

Shakespeare and Social Crime: Legality and the People's Justice

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The idea of “social crime” was first developed by Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm, who defined as “social” those crimes which “have a distinct element of protest in them”, and are therefore supported by the community’s consensus as crimes of necessity. Though potentially fertile, however, the notion of “social crime” was quenched by the partial disagreement of another Marxist historian, E. P. Thompson, who objected that such definition would imply a distinction between “good” and “bad” criminals, overlooking the fact that all criminals occupied the same disadvantaged social group. The present article examines three Shakespearean texts where the idea of social crime is differently represented: *Coriolanus*, the Hand D pages of *Sir Thomas More* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. The citizens’ revolt in the first scene of *Coriolanus* is probably the most relevant theatrical representation of a social crime in Shakespeare’s plays. Not only are the Roman Citizens represented in it as performing a conscious action of protest dictated by need; but, as has been noted, the play has an apparent topical feature, for it was written a year after the Midlands Rising (1607), a protest against enclosures which Shakespeare re-reads, in *Coriolanus*, as a food riot. The “Ill May day scenes” in *Sir Thomas More*, instead, are presented as the instance of an irrational protest against foreign labourers which, being dictated by mere xenophobia, cannot be justified as “social” crime. Even less can the “disparagement” Falstaff performs in *Merry Wives* by poaching in the lands of JP Shallow. Falstaff and his gang of friends are indeed “bad” criminals who profit from their vicinity to the *nouveaux riches* to perform an offense that should have been prosecuted at the highest degree, that of the Star Chamber, but is instead celebrated with a venison dinner.

Keywords: *Coriolanus*, *Sir Thomas More*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, social crime, protest

1. Representing the law

On 3 September 1562, William Tyldesley, a Buckinghamshire Justice of the Peace (JP), wrote a letter to Secretary Cecil complaining about the laxity and incompetence with which, in his opinion, certain crim-

inal cases were prosecuted (while others were utterly disregarded) by those appointed to administer justice. He relates that “of late” an enquiry about “sertayne penall statutes” had been urged by a letter from the Council, that the letter had “caused in some shyres A littil to be done, & in some shyres nothing at all”, and that, after a while, also those that had “begone to do partlye well” had started “to wexe [...] cold”, probably because they “had conferens with the Justices of other shyres” (Tawney and Power 1935, 1:330), who tended to overlook or even ignore the Council’s dictate. Thirty-four years later, on 25 September 1596, Edward Hext, a Somerset JP, wrote to Cecil an even more dramatic letter. Hext was mainly worried by the increase in crimes, especially those committed by “wandering suspycyous persons”, but he also points out certain drawbacks in the system for, he says, it often happens that criminals “are delyvered to simple Constables and tythingmen that sometimes wylfullye other tymes negligently suffer them to escape” (Tawney and Power 1935, 2:340). The letters seem to reflect real concerns, for they were sent by scrupulous JPs to the most powerful civil servant of the reign; and, although they were written at a considerable distance of time, in both cases the incompetence of the officers in charge of administering justice seems to constitute their main concern¹.

1 For Tyldesley, see Jones 2015, 84; 97-98; for Hext, see Sharpe 1999, 63; 64; 265. Lack of space prevents me from dealing adequately here with a vital aspect of public life during the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods: the willing participation of large sections of the population in the administration of justice. Though law enforcement was officially entrusted to justice officers (Constables and JPs essentially), it was also characterized by a remarkable popular participation which reflected the community’s moral and social visions of crime. Mark Goldie contends that “[g]overnance was not something done from on high to the passive recipients of authority, but something actively engaged in by the lesser agents of government: and every citizen was in some measure a lesser agent of government” (2001, 155). Steve Hindle, in turn, observes that “recent scholarship has suggested that magistrates’ labours would have been fruitless without the active co-operation of inferior officers and sections of the public at large” (2000, 97). Crucial in determining certain active attitudes towards the impositions of authority was the fact that people knew very well that what they experienced was a form of “self-government at the king’s command” (206; the expression was coined by A.B. White, as the title of his 1933 book). They knew very well, that is, that “Effective government could not do without the willingness of men to act

Shakespeare was certainly interested in those charged with administering justice and keeping the peace. Between the impeccable and inflexible Lord Chief Justice in *2Henry IV* and Lear's imagined "rascal beadle" (*King Lear*, IV.vi.145)², a wide range of magistrates and lesser officers is iconically represented in his plays, often characterized by the ineptitude Tyldesley and Hext complained about. Gloucestershire Justice Robert Shallow in *2Henry IV* is the most famous and the most emblematic of the company. He is inept and unscrupulous, and also vain and boastful. As we shall see in the following pages, he will appear again in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* in a less senile and weak-minded version, but again as a person for whom the administration of justice is the least of his worries. On the contrary, Dogberry and his partner Verges in *Much Ado About Nothing* are much concerned with their task as town watchers. But Dogberry, for whom "to write and read comes by nature" (III.iii.11-12), does not possess either these 'natural' gifts, or that of clearly expressing his meanings, and, least of all, that of appropriately applying the law's requirements; Fang and Snare in *2Henry IV*, who are responsible for maintaining law and order in the city, embody the prototype of inefficiency that, as Hext complains, allows criminals to escape. They prove their ineptitude and cowardice when called by Mistress Quickly to arrest Falstaff in

as agents of central institutions" (Herrup 1987, 205-06). Tim Stretton provides a useful synthesis of the general features of this kind of involvement in a contribution to the administration of law: "People from all backgrounds reported and prosecuted crimes and appeared as witnesses at trials; members of the community acted as constables; yeomen and gentlemen served on grand and trial juries in the complex process that governed the path from accusation to verdict and sentencing. Each of the individuals involved could exercise discretion, observable in witnesses who chose to turn a blind eye to certain offences or offenders, constables and magistrates who decided not to assist a prosecution, and jurors who reduced the value of stolen goods to attract a lesser penalty or risked judicial sanction by voting to acquit an offender they thought was guilty" (2017, 213-14). The so-called "social crimes" that will be discussed in the following pages were among those infractions about which ordinary people "exercised discretion". In a similar fashion they expressed dispassionate reactions to the "wanderynge suspicious persons" mentioned by Hext, which constituted instead one of the obsessions of the political power.

