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# The Populace in Shakespeare's English History Plays

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## Abstract

In Elizabethan England speculation about organization of government on democratic lines was not uncommon. Thomas More's Utopia and the works of writers like Erasmus had tried to draw attention to the idleness of the aristocracy and the need for the participation of the masses in governmental activities. Speculation about democratic structures is as old as Aristotle. In his definition of various forms of governments he had suggested that the end of democracy is ultimately a government by people and their liberty. Monarchy on the other hand aimed at caring for the people and maintenance of power to rule over them. However, the common man had not tasted the fruits of democracy, namely liberty and freedom to participate in the functioning of the state. Shakespeare's history plays, which have often been considered a true reflection of the Elizabethan society, trace the continuous process of change in the body politic, though they cannot be described as prescribing any ideal of kingship. The ruler and the ruled in these plays are analysed through their actions and speech, sympathised with, criticized and yet not totally dismissed. The ruled, that is the populace nevertheless gain status as the history plays progress. This study examines some of the English history plays of Shakespeare to understand the perspective and position of the populace in this age. Shakespeare's treatment of politics and history should be seen as exploratory as suggested by many critics. Rather than a prescriptive model it offers an examination of the nascent form of the democratic voice.

**Keywords:** History plays, power, populace, popular support, mob, public opinion

## INTRODUCTION

England as depicted in Shakespeare's history plays depicts a nation in its evolutionary stages rising gradually from mediaeval structures and moving towards individualism. People are still being used as

pawns by groups of political adventurers. Power is seen as residing more in the nobility than in the king or the people. The Magna Carta which King John was compelled to sign by the barons shows their increasing power until powerful monarchs such as Queen Elizabeth came to reign over England.

Power, therefore, as depicted in the history plays is in a state of flux and the course of a history play depicts the shift in power centres; the irresolution of factions while tracing the defeats and victories of kings. The masses appeared as a rising force around this time though they had been neglected for long. The common people appear as groups and as a participative voice in the English and Roman history plays of Shakespeare. In **King Henry VI Part I, II & III**, the Jack Cade scenes are not just a piece of establishment writing in favour of the monarch to criticize the commons as muddle-headed anarchists. The Babington plot of 1586 at the time of accession of Queen Elizabeth had been exposed and many readers believe that Shakespeare was trying to advise against insurrection through the play.

## THE POLITICS AT WORK IN KING HENRY VI

Shakespeare's motive in writing the Jack Cade episodes cannot be so easily pinpointed. In **King Henry VI, Part I**, the commons appear as the supporters of Gloucester. They are infuriated by Winchester's act of preventing Gloucester from access to the tower and start behaving like a mob. They behave like blind-supporters of Gloucester but are pacified and checked by his words ( **King Henry VI, Part I, Act I, sc.iii**). The commons here are not

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fighting a battle of their own. They still place faith in the hands of the nobility and are ruled by their hand. The Lancastrian War of the Roses put not only Vernon and Basset at loggerheads but also the masses of the whole nation which are divided between the white and the red rose.

In the Cade scenes, although apparently it was a spontaneous mass uprising, it is actually mobilized by York to his own advantage. He wishes to gauge the pressure he can build in favour of his claim to the throne. For a moment, Cade seems to have shaken the state but the disorganised nature of the revolt makes it a failure. One must remember that the Cade episodes are based on the Peasant's Revolt of 1381 and Café's rebellion of 1450. Shakespeare combines these two episodes in order to accentuate the chaotic and violent nature of the rebellion. One must also remember that the Essex rebellion of 1601 was a dreaded rebellion due to popular support to Essex. And "popularity" or popular support as Joel Hurstfield points out spelt discord to Elizabethan minds(Shakespeare's World,35). Thus the populace is perceived as a disruptive force here.

Cade is the leader of commoners such as blacksmiths, tailors, butchers etc. who are all illiterate and poor. He too, like the power-mongering nobility gets drunk with the power that he wields over so many. Cade symbolises how a man gets corrupted when he gains power. In an absurd attempt and under York's guidance he even floats the idea of his claim to the throne due to his descent from the Mortimers. The tone in these scenes is not devoid of criticism of anarchy which breaks the order of hierarchy. This tone permeates also in the playwright's depiction of the aristocracy where the ambitions of Worcester, Warwick and other power-brokers lead to anarchy in the state.

