

Anonymity in Early
Modern England
“What’s In A Name?”

Edited By

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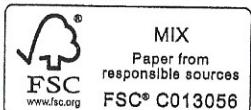
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Chapter 3

What Wrote *Woodstock*

Thomas Cartelli

1.

Attribution studies tend to operate at the speculatively charged margins of the greater metropolitan Shakespeare industry. The dedicated attributionist invests considerable scholarly capital in the effort of “proving” that Middleton is the *real* author of *The Revenger’s Tragedy* or *The Family of Love*, or that Shakespeare is *essentially* the author of *Sir Thomas More*, or (even more painstakingly) that Shakespeare’s hand is most prominent in this or that act of *Pericles* while Fletcher’s imprint emerges more clearly in one or two others. As Marcy North acknowledges, in her groundbreaking book *The Anonymous Renaissance* (2003), the scholarly returns on a convincingly argued case of attribution can be quite high. As the recent release of Middleton’s *Collected Works* demonstrates, a successful argument for adding a play to the Middleton canon may not only lead to its re-publication and theatrical revival, but makes the play newly available for critical attention, and encourages a re-examination of how its inclusion affects our understanding of the other plays already assembled under the Middleton *imprimatur*.

However, given the largely lackluster response of most Shakespeare scholars and critics to the determined efforts of attributionists to claim a place at the table for plays like *Edmund Ironside*, *Cardenio*, and the play variously titled *Thomas of Woodstock*, *Woodstock: A Moral History*, and, more troublingly, *1 Richard II*, one may conclude that attribution studies more often functions as a field commanded by a brave but arguably insular band of scholar-enthusiasts quixotically bent on breaching the walls of an established canon that may occasionally bend but seldom opens its gates. Like the changeling boy in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, anonymous playtexts variably serve as objects of desire or neglect for a variety of differently motivated claimants. Some of these claimants wish merely to give the orphan-text a competitive place in the canonical hierarchy (and only incidentally to make their names as editors or scholars in the process). Others more aggressively seek to affiliate the unclaimed text with the more established spawn of a powerful author-father (and in so doing to extend the horizons of that author’s *oeuvre* into newly annexed territory). A third class of attributionists may more modestly seek to enrich the comparatively smaller and poorer domain of a rival playwright, who thus becomes better equipped to compete with his stronger opponent on the fields of course syllabi, scholarly monographs, and in revised volumes of *Collected Works*. These three tendencies each partake of motives that have their analogues

in family and social relationships, the first being (stereotypically) maternal or liberatory, the second paternalist or imperializing, with the third bearing an odd resemblance to the practice of affirmative action and theories of distributive justice. The first seeks to give the canonically marginalized text a fighting chance to make it on its own; the second to invest it with the influence and prestige of a powerful father and supply it additionally with a set of celebrated cousins, second cousins, and siblings; the third to give it a smaller family or sponsoring party to belong to, but one also comparatively (if not comparably) rich in achievement, influence, and tradition. We may consider, for example, the different fates that might await plays like *Arden of Faversham* (1592) or *Woodstock* (1595) should they be successfully annexed to the great house of Shakespeare, the “ruin’d choirs” of Marlowe, or the guildhall of Dekker.¹ Neither play would arguably do much to enrich the Shakespeare canon, however welcomed they might be to the fold (though they might do much to enrich the professional fortune(s) of the successful attributor). Both might do considerably more for Marlowe, but given the comparative conservatism of these plays’ critiques of social mobility and social upstarts, one would, upon annexation, have to rewrite most essays and books on the playwright’s work. The case is somewhat altered with respect to Dekker, whose *oeuvre* would notably be refreshed and made considerably more provocative by such additions, which would likely jump-start that “proliferation of meaning” normally precluded by the imposition of claimed authorship on a formerly, comparatively free-floating anonymous text (Foucault 119).