2 Unless otherwise stated, Shakespeare quotations are from Shakespeare 2016.

II.i³. Elbow in *Measure for Measure* is “the poor Duke’s constable” (II. ii.45, meaning ‘the Duke’s poor constable’, of course); like Dogberry, he is characterised by malapropisms, equivocations and incapability, though he boastfully declares to have been “[e]leven years and a half” (II.i.219) a constable. A beggar (“Thou robèd man of justice”) and a Fool (“his yoke fellow of equity”) are entrusted by Lear with the imaginary arraignment of his daughters; and a servant (the disguised Kent) is “of the commition” (*King Lear*, III.vi.30-32). Other characters representing the law are only designated by their role: the Sheriff of Wiltshire in *Richard III*, the Sheriff of Herefordshire in *1Henry IV*, the Provost in *Measure for Measure* and others. There are officers who enter the stage to take some characters into custody, or to accompany others to execution. Some of their actions are perceived as dictated by respect for the law, others as a breach of (poetic) justice.

2. “Popular legalism”: authority and resistance

Law officers, however, did not have an easy task, for they had to cope with the fact that the people were not simply the passive receivers of rules imposed from above. Indeed, as Christopher Brooks argues, law was “deeply ingrained into everyday life”, for its effects permeated the life of “most men, and many women, from country squires to seamen and urban wage labourers”, who “regularly used legal instruments to record many of the most important transactions in their lives” (2008, 307; 308). Steve Hindle defines “popular legalism” as the “general familiarity with, and desire to use, judicial structures and processes” (2000, 97). This familiarity with justice determined, in turn, opinions and attitudes which were not always those of obedience and deference. In fact, Tyldesley’s and Hext’s ideals of efficiency and good management were not the only benefits the people expected to experience from the administration of justice; especially as concerned certain kinds of crime. There was in fact disagreement about what was to be considered crime and what was not, and where the

3 This scene is often quoted as expressing the limited efficiency of the Chief Justice’s intervention. On the one hand, he is unrealistically depicted as going to the Eastcheap suburb and taking part in Mrs Quickly’s rescue, but on the other, he fails to accomplish this simple mission.

law should draw the line of demarcation between the two. As John Brewer and John Styles say, "All men assumed that the law should work *pro bono publico*, but one man's view of the public good was often regarded by another as a flagrant instance of private interest" (1980, 16). Consequently, those who took up the office of JP, either out of a sense of duty, or from a desire for social promotion in their community, found themselves bound to a double allegiance: on the one hand, to the dictates of the law and, on the other, to the need to keep the people's consent. This meant that they often found themselves in the position of mediators, for "the majority of the people [...] possessed some degree of agency in constructing the terms of their inferiority" (Griffiths *et al.* 1996, 5).

Discussing these "two concepts of order", Keith Wrightson illustrates the position of those magistrates who were charged with enforcing the law, especially in small communities:

[e]nshored at the point where national legislative prescription and local customary norms intersected were the wretched village officers, the much-tried, sorely abused, essential work-horses of seventeenth-century local administration. (1980, 21-22)

Theirs was an uncomfortable position, because of the people's capability to exercise social control, but also because of the pressure exerted by the contextual circumstances. JPs were the essential link and mediators between the people – both victims and offenders – and the Assize judge who was charged with pronouncing a sentence. But, while the judge, being an outsider, was unaware of the dynamics of the social context in which he performed his intermittent office, the JP inevitably experienced "the tension between the order of the law and that of the neighbourhood [...] For the very complexity of relationships [...] made it exceedingly difficult to judge the behaviour of an individual without bringing into play a host of personal considerations" (25). One discrepancy between legal and popular views of the law concerned certain recreational activities like gaming, tippling and drinking, which were unlawful in the eyes of the law, but were considered "'good fellowship and a good means to increase a love amongst neighbours' in the eyes of villagers" (25)⁴.

4 The text quoted is Dent 1607, 165-66.

3. *The idea of "social crime"*

Recreational crimes, however, were not the only ones on which different evaluations were expressed. Indeed, "several forms of conduct classified as criminal by the courts and the statute book were regarded as legal, or at least justifiable on quasi-legitimate grounds, by large sections of the population at large" (Sharpe 1999, 175). Discussing those that have been defined as 'social crimes', Sharpe suggests, for instance, that "Rioting [...] can be understood in terms of collective actions of defence of what were perceived as rights", as were also "some aspects of poaching, especially when [...] poachers were acting in accordance with what they felt were their rights to hunt game" (198; 199).

The idea of banditry as a form of social crime was elaborated by E. J. Hobsbawm in his 1959 book *Primitive Rebels*. He says that "in one sense banditry is a rather primitive form of organized social protest", and that "in many societies [it] is regarded as such by the poor, who consequently protect the bandit, regard him as their champion, idealize him, and turn him into a myth" (2017, 17). In this work, Hobsbawm does not use the expression 'social crime'. He introduced it for discussion at a Conference held at the Polytechnic of Central London on 20 May 1972. We only have short versions of the speakers' contributions on that occasion, but Hobsbawm's definition of "social criminality" is clear:

'Social criminality' [...] occurs when there is a conflict of laws e.g. between an official and an unofficial system, or when acts of law-breaking have a distinct element of protest in them, or when they are closely linked with the development of social and political unrest. (1972, 5)

This definition implies a distinction between 'bad criminals', whose crimes do not have a social justification and 'good criminals', whose crimes are justified as some form of social protest and are endorsed as such by the community. It was precisely this distinction that, on the same occasion, was disputed by E. P. Thompson. Thompson suggested that we should "draw the distinction cautiously and with reservations" for we should consider that good and bad criminals "inhabit – although perhaps at different edges of it – a common culture, that of the exploited labouring poor" (1972, 11).

This early disagreement seems to have intimidated historians, so much so that discussions of the potentially fertile notion of "social

crime" have not produced meaningful results. When the formula is mentioned, it is usually followed by the cautions expressed by Thompson on that occasion, on the basis of the general statement that to distinguish between 'good' and 'bad' criminals would mean to ignore that all criminals were part of the same disadvantaged social group. Thus, only timid attempts at reviving the notion of social crime have been produced. Apart from the brief but useful treatment in Sharpe 1999 (176-198), we may quote an article in which J. L. McMullan mentions a few books (Hay et al.'s *Albion's Fatal Tree*, 2011; Brewer and Styles's *An Ungovernable People*, 1980; and Thompson's *Whigs and Hunters*, 1975) where, he says, "[t]he authors make strong cases for viewing some illegal acts as 'social' crimes", that is, more as "a measure of resistance and protest than deliberate spite of the law". McMullan mentions certain "'victimless' crimes such as tipping, gambling, prostitution and swearing", but also "poaching, wrecking, smuggling, coining, rioting, gleaning, and pilfering", which "were often regarded by their perpetrators and the citizenry as legitimate expressions of common rights and tradition" (1987, 255). More often, in assent with Thompson's warning, scepticism and reservations prevail. John Styles, for instance, observes that the distinction between 'social' and 'normal' crimes which tends to describe certain "illegal activities as forerunners of popular political movements" on the basis of the popular support which they enjoyed is "exceptionally dubious" (1980, 245)⁵.

