

Demotic Voices and Popular Complaint in Elizabethan and Early Stuart England

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Abstract

Though Shakespeare's creations are said to be infused by the structures of popular culture, it remains uncertain how closely his characters echo the phrases of everyday speech. The text alone cannot tell us how Shakespeare's contemporaries talked, or what commoners said of each other or of those in authority above them. Fortunately alternative and complementary sources exist that yield informal and unscripted utterances by ordinary men and women in Elizabethan and early Stuart England. Court reports, depositions, and examinations by magistrates preserve versions of scandalous and transgressive words that were never intended to be recorded. These include the gendered language of insult, expressions of social complaint, and verbal challenges to royal authority. Despite problems of mediation, ventriloquism, and scribal processing, of the sort familiar to literary scholars, these archival traces reveal a vigorous vein of plebeian speech, that can be compared to the 'speeches' of Shakespeare and his contemporaries. Abundant examples illuminate the popular discursive culture of Shakespeare's age and environment, and suggest the possibility of building towards a new corpus of demotic and non-literary text that can be compared to the language of the plays.

Keywords: Defamation, Insults, Language, Sedition, Shakespeare.

1. *Voices*

More than two decades ago, in her study of *Shakespeare and the Popular Voice*, Annabel Patterson wondered how closely the language of Jack Cade's rebels in *Henry VI part II* reflected 'the voice of popular protest' in Shakespeare's own age. When the rebel John Holland avows, for example, 'it was never merry world in England since gentlemen came up' (*2 Henry VI*, IV.ii, 8-9) does this character from the late middle ages speak the language of the troubled 1590s? And how, in any case, would we know? We might applaud or disparage the leveling sentiment, and puzzle over Shakespeare's relation to it, but the play itself cannot tell us whether we are listening to a 'popular' or 'plebeian' voice, or this was how real rebels talked. As Patterson shrewdly reminds us, we encounter 'a double ventriloquism: the voice of popular protest speaking through Cade (despite his insincerity) speaking through Shakespeare's play text' (1989, 50). Refracted through Marxist, materialist or historicist eyes, and recalled for today's international, transdisciplinary, and post-ironic conversation, the



ventriloquism now seems all the more layered and artful, in my report to you of Patterson's reading of Shakespeare on Cade. The early modern 'voice of popular protest' is faint and fading, if present at all, in this literary, theatrical, and now academic entertainment.

Though the principal characters of Shakespeare's plays are royal, noble, aristocratic or gentle, with voices derived from the English elite, they are attended, amused, and sometimes threatened by humbler sorts who may be imagined to speak with the cadence and vocabulary of the village or the street. Through them, we might suppose, we might hear the voices of the common people, and perhaps too the sympathies and attitudes of the playwright who came from their class. It is, to be sure, a game of mirrors and echoes, of buried hints and muted whispers, since Shakespeare, like fellow dramatists, was an artist, a writer of lines. It was the artist's task to conjure character and set up scenes, and give his players convincing dialogue; but it was not necessarily his business to transcribe or capture the speech of his neighbours and contemporaries. There was noise all around him, but it was filtered, processed and re-worked before it appeared in Shakespeare's plays. Tuning in to that noise, if such were possible, would illuminate the discursive environment of early modern England, and might also indicate how playwrights made use of it.

My purpose here is not to engage in Shakespeare criticism, but rather to offer a historian's guide to selected utterances from the era in which Shakespeare lived. I build on the work of other historians who have scoured the archives for traces of spoken discourse, and have sometimes linked their findings to dramatic literature. Bernard Capp, for example, has argued that 'the sharp wit and repartee of Shakespeare's comic heroines reflected and sanitized countless exchanges in the street between more ordinary folk, and represented the apotheosis of an oral culture that would have been familiar to all'. We should not be surprised by 'the verbal agility of the semi-literate', he advises, because 'sexual banter, the jocular or waspish exchange of taunts, puns, and innuendo, was part of everyday life' (2003, 198).¹ Recovering that banter, and other modes of oral expression, offers opportunities for cultural studies, legal history, historical ethnography, and perhaps too for appreciation of Shakespeare.