The recent revival of interest in biographical criticism, literary biography, and in the shaping of literary careers by early modern writers (see, for example, the recent publications of Patrick Cheney, Katherine Duncan-Jones, and Lukas Erne, among others) has tended to erode the consensus that began to form in the 1980s around ideas associated with the death of the author and the social production of literary texts. Indeed, we see in the work of Cheney in particular pronounced symptoms of the tendency to turn the author into “a functional principle” whose critically outlined career path becomes the river into which the tributary streams of his collected works predictably empty (Foucault 119 and Cheney, *Marlowe’s Counterfeit Profession*). While no doubt tempting, this tendency has dangerous implications for early modern texts collected under the auspices of “Anonymous.” Because such texts cannot be contextualized in such ways, they not only run the risk of becoming increasingly marginalized, but of being vulnerable to, and made available for, critical appropriation into a “known” author’s *oeuvre*. As Marcy North notes: “The association of the Renaissance with self-naming, print dissemination of knowledge, and anonymous authorship has undoubtedly encouraged the view that anonymous texts from the period are far inferior to those of known authors,” adding that “The privilege granted to the named author extends as well to the

¹ Trying to identify with any degree of certainty the dates of first performance and production of most plays of this period relies as much on inspired guesswork as on painstaking documentation. I have consequently chosen to provide the plays that enter into the body of my discussion only with the dates of their first known publication.

recovered author, who is credited with having more authorial intention and artistic merit than those who remain anonymous” (North 11). There is nothing terribly mysterious about this practice, apart from the fact that it is the very mystery of the conditions of anonymous production which remain in danger of being neglected or ignored. As Foucault observes:

We now ask of each poetic or fictional text: From where does it come, who wrote it, when, under what circumstances, or beginning with what design? The meaning ascribed to it and the status of value accorded it depend on the manner in which we answer these questions. And if a text should be discovered in a state of anonymity—whether as a consequence of an accident or the author’s explicit wish—the game becomes one of rediscovering the author. Since literary anonymity is not tolerable, we can accept it only in the guise of an enigma. (Foucault 109–10).

The intolerability of anonymity is, of course, a comparatively recent phenomenon. As North has demonstrated, it could actually be considered a preferred mode of literary production throughout the middle ages and the early modern period: “Rather than falling out of fashion with the development of print, Anonymous was welcomed into the Renaissance as an old friend and new ally, occasionally as an aggravation or threat, but more often as a familiar and useful collaboration in both the growing print industry and the manuscript trade” (North 5). Indeed, in the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods, I count roughly seventy known plays and masques (equal in number to the dramatic output of Marlowe, Shakespeare, Jonson, and Webster combined) that lack a consensually agreed-upon author. While many of these plays have been associated—as sources, early versions, “pirated” editions, or textual variants—with the work of celebrated playwrights, many (including the most oft-played, *Mucedorus*) have not, and for that reason have either been consigned to oblivion or live on mainly as oft-studied enigmas and, hence, as continuing fodder for future generations of attributionists. In this respect, a better (and far more daunting) question than *who* wrote *Woodstock* would be *why* did the *Woodstock* or *Mucedorus* author(s) *choose* anonymity, or *why* was anonymity *chosen* for them?

Having made a generally prejudicial case against attributionism, I may well be asked what, apart from the appreciation of “anonymity’s legible functions and meanings as well as its mysteries” (North 12), is gained by privileging the anonymity of authorship? In addition to gaining the advantage of what Foucault terms the “proliferation of meanings” that generally follows the absenting of the “ideological figure” of the author from the mix (Foucault 119), I would place in the “gained” column an opportunity for a criticism focused on the contextual or social production of texts to claim a provisional interpretive priority over author-centered methodologies; an opportunity to read the text against the grain of what is known or knowable about contemporaneous authors, thought or thinkable about their established *oeuvre*; and an opportunity to establish the existence, and promote the cultural agency of, a critically emergent “new” or counter-voice, one that has

not yet been claimed by, or fully integrated into, scholarly discourse and debate. I would also add to the “gained” column the opportunity to inquire generally and specifically into the related questions of why some authors chose anonymity and why anonymity was chosen for others.