The disagreement between Hobsbawm's and Thompson's views, however, was less radical than it appeared. Indeed, a year before the London Conference took place, Thompson had published an essay en-

5 An attempt at reviving the idea of social crime within the ample framework of property crimes is presented in a book by Drew Gray published in 2016. Gray affirms that "[i]n recent years, social crime as an idea has all but disappeared from the historiography", though the "class-based interpretations of history" which inspired the notion in works by such Marxist historians as Thompson and Hobsbawm "have fallen out of fashion". Gray then argues that, though seen and interpreted within a perspective different from that of class struggle, "an understanding and critique of social crime and banditry remain useful" (131). Gray also devotes a few paragraphs to a discussion of the problems which have made the idea of social crime controversial, and concludes, not differently from its first commentators, that "the borders between normal and social crime were easily crossed, and the exact topography of both is difficult to map" (135).

titled “The Moral Economy of the English Crowd” in which he discusses his idea of “moral economy” in connection with eighteenth-century food riots. Those riots, he says, were characterised by the presence of some “legitimising notion”; that is, by the rioters’ consciousness that they “were defending traditional rights or customs; and, in general, that they were supported by the wider consensus of the community”. It is evident that Thompson’s concept of “moral economy” has much in common with the idea of “social crime”. Eighteenth-century food riots, he argues, were justified by moral and social, rather than legal, motivations. They were legitimised as riots of necessity and as customary rights, not only allowed by tradition, but also supported by passages in the Scriptures. Thompson also discusses the manner and degree of political consciousness of these eighteenth-century popular actions: “While this moral economy cannot be described as ‘political’ in any advanced sense, nevertheless it cannot be described as unpolitical either, since it supposed definite, and passionately held, notions of the common” (1993, 188). Can it be held that the same “passionately held notions of the common” were present also for the people in the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods as well, at least when they were engaged in such survival crimes as food riots?

Let us read what Tim Harris says about the difficulty (and even, perhaps, the unsuitability) of establishing the date of birth of the political awareness of a certain “mass political activism”:

Those who might have believed that crowd activities and other forms of collective protest prior to the industrial revolution were essentially pre-political clearly need to think again. The idea that public opinion first came into being in the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century, or the notion that the masses first became actively engaged in politics during the 1640s as a result of the upheavals of the civil war, also appear to be in need of re-examination. (2001, 21)

It is in a text like Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus* that the representation of an organised and politically conscious early form of dissent can be discerned⁶.

6 On Thompson’s idea of ‘moral economy’ and *Coriolanus*, see Cheng 2010. Cheng convincingly argues that Thompson’s model, though constructed for the eighteenth-century food riots, may be applied to Jacobean England as well (2010, 20).

4. 'Good' and 'bad' rioters

4.1. The food riot as social crime in *Coriolanus*

To my knowledge, the first critic to read *Coriolanus* in the light of the 1607 Midland Rising was E. C. Pettet in an essay published in 1950⁷. Once established, however, this topical connection, which was strengthened by the probable date of the play's composition (1608), was deemed worthy of further elaboration in subsequent writings; and it also triggered reflections on the relationship the play is thought to illustrate between the early years of the Roman Republic and those of Jacobean politics. This critical trend tended to emphasize the issue of Shakespeare's intentions and contributed significantly to establishing a radical critique of the Coleridgean idea of Shakespeare's conservatism (though not extinguishing it) which was, for instance, perceived in the text of Philip Brockbank's influential edition of the play (1976)⁸.

My attention will be focalized on the play's first scene and, in particular, on the commoners' actions and attitudes as active and conscious protagonists of the social crime of food riot and as the recipients of the political power's response.

The main source of *Coriolanus* is "The Life of Caius Martius Coriolanus" in Thomas North's translation of Amiot's French version of

7 The Midland Rising took place in 1607 in the Counties of Northamptonshire, Warwickshire and Leicestershire. It was essentially a protest against enclosures. For specific attention to the Midland Rising in connection with the composition of *Coriolanus*, see, among others, Zeeveld 1962, Patterson 1989 (120-53), George 2004 and especially Hindle 2008. The final pages of Hindle's article (41-51) present an excellent analysis of the play's first scene.

8 The most theatrical (in all senses of the word) of these disputes was that between Günter Grass and Bertolt Brecht (*in absentia*). According to Grass, Brecht's Berliner Ensemble performance of his *Coriolan* adaptation in 1952-53 in West Berlin had misrepresented Shakespeare's play with the "intention of transforming the original [...] into a play of partisanship" (Grass 1966, xx). Grass's idea was, on the contrary, that Shakespeare's play embodies a conservative vision of the events staged. In an address given at the Berlin Academy of Arts and Letters on 23 April 1964, Grass recalled Brecht's refusal to offer support to the East German uprising of 17 June 1953. Grass represented Brecht's refusal to grant support to the rioters in his play *The Plebeians Rehearse the Uprising* (Grass 1966). See, on this issue, Brecht 1964; Patterson 1989, 121-22; 129, and Heinemann 1994.

Plutarch's *Lives* (see North 1579). As always with Shakespeare's 'historical' plays, it is vital to consider how he altered his sources. In Plutarch, the riot is determined by "the sore oppression of vsurers" (North 1579, 239). In the play, instead, the reason for the rebellion is food:

FIRST CITIZEN

You are all resolved rather to die than to famish?

ALL CITIZENS

Resolved, resolved!

(*Coriolanus*, I.i.3-4)

The citizens know that Caius Martius is "chief enemy to the people" (5-6), and the First Citizen advocates killing him. But he points out: "I speak this in hunger for bread, not in thirst for revenge" (18-19).

