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Voicing the Unspeakable. Political Dissent in Three Early Modern Plays

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This paper explores how the lower classes voice discontent or political dissent in an acceptable balance between insubordination and formal respect of authority in three early modern texts written between the 1590s and the first decade of the 17th century. The plays under analysis are *The Life of Jack Straw* and *Thomas of Woodstock* (both anonymous) and Shakespeare's *Richard II*, which all deal with the same sovereign and his reign, characterised by three main crises. Despite their distinct approaches, they all address political grievances and present their own interpretations of monarchy, political power and the role of kingship. The comparison shows interesting shifts in the vision of the commonwealth and in the perception of power in a clear progression towards radicalisation in the criticism of the king, which leads to the later Civil War.

Keywords: *Jack Straw*, *Thomas of Woodstock*, *Richard II*, Political dissent, Drama

This paper examines three history plays centred around the figure of Richard II who ruled between 1377 and 1399 and whose reign was characterised by three significant crises: the peasant revolt of 1381, the first crisis involving the young king and the Lord Appellants (1388 ca.) and the final crisis when Bolingbroke, the future Henry IV, deposed Richard and (supposedly) had him killed. The three plays under consideration are the anonymous *The Life and Death of Jack Straw*, Shakespeare's *Richard II* and the anonymous *Thomas of Woodstock*[1]. The paper will focus on the idea of political unrest, dissent and open rebellion, and the way these elements are depicted in the plays ac-

1 This last text, existing in only one manuscript lacking the external folio containing the first and last page, has no title and has been variously titled in the course of its editorial history, varying from *Richard II Part One* to *Thomas of Woodstock*. For a complete list of editions and titles, see Sebellin forthcoming, 31-32.

cording to three main subjects: 1. the attitude towards the King (specifically, in this case, the portrayal of an unfit, corrupt, tyrannical King) and monarchy in general from the point of view of the characters in the play and the playwright's; 2. the attitude towards rebellious people, again from the point of view of the characters in the play and the playwright's; 3. the voice of the protest: the people's words expressing dissent and rebellious opinions. The first of the three plays, *Jack Straw*, was published twice: in 1593 by Danter and in 1604 by Pavier. Shakespeare's *Richard II* was published several times between 1597 and 1608 (Q1 1597, Q2 and Q3 1598, Q4 1608, and later Q5 1615, F 1623), but was probably composed around 1595. As is common knowledge, Act 4 (the so-called deposition or Parliament scene) only appears in Q4 and in the Folio, conceivably for censorship reasons. *Thomas of Woodstock* presents yet a different situation, as the one extant copy, preserved at the British Library (MS Egerton 1994), is a manuscript, possibly a prompt book, and there are no known published copies until 1870: there are currently twelve modern editions, starting from the 1870 one to the more recent 2022 one. The composition date of this anonymous play is a hotly debated topic: usually considered a source for Shakespeare's tragedy, therefore pre-1595, in more recent decades this date has been questioned and composition postponed to the beginning of the seventeenth century (by Jackson, Lake, Montini, Gabriel Egan and myself[2]). There are several valid reasons to postpone the composition date of *Thomas of Woodstock* to the beginning of the seventeenth century, thus inverting the reciprocal influences with the more widely read *Richard II* by Shakespeare: lexical, stylistic and metric reasons (Jackson 2001), the markings of the Master of the Revels George Buc, active after 1603, and identified by Frijlinck (1929) and Lake (1983), the use of *ye* as studied by Montini (2012), the featuring of specific musical instruments such as trumpets and cornets never employed before 1609 (Lake 1983).