For such reasons among others, I am happy to claim that Anonymous is the author not only of *Woodstock* but of at least two other plays of the 1590s specifically devoted to the reign of Richard II and those of his usurping successor’s son—that is, *The Life and Death of Jack Straw* (1594) and *The Famous Victories of Henry V* (1598)—and all but officially accountable for a third contemporaneous play devoted to the period, *Sir John Oldcastle* (1600), given that play’s collaborative authorship. The fact that the first three editions of Shakespeare’s initial contribution to the subject—*Richard II* (1597)—were famously censored, and that a non-dramatic account of Henry IV’s life published by John Hayward in 1599 led to its author’s imprisonment, would indicate the political volatility of the subject matter in question. Such instances also indicate that trying to ascertain *what wrote Woodstock* may constitute a more productive line of inquiry than trying to determine who wrote this remarkably suggestive play: a play which, despite textual evidence attesting both to its formal censorship and apparent popularity, never found its way into print and survives only in manuscript form, with its last pages regrettably missing.²

Some of the questions I intend to explore in the process of making a case for the contextual “authorship” or social production of *Woodstock* are: How do we assemble and read this play’s unusually mixed social and political positioning? From what point(s) of view does it seem to speak? Whose (class, social, political) interests does it seek to defend, protect, promote? How does it situate itself in relation to ongoing debates about order and disorder, deference and disobedience, social mobility and established structures of rank and authority? How, where, and when does it enter into conversation with other plays of the period (*Arden of Faversham*, Shakespeare’s *2 Henry VI* [1594], and Marlowe’s *Edward II* [1594]) which address some of the same questions? How does it specifically operate as a reading of a particular moment in the history of the uneasy relations that obtained among English kings, their favorites, and their aristocratic rivals and protectors? How does it operate as a staged history of the late Elizabethan present, that is, as implied commentary on the relations between England’s queen, her appointed administrators, and her disappointed courtiers? And, finally, how does it enter into conversation with other anonymous and attributed texts of the period which specifically address the matter of Richard II?

² William B. Long attests to *Woodstock*’s popularity on the grounds that “the manuscript is now thumbed and stained from playhouse use, not merely decayed from several centuries of poor storage.” He also contends that “The play was revived on two occasions [ca. 1604 and 1633] after the creation of the original playbook; with each revival, new marginalia were added, so that this manuscript provides insight into theatrical marking practices in three periods. It is probable that composition and original production occurred in the season of 1594–1595. Playwright or playwrights, company, and theater performance of the original are unknown” (Long 95–6).

2.

Woodstock stakes out a complicated position in a conversation that is also prominently staged in *2 Henry VI* and *Edward II*, and to a different extent in *Richard II*. Whereas in *2 Henry VI* the most serious antagonists to right rule in the state are drawn from a cast of royal, aristocratic, and ecclesiastical characters (with the threat embodied by Jack Cade and his cohorts arguably being more theatrically than thematically significant to the ongoing courtly contention), in *Woodstock* disorder draws both its energy and character from its weak king’s licensing of the unrestrained opportunism of “social upstarts”, two of whom (Nimble and Tresilian) are significantly drawn from the ranks of the legal profession. The king’s reliance on some of the same named favorites also plays a consequential role in *Richard II*. But that play is arguably less interested in the influence they exert on Richard—which effectively concludes by the end of the play’s second act—than it is in exploring Richard’s extended response to his sudden loss of power and contention with his usurping successor, Bolingbroke, in whom *Woodstock*’s pronounced anxiety about worldly ambition becomes embedded.³ *Woodstock* is, in this respect, more directly comparable to *Edward II*, with the crucial difference that in Marlowe’s play the preoccupation with, and attack on, the king’s minions and social upstarts in general is largely constructed (and dramatically represented) as a symptom of aristocratic anxiety and not as the exclusive concern of the play itself, which depicts both upstarts and aristocrats as equally motivated by predatory ambitions and opportunism.⁴ By way of comparison, *Woodstock* takes considerably more liberties with the “text” of history to dignify and idealize Richard’s aristocratic opponents, and to make their demonization of Richard’s favorites consistent with the overt aims of the play itself. Indeed, in its effort to evoke audience sympathy and admiration for “plain Thomas” and the allegedly “traditional” values of austerity, moderation, and honesty he represents, *Woodstock* casts an anachronistic net over Richard II’s reign that embraces characters and events that variously overlap with, and supercede, the Duke of Gloucester’s documented existence in history. So eager is the *Woodstock* author-function to display a world turned upside-down that it conflates residual elements of the morality play’s personifications of worldly

