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## Bourgeois Shakespeare Disdained Trade and the Bourgeoisie

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To the intense irritation of French and German and Japanese people, England, with Wales and lowland Scotland and a few scattered parts of Ireland in attendance, has been since about 1700 the very fount of bourgeois virtues and especially their acceptance by the rest of society. Admiration for British merchants, British investors, British inventors, British imperialists, British bankers, British economists led to the Great Enrichment, an increase of real income per head since 1800 of anything from 1,900 to 9,900 percent. Only in the twentieth century have the British passed along some of their international duties to their American cousins, as now the Americans pass them to the East.

One view is that Englishmen have always been good capitalists, eager to learn crossbows from Italians and gunpowder from Chinese and how to make silk from both. On this view, the historical anthropologist Alan Macfarlane was substantially correct in his *Origins of English Individualism* (1978, of which I gave an admiring review in the *Journal of Political Economy* in 1979) that English people were “individualistic” in their personal and trading lives. The implication of Macfarlane’s view, and that of many other students of the medieval English evidence, is that the North-Weingast and now Acemoglu-Robinson attribution of the invention of property rights to the Glorious Revolution of 1688 is gravely mistaken.

As it certainly is. But how can one make the Macfarlane view of antique individualism comport with the evident fact that something did change radically at about the same time as the Glorious Revolution, the something being not new institutions (which did not in fact much change until the 1830s) but a new attribution of dignity and liberty to the betterers among the bourgeoisie?

The answer is that the society Macfarlane praises as individualistic in the thirteenth century (and before: Macfarlane goes back to Anglo-Saxon times) was also deeply *hierarchical*. It is hierarchy, I would argue – the Great Chain of Being, in the

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Elizabethan view, plain in every play of Shakespeare and his contemporaries – which was the main obstacle to betterment. Equality before the law and equality of social dignity, perfected in the Blessed Adam Smith – “the liberal plan of equality, liberty and justice” – was around 1700 a startling novelty.<sup>2</sup> The Leveller Richard Rumbold facing the hangman in 1685 declared, “I am sure there was no man born marked of God above another; for none comes into the world with a saddle on his back, neither any booted and spurred to ride him.”<sup>3</sup> The crowd gathered to mock his hanging would not then have agreed. A century later, they did.

Medieval England – and medieval France and Italy and Germany – was a society of laws, and in particular of property rights. Property laws are necessary but nothing like sufficient for the startling betterment that begins in the Industrial Revolution and eventuates in the still more startling Great Enrichment of the past 150 years – all of which, embarrassingly for the North-Acemoglu orthodoxy, happens a century or more after the alleged improvement of property rights out of 1688. A society can be individualistic in a thoroughgoing way but still honor only noblemen, not letting ordinary people have a go at spinning jennies and desktop computers. Roman sculpture (a conventional if not obviously correct line in art history claims) was “individualistic” in a way that Greek sculpture, which dealt in ideal figures, was not. Yet at Rome, as in Shakespeare’s England, rank told above all.

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Aristocratic England before its embourgeoisement was on the whole and in its theory of itself hostile towards betterment tested in trade. Betterment in instruments of war, yes; betterment in general, no, enforced by guild and mercantilism. Betterment of the society as a whole was inconceivable in a zero-sum world, and betterment of position by an individual anyway disturbed the Great Chain of Being. The literary critic Katherine Eiseman Maus, writing in 2002 on Philip Massinger’s play of the 1620s, *A New Way to Pay Old Debts*, notes that “such an ethos, which resists innovation and sees agents of change as presumptuous, influences Massinger’s methods of characterization.”

Some critics complain that his characters do not develop. . . . Such critics assume that novelty is interesting and that a writer who depicts change is more skillful than one who does not. In Massinger’s worldview, however, development is not a desideratum. . . . [a leading character in the play] could do better, Massinger implies, to know his place and stick to it.<sup>4</sup>

In 1516 Thomas More, who recommended a nightmarish society of slaves, which was at last achieved in fascism and in the Soviet Union and its followers down to the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, was pleased that “the use as well as the desire of money being extinguished, much anxiety and great occasions of mischief is cut off with it, and who does not see that the frauds, thefts, robberies, quarrels, tumults,

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2 Smith *WN*, Bk. IV, Chp. ix, p. 664.

3 Quoted in Brailsford 1961, p. 624.

4 Maus 2002, p. 1837.

contentions, seditions, murders, treacheries, and witchcrafts, which are, indeed, rather punished than restrained by the severities of law, would all fall off, if money were not any more valued by the world?"<sup>5</sup> The USSR in May, 1961 made economic crimes of mutually advantageous exchange subject to the death penalty (rather like the U.S. making the economic crime of buying and selling certain drugs subject to a life-destroying penalty), and it was not until 2003 that China removed the death penalty for being a millionaire – though by then it was a law unenforced, like most of its constitution; China had officially recognized private property in 1998.