Before addressing the comparative analysis of the three texts, a brief outline of the political context in which they were composed and staged is mandatory, as the Tudor era brought a new idea of monarchy and management of power, an innovation never upheld before in England. According to Kristin Bezio, "Henry VIII's reign

2 For a summary of the debate on composition date, see Sebellin forthcoming, 14-26.

put forth a 'doctrine of absolute non-resistance to the king – a novel doctrine […] which had enjoyed little vogue during the middle ages.' […] The need to publicize non-resistance indicates that the doctrine was not universally accepted, but the fact that such a doctrine was published at all nevertheless confirms its increasing prominence" (Bezio 2015, 27; the quotation within is from Van Baumer 1966, 85). A new political philosophy was slowly but steadily overcoming the ancient idea of an elected king favoured by Germanic tribes in the early Middle Ages (see Ciocca 1987, 170ff) and still somewhat residually present before the advent of Henry VII. It is in this liminal space between a medieval idea of *communitas* as a natural counterbalance to the power of the king and its limitations via the parliament, and the idea of an increasingly absolute power to be fought and rebelled against, that these three plays are interesting to look at.

Therefore, a comparison of the way authors depicted both kingship on the one hand, and rebellious people on the other, is useful to perceive the evolution of a political attitude: the balance between those two political standpoints shows a clear shift in perspective, possibly leading to the Puritan uprising and the Civil War. The emphasis of this article, then, is on the anonymous *Thomas of Woodstock*, which stands out in its treatment of political unrest when compared with the other two tragedies. Most scholars, as shown below, recognise the peculiar position of this text among histories in general, but it is when scrutinised next the other two that this difference in political attitude stands out more clearly. In light of what will be developed below, the correct order of composition needs to be altered as follows: *Jack Straw*, *Richard II*, *Thomas of Woodstock*.

1. The Life and Death of Jack Straw

The first text to be dealt with is *Jack Straw*, which depicts the notorious historical figure of Wat Tyler, probably one and the same with Jack Straw, who was popular throughout the early modern era and is even mentioned several times by Dickens in *Bleak House*. This character was also the subject of popular ballads, and was so evidently appealing to the reading public that the play was published twice, as already mentioned. The subject presents some similarities with the even more popular narration of Robin Hood: the underage King is

preserved from criticism by the rebels, who considers themselves the true loyal subjects, almost to the end of the play. The real villains are, as often happens, the members of the court: John of Gaunt in particular. So here again, as in Robin Hood, there is a good King Richard and a bad King John (the Duke of Lancaster, John of Gaunt, claimed the throne of Castile).

The brief play (1,200 lines in all) is divided into four acts and describes the events which occurred in 1381, culminating in the so-called peasant revolt. The text opens with a tussle originating over the abuse committed by a tax collector (the infamous poll tax levied to finance the Hundred Years War) against the underage daughter of the protagonist, Jack Straw. The tax collector is killed in the fray and the revolt snowballs from that minor, peripherical event and culminates in London. "First performed in 1592, the anonymous *Life and Death of Jack Straw* is one of the earliest history plays to focus entirely on a lower-class-revolt […]. Based on Richard Grafton's *Chronicle* (1569), Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland* (1577, 1587) and John Stow's *Chronicles of England* (1580), the play dramatizes Elizabethan narratives about the 1381 Peasant's Rising" (Mathur 2007, 37). The sources are, however, treated with the customary unreliability: in the sources it is Wat Tyler and not Jack Straw who is killed by the Mayor of London for disrespecting the King, while Jack Straw is later apprehended and condemned to death; in the play the opposite occurs. The issue is partly due to the confusing reports regarding the identity of the leaders of the revolt: some scholars claim that Jack Straw is a nickname for Wat Tyler and that they are one and the same; in later chronicles they appear as two individuals (see Pettitt 1984, 8, and Brie 1906; for a summary and recapitulation of the difference with the sources, see also Muse Adkins 1949).

This text is generally considered a very simplistic one, politically conservative and quite crude (see Muse Adkins 1949). Only Schillinger (2008) advocates for a radical position expressed in the play and considers the conclusion, where the rebellious commoners are all defeated, killed or executed, a perfunctory homage to the establishment and to the necessity of avoiding censorship. The brief introduction to the Malone Society Reprint of *The Life and Death of Jack Straw*, issued in 1957 and edited by Kenneth Muir, states that "[n]othing is known about the date of composition, nor about the authorship. It

has been ascribed to George Peele by a number of the critics on what would appear to be insufficient evidence: for, although Peele could, on occasion, write very badly, none of his acknowledged plays is so destitute of poetry as this" (Muir 1957, v).