Shakespeare's decision to shift from usury to dearth has been rightly seen as one of the elements connecting the composition of *Coriolanus* with the events of the Midland Rising. As Hindle says, by modifying his source,

Shakespeare in effect conflated two historical rebellions (the usury riots which led to the creation of the Roman tribunate in 494 BC and the corn riots of 491 BC) into a single fictional one which, like the Midland Rising, was caused fundamentally by dearth. (2008, 41)

The Citizens who, in I.i, gather in a street of Rome, armed with agricultural weapons⁹ have in mind a project which is distinctly political: they know that it will be impossible to get grain at the right price as long as Caius Martius opposes them; therefore the rational sequence of their actions must be first to remove the main cause of the food scarcity, i.e. Coriolanus, and then negotiate with the Senate to set the right price for the grain. Hindle comments on the rationality of the Citizens' plan saying that

the actions of the 'company' represented in the opening scene of *Coriolanus* resemble less the wild irrational fury of the 'many-headed monster' repeatedly described by Martius [...] than the disciplined and orderly crowd actions in defence of the moral economy reconstructed by Edward Thompson (2008, 43).

9 The caption "Enter a Company of Murtherous Citizens, with Staues, Clubs, and other weapons" is in F1, which is the play's first edition.

Anne Barton was probably the first to attribute full political consciousness to these citizens. She argues that, while in the plays he wrote before *Coriolanus*, including *Sir Thomas More*, "it would be hard to claim that Shakespeare displays much sympathy for urban crowds", *Coriolanus*, "is unique in the canon for the tolerance and respect it accords an urban citizenry" (2004, 70). The rationality and consciousness of the rebels' action is clearly expressed by the First Citizen when he motivates their claim for what – for the rich – is "superfluity" (I.i.14).

The events of the play's first scene establish the question of the commoners' demands, their different positions with regard to the actions to be undertaken and the contrary reaction of the patricians. Later, we will hear from the Third Citizen a considered and mindful explanation of the 'many headed monster', an expression usually meant as derogatory¹⁰. The citizenry is indeed many headed, in that each of its components has an opinion of their own:

We have been called so [many-headed multitude] of many, not that our heads are some brown, some black, some abram, some bald; but that our wits are so diversely coloured. And truly I think, if all our wits were to issue out of one skull, they would fly east, west, north, south, and their consent of one direct way should be at once to all the points o' th' compass. (II.iii.13-17)

Clearly, however, they have a common grievance and they know they must reach a common decision about how to address it. Furthermore, a deeper and more pondered form of consciousness of these citizens is their awareness that their power is only formal. While they are deliberating whether or not to give their "voice" to Coriolanus to gratify his ambition to become Consul, a short exchange shows that they know that State politics is going to prevail:

FIRST CITIZEN

Once if he do require our voices, we ought not to deny him.

SECOND CITIZEN

We may, sir, if we will.

THIRD CITIZEN

We have power in ourselves to do it, but it is a power we have no power to do. (II.iii.1-4).

10 The derogatory meaning is expressed by Coriolanus in his comment: "With every minute you do change a mind" (I.i.164). On the issue of the 'many-headed multitude', see Patterson 1989, 130-31.

Even their crucial conquest, the establishment of the Tribune, which was certainly vital in the early years of the Roman Republic, turns against them, for the tribunes Sicinius and Brutus prove to be more interested in keeping their power than in defending the interests of the plebeians. It is their manipulatory action that reduces to zero the several “wits” of the rioters; and, especially, the prospect of an imminent war is fatal in decreeing the disruption of the commoners’ protest: not only because it drives the attention away from domestic problems, but also because it is considered as a means to get rid of those who foment troubles. When notice is given that “the Volsces are in arms”, Martius’s reaction is: “I am glad on’t; then we shall ha’ means to vent / Our musty superfluity” (I.i.208-10). As Curtis Breight comments,

[t]o vent Rome’s superfluity is a forthright policy, albeit curiously phrased, to exterminate Roman citizens [...] *Coriolanus* epitomizes what Shakespeare gradually, and hence safely, reveals over the course of the *Henriad* – common men as victims of war, common women and children as collateral damage. (1996, 237; 238)

But the politics of the Roman Republic, as Patterson contends, also calls into question certain aspects of the Jacobean politics:

Coriolanus seems clearly to address [a] stage of crisis brought to the public attention by the Midlands Rising of 1607, but involving larger questions, of the distributions of power in the state and of the nation’s resources.

Patterson also remarks that “several times in 1605 and 1606 James himself referred to the opposition leaders in the Commons as tribunes of the people”. Furthermore, she adds,

Only if one perceives how this crucial moment in the development of Rome as a republic marked the convergence of class interests and constitutional theory does the choice of the *Coriolanus* story seem inevitable for Shakespeare, at this stage of his development and that of the Jacobean state. (1989, 123)

Indeed, Patterson concludes, “for the first time, Shakespeare’s audience is invited to contemplate an alternative political system” (127).

4.2. Menenius and the belly fable

The political and conceptual difference between the 'good' rioters in *Coriolanus* and the 'bad' rioters we will meet in *Sir Thomas More* is illustrated by the arguments deployed by the defenders of legality to appease the rebels: Menenius in *Coriolanus* and More in *Sir Thomas More*¹¹. But they also appear in the dialogues among the rioters themselves.

In the brief first exchange between the Citizens in *Coriolanus*, the argument of the mutiny is clearly introduced by three parties: First Citizen, Second Citizen and All Citizens. The argumentative structure of the exchange is that of *antithesis*, a rhetorical device which allows the display, in the same communicative context, of distinct opinions on a given issue. First Citizen and All Citizens have the same idea about their present tribulation: they are "resolved rather to die than to famish" (I.i.3); and are also firm in blaming Coriolanus for the high price of grain. First Citizen is resolute, and All Citizens agree: "Let us kill him, and we'll have corn at our own price" (I.i.8). Second Citizen, at this stage, presents an antithetical opinion about how to proceed: he invites his companions to consider Coriolanus's military merits: "Consider you what services he has done for his country?" (I.i.22). In this exchange, the antithesis between these two visions is not solved, but the issue has been clearly set, and the mutiny has been presented as an instance of social insurrection. Menenius, who arrives while the Citizens are resolving to go to the Capitol, knows well what the audience also perceives at this point, that is, that the Citizens' dissent is based on plausible grounds (indeed, the plausible grounds of their 'moral economy'). Being conscious of the complexity of the situation, Menenius tries various verbal registers and different rhetorical and narrative strategies. One thing to be noted is the way in which Menenius's forms of address are distributed in his first encounter with the Citizens. He is obliged to sound captivating to confirm his reputation as "one that has always loved the people" (I.i.38-39). The first address he uses is "my countrymen" (I.i.41), a form that tends to create a mood of collaboration on an equal footing. The sharp reply of Second Citizen (note that Second Citizen, who had been the most accommodating,