Historians and literary scholars share an interest in the verbal expressions in Shakespeare's drama, and in the social, cultural and linguistic influences that may have shaped them. Our attention shifts from inside to outside the play, from canonical text to historical environment – both areas of almost limitless endeavor. It is well worth asking to what degree the playwright was articulating, inhabiting, or criticizing contemporary cultural domains, but the project is hampered by problems of theory and evidence. On the one hand, our categories are compromised, since such concepts as 'popular culture' and 'the common or plebian voice' are reified, historicized, and culturally-constructed.² On the other, the oral expressions of Elizabethan and early

Stuart England are mostly irrecoverable, except through textual mediation of selected fragments. We may look to the drama to imagine how popular speech might have sounded, and seek out historical sources to find what people allegedly said, but independent confirmation of Shakespeare's demotic receptivity remains elusive.

It is commonly implied, and sometimes asserted, that Shakespeare had his ear to the ground and his nose to the wind, and was 'extraordinarily responsive' as he 'tapped into popular verbal culture'. Shakespeare, more than any of his contemporaries, is renowned for rendering, or representing theatrically, the common or plebian voice of his age. His creations are said to be infused by 'the structures of popular culture' and 'irrigated by the diction of common life'. Critics from Samuel Johnson to Neil Rhodes have registered and applauded the Shakespearian popular voice and its borrowings from 'popular idiom'. His works, by one count, include 4684 proverbs, proverbial allusions, and 'sayings' from the milieu in which he lived.³ An influential alternative line of analysis insists, however, that, far from reproducing or representing popular culture, Shakespeare and his literary contemporaries were in fact creating or producing a simulacrum that served artistic, social and ideological purposes. Their depiction or evocation of the 'popular' in texts, works, or writings is 'detached from lived interactions with members of the lower sorts', while their borrowings of speech and voice involve blurring, shading, and renegotiation. Mary Ellen Lamb alerts us to the 'simultaneous affiliation and alienation within these texts', and similar warnings are applicable to historical documentary sources (2006, 5, 230; see also Sherstow 1998).

2. *Dangerous Talk*

Social historians are concerned with the conditions, experiences, relationships and interactions of the past. We can't go back with notebooks or recorders, or eavesdrop directly on lost conversations, but we do have sources that provide access of a sort to long-ago verbal expressions. Everyday spoken language, for the most part, was lost to the wind, but certain circumstances fostered its recall, re-iteration, re-telling, and scribal recording, if only in part. As the Romans recognized, *vox audita perit, litera scripta manet*. Certain types of legal evidence, court reports, depositions, and examinations by magistrates capture, if not verbatim at least indicatively, a version of what people were alleged to have said. Fragments of oral discourse were remembered and reproduced, and entered into documentary records. The archives of judicial process, both secular and ecclesiastical, yield redactions, quotations and representations of popular parlance, especially expressions that were actionable, contentious, or of interest to the law. Even allowing for scribal interventions, legal formulae, misrepresentation, and lapses of memory – the 'fiction in the archives' syndrome (Davis 1987; Goldberg 1997; Gaskill 1998) – they leave us fragments of

exchanges, echoes of altercations, and reports of words spoken in carelessness, in anger, or in drink. The evidence is often compromised, frequently opaque, and occasionally stunning. Anyone interested in the ideas and opinions of ordinary people, as well as the responses of the elite, does well to pay attention to this hidden transcript (Cressy 2010, x).⁴

One does not need familiarity with ‘speech act theory’ to know that words have consequences, that spoken utterance can have situation-altering effects.⁵ Though ‘words are but wind’ was a popular saying,⁶ it was well recognized in Shakespeare’s day that speech could hurt as hard as sticks and stones. Malicious tongues caused dispute between neighbors, seditious words endangered the state, and scandalous and impious language disturbed the community of Christians. ‘It would make a man’s heart to bleed’, wrote William Perkins in 1593, ‘to hear ... how swearing, blaspheming, cursed speaking, railing, slandering, chiding, quarrelling, contending, jesting, mocking, flattering, lying, dissembling, vain and idle talking, overflow in all places’, to ‘lamentable and fearful’ effect (1638, sig. A2). It was a standard trope of moral reformers that common people commonly abused themselves through failure to govern their tongues. Loose conversation overflowed ‘at ordinaries and common tables’, as well as ‘bowling-greens and alleys, alehouses, tobacco-shops, highways and water passages’, and other venues where ‘makebates and tattling gossips’ gathered.⁷

Three distinct genres of demotic speech resonate through the archival record. We hear traces of neighbors insulting or slinging defamatory remarks against each other; railing voices raised in anger against established authority; and reckless subjects expressing treasonable or seditious sentiments against the crown. Fragments of casual banter and venomous rants appear in the records, as well as snippets of dialogue. Scandalous, offensive, and unseemly expressions by one party are sometimes offset by reports of the temperate or emollient remarks of another, such as ‘say not so’, or ‘heaven forfend’. Representations of these exchanges survive because their participants became enmeshed in the processes of law. Taken together, they bring us closer than any other evidence to the early modern popular voice.