Jack Straw no doubt shows a radical group of people who initially are only trying to be heard by the King in connection to abuses they have suffered by the hands of tax collectors ("The king God wot knowes not whats done by such poore men as we, / But wele make him know it", *The Life and Death of Jack Straw*, from now on, *JS*, I.i.61-62). From an initial Edenic egalitarianism of religious origin ("But I am able by good scripture before you to proue, / That God doth not this dealing allow nor loue. / But when *Adam* delued, and *Eue* span, / VVho was then a Gentleman", *JS*, I.i.80-83). A few examples suffice to show that the bold, at times extreme statements of the rebels, thought initially justifiable in the light of the outrageous treatment they received, soon turn to an execrable and totally condemnable behaviour: the group veers to radical positions and steadily refuses to stand down even when they are promised pardon by the King: "We will haue all the Rich men displaste [displaced] / And all the brauerie of them defaste [defaced]", *JS*, I.i.113-14; "God amarcie, Wat, and ere we haue done, / VVe will be Lords euerie one", *JS*, II.i.515-16; "VVe come to reuenge your Officers ill demeanor / And though we haue kild him for his knauerie, / Now we be gotten together, we will haue wealth and libertie", *JS*, III.i.702-05; "I came for spoile and spoile Ile haue" *JS*, III.i.757. The rebels are described (albeit by the aristocracy surrounding the King) as unnatural (15 occurrences) and unjust (1); lawful subjects are by opposition labelled as natural (twice).

The end is therefore quite obvious: they must be punished. Historically, more than 1,500 people were killed during the revolt or as a consequence of it, condemned to death by the King or his officials (among which Thomas of Woodstock and Tresilian, discussed below).

Nonetheless, the underlying royalist position of the playwright can be discerned in his attitude towards the figure of the King, which is almost invariably positive. The appositions to the King are the most traditional and conservative ones: anointed, lawful (4 occurrences each), true succeeding (2), "Gods visgerent" (once, I.iv.439), natural Liege (once). The young sovereign is portrayed almost hagiographically, animated by a sincere love of his people: "I maruaile

much my Lords what rage it is, / That moues my people whom I loue so deare, / Vnder a show of quarrel good and iust, / To rise against vs thus in mutinies, / VVith threatning force against our state and vs" (*JS*, I.iv.338-42). Richard II is shown as a merciful, patient, forgiving King who reluctantly condemns to death only the "archrebels" (IV.i.1108), John Ball and Wat Tyler, sparing all the others led astray by the leaders of the revolt. In general, "the rebels and the king have mutual regard, [but] no such rapport exists between commoners and nobles. […] Indeed the attitude of the nobles is the harsher" (Muse Adkins 1949, 63; 64): this is a peculiar attitude that only this text exhibits among the three examined here.

No issue is ever raised discussing the figure of the King, neither in the attitude of the playwright (understandably so), nor in the rebel's words, who only turn truly disrespectful at the end of the play, after their demands of "wealth and libertie" (repeated several times in III.i) are wilfully met by the King with a general promise of "liberty and pardon" (*JS*, III.i.712). Wealth is not, apparently, something even a saintly King is inclined to give.

2. *Richard II*

In his introduction to *The Movement Towards Subversion. The English History Plays from Skelton to Shakespeare*, Sterling argues that Shakespeare's histories question authority and divine right: "in the chapter on *Richard II*, I discuss Shakespeare's demystification of divine right and the king's two bodies through the playwright's purposeful telescoping of history, through his altering of chronicle history, and through his characterization of Richard" (Sterling 1996, x).

