to advance such petitions with the presumed French habit of sovereign indifference and contempt:

My Lord of Suffolk, say, is this the guise,
Is this the fashions in the court of England?
Is this the government of Britain's isle,
And this the royalty of Albion's king? (1.3.43–6)

The connection established here between Suffolk's contempt for the commons and Margaret's impatience with the structures of governance in England will later help underwrite and legitimate the simultaneously populist and patriotic cast of the Lieutenant's speech. At this point it helps to establish Suffolk, and his mutually
opportunistic alliance with Margaree, as the most conspicuous source and symptom of the disordered relations that now obtain not only between ruler and ruled but within the King’s court itself.

Although in Shakespeare’s hands the story that Hall and Holinshed tell of the depredations visited on the kingdom by Suffolk and his associates is radically fore-shortened, it rises to the surface in the Lieutenant’s speech, the first half of which reads:

Now will I dam up this thy yawning mouth
For swallowing the treasure of the realm.
Thy lips that kissed the Queen shall sweep the ground;
And thou that smiledst at good Duke Humphrey’s death
Against the senseless winds shall grin in vain
Who in contempt shall hiss at thee again.
And wedded be thou to the bags of hell
For daring to affy a mighty lord
Unto the daughter of a worthless king,
Having neither subject, wealth nor diadem.
By devilish policy art thou grown great
And, like ambitious Sylla, overgorged
With gobbets of thy mother’s bleeding heart. (4.1.73–85)

As noted most recently by Ronald Knowles, “The catalogue of crimes and misdemeanours” iterated by the Lieutenant “can be documented from the chronicles, particularly in the articles presented by the commons against Suffolk” (Knowles 1999: 369), and reiterate the claims against Suffolk summarized earlier in the play by Salisbury on the heels of Gloucester’s murder (3.2.243–69). Indeed, some of the most potent phrases of the Lieutenant’s indictment are direct borrowings from Hall’s summary of the complaints formally lodged against Suffolk by the commons in parliament, such that it may be said that he, as much as Salisbury, serves as their “ven-triloquist” or mouthpiece. Motivated by their “disdain of lascivious soveraigne which the Quene with her minions, and vnprofitable consailers daily toke and vsurped vpo[n] them,” the “commonaltie,” as Hall writes,

began to make exclamacion against the Duke of Suffolke, affirming him, to be the onely cause of the deliuerie of Angeow & Mayne, the chief procurer of the death of the good duke of Gloucester, the vere occasion of the losse of Normandy, the most swallerer up and consumer of the kynges treasure, . . . the expeller fro the kyng, of all good and verreous consailors, and the bringer in and auancer of vicious persones, common enemies and apparaunt adversaries to the publique wealth: So that the duke was called in euerie mannes mouth, a traitor, a murderer, a robber of the kynges treasure, and worthy to bee put to mooste cruell punishment. (Hall 1965: 217; my emphases)

In this respect among others, the Lieutenant’s speech may be construed as the voice of the commonweal itself rising up in righteous indignation against what Hall else-
where describes as the aristocratically induced "inward grudge, and intestine division, which to all Realmes is more pestiferous and noisome, then outward warre, dayly famine, or extreme pestilence" (ibid: 219). And it bears noting that the voice the Lieutenant ventriloquizes is not that of the many-headed mob but of what had become by 1450 a parliamentary membership comprised of "municipal officers and substantial citizens," such that it might be said that "There was nothing common about the incomes or social position of Commons" (Smith 1966: 49).

The indictments delivered by Salisbury and the pirate-Lieutenant, respectively, prompt responses from Suffolk that are stridently class (or status) conscious. In the face of Salisbury's recitation, for example, Suffolk brusquely remarks, "But all the honour Salisbury hath won / Is that he was lord ambassador / Sent from a sort of tinkers to the King" (3.2.275–7), his withering phrase carrying no hint of recognition of the well-ordered citizenry arrayed against him. His response to the Lieutenant's indictment is more elaborate:

O, that I were a god to shoot forth thunder
Upon these paltry, servile, abject drudges!
Small things make base men proud: this villain here,
Being captain of a pinnace, threatens more
Than Bargulus, the strong Illyrian pirate.
Drones suck not eagles' blood, but rob beehives.
It is impossible that I should die
By such a lowly vassal as thyself.
Thy words move rage and no remorse in me. (4.1.104–12)

Suffolk's refusal to respond to the Lieutenant's indictment on any ground other than the Lieutenant's presumption not only seals his fate but leaves unanswered the charges leveled against him, while also vividly marking him as the play's (and the kingdom's) most insistent cultivator of social conflict and division. The direction those charges take in the words of the Lieutenant (I am thinking specifically of phrases like "swallowing the treasure of the realm," a clear borrowing from Hall) not only prove powerfully resonant but resonate powerfully with a long catalog of abuses Shakespeare chooses neither to stage nor refer to in any detail, but which Hall, among others, reproduces in painstaking detail (see Hall 1965: 217–18).

