Shakespeare's Caste Prejudices
A Reply to Ernest Crosby

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Both external and internal evidence lead us to the inference that "Cymbeline" was written about the years 1609-10, one or two years before the poet's retirement from the stage to his country residence at Stratford-on-Avon. It is possible and even highly probable, that this play, as well as one or two others, was written in the luxuriously furnished apartments of New Place, the finest house in Stratford. Written as this play was, at a time when the poet was rich enough to retire from active theatrical work and to devote himself to a life of ease and luxury in which his "aristocratic prejudices"—if he had any—would find ample opportunity for developing, it is especially calculated to betray such caste prejudices as he may have fostered.

The plot of "Cymbeline" is based on a few facts from Holinshed and the story of Bernabo Lomellin, merchant, in Boccaccio's Decamerone; the play is a tragic-comic dramatization of Boccaccio's tale with an historical setting and a beautiful romantic background of country scenes, with the addition of some romantic incidents. Instead of the merchants of the tale the dramatis personae of the play are:—Cymbeline, King of Britain; his Queen; the Princess Imogen; the Prince Cloten; Posthumus Leonatus, who takes the place of Lomellin; Lord Iachimo, who takes the place of "the young merchant of Piacenza, Ambrogiuolo"; and Courtiers. The elevation of the social status of the characters seems to confirm the charge that "Shakespeare was unable to conceive of any situation rising to the dignity of tragedy in other than royal and ducal circles." It is said that he does not treat of the triumphs of the common people, and that he does not make anything of people of humble origin. "His opinion of them (i.e. the common people) is indicated more or less picturesquely by the names which he selects for them." Mr. Crosby complains that he cannot find any instances in Shakespeare's works of "serious and estimable behaviour on the part of individuals representing the lower classes, or of considerate treatment of them on the part of their 'betters.'" The hero of the play now under

1Ernest Crosby, "Shakespeare's Working Classes," The Craftsman, April, 1903, p. 35. 2Id. p. 37. 3Id. p. 41.
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consideration in himself gives the lie to these statements. His name—Posthumus Leonatus—is as high sounding and picturesque as that borne by any Shakespearean “noble” hero; his “common” origin is amply attested by almost all the characters in the play, friend and foe alike. The 1st Gentleman describes him as “a poor but worthy gentleman” (i. i, 7). Later he says of him:

He......is a creature such
As, to seek through the regions of the earth
For one his like, there would be something failing
In him that should compare. I do not think
So fair an outward and such stuff within
Endows a man but he.”

How highly Posthumus is esteemed at the Court appears from the fact that not a single nobleman has a word to say against him or his marriage with the Princess. As to his ancestry we have the following dialogue:

2 Gent. What’s his name and birth?
1 Gent. I cannot delve him to the root: his father
Was called Sicilius, who did join his honor
Against the Romans with Cassibelan,
But had his titles by Tenantius, whom
He serv’d with glory and admir’d success,
So gain’d the sur-addition Leonatus. (i. i, 119-120)

Here we have an example of an obscure and humble family raised to eminence by the King for glorious military achievements. The King further showed his appreciation of this humble family by taking the orphan Posthumus to his protection, “made him of his bed-chamber, and put to him all the learnings that his time could make him the receiver of.”

Posthumus tells Imogen:

I my poor self did exchange for you,
To your so infinite loss. (i. i, 119-120)

Cymbeline, drawn by the treacherous Queen to the scene of parting between the lovers, exclaims:

Thou basest thing, avoid! hence, from my sight!
If after this command thou fraught the court
With thy unworthiness, thou diest!
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When Imogen protests that she had chosen an eagle and did avoid a puttock, the King tells her:

Thou took’st a beggar; wouldst have made my throne
A seat for baseness.