It is certainly true that the guilt of Richard II in his uncle's murder is hinted at and even stated openly (*Richard II*, from now on *R2*, I.ii.4-5 and 37-41; I.iii.154-58) and that he is portrayed as an incompetent king, especially if compared to the more savvy Bolingbroke, but it is also true that this position is heavily counterbalanced by the idea of Richard as a Christ-like figure, also openly referred to in the tragedy (see Smith 2011); by the use of the term "depose" and "deposed", of clear religious origin and mainly employed by Richard himself; by the idea that this act of deposition/usurpation is the original sin causing the War of the Roses, repeatedly

mentioned by York, Carlisle and the King. In this play Shakespeare seems to portray these two irreconcilable positions, lawful deposition vs. aberrant usurpation, giving both very substantial weight, so much so that any minimal shift in perspective modifies the final reconstruction and historical judgement of the events. Exactly as happens in anamorphic painting, fashionable at the time and explicitly mentioned in the text: "Like perspectives, which, rightly gazed upon / Show nothing but confusion; eyed awry, / Distinguish form" (*R2*, II.ii.18-20).

The famous deposition or parliament scene (the very terms abolish the possibility of neutrality, as each term is politically charged), excised from publications during Elizabeth's reign and reinstated later on, is open to a double interpretation: a necessary and rightful act involving the parliament and public participation (the idea of *communitas* represented by the public viewing the performance), or a tragic, sacrilegious act, with grievous outcome for the commonwealth.

In Shakespeare, therefore, the king – though neither innocent nor saintly – is seen as a sacred figure, which cannot be touched without dire consequences befalling the nation. The recurrence of terms like "sacred", "anointed" and the like is striking. Richard, his figure and his body are described in terms that admit no doubt as to the sacrality of his role. He is at various times designated as anointed, as in the following quotations: "God's substitute, / His deputy **anointed** in His sight" (*R2*, I.ii.37-38); "Commit'st thy **anointed** body to the cure" (*R2*, II.i.98); "Come'st thou because the **anointed** king is thence" (*R2*, II.iii.96); "Not all the water in the rough rude sea / Can wash the balm off from an **anointed** king" (*R2*, III.ii.54-55); "And shall the figure of God's majesty, / His captain, steward, deputy elect, / **Anointed**, crowned, planted many years" (*R2*, IV.i.126-28).

Overall, in the tragedy we find a total of 5 anointed, 1 rightful, 8 sacred (variously labelled: king 1, head 1, blood 3, sceptre 1, state 2). And even if he is an unfit king, Richard is no doubt the character where our sympathy lies: he may be portrayed as proud and aloof at the beginning, self-absorbed and misruled by his sycophants, but he soon turns into a heart-breaking, doleful figure, whose parable we follow with mixed feelings of pity and reproach.

On the other hand, in *Richard II* the people are scarcely mentioned and play a very minor role. They are generally described by the king

and courtesans in disparaging terms, in contrast with Bolingbroke's affinity with commoners. Richard labels his subjects as "slaves" (*R2*, I.iv.26), he and his flatterers mock the newly exiled Hereford's attitude towards the commoners and their love for him: "Off goes his bonnet to an oyster-wench. / A brace of draymen bid God speed him well, / And had the tribute of his supple knee", *R2*, I.iv.31-33. The mob is also described as a faceless monster, insulting the defeated king and throwing "dust and rubbish" on him, when he enters London on foot, following the new king on horse. The description is given by the sympathetic York to his Duchess, and Richard is described as a meek, Christ-like figure proceeding towards Golgotha after he has relinquished the crown (*R2*, V.ii.1-40). The only instance of a commoner actually speaking in the play is in the garden scene, when the Gardener expounds in a highly metaphorical language, and in verse, Richard's guilt in neglecting his duty as a monarch, who has disregarded his kingdom and let parasites and courtesans thrive and grow too prominent. Although the Gardener is quite explicit in describing the situation of the kingdom as an unkempt garden, when one of his men expresses a mildly critical observation ("Why should we in the compass of a pale / Keep law and form and due proportion, / […] When our sea-walled garden, the whole land, / Is full of weeds, her fairest flowers choked up, / Her fruit trees all unpruned, her hedges ruined, / Her knots disordered and her wholesome herbs / Swarming with caterpillars?", *R2*, III.iv.40-47, hardly a seditious speech at all), he is immediately chided by his master: "Hold thy peace. / He that hath suffered this disordered spring / Hath now himself met with the fall of leaf" (*R2*, III.iv.47-49).