11 Vittorio Gabrieli and Giorgio Melchiori note that More's speech to the rebels is "[u]sually compared with Menenius's speech in *Coriolanus*" (1990, 102n).

starts to get hostile after Menenius's first inquiring speech) triggers a more profuse (and thus more devious) chain of addresses: "masters", "my good friends", "mine honest neighbours" (47) before he utters an apparently friendly warning which is also readable as a threat: "Will you undo yourselves?" (I.i.48). It is again Second Citizen's reply, "We cannot, sir. We are undone already" (49), which catches Menenius off-guard. Addressing the Citizens as simply "friends" (50) and trying to absolve the patricians of responsibility for the dearth they are suffering from, he is forced to appeal to an unconvincing religious argument: "For the dearth, / The gods, not the patricians, make it" (57-58). Again, Second Citizen enumerates with ruthless precision the patricians' and the Senate's abuses. Menenius's following reference to the citizens is the unfriendly designation "wondrous malicious" (71). At this point, he resorts to the 'belly fable', playing the card of his cultural and rhetorical superiority to show that the State (the belly) is not, as the Citizens seem to believe, the body organ that swallows all the food to its sole profit, but "the store-house and the shop / Of the whole body" (115-16), which, the belly says,

MENENIUS

[...]

I send [...] through the rivers of your blood
 Even to the court – the heart – to th' seat o'th' brain;
 And, through the cranks and offices of man,
 The strongest nerves, and small inferior veins
 From me receive that natural competency
 Whereby they live.
 (I.i.117-22)

It is worth noting that, while according to Plutarch-North "these persuasions pacified the people" (North 1595, 238), in the play the telling of the fable is frequently interrupted by Second Citizen with impatient comments ("You're long about it", 108; "Ay, sir, well, well", 124) and that nowhere the Citizens manifest assent to its argumentation. Furthermore, Second Citizen points out that the simple tale is meaningless unless a proper interpretation of the text is provided: "It was an answer. How *apply* you this?" (129, my emphasis), he says. At this stage, Menenius has run out of patience, and his language reveals his true feelings. Second Citizen is a "rascal" and "worst in

blood to run", 141); and the whole company are Rome's "rats" (144). Indeed, far from placating the commoners' protest, as Andrew Gurr says, Menenius's fable

is an extraordinary demonstration of his contempt for his hearers and his faith in verbal smokescreens that he should offer this defence of the Senate to citizens whose whole complaint [...] is that the Senate is refusing to distribute its stores [...]. Menenius is not offering a rationale of the state as a single natural organism so much as conducting a cynical delaying action until help in the form of his fellow patrician Caius Marcius arrives. (1975, 67).

In the following action of the play, Menenius will have ample space to show his contempt for the commoners, overlooking the fact that their resistance was crucial for obtaining the institution of the Tribune¹².

4.3. "the worst may day for the strangers" (Sir Thomas More, 1.143)

The Ill May Day Riot of 1517, as staged in *Sir Thomas More*, was not determined by hunger¹³. It was, instead, a violent explosion of xenophobia against the Lombards (or Flemish, or French), fuelled by the fact that one of them, Barde, had attempted to ravish Doll Williamson, the carpenter's wife, and another, Cavaler, had taken from Doll's husband a pair of doves the carpenter had bought; but the strangers are also accused indiscriminately of other offences determined by their mere presence: for taking away work, food and money from the locals, even for importing unwholesome food and spreading strange infections (6.11-16; 14-21)¹⁴. "Must these wrongs be thus endured?"

12 W. G. Zeeveld comments on the institution of the Tribune saying that the tribunes "are the one clear structural innovation in *Coriolanus*. For good or ill, in them is embodied a new power in the commonwealth, and a threat to its traditional balance" (1962, 323).

13 The main source of the play is Raphael Holinshed's *Third Volume of Chronicles* (1586). In this source, however, the role played in the riot by More is almost null. Unless otherwise stated, quotations from *Sir Thomas More* are from Munday et al. 2011. References are by Scene number followed by line number(s).

14 Jowett's comment in the footnote to 6.14-15 is: "The effect of the foreigners' diet on the body is correlated with the xenophobic idea that their presence infects the body politic." For the Londoners' xenophobia and the Ill May Day Riot, see Archer 2000, 30-31. Sharpe reports a comment by a Venetian ambassador about

says John Lincoln (1.37-38). Clearly, in *Sir Thomas More*, the revolt is not an action of “defence of what [are] perceived as rights” (Sharpe 1999, 198). The rioters know well that their action is illegal and that it is a violation of the principle of obedience¹⁵. Furthermore, while the revolt in *Coriolanus* is represented as an organised uprising, that of the citizens in *Sir Thomas More* is undetermined as regards both their complaints and the action to be undertaken. Also the kind of offences the citizens believe to be suffering is not clearly expounded: even price increases are seen as a future possibility, not as a present predicament. It is again Lincoln who poses the issue clearly:

LINCOLN

[...] He that will not see a red herring at a Harry groat, butter at eleven pence a pound, meal at nine shillings a bushel and beef at four nobles a stone, list to me.

followed by a comment in agreement by George Betts:

GEORGE BETTS

It will come to that pass *if strangers be suffered*. (6.1-6, my emphasis)

But, apart from the motivations at the basis of the revolt, there are also other elements which hinder an interpretation of the play's III May Day Riot as a social crime: none of the rioters' rights has been imperilled; rather, it is the community of foreign labourers that is being threatened with expulsion. Also Doll's role in the play is at odds

a trait of the character of the English: “One of their salient features was their xenophobia” (Sharpe 1988, 4).

