

**Deference and Dissent in Tudor England: Reflections on Sixteenth-Century Protest**  
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*Abstract:* Historians have long characterized the riots and rebellions of sixteenth-century England as conservative and constrained. Recent work in the field has embraced an expanded definition of politics and moved outward from riot to popular political culture more generally. In this transition, negotiation and participation have become key words. In reviewing these historiographical developments, this paper echoes studies that have begun to question the pervasiveness of conservatism in protest and to explore the limits within which negotiation took place. It examines the responses to one riot and the role of prophecy in protest to emphasize the dissent behind the deference and the power behind the paternalism.

The study of early modern riot and rebellion served as a focal point for the first wave of social historians. It continues to fascinate a new generation of scholars. After all, the sixteenth century saw its share of armed rebellions, riots too numerous (and often too sparsely documented) to count, and the sort of grumbling speech that prompted the notorious Tudor laws on treason and sedition. Over the years, studies of sixteenth-century protest have sought to answer a variety of underlying questions: In an age in which the power of the nobility was subsumed to that of the crown, in which vagrancy, dearth, and enclosure abounded, and in which one faith replaced another, how was any stability secured? In an age, we are frequently reminded, that had no standing army or

salaried police, how did the Tudors survive the transition from medieval to early modern, from feudalism to incipient capitalism, and from Catholicism to Protestantism? What role did the people of sixteenth-century England play in their own history? How clearly, if at all, did any of them envision an alternate order?

In their answers to such questions, historians advanced theories now generally accepted as orthodox: sixteenth-century protesters reserved their violence for property rather than persons, acted according to customs of obedience, and had conservative aims. In short, power was negotiated within customary frameworks of deference and paternalism. This paper surveys these and similar conclusions scholars of sixteenth-century protest have offered over the past decades, while highlighting a trend in recent work that questions the inevitability and degree of conservatism in protest. It echoes those who warn against using current models in ways that minimize both the reality of domination and the possibility of resistance that sought to negotiate not just the terms but also the substance of subordination. The trick, as ever, is to avoid making our models too broadly encompassing and to judge with care when early modern political actors might be accepted at their word.

Individual rebellions have long had their own historians, be they interested primarily in local history or in the effects such revolts had on political developments at court. The social history of protest developed more recently and found much inspiration in the pioneering studies done by Marxist historians of riot in industrialising England. Their demonstration of the rationality of crowds, their determination to access ‘history from below’, and their elaboration of the rites and rituals that shaped protest have had a special importance. With George Rudé, ‘the mob’ was resurrected as ‘the crowd’, an

aggregation of individuals with their own reasons for action, rather than a disembodied abstraction bent on meaningless destruction.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, E.P. Thompson treated riots as a point of entry into plebeian beliefs and practices otherwise hidden from view. He characterized their actions as both shaped by customs of disobedience and done with the aim of protecting customary rights.<sup>2</sup> Thompson's insight into the ritualistic aspects of crowds and their carefully directed violence received broader currency with Natalie Zemon Davis's studies of religious riots in sixteenth-century France.<sup>3</sup>

Studies specific to sixteenth-century England worked along similar paths. M.E. James's work on Tudor rebels showed that despite the angered militancy of some, most neither resorted to violence nor explicitly questioned the authority of the Crown; some opted for a negotiated settlement rather than battle, and most sought to express their dissent within pre-existing conventions of obedience. Few risings produced overt opposition between elites and commoners.<sup>4</sup> In his introduction to a 1984 edited collection of foundational articles on the topic, Paul Slack summarized many of their common findings: most rebels, save for religious protesters, had conservative aspirations. They drew support from all ranks of society, and their demands did not openly challenge the social structure of deference and obedience – on the contrary, they often insisted that their governors were the ones who had violated the hierarchical links of obligation that

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<sup>1</sup> George Rudé, The Crowd in History (New York, 1964).

<sup>2</sup> E.P. Thompson, 'The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century', Past and Present 50 (1971), pp. 76-136.

<sup>3</sup> Natalie Zemon Davis, 'The Reasons of Misrule: Youth Groups and Charivaris in Sixteenth-Century France', Past & Present 50 (1971), pp. 41-75 and 'The Rites of Violence: Religious Riot in Sixteenth-Century France', Past & Present 59 (1973), pp. 51-91.

<sup>4</sup> James' essays have been collected in Society, Politics and Culture: Studies in Early Modern England (Cambridge, 1986). Of particular relevance are 'Obedience and Dissent in Henrician England: the Lincolnshire rebellion, 1536', pp. 188-269, and 'English Politics and the Concept of Honour', pp. 308-415.

permeated society.<sup>5</sup> R.B. Manning's work on the enclosure riots endemic to the period also emphasized protesters' use of custom to legitimize their actions and their efforts to hold their rulers up to their own rhetoric.<sup>6</sup> In a small volume that continues to be eminently useful, thanks to frequent revisions by Diarmaid MacCulloch, Anthony Fletcher offered succinct descriptions of each Tudor rebellion and interpretive essays on the theories of obligation and submission that shaped political action.<sup>7</sup> Finally, Alison Wall has recently provided a particularly strong statement of the conservatism, traditionalism, and orderliness of early modern protest in her own synthetic study of the period.<sup>8</sup>

Out of this body of work on riot and rebellion has grown an interest in popular politics more generally. In contrast to some of the authors cited above, who deemed their rioters or rebels 'pre-political', others have used a more expansive concept of politics. But while the existence of something approximating 'popular politics' is now well documented, some have expressed reservations about the term. Tim Harris, for instance, worries the 'popular' part of the phrase implies a polarized rather than participatory model and a plebeian political culture distinct from that of the elite. He has suggested instead the 'politics of the excluded'.<sup>9</sup> Andy Wood acknowledges this potential difficulty, but retains the term in part because contemporaries often did see their world in

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<sup>5</sup> Paul Slack, 'Introduction', in Rebellion, Popular Protest and the Social Order in Early Modern England, ed. Paul Slack (Cambridge, 1984), pp. 1-15.

<sup>6</sup> R.B. Manning's Village Revolts: Social Protest and Popular Disturbances in England, 1509-1640 (Oxford, 1988).

<sup>7</sup> Anthony Fletcher and Diarmaid MacCulloch, Tudor Rebellions (Longman, 2004, 5<sup>th</sup> edn). This remains the best text for teaching purposes and an ideal starting point for those interested in a particular rebellion. In addition to the detailed narratives of each rising, it also includes a selection of primary documents and useful bibliographies.

<sup>8</sup> Alison Wall, Power and Protest in England, 1525-1640 (London, 2000).

<sup>9</sup> Tim Harris, London Crowds in the Reign of Charles II: Propaganda and Politics from the Restoration until the Exclusion Crisis (Cambridge, 1987), pp. 15-17 and his 'Introduction' in The Politics of the Excluded, ed. Harris (New York, 2001), pp. 1-29.

polarities of opposition. Instead, Wood objects to conflation of politics with ‘power’, a more pervasive entity; as such, he restricts ‘politics’ to ‘any attempt to extend, reassert or challenge the distribution of power’.<sup>10</sup> Cognizant of its limitations, historians nonetheless continue to use the term ‘popular politics’ to advantage. In his study of the acts of protest and accommodation that accompanied the Reformation, for example, Ethan Shagan uses the term to denote ‘the presence of ordinary, non-elite subjects as the audience for or interlocutors with a political action’ and in doing so adds rich texture to our understanding of the processes of religious reform.<sup>11</sup>

Whatever the terminological difficulties, social historians and scholars of state formation have nonetheless drawn attention to the ‘social depth’ of early modern political culture; that is, the presence of political actors at social levels well below the obvious political elite. One particularly fruitful branch of this interest in popular politics has examined plebeian news culture as an aspect of mass politicization. As Adam Fox noted, many conversations began with the enquiry, ‘What news?’ and progressed to discussions of national and even international concerns. Fox and others have shown that the political culture of early modern England had a broader social base than one might expect in an age predating mass literacy and the proliferation of works from the popular presses.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Andy Wood, Riot, Rebellion and Popular Politics in Early Modern England (Basingstoke, 2002), p. 13.

<sup>11</sup> Ethan Shagan, Popular Politics and the English Reformation (Cambridge, 2002), p. 19.

<sup>12</sup> See Richard Cust, ‘News and Politics in Early Seventeenth-Century England’, Past and Present 112 (1986), pp. 60-90; Adam Fox, ‘Rumour, News, and Popular Political Opinion in Elizabethan and Early Stuart England’, Historical Journal 40 (1997), pp. 597-620; Ethan Shagan, ‘Rumours and Popular Politics in the Reign of Henry VIII’, The Politics of the Excluded, ed. Tim Harris, pp. 30-66; Walter, ‘Public Transcripts, Popular Agency and the Politics of Subsistence’, in Negotiating Power in Early Modern Society, ed. Michael J. Braddick and John Walter (Cambridge, 2001), pp. 123-48; J.P.D. Cooper, Propaganda and the Tudor State: Political Culture in the West Country (Oxford, 2003), pp. 93-107; Kesselring, “‘A Cold Pye for the Papistes’”: Constructing and Containing the Northern Rising of 1569’, Journal of British Studies 43 (2004), pp. 417-43. Much of this work addresses to one degree or another Jürgen Habermas’s influential but problematic notion of the “public sphere,” as presented in The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere, trans. T. Burger with F. Lawrence (Cambridge, Mass., 1989). For an older but still valuable treatment of the subject, see J. Samaha, ‘Gleanings from Local Criminal-Court

And political action accompanied political awareness. Keith Wrightson, John Walter, M.J. Braddick and others have demonstrated that the crown relied on the involvement of large segments of the population to enforce its policies.<sup>13</sup> Churchwardens, poor relief guardians, jurors, and constables, for instance, all had their roles to play. While such direct avenues of participation generally involved men of middling status in their local communities, those lower on the social scale also had the ability to exert influence and make demands of their superiors, both in moments of protest and in their day-to-day encounters. Poor relief petitioners, enclosure rioters, and others were often able to hold their betters to their end of the paternalist bargain. Here, early modern historians have the support of medievalists who have shown a similarly broad political engagement among the subjects they study. Phillipp Schofield, for instance, notes that far from living in closed communities, late medieval peasants acquired a political education from their involvement in systems of law and taxation and some through the devastation of war.<sup>14</sup> While they and their sixteenth-century counterparts were not perhaps participants in a ‘bourgeois public sphere’, neither were they ‘pre-political’.

In this ‘social history of politics’, borrowings from other disciplines have played an important part. Political scientist James C. Scott, in particular, has had a notable

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Records: Seditio amongst the ‘Inarticulate’ in Elizabethan Essex,’ Journal of Social History 8 (1975), pp. 61-79.

<sup>13</sup> Keith Wrightson, ‘The Politics of the Parish in Early Modern England’, in The Experience of Authority in Early Modern England, ed. Paul Griffiths, Adam Fox, and Steve Hindle (London, 1996), pp. 10-46. See also Patrick Collinson’s influential call for a ‘history of political processes which is also social’ in ‘De Republica Anglorum: Or History with the Politics Put Back’, in Elizabethan Essays (London, 1994), pp. 1-30.

<sup>14</sup> Phillipp R. Schofield, Peasant and Community in Medieval England, 1200-1500 (Basingstoke, 2003), esp. pp. 157-85. See also I.M.W. Harvey, ‘Was there a popular politics in fifteenth-century England?’, in The Mcfarlane Legacy: Studies in Late Medieval Politics and Society, ed. R.H. Britnell and A.J. Pollard (Stroud, 1995), pp. 155-74.

influence.<sup>15</sup> Scott catalogued the ‘weapons of the weak’, means by which the dominated could negotiate the terms of their subordination or express their independence without overt confrontation. Historians have been quick to use his insights into the difference between ‘public’ and ‘hidden transcripts’: in other words, the disjuncture between what is said in face-to-face encounters between groups with varying levels of power and the words said privately. ‘Participation’ and ‘negotiation’ have become key words in this new history of political culture, one that focuses on complex hierarchies rather than simple dichotomies, and on a continuous rather than episodic history of political interaction.<sup>16</sup>

Within and alongside this new social history of politics, however, has grown a sense of unease with some of its premises and with conclusions about popular protest long accepted as orthodox. In his study of popular violence in riots preceding the Civil Wars, John Walter draws on Scott to warn of the ‘dangers of conflating custom with conservatism’, insisting that ‘to label popular politics conservative underestimates its capacity for critical analysis’.<sup>17</sup> Both Andy Wood and Adam Fox have questioned the deferential public statements of plebeians and pointed to cases in which more challenging voices spoke.<sup>18</sup> My own previous work on the pardons that accompanied acts of protest showed that while they were a medium conducive to the negotiations between rulers and ruled, they forced supplicants to use a form of political expression generally suited to the

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<sup>15</sup> James C. Scott, Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance (New Haven, 1987) and Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts (New Haven, 1992).

<sup>16</sup> Braddick and Walter, ‘Introduction’, in Negotiating Power, ed. Braddick and Walter, pp. 1-42; Harris, ed., Politics of the Excluded; Fox, Griffiths, Hindle, eds., Experience of Authority.

<sup>17</sup> Walter, Understanding Popular Violence in the English Revolution (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 4-5.

<sup>18</sup> Andy Wood, “‘Poore men woll speke one daye’”: Plebeian Languages of Deference and Defiance in England, c. 1520-1640’ in Politics of the Excluded, ed. Harris, pp. 67-98; Adam Fox, ‘Rumour, News, and Popular Political Opinion’.

interests of the crown.<sup>19</sup> Steve Hindle has expressed reservations about the utility of readings focused on the orderliness of riots: ‘after all,’ he notes, ‘it is abundantly clear that elites were very often terrified’.<sup>20</sup> In a similar vein, the material that follows suggests further reasons to test and apply with care our usual characterizations of deference and dissent in sixteenth-century political culture.

## I

The recognition that much early modern protest constituted ‘bargaining by riot’, a negotiation of sorts between rioters and authorities, has been one of the most insightful products of the literature. A number of case studies have argued that the subordinate used the legitimizing language of the dominant to hold them to account. Although frequently genuine, the expressions of deference and paternalism that suffused the resolution of riots and even day-to-day encounters were sometimes purely pragmatic.<sup>21</sup> It is worth noting, however, that at times they were even less than that: just the show without the substance, and the negotiation more apparent than real. One example from the summer of 1569 at first glance seems a prototypical example of riotous bargaining, but closer examination reveals these particular paternalist promises of care as empty rhetoric.

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<sup>19</sup> Kesselring, *Mercy and Authority in the Tudor State* (Cambridge, 2003).

<sup>20</sup> Steve Hindle, ‘Crime and Popular Protest’, in *Blackwell Companions to British History: A Companion to Stuart Britain*, ed. Barry Coward (Oxford, 2003), p. 140.

<sup>21</sup> In some ways, this paper echoes Christopher Marsh’s recent injunction that models of negotiation not be applied too broadly, although Marsh is at pains to counter those who might see all expressions of deference or paternalism as purely pragmatic. As he rightly notes of an intensely religious age in which hierarchy was depicted as having divine sanction, ‘Early modern people were obviously not blindly or unquestioningly obedient, but our ancestors were far more likely than we could ever be to accept hierarchical principles as natural, just and true’. See Marsh, ‘Order and Place in England, 1580-1640: The View from the Pew’, *Journal of British Studies* 44 (2005), 22.



On June 24, local tenants gathered in the Westward Forest of county Cumberland to throw down enclosures recently erected. The forest, some twelve to thirteen miles in compass, had grazing fit for sheep, but most importantly, the woods had long served as ‘the great refuge of all the country for the preservation of their cattle against the Scots’.<sup>22</sup> Reports variously identified the number of rioters as between three and four hundred or over a thousand. At either count, it was an impressive display. ‘Riotously or rather in the manner of rebellion’, the gathering of men, women, and children set their cattle loose on the grain and grass. Sheriff Musgrave read a proclamation ordering the rioters to disperse, but to little avail. Efforts to forestall another demonstration on the commons the following day had more success, and many men were arrested. Some two to three hundred people confessed to misdemeanor riot and paid fines, but the privy council insisted an example be set and ordered that some of the rioters who had stayed after the sheriff’s proclamation be charged with felony riot. The Earl of Sussex, then president of the Council in the North, singled out one of the instigators, a John Bawne, for special attention due to ‘his notorious abusing of the Queen’s Majesty’s name and authority’. The resolution of the riot dragged on into early fall. The councilors opined that ‘we think it good that no forbearing be used to convict as many of the offenders in this tumult upon felony,...whereby more terror may grow and yet the Queen’s Majesty may have good occasion to grant pardon to so many of them as afterwards shall be thought meet’.

One notable aspect of this riot was the difficulty the commissioners had in effecting the privy councilors’ desire for exemplary punishment. To judge the riot felony, they had to proceed by the Marian statute on unlawful assembly rather than by

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<sup>22</sup> The National Archives: Public Record Office [TNA:PRO] E 164/37, fol. 19d.

common law, and the statute presented problems.<sup>23</sup> By one clause, twelve or more people gathered together with force and arms of their own authority who remained an hour after proclamation to disperse could be convicted of felony. The rioters, however, had no weapons but spades, shovels and a few axes, and the sheriff's proclamation had not quite met the terms required by the statute. For these and other reasons not made clear, the commissioners decided to proceed by a second clause of the statute, one that made it felony for forty or more people to assemble for any purpose and remain together for three hours after an order to disperse. Yet, this too presented problems as the grand jury struck names off the list, leaving only forty indicted; all forty would need to be proven guilty to meet the terms of the statute. Already evidence appeared that one of the forty had not participated, and witnesses and jurors showed little desire to cooperate with the commissioners. Nor did the queen's men think it wise to explain to the large assembly they encountered on court day that forty rioters might continue their efforts for up to three hours after being told to quit and still be safe from the law. Despite the opinions of the assize justices that felony charges would not hold, the commissioners decided to proceed 'for terror's sake' through arraignment, try the men against whom they had the best evidence, and harangue the assembled crowd about the deep wrong they had done their queen. Luckily for the commissioners, some then confessed; Sussex recognized his good fortune, noting 'we were very glad of their submissions, lest otherwise more doubt would have risen upon the evidence and opening of the statute'. To bring the process to a conclusion, the commissioners made a magnanimous (or pragmatic) show of mercy, exchanging the felony charges for misdemeanor for almost

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<sup>23</sup> 1 Mary St. 2, c. 12.

all. Some twelve remained in ‘long imprisonment’ awaiting the pardon that had already been decided upon.<sup>24</sup>

When Sussex explained to the rioters the grievous nature of their offence, he also described for them the proper means of seeking redress, namely humble petition to one’s superiors. In the privy councilors’ letter urging felony convictions, they also noted that ‘nevertheless we think it necessary on the other part, that if the enclosures of the grounds in the forest of Westward, be not maintainable by law to exclude the usual tenants to have their common... the tenants may be restored to their said common and other rights with some public knowledge given in their parish churches or otherwise that in such like cases, when they shall be grieved, they shall not lack remedy if they seek the same, in lowly manner by way of complaint’.<sup>25</sup> Subsequent letters made similar reference to promises of redress and to the Queen’s determination that ‘her obedient subjects...have justice ministered unto them, when they shall at any time in due and orderly sort seek for the same’.<sup>26</sup> The language is exactly what one would expect of a power relationship characterized by paternalist negotiation. Yet, months and even years later, well after the rioters had paid their fines and the commissioners had moved on, letters continued to reach the council reminding them of their promises and the need to address the tenants’ very real grievances. A survey made in March of 1570 declared the woods already heavily spoiled and the hardships this caused for local tenants. In October of 1571, Lord Scrope, warden of the West March, wrote to Cecil to urge redress. Scrope noted that the ‘poor inhabitants’ had long enjoyed rights of common within the forest and some three hundred householders were now in desperate straits. He asked that a commission inquire

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<sup>24</sup> TNA: PRO SP 15/14, no. 87.

<sup>25</sup> British Library [BL] Cotton MS Titus F. III, fols. 112-114.

<sup>26</sup> BL Cotton MS Titus F.III, fol. 123.

into their claims.<sup>27</sup> In January of 1572 and again in September, Bishop Barnes of Carlisle similarly asked for aid for his ‘poor neighbours’; the commissioners had convened, but left their task ‘poorly executed’.<sup>28</sup> The lack of redress seems especially surprising as much of the enclosure in question had been done under the orders of the Earl of Northumberland, after whose rebellion in late 1569 a lord the crown need not worry about offending. So much for this attempt at ‘bargaining by riot’.

In reading the records of this riot, we might chose to be impressed by the way in which the commissioners ultimately accepted the limitations imposed by the Marian riot statute. On the other hand, we might see this as a reminder that the parameters of the negotiations between rulers and ruled were set in part by legal mechanisms largely beyond the control of the latter. Jurors and witnesses might stymie the efforts of the authorities from time to time, and protesters sometimes did their best to work within the law. They might, for instance, break into pairs to avoid common law definitions of riot in which three or more persons were necessary, or depart just before the allotted time.<sup>29</sup> Nonetheless, the crown’s officials enjoyed a greater degree of flexibility and the categorization of an action lay largely within their hands. The participants in the Evil May Day Riot of 1517, for instance, were surprised to find their offence deemed an act of treason and dozens of their number strung up on gallows. Late in Elizabeth’s reign, Sir Edward Coke made an art of turning riots into treason; riotous assemblies, even plans to assemble, came to be construed as acts of war or insurrections against the crown. If poorly penned statute law sometimes made it difficult to label a riot felony, then judicial

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<sup>27</sup> TNA: PRO SP 15/19, nos. 83 and 84.

<sup>28</sup> TNA: PRO SP 15/21, no. 7; SP 46/29, fo. 165.

<sup>29</sup> Wood, Riot, pp. 38-42; Manning, Village Revolts.

construction might just be able to take it the further step.<sup>30</sup> The law, then, much like differing access to material resources, shaped the parameters of negotiation to the general disadvantage of the protesters. This much is accepted, if occasionally minimised, in the historiography.<sup>31</sup> In following this riot through subsequent records, though, we also see the empty reality that sometimes lay behind the paternalist rhetoric. To get their lighter punishments, pardons, and promises of aid, the rioters had to make their humble, ‘sorrowful’ submissions. Their deference may well have been pragmatic rather than real; in this particular case, the paternalism was even less than pragmatic and merely a show.

## II

If we sometimes take the words and actions of early modern political actors too much at face value and thus exaggerate the reality of ‘negotiation’, at other times we fail to take them as seriously as we ought. Prophecies played a part in every major rebellion of the

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<sup>30</sup> William Holdsworth, A History of English Law (London, 1945, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn, 16 vols.), IV, 319-33; Manning, Village Revolts, pp. 55-6. On early history and changing definition of ‘riot’, see Bellamy, Criminal Law and Society in Late Medieval and Tudor Society (New York, 1984), esp. pp. 54-9.

<sup>31</sup> This is often a matter of differing degrees of emphasis among those who prefer to document instances of agency rather than the depressing effects of unequal relations of power, but sometimes a product of disputes between those who see “conflict” or “consensus” as primary. See, for example, the range of responses to Douglas Hay’s ‘Property, Authority, and the Criminal Law’, in Albion’s Fatal Tree, ed. Hay et al (New York, 1975), 17-64. John Langbein refused to see the law as a prop of elite hegemony and focused on the ways in which non-elite actors participated in the process as victims, prosecutors, and jurors; Langbein, ‘Albion’s Fatal Flaws’, Past and Present (1983), 96-120. In an early and still widely cited response to Hay, Peter King acknowledged briefly that the law did not offer a level-playing field but was nonetheless a ‘multi-use right’; reacting to what he saw as Hay’s overemphasis on conflict he kept the focus firmly on aspects of participation. In his more recent book, however, King allows the playing field to be even more firmly tilted towards the elite and successfully balances the fact of inequality with instances of participation and agency. See: ‘Decision-Makers and Decision-Making in the English Criminal Law, 1750-1800’, Historical Journal 27 (1984), 25-58; Crime, Justice and Discretion in England, 1740-1820 (Oxford, 2000); and also his closing comments at a recent conference, in which he warns that a focus on discursive acts of agency must nevertheless retain a firm awareness of their context, reported in Steve Poole, ‘Tales from the Old Bailey: Writing a New History from Below’, History Workshop Journal 59 (2005), 284.

Tudor period. Some prophetic texts claimed direct, divine revelation, while others emerged from putatively ancient works, often relying on animal imagery or similar symbols, interpreted as references to heraldic badges. Best known, perhaps, are the Merlinic prognostications that suffused the Pilgrimage of Grace and the prophecy that prompted the Norfolk rebels of 1549 to move camp to Dussindale, where they suffered their bloody defeat. Yet, while studies of protest often note the presence of such prophecies, they rarely examine their significance in depth. Years ago, Keith Thomas provided an excellent overview of the functions and meanings of ancient prophecies, but his insights have had little effect on discussions of early modern rebellion.<sup>32</sup> Prophecies seem too irretrievably foreign, too easily dismissed as ‘irrational’ elements in otherwise rational actions; nor do prophecies readily fit into recent models of popular political action. They cannot properly be considered ‘hidden transcripts of resistance’ - safe ways for the dominated to fantasize about a better life - as their very utterance was a harshly punished criminal action for much of the century. Nor does the use of prophecy appear conducive to the ‘negotiation of authority’ model that so many recent works have identified as central to political relationships. Such a model works only when protesters deemed their interlocutors legitimate holders of power or deemed themselves insufficiently powerful to do anything different; prophecy sometimes overturned both these assumptions. Rebels motivated, even in part, by prophecies that predicted the overthrow of a king or the advent of an earthly utopia of equality and plenty do not conform to the standard model of conservative, deferential protest. If we take the use of

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<sup>32</sup> Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (Oxford, 1971), pp. 389-432; also, 128-46. See also R. Taylor, *The Political Prophecy in England* (New York, 1911) and S.V. Larkey, ‘Astrology and Politics in the First Years of Elizabeth’s Reign’, *Bulletin of the Institute of the History of Medicine* 3 (1935), pp. 171-86.

prophecies in protest seriously, then they suggest a popular political culture with room for greater transformative aims than we usually allow.

It is easy to downplay or dismiss the significance of accounts of prophetic words triggering protest. Yet, these prophecies emerged from a larger worldview in which magic and religion overlapped, in which history itself was the fulfillment of divine prophecy, and in which the foreknowledge afforded by astrology probably made sense to more people than did Calvinist predestination. While some Protestants denounced secular prophecy and its allied genres as presumption, idolatry, or the work of the devil – and something to which papists were much inclined – only a few yet dismissed it as inherently implausible. While prophecy may have been sinful, it was not impossible. Even if a particular instance proved fraudulent, the practice was not unfounded. As Robert Scribner and others have demonstrated, protestant thought modes did not preclude a mentality that accepted the efficacy of prophecy, magic, and miracle.<sup>33</sup> Prophecy, whether based on the stars, the scriptures, or the supposed texts of ancient seers, fit into a world of portents, prodigies and signs. In her study of providentialism, Alexandra Walsham described this set of beliefs as a ‘repertoire... a mosaic and an amalgam of a cluster of superficially inconsistent intellectual traditions’, a cluster of beliefs, moreover, that ‘enjoyed near universal acceptance’.<sup>34</sup>

The notion that the use of prophecy in protest remained solely, or even primarily, the preserve of the poor and downtrodden must also be dispelled. Sharon Jansen, in her

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<sup>33</sup> Robert Scribner, ‘The Reformation, Popular Magic, and the ‘Disenchantment of the World’’, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 23 (1993), p. 492.

<sup>34</sup> Alexandra Walsham, *Providence in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 1999), pp. 169, 2. On prodigies and portents, see also David Cressy, *Agnes Bowker’s Cat: Travesties and Transgressions in Tudor and Stuart England* (New Haven, 2002). On the ‘rationality’ of such features of early modern culture within their own context, see Patrick Curry, *Prophecy and Power: Astrology in Early Modern England* (Princeton, 1989).

book on political prophecy in the reign of Henry VIII, maintained that ‘those who chose the weapon of prophecy were those who had few other weapons to hand’. Like others, Jansen assumed the especial importance of prophecy as a political voice for ‘those who were more commonly voiceless – those outside the sphere of power, prestige, and influence of the court’.<sup>35</sup> Yet, the annals of the Tudor nobility contain many a tale of lords humbled after listening to prognostications of future glory. At the Duke of Norfolk’s trial for conspiracy and plotting rebellion, one particularly damaging bit of evidence introduced against him was a Merlinic prophecy which foretold that ‘At the exaltation of the Moon, the Lion shall be overthrown; then shall the Lion be joined with a Lion and their whelps shall reign’. According to Norfolk’s accusers, this cryptic text promised that upon the rising of the earl of Northumberland, Queen Elizabeth would be replaced by Norfolk, his bride-to-be Mary queen of Scots, and their progeny in turn. Merely possessing such a text seemed proof enough of Norfolk’s treasonous intent. As Norfolk’s examiner declared, ‘such blind prophecies have oft deceived noblemen’.<sup>36</sup> Norfolk’s father had also died for treason inspired by prophecy, and his grandfather had only escaped the same fate because of Henry VIII’s timely death just before the scheduled execution. Norfolk’s brother, Henry Howard, thus had much personal animus behind his book, A Defensative Against the Poison of Supposed Prophecies (1583). Like Jansen and other modern scholars, and like many of his contemporaries writing on the same topic, Howard tended to treat prophecy as a problem particularly ‘among the simple and unlearned’. He thought the young and elderly, the simple and superstitious, and, of course, women, especially susceptible. Yet, ultimately Howard denounced prophecy as

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<sup>35</sup> Sharon L. Jansen, Political Protest and Prophecy under Henry VIII (Rochester, 1991), pp. 18-19, 149.

<sup>36</sup> Howell, State Trials, I, 997.



‘the shipwreck of honour and the poison of nobility’; he, more than most, knew this to be a proclivity shared across social lines.<sup>37</sup> Clearly, prophetic discourse did not always offer a safe means of expressing dissent or fantasizing about a better future; nor did it attract only the marginalized.

Indeed, prophecy permeated the Tudor regime itself. As Howard Dobin notes, Merlin served just as much as ‘official crown prophet’ as ‘prophetic spokesman for ambitious rebels’.<sup>38</sup> Henry VII memorably made great play of the Welsh legends that promised the return of King Arthur; Welsh bards cooperated by praising him as the ‘son of prophecy’. His court propagandists set out the story in which the saintly Henry VI had foreseen the young Henry Tudor’s destiny, declaring that this was the man to whom all in future would bow.<sup>39</sup> From its inception, then, the Tudor dynasty boasted the imprimatur of prophetic foreknowledge. Henry VIII and his defenders countered hostile interpretations of ancient prognostications with their own, more favourable glosses; Richard Morrison, for example, portrayed Henry as the lion that would defeat the popish eagle.<sup>40</sup> Thus, rather than resting on the margins, prophecy enjoyed a certain respectability across social lines. None of this is to say that the prophetic mode of discourse or the content of a particular prophecy meant the same thing in all hands; this is

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<sup>37</sup> Henry Howard, A Defensative Against the Poyson of Supposed Prophecies (London, 1583), pp. 119, 120d. See also Simon Walker, ‘Rumour, Sedition and Popular Protest in the Reign of Henry IV’, Past and Present 166 (2000), pp. 31-65, which notes that reliance on prophecy was ‘common to all social levels of dissent’ (p. 51), although the explanation that prophecy’s popularity lie in its ‘practical safeguards’ seems contradicted by the execution of sixteen men in 1402 for spreading rumours of King Richard’s prophesied return.

<sup>38</sup> Howard Dobin, Merlin’s Disciples: Prophecy, Poetry and Power in Renaissance England (Stanford, 1990), p. 51.

<sup>39</sup> Cooper, Propaganda and the Tudor State, p. 109; Sydney Anglo, Images of Tudor Kingship (London, 1992), pp. 66-70.

<sup>40</sup> Jansen, Political Prophecies, pp. 57-61; Richard Morison, An Exhortation to styrre all Englyshemen to the Defense of theyr countreye (London, 1539), sigs. D4v-D6.

not an attempt to resurrect a model of a generalized, homogenous culture.<sup>41</sup> The point is that however irrational prophecy may now seem, contemporaries accorded it a far greater degree of respect and power.

Thus, prophecy existed as an element of political life shared by high and low, and accorded respect by the authorities, who both used it to their own ends and regulated its use by others. We need to take these prophecies seriously, to acknowledge them as a real source of inspiration, a mode of discourse not 'irrational' within its context, and with content that might provide valuable legitimizing authority and structure to previously inchoate grievances. And taking prophecy seriously means allowing for the possibility that the loyal, deferential elements of early modern protest sometimes co-existed with more thoroughly transformative aims. One of the better examples comes from the summer of protest in 1549, when prophecies portended dramatic changes. William Ombler, a yeoman of East Heselton in Yorkshire, joined with Thomas Dale, a parish clerk in Seamer, to rally a gathering of 3000 men or more. Unhappy with the Edwardian attacks on their churches, they saw a chance for change when they heard of the rising in Devonshire. They believed the revolt in the south-west partial fulfillment of a prophecy that rebellions begun at the north and south seas would result in the abolition of monarchy, the destruction of noble and gentlemen, and the calling of a parliament of the commons to elect four governors for the realm. Sufficiently inspired, they captured, spoiled, and killed several gentlemen before the offer of a royal pardon prompted most rebels to return to their homes. Ombler, Dale, and perhaps six other leaders were

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<sup>41</sup> For a discussion of this point, see Ottavia Niccoli, *Prophecy and People in Renaissance Italy*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Princeton, 1990); she argues that 'transfers of cultural content through various strata of society were usually accompanied by a change in their social and political function'. (p. xiii.)

executed in York soon after.<sup>42</sup> Even though these rebels wanted a restoration of the old faith, labeling their protest ‘traditional,’ ‘conservative,’ or ‘backwards-looking’ surely mischaracterizes an event intended to bring about a new political order.

Of course, in some sense, effecting an action long foretold might not seem ‘new’; such prophecies have been allowed to fit within the model of deferential, conservative protest partly because they have been seen as appeals to the past in drawing upon ancient (or supposedly ancient) texts. Their use allowed people to avoid charges of innovation and to portray themselves as fulfilling a predetermined plan. Yet, this was precisely the danger and possibility afforded by prophecy, and the way in which it diverges from models of inherently conservative protest. As Thomas noted, in appealing to the past, prophecy ‘had the effect of disguising any essentially revolutionary step’.<sup>43</sup> Through prophecy, people could draw on the sanction of antiquity to shrug off the weight of history. Tudor tracts on obedience always encouraged their readers to consider the ill-starred fate of past revolts. The 1570 Homily against Rebellion, for example, admonished its hearers to ‘Turn over and read the histories of all nations, look over the chronicles of our own country, call to mind so many rebellions of old time, and some yet fresh in memory, ye shall not find that God ever prospered any rebellion against their own natural and lawful prince’.<sup>44</sup> Against such history, against the inertia of resignation, prophecy provided a sense of agency and possibility, even if cloaked as a predetermined action.

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<sup>42</sup> Raphael Holinshed, Chronicles (London, 1587), vol. III, p. 1040; A.G. Dickens, ‘Some Popular Reactions to the Edwardian Reformation in Yorkshire’, Reformation Studies (London, 1982), pp. 28-39. The account reprinted by Holinshed, Foxe, and other chroniclers spoke of roughly 3000 rebels, but as Dickens notes, a letter sent by the archbishop noted the presence of up to 10,000 men.

<sup>43</sup> Thomas, Religion and the Decline, p. 423.

<sup>44</sup> Certain Sermons or Homilies (1547) and A Homily Against Disobedience and Wilful Rebellion (1570): A Critical Edition, ed. Ronald B. Bond (Toronto, 1987), p. 233.

Sometimes, too, the discontented turned from prophecy to magic.<sup>45</sup> Rather than assisting in the unfolding of a foretold plan, they sought to become more active agents of historical action. Rather than supplication, they opted for manipulation through spells, calling on the assistance of forces stronger than they rather than negotiating humbly with those in power. Mabel Brigges, for example, held a magical fast to procure the death of King Henry in 1538.<sup>46</sup> Conspiracies against Elizabeth often included magical components. In a plot to make Mary Stuart queen of England in 1561, for instance, the conspirators, including remnants of the Pole family, had drawn encouragement from prophecies, and proceeded only after one John Prestall had invoked spirits to ask of them the best way to effect their intended treasons.<sup>47</sup> As Norman Jones has shown, the discovery of this plot alarmed the authorities sufficiently to prompt the passage of statutes against conjuration and false prophecies in 1563.<sup>48</sup>

Like poisoning, magic and prophecy were believed to allow an illicit power that threatened (or promised) to overturn hierarchies of order. Deference is the product of a lack of power; while we may not think much of the power afforded by prophecy or magic, in sixteenth-century England, they could redress that lack and obviate the need for humble supplication. Despite appearing to be yet another example of an appeal to the past, the prophecies that permeated every rebellion of the Tudor period were not

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<sup>45</sup> On the connections between prophecy and witchcraft, see for instance George Kittredge, who notes as evidence of contemporaries' perception of the 'almost primeval' link the fact that statutes 'against conjuration and prophecy proceeded side by side, sometimes, indeed, in combination in a single bill'; George L. Kittredge, *Witchcraft in Old and New England* (New York, 1958), p. 226.

<sup>46</sup> Discussed in Shagan, 'Rumours', p. 42 and other accounts of the Pilgrimage and related protests. This also highlights the possibility that were prophecy and magic taken seriously as aspects of protest, women might assume a higher profile in our accounts of early modern popular political culture.

<sup>47</sup> *Calendar of Patent Rolls, Elizabeth*, vol. 4., nos. 455 and 457.

<sup>48</sup> Norman L. Jones, 'Defining Superstitions: Treasonous Catholics and the Act against Witchcraft, 1563', in *State, Sovereigns, and Society in Early Modern England*, ed. Charles Carlton, et al. (Stroud, 1998), pp. 187-203.

inherently backwards looking. Prophecy was a widespread, broadly used element of political culture, a mode of expression shared across social lines. When we recognize prophecy as deeply rooted and broadly shared, we see it not just as a credible means of shaping and articulating dissent, but also as one that had a particular power when authority was premised on the sanction of the supernatural. When we recognize this and its implications, we find examples of prophecies used in ways that had little to do with negotiating power. If we genuinely allow for the credibility of prophecy in early modern political culture, instead of just looking for the ‘real’ motives it must have masked, we often see less deference and conservatism than our usual models allow. Yes, other motives existed: no one rebelled because of prophecy alone, and as Alistair Fox has noted, prophecy could just as easily console the quiescent.<sup>49</sup> Something drove would-be rebels to latch onto or to reinterpret a particular prophecy, but in doing so the nature of their protest could be transformed. Neither objective conditions nor prophecies alone produced rebellion, as action depended on perceptions of those conditions and a sense that change was possible. Prophecy sometimes offered a sense of historical possibility, even when not objectively justified.

Recent work in the field has built on earlier accounts of the customs and conservatism of protest to illustrate the ways in which power was not simply exerted and resisted, but actively negotiated. Yet, as some proponents of this new orthodoxy have warned,

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<sup>49</sup> Alistair Fox, ‘Prophecies and Politics in the Reign of Henry VIII’, in *Reassessing the Henrician Age*, ed. Fox and John Guy, (Oxford, 1986), p. 91; see also Cooper, *Propaganda and the Tudor State*, p. 113.

conservatism had its limits, and so too did negotiation. We can recognize the agency of protesters and the restraint sometimes imposed on elite action, whether by fear of the unruly masses or by the successful manipulation of the languages of domination, without removing the reality of subordination from the story. So, too, can we acknowledge the role of custom in shaping protest without ignoring real hope for change or desires that cannot be labeled conservative. The paternalist legitimizing language of the dominant sometimes masked complacent cruelty; on the other hand, the dominated could sometimes craft legitimizing languages of their own that had transformative rather than regressive potential. Learning when and where to take early modern political actors at their word is a tricky business, but one well worth the effort.

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