3. *Thomas of Woodstock*

This anonymous play relates the events of the second crisis of the reign of Richard II, the one occurring around the year 1388, even though the author is quite careless with his sources (Holinshed, mainly) and coalesces in the span of a few months events spanning from 1382 (Richard's marriage to Anne of Bohemia) to the apprehension of Tresilian (executed in 1388), the death of Greene (1399) and of Woodstock himself (1397). In depicting these events, historical figures belonging to a later period are merged in the play and depicted ac-

cording to the playwright's needs rather than to historical accuracy. Thomas of Woodstock, the main character and a tragic figure, is here represented as meek and gentle, at times righteously enraged by the young king's behaviour, but generally respectful and temperate. The sources, on the other hand, tell a very different story and Woodstock is usually represented as ambitious, ruthless and fierce.

The young king in this play is immediately shown as guilty and plotting: the first scene opens with the attempted poisoning of the king's uncles, and even though the King is ultimately called innocent of this deed, and the entire responsibility is laid with his plotting minions, in the course of the play Richard is often seen in agreement with his sycophants when not openly instigating schemes against his uncles.

If compared with the previous plays, there are fewer instances of the king as sacred, as in the following samples:

> As of the King's rebellious enemies:
> As underminers of his **sacred** state
> (*Thomas of Woodstock*, II.i.34-35; from now on, *ToW*)

> My royal lord, even by my birth I swear
> My father's tomb, and faith to Heaven I owe,
> Your uncle's thoughts are all most honourable,
> And to that end the good Protector sends me
> To certify your **sacred** majesty
> The peers of England now are all assembled
> To hold a parliament at Westminster
> (*ToW*, II.i.143-49)

> Although we could have easily surprised,
> Dispersed and overthrown your rebel troops
> That draw your swords against our **sacred** person,
> The highest God's **anointed** deputy,
> Breaking your holy oaths to Heaven and us
> (*ToW*, 5V.iii.54-58)

> Yield to your uncles. Who but they should have
> The guidance of your **sacred** state and council?
> (*ToW*, V.iii.86-87)

Here, therefore, we have four occurrences of sacred, but they are applied either to the state, or to the figure of his majesty, only once di-

rectly to the person of the King, by Richard himself. These are the only instances of the terms.

It appears quite clear that the idea of a sacred King is very much preserved in *Jack Straw* and in *Richard II*, much less so in *Thomas of Woodstock*. This last play depicts without hypocrisy a king unworthily striving to achieve absolute power, irritated by any form of limitation both from the peers and from Parliament, which he dismisses as soon as he claims the throne in II.ii. The old nobility goes back to the medieval idea that the power of the king should be limited, a concept dating back to the Magna Charta; the new court is seeking the new absolute power rising in Europe. This is a situation that begun with the Tudors, with Henry VIII in particular, but became more extreme under the Stuarts.

It is clear that people have a role here, and that stance is seen sympathetically by the author. In *Thomas of Woodstock* the commoners are oppressed by unfair taxation: Tresilian has devised the abominable blank charters, a sort of promissory note where the amount to be disbursed is arbitrarily decided by the king and his flatterers. "Wanton Richard" and the courtesans surrounding him are totally out of control. Yet, criticism is not voiced primarily by the commoners, but by the nobles. The most violent condemnation of King and Court comes from the uncles of the King. The people protest in two (very bland) ways: talking in general about the misfortunes of being poor and having to submit to unfair taxation, and in the form of satirical ballads; later on, appealing to ancient laws which supposedly granted certain rights, no matter what the King might wish to do.

The examples that follows are quite meaningful. In III.iii, there is the marketplace scene, where people from the village are faced with tax collectors distributing the blank charters.