³ In a move that owes much to Harry Berger’s brilliant distinction between Prospero’s play and Shakespeare’s play in “Miraculous Harp: A Reading of *The Tempest*,” I assume here a distinction between Bolingbroke’s play and Shakespeare’s. In Bolingbroke’s play, Bushy, Bagot, and Green are trumpeted as primary cause for the assault he mounts against Richard’s sovereignty and effort he makes to “weed” the corrupted English garden. In Shakespeare’s play, this is the public policy or rationale Bolingbroke promotes in order to mask or mystify his real intentions. Note, for example, the frequently ignored fact that Shakespeare has Bolingbroke return to England and begin his assault on Richard *before* the basis for his complaint—Richard’s expropriation of his title and property—has been dramatically transacted.

⁴ See my chapter on *Edward II* in Patrick Cheney (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Christopher Marlowe*.

vanity and pride with emergent elements of the Machiavellian stage-villain in assembling the characters of Nimble and "my Lord Tresilian," who are made to carry the double-burden of moral and political corruption. And it fills the stage with favorites who live to wear their gaudy fashions anew in the more historically faithful confines of Shakespeare's *Richard II*.

By fastening so heavily on the contrast between the unrestrained opportunism of the favorites who rule the kingdom by royal appointment and the generally unstinting loyalty of Woodstock and his brothers, who only move to the level of resistance upon the former's demise, *Woodstock* performs a striking act of dramatic reversal in which the sovereign's authority (though not the sovereign himself) effectively deposes itself by no longer being the thing it is supposed to be and is taken on by "rebels" to that authority who better represent the thing it was (see Rossiter 14 and *passim* on this subject). While this reversal may be said to anticipate Richard's more permanent deposition at the hands of Bolingbroke in Shakespeare's *Richard II*, it may also be said to make a pre-emptive case for that act's illegitimacy, given how unfavorably Bolingbroke's "bad faith" assault on Richard compares with Woodstock's unflagging loyalty to the crown and his surviving brothers' reluctant redress of Richard's royal transgressions. The palpable anxiety about social mobility evinced throughout *Woodstock* fastens particularly on Tresilian's rise from "plodding clerk" to Lord Chief Justice: an evolution Tresilian accounts to a mind stirred up "to industry" (1.2) but which the *Woodstock* author (through the medium of Tresilian's henchman, Nimble) attributes to Tresilian's eagerness to do anything he can to advance himself. This anxiety migrates, in *Richard II*, to the critically under-remarked presumption of Bolingbroke's premature and aggressive assault on the crown. From Richard's early likening of Bolingbroke to a politician willing to woo support from any quarter to York's initial rebuke of Bolingbroke's presumption to Bolingbroke's own premature assumption of royal prerogatives to his taking possession of the throne in the vein of a latter-day strong-man, Shakespeare's play effectively detaches *Woodstock*'s concern with social upstarts drawn from the ranks of the commons and attaches it to a possibly more pressing concern about powerful aristocrats modeling their behavior on that of upstart commons. As Tresilian's power and presumption grow in *Woodstock*, and he and his henchmen distribute their coercive "blank charters" and launch their intimidating campaign against "whispering," the domain he claims possession of bears more than a few resemblances to the "new world" Bolingbroke brings into being in the fourth act of *Richard II*, in which history is re-scripted in the form of enforced confessions while voices that continue to speak on Richard's behalf are interrogated, silenced, or consigned to remote corners of the kingdom.⁵

In venturing such comparisons, I do not mean to re-open the debate about Shakespeare's possible authorship of *Woodstock*, or to encourage the kinds of arguments that inform Michael Egan's effort to write the "lost" last pages

⁵ I am thinking specifically here of Bolingbroke's consignment of the Bishop of Carlisle to "some secret place" in *Richard II*, 5.6.24–9.