15 Interestingly, Jowett notes that, in Shakespeare's revision of Sc. 6, “the strangers have ceased to be arrogant abusers of privilege and are presented instead as victims of prejudice” (2011, 47). Indeed, in *More's* suasive speech, they have become the “wretched strangers” (6.85). The most convincing argument to illustrate this changed perspective has been offered by Giorgio Melchiori. Melchiori takes into consideration what he believes is an “inconsistency”, notable especially in the three pages attributed to Shakespeare. In spite of the remarkable coherence of the text as a whole, Melchiori argues, while in the original version of the manuscript “in the hand of Anthony Munday the London citizens are shown as justified in their resentment against the aliens”, they “become in the hand D addition an irresponsible rabble in the hands of a clownish demagogue” (1986, 170; 171).

with what we know of women's participation in riots at the time. Peter Clark says that the explanation of women's active role in riots

is probably two-fold: firstly, women enjoyed greater general immunity from the law than men; secondly, there may have been a special immunity for women who were unable to fulfil their familial role of feeding their household because of food shortage. (1976, 376-77)

On the contrary, Doll joins the protest (indeed, she seems to have initiated it) because her honour, and therefore also that of her husband, has been offended. Nonetheless, she is the most eloquent in her praise of More's condemnation of the rioters' "mountainish inhumanity" (6.156)¹⁶, and is won over by the sole assurance of obtaining the king's pardon:

DOLL

Well, Sheriff More, thou hast done more with thy good words than all they could do with their weapons. Give me thy hand. Keep thy promise now for the King's pardon, or, by the Lord, I'll call thee a plain cony-catcher. (6.187-191)

But how did More win the commoners' approval? What was his (rhetorical) strategy compared with Menenius's? If we look at the appellations More employs to address the citizens, we note that, unlike Menenius, he is not trying to ingratiate himself to obtain their sympathy. The first, neutral, appellation is to Lincoln, the rioters' leader: "You that have voice and credit with the number" (6.60); then, seeing that Lincoln is unable to pacify the rebels, he comments on Lincoln's followers as performing a "rough" and "riotous" action (6.64). The most favourable address he uses ("Good masters", 6.66) is only slightly more accommodating. After chiding them for the disturbance of the peace, he receives from John Betts the contents of their request, which is

GEORGE BETTS

[...] the removing of the strangers, which cannot choose but much advantage the poor handicrafts of the City. (6.80-82)

16 The adjective "mountainish" represents the solution of a textual crux, for the manuscript presents "momtanish". On the emendations which have been suggested, including the present "mountainish", see Wentersdorf 2006.

Betts's reply suggests to More the following argument to be developed, that of the consequences of the strangers' removal. The strongest argument deployed by More is not the moral consideration that the strangers deserve the rioters' pity, but the clearly political consideration that the rioters' action will in the end turn to the detriment of the local labourers' rights for, he says, with their inhumane request, they "had taught / How insolence and strong hand should prevail, / How order should be quelled" (6.91-93). Doll's comment: "Before God, that's as true as the gospel" (6.99) suggests to More the development of the religious argument. But, unlike Menenius, who irrationally evokes "the gods" as being responsible for the dearth, More develops the political argument of disobedience, for being disobedient to the king means to "rise 'gainst God" (6.120). More then depicts what would be the citizens' case if they found themselves, as traitors, in a foreign country "that not adheres to England" (6.145): "This is the strangers' case / And this your mountainish inhumanity" (6.155-56), he concludes. More's harangue unequivocally qualifies the Ill May Day rebels as 'bad' rioters. After all, protesting against the inhuman patricians as in *Coriolanus*, or against other commoners as in *More* are by no means equally defensible. The *More* rioters, it appears, cannot be justified as performing an organized form of 'social' protest. The introduction of a fictional comic character, Clown Betts, further abases the political standing of the protest. No legitimising notion can justify the rioters in the Ill May Day Riot scene of *Sir Thomas More*.

5. *Property and justice*

In 1975, E. P. Thompson published a book on the "Black Act", an exceptionally severe law that was passed in May 1723, whose core was the punishment for poaching, that is, illegal hunting and fishing as performed by armed and masked men. The "Black Act" notably tightened previous statutes, broadening the cases in which the death penalty was formerly prescribed. Thompson opened the Introduction to his book with a general statement on the legislation concerning property: "The British state, all eighteenth-century legislators agreed, existed to preserve the property and, incidentally, the lives and liberties, of the propertied. But there are more ways than one of defending property" and, in the early years of the eight-

eenth century, "[i]t was still not a matter of course that the legislature should, in every session, attach the penalty of death to new descriptions of offense" (1975, 21).

One of the legends of Shakespeare's biography is the story that he left Stratford for London following his illegal killing of a deer on the property of Sir Thomas Lucy. If he was really involved in this deed, then it must have left a faint memory in his mind, for the crime of poaching appears with some prominence only once in his plays, and in a textual context which is apparently the least apt to represent a crime that, even before the "Black Act" was issued, was punished with exceptional severity. The play is *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, one of the merriest and seemingly least problematic of Shakespeare's comedies.

The Merry Wives of Windsor is one of Shakespeare's plays which have a marked *in medias res* beginning. There are three characters at the opening of the action, who we are going to know as Shallow, a JP in Gloucestershire, Sir Hugh Evans, a Welsh Priest, and Abraham Slender, Shallow's nephew. The first words are pronounced by Justice Shallow: "Sir Hugh, persuade me not. I will make a Star Chamber matter of it" (I.i.1). What follows in the same exchange gives us further information about what has been discussed before the opening of the play: "it" seems to refer to an abuse, and the perpetrator is probably Sir John Falstaff, named here for the first time by Evans: "If Sir John Falstaff have committed disparagement unto you [...]" (24), while the victim is "Sir Robert Shallow, Esquire" (3). The content of the abuse seems to be serious, for Shallow is determined to have his offense avenged at the highest degree, that of the Star Chamber. We will soon know that the "abuse" was Falstaff's poaching on the private lands of Shallow.

Opening speeches in plays are usually crucial in view of the future developments of the action. The most evocative of Shakespeare's *in medias res* openings is probably Antonio's first speech in *The Merchant of Venice*: "In sooth, I know not why I am so sad" (I.i.1). Antonio further elaborates his meaning saying that sadness and melancholy seem to him not to have a palpable reason, which makes the friends to whom he is talking, and who seem to have previously questioned him about his melancholy, suggest various plausible reasons for his sadness. Though the enigma is not solved in the same scene, a significant future development is clearly foreshadowed.