Interpreting these fragments requires, of course, the cautions and caveats of critical scholarship. We need to beware of their formulaic quality, their fictional elements, their speakers’ discursive strategies, and the distortions of scribal processing. Even extempore speech could be artful and evocative, shaped by popular sayings or influenced by popular texts. Judicial examinations were oral proceedings (like plays?) but they generated reams of paper. They followed a script, not word for word but nonetheless guided by protocols of custom and law. The words they focused on could shape outcomes, determine guilt, or secure conviction. Detached from their original conversational context, and introduced as ‘evidence’, the fruits of fleeting utterance became fixed for subsequent scrutiny.

Most of these words were recalled or recited before magistrates of the gentle or armorial class, and taken down by literate clerks. The speakers themselves were mostly humbler folk in unfamiliar roles, as plaintiffs, deponents, examiners, or witnesses. Some of them were lying, or misremembering, or using the occasion to settle other scores. Some were intimidated or tongue-tied; others gave hostile, malicious, or contradictory testimony. None of the words were natural, unprocessed, or completely authentic, but then again, what is? The layers of mediation and ventriloquism in these records are at least as complex as those pertaining to the stage, and no less worthy of scrutiny.

3. *Insults*

Historians of defamation, slander, sexual honor and social reputation have made us familiar with the language of insult, so only a cursory review is needed here.⁸ The evidence is abundant in both secular and ecclesiastical courts, and its general features are well known. At issue was the damage done to a person's reputation or social standing, and the remedy or reparation deserved.

Both men and women suffered sexual defamation, but the language used against them was heavily gendered. Hundreds of cases involved the words 'whore', 'harlot', 'jade', or 'quean', usually directed at a woman, though the speaker could be male or female. 'Drab', 'slut', 'strumpet', or 'baggage' rang the changes, with such damaging adjectives as 'mangy', 'maggoty', 'lousy', 'pockey', or 'shitten'. Typical Elizabethan cases had someone saying, 'you are a damned bitch, a whore, a pocky whore', or telling a married woman who behaved like a prostitute, 'a cart is too good for thee' (Gowing 1996; Burn 1775, vol. II, 116-117). 'Whore, common whore, and rotten whore', shouted John Wall of Hereford at a female neighbor.⁹ 'Mistress stinks, mistress fart ... mistress jakes, mistress tosspot and mistress drunkensoul', taunted one Wiltshire woman or another in 1586. Similar epithets, such as 'brazen-faced quean, hacking jade, filthy bawd, and hot tailed whore', were strung together in chains of verbal sexual abuse (Ingram 1987, 300). A Middlesex man in 1608, called the local vicar's wife 'quean and drab' after she 'called him a knave' and spat in his face.¹⁰ 'What a carrion whore this is', said one Sussex woman of another, with venom that could be imagined on stage (Capp 2003, 187). 'Arrant whore', 'brazen whore', 'scurvy drab', or imputations of the pox heated the dialog and intensified the message.

Whereas a woman might be defamed for her sexual incontinency, as 'harlot', 'whore' or 'quean', a man was more likely to be attacked for his character, as 'rogue', 'rascal', 'varlet', 'villain', 'churl', or 'knave', often preceded by the adjectives 'base', 'false' or 'forsworn'. These words, along with 'fool' and 'dog', imputed inferior status, untrustworthiness, or petty criminality. 'Thou art a false deceitful knave and I will prove thee a false deceitful knave, thou art a rogue and worthy to be set on the pillory', said one male Elizabethan to

another in 1577. But a sexualized vocabulary of abuse also embroiled men, through such epithets as 'whoreson', 'whoremonger', and 'harlot monger' for alleged sexual predators, and 'cuckold' or 'wittol' for victims of another man's predation. 'Thou art a bawdy knave, old cuckoldy knave, whoreson churl', accused a woman in Cambridge (Capp 2003, 258). 'You are an old whoring rogue and a bastard-getting old rogue', said one man in Norfolk to another (Hale 1847, 14, 27, 68, 99, 208, 245). When Elizabeth Knowles called Richard Ingram of York 'whoremaster, whoremonger harlot' in 1593 his lawyers argued 'that by reason of the utterance of these defamatory words, the status, good fame and reputation of [the said Richard] are greatly and grievously injured and lessened'. The words were defamatory, and therefore actionable, because they damaged the victim's social and moral standing, and thereby his livelihood, which is why they survive in the record (Helmholz 1985, 18).