As a long list of authorities have noted, the historical Lord Suffolk played the role of ringleader of a group of powerfully placed individuals bent upon treating "the kynes treasure" as their private treasury, one of whom, Adam Moleyns, Bishop of Chichester, was attacked by "a mob of furious sailors and soldiers, said to number over 300 men, who on 9 January [1450] dragged him out of his lodgings to a field and killed him" (Harvey 1991: 63). This event occurred some five months before the capture and murder of Suffolk, but only about two weeks prior to an attempted uprising led by one Thomas Cheyne along the Channel coast in Kent. This failed uprising was notable on several accounts, first for its revival of "the notion, put into
effect in 1381 of addressing complaints to the king by raising the south-eastern counties into a mass demonstration converging on London”; second for the list the rebels drew up of notables “they wanted to see beheaded” that “comprised William Ais couch, bishop of Salisbury, William, duke of Suffolk, [and] James, Lord Saye”, and third for the carnivalesque cast of the proceedings, made manifest by the names chosen by the leaders to hide their identities, which included “Blewbeard,” “King of the Fairies,” “Queen of the Fairies,” and “Robin Hood” (ibid: 64–5). While there is no way to know what knowledge Shakespeare had of these events, he would know enough from his reading of Holinshed that the king’s earlier freeing of Suffolk from official restraint “so much displeased the people” that “the commons in sundrie places of the realme assembled together in great companies, and chose to them a capitaine, whom they called Blewbeard” and that the suppression of these assemblies coincided with Suffolk’s commitment to the Tower on January 29. And though he probably did not know that “the more Suffolk came under attack [in official quarters] the better the populace were liking it” and that “by late February or March the chanting in the street seems to have become positively gleeful” (Harvey 1991: 680), he would have read in Holinshed that the continuance and intensification of “the peoples furie” led directly to Suffolk’s banishment “as the abhorred tode and common noyance of the whole realme” (Holinshed 1807–8, III: 220).

My aim in bringing this material to bear in the present context is to try to account for the difference between the way Shakespeare stages the arraignment and execution of Suffolk and the way he will later stage Jack Cade’s arraignment and execution of the Lord Saye, who was closely linked to Suffolk in the collective mind of the commons and whose murder in the process of the historical Cade’s revolt was directly indebted to that linkage. Why does Shakespeare make the Lieutenant a second, more eloquent (than Salisbury) mouthpiece for the articles of complaint issued by the commons, one who directly articulates a message that Salisbury only indirectly reports? How or why does this conferral of righteousness and eloquence on the Lieutenant help legitimate actions that would presumably abridge all established orders of legal and social authority? How can the Lieutenant and Whitworth take such a charge upon themselves without being jointly linked to the Cade rising which Shakespeare begins to dramatize as soon as they leave the stage? Are we rather led to assume that the pirates are executors of the will of the commons as expressed in the legally tendered complaint against Suffolk earlier presented at court by Salisbury? And how, finally, do we assess the passages of the Lieutenant’s speech which reveal him to be an avowed partisan of the Yorkist claim? Does this cast additional credit, or discredit, on the patriotic cast of his speech and sentiments?