> Cowtail
> […] I tell ye neighbour, I am more afraid of the bee than the bear: there's wax to be used today, and I have no seal about me. I may tell you in secret, here's a dangerous world towards. Neighbour, you're a farmer, and I hope here's none but God and good company. We live in such a state, I am e'en almost weary of all, I assure ye. Here's my other neighbour, the butcher that dwells at Hockley, has heard his landlord tell strange tidings. We shall be all hoisted and we tarry here, I can tell ye. […]

Farmer
Ah, sirrah, and what said the good knight your landlord, neighbour?
Butcher
Marry, he said, but I'll not stand to anything, I tell ye that aforehand, he said that King Richard's new councillors (God amend them), had crept into honester men's places then themselves were; and that the King's uncles and the old lords, were all banished the court; and he said flatly we should never have a merry world as long as it was so.
(*ToW*, III.iii.48-73)

As it appears, the protest is hardly subversive, yet the people are threatened by Tresilian's men and they will be arrested and brought to court as "privy whisperers" (*ToW*, III.iii.150-51).

Another instance of protest well covered in the form of ballad is the Schoolmaster song:

Will ye buy any parchment knives?
We sell for little gain:
Whoe'er are weary of their lives
They'll rid them of their pain.

Blank charters they are called
A vengeance on the villain,
I would he were both flayed and bald
God bless my lord Tresilian.
[…]
A poison may be Greene,
But Bushy can be no faggot:
God mend the king and bless the queen,
And 'tis no matter for Bagot.

For Scroop, he does no good;
But if you'll know the villain,
His name is now to be understood
God bless my lord Tresilian.
(*ToW*, III.iii.180-87, 196-203)

Even though the Schoolmaster feels quite safe from censorship as he has "covered [the verses] rarely" (*ToW*, III.iii.167-68) with the final mock-blessing, he is of course detained as well.

In IV.iii we find other people who protest against unfair accusations and incarceration: the sheriffs of Kent and Northumberland.

> Shrieve of Kent
> My lord, I plead our ancient liberties
> Recorded and enrolled in the King's Crown Office,
> Wherein the Men of Kent are clear discharged
> Of fines, fifteens, or any other taxes,
> Forever given them by the Conqueror.
> (*ToW*, IV.iii.19-23)

> Shrieve of Northumberland
> We are free born, my lord, yet do confess
> Our lives and goods are at the King's dispose;
> But how, my lord? – like to a gentle prince
> To take or borrow what we best may spare,
> And not like bondslaves, force it from our hands!
> Tresilian
> Presumptuous traitors, that we will try on you.
> Will you set limits to the King's high pleasure?
> Away to prison! Seize their goods and lands.
> Shrieve of Kent
> Much good may it do ye, my lord. The care is ta'en:
> As good die there as here abroad be slain.
> Shrieve of Northumberland
> Well, God forgive both you and us, my lord.
> Your hard oppressions have undone the state
> And made all England poor and desolate.
> (*ToW*, IV.iii.34-46)

Despite the dreadful treatment they are served for uttering a very respectful remonstration against the new unfair taxes, the two sheriffs are sent to prison and their property is illegally taken by the Lord Chief Justice. Their final reaction is mild at the best. The people are outspoken, but remain respectful, law-abiding, and bland in their protests.

The aristocracy, on the other hand, are not so careful in expressing criticism towards the king. As mentioned above, it is they who voice the strongest denunciation of the King's wrongdoings.

> Woodstock
> […] Speak, speak, what tidings, Cheney?
> Cheney
> Of war, my lord, and civil dissension.
> The men of Kent and Essex do rebel.
> Woodstock
> I thought no less and always feared as much.

Cheney
The shrieves in post have sent unto your grace
That order may be ta'en to stay the commons,
For fear rebellion rise in open arms.
Woodstock
Now, headstrong Richard, shalt thou reap the fruit
Thy lewd licentious wilfulness hath sown.
I know not which way to bestow myself.
York
There is no standing on delay, my lords.
These hot eruptions must have some redress
Or else in time they'll grow incurable.
Woodstock
The commons they rebel – and the King all careless.
Here's wrong on wrong to stir more mutiny.
Afore my God, I know not what to do.
Lancaster
Take open arms, join with the vexed commons
And hale his minions from his wanton side.
Their heads cut off, the people's satisfied.
(*ToW*, I.iii.231-249)

It is therefore clear that in this text the noble uncles of the king decidedly side with the mutinous people to rid the court of the flatterers who influence the king. And the king is guilty as well as his minions.