Court records sometimes render both sides of an argument in which neighbors attempted to mock, outmatch, outshout, or withstand each other. It takes little imagination to reconstruct these unstaged dramatic scenes. In 1611, for example, two fellows of Pembroke Hall, Cambridge, both distinguished clerics, fell into a shouting match over slights one perceived to have been done him by the other. 'Stiff clown', 'base fawning fellow', 'back-biter', and 'base rascal', were among the insults Theophilus Field rained on Alexander Read, who told Field in turn that he was 'base and contemptible'.¹¹ On another occasion John Holt of Hereford, of the same occupation as Shakespeare's father, 'reviled and mewed' at another glover's wife, 'calling her filthy sot and a spawn of a bastard'. When the woman's husband called on the speaker 'to bridle his tongue', Holt called him 'knave' and said 'he did not care a fart or a turd for him, nor did not care for no man or no man in England' (Herefordshire Record Office, BG 11/5/35). More determined deprecators went beyond impromptu speech to elaborate, enact, or even set their ill feelings in verse, charivari, skimmingtons, rough ridings and libelous verse. One woman at Salisbury in 1614 even erected a stage on two hogsheads in her backyard and mounted a play to deride the adulterous affairs of her neighbors (Fox 1994; Croft 1995; Bellany 2001; McRae 2004; Cressy 2010, 33-37).¹²

It is clear from the archives that oral culture was rich in insults. Defamatory speech could be virulent and vicious, deployed with needling and penetrating effect. But the epithets and exchanges of everyday life seem pale beside the more extravagant cursing of some of Shakespeare's characters. When Prince Hall calls Falstaff, 'thou whoreson, obscene, grease tallow catch ... thou whoreson impudent embossed rascal'; and when Doll Tearsheet curses Falstaff, 'a pox damn you, you muddy rascal', and scorns Pistol as 'scurvy companion ... poor, base, rascally, cheating, lack-linen mate, away you mouldy rogue', the words have more cadence and flourish than those of the ordinary alehouse (*1 Henry IV*, 2.4, 227-228, 3.3, 156-157; *2 Henry IV*, 2.4, 39, 123-125). When Petruchio addresses Grumio, 'you whoreson malt-horse drudge'; and when

Antipholus berates Dromio, 'thou whoreson senseless villain', the contempt of superiors for inferiors is almost extravagantly excessive, the verbal equivalent of a whipping (*The Taming of the Shrew*, 4.1, 129; *The Comedy of Errors*, 4.4, 24). 'You whoreson dog, you slave, you cur', shouts Lear at the hapless Oswald; and the disguised Duke of Kent calls the same unfortunate character 'knave ... rascal ... rogue ... and varlet' (*King Lear*, 1.4, 81, 2.2, 15-18) in a powerful cascade of abuse. Words like these recur in hundreds of court records, but rarely with Shakespeare's dramatic, comedic, or character-making effect. Perhaps both playwright and public were learning to curse.

A special sub-set of insults flowed from the mouth of clergymen, and these were more colorful and inventive than those of lay commoners. Encompassing much of the religious spectrum, from Calvinist puritan to Arminian ceremonialists, they erupted when university-trained clerics lashed out at their sluggish and plebeian congregations. The reverend Thomas Geary of Bedingfield, Suffolk, for example, railed at his people as 'sowded pigs, bursten rams and speckled frogs'. Another Suffolk minister, Robert Shepherd of Hepworth, berated his congregation as 'black mouthed hell hounds, limbs of the devil, fire brands of hell, plow joggers, bawling dogs, weaverly jacks, and church robbers, affirming that if he could term them worse he would'. Edward Layfield of All Saints, Barking, lashed out at his parishioners as 'black toads, spotted toads, and venomous toads, like Jack Straw and Wat Tyler', when some of them protested his liturgical innovations. Other enraged clergymen called their parishioners 'base', 'greasy', or 'saucy fellows', 'scurvy companions ... reprobates ... coxcombs ... giddy headed fellows', or likened them to lowly beasts. Clearly failing in their pastoral duties, and short on charity and forbearance, these clerics deployed a vocabulary of denigration more inventive, more learned, and sometimes more vicious than that of ordinary countrymen. Their parlance was, perhaps, closer to that of the dramatists, whose social origins and linguistic competence many of them shared (Cressy 2000, 156, 157).