To help thicken my treatment of these questions, it may prove useful to return to Holinshed and to other, less obvious sources of information to see just what Shakespeare might have gleaned from the chronicles he consulted and from material that might have come to his knowledge more circuitously. While Holinshed rather plainly treats the particulars of Suffolk’s capture and death – “[H]e was encountered with a ship of warre apperteyning to the duke of Excester, constable of the Tower of
London, called the Nicholas of the Tower. The capitaine of that bark with small fight entered into the dukes ship and perceiving his person present, brought him to Dover road, and there, on the one side of a cock bote, caused his head to be striken off, and left his bodie with the head lieng there on the sands” (Holinshed 1807–8, III: 220) — his chronicle directly moralizes on Suffolk and the action taken against him. At the outset of its account of the duke’s capture, for example, the chronicle remarks that “Gods justice would not that so vnvenient a person should so escape.” And it concludes the account of Suffolk’s execution in the following manner: “This end had William de la Pole duke of Suffolk, as men judge by Gods prouidence, for that he had procured the death of that good duke Gloucester” (ibid). In both passages we have prouidence to thank for the encounter between the “vngratious” Suffolk and the pirates, no mention being made of the possible anticipation of prouidence by the Duke of Exeter, or question raised regarding the qualifications of the ship’s captain as a duly delegated executor of “Gods justice.” But what was this ship really doing in the area of Dover road? What relationship (if any) obtained between the Duke of Exeter and the ship’s captain? Are such questions of any real interest to a project that was, in Annabel Patterson’s words, “an expression of citizen consciousness” (Patterson 1994: xiii), and, hence, not prompted to dispute the actions of this peremptory agent of prouidence? Are they of any interest to Shakespeare?

A fuller account of Suffolk’s capture and murder is found in a letter written on May 5, 1450 by William Lonmor to John Paston I which states that “the master of the Nicholas had knowledge of the Duke’s coming” and that upon Suffolk’s boarding of his ship this same master greeted him with the words “Welcome, traitor” (Davis 1963: 27). Lonmor says nothing more of this master but does say something about Suffolk’s executioner that both departs from, and resonates in interesting ways with, Shakespeare’s apparent invention of the tough-talking, self-styled gentleman, Walter Whitmore: “And in the sight of all his men, [Suffolk] was drawn out of the great ship, into the boat, and there was an axe and a stock; and one of the lewedest of the ship bade him lay down his head, and he should be fair ferd with, and die on a sword; and took a rusty sword, and smote off his head within half a dozen strokes, and took away his gown of russet and his doublet of velvet mailed, and laid his body on the sands of Dover” (ibid: 27–8). With little further ado, and no further notice paid to the rather shocking testimony of a great man’s head being chopp’d at six times with a rusty sword by the “lewedest” of the ship, Lonmor moves on to remark a few pieces of news of the French wars before signing off. Apart from its graphic detailing of Suffolk’s crude execution, the most notable aspects of this account are its apparent neutrality and the cues it leaves for the elaboration of the scene we find in Shakespeare, which fastens on the Lieutenant’s treatment of Suffolk as a traitor and on Whitmore’s irreverent approach to the body and persona of this most highly positioned aristocrat.

It is worth noting here that neither Holinshed nor Lonmor ever uses the term “pirate” to identify Suffolk’s captors, and that it is only the highly status-conscious Suffolk who does so, and only after first negatively comparing the threats of a mere
"Captain of a pinnace" to those of "Bargulus, the strong Illyrian pirate" (4.1.108). As Kingsford long ago noted, "The prevalence of piracy in the narrow seas was always a difficulty for the English government in the Middle Ages" (Kingsford 1925: 79), but it was even more difficult to generalize on the character and motivations of so-called pirates themselves, much less to identify seamen by this name. As Kingsford observes, when "we speak of these early seamen as pirates, it is necessary to bear in mind that the word had a wider meaning [in its day], and was applied alike to those who were at the worst unlicensed privateers and to those whose only object was plunder" (p. 78). Kingsford adds that two representative figures of the time, "the redoubtable privateer Harry Pay of Poole" and "the rich Dartmouth merchant John Hawley," played "the parts of patriot and pirate in turn, and in spite of occasional backslidings their careers were on the whole not unworthy" (pp. 78, 84).

While considerable collateral information regarding the ship's provenance and future associations is available, more reliable knowledge of the identities of its master and the "lewd" sailor who took Suffolk's life is nonetheless wanting. As Kingsford writes:

The mystery of Suffolk's murder has never been solved. The Nicholas of the Tower, as the name shows, was a royal ship; but this would not have precluded its illicit employment by some person of influence ... Later in the year the Nicholas, under the command of John Norton, was concerned in a piratical enterprise in the company of the notorious Clays Stephen. If this John Norton may be identified with the person of the same name who had been committed to prison for his share in the piracy of the Edward of Polruan, he was perhaps released as a fit agent for unlawful violence ... The Duke of Exeter, who was Admiral and therefore in control of the Nicholas, was contracted to a daughter of Richard of York. It is conceivable, as some have suggested, that the murder was inspired by a political enemy. Or it may have been due to the same unpopularity which had been fatal to Moleyns. (Ibid: 172–3)