Cloten speaks of him as “this fellow,” and Iachimo describes him as “a beggar without less quality,” although he knows him only by report. Cloten, in his wooing of Imogen, gives utterance to the most vigorous expression of Posthumus’ common origin:

The contract you pretend with that base wretch,
One bred of alms and foster’d with cold dishes,
With scraps o’ the court, it is no contract, none:
And though it be allow’d in meaner parties—
Yet who than he more mean?—to knit their souls,
On whom there is no more dependency
But brats and beggary, in self-figur’d knot;
Yet you are curb’d from that enlargement by
The consequence o’ the crown, and must not soil
The precious note of it with a base slave,
A hilding for a livery, a squire’s cloth,
A pantler, not so eminent. (11. 3, 112-123)

It is true that Cloten is jealous of Posthumus and hates him heartily; and we must not place too much reliance on his words; and yet his are the very sentiments which an aristocratic nobleman would entertain concerning the marriage between Posthumus and Imogen. Surely no one can claim Cloten for the poet’s mouth-piece! The mere fact that the poet has created a “low” Posthumus, married him to a Princess, and approved of the match, is sufficient proof of his indifference to conventional social distinctions.

That Imogen is conscious of the unusualness of her conduct and of her husband’s social inferiority is evident from what she says in III. 4, 87-92:

And thou, Posthumus, thou that didst set up
My disobedience ’gainst the King my father,
And make me put into contempt the suits
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Of princely fellows, shalt hereafter find
It is no act of common passage, but
A strain of rareness.

We may be sure that Cloten’s opinion, expressed in the following words, does not lack second:

Throwing favors on
The low Posthumus slanders so her judgment
That what’s else rare is chok’d. (iii. 5, 75-77)

In another part of the same scene he inquires of Pisanio

Is she with Posthumus?
From whose so many weights of baseness cannot
A dram of worth be drawn. (iii. 5, 87-89)

He always speaks of his successful rival as “that beggar Posthumus,” “thou villain Posthumus,” “rascal,” “villain” (in the feudal sense), and speaks of himself as being “above him in birth”.

The testimony of the conscience stricken Iachimo on this point is of great importance, inasmuch as it is based on general report and (probably) on information given by Philario, the friend of Posthumus’ father. After his defeat in battle in a hand to hand combat, in which he recognized his foe to be the injured Posthumus, Iachimo says:—

Could this carl,
A very drudge of nature’s, have subdued me
In my profession? Knighthoods and honors, borne
As I wear mine, are titles but of scorn,
If that thy gentry, Britain, go before
This lout as he exceeds our lords, the odds
Is that we scarce are men and you are gods. (v. 2, 4-10)

Posthumus has never been knighted, and he is not included among the “gentry.”

Imogen knows that it is the disparity in their ranks which causes her father’s opposition to her alliance with Posthumus:

Would I were
A neat-herd’s daughter, and my Leonatus
Our neighbor shepherd’s son!
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When she encounters the mountaineers in Wales, she longs to have been born their sister, that she might be "more equal ballasting" to Posthumus. From Iachimo and Imogen we learn that Posthumus is living in exile on an allowance sent him by Imogen:

To be partner'd
With tomboys, hir'd with that self-exhibition
Which your own coffers yield! (1. 6, 120-122)

From all these considerations it is perfectly evident that Posthumus is a son of the respectable middle class, and that the poet spared no pains to impress this fact on his audience. There was dramatic necessity for a Posthumus of humble origin. Custom and the rule of the realm had decreed that the crown of Britain must be worn by a son of the royal blood. To Cymbeline a respect and reverence for "degree" are of paramount importance in the stability of the commonwealth; without that social order is impossible. In v. 5 not even the royal pardon and the gratitude of the entire nation can save the life of one who has slain his "better." The Queen, intriguing to place the crown on her son's head, works upon these settled convictions of the old King, and thus brings about the banishment of her son's rival. She could not have accomplished this had Posthumus been of noble blood. That his daughter should "have put into contempt the suits of princely fellows," and that his throne should become a seat for baseness are beyond his comprehension and not tolerable. For the best interests of the state Imogen must be ordered into confinement and Posthumus must be banished.