4. *Social Anger*

We have already heard from the glover John Holt who 'did not care a fart or a turd ... for no man or no man in England' (Herefordshire Record Office, BG 11/5/35). Expressions of this sort were common, and fall into two categories. First were leveling remarks or ventings of anger against the wealth and privilege of the elite, reflections of class hostility. The second were diatribes against authority of all sorts, almost antinomian calls for the world itself to fall by the ears.

A deep vein of social resentment connected the peasant revolts of the middle ages to the strains of the Tudor era. 'There are too many gentlemen in England by five hundred', said one Norfolk commoner in the mid-sixteenth century. 'If it pleased the king to make him hangman ... he could find it in

his heart to hang a great many of them', said another. 'As sheep and lambs are a prey to the wolf or lion, so are the poor men to the rich', opined William Cowper of Norwich. 'The false knaves are the rich men', agreed his neighbor George Smyth (Rye, ed., 1905, 18, 22, 26, 28). 'There would never be merry world before there was a new alteration', declared the tailor John Massey in 1592, 'and as for my peck of malt, set the kettle on fire'. 'If the queen was once dead, we should have land cheap enough, and a merry world', avowed the yeoman George London in 1594, 'but he wished he might be dead first' (Cockburn, ed., 1979, 336, 355). Like Shakespeare's John Holland, for whom 'It was never merry world in England since gentlemen came up', a chorus of commoners complained of social inequities in somewhat similar terms.

Fantasies of redistributive revolt continued to agitate Elizabethan conversations. 'It is time they were up; it will never be merry till they be up; or by God's blood, if they were up, I would pull the skin over some of their ears', said the Surrey laborer Roger East in 1588, evoking earlier threats of peasant commotion. Thomas Delman, a clothier from Kent, 'did hope to see the rich churls pulled out of their houses, and to see them together by the ears in England before Candlemas next', so the assize court heard in 1595. The laborer Henry Daniel declaimed similarly in 1598, 'that he hoped to see such war in this realm to afflict the rich men of this country, to requisite the hardness of their hearts towards the poor'. 'There was such sassing and oppressing one another that he could not live any longer', declared the weaver James Hearnden in 1601, and he prophesied 'that it would never be merry world amongst us until we go altogether by the ears and shift stakes' with the rich men (Cockburn, ed., 1975a, 118; 1980a, 137; 1980b, 406). Shakespeare too writes of conflict 'by the ears', and of a lost 'merry world', in dialogue shaded by popular parlance.¹³

Other social complaints invoked the power of England's enemies to bring about change. At the height of Elizabeth's war with Spain in 1596 the Hertfordshire brick-burner John Feer expressed his wish 'that all the Spaniards of Spain were landed here in England to pull out the boors and churls by the ears'. 'It is no matter if the Spaniards were come, and I would they were come, for the people here be all naught; a plague of God light upon them all', cursed a Kentish laborer the same year. Voicing similar unpatriotic thoughts, the Surrey yeoman William Whiting declared 'that there were better laws and justice in Spain than in England ... and that the charity of Spain was greater and better than is here in England ... and if the time should fall out now as it did in times past, there would be as many turn-coated now as was then' (Cockburn, ed., 1975a, 118; 1980a, 137; 1980b, 406). Some of these speakers were religious conservatives who wished for the return of Catholicism, though their seditious sentiments associated them with social rebels.

A vigorous vein of plebeian speech was marked by bloody-mindedness, an almost-nihilistic condemnation of hierarchy and power. It crudely rejected

the protocols of deference and respect for authority enjoined by mainstream patriarchalism. Commoners were supposed to tip their caps and guard their tongues, but hundreds gave vent to an anarchic and dismissive anger. 'I care not for king nor queen', said the Sussex laborer Edward Smith in 1583. 'I care not a turd for the queen nor her precepts', said the wife of a Kentish husbandman in 1599. 'A turd for the queen', said one London yeoman in 1602; 'a pox and a vengeance' on all authorities, said another (Cockburn, ed., 1975b, 182; 1980b, 445; Jefferson, ed., 1886, 283-284). Though most of the queen's loving subjects no doubt offered dutiful acclaim, the evidence provides examples of some who did not.