As we return to the scene of the crime, I would like to keep two of the possibilities outlined by Kingsford in play: that privateers could "play the part of patriot and pirate by turn" and that the assault on Suffolk was driven by, or on behalf of, York. If we add to this mix of motive and identity the material Shakespeare adds to his Lieutenant's characterization, we may conclude that the Lieutenant might well have been the pirate Suffolk claims he is, but such a pirate that Suffolk would not have previously been able to imagine: one who has risen from a former position of servility to some appreciable form of mastery; one considerably more capable than Suffolk of seeing himself as a patriotic subject of his nation, if not of his king, and capable as well of seeing himself as an armed extension of the legally assembled commons; one fueled by the same impatience and contempt for the corrupt nobility as the sailors and soldiers who murdered Suffolk's associate, Adam Moleyns; and one allied, if not officially, then surely sympathetically, with the emerging party and cause of Richard Duke of York. As the Lieutenant himself rather emotionally states towards the close of his peroration:
And now the house of York, thrust from the crown
By shameful murder of a guiltless king
And lofty, proud, encroaching tyranny,
Burns with revenging fire, whose hopeful colours
Advance our half-faced sun, striving to shine,
Under which is writ 'invisibis nubibus'.
The commons here in Kent are up in arms;
And, to conclude, reproach and beggary
Is crept into the palace of our King,
And all by thee. Away! Convey him hence. (4.1.94–103)

If all these qualities do not entirely license the action the Lieutenant bids Walter Whitmore to take against Suffolk, they add a conspicuously representative character to his motivations, and help to explain the confidence and fervor with which it is undertaken.

As opposed to Cade’s riotously disposed murder of Lord Say – a character who “[pleads] so well for his life” (4.7.99–100) and whom Shakespeare chooses both to sentimentalize and misrepresent – the capture and execution of Suffolk is largely presented as something in the order of a high-mindedly motivated public service undertaken to advance the interests and concerns of the commons, its possible sponsorship by the soon-to-become-unruly York only residually apparent towards the scene’s end. Arguably more provocative is the verbal sparring between the Lieutenant and Suffolk, on the one hand, and Whitmore and Suffolk, on the other, which deserves fuller treatment. Though the Lieutenant and Whitmore are identified as pirates and worse by Suffolk, both bitterly resent and resist their representation as mercenaries. Even before Suffolk has identified himself to his captors, Whitmore refuses to bargain with his captive, arguing that his claimed status as gentleman will not allow him to take money in place of revenge for an injury suffered:

Never yet did base dishonour blur our name
But with our sword we wiped away the blot.
Therefore, when merchant-like I sell revenge,
Broke be my sword, my arms torn and defaced
And I proclaimed a coward through the world. (4.1.38–43)

In lines like these Whitmore oddly sounds more akin to the self-styled esquire of Kent, Alexander Iden, who encounters and kills Jack Cade in his garden, than he does to “the lowest of the ship” who presumably slew Suffolk with six strokes of a rusty sword. Indeed, his rejection of the very idea that he might “merchant-like . . . sell revenge” presents him as an obvious alternative both to predatory aristocrats like Suffolk whose practice it is to plunder the “publique wealthe” and to self-regarding privateers who lack his sense of patriotism and honor. I would submit, on the basis of such evidence, that rather than overtly functioning as agents of the Duke of York or as anticipations of Jack Cade’s riotous army, Whitmore and his Lieutenant are
designed to operate both as extensions of the will of the commons and as idealized projections of the citizen consciousness that serves as something like the author-function of this play. That they may also be both more and less than this, products or symptoms of the disorder that reigns at the heart of the corrupt court and of the generalized misrule that will soon take full charge of the stage, is possibly signaled by the scene’s last lines as uttered by the gentleman charged with delivering Suffolk’s corpse to the Queen:

O barbarous and bloody spectacle!
His body will I bear unto the King.
If he revenge it not, yet will his friends;
So will the Queen, that living held him dear. (4.1.146–9)

But the oddly uncritical privileging of the Queen’s disproportionate affection for Suffolk in these lines rather place this gentleman, along with his sentiments, in the party of those that still make their home in an unholy political dispensation instead of among those who can no longer suffer the prospect of an England bled dry by Suffolk and his followers. Indeed, what would this gentleman make of the “bloody spectacle” displayed in 4.4 of the sorrowing Queen holding the unrighteous Suffolk’s head in her lap as the King looks on in dismay and their kingdom explodes in disarray around them?