For the proper working out of the main plot Posthumus had to be at a distance from his wife and had subsequently to join the Roman forces. This was effected by his banishment. But there was another reason for the creation of a Posthumus who should spring from the common people, and a very important reason it was. Once the marriage of Posthumus and Imogen had been consummated, the Queen's plans were bound to fail, and the dramatist would have had no need for a Cloten, and there would have been no tragic sub-action, no slaughter of Cloten, no conscience stricken Queen. But the great social disparity between
the lovers gives the Queen hope of bringing about an annulment of the marriage; she could easily convince the King that such a marriage was not valid, "though it be allowed in meaner parties to knit their souls on whom there is no more dependency but brats and beggary, in self-figur'd knot." This then gives scope for their being and machinations.

The poet's "caste prejudices" were evidently not sufficiently deep-rooted to prevent his creation of an ideal woman of rank who sets social usages at defiance and allies herself with one of her father's dependents; nor did it stand in the way of his creating a "low" Posthumus who

liv'd in court—
Which rare it is to do—most prais'd, most lov'd;
A sample to the youngest; to the more mature
A glass that feasted them; and to the graver
A child that guided dotards. (1. 1, 46-50)

What the courtiers and nobles think of the "villain" Posthumus and his marriage with the "heir of the kingdom" is indicated in the passages as already quoted beside the following The 1st Gentleman, speaking of the marriage to a stranger at the court, says:

not a courtier,
Although they wear their faces to the bent
Of the King's looks, hath a heart that is not
Glad at the thing they scowl at. (1. 1, 12-15)

This same gentleman, if we may judge from his eulogy of the hero, does not believe that all worth is the exclusive due of members of the upper class, or that a person of obscure origin must necessarily be unworthy and an object of contempt. Judging from the eulogies of Posthumus in the mouths of other lords and gentlemen, we may be sure that Imogen is not alone in her opinion that "he is a man worth any woman," and that he would have "added a lustre" to the throne of Britain.

Posthumus' reputation for valor and accomplishments has preceded him abroad. Iachimo says of him that "he was expected to prove so worthy as he hath been allowed the name of."
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Philario, who has never met him, tells us that he is completely “furnished . . . both within and without.”

Having seen how the poet has exalted the son of a mere soldier, “a beggar,” let us proceed to examine his portrait of Prince Cloten. Cloten was not the son of Cymbeline, but he was none the less “a prince.” Cloten and Posthumus! What a contrast in their very names!—the one earthy, the other lion-born. The poet’s “servile worship of nobility and royalty” did not prevent him from showing up a prince as a most despicable and contemptible lout. Not a single courtier has a good word to say of him. The 1st Gentleman describes him as “a thing too bad for bad report.” Imogen terms him “a puttock.” Two entire scenes (1.2 and II.1) are devoted to lampooning Cloten and disclosing his profound asinity. He is painted as a perfect fool, a contemptible coward, and debauchee—a portraiture not well calculated to take the fancy of the young gallants who sat lounging on the stage. We may remark here that the lords who flatter and ridicule Cloten are not the gentlemen who sang the praises of Posthumus in previous scenes.

In 1.2 we learn from a lord that a “rank scent” was not invariably associated with the many in the poet’s mind, but occasionally characterized one of the nobility. After Cloten’s assault on Posthumus the 1st Lord advises him “to shift a shirt; the violence of action hath made you reek as a sacrifice: where air comes out, air comes in: there’s none abroad so wholesome as that you vent.” In II.1 this “son of a King” is shown to be a hot headed and reckless gambler of uncontrollable temper who regards his “inferiors” with the utmost contempt. The mere emptiness and hollowness of conventional social distinctions are well brought out in this scene, and show better than volumes of commentaries how meaningless and worthless Shakespeare thought them. The following dialogue speaks for itself:

Clo. When a gentleman is disposed to swear, it is not for any standers-by to curtail his oaths, ha?