of *Woodstock* as Shakespeare might have written them. On the contrary, I see *Woodstock* and *Richard II* as very differently situated plays, with the former speaking in the mixed (up?) social idiom David Bevington long ago sketched out in *Tudor Drama and Politics*, which may be said to be at once populist and anti-populist, monarchist and anti-monarchist. By contrast, *Richard II* seems to me too implicitly royalist to have been commissioned for private performance by supporters of the Earl of Essex, though ambiguous enough to have merited mutilation at the hands of the censors and to have served Essex's purposes.⁶ Indeed, if I had to determine which play of *Richard II* might have better served as a rallying point against Queen Elizabeth and her ministers, I might venture on *Woodstock*. Why? As David Bevington has observed, "To the extent that the play's heroes are noblemen who believe in rank, *Woodstock* is hierarchically orthodox" and "upholds an ideal of old-fashioned nobility as England's best hope for justice. No Cade or Tyler sports leveling doctrine" (Bevington 250–51). As Bevington goes on to contend:

Woodstock's civil war is ... politically close to the aims of the Pilgrimage of Grace (1536), the Western Rising of 1549, or the Northern Rebellion of 1569, with their reverence for the conservative nobility, their sympathy for the oppressions of the peasantry, and their longing to disencumber the monarch of upstart favorites. To this older form of protest is added a radical interest in plain dress, free speech, and constitutional safeguards—a coalescing of extreme dissidence in the 1590s increasingly associated with the erratic leadership of Essex. Such a political alignment explains how *Woodstock* can be at once old-fashioned in its social values and unorthodox regarding Tudor monarchism. (Bevington 253)

Bevington's remarks bring *Woodstock* into the circuit of late Elizabethan concerns about the largely professional state apparatus Queen Elizabeth had set up to administer court affairs, the increasingly marginalized role played by the old nobility within it, and the increasing influence over the queen commanded by Robert Cecil in particular.⁷ Unfortunately, the examples that Bevington draws on—

⁶ My reading of *Richard II* clearly goes against the grain of most commentaries on the play, which insist rather on Elizabeth's identification with Richard and Essex's growing association with Bolingbroke. As Richard Dutton writes, "the history of *Richard II* had undoubtedly acquired a very specific topicality by the time of its 1601 performance. It was not unknown from the 1580s onwards for people to draw parallels between *Richard II* and Elizabeth, in relation to such matters as the influence of favourites and her generosity to them, at the expense of the general populace who paid through taxation, monopolies and enforced benevolence ... By 1601 ... there was an all-too-plausible candidate for the role of Bolingbroke in the person of Essex" (118–19). See the debate on this subject engaged in by Blair Worden and Frank Kermode in the Letters pages of the *London Review of Books* (July–November 2003).

⁷ The applicability of specific aspects of *Woodstock* to contemporary conditions at court is indicated by the strong likelihood of certain passages having been scored for omission "in accordance with the censor's instructions to remove explicit reference to

which link the concerns of the peasantry and the “conservative nobility”—seem somewhat peripheral to the social concerns and anxieties that inform *Woodstock*. Moreover, the connection Bevington draws between the political alignments in *Woodstock* and the political divisions that beset the Elizabethan court in the 1590s tends to oversimplify the more complex intra-generational infighting that characterized the latter. If *Woodstock* is to be read as some kind of lightly veiled political allegory of the late Elizabethan present, it fails to align itself specifically enough with the actual conditions that then obtained, which effectively pitted a younger generation of powerfully ambitious *apparatchiks* headed by Robert Cecil against equally ambitious factions of comparatively young aristocratic dissidents led by Essex on the one hand and Raleigh on the other. Although Essex would serve as a rallying point for a variety of dissident interests and professions, with several notable Catholic and Puritan figures allying themselves to what can only vaguely be called his “cause,” his egotism, unreliability, vanity, ostentation, and passionate temperament—not to mention his participation in what passed at the time for the “leasing out” of governmental prerogatives—place him just as squarely in the company of *Woodstock*’s dissolute upstarts and Shakespeare’s Richard II as of the “old nobility.” Essex can, in this respect, hardly be associated with the avowedly high-minded positions that prompt *Woodstock* and his brothers to defend ancient English freedoms and the chronically put-upon peasantry.

It rather seems that though the aims of the *Woodstock* author-function may be as nostalgic as those Bevington proposes, they are also more extreme. They are nostalgic insofar as they are linked to popular (and periodically volatile) fantasies of a feudal social contract that neither present conditions nor the past provide a viable example of. They are extreme insofar as they seem to condemn virtually all preferred latter-day forms of social, cultural, and political behavior as corrupt and corrupting, and advocate a wholesale social reformation in which the values of plainness, property rights, honesty, industriousness, free expression, and austerity should reign supreme: values that had already become closely associated with the Puritan challenge to the uneasy Elizabethan consensus. That the channel through which this reformation is to be achieved runs through the variously self-deprecating and self-righteous media of “Plain Thomas” and his brothers—who throughout protest their reluctance to effect the political transformation that would make reformation possible—at once localizes and dislocates the play’s preferred alignment of moral and political authority. By localizing moral authority in *Woodstock*, the play dislocates political agency; by localizing political agency in Richard and his favorites, the play dislocates moral authority.

The high-powered aristocrats (chiefly Lancaster and York) who adhere to *Woodstock*’s cause, not to mention *Woodstock* himself, speak emphatically and often of their work in defense of the commonwealth and of the commons’ prerogatives.

rebellion and the more overt denunciations of King Richard; such material may well have been perceived as bearing a generalized likeness to current affairs of state, or at least as offering a dangerous precedent to disaffected subjects” (Clare 46).

But the actual combat that is engaged—between the king and his social upstarts on one side and the king’s uncles on the other—dramatically operates at a considerable level below the discursive formations in which it is pitched. In many respects, the debate over right rule is fuelled—as it is in both *Edward II* and *Richard II*—by the impatience and immoderation of the aristocratic party itself. However often that party may represent itself as reluctant to oppose the king directly, it nonetheless opposes him at virtually every turn, even when a more circumspect, cautious approach appears more viable. This is certainly the case with Thomas of Woodstock, who, motivated by the general applause lavished on his austerity and integrity, fails to heed his brother Lancaster’s advice that “To hide our hate is soundest policy,” choosing rather to press his case against Richard and his minions at the most inopportune of times and to do so in the most self-congratulatory and immodestly modest manner. It is, in fact, sometimes hard to reconcile the shrillness and indecorousness of *Woodstock*’s public reprimands of Richard with the play’s apparent privileging of the social and political values and virtues *Woodstock* is seeking to advance. Indeed, in order to claim that the *Woodstock* author is entirely supportive of Plain Thomas and his rather puritanical agenda—which frequently and stridently fastens on Richard and his favorites’ inordinate concern for outlandish fashions and lavish dress—one would also have to claim that he is unusually deaf to the ironies that attend *Woodstock*’s prideful celebration of his own plainness and humility, which often assemble around the play’s 13 repetitions of the “Plain Thomas” catch-phrase.

The contextual permutations of the play’s rehearsals of this mantra are worth following in some detail. We first hear the name “Plain Thomas” applied to *Woodstock* in the play’s first act as the Duke of York elaborates on its significance, adding, in turn, a second catch-phrase to what will become a formulaic inventory of the Duke’s “parts”:

Plain Thomas, for by the rood so all men call him
For his plain dealing and his simple clothing [?]
'Let others jet in silk and gold,' says he,
'A coat of English frieze best pleaseth me.' (1.1.99–102)⁸

York repeats the Plain Thomas attribution some hundred lines on, but in this instance adds two qualifiers that may give us pause. Trying to persuade *Woodstock* to don appropriate finery to grace the king’s wedding-day, York claims that only “the coarse and vulgar” (as opposed to “all men”) call him by this name, and suggests that it is to court their affection that *Woodstock* wears his “country habit” in the first place:

We'd have you suit your outside to your heart,
And like a courtier cast this country habit,
For whiche the coarse and vulgar call your grace
By th'title of Plain Thomas. (1.1.196–9)

⁸ All quotations from the play are taken from *Thomas of Woodstock or King Richard the Second, Part One*, edited by Peter Corbin and Douglas Sedge.