In Shakespeare’s Heroical Histories (1971), David Riggs makes the following point about this play’s difference from influential predecessor plays like Tamburlaine the Great:

From a loose rendition of heroic aspiration in an exotic setting, the emphasis has shifted towards a drama of ambition and disruption that anatomizes the ambivalent status of the Elizabethan peerage. In Lawrence Stone’s analysis, a complex series of events was, by the 1590s, leading to a general failure of nerve among the aristocracy. Two familiar symptoms of that failure emerge directly from the social drama of 2 Henry VI: Suffolk’s fierce, reflexive pride in his noble blood and connections at court, and York’s desperate impulse to restore his family’s lost eminence by reckless military adventures. Just as these are indices of a more general failure to govern, the one tragic figure in the plan is a governor: Good Duke Humphrey. He can fill the administrative vacuum that results from the defection of Suffolk and York, but he is powerless to resist their determination to destroy and replace him. (Riggs 1971: 115)

As Riggs recounts, in scene after scene in the play’s first three acts the “heroic” claims of York and Suffolk are found to be not only unequal, but inimical, to the needs of subjects and citizenry, “while Duke Humphrey suggests a new type of ideal ruler, the Ciceronian governor,” who is willing to sacrifice even his own supremely erring wife for the good of the commonweal (p. 115). The weakness of this governor in the face of the machiavellian maneuvering of York, Suffolk, and the Cardinal, rather than reducing his dramatic status in the play, enhances it at the expense of characters whose
actions seem opportunistically designed to throw the established social order into an “anarchic” state (p. 117). Scenes like those that focus on the intrigues hatched by Suffolk and the Cardinal to bring down the Lord Protector and his wife and on York’s efforts to solicit support for his claim to the throne “serve to discount the value of ancestral name and martial fortitude, while laying stress on the importance of [virtues like] prudence [and] justice” which are clearly housed in Duke Humphrey, whose “judicial rectitude and expertise is established in a series of trial scenes” (p. 115). While the Duke himself is, of course, as much of an aristocrat as are his enemies, he is repeatedly represented in these scenes as the only remaining source of balance and fairness in the kingdom and as friend, if not always defender, of the common people. Indeed, the immediacy and fervor with which the commons bring their case against Suffolk on the heels of the discovery of Duke Humphrey’s assassination in 3.2 – “Down with Suffolk! Down with Suffolk!” they are heard crying from offstage – demonstrates with unusual force the extent to which Shakespeare has them identify Duke Humphrey with their concerns.

Riggs nonetheless claims that removal “from the scene [of] the one figure who embodies a thoroughgoing criticism of their personal aspirations” allows Suffolk and York to “enjoy a renewed vitality in the latter half of the play, as the social commentary, without Gloucester to interpret it, recedes into the background, and impinges less directly on the values of the two aristocrats” (p. 116). He adds that “the critique of Suffolk and York that is sustained by Gloucester never begins to generate a vision of the aristocratic life which convincingly supplants their own” (pp. 117–18). While York certainly does come to enjoy what Riggs terms “a renewed vitality” (however misdirected), Suffolk merely becomes more inexorably himself, stiffly insisting on his superannuated privileges and prerogatives to the end. Both, in any event, continue to model already discredited aristocratic values of pride and presumption while the “social commentary,” which Riggs finds receding into the background, becomes instead translated into the domain of the protesting commons, achieving practical form in the exile of Suffolk and in his execution by the pirates before being retranslated into the carnivalesque idiom of collective misrule by Jack Cade and his “ragged multitude” (see Longstaffe 1998). Lacking any other qualified aristocratic aspirant, the space that Duke Humphrey once occupied becomes dramatically filled by the voice of the commons itself as reproduced by Salisbury, who functions as something like a bridge between the silenced Duke and the commons:

Dread lord, the commons send you word by me,  
Unless Lord Suffolk straight be done to death,  
Or banished fair England’s territories,  
They will by violence tear him from your palace  
And torture him with grievous lingering death.  
They say, by him the good Duke Humphrey died;  
They say, in him they fear your highness’ death;  
And mere instinct of love and loyalty,
Free from a stubborn opposite intent,
As being thought to contradict your liking,
Make them thus forward in his banishment. (3.2.243–53)

In her provocative commentary on this moment Annabel Patterson sees Salisbury functioning here as “the temporary substitute” for Duke Humphrey and, consequently, as “the people’s spokesman.” Patterson adds that “The rhetorical ‘They say’ formula identifies Salisbury as ventriloquist, while the dramatic situation ensures his recognition as the people’s sincere advocate,” and concludes that “This protest is . . . both morally authoritative and, as petitioning from strength, effective” and, moreover, that it conveys Shakespeare’s own “conditional approval of the role of popular protest in the play – conditional, that is, on rightful motives, a basic loyalty to the crown, and a proper spokesman” (Patterson 1989: 48).