2d Lord. No, my lord; (Aside) nor crop the ears of them.

Clo. I give him satisfaction? Would he had been one of my rank!

2d Lord. (Aside) To have smelt like a fool.
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Clo. I am not vexed more at anything in the earth. A pox on’t! I had rather not be so noble as I am; they dare not fight with me because of the Queen my mother: every Jack-slave hath his bellyful of fighting, and I must go up and down like a cock that nobody can match. . . . . .

2d Lord. It is not fit your lordship should undertake every companion that you give offense to.

Clo. No, I know that: but it is fit I should commit offense to my inferiors.

2d Lord. Ay, it is fit for your lordship only.

When Cloten is informed of the arrival of a friend of Posthumus, who, according to Cloten, must also be “a rascal” (in the feudal sense), he inquires:

Is it fit I went to look upon him? is there no derogation in’t?

2d Lord. You cannot derogate, my lord.

There cannot be the least doubt that in these scenes the poet is satirizing the follies of the nobility of his time and their conventional code of honor. They indicate anything but a worship of the nobility.

In other parts of the play Cloten is described as an “ass,” one who “cannot take two from twenty, for his heart, and leave eighteen,” and as a “wooer more hateful than the foul expulsion is of thy dear husband, than that horrid act of the divorce he’d make.” In 11.3 Cloten is seen after a night spent in gambling, during which he was systematically robbed by their lordships, resolved on harassing the Princess with his unholy suit. The result is not exactly what he desired, but the scene serves to present him as a stupid, vain, and woefully conceited booby, and to prepare us for his tragic fate. How Cloten is regarded by the court servants is clearly indicated in the interview between him and Imogen’s lady-in-waiting. After he has greeted Imogen, and in reply to her very plain declaration of her hate for him, he takes her to task for her lack of filial duty and proceeds to convince her that the contract which she pretends “with that base wretch is no contract, none,” she vents this speech on him:

Wert thou the son of Jupiter and no more
But what thou art besides, thou wert too base
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To be his groom; thou wert dignified enough,
Even to the point of envy, if ’t were made
Comparative for your virtues, to be styl’d
The under-hangman of his kingdom, and hated
For being preferr’d so well.

Clo. The south-fog rot him!
Imo. He never can meet more mischance than come
To be but nam’d of thee. His meanest garment,
That ever hath but clipp’d his body, is dearer
In my respect than all the hairs above thee,
Were they all made such men.

How the groundlings must have applauded that speech! In the Princess’ contempt for high birth without other merit, and her worship of true worth in a person of low birth, the audience, nobles and commons, saw no reverence for aristocracy on the part of the dramatist.

In the scene in which the King gives audience to the Roman ambassador, Cloten comes nearer to showing his vulgarity and stupidity than in any other scene. He presumes to advise the King and to speak in his behalf, unasked, without having the faintest conception of the consequences of the policy that he is advocating. The statesmanship exhibited in this scene is not calculated to inspire the common people with a worship of royalty.

Cloten’s last appearance in the play is employed by the poet to bring out all the salient points in his character. Poor Cloten! He thinks that his name and rank are symbols to conjure with and command; but they prove traitors to him and contribute to his undoing. The interview between him and Guiderius so admirably discloses the poet’s conception of true dignity and honor and the utter meaninglessness of its merely conventional congener as determined by arbitrary social laws that it merits being quoted at length.

Clo. What are you
That fly me thus? some villain mountaineers?
I have heard of such. What slave art thou?

Gui. A thing
More slavish did I ne’er than answering
A slave without a knock.

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Clo. Thou art a robber,
A law-breaker, a villain: yield thee, thief!
Gui. To who? to thee? What art thou? have not I
An arm as big as thine? a heart as big?
Thy words, I grant, are bigger, for I wear not
My dagger in my mouth. Say what thou art,
Why I should yield to thee?