After an initial show of resistance, Woodstock agrees to break a sartorial habit of some twenty years standing, but in the process takes on and “naturalizes” (with what militates between self-deprecating irony and self-congratulation) the “title” lavished on him by “the coarse and vulgar”: “Let’s hie to court, you all your wishes have: / One weary day plain Thomas will be brave” (1.1.215–16).

Irony takes on the somewhat different character of contempt in the next scene as Greene regrets the failure of a plot to poison Richard’s other uncles, which would have left “Plain Thomas the Protector” (1.2.15) the only remaining obstacle to power. By its next iteration, the gap between how Woodstock represents himself and how he is represented by “the coarse and vulgar” has all but closed, “the plain and honest phrase” (1.3.18) having become Woodstock’s byword for his own unerring earnestness. Responding to the King’s assay at ironically disarming him of the inappropriately censorious vein he has fallen into in a speech that begins as a formal welcome to England’s new queen, Woodstock fails to rise to the good-natured pitch of Richard’s “I thank ye for your double praise, good uncle,” offering instead the humorless and self-reflexive strains of “Ay, ay, good coz, I’m Plain Thomas, by th’rood, / I’ll speak the truth” (1.3.34–5). Woodstock’s failure to respond to Richard’s party with the public grace that befits such an occasion may well bespeak his integrity and courageous refusal to compromise on his principles and the public good they seek to promote. But we may, alternatively, detect here a hint either of the character’s obtuseness or of his author’s deafness to dramatic irony. All options remain in play as Woodstock’s indignation breaks out in force as a consequence either of his principled or boorish refusal to bandy jest with jest about his sartorial preferences with the King and his favorites: “Scoff ye my plainness, I’ll talk no riddles. Plain Thomas / Will speak plainly” (1.3.115–16). Proving impervious even to the saintly Queen’s admonition that “The King but jests, my lord, and you grow angry” (1.3.110), Woodstock’s plainness leads him to demand that Richard’s favorites trade their places beside Richard’s throne with those who better deserve them: “Upstarts, come down; you have no places there. / Here’s better men to grace King Richard’s chair / If ’t pleased him grace them so” (1.3.118–20).

The play’s overt display of the greedy machinations of Richard’s all-licensed “upstarts” would appear to grace Woodstock’s strong pronouncement with both dramatic and moral authority, and to position it as a dramatically privileged and disinterestedly principled stand against misgovernance. But the obvious, if unacknowledged, rage of Woodstock at having his and his brothers’ authority flouted and discredited also plays a crucial role here, and moves to the foreground of our attention in an exchange between the three brothers that closes out the play’s first act:

York. God for his mercy, shall we brook these braves,
Disgraced and threatened thus by fawning knaves?

Lancaster. Shall we that were great Edward’s princely sons
Be thus outbraved by flattering sycophants?

Woodstock. Afore my God and holy saints, I swear,

But that my tongue hath liberty to show
The inly passions boiling in my breast,
I think my overburdened heart would break. (1.3.208–15)

The discourse within which this exchange is framed seems directly modeled on similar exchanges that occur in Marlowe’s *Edward II*, with its formulaic contrasts between “princely sons” on the one hand, and “fawning knaves” and “flattering sycophants” on the other, and repeated use of terms like “brook,” which signal the temperamental impatience of characters used to having their own way. More revealing, however, is the way the surplus of passion, which the earlier play delegates to the love-lorn Edward II, migrates here to the “overburdened heart” of Woodstock himself, who tends to privilege, rather than censure, his outbursts of emotion. Nonetheless, when news is brought, on the heels of this exchange, that the common themselves have risen in reaction to Richard’s “lewd licentious willfulness”—news that provokes the characteristically more intemperate Lancaster to advise his brothers to “Take open arms. Join with the vexed commons / And hale his minions from his wanton side. / Their heads cut off, the people’s satisfied” (1.3.247–9)⁹—Woodstock appears to regain his composure, and advises, instead, that they first seek “to pacify the murmuring commons’ rage” (1.3.256) and use legal means to have the deeds of Richard’s favorites “examined thoroughly” (1.3.259).

At this point in the drama, the tendency of the *Woodstock* author to simplify, rather than complicate, returns in full force as we witness Richard and his minions arraign Richard’s uncles as if there were little difference between indignant aristocrats and rebels of the stripe of Jack Straw. Variously terming the uncles “the King’s rebellious enemies” and “underminers of his sacred state” who are guilty of “treason capital” in allegedly seeking “to subvert their king and sovereign,” these prevailing lords of misrule deploy every rhetorical device available in this discursive formation as they work themselves up to Richard’s peremptory order to “Attaint them … arrest them and condemn them,” which is met by Greene’s answering resolve to “Hale them to th’block and cut off all their heads” (2.1.26–40). Their impulse to sudden execution restrained by the more politic and temporizing Tresilian, Richard and company next engage in one of the most peculiar (and peculiarly self-reflexive) activities witnessed in the career of the English chronicle or history play. They collectively consult the equivalent of their author’s source: a book which Bushy describes as “The monument of English Chronicles / Containing acts and memorable deeds / Of all your famous predecessor kings,” finding in it what Bushy selectively terms “Examples strange and wonderful” of “The end of treason even in mighty persons” (2.1.55–60). Aptly enough, the first example is drawn from the chronicles of Edward II and Edward III, and describes the latter’s execution, “for his pride and treachery,” of his “Protector then, proud

⁹ Cf. Young Mortimer’s “Were all the earls and barons of my mind / We’ll hale him from the bosom of the king, / And at the court gate hang the peasant up,” in *Edward II* (1.2.28–30).

storied past into a more anxious present in which conservative values are held together by the fraying threads of old saws and maxims and the rough justice of royal edicts and summary execution.¹² The generational animosity that prompts Greene to declare that “it shall be henceforth / counted high treason for any fellow with a grey beard to / come within forty foot of the court gates” (2.2.174–6) and the loyalist Cheney to describe the favorites sitting “in council to devise strange fashions, / And suit themselves in wild and antic habits / Such as this kingdom never yet beheld” (2.3.88–90) will assuredly continue to occupy playwrights like Jonson and Shakespeare, among others, throughout the first decade of the seventeenth century (what is *King Lear* if not, in great part, a generational tragedy?). But as *Lear* itself demonstrates, and as Bosola brilliantly observes in Webster’s *Duchess of Malfi*, the shift from an hierarchical (vertical) to an increasingly competitive (horizontal) perspective toward a decidedly material world had already been accomplished.¹³ Indeed, by 1599 Simon Eyre’s pseudo-Tamburlainean catch-phrase, “Prince am I none, yet am I princely born,” which serves as the refrain for his exemplary climb to the position of Lord Mayor in Dekker’s *Shoemaker’s Holiday*, will celebrate the ambitions and achievements of London’s citizen-class, and make Woodstock’s catch-phrase, “Let others jet in silk and gold … / A coat of English frieze best pleaseth me,” seem, by comparison, very plain fare indeed.

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¹² As Anthony Esler observes, “despite the tremendous volume of sententious literature that issued from the Elizabethan presses, the moralist remained a pathetically lonely figure among the hustling ruling class of England. He preached status quo to an exuberantly progressive nation; he extolled the virtues of a poverty-stricken, pray-and-bear-it culture to a jubilantly affluent society. Everything in the lives of these young gentlemen pointed one way: it is not surprising that they had short shrift for the sleeve-tugging moralizer who pointed the other” (71). While the consensus view of England as “an exuberantly progressive nation” and “a jubilantly affluent society” has undergone considerable revision in the last 20 years or so, Esler’s point about what he calls “the aspiring mind of the Elizabethan younger generation,” and about the differences between that generation and the ones that preceded it, continues to hold.

¹³ The lines to which I am referring comprise Bosola’s response to the Duchess’s question, “Do we affect fashion in the grave?”: “Most ambitiously. Princes’ images on their tombs / Do not lie as they were wont, seeming to pray / Up to heaven, but with their hands under their cheeks, / As if they died of the toothache. They are not carved / With their eyes fixed upon the stars; but, as / Their minds were wholly bent upon the world, / The selfsame way they seem to turn their faces” (4.2.145–52).

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