These are large claims that it is not my purpose to examine or contest in great detail. Suffice it to say that I have as much trouble with Patterson’s outright identification of Humphrey as “the people’s spokesman” as I do with making Salisbury, through what Patterson calls his “formal act of ventriloquism” (p. 47), so complicit with the voice of the commons which he reproduces that he loses his highly differentiated place outside it. After all, what persuades the King to banish Suffolk is less Salisbury’s ventriloquy than the far more direct threat from without that Suffolk will be taken by force if an “answer from the King” is not forthcoming (3.2.278). This is, of course, not to understate the powerful message sent by the commons through the medium of Salisbury. But what I prefer to take from Patterson are two other ideas, the first being that what might be called the Duke Humphrey alternative does not entirely dissolve with his death, leaving (as Riggs argues) either Suffolk or York in temporary command of what counts as noble or aristocratic; the second involving her notion of what conditions might inform the legitimation “of popular protest in the play,” those conditions being “rightful motives, a basic loyalty to the crown, and a proper spokesman.”

The fact is that until the emergence of Henry Tudor in the closing movement of Richard III, there are very few influential representatives of the aristocracy in this or the remaining plays of the first tetralogy who are free for very long of opportunistic motives that set them at odds with the common good. As in Marlowe’s Edward II, the contentious barons are rather the source and symptoms of disorder than in any significant degree its potential solution or remedy, and the four plays that dramatize their misdeeds collectively “offer a searing indictment of aristocratic factionalism” (Hattaway 1988: 16). The only characters who can be said to escape the “sickness” of this society, and to see that sickness for what it is, namely, blind ambition, are those who have no real stake in the intra-aristocratic struggle for dominance or mastery. And these characters tend, for the most part, to belong to the citizen or “middling” class (see Leinwand 1993 on the “middling sort”).

A better case for the legitimation “of popular protest in the play” can be made on behalf of the pirates who, in their arraignment and execution of Suffolk, not only see
themselves acting in direct response to the murder of Duke Humphrey but also func-
tion, for Holinshed at least, as executors of “Gods justice.” Whether they also func-
tioned in the same manner for Shakespeare remains an open question, but as Richard
Strier has noted, it is not far-fetched to assume that Shakespeare was sufficiently
responsive to a sixteenth-century discourse on civil disobedience to entertain the
legitimacy of resistance to a corrupted authority. Strier largely isolates Shakespeare’s
responsiveness to the more provocative writings of John Ponet, Christopher Goodman,
and George Buchanan to the period that begins with his composition of Hamlet and
in particular application to King Lear, which he sees as “the culmination of a de-
velopment in Shakespeare’s political thinking from a focus on the problem of order to a
focus on the problem of corrupt (and corruption-inducing) authority” (Strier 1995:
176). But in light of my own effort to connect Shakespeare’s construction of disorder
in 2 Henry VI to the “problem of corrupt (and corruption-inducing) authority,” and
the focus of the play itself on popular protest, it is worth wondering to what extent
Shakespeare was indebted to this discourse in shaping the assured and righteously
indignant approach of his pirates to Suffolk.

Strier, for example, quotes Ponet to the effect that “he is a good cizezin that clothe
none evil,” but “he is a better that letteth [prevents] others, that they shal not doe
hurt nor uniustice” and quotes Goodman to the effect that “‘comon and simple people’
[who] think that they must be obedient ‘because their doings are counted tumults
and rebellion’ wrongly ‘suffer themselves like brute beasts rather than reasonable
creatures, to be led and drawn where so ever their Princes commandments have
called’” (Strier 1995: 173). And finally, and most suggestively, he speaks of Buchanan
joining “what he sees as a scriptural injunction ‘to cut off wickedness and wicked
men, without any exception of a rank or degree’ to a classical conception of tyrannicide:
’a Tyrant is a publick Enemy, with whom all good men have a perpetual warfare’”
(p. 175). Although Strier fails to demonstrate that Shakespeare had any direct
knowledge of these writings, or that they impinged directly on his staging of Corn-
wall’s servant’s intervention in the blinding of Gloucester which Strier discusses in
detail in Resistant Structures (1995), he makes a powerful case for the centrality of the
servant’s resistance to his master in this scene, and for the legitimacy of that servant’s
claim to be doing his master “better service” than he has ever done him before by
intervening:

Hold your hand, my lord!
I have served you ever since I was a child;
But better service have I never done you
Than now to bid you hold.
(King Lear, 3.7.75–8)

Strier grounds his reading of the servant’s “treasonous” but licensed resistance on the
“extrajudicial, purely private nature” of Cornwall’s own actions for which “there is no
legal or political point” and claims, further, that “the presentation of a world ‘upside
down' is made literal in the procedure Cornwall announces for the mutilation of Gloucester: 'Upon these eyes of thine, Ile set my foote' (Strier 1995: 192). He goes on to contend that while the "better service" the servant attempts to supply is arguably equally "outrageous" and "unthinkable," Shakespeare "is presenting [this] most radical possible sociopolitical act in a way that can only be interpreted as calling for the audience's approval" (pp. 192–3):

The servant is obviously not a "public person," and his action is one of militant interference; it transcends and does not even involve nonobedience, since it is not clear that he has been directly commanded to do anything . . . The scene is that which Buchanan describes and endorses: "[when] from amongst the lowest of the people some very mean, and obscure" person is stirred up to revenge Tyrannical Pride. (Ibid: 193)

Although the capture and extrajudicial execution of Suffolk by pirates may seem to be a very different kind of act, and occurs in a play written at a stage in Shakespeare's career when his politics were allegedly more "conservative" (ibid: 192, n. 74), its status as an act of "militant interference" undertaken "to revenge Tyrannical Pride" not only makes it perfectly consistent with Strier's assessment of the higher legitimacy of the servant's revolt, but suggests also that Shakespeare's politics may have been at this time less conservative than Strier imagines.

Strier focuses his backward reference to (and judgment of) 2 Henry VI on Greenblatt's (1990) discussion of "Shakespeare's depiction of the death of Jack Cade," a scene whose politics is (as I have elsewhere argued) considerably more complicated than Greenblatt allows, and not on Suffolk's fateful encounter with the pirates. Had he taken this scene into account, Strier might well have had to grapple, as I will in closing, with the difficulty of locating there the Shakespearean point of view. What, in my opinion, most differentiates the actions of the pirates from Cade's revolt, and links them so closely with Cornwall's servant's resistance to (and murder of) his master, is their own obvious "calling for" audience approval, and privileging of a point of view that both speaks to, and well of, the values of justice and fair play of "the literate, industrious, [and otherwise] law-abiding citizen class." Although neither Cornwall's servant nor Suffolk's pirates are themselves members of this class, their actions operate in direct resistance to the kind of corrupt and corruption-inducing authority which, if allowed to flourish, would constitute a direct threat to the well-being of subject and citizen alike. For their part, Suffolk and Cornwall are both represented as dramatic embodiments of "Tyrannical Pride," inflexibly and unregenerately bent on satisfying their own ambitions and desires at the expense of the commonweal. Although their being brought to justice summons up the shock and indignation of their associates in crime – "O barbarous spectacle," says the first gentleman in 2 Henry VI; "A peasant stand up thus?," exclaims Regan in King Lear – that shock is hardly meant to resonate as strongly in an audience presumably more shocked by the actions that have brought them to this pitch, the murder of the good Duke Humphrey, on the one hand, the blinding of Gloucester on the other.
Are these actions then as “radical” as Strier suggests? Only, I would imagine, to the class that suffers them, not to the one (or ones) whose survival and well-being are premised on their approval. What conceivably constitutes a more truly radical gesture, from both the citizen and Shakespearean point of view, would be something like Jack Cade’s arraignment and execution of Lord Say, an act undertaken by a figure who, in Annabel Patterson’s words, “fails every test for the proper popular spokesman” (Patterson 1989: 48), against a character who, as radically transmuted by Shakespeare, appears not only to be continuing to do the good work of the late Duke Humphrey, but also to have thrown his lot in with the citizens of London themselves, with whose cause he is dramatically associated and identified. Yet given the disproportion between the isolated excesses of a short-lived popular rising and the horrors unleashed by a clash of aristocratic ambitions that would generate thirty-five years of civil war and wholesale disorder, what hard-working citizen or householder could fail to agree that “it was / never merry world in England since gentlemen came up” (4.2.7–8).