Clo. Thou villain base,
Know'st me not by my clothes?
Gui. No, nor thy tailor, rascal,
Who is thy grandfather: he made those clothes
Which, as it seems, make thee.

Clo. Thou precious varlet,
My tailor made them not.

Gui. Hence, then, and thank
The man that gave them thee. Thou art some fool:
I am loath to beat thee.

Clo. Thou injurious thief,
Hear but my name, and tremble!

Gui. What's thy name?

Clo. Cloten, thou villain.
Gui. Cloten, thou double villain, be thy name,
I cannot tremble at it: were it Toad, or Adder, Spider,
'T would move me sooner.

Clo. To thy further fear,
Nay, to thy mere confusion, thou shalt know
I'm son to the Queen.

Gui. I'm sorry for 't; not seeming
So worthy as thy birth.

Clo. Art not afeard?
Gui. Those that I reverence, those I fear,—the wise:
At fools I laugh, not fear them.

Clo. Die the death:
When I have slain thee with my proper hand,
I'll follow those that even now fled hence,
And on the gates of Lud's town set your heads:
Yield, rustic mountaineer! (Exeunt fighting)

Thus far, we have seen nothing that could be interpreted as
the poet's tribute to nobility. Let us proceed to examine the
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passages in this play which seem to support the statements of those who regard the poet “as the parasite of the rich and lordly.”

Wilkes bases his arraignment of the poet on certain passages in III.4, and III.6, and V.1. In III.3 the two Princes mildly protest against the uninterruptcd tenor of their simple mountain life, and this provokes the following speech of admiration from their supposed father:

How hard it is to hide the sparks of nature!
These boys know little they are sons to the King;
They think they are mine; and though train’d up thus meanly
I’ the cave wherein they bow, their thoughts do hit
The roofs of palaces, and nature prompts them
In simple and low things to prince it much
Beyond the trick of others. This Polydore,—
When on my three-foot stool I sit and tell
The warlike feats I’ve done, his spirits fly out....
The princely blood flows in his cheek, he sweats,
Strains his young nerves, and puts himself in posture
That acts my words.

Wilkes¹ says that in this speech Shakespeare “inculcates upon the British mind the innate and instinctive royalty of kings.” But we believe that there is both dramatic and moral necessity for the exaltation of the characters of the Princes. Polydore is to succeed his weak and impotent father as King of Britain; our knowledge of the corruption of Cymbeline’s court makes us tremble for the safety of the nation, and our artistic instinct requires us to know that his successor will be a wise, noble, upright and strong man, one endowed with all the king-becoming graces which the present incumbent of the throne lacks. We must also bear in mind that one of these boys is to punish the persecutor of their sister; that they, together with Posthumus, are to save Britain from the ruinous consequences of the policy forced upon Cymbeline by his wicked Queen and her foolish son.

The picture of the ideal dignity and nobility of the Princes brought up in the forest, contrasts beautifully with the licentiousness and villainy of the court. Its conception was undoubtedly

¹ Shakespeare From An American Point of View, p. 117

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due to the poet's love of the country and life in the forest. He delighted in portraying villainy dwelling in the court and honesty driven into the forest.

Another and a very important consideration makes this picture of true nobility of nature in persons of noble birth necessary. The banishment of Posthumus, the beginning of all the woes of the lovers, is due to the great inequality in their rank. Once this matter of differences in social rank as a dramatic motive occurs to the dramatist, he characteristically probes into the very heart of the matter, and embodies the results of his investigations in the portrayal of persons of different social rank. Accordingly we find among the dramatis personae of this play a King lacking in royalty and holding his exalted office only because of the accident of birth; a prince too bad for bad report; a Queen, a "crafty devil;" lords who are cowards, time-servers and villains; an Italian knight, a roué and diabolical fiend. These personages, and others of their kind, know only two classes of men—nobles and villains; to them the marriage between a Cloten and an Imogen would be a highly desirable union, whereas an alliance in matrimony between a Posthumus and an Imogen would be an evidence of vileness. But Shakespeare did not believe that all noblemen were as those just mentioned; he knew that truly noble men and women could be found among the nobility as well as among the lower classes; that if the sons of noble parents were properly reared, away from the evil influences to which their station exposed them, they would be an honor to the nation. It was for art’s sake as well as for truth’s sake that he created a Polydore and an Arviragus. He would have been unworthy of his calling and his genius had he not done so.