It hardly mattered which monarch was in power. 'By God, I do not care a turd neither for the king nor his laws', said the Essex husbandman Henry Collyn at the beginning of James I's reign. 'A turd for thee and the king', offered a Kentish laborer two years later. The sailor Thomas Gibson went further in 1607 and said 'that the king's majesty was nothing but an ass, and that he, Thomas, would make a fool and an ass of him'. Subjects of Charles I likewise derided magisterial authority, asserting that they 'did not care a fart' for local officials, and 'cared not for the king nor his laws' (Cockburn, ed., 1982, 3; 1980a, 26, 38; Staffordshire Record Office, Q/SO/5. f. 16, Q/SR/243, fos. 6-7, 11). 'Shite on Justice Jopson, and fart for him', said one disgruntled Yorkshire yeoman. 'I scorn Sir Francis Wortley's proposition with my arse, and I worship him with my arse ... I care not a fart for Sir Francis's warrants' said others (Lister, ed., 1915, 60, 159-160, 264). Derisory physical gestures theatricized this scatological vocabulary of resistance. When magistrates in Essex ordered the vintner Thomas Holman in 1608 to maintain good behavior and keep the peace, he retorted that he cared not, 'casting up his leg and layering his hand on his tail, making a mouth in a very contemptuous sort' (Essex Record Office, Chelmsford: Q/SR 182/43). Shakespeare's audience would have recognized this business with fingers, thumbs, foreheads, eyes, noses, and tongues, whether performed by actors or neighbors, onstage or off.

5. *Treasonous Speech*

Most spectacular, most dangerous, and most likely to attract the attentions of the law were speeches that scandalized the monarch or threatened royal authority. It was *lèse majesté* or sedition to speak contemptuously of the king or queen, and some thought this verged on treason. Any 'violating or abating of majesty' was treason, asserted the Elizabethan lawyer Thomas Norton. They were 'traitorous vipers' who libeled the queen or her government, Lord Keeper Egerton declared in 1599 (Norton 1570, sig. Ci; The National Archives, Kew: SP 12/273/35).

It was treason in Elizabethan England to 'compass, imagine, invent, devise or intend' the death or destruction of the queen, or to call her 'heretic,

schismatic, tyrant, infidel, or usurper'. Merely to speak scandalously or slanderously of her majesty entailed the lesser offence of sedition. Speech of this sort may have been rare, but it emerged from the same milieu as insults and libels. Legal and investigative processes allow us to hear parts of this discourse, along with more loyal rebuttals.

A recurrent canard in Elizabethan England was that 'the queen is no maid, and she hath had three sons by the Earl of Leicester'. The rumor was false and scandalous but unstoppable. Some variants were even worse, charging the queen and her midwives with infanticide. Lurid tales told of a royal daughter destroyed 'in a very great fire of coals', and serial by-blows 'wrapped up in the embers in the chimney' or otherwise destroyed. Rumor spread through Suffolk in the 1560s 'that Lord Robert kept her majesty and that she was a naughty woman and could not rule her realm, and that justice was not administered'. A Southwark artisan asserted in 1586 that 'the queen of England is a whore and hath two bastards'. An Essex husbandman claimed similarly in 1590 'that my lord of Leicester had four children by the queen's majesty, whereof three of them were daughters and alive, and the fourth a son that was burnt' (Cockburn, ed., 1982, 355; 1980b, 276; The National Archives, Kew: SP 12/148/34, SP 12/190/56, SP 12/279/48).

More common identifications of Queen Elizabeth as 'whore', 'quean', 'jade', 'rogue' or 'rascal' pale besides these seditious fantasies, though an Irish critic railed against her majesty as 'a base bastard pisskitchen woman' (Morgan 2004, 302; see also Levin, 1998, 77-95). Both men and women were heard to say that 'because she is but a woman she ought not to be governor of a realm'. But few spoke as venomously as the disaffected Kentish laborer Jeremy Vanhill, who cursed in 1585, 'shite upon your queen, I would to God she were dead that I might shit on her face' (Cockburn, ed., 1979, 246). Few went so far as the London baker, Thomas Garner, who told listeners at Rotherhithe in 1590 'that the queen's majesty was an arrant whore and his whore, and if he could come to her he would tear her in pieces, and he would drink blood; and that he would set London on fire, and it would be a brave sight unto him' (Cockburn, ed., 1980b, 345). There was drama in these words, but none of it made up by a dramatist.

Some Elizabethans looked back to an imagined past, or forward to a better future, in either case scandalizing the present monarch. 'We shall never have a merry world so long as we have a woman governor, and as the queen lived', said a yeoman in Kent in 1568 (Cockburn, ed., 1979, 77). 'It was merry England when there was better government, and if the queen die there will be a change', declared a laborer in Essex a few years later (Samaha 1975, 69). Another Essex commoner declared in 1591 that

the queen was but a woman and ruled by noblemen, and the noblemen and gentlemen were all one, and the gentlemen and farmers would hold together one with another

so that poor men could get nothing among them, and therefore we shall never have a merry world while the queen liveth.

He further bragged that ‘if we had but one that would rise I would be the next, or else I would the Spaniards would come in that we may have some sport’ (Cockburn, ed., 1982, 373; Samaha, 1975, 69). Nor was he alone in wishing ‘that all the Spaniards of Spain were landed here in England to pull out the boors and the churls by the ears’, or avowing of the Spanish, ‘I would they were come, for the people here be all naught. A plague of God light upon them all’. Such were the sentiments of a Hertfordshire brick burner and a Kentish laborer recorded by assize courts in 1596 (Cockburn, ed., 1975a, 118; 1980a, 393). The ‘merry world’ conceit could also apply to religious developments. ‘It was never merry in England since the scriptures were so commonly preached’, declared a Suffolk petticoat-maker in 1577 (Essex Record Office, Q/SR 65/61). ‘It was a merry world when the service was used in the Latin tongue, and now we are in an evil way and going to the devil’, protested a husbandman of East Tilbury in 1581 (The National Archives, Kew: ASSI 35/23/H/36). Their voices too shaped the noise in the early modern public sphere.

Legal and administrative processes captured threatening, vaunting, and desperate words, spoken, for the most part, by ordinary Elizabethans. They illuminate a belligerent and oppositional stream in popular culture, akin to Jack Cade’s rebels. But words of protest and resistance are by no means typical of everyday discourse. The same sources replete with curses reveal counter-currents of deference, docility, and assuagement. Common discourse appears to have been self-healing, with plenty of speakers quick to soften the most dangerous expressions. When a workman in Southwark asserted in 1586 that ‘the queen of England is a whore’, another rose to silence him, ‘hold your peace, ye villain, a pox upon thee . . . get hence’. When a countryman in Essex repeated ‘that the queen was a whore’, a tailor in his company claimed to be ‘stupefied’ by these ‘horrid and diabolical words’. Witnesses to angry altercations frequently report themselves to have spoken dutifully: ‘take heed what thou sayest, though thou be drunk now thou wilt repent these words when thou art sober’; ‘these are naughty words, which ought not to be spoken’; or ‘thou rogue, meanest thou to be hanged, or knowest thou what thou speakest?’ (Cockburn, ed., 1978, 294; 1980b, 345; 1975a, 191; The National Archives, Kew: SP 12/13/21, SP 12/190/56, SP 14/143/18). Traces of such words are no more reliable or authentic than any other, but they point to the many sides of each conversation, and the fragments that survive from past to present.

6. *Conclusion*

Historical research has revealed a trove of popular discourse from the age of Shakespeare that yields contentious utterances that challenged the established

order. Some of these expressions have become well known, though others have only recently emerged from the archives. What use we make of these traces will vary with our present projects. Whether we subject them to philological, legal, social or political analysis, or connect them to Shakespeare or the history of his age, may be a matter as much of disciplinary convention as judgement or taste. I offer them here with minimal processing.

There is grist here for many mills, not least the debate about Shakespeare and early modern popular culture that Paola Pugliatti and Janet Clare stimulated at the Ninth World Shakespeare Congress at Prague in July 2011.¹⁴ Pugliatti and Clare pose questions about matters central and peripheral, normative and canonical, metamorphic and marginal, as well as elite and popular, that can be addressed but not resolved through study of Shakespeare's works. The discussion may be expanded by going off stage and beyond the text, into the world of dangerous talk.

The angry and agitated voices of ordinary men and women of Elizabethan and Jacobean England invite fresh analysis in several areas of current scholarship. They illuminate 'the connection between fiction and reality' that Luca Baratta examines, 'the eternal power struggle between the upper and the lower classes' that Heike Grundmann pursues, and the 'gendered version of the popular' addressed by Mary Ellen Lamb. Early modern speakers of scandalous and seditious words give voice to 'the common blocks and lower messes' that François Laroque investigates, and to the 'subaltern hierarchies' and 'underworld' discourses examined by Vladimir Makarov. Ciara Rawnsley finds Shakespeare 'relying on and exploiting his audience's familiarity' with popular culture, and contemporary verbal expressions support her case. Fragments, mediations, and scribal renditions of scandalous spoken language, contemporary with Shakespeare's plays, also shed light on Richard Meek's exploration of Shakespeare's 'common linguistic currency', and Roberta Mulini's lexicon 'from the social margins'. They complicate the attempt by Diane Purkiss to distinguish 'culture about the popular' from 'culture made by the popular', and they challenge opinions about popular culture as an environment, a commodity, or a chimera.¹⁵