The play criticizes the anarchic Utopianism of Cade and company. Cade's boasts are satirised so that it seems more like an anti- democratic satire. The world envisaged by him is not possible:

**There shall be in England seven  
half-penny loaves sold for a  
penny: the three-hooped pot  
shall have ten hoops, and I will  
make it felony to drink small  
beer: all the realm shall be in  
common... when I am  
king.(King Henry VI Part  
II,Act IV, ii 62-5)**

This seems very much like building a castle in mid-air. The masses of Elizabethan times were oppressed and poor as historians of the age have pointed out and it is a part of Shakespeare's realism to show these dreamers on stage. Cade who professes to believe in an egalitarian and democratic organisation of the state ironically becomes the Big Brother when he expresses his desire to be king of the future state.Shakespeare exposes the sham idealism of Cade who is killed by Iden. Chaos prevails as the clerk of Chatham and Lord Say are killed by the mob.

Therefore, though the masses are shown to be instrumental in the banishment of Suffolk, yet they remain instruments in the hands of the power brokers such as York. They remain the "gullible architects of anarchy" as suggested by M.M.Reese(**The Cease of Majesty**,188). The masses are led by their fickleness from one judgement to another and Cade himself makes an observation regarding this when they are swayed by Clifford's appeal for allegiance to the state:

Was ever feather so lightly blown  
to and fro as this multitude? The  
name of Henry the Fifth Hales  
them to a hundred mischiefs and  
makes them leave me  
desolate.(**King Henry VI, Part  
II,Act IV,viii,52-60**)

One sympathizes with the populace in **King Henry VI**, finds their anger justified and yet their disorganised fury aimed at the state exposes the

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anarchic dance of ambition which was scoffed at by the moralists of this age. Shakespeare's comparison of Cade to a Morisco: dancer brings this out clearly. And yet there is a ring of truth in what the commoners have to say about the aristocracy:

George: O miserable age! Virtue  
is not regarded in handicrafts-  
men.

John: The nobility think scorn to go in leather aprons.

George: Nay, more: the king's council are no good workmen

.(**King Henry VI**, Part II, ii 10-12)

Thus we see the nobility as more culpable than the masses. If the commons are to be blamed, they are to be blamed for being instruments of disorder in the hands of an even more irresponsible nobility whose mutual squabbles led to the War of Roses.

**THE COMMONS IN KING RICHARD III&  
KING RICHARD II**

In **King Richard III**, the mob scenes are not so extensive as in **King Henry VI**. The reason is probably the presence of a despotic, authoritarian ruler as the head of the state. The common people are however perceptive and see through the motives of their superiors. They fear the ambitions of Crookback and are aware of the bad times they are going through. They also see the threat to young Edward V from his uncle but are unable to prevent any harm in the face of the despotic Machiavellian machinations of Crookback (Act II, iii).

In the second tetralogy that Shakespeare wrote, we see the commons gradually gaining power. In **King Richard II**, Shakespeare does not directly focus on the populace but shows the gradual and steady gain of power by the commons through the indirect comments of various characters. Richard himself realizes the need to woo the commons and fears the rising popularity of Bolingbroke. The winning of popular support is an important factor to consolidate a king's rule and Richard realises this too late. He observes Bolingbroke's "courtship to the common

people" when " he did seem to dive into their hearts" and was " wooing poor craftsmen"( **King Richard II** Act I, iv,24-26).

Richard avoids the masses,while Bolingbroke plans his strategies keeping popular support in mind. Knowing very well that he is a usurper he has to sway public opinion in his favour. In the famous garden scene the gardeners, who are common men critically appraise Richard as ruler and find him deficient. They consider Bolingbroke as the capable gardener of the two. Explaining the small labours that go into keeping the garden in order, the gardener connects the craft of gardening to state craft:

Superfluous branches

We lop away, that bearing boughs  
may live;

Had he done so, himself had  
borne the crown.(**King Richard**  
**II**, Act III,iv,63-66)

The gardeners discuss how instead of promoting general welfare, Richard has reared "caterpillars of the commonwealth"(**KingRichardII**, Act II,iii,165). This scene goes to show that the common people are intelligent enough to see through what the aristocrats are doing. In **King Henry VI**, they had been mostly gulls but not anymore.