But true nobility and manhood do not abide alone in the mountain recesses of Wales, nor only among those of gentle birth. The "low Posthumus" and his servant Pisanio are ideal types of manhood, notwithstanding their obscure origin.

Wilkes selects the following passage to illustrate Shakespeare's servility to lordship:

1 Wilkes, p. 330
Thou divine Nature, how thyself thou blazon'st
In these two princely boys! They are as gentle
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As zephyrs blowing below the violet,
Not wagging his sweet head; and yet as rough,
Their royal blood enchaf'd, as the rud'st wind,
That by the top doth take the mountain pine,
And make him stoop to the vale. 'Tis wonder
That an invisible instinct should frame them
To royalty unlearn'd, honor untaught,
Civility not seen from other, valor
That wildly grows in them, but yields a crop
As if it had been sow'd. (IV. 2, 170-181)

In reply to this it is only necessary to quote Hudson's comment on this very passage: "The old man, glorious in his humility, imputes to their royal blood the high and heroic thoughts which his own great and childlike spirit has breathed into them." The words are very appropriate in Belarius' mouth, but do not express the poet's opinion. The banished Belarius was too true a patriot, in spite of his great crime, to permit his wards to grow to seed, and with the hope that some day he would return to his beloved Britain and restore the Princes their birthright, he devoted the times between huntings to inculcate grand and noble lessons in them and to impart to them the practical wisdom he had acquired from his experiences at the court of Cymbeline. The devout religious spirit in Belarius is an important element in his character, and must not be overlooked in this connection.

When the Princes are about to bury the narcotized Imogen, the beheaded Cloten being entirely forgotten by them, Belarius thus admonishes the lads:

Great griefs, I see, medicine the less, for Cloten
Is quite forgot. He was a Queen's son, boys,
And though he came our enemy, remember
He was paid for that: Though mean and mighty, rotting
Together, have one dust, yet reverence,
That angel of the world, doth make distinction
Of place 'tween high and low. Our foe was princely;
And though you took his life, as being our foe,
Yet bury him as a prince. (IV.2, 243-251)

Wilkes' comments on this passage thus: "These expressions of

1 Wilkes, p. 344

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groveling homage to mere rank in the mouth of a worthy character like Belarius, invested as that rank was in the body of an utter beast and ruffian, as the speaker knew Cloten to be, show an extent of base cringing and moral abasement to mere worldly station, as contrasted with the respect due that ‘pale primrose and azured hare-bell, pure Fidele,’ which is absolutely painful. It is the very worst and lowest specimen of the abjectness of royal worship that has yet appeared to us in Shakespeare, and so shocks our better sentiments that we can hardly refrain from hoping, in excuse, that the poet was well paid for it.” It is difficult to be patient with such criticisms and with such tender sentiments. In the first place we wish to correct his (voluntary or involuntary) misstatement of facts. He says that “the boys are about to bury Imogen on terms of equality with the beheaded prince,” and that this provokes the old man’s servile speech. Any one reading the scene will note that there were no such thoughts in the boys’ minds; that as a matter of fact they were not going to bury Cloten at all, and had completely forgotten him; that Belarius saw here an opportunity of teaching the boys another lesson—magnanimity to a conquered foe; that he demanded merely his burial, without saying anything as to how he was to be buried; that Cloten was not interred with the same obsequies as Fidele; that prudence required that the decapitated Cloten should not be left on the highway. That Belarius is not giving expression to the poet’s thoughts in this speech any more than in any other speech in the play, is evident from the fact that he speaks as though Cloten were of higher rank than Fidele, whereas the poet knew that Fidele was the Princess Imogen. The sentiments expressed in 11.246-249 are true and honor the poet, as well as the character who expresses them. Shakespeare was convinced of their truth and has given expressions to them also in other plays, e. g. Troilus and Cressida, and The Tempest. It must also be borne in mind that Belarius did not “know Cloten to be an utter beast and ruffian.” The imputation that Shakespeare wrote for hire at any time, and especially when he was wealthy enough to retire, is too absurd to be seriously entertained. As to the implied superiority of a princely corpse over another we have the statement of Guiderius