Once people's pens or brushes get filled they seem to have a hard time restraining their eloquence against trade and money and betterments tested by profits in money that the bourgeoisie (so criminally) earns: the frauds, thefts, robberies, quarrels, tumults, contentions, seditions, murders, treacheries, and witchcrafts. A traditional peasant-aristocrat resentment of the middleman comes out in volume, as nowadays in a highly capitalist Sweden in much of its popular fiction and television shows. In Scotland in 1552-1554 the character Deceit in Sir David Lindsay's court play *A Satire of the Three Estates* explains in 54 lines how he has helped merchants to cheat, for instance:

I taught you merchants many a wile,  
Upland wives for to beguile  
Upon a market day.  
And make them think your stuff was good,  
When it was rotten, by the Rood [that is, by the Cross],  
And [to] swear it was not sway [so].

I was always whispering in your ear,  
And teaching you for to curse and swear,  
What your gear cost in France;<sup>6</sup>  
Although not one word was true. And more:  
I taught you wiles many-fold:  
To mix the new wine with the old. . . .  
To sell right dear and buy goods cheap,  
And mix rye meal among the soap,  
And saffron with olive oil.

The play bulges with such vituperation of crafts and merchants, unsurprising at the time from the pen of a man yclept "Sir." The speech of another character, Falsehood, before he is hanged, fills 78 lines with light weights and high prices on offer from the townsmen (with 30 lines added for a thieving shepherd and a "good common thief"): "then all the bakers will I curse/ That mixes bread with dust and bran/ And fine flour

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5 More 1516, p. 179.

6 I give the English translation of the Scots original. Lindsay (1542-1544), lines 4070-4075; the next is 4082-4083 and 4085-4087. I thank my *vriendinnetje* Margaret Raftery of the University of the Free State for the reference.

with barley meal," and "Adieu, ye crafty cordiners,/ That sell the shoes over dear," and so on and so forth, down to Barbara Ehrenreich and Naomi Klein.<sup>7</sup>

The Elizabethan world picture, and the Great Chain of Being, was an ideology or rhetoric, a system of ideas supporting those in power. Queen Elizabeth gave a short speech in Latin to the heads of Oxford University on September 28, 1592, ending with "Each and every person is to obey his superior in rank. . . . Be of one mind, for you know that unity is the stronger, disunity the weaker and quick to fall into ruin."<sup>8</sup> Everyone must have a master, and dignity for all consists in obedience, not disturbing enterprise. Ulysses in Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* (1602) gives the conventional analysis:

Degrees in schools, and brotherhoods, in cities,  
Peaceful commerce from dividable shores,  
The primogenity and due of birth,  
Prerogative of age, crowns, scepters, laurels,  
But by degree stand in authentic place?  
Take but degree away, untune the string,  
And hark what discord follows.<sup>9</sup>

The theme of *Coriolanus* is the same, the Great Chain of Being expressed as the body politic, and the nobleman's pride at being the head and belly and arm of the body. The figure of the social body as a defense of hierarchy was ancient, as John Filling notes.<sup>10</sup> The senator and patrician Menenius Agrippa in the first scene of *Coriolanus* defends the belly of the body, which has been blamed by the mob as taking without giving:

MENENIUS. The senators of Rome are this good belly,  
And you the mutinous members; for examine  
Their counsels and their cares, digest things rightly  
Touching the weal o' the common, you shall find  
No public benefit which you receive  
But it proceeds or comes from them to you  
And no way from yourselves. What do you think,  
You, the great toe of this assembly?

FIRST CITIZEN. I the great toe! why the great toe?

MENENIUS. For that, being one o' the lowest, basest, poorest,  
Of this most wise rebellion, thou go'st foremost.<sup>11</sup>

Such noble pride does not of course disappear even in bourgeois England – a point that the English historian David Cannadine makes.<sup>12</sup> But by 1776 the obedience to superiors as the chief political principle, or the subordination of the great toe to the belly or brain, becomes much less prominent than it was in 1600. In the United States nowadays, for example, it is affirmed chiefly by certain members of the country club.

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7 Lindsay (1542-1544), bakers lines 4187-4189; cordiners 4194-4195.

8 Elizabeth 1592, in Marcus and others, eds. (2000), p. 328.

9 *Troilus and Cressida*, Act 1, sc. iii, ll. 103-110

10 Filling 2009, p. 9.

11 *Coriolanus*, Act 1, sc. 1, ll. 158-167.

12 Cannadine 1990.

In Shakespeare's England, then, the bourgeois virtues were not respectable. Sneered at, rather. (This was despite Will's own economic success in the business of running theatre companies.) A claim of "virtue" for a merchant was seen as flatly ridiculous. "Let me have no lying," says the rogue Autolycus in *The Winter's Tale*, "It becomes none but a merchant."<sup>13</sup> The only one of Shakespeare's plays that speaks largely of merchants offers no commendation of what was supposed to be the bourgeois virtue of thrift. Shylock's "well-worn thrift" is nothing like an admired model for behavior. It is the lack of thrift in aristocratic Bassanio, the "disabling of his estate," itself viewed as amusing and blameless – since had he but the means he could hold a rival place with Portia's wealthy and aristocratic suitors – that motivates the merchant Antonio's foolish blood bargain in the first place. No blame attaches, and all ends well, except for the Jew.