The 'dangerous talk' that concerned early modern churchmen and magistrates provides an under-explored body of informally produced text. Though not so precise and scientific as a 'control group', it none the less allows comparison between words and expressions written for Shakespeare's stage, and contemporary utterances preserved (or at least rendered) by the courts. Historians might use this material primarily to expose social relations and the shifting tensions of religious and dynastic politics. It may also contribute to discussions of Shakespeare's skill and purpose in representing, reproducing, or re-creating the demotic quirks and currents of his age. Abundant examples suggest the possibility of building towards a new corpus of demotic and non-literary texts that can be compared to the language of the plays.

¹ Historians who have explored these aspects of early modern oral culture include (in order of publication) Houlbrooke 1979; Sharpe 1980; Helmholz 1985; Ingram 1987; Gowing 1996; Fox 2000; and Cressy 2010. This article is an expanded and revised version of a paper discussed at the Ninth World Shakespeare Congress (Prague, 17-22 July 2011).

² Historical enquiries include Burke 1978; Reay, ed., 1985 and Harris, ed., 1995, especially, in the same volume, his essay 'Problematising Popular Culture', 1-27. The problem is well theorized in Wiseman 2009.

³ Gillespie and Rhodes, eds, 2006, 'Introduction', 3, 14, 15, and, in the same volume, Rhodes, 161, 173. See also Wilson 1969, 101, 122, 143-175; Fox 2000, 132; Dent 1981, 4.

⁴ The phrase 'hidden transcript' evokes the work of James Scott (1990).

⁵ 'Speech act theory' begins with J.L. Austin (1962). It treats language as action, analyses 'performative utterances', and examines the consequences of 'the perlocutionary act'. Refined by John R. Searle (1969 and 1998), it has transformed the philosophy of language. Pierre Bourdieu (1991) understands linguistic exchanges as instruments and relations of power and authority. Legal scholars concerned with 'free speech' analyze 'speech as conduct', for example, Haiman 1993; Volokh 2005; Anonymous 2007. See also Greenawalt 1989; Butler 1997.

⁶ See, for example, Reyner 1656 (John Meriton, 'To the Reader'): 'Words are but wind, is the common saying, but they are such wind as will either blow the soul to its haven of rest, if holy, wholesome, savoury, spiritual, and tending to edification, or else sink it in the dead sea and bottomless gulf of eternal misery, if idle, profane, frothy, and unprofitable' (sig. B3).

⁷ Lord Keeper Egerton in 1599, quoted in Cressy 2010, 15; Taylor 1626; West 1607, sig. F.

⁸ In addition to sources in note 1, see Kegl 1994, 253-278.

⁹ Herefordshire Record Office, Hereford (1634): Quarter Sessions Recognizances and Examinations 1627-1635.

¹⁰ Guildhall Library, London: MS. 9064/15, f. 19; MS. 9064/16, f. 206v.

¹¹ Cambridge University Archives: Vice Chancellor's Court, III 17/2.

¹² The Salisbury incident is cited in Ingram 1985, 166.

¹³ For 'by the ears', see *All's Well*, 1.2, 1; *Coriolanus*, 1.1, 234; *2 Henry IV*, 2.4, 290; Dent 1981, 259. For 'never merry world', see *2 Henry VI*, 4.2, 8; *Measure for Measure*, 3.2, 5; *Twelfth Night*, 3.1, 98.

¹⁴ Seminar on 'Shakespeare and Early Modern Popular Culture', Ninth World Shakespeare Conference, Prague, 18 July 2011, organized by Paola Pugliatti and Janet Clare, with contributions from Luca Baratta, Nicoletta Caputo, John Cox, David Cressy, Heike Grundmann, François Laroque, Vladimir Makarov, Richard Meek, Roberta Mullini, Donatella Pallotti, Natália Pikli, Diane Purkiss, Ciara Rawnsley, and Karoline Szatek-Tudor.

¹⁵ Citations from papers circulated for the Prague seminar on 'Shakespeare and Early Modern Popular Culture'.

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