

Reading Copy of the Shakespeare-relevant Passages in
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“Bourgeois Shakespeare Disdained Trade and the Bourgeoisie,”

being a portion of *Bourgeois Equality: How Betterment Became Ethical, 1600-1848, and Then Suspect* (University of Chicago Press, c. 2016; final volume of the trilogy, *The Bourgeois Era*), for American Economic Association meetings, Boston January 2015, 8:00 am on Sunday, January 4 at the Sheraton Boston, Beacon B. The skeleton of the argument is in **bold**. The full original is at deirdremccloskey.org

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.

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) that English people were “individualistic” in their trading and marrying 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.

But how can one make the Macfarlane view of antique individualism fit 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 was also deeply hierarchical. It is hierarchy, I would argue – the Great Chain of Being, in the Elizabethan view, plain in every play of Shakespeare and his contemporaries and ancestors – 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 therefore a startling novelty. 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. England c. 1600 was.

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 and royalty. 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." Everyone must have a master, and dignity for all consists in obedience, not a 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.

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 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.

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.

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."** 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.

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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. **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 did 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 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!

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.**

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.

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In its very conventionality about the bourgeoisie and their money-making, **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 and its calculative way of life, 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.

It 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-ranking soldier by profession, was “honorable, noble, warlike, aristocratic.” (For a fuller discussion of “honest” in the play see McCloskey 2006, pp. 294-295; and Empson 1951 [1989], p. 218.) 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.” 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.

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 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.” In Shakespeare “commonly honest” would be a contradiction in terms, and “honest but poor” an absurdity. “

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.” 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.

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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,” 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.

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* (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.”¹

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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.**

1 Crystal and Crystal 2002, p. xx.