**THE NEED TO WOO THE UNPREDICTABLE  
POPULACE**

**KingHenryIV** Part I and II show Bolingbroke as the ruler of the throne which he had acquired through popular support. But here, unlike the previous play, Bolingbroke is not able to keep up his popularity. His inability to rule well and civil strife bring him into disfavour. The fickleness of popular favour is revealed when the Archbishop of York comments on the mob that desecrated the body of the annointed Richard. Now they wish that the dead Richard were alive and Bolingbroke expelled. The vacillating attitude of the masses is a common feature in the

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history plays. They reveal that democracy in its nascent form is always disorganised.

In **King Henry IV**, while Bolingbroke realizes the potential power of the commons, Hal his son who is an arch-contriver, programmed to kingship, is the one who uses public opinion to his ends. His association with Eastcheap is a desirable exercise to manipulate public opinion in his favour. The stratagem of wooing the common people becomes important and he acknowledges this:

I know you all, and will awhile  
uphold

The unyok'd humour of your idleness:

Yet herein will

I imitate the sun,

Who doth permit the base contagious clouds

To smother up

his beauty from the world. (**King Henry IV**, I, Act I  
ii 41)

Hal fully realizes the worth of having strong support at the grassroots level. This is one of the factors that makes him the most successful and pragmatic of all Shakespearean kings.

In the subsequent play in this second tetralogy, **King Henry V**, the mob includes people like Nym, Bardolph and Pistol who are all time-servers and will make money out of a war or and when opportunity arises (Act III,I). Their condition however, like the troops deployed by Falstaff is deplorable. Falstaff who in **King Henry IV**, is guilty of malpractices, comments on the pathos inherent in the fate of the commons who are nothing more than “food for powder” i.e. food for gunpowder (**King Henry IV**, Part I, Act IV, ii, 57). Killing the king is a heinous crime but killing the common man is insignificant and kings in the past have neglected him altogether.

THE RISING SIGNIFICANCE OF THE  
POPULACE

The pathetic condition of the common man is highlighted when Hal mocks Francis, the drawer

(**King Henry IV**, Part I, Act II, iv, 25-40). He has the power of a prince and can command these poor people at his beck and call. Along with Poins, Hal plays a trick upon Francis, getting him confused by his own questioning and incessant calls from Poins. This confuses the poor man and he ends up answering “anon, Sir” to each. The common man is thus depicted as being used by his superiors. However, gradually the populace which has been a silent sufferer starts questioning the justice meted out to it.

In **King Henry V** the soldiers Bates, Court and Williams question the logic behind their being deployed in a war against France from which they will not benefit at all. King Henry in disguise is compelled to listen to their criticism. Williams rightly tells the king that in the war he may be ransomed as he is a king while they will be taken prisoners and die. Henry tries to clear his conscience but his answers do not satisfy the soldiers. Shakespeare is here presenting a stage in English history when the voice of the commons becomes urgent and cannot be ignored any longer. For them, the king is no longer the unquestioned deputy of God on earth.

CONCLUSION

In these two tetralogies of English history plays we see that kings cannot be merely concerned with consolidating power. They have a responsibility towards public welfare. In the first tetralogy, people are like pawns in the hands of those who wield power but gradually in the second tetralogy they become a potential force while still remaining disorganised. It is in the Roman history plays (which trace a period much before the Tudor age) that the mob is seen as a significant force. Certain critics have tried to see Shakespeare's mob scenes as a manifestation of liberalism and democratic sentimentalism, while others have tried to see them as an expression of pro-establishment writing. However it seems more likely that Shakespeare was interested in depicting the political process. Democracy was still a long way off but if politics is a game of power, the populace was an important power bloc trying to gain power. As individuals the common people are likable (like the groom in **King Richard II**) but seen as a mob, the

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populace spell discord. Despite being depicted as disorderly and anarchic they are also the ones like the gardeners in **King Richard II** who provide the picture of the state as a microcosmic garden. Though they have been manipulated, they become an important factor in the functioning of the state and the rulers cannot undermine them anymore.

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