As regards *The Merry Wives*'s incipit, we are misled into thinking that the event to be made into a Star Chamber issue is going to receive a significant development. After all, Shallow – as we will know from what follows in the same exchange – is not only the abused person, but also a man of justice and a man of honour, a JP and an Esquire with a regular coat of arms, and he seems to be determined to avenge the offence he has suffered, the “disparagements” (24) “Sir John Falstaff have committed” (23-24): “the Council shall hear it; it is a riot” (27), Shallow threatens¹⁷.

Soon after, in fact, rather incongruously, Shallow's purpose is dismissed, qualified by Evans as “pribbles and prabbles” (43) and substituted by what Evans introduces simply as “another device in my prain” (33), the suggestion that Shallow's nephew Slender should marry Anne Page¹⁸. When Master Page, Anne's father, enters, the issue of the “disparagement” is resumed, although indirectly. Master Page greets Shallow by thanking him “for my venison” (57-58); Shallow replies with a rather ambiguous statement: “I wished your venison better; it was ill-killed” (60), which may mean that it was not killed in the proper manner or that it had been taken illegally, that is, by poaching.

But the exchange also serves to outline a certain social context. As Christopher Hill says, “[v]enison became a social and prestige symbol. It was essential to hospitality, and for giving as gifts” (1996, 103). Manning, in turn, says that “gifts of venison [...] allowed a magnate to display his power and largesse” (1993, 6). The *nouveau riche* Page also possesses a hunting dog which, unfortunately, having been set on a deer, had been outrun. Slender introduces the dog saying: “How does your fallow greyhound, sir? I heard say he was outrun on Cotswold” (I.i.66-67). The legal possession of a hunting dog was itself a mark of privilege: “No one without a sufficient estate was allowed

17 The Star Chamber seems to have been commonly used for prosecuting the crime of poaching. As Roger Manning says, “uring the reigns of James I and Charles I [...] the Court of Star Chamber saw a veritable flood of prosecutions for hunting offences” (1993, 1).

18 Patriarchy and matriarchy are at difference as concerns their idea of Anne's most convenient marriage match. Anne's father, backed by Evans, inclines towards Shallow's slow-witted nephew Slender, while her mother endorses the cause of Doctor Caius, a choleric French physician. In the end, both father's and mother's will are going to be defeated by Anne's independent decision.

to keep a hunting dog which had not been 'lawed' or expediated. This meant amputating either three claws of anterior feet or the left claws of all four feet" (Manning 1993, 71). This practice, Thompson says, meant "laming the dog so badly that it could not chase deer" (1975, 31)¹⁹. Hunting was actually a highly discriminatory social and economic privilege: "The qualified person", established by rank and income, "could [...] hunt where he wished, while the unqualified could not even take game on his own land" (Sharpe 1999, 180). Breaking the game laws, when performed by the poor, can therefore be described as a social crime because, by poaching, the poor man "asserted a set of attitudes to at least one form of property which was at variance with that of his social superiors" (181), not least because the common property of wild animals was advocated by the Bible (Gen. 1: 25-28). In fact, as Manning says,

Despite the many attempts by monarchs and aristocrats to preserve beast, fish, and fowl for their own sport, the popular belief persisted that wild animals could not be possessed and the places where they lived or swam should not be enclosed. (1993, 61)

Though his analysis is devoted to game in the eighteenth century, some of Douglas Hay's reflections may be considered as general issues. He argues, for instance, that "the great majority of men in rural England considered the game laws rank injustice", and that "[t]he conviction of middling men that an arbitrary property qualification was oppression was undoubtedly held also by the mass of labourers and cottagers" (2011, 207). As Andy Wood says, poaching, as well as "the right to glean for scraps of corn [...] after the harvest had been taken" were considered by the poor as customary rights which "sometimes extended into enclosed, privately held land" (2002, 83-84). On the contrary, as Manning points out, for the law

a trespass was committed when a hunter broke the pales and entered another person's deer park, and this was actionable. Tumultuous hunting by three or more persons constituted a riot, and the Court of Star Chamber always took an interest in any breach of public order. (1993, 59)

19 Incidentally, Thompson devotes Part 1 of his *Whigs and Hunters* (1975) to hunting in Windsor Forest, which is where the events of *Merry Wives* take place.

But in the context in which the events of *Merry Wives* develop, Falstaff's stealing of a deer, far from being considered as a social crime, is considered as a personal insult and as an attack on a social privilege²⁰.

When Falstaff appears, Shallow pronounces his accusation: "Knight, you have beaten my men, killed my deer, and broke open my lodge" (I.i.85-86), to which Falstaff, backed by Nym, Pistol and Bardolph, though confessing to having committed the crimes of which Shallow accuses him, replies by displaying an array of linguistic tricks and equivoques. In addition, it appears that Shallow's nephew Slender has also been made drunk and then beaten by the gang. This, too, Falstaff confesses: "Slender, I broke your head. What matter have you against me?" (I.i.95-96). As the confession is pronounced in the presence of a JP, it manifests Falstaff's assurance of his impunity. Shallow, in turn, being a JP himself, should have reacted not only for having been personally offended, but also as an officer used to hearing accusations of poaching.

What kind of social scenario does *Merry Wives* I.i. present to its audience? It is clear that Falstaff and his companions have not committed a social crime owing to their consideration of game laws as an instance of "rank injustice". They are 'bad' normal criminals, for their illegal hunting is not, as Jeffrey Theis says, an act "about finding dinner" (2001, 47), or an act which "directly challenges one of the foundations of the aristocracy – the right to hold and control land in the form of private property" (53). Rather, as we know from 1 and 2*Henry IV*, Falstaff is a social stereotype, that of one who profits from his vicinity to the monarchy, the aristocracy and, now, the *nouveaux riches* who have succeeded in attaining the hunting privilege.

It should be pointed out, however, that the riot Falstaff and his gang performed by breaking into Shallow's property is all the more serious for it challenges the sovereign's authority in the person of a magistrate. But for the magistrate who prides himself on being the keeper of the rolls ("Custalorum" and "Rotulorum": I.i.5, 6), the office is mainly a mark of social promotion, with no duty attached. Master Page, in turn, is anxious to display his privilege, shown by the gift of deer he has received from Shallow, and therefore he puts

20 Manning says that "many of the recipients of royal game keepers' warrants were undoubtedly justices of the peace" (1993, 65).

a stop to any possible further altercation, saying: "I hope we shall drink down all unkindness" (I.i.151-52). Thus, Falstaff's victim and he, the offender, accept Page's invitation to enjoy the "hot venison pasty to dinner" (150-51) at his table, eating the "ill kill'd" deer (60). It is clear, at this point, that the initial trouble is not going to become a Star Chamber issue. After all, as JP Tyldesley complains, there will be "no punishment to the Redress" of unlawful shooting (Tawny and Power 1935, 1:331). Disguising a complex social problem with the vesture of satire, Shakespeare may seem to belittle the complex issue of illegal poaching and its social and criminal implications. But satire is a biting though humorous vehicle of censure, and the audience cannot but perceive that few of the comedy's characters are immune to its bite.