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that "Thersites' body is as good as Ajax', when neither are alive," which may as well be Shakespeare's own opinion as any other opinion the critics may wish to force upon him. There is nothing in this scene or in the action of the entire play to indicate that the dramatist believed that "Princes are a model, which heaven makes like to itself."

Shakespeare's positive preference for the common people and his high estimation of them are manifested in many passages in the play besides the portrayal of such characters as Posthumus and Pisanio.

In 1.1, Imogen expresses the longing

Would I were
A neat-herd's daughter, and my Leonatus
Our neighbor shepherd's son!

In 1.6, she reflects on how

Most miserable
Is the desire that's glorious (i.e. for glory): blest be those,
How mean soe'er, that have their honest wills,
Which seasons comfort.

When she has been misdirected in the forest, Imogen wonders

Will poor folks lie,
That have afflictions on them, knowing 'tis
A punishment or trial? Yes; no wonder,
When rich ones scarce tell true. To lapse in fulness
Is sorer than to lie for need, and falsehood
Is worse in kings than beggars. (111.6, 9-14)

When Arviragus addresses her as "brother" she says:

So (i.e. brothers) man and man should be;
But clay and clay differs in dignity,
Whose dust is both alike. (IV. 2, 3-5)

In V. 2, the defeated Iachimo confesses that

Knighthoods and honors, borne
As I wear mine, are titles but of scorn.
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Concerning wealth we have the following sentiment from Arviragus, when Imogen offers to pay for her food:

All gold and silver rather turn to dirt!
As 'tis no better reckon'd, but of those
Who worship dirty gods. (III.6, 54-56)

There is nothing in any of the above passages to indicate anything but the highest respect for the life of the lowly with their honest wills, and a contempt for merely nominal dignities and honors.

Of courtiers and life at the court the poet has a great deal to say in this play, and all unfavorable and in way of censure. Belarius, always moralizing, tells the boys, as they are about to set out in pursuit of game:

Consider,
When you above perceive me like a crow,
That it is place which lessens and sets off:
And you may then revolve what tales I've told you
Of courts, of princes, of the tricks in war:
This service is not service, so being done,
But being so allow'd: to apprehend thus,
Draws us a profit from all things we see;
And often, to our comfort, shall we find
The sharded beetle in a safer hold
Than is the full-wing'd eagle. O, this life
Is nobler than attending for a check,
Richer than doing nothing for a bribe,
Prouder than rustling in unpaid-for silk;
Such gain the cap of him that makes 'em fine,
Yet keeps his book uncross'd: no life to ours. (III.3, 11-28)

Rebuking them for their dissatisfaction with the life they lead, he says:

Did you but know the city's usuries
And felt them knowingly; the art o' the court,
As hard to leave as keep; whose top to climb
Is certain falling, or so slipp'ry that
The fear's as bad as falling; the toil o' the war,
A pain that only seems to seek out danger
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I’ the name of fame and honor; which dies i’ the search,
And hath as oft a sland’rous epitaph
As record of fair act; nay, many times,
Doth ill deserve by doing well; what’s worse,
Must court’sy at the censure: (III.3, 45-55)
We will fear no poison, which attends
In place of greater state. (III.3, 77-78)

If Rosalind’s playful remark concerning Phoebe’s hand merits
Mