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978-1-108-00261-5 - Life in Shakespeare's England: A Book of Elizabethan Prose

John Dover Wilson

Excerpt

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CHAPTER I

ENGLAND AND THE ENGLISH

This royal throne of kings, this scepter'd isle,
 This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars,
 This other Eden, demi-paradise,
 This fortress built by Nature for herself
 Against infection and the hand of war,
 This happy breed of men, this little world,
 This precious stone set in the silver sea,
 Which serves it in the office of a wall,
 Or as a moat defensive to a house,
 Against the envy of less happier lands,
 This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England. . . .

Richard II, II, i. 40–50

ENGLAND

The air of England is temperate, but thick, cloudy and misty, and Caesar witnesseth that the cold is not so piercing in England as in France. For the sun draweth up the vapours of the sea which compasseth the island, and distills them upon the earth in frequent showers of rain, so that frosts are somewhat rare; and howsoever snow may often fall in the winter time, yet in the southern parts (especially) it seldom lies long on the ground. Also the cool blasts of sea winds mitigate the heat of summer.

By reason of this temper, laurel and rosemary flourish all winter, especially in the southern parts, and in summer time England yields apricots plentifully, musk melons in good quantity, and figs in some places, all which ripen well, and happily imitate the taste and goodness of the same fruits in Italy. And by the same reason all beasts bring forth their young in the open fields, even in the time of winter. And England hath such abundance of apples, pears, cherries and plums, such variety of them and so good in all respects, as no country yields more or better, for which the Italians would gladly exchange their citrons and oranges. But upon the sea coast the winds many times blast the fruits in the very flower.

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The English are so naturally inclined to pleasure, as there is no country wherein the gentlemen and lords have so many and large parks only reserved for the pleasure of hunting, or where all sorts of men allot so much ground about their houses for pleasure of gardens and orchards. The very grapes, especially towards the south and west, are of a pleasant taste, and I have said, that in some counties, as in Gloucestershire, they made wine of old, which no doubt many parts would yield at this day, but that the inhabitants forbear to plant vines, as well because they are served plentifully and at a good rate with French wines, as for that the hills most fit to bear grapes yield more commodity by feeding of sheep and cattle. Caesar writes in his Commentaries, that Britanny yields white lead within land, and iron upon the sea coasts. No doubt England hath inexhaustible veins of both, and also of tin, and yields great quantity of brass, and of alum and iron, and abounds with quarries of freestone, and fountains of most pure salt; and I formerly said that it yields some quantity of silver, and that the tin and lead is mingled with silver, but so, as it doth not largely quit the cost of the labour in separating or trying it. Two cities yield medicinal baths, namely Buxton and Bath, and the waters of Bath especially have great virtue in many diseases. England abounds with sea-coals upon the sea coast, and with pit coals within land. But the woods at this day are rather frequent and pleasant than vast, being exhausted for fire, and with iron-mills, so as the quantity of wood and charcoal for fire is much diminished, in respect of the old abundance; and in some places, as in the Fens, they burn turf, and the very dung of cows. Yet in the meantime England exports great quantity of sea-coal to foreign parts. In like sort England hath infinite quantity, as of metals, so of wool, and of woollen clothes to be exported. The English beer is famous in Netherland and lower Germany, which is made of barley and hops; for England yields plenty of hops, howsoever they also use Flemish hops. The cities of lower Germany upon the sea forbid the public selling of English beer, to satisfy their own brewers, yet privately swallow it like nectar. But in Netherland great and incredible quantity thereof is spent. England abounds with corn, which they may transport, when a quarter (in some places containing six, in others eight bushels) is sold for twenty shillings, or

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THE ENGLISH

under; and this corn not only serves England, but also served the English army in the civil wars of Ireland, at which time they also exported great quantity thereof into foreign parts, and by God's mercy England scarce once in ten years needs supply of foreign corn, which want commonly proceeds of the covetousness of private men, exporting or hiding it. Yet I must confess, that daily this plenty of corn decreaseth, by reason that private men, finding greater commodity in feeding of sheep and cattle than in the plough requiring the hands of many servants, can by no law be restrained from turning corn-fields into enclosed pastures, especially since great men are the first to break these laws. England abounds with all kinds of fowl, as well of the sea as of the land, and hath more tame swans swimming in the rivers, than I did see in any other part. It hath multitudes of hurtful birds, as crows, ravens and kites, and they labour not to destroy the crows consuming great quantity of corn, because they feed on worms and other things hurting the corn. And in great cities it is forbidden to kill kites and ravens, because they devour the filth of the streets. England hath very great plenty of sea and river fish, especially above all other parts abundance of oysters, mackerel and herrings, and the English are very industrious in fishing, though nothing comparable to the Flemmings therein.

FYNES MORYSON, *Itinerary*, 1617

THE ENGLISH (A FOREIGN VIEW)

That island of England breeds very valiant creatures: their mastiffs are of unmatchable courage. . . . And the men do sympathize with the mastiffs in robustious and rough coming on, leaving their wits with their wives: and then give them great meals of beef and iron and steel, they will eat like wolves and fight like devils.

Henry V, III. vii. 154-68

The English are grave like the Germans, lovers of shew; followed wherever they go by whole troops of servants, who wear their masters' arms in silver fastened to their left arms, and are not undeservedly ridiculed for wearing tails hanging down their backs. They excel in dancing and music, for they are active and lively, though of a thicker make than the French; they cut their hair close on the middle of the head, letting it grow on either side; they are good sailors, and better pirates, cunning, treacherous,

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and thievish; above 300 are said to be hanged annually at London. Beheading with them is less infamous than hanging. They give the wall as the place of honour. Hawking is the common sport of the gentry. They are more polite in eating than the French, consuming less bread, but more meat, which they roast in perfection. They put a great deal of sugar in their drink. Their beds are covered with tapestry, even those of farmers. They are often molested with the scurvy, said to have first crept into England with the Norman conquest. Their houses are commonly of two stories, except in London, where they are of three and four, though but seldom of four; they are built of wood; those of the richer sort with bricks; their roofs are low, and where the owner has money, covered with lead. They are powerful in the field, successful against their enemies, impatient of anything like slavery; vastly fond of great noises that fill the ear, such as the firing of cannon, drums, and the ringing of bells, so that in London it is common for a number of them, that have got a glass in their heads, to go up into some belfry, and ring the bells for hours together, for the sake of exercise. If they see a foreigner, very well made or particularly handsome, they will say, 'It is a pity he is not an Englishman.'

PAUL HENTZNER, *Travels in England*, 1598 [Ryc]

BIRTH AND RANK

How could communities,
 Degrees in schools, and brotherhoods in cities,
 Peaceful commerce from dividable shores,
 The primogenitive and due of birth,
 Prerogative of age, crowns, sceptres, laurels,
 But by degree, stand in authentic place?

Troilus and Cressida, I. iii. 103–8

[Shakespeare's father applies for a coat of arms, 20 Oct. 1596. It is granted in 1599.]

Of Gentlemen

Ordinarily the king doth only make knights and create barons or higher degrees: for as for gentlemen, they be made good cheap in England. For whosoever studieth the laws of the realm, who studieth in the universities, who professeth liberal sciences, and to be short, who can live idly and without manual labour, and will

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BIRTH AND RANK

bear the port, charge and countenance of a gentleman, he shall be called master, for that is the title which men give to esquires and other gentlemen, and shall be taken for a gentleman: for true it is with us as is said, *Tanti eris aliis quanti tibi feceris*. And (if need be) a king of heralds shall also give him for money arms, newly made and invented, the title whereof shall pretend to have been found by the said herald in perusing and viewing of old registers, where his ancestors in times past had been recorded to bear the same: or if he will do it more truly and of better faith, he will write that for the merits of that man, and certain qualities which he doth see in him, and for sundry noble acts which he hath performed, he, by the authority which he hath as king of heralds and arms, giveth to him and his heirs these and these arms, which being done I think he may be called a squire, for he beareth ever after those arms. Such men are called sometimes in scorn gentlemen of the first head. . . .

Of Citizens and Burgesses

Next to gentlemen, be appointed citizens and burgesses, such as not only be free and received as officers within the cities, but also be of some substance to bear the charges. But these citizens and burgesses be to serve the commonwealth in their cities and boroughs, or in corporate towns where they dwell. Generally in the shires they be of none accompt, save only in the common assembly of the realm to make laws, which is called the Parliament. The ancient cities appoint four and each borough two to have voices in it, and to give their consent or dissent in the name of the city or borough for which they be appointed.

Of Yeomen

Those whom we call yeomen next unto the nobility, knights and squires, have the greatest charge and doings in the commonwealth, or rather are more travailed to serve in it than all the rest: as shall appear hereafter. I call him a yeoman whom our laws do call *legalem hominem*, a word familiar in writs and inquests, which is a freeman born English, and may dispend of his own free land in yearly revenue to the sum of 40/- sterling: this maketh (if the just value were taken now to the proportion of monies) £6 of our

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ENGLAND AND THE ENGLISH

current money at this present. This sort of people confess themselves to be no gentlemen, but give the honour to all which be or take upon them to be gentlemen, and yet they have a certain pre-eminence and more estimation than labourers and artificers, and commonly live wealthily, keep good houses, and do their business, and travail to acquire riches. These be (for the most part) farmers unto gentlemen, which with grazing, frequenting of markets, and keeping servants not idle as the gentleman doth, but such as get both their own living and part of their master's: by these means do come to such wealth, that they are able and daily do buy the lands of unthrifty gentlemen, and after setting their sons to the school at the universities, to the law of the realm, or otherwise leaving them sufficient lands whereon they may live without labour, do make their said sons by those means gentlemen. These be not called masters, for that (as I said) pertaineth to gentlemen only: but to their surnames, men add goodman: as if the surname be Luter, Finch, White, Browne, they are called Goodman Luter, Goodman White, Goodman Finch, Goodman Browne, amongst their neighbours I mean, not in matters of importance or in law. But in matters of law and for distinction, if one were a knight they would write him (for example sake) Sir John Finch knight; so if he be an esquire, John Finch esquire or gentleman; if he be no gentleman, John Finch yeoman. For amongst the gentlemen they which claim no higher degree, and yet be to be exempted out of the number of the lowest sort thereof, be written esquires. So amongst the husbandmen, labourers, lowest and rascal sort of the people, such as be exempted out of the number of the rascality of the popular be called and written yeoman, as in the degree next unto gentlemen. . . .

Of the fourth sort of men which do not rule

The fourth sort or class amongst us is of those which the old Romans called *capite censi proletarii* or *operae*, day labourers, poor husbandmen, yea merchants and retailers which have no free land, copyholders, and all artificers, as tailors, shoemakers, carpenters, brickmakers, masons, etc. These have no voice nor authority in our commonwealth, and no account is made of them but only to be ruled, not to rule other, and yet they be not altogether neglected.

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ENGLISH SNOBBERY

For in cities and corporate towns for default of yeomen, inquests and juries are impanelled of such manner of people. And in villages they be commonly made churchwardens, aleconners, and many times constables, which office toucheth more the commonwealth and at the first was not employed upon such low and base persons. Wherefore generally to speak of the commonwealth, or policy of England, it is governed, administered, and manured by three sorts of persons, the Prince, Monarch, and head governor, which is called the King, or if the crown fall to a woman, the Queen absolute, as I have heretofore said: in whose name and by whose authority all things are administered. The gentlemen, which be divided into two parts, the barony or estate of lords containing barons and all that be above the degree of a baron, (as I have declared before): and those which be no lords, as knights, esquires, and simply gentlemen. The third and last sort of persons is named the yeomanry: each of these hath his part and administration in judgments, corrections of defaults, in election of offices, in appointing and collecting of tributes and subsidies, or in making laws, as shall appear hereafter.

SIR THOMAS SMITH, *De Republica Anglorum*, 1583 (written c. 1551)

ENGLISH SNOBBERY

In London, the rich disdain the poor. The courtier the citizen. The citizen the country man. One occupation disdaineth another. The merchant the retailer. The retailer the craftsman. The better sort of craftsmen the baser. The shoemaker the cobbler. The cobbler the carman. One nice dame disdains her next neighbour should have that furniture to her house, or dainty dish or device, which she wants. She will not go to church, because she disdains to mix herself with base company, and cannot have her close pew by herself. She disdains to wear that everyone wears, or hear that preacher which everyone hears. So did Jerusalem disdain God's prophets, because they came in the likeness of poor men. She disdained Amos, because he was a keeper of oxen, as also the rest, for they were of the dregs of the people. But their disdain prospered not with them. Their house, for their disdain, was left desolate unto them.

THOMAS NASHE, *Christs Teares over Ierusalem*, 1593

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[More information](#)

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The gentlemen disdain traffic, thinking it to abase gentry, but in Italy with graver counsel the very princes disdain not to be merchants by the great, and hardly leave the retailing commodity to men of inferior sort. And by this course they preserve the dignity and patrimony of their progenitors, suffering not the sinew of the commonwealth upon any pretence to be wrested out of their hands. On the contrary, the English and French, perhaps thinking it unjust to leave the common sort no means to be enriched by their industry and judging it equal that gentlemen should live of their revenues, citizens by traffic, and the common sort by the plough and manual arts, as divers members of one body, do in this course daily sell their patrimonies, and the buyers (excepting lawyers) are for the most part citizens and vulgar men. And the daily feeling [? feeding] of this mischief makes the error apparent, whether it be the prodigality of the gentry (greater than in any other nation or age), or their too charitable regard to the inferior sort, or rashness, or slothfulness, which cause them to neglect and despise traffic, which in some commonwealths, and namely in England passeth all other commodities, and is the very sinew of the kingdom.

FYNES MORYSON, *Itinerary*, 1617

ENGLISH WOMEN (A FOREIGN VIEW)

Wives in England are entirely in the power of their husbands, their lives only excepted. Therefore, when they marry, they give up the surname of their father and of the family from which they are descended, and take the surname of their husbands, except in the case of duchesses, countesses and baronesses, who, when they marry gentlemen of inferior degree, retain their first name and title, which, for the ambition of the said ladies, is rather allowed than commended. But although the women there are entirely in the power of their husbands, except for their lives, yet they are not kept so strictly as they are in Spain or elsewhere. Nor are they shut up: but they have the free management of the house or housekeeping, after the fashion of those of the Netherlands, and others their neighbours. They go to market to buy what they like best to eat. They are well dressed, fond of taking it easy, and commonly leave the care of household matters and drudgery to their

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ENGLISH WOMEN

servants. They sit before their doors, decked out in fine clothes, in order to see and be seen by the passers-by. In all banquets and feasts they are shown the greatest honour; they are placed at the upper end of the table, where they are the first served; at the lower end they help the men. All the rest of their time they employ in walking and riding, in playing at cards or otherwise, in visiting their friends and keeping company, conversing with their equals (whom they term gossips) and their neighbours, and making merry with them at child-births, christenings, churchings and funerals; and all this with the permission and knowledge of their husbands, as such is the custom. Although the husbands often recommend to them the pains, industry and care of the German or Dutch women, who do what the men ought to do both in the house and in the shops, for which services in England men are employed, nevertheless the women usually persist in retaining their customs. This is why England is called the Paradise of married women. The girls who are not yet married are kept much more rigorously and strictly than in the Low Countries.

The women are beautiful, fair, well-dressed and modest, which is seen there more than elsewhere, as they go about the streets without any covering either of huke or mantle, hood, veil, or the like. Married women only wear a hat both in the street and in the house; those unmarried go without a hat, although ladies of distinction have lately learnt to cover their faces with silken masks or vizards, and feathers,—for indeed they change very easily, and that every year, to the astonishment of many.

VAN METEREN, *Nederlandsche Historie*, 1575 [Rye]

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CHAPTER II

THE COUNTRYSIDE

And this our life exempt from public haunt,
 Finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks,
 Sermons in stones, and good in every thing.
 I would not change it. *As You Like It*, II. i. 15-18

§ I. COUNTRY-FOLK

A Country Gentleman

Remember who commended thy yellow stockings.
Twelfth Night, II. v. 160

Is a thing, out of whose corruption the generation of a justice of peace is produced. He speaks statutes and husbandry well enough to make his neighbours think him a wise man; he is well skilled in arithmetic or rates: and hath eloquence enough to save his twopence. His conversation amongst his tenants is desperate; but amongst his equals full of doubt. His travel is seldom farther than the next market town, and his inquisition is about the price of corn: when he travelleth, he will go ten mile out of the way to a cousin's house of his to save charges; and rewards the servants by taking them by the hand when he departs. Nothing under a subpoena can draw him to London: and, when he is there, he sticks fast upon every object, casts his eyes away upon gazing, and becomes the prey of every cutpurse. When he comes home, those wonders serve him for his holiday talk. If he go to court, it is in yellow stockings; and if it be in winter, in a slight taffety cloak, and pumps and pantoffles. He is chained that woos the usher for his coming into the presence, where he becomes troublesome with the ill managing of his rapier, and the wearing of his girdle of one fashion and the hanger of another. By this time he hath learned to kiss his hand, and make a leg both together, and the names of lords and councillors; he hath thus much toward entertainment and courtesy, but of the last he makes more use; for by the recital of