Allusions to poaching, however, remain disseminated throughout the text as verbal reminders of the gang's riot. Such allusions appear after the topics of hunting and poaching seem to have been dropped. Though now located in a non-specific linguistic or semantic context, they may not have escaped the audience's perception precisely owing to the people's familiarity with legal issues. Simple says, for instance, that Shallow's nephew Slender "hath fought with a warrener" (I.iv.22), that is, with a keeper of a game park; which means that he, too, was presumably caught poaching. Pistol's definition of hope in II.i.84 ("Hope is a curtal dog in some affairs") alludes to the amputation of dogs' claws to render them unfit for hunting. The exclamation of the Host in II.iii.68: "Cried game?" is equivalent to 'The hunt is up'. While he is waiting in the forest for the arrival of Mrs. Ford, Falstaff, disguised, considers his situation as follows: "I am here a Windsor stag, and the fattest, I think, i'th' forest" (V.v.9-10). Arriving at the appointment, Mistress Ford welcomes Falstaff saying: "Art thou there my dear, my male deer?" (V.v.13), to which Falstaff replies: "My doe with the black scut" (V.v.14). When Mrs Page also arrives, Falstaff believes he may manage both women: "Divide me like a bribed buck" (V.v.18), he says (here "bribed" means "stolen"). Later, Mistress Ford's appellation to Falstaff is: "I will always count you my deer" (V.v.10708). Finally, Falstaff's last speech: "When night-dogs run, all sorts of deer are chased" (V.v.206) seems to set the scenario for the gang's future "disparagements".

6. Conclusion

The “Statute of Artificers” was issued in 1563, one year after Tyldesley wrote his letter of complaint to Cecil. It had been preceded by many norms concerning work, labourers, wages, training, etc. It was probably also following such complaints as Tyldesley’s that a comprehensive law was drawn up, “digested and reduced into one sole lawe and statute” (Tawney and Power 1935, 1:338). It gave to justice officers a freer hand to prosecute labourers who did not comply with its norms and to labourers a worse freedom of movement and a stricter assessment (downwards) of pay rates²¹. There was more than enough to provoke the social crime of riot.

Though the texts I have been discussing present different forms of social crime, they have in common the essence of their medium: they are neither ‘historical’ in the full sense of the word, nor fully fictional. They tend, rather, to construct imaginatively (at least in part) facts which *may have happened*. The relationship between history and fiction, or imagined reality, in historical writings has been amply discussed by historians, producing a notable range of reflection which is however far from settled. I will quote the thoughts of two historians who have reflected on this issue. Their influence transpires in many ways throughout the storyline of the present article.

In the Introduction to a collection of essays in which he considers the categories of “true”, “false” and “fictive”, Carlo Ginzburg suggests that, instead of blurring “the borders between fictional and historical narrations”, we should view “the relation between the two as a competition for the representation of reality” (2012, 2). He, then, discusses the possibility of “isolating fragments of truth”, even of a deeper kind of truth, disseminated by either voluntary or involuntary traces in a novel or in a romance. Certain works of fiction, therefore, if “not as historical documents,” may be read “as texts impregnated with history” (4).

Christopher Hill, in turn, affirms that “[m]ost state papers are work of fiction”, and that “[g]overnment statements are usually intended to deceive”. Therefore, in order to give a voice to the majority of the people who “were inarticulate and remained silent”, “those who had no share in making laws, who were legislated against”, we should turn

²¹ The Act was repealed only in 1813.

to such texts as “ballads, plays and other popular literary forms neglected by real historians”, which may “provide fresh insight” (1996, 4). Literary, or quasi-literary texts, therefore, may be read as *alternative sources*, differently, but no less ‘historical’ than state documents.

It is evident that what is found in such documents as the JPs’ letters to Cecil or those encountered in the pages of the “Statute of Artificers” are dictated by variously prejudiced points of view, various intentions to deceive, in Hill’s words. A wish to appear overdiligent in the performance of their duties may have coloured the JPs’ letters to Cecil both by an excess of concern and by a harsher description of crimes and criminals. (We know, for instance, that Hext’s fraternities of “wandering suspicious persons” are an invention of pamphleteers.) And in the statutes, on the government’s part, the need to be (and to appear as) strict defenders of the public good may have suggested a similar excess in alarming the people about criminals and in decreeing penalties. State papers, as Hill says, “at best [...] make assumptions which it is difficult for us to recover now” (1996, 4).

The events in *Coriolanus* and *Sir Thomas More* are proved true by historical sources, but in those texts we encounter “a deeper kind of truth” precisely when historical sources are modified, or elaborated. The concentration of various events and the alteration of Plutarch’s report on the motivations of the revolt in *Coriolanus* and the expansion of More’s role as compared with Holinshed’s report in *Sir Thomas More* represent voluntary attributions of meanings which the source had not intended.

Merry Wives, instead, is one of a small number of Shakespeare’s plays (together, for instance, with *Love’s Labour’s Lost* and *The Tempest*) for which no convincing possible source has been identified. All the same, the comedy is “impregnated with history”, or disseminated with traces of contemporary topicality. The political relevance of the issue of poaching, though introduced in a comedic context, is shown by the fact that, though seemingly obscured after the first scene, it remains disseminated throughout the text until the last of Falstaff’s speeches: “When night-dogs run, all sort of deer are chased” (V.v.206). Indeed, an authoritative remark seems to confirm my reading: “[t]he first act of *Merry Wives* alone contains more life and reality than all German literature” (Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx, 1873; quoted in Taylor *et al.* 2016, 1757).

In the last scene of the play, a luminous act of disobedience obfuscates the display of opportunism and social aspirations that constitutes one of the action's subtexts: Anne refuses both the pretenders her parents want to force on her and imposes her will to marry Fenton, the "poor" gentleman she loves.

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