This does not mean that Shakespeare's contemporaries did not acknowledge the acquiring of money, or did not want income. As people have been in all ages, they were greedy for money. Bassanio was, for example. But economic power could express itself honorably only in the aristocratic notion that Lord Bassanio simply deserved the money income from his lands or borrowings or gifts from friends or marrying well or any other unearned income he could assemble, and then gloriously spend. Shylock was to be expropriated to enrich others – never mind such bourgeois notions as incentives to thrift or work or betterment, with its attendant virtues of prudence and the commercial justice, which even Shakespeare understood was foundational to Venice.

The gentry and especially the aristocracy in Shakespeare's England discounted bourgeois thrift, and scorned the bourgeois work that earned the income to be thrifty about. Gentlemen, and especially dukes, did not deign to pay their tailoring bills. As late as 1695 the English economic writer Charles Davenant complained that "if these high [land] taxes long continue, in a country so little given to thrift as ours, the landed men must inevitably be driven into the hands of . . . usurers."<sup>14</sup> The unthrifty were the landed English gentlemen puttin' on the style. Francis Bacon had been in Shakespeare's time the very type of such a man, given to "ostentatious entrances, arrayed in all his finery, and surrounded by a glittering retinue," greedy, chronically unthrifty, always in debt, and giving into the temptation therefore to misuse the Lord Chancellor's mace, when finally his ambition achieved it, by soliciting bribes from both sides in legal disputes.<sup>15</sup> Pope wrote in 1732-34 in *The Essay on Man* to those who admired Bacon, "If parts allure thee, think how Bacon shin'd,/ The wisest, brightest, meanest of mankind." About the same time as Bacon's disgrace, a prudent temperance had made Plymouth Colony and Massachusetts Bay succeed where Jamestown, Virginia had failed. The adventurers of Jamestown were gentlemen, not the thrifty and calculating Puritans of Massachusetts.

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13 *Winter's Tale* 4.4.702.

14 Quoted in Wilson 1965, pp. 155-56.

15 Jardine and Stewart 1999, p. 433.

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All of Shakespeare's works record, further, an aristocratic refusal to calculate. Think of Hamlet's indecision, Lear's proud impulsiveness, King Leontes' irrationalities in *A Winter's Tale*. Even Antonio the merchant makes the fatal bargain impulsively, and admirably, in one line of blank verse, on account of his deep friendship. Such behavior is quite unlike the prudent examining of ethical account books even in late and worldly Puritans such as Daniel Defoe, or in their still later and still more worldly descendants such as Benjamin Franklin.

One countable piece of evidence that bourgeois values were scorned in England until the seventeenth and then the eighteenth centuries is the unfashionability in the time of Shakespeare of reasoning by count. A century ago Sombart made the point that in the Middle Ages in Europe "the handling of figures was very primitive."<sup>16</sup> Europe had to learn late to count with Arabic (really, Indian) as against Roman numerals. The Italians, of course, led. "Italy was the first in the field as the land where commercial arithmetic was in vogue."<sup>17</sup> Yet even among the northern Italians, Sombart observed, that "as late as 1299 the use of Arabic numerals was forbidden by the brethren of the Calimala guild." It has recently been realized, further, that medieval Europe was peculiarly backward in such matters: China was far ahead. In northern Europe the leaders in counting in Arabic numerals, much later, were the Dutch, and not merely as a technique but as an attitude towards the commercial and calculating life.

The pre-modern attitude – which survives nowadays in many a non-quantitative modern – shows in a little business between Prince Hal and Sir John Falstaff. The scene is fictional early fifteenth century. *1 Henry IV* was written in London at the end of the sixteenth century. Either time will do. Prince Hal disguised in a stiffened cloth called buckram had been the night before one of the merely two assailants of Falstaff and his little gang of three other thieves. The princely two had relieved the four thieves of their loot just taken. Falstaff had, after a token resistance, fled in terror, as had his confederates. One of them, Gadshill, and poor old Jack Falstaff, re-count the episode to Prince Hal, without realizing that it was the Prince himself who attacked them (and here among the low life even the Prince – though soon to become noble and blank-verse Henry V – speaks of course in prose):

FALSTAFF. A hundred upon poor four of us.

PRINCE. What, a hundred, man?

FALSTAFF. I am a rogue if I were not at half-sword with a dozen of them,  
two hours together:

GADSHILL. We four set upon some dozen –

FALSTAFF [to the PRINCE]. Sixteen at least, my lord.

GADSHILL. As we were sharing [the loot], some six or seven fresh men set  
upon us.

FALSTAFF. If I fought not with fifty of them, I am a bunch of radish. If  
there were not two- and three-and-fifty upon poor old Jack, then I

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16 Sombart 1913, p. 17

17 Sombart 1913, pp. 118, 128.

am no two-legged creature. I have peppered two of them. Two I am sure I have paid [that is, mortally injured] – two rogues in buckram suits. Four rogues in buckram let drive at me –

PRINCE. What, four? Thou saidst but two even now.

FALSTAFF. Four, Hal, I told thee four. I took all their seven points in my target [shield], thus.

PRINCE. Seven? Why, there were but four even now.

FALSTAFF. In buckram. These nine in buckram that I told thee of –

PRINCE. So, two more already.

FALSTAFF. [As swift as] a thought, seven of the eleven I paid.

PRINCE. O monstrous! Eleven buckram men grown out of two!<sup>18</sup>

Yet less than two centuries after Shakespeare's England, Boswell says to Johnson: "Sir Alexander Dick tells me, that he remembers having a thousand people in a year to dine at his house; that is, reckoning each person as one, each time he dined there."

JOHNSON. That, Sir, is about three a day.

BOSWELL. How your statement lessens the idea.

JOHNSON. That, Sir, is the good of counting. It brings every thing to a certainty, which before floated in the mind indefinitely.

BOSWELL. But . . . one is sorry to have this diminished.

JOHNSON. Sir, you should not allow yourself to be delighted with error.<sup>19</sup>

Something had changed. As Johnson wrote elsewhere, "To count is a modern practice, the ancient method was to guess; and when numbers are guessed they are always magnified," in the style of true Jack Falstaff, plump Jack Falstaff.<sup>20</sup> Johnson the classicist knew what he was talking about. The economic historian Gregory Clark has reviewed the startling evidence from tombstones that wealthy if illiterate and innumerate ancient Romans, for example, didn't know their own ages. In the style of fabled Methuselahs the innumerate among the Romans would grossly exaggerate the age at death of very old folk, with every sign of believing their own miscalculations.<sup>21</sup> The lack of precision in counting persisted among the ignorant. When Casanova escaped from prison in Venice in 1757 he went to Paris, where he lighted on a promisingly gullible female victim, the Marquise d'Urfe. But she was already captivated by another gentlemanly scoundrel, the Comte de Saint-Germain, who had persuaded her to believe he was three hundred years old.<sup>22</sup>

Numeracy was always advanced among the bourgeois, who had to calculate to live. Ordinary people in commerce-drenched Holland around 1600 thought quantitatively. In Britain by 1757 even among people not in business a common numeracy was more advanced than in, say, France. Johnson laid it down that "no man should travel unprovided with instruments for taking heights and distances," using his

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18 *1 Henry IV*, 2.5, lines 160-199, condensed

19 Boswell 1791 (1949), II, 1783, p. 456

20 Boswell 1791 (1949), II, p. 458

21 Clark 2007, pp. 175-180.

22 Maynial 1911, pp. 7, 10.

walking stick.<sup>23</sup> Boswell reports a conversation in 1783 in which Johnson argues against constructing a wall around a garden on calculative grounds, as not productive enough to bear the expense of the wall – the same calculation at the same time, by the way, which was surprisingly important for the enclosure movement in English agriculture. “I record the minute detail,” writes Boswell, “in order to show clearly how this great man. . . was yet well-informed in the common affairs of life, and loved to illustrate them.”<sup>24</sup> The point is that he loved to illustrate them quantitatively, quite contrary to the routine in earlier centuries.

And this was a literary man. Because of his friendship with Mr. and Mrs. Thrale, who ran a large London brewery, Johnson turned his quantitative mind to their hopes. In 1778 he writes, “we are not far from the great year of 100,000 barrels [of porter brewed at the Anchor's brewery], which, if three shillings be gained from each barrel will bring us fifteen thousand pounds a year [an immense sum, much larger than Mr. Darcy's income in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*]. Whitbread [a competing brewery] never pretended to more than thirty pounds a day, which is not eleven thousand a year.”<sup>25</sup> Calculate, calculate. That is the good of counting. No wonder that “by the early nineteenth century,” as Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall note, “foreign visitors [to England] were struck by this spirit: the prevalence of measuring instruments, the clocks on every church steeple, the ‘watch in everyone's pocket,’ the fetish of using scales for weighing everything including one's own body and of ascertaining a person's exact chronological age.”<sup>26</sup>

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Hostility to social equality. Hostility to counting. And hostility to the market. In 1621 in England the scholar and cleric Robert Burton wrote fiercely, in *The Anatomy of Melancholy*:

What's the market? . . . . A vast chaos, a confusion of manners, as fickle as the air, *domicilium insanorum* [abode of madmen], a turbulent troop full of impurities, a mart of walking spirits, goblins, the theatre of hypocrisy, a shop of knavery, flattery, a nursery of villainy, the scene of babbling, the school of giddiness, the academy of vice; a warfare, *ubi velis nolis pugnandum, aut vincas aut succumbas* [where, whether or not you wish to fight, you either conquer or succumb], in which kill or be killed; wherein every man is for himself, his private ends, and stands upon his own guard. No charity, love, friendship, fear of God, alliance, affinity, consanguinity, Christianity, can contain them. . . . Our *summum bonum* is commodity, and the goddess we adore *Dea moneta*, Queen money, . . . . It is not worth, virtue, . . . wisdom, valour, learning, honesty [which meant then “nobility”], religion, or any sufficiency for which we are respected,

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23 Johnson and Boswell, 1775, 1785, p. 139.

24 Johnson and Boswell, 1775, 1785, p. 104.

25 Quoted in Mathias 1979, p. 312.

26 Davidoff and Hall 1987, p. 26.

but money, greatness, office, honor, authority; honesty is accounted folly; knavery, policy; men admired out of opinion, not as they are, but as they seem to be.<sup>27</sup>

Well. If many people believed this, and acted on it, a modern economy would be impossible. If dignity was not accorded to transactions in trade and to the betterments that the bourgeoisie brings forward to the test of profit, and if the liberty to trade and to invent were scorned, and if liberty to compete were not the test of anyone's betterment, then the modern world would have stopped in 1621.

My claim is that the old, anti-bourgeois view – the exceptions came early among the Italians and Catalans, and then the Bavarians such as the Fuggers of Augsburg, and the northern Hanseatic League and above all the Netherlanders – dominated the public rhetoric of Scotland and England until the very late seventeenth century, that of France until the late eighteenth, and of Germany until the early nineteenth, of Japan until the late nineteenth, of China and India until the late twentieth. The belief I say is ancient, and it lasts in some circles into the Bourgeois Era even in bourgeois societies. We find echoes of it down to the present, for example, among radical environmentalists and now, startlingly, among Republicans hostile to market solutions to CO<sub>2</sub> problems, so long as Democrats suggest them; or among populists and left-academics eager to bring down the CEOs and the World Trade Organization.

If trading was in fact a scene mainly of adulterated flour and over-dear shoes, a matter of making upland wives think your stuff was good when it was rotten, a "theatre of hypocrisy" ruled only by lying and plotting, then no one of faith or justice or indeed of common prudence would venture to take part in it. The self-selection would drive out all faithful people, by the lemons effect. The historian James Davis makes the same point: "If unremitting suspicion [which he finds especially in literary and religious comments on petty traders] reflected the opinion of all medieval market users then exchange would have been very difficult, . . . requiring constant (and costly) surveillance."<sup>28</sup> If only deceitful Scottish tradesmen, or English knaves and the men admired out of opinion rather than who they really are, can succeed in the secondhand market for horses, then everyone will come to suspect that any horse put up for sale by such marketeers is very likely to be rotten, impure, over-dear, and dissembling. Make sure you look in the horse's mouth and count the sound teeth. Watch out for blue eyes. In an auto chassis watch out for signs of welded breaks. Or, better, don't buy a horse or car at all. Walk, and remain at \$3 a day.

Of course, something is strange here. Lindsay and Burton could not actually have maintained such a view without self-contradiction. After all, they bought their ink and quills to scribble away at *A Satire the Three Estates* or the *Anatomy of Melancholy* in a market, and sustained themselves with wine purchased in a market supplied from France with *Dea moneta*, and rode on purchased horses when they could, and if really wealthy and citified were carried in hired sedan chairs or in self-owned carriages. A modern who holds such anti-market views faces the same self-contradiction, buying

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27 Davidoff and Hall 1987, pp. 352-361.

28 Davis 2012, p. 136.

paper and ink and computers in the marketplace to produce *The Socialist Worker*, or driving her recently purchased Mercedes to meetings to overthrow capitalism.

Burton himself could not sustain it. In his book the other 18 instances of the word “market” (all coming after the first passage attacking the very idea) refer to market *places*, not the abstract concept, analogous here to Vanity Fair, and do not carry connotations of nattering by walking spirits. Anyway, such blasts against greed are standard turns in literary performances from the *Iliad* (I: 122, 149) and the prophet Amos (2:6-7; 5:10-12; 8:4-6) down to the novels of Sinclair Lewis and the TV show “American Greed: Scams, Schemes, and Broken Dreams.” They must be satisfying to write, because there is a great supply of them; and the demand, too, seems brisk.

In its very conventionality, however, Lindsay’s speeches and Burton’s paragraph and Shakespeare’s plays typify the rhetorical obstacle to a modern economy. The sneer by the aristocrat, the damning by the priest, the envy by the peasant, all directed against trade and profit and the bourgeoisie, conventional in every literature since ancient times (though there is some doubt concerning Mesopotamia or Israel), have long sufficed to kill economic growth. Only in recent centuries have the clerisy’s prejudice against trading been offset and partially disabled by economists and pragmatists and the writers of books on how to win friends and influence people.

Consider the analogy with other prejudices. Anti-Semitism was “merely” an idea, unless implemented in Russian pogroms during the 1880s or Viennese politics during the 1890s. But of course lacking the mere idea, and its long history in Europe, and its intensification in the nineteenth century, the Russian pogroms and the Viennese newspaper articles and their spawn after 1933 would not have happened. Hitler, although not much of a reader, was an intellectual in the sense that hole-in-corner dealers in ideas on the blogs are nowadays. Ideas, especially about art and architecture, mattered to Hitler and motivated him, which made him a member of the clerisy, for good or ill. (The committee that turned down his application in 1907 to become a student at the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts bears a heavy weight of historical guilt.) The coming of the idea of praise for bourgeois values, or at least toleration for them, resembles the ending, or the moderating, or at least the embarrassing, of anti-Semitism. And of course anti-trade prejudice and anti-Jewish prejudice are connected at the hip. Ideas mattered. That the ideas mattered didn’t mean that legal and financial implementation was a nullity, or that self-interest never motivated a Czech seizing the house of an exterminated Jew. But ideas are not, as the economists believe, merely cheap talk with no impact on social equilibria.

Or consider racism in America. The hypocrisy of Lindsay’s or Burton’s or Shakespeare’s anti-market blasts while trading with their friend Nat the stationer for ink can be compared, as the economist Virgil Storr has observed, with talking about African-Americans being quite terrible on the whole, as burglars of houses and rapists of white women—except my cleaning lady, who is a good one, or except my friend from church, whom after long acquaintance I hardly remember is one, or Sammy Davis, Jr., who after all was Jewish. “All merchants are crooks,” writes Storr in free indirect

style, “but this chap I deal with isn’t so bad.”<sup>29</sup> Or consider prejudice against women. My daughter deserves respect, says the virulent sexist. But those others are whores.

Or to return to the main point – the prejudice against business so crippling to economic growth – the unreflective hypocrite will declare that “My grocer is a good fellow, but in general they’re cheats.” Yet for a Great Enrichment the middleman in the marketplace or in the corporation requires the same liberty and dignity as does the betterer in the laboratory or the Jazz Showcase. All of them sell dear and buy cheap, the one routinely with, say, food, the other creatively with ideas, whether of furniture or saxophone riffs. The idea-betterment must be tested by what people will trade for it, or else it is a mere fancy that will on balance reduce welfare. The central error of comprehensive socialism is to suppose that betterment does not need to be tested by trade, that no discoveries are to be made by putting a cash test to people about what they value, that we already know everything we need to know to satisfy consumers or listeners.

The point is that the prejudice against the middleman, the boss, the banker – vile things – if it gets beyond cheap talk, and it often does, can stop discovery, betterment, and creative destruction cold. Smith and Schumpeter are overturned. Stupidity comes to reign. It all needs to be contradicted, and in Britain in the eighteenth century it was.

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That is, the society’s attitude towards trade-tested betterment and all thing bourgeois changed. Start with a word once surprisingly redolent of an aristocratic civilization, but nowadays thoroughly bourgeois. Lots of English words have such a history. In English our bourgeois word “honest” once meant not mainly “committed to telling the truth” or “paying one’s debts” or even “upright in dealing,” but mainly “noble, aristocratic,” or sometimes “dignified,” in a society in which only the noble were truly dignified. After all, what true aristocrat would bother with merely propositional truth or procedural uprightness when style, gesture, heroism, dignity, loyalty to persons, and social position are the life of man?

The modern and secondary meaning of “truth telling and keeping one’s word, whether or not of high or at any rate upright and sincere social rank” does occur in English as early as 1400. But the meaning of “honorable by virtue of high social standing” is still dominant in Shakespeare’s time and quite lively until the eighteenth century. Shakespeare uses the ambiguity of the two meanings “worthy of social honor” and “truth-telling” in many places, for example in *Cymbeline*. The loyal servant Pisanio says to himself that he must dissemble to remain true to a wider truth: “Wherein I am false, I am honest [that is, honorable and genuine]; not true, to be true” [that is, not truth-telling, yet faithful; IV. iii, 42].

In Shakespeare’s time a phrase such as “honest, honest Iago” in *Othello* mainly meant, with a certain coy ambiguity, that the lying, motivelessly malignant Iago, a high-

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29 Storr, personal correspondence 2008.

ranking soldier by profession, was “honorable, noble, warlike, aristocratic.”<sup>30</sup> The famous definition of a “diplomat” by Sir Henry Wotton (1568-1639) plays on the ambiguity: “an honest man sent to lie abroad for the good of his country.” “Honest” here means “noble, distinguished,” but dances prettily with “lying” in its non-postural sense. The old phrase in men’s mouths, “an honest woman” – thus Desdemona in *Othello*, repeatedly, an ironic commentary on her husband’s suspicions – preserves the original meaning of the word “honest,” with adjustments for a woman’s place in a male system of honor. Anne Boleyn, Elizabeth I’s mother, refused Henry VIII’s advances unless he married her: “I would rather lose my life than my honesty.”<sup>31</sup> Charles I on the scaffold, 1648, said he was “an *honest* man and a good King, and a good Christian.” He did not mean that he kept to his business bargains or told the truth, which he chronically did not.

In the Chrystals’ *Shakespeare’s Words* four definitions of “honest” are given, and none the straightforward “truth-telling” in the modern sense. The closest the Chrystals give is 3: “genuine,” as in Second Part of Henry IV, the ‘umble servant Davy’s appeal for an occasional indulgence toward knaves: “if I cannot once or twice in a quarter bear out a knave against an honest man, I have but a very little credit with your worship. The knave is mine honest friend, sir; therefore, I beseech your worship, let him be countenanced” (2HenIV, V.i). The other three definitions in *Shakespeare’s Words* tell of knightly honor.

Compare a century and a half later *Tom Jones* (1749). Fielding uses “honest” only four times in one of the first English novels to be accounted such by professors of English, all in Book 1 of the 18 books: “the honest and well-meaning host”; “these honest victuallers” (Chap. 1); “he lived like an honest man, owed no one a shilling” (Chap. 3); and “a good, honest, plain girl, and not vain of her face (Chp. 8).<sup>32</sup> All mean “upright, sincere,” with by then an old-fashioned and even slightly parodic air. By 1749 they have nothing to do, as forty years before they still often did, with honorableness in the aristocrat’s sense. In Johnson’s *Dictionary* (1755) the senses of “honest” given are (1.) upright, true, sincere [that is, the bourgeois definition], (2.) chaste, and (3.) just, righteous, giving every man his due.” Not aristocratic. Yet also under “honesty” Johnson quotes Temple late in the previous century giving a definition and the recent etymology: “goodness, as that which makes men prefer their duty and their promise before their passions or their interest, and is properly the object of trust, in our language goes rather by the name of honesty, though what we call an honest man, the Romans called a good man; and honesty, in their language, as well as in French, [and I am saying in earlier English] rather signifies a competition of those qualities which generally acquire honor and esteem.”

The idea of “honest” dealing in trade comes from merchants and tradesmen (such as Quakers, the first merchants to post fixed prices instead of bargaining, which

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30 For a fuller discussion of “honest” in the play see McCloskey 2006, pp. 294-295; and Empson 1951 (1989), p. 218.

31 Moynahan 2002, p. 402.

32 [bibliomania.com/0/0/22/49/frameset.html](http://bibliomania.com/0/0/22/49/frameset.html)

they considered to be lying), never from the gentry or the aristocrats. Adam Smith admired honesty, sincerity, truth, candor in a fashion foreign to Shakespearean England. In Smith's books of 1759 and 1776 in their first editions "honest" means "upright" or "sincere" or "truth-telling," never "aristocratic." Even a poor man, he argues in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, is constrained not to steal by "the man within": "there is no commonly honest man who does not more dread the inward disgrace."<sup>33</sup> In Shakespeare "commonly honest" would be a contradiction in terms, and "honest but poor" an absurdity. "Honest but poor" was not old-southern-English talk but new eighteenth-century-Scots-Lowland talk, as in 1795 in Burns' "The honest man, though e'er so poor,/ Is king of men for all that." (As early as 1732-34 to be sure Alexander Pope in the Fourth Epistle of *The Essay on Man*, line 247, declares Burns-style, that "An honest man's the noblest work of God." Yet be careful—the "noblest" work, and no mention of poverty.)

In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* Smith writes, "The man who indulges us in this natural passion, who invites us into his heart, who, as it were, sets open the gates of his breast to us, seems to exercise a species of hospitality more delightful than any other."<sup>34</sup> Smith's usage anticipates a Romantic faithfulness to the Self, as in Wordsworth, when democratic sincerity comes fully into its own. By contrast, any Othello or Hamlet who opened the gates of his breast would invite a fatal wound. Even in Shakespeare's comedies it was prudent to dissimulate. He again and again, sometimes favorably, sometimes unfavorably, exhibits instances of what we would call dishonesty. There is no play in which bourgeois "honesty" is honored.

By the eighteenth century at last, then, "honest" had changed. In the eight works of Jane Austen, written from 1793 to 1816 (including *The Watsons*, 1804, unfinished, and her early and unpublished *Lady Susan* [something of a first draft of *Sense and Sensibility*] but not including her last, unfinished *Sanditon*), "honest" occurs 31 times.<sup>35</sup> It means "upright" on six occasions, dominantly in the old phrase an "honest man," but never in Shakespeare's dominant sense "of high social rank, aristocratic." Another third of the time it means "genuine," as in "a real, honest, old-fashioned boarding-school" (*Emma*), very far indeed from "honest" as "aristocratic." In its dominant modern sense of "truth-telling" it occurs a third of the time in the meaning "sincere," and in four out of the 31 total occurrences as simply "truth-telling."

What is most surprising, however, confirming a deeper significance for the coming of a bourgeois civilization of trade-tested innovation, is that the identical shift occurs in non-English Germanic languages. That is, in the *Germanic* languages during the time that Shakespeare or Cervantes or Molière are using the word from the Latin *honestus*, meaning "aristocratic," the same honor-code meaning of "honest" is attached to an honesty-word meaning aristocratic honor, though coming out of an entirely different linguistic root than in the Romance languages. In Dutch for example the root is spelt *eer*, "aristocratic" (and cognates with the same pronunciation, of English "air,"

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33 Smith *TMS*, III.3.6.

34 Smith *TMS*, VII.iv.28, p. 337.

35 [pemberley.com/janeinfo/novlsrch.html](http://pemberley.com/janeinfo/novlsrch.html)

in all the Germanic languages spoken now and earlier, from Iceland and Sweden south to Switzerland and Austria, including Old English). Though deriving from a quite different root, the word *eerlijk* comes to have the identical modern history as “honest” does in the word derived from Latin *honestus* of English, French, and Italian. Both Romance and Germanic languages start at the same aristocratic place in their expressions of honor in, say, 1500, and arrive at latest by 1800 in a different, and commoner and even bourgeois, place.

When the bourgeois southern Netherlanders printed in 1516 the medieval romance *Heinric en Margriete van Limborch*, they added that Sir Heinric would achieve *eer*, honor, by paying his debts generously: *so sal men eer van u spreken*, literally “so shall people honor of you speak,” if you act as a bourgeois who pays his bills and not only as a knight who chronically does not.<sup>36</sup> But the tale is still of knights and their ladies, of whom *eer* is routinely spoken. In the twenty-first century German *Ehrsucht*, honorable “honor-seeking,” has become to mean “excessive ambition” (*Ehrgeiz* is normal, restrained ambition). The Dutch *eer* and German *ehre* still nowadays mean “noble, aristocratic” – like English “honorable” when used among would-be aristocrats on the dueling grounds. And the word persists, as it does in English and French, in dead metaphors remembering hierarchy. “*Meine Ehre heißt Treue* (“My Honor is Loyalty”; note *treue*) was taken as the motto of Hitler’s SS. Using it as a noun, the Dutch say *de eer aandoen om*, “to do [me] the honor of.” Or an old-fashioned German politely answering the telephone will say, *mit wem habe ich die Ehre zu spreken?* – “with whom do I have the honor to speak?”

But in Dutch and in German the addition of *-lijk/-lich* (-like) yielded an *eerlijk/ehrlich* that eventually comes to mean simply “honest,” in the same style as the modern English commendation of the truth-telling necessary for a society of merchants. Thus too Danish and Norwegian *ære*, honor (but be careful: plain *ær* by itself and without the *-e* means “duck”!), parallels *aerlig*, honest (like Old English *árlic*, “honorable”). The surprising fact, in short, is that both the Germanic languages and the commercial daughters of Latin developed from their respective root words meaning “aristocratic, worthy of honor” a new word appropriate to an increasingly bourgeois society meaning instead “truth telling, worthy of trust.”

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Another word. (I could go on and on like this, but here will not.) “Gentleman,” sense 2a in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, is “a man in whom gentle birth is accompanied by appropriate qualities and behavior; hence, in general, a man of chivalrous instincts and fine feelings,” with an instance as early as 1386, in Chaucer. The lexicographers of Oxford note further that “in this sense the term is frequently defined by reference to later derived senses of ‘gentle,’” that is, mild mannered, an early and unusual use being 1552. Yet much more usually until modern times the word “gentle” continued to mean “well-born.” In their book *Shakespeare’s Words: A Glossary and Language Companion*

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36 Pleij 1994, p. 64.

(2002) David and Ben Crystal put “gentle” among their selection of the hundred most frequently encountered words that would mislead a modern reader of the Bard. They define “gentle” simply as “well-born.”<sup>37</sup> The alternative spelling and pronunciation, “genteel,” meant much the same as “gentle” in seventeenth-century English, “appropriate to persons of quality,” as in Pepys writing in the *OED* quotation from 1665 that “we had the genteelist dinner.” But in its various shades of meaning recorded in the *OED* “genteel” becomes in the eighteenth century a bit of a joke, and was and still is used “chiefly with sarcastic implication.” Thus Jane Austen says of an unfortunate family that was, in Emma’s opinion (spoofed in free indirect style) “of low origin, in trade, and only moderately genteel.”<sup>38</sup> Note Austen’s gentle, and genteel, touch of irony about the distinction.

The mid-Victorian moralist Samuel Smiles held up in the final Chapter of *Self Help* (1859) “The True Gentleman” as his ideal. The way Smiles mixes aristocratic and Christian/ democratic and bourgeois notions of gentlemanliness is not the main line of the word until very late. Smiles’ modern assertion on the last page of his book that “Gentleness is indeed the best test of gentlemanliness” may serve well enough now in our egalitarian times, originating in the crazy notions of Levelers in the 1640s or Wat Tyler’s mad talk in 1381 that rank and birth should not matter: “When Adam delved, and Eve span/ Who then was the gentleman?” Likewise in *Tom Brown’s School Days* (1857) celebrating the new Rugby model of the public school introduced by Thomas Arnold, fictional Tom’s father intends only that little Tom will “turn out a brave, helpful, truth-telling Englishman, and a *gentleman*, and a Christian.”<sup>39</sup> Even Joel Mokyr slips into anachronism when he echoes Smiles on the gentle gentleman and applies it to the eighteenth century. But such a late bourgeois notion has nothing to do with the self-confident society of sneering rank and birth that Shakespeare’s gentlemen praised, or that Eton College long practiced, or that still in the eighteenth century associated the gentleman with sword-carrying and sword-using, and still anyway in the nineteenth with a lack of an occupation.

By the very end, by 1848, notoriously, in Holland and England and America and their imitators in northwestern Europe, a busy businessperson was routinely said to be good, and good for us, except by the angry and as yet tiny anti-betterment clerisy, gathering especially in France and Germany. The new form of betterment, dating from its precursors in the northern Italian city states around 1300 to the first modern bourgeois society on a large scale in Holland around 1600 to a pro-bourgeois ethical and political rhetoric in Britain around 1776 to a world-making rhetoric around 1848, grew for the first time in history at the level of big states and empires to be acceptable, even honorable, even virtuous.

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37 Crystal and Crystal 2002, p. xx.

38 Austen *Emma*, Chp. XXV.

39 Quoted to this effect in Moretti 2013, p. 135n.

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