NOTES

1 I add this gloss on Suffolk’s murder from Edward Hall’s 1548 Chronicle to qualify Wilson’s rather glib characterization of the Chronicle as a mere “glorification of the ruling dynasty” (Wilson 1993: 27). Indeed, in the passage from which the quote is drawn Hall shows a marked contempt for the presumptions of the ruling elite, suggesting that Suffolk might have kept his head on his shoulders “if he had remembered the counsel of the popinjay, saying: when thou thinkest thy self in courte moste surest, then is it high tyme to get thee home to rest” (Hall 1965: 207).


3 I discuss the social implications of Tamburlaine’s dramatic assault on Cosroe and the Tamburlainean orientation of Cade’s rising and Suffolk’s encounter with the pirates in Marlowe, Shakespeare, and the Economy of Theatrical Experience (1991: 77–80, 86–8). In those pages I claim that “2 Henry VI is virtually saturated in Tamburlainean statements of proud self-assertion” (p. 86), and that “at the time of 2 Henry VI’s composition” Shakespeare “was too immersed in the Tamburlaine phenomenon to sustain a consistent critical detachment” (p. 88). As the rest of this essay should make clear, I now believe that Shakespeare was capable of sustaining “critical detachment” in his characterizations of figures like Suffolk and Richard Duke of York. All quotations from 2 Henry VI are drawn from the Arden edition, third series, edited by Ronald Knowles.

4 See Patterson (1989: 48–9) on “Salisbury as ventriloquist” (and below).

5 I have been sufficiently tutored by Annabel Patterson’s Reading Holinshed’s Chronicles (1994) to recognize that the “Holinshed” I employ here to establish the point of view of the chronicler in question is not, strictly speaking, identifiable with the historical Raphael Holinshed but with “a giant interdisciplinary project” that was “a collaboration . . . between freelance antiquarians, lesser clergymen, members of Parliament with legal training, minor poets, publishers, and booksellers” (pp. vii–viii).

6 Norman Davis states that Lonnor was “a trusted agent of the Pastons,” probably a blood relative, and also a soon-to-be-avowed Yorkist of some influence in that circle (Davis 1963: 26–7). Lonnor’s “neutral” tone may convey his approval of the actions taken against Suffolk who had allegedly “imposed a reign of terror [in the Pastons’s home county of Norfolk], using forcible methods to
extort money and gain possession of land, yet contriving to deny the victims the means of lawful redress" (Storey 1966: 54). Storey adds that "In 1448, Margaret Paston had written that it was being said in Norfolk that no man dared to do or say anything which might offend the duke and his clients, and that those who had been so foolhardy would 'sore repent them'" (ibid). In four letters written in 1448–9 Margaret Paston vividly describes these and other circumstances, including living in a state of siege in her own house in order to defend her family from the threats of Suffolk's close associate, Lord Moleyns (see Davis 1963: 10–21).

The fact that it actually took three years in historical time for the commons to bring their case against Suffolk indicates how invested Shakespeare was in making Suffolk appear the chief source and symptom of aristocratic disorder, and in linking "the good Duke Humphrey" to the cause and concerns of the commons.

The three texts in question are Ponen's *A Short Treatise of Politicks Power* (1556), Goodman's *How Superior Powers Ought to be Obeyed* (1558), and Buchanan's *De Jure Regni apud Scotos, or, A Dialogue, concerning the due Privilege of Government in the Kingdom of Scotland* (1579) London, 1689.


Shakespeare goes to great pains to place the historically predatory Say in direct dramatic linkage to the good Duke Humphrey by giving him lines like the following: "Tell me, wherein have I offended most? / Have I affected wealth or honour? Speak. / Are my chests filled up with extorted gold? / Is my apparel sumptuous to behold?" (4.7.90–3).

I am, of course, well aware that many London citizens (Shakespeare included) made it their life's ambition to achieve the honorific title of gentleman and that, as William Harrison long ago observed of his contemporaries, merchants "often change estate with gentlemen as gentlemen do with them, by mutual conversion of one into the other" (Harrison 1968: 271). What I seek to bring into focus here is less the disturbances produced by social mobility than the larger social and political disarray generated by the intermecine conflicts of exclusively self-regarding aristocrats. In addition to Laslett's chapter on "social divisions and power relations" (Laslett 1971: 23–54), see Rapaport (1989: 285–376) on "patterns of mobility" in early modern England and, of course, Stone (1969) on "the crisis of the aristocracy."

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