Woodstock
[…] Blank charters call ye them? If any age
Keep but a record of this policy,
(I phrase it too, too well) – flat, villainy! –
Let me be chronicled Apostata,
Rebellious to my God and country both.
Lancaster
How do the people entertain these blanks?
Cheney
With much dislike, yet some for fear have signed them,
Others there be refuse and murmur strangely.
Woodstock
Afore my God I cannot blame them for it.
He might as well have sent defiance to them.
O vulture England, wilt thou eat thine own?
Can they be rebels called that now turn head?
I speak but what I fear, not what I wish.

> This foul oppression will withdraw all duty
> And in the commons' hearts hot rancours breed
> To make our country's bosom shortly bleed.
> (*ToW*, III.ii.74-89)

Again, the rebellion is seen as understandable, reasonable, even justifiable: the king's behaviour has broken the social pact and obedience is no longer a virtue. In a later outbreak of desperation, Woodstock admits he has neither power nor arguments against the rising: he can only preach patience and forbearance.

It can be argued that the protest is voiced by the nobles in order to prevent any accusation to the people: the text takes the part of the wronged citizens but depicts them as harmless and meek; the old nobility, on the other hand, can freely speak of a righteous rebellion, distancing themselves from the deeds, which are formally condemned, but at the same time seen with understanding and a recognition of blamelessness. *Thomas of Woodstock* is therefore a masterpiece of indirect, transversal rebellion and criticism of a tyrannical king, able to save both the commons and the nobles from the accusation of treason, yet enabling the expression of dissent: "This day shall here determinate all wrongs. / The meanest man taxed by their foul oppressions / Shall be permitted freely to accuse, / And right they shall have to regain their own; / Or all shall sink to dark confusion" (*ToW*, V.iii.32-36).

The political stance expressed in the text has not gone unnoticed among scholars, who at various stages have recognised *Woodstock*'s peculiar political strength.

Rossiter, for examples, writes:

> There, as in his feeling for the common man, the author stands a little apart from his times. […] [W]e should see our Anon standing somewhere between the quasi-medieval picture which backgrounds Shakespeare and the new world shaped for us by the later struggles of Parliament and King: the world of 1688, shall I say? (Rossiter 1946, 31)

And, further on,

> the argument of *Woodstock* and its patterning of character-design give it a point which was, if nothing more, sharply conflicting with the political principles fully accepted by most dramatists, Shakespeare among them. To that

> extent it is unorthodox, and its author an independent thinker – about History if no more (Rossiter 1946, 32).

Marie Axton considers *Woodstock* "unconventional and audacious" (Axton 1977, 97). Janet Stavropoulos admits that "[i]ts coherent plot and language facilitate the expression of its unorthodox political statement: subjects oppressed by tyrannical rule may understandably rebel against their king" (Stavropoulos 1988, 1).

MacDonald P. Jackson sees it as a mixture between "orthodoxy and subversiveness" (Jackson 2001, 45):

> If 'On the matters of civil war and obedience to the king, the author of Woodstock is ample, explicit, and scrupulously orthodox,' while accepting 'doctrine that a man must not obey the king to the danger of his mortal soul' […] Yet Woodstock boldly 'highlights the grievances of the common people' and 'finds […] much justification for rebellion led by the Council'. (Jackson 2001, 45-46)[3]

Margot Heinemann also considers *Woodstock* to be "in some ways the boldest and most subversive of all Elizabethan historical plays" (Heinemann 1991, 184).

Alzada Tipton claims that "the playwright establishes the commons as a significant force in political events and reminds any magistrates who may be watching the play to take them seriously" (Tipton 1998, 118), and elsewhere affirms:

> If *Woodstock* is distinctive in its support for the commons as they act within the bounds of the law and in its condemnation of princes who ignore that law, the play is perhaps unique in its continued support for the commoners once they cross over the boundary of the law and into rebellion. In general, the play's depiction of the commoners is surprisingly wholehearted in its defense of their right to rebel against an exploitative prince. (Tipton 1998, 125)

Melchiori too, back in 1979, claimed that "l'autore di *Woodstock* è su posizioni ideologiche che anticipano quelle che, meno di cinquant'an-

3 Here Jackson is quoting from E. M. W. Tillyard 1944, and Margot Heinemann 1991, 184-85.

ni dopo, avrebbero provocato la rivoluzione borghese e la caduta della monarchia in Inghilterra" (Melchiori 1979, 8)[4].

Woodstock can therefore be considered the boldest among the three plays considered here: the least concerned with the idea of a sacred king and more connected with the idea of contractual monarchy, and the most open, if not in depicting rebellious commoners, at least in taking the side of the wronged mutinous citizens.

4. Concluding remarks

If absolutism can be seen as a product of the war of the Roses and the ascent of the Tudors (Bezio 2015, 9), it can also be stated that the tendency towards absolutism produces a counter effect in the desire to rebel against a monarch who no longer observes his/her oath to govern within certain boundaries, together with his/her people (at various moments represented differently, culminating in the Parliament), and for the benefit of the common weal.

If during the Middle Ages it was argued that rebellion and even tyrannicide may be justified (see Bezio 2015, 8 and notes 27 and 28, quoting Nenner, Manegold of Lautenbach, John of Salisbury, Fortescue, Languet, Robert Person and Christopher Goodman), expressing political criticism or discontent in the Tudor or Stuart age could easily lead to accusations of treason and to a painful, excruciating death. And it is in this context that the three plays depicting medieval crisis and political unrest were written and staged. Thence, the need for balance between criticism of inadequate rule, poetic justice and the political ability to avoid censorship.

According to Sterling,

> As the genre of the history play progresses, it becomes more politically subversive, for the dramas begin to question the sociopolitical hierarchy (of which the monarch is the apex) instead of reinforcing the social order. Richard Helgerson suggests 'a special relation between popular revolt and the theater. Clearly a significant portion of the Elizabethan theater audience liked seeing such plays, and … the theater was a willing bearer of a

4 "The author of *Woodstock* shares ideological positions that foreshadow those which, fifty years later, would lead to the bourgeois revolution and the fall of the monarchy in England" (my translation).

> radically subversive peasant, or more generally commoner, ideology. […] Renaissance history plays become increasingly seditious politically' (Sterling 1996, IX-X).

It is noteworthy that, in the case of *Thomas of Woodstock*, neither the people's criticism nor the nobles' heavy criticism are censored. Other portions of the text are struck out by Sir George Buc, the Master of the Revels active at the time: the passage where King Richard himself admits to his being guilty (in the division of the kingdom), and the mention of Richard being "Superior Lord of Scotland", deemed unacceptable under James I. So after all what is struck out are the King's words, his own profession of guilt, and his admitted responsibility in his uncle's murder.

Authors constantly face the need to avoid censorship and navigate potentially disruptive issues with care to avoid trespassing. Having lower class villains proclaim clearly outrageous statements, and later having them punished, is a way of showing abidance to political orthodoxy and respect for political power. Displacement of criticism to the highest ranks of nobility and aristocracy is also a way of expressing unruly, riotous points of view shielding the author and his ideas from censorship.

To conclude, in comparison with the other two texts analysed so far, *Thomas of Woodstock* shows a more refined political criticism and a more deeply subversive attitude; therefore it can be considered a later text, with a more radical position in what concerns rebellion and criticism of power. In a hypothetical sequence of increasingly subversive positions, possibly confirming the latest dating of the texts, *Jack Straw* appears to be the most conservative, *Richard II* the most ambiguous in representing an inept king, yet keeping an orthodox position, and *Thomas of Woodstock* the latest one, already projected towards the Civil War which broke out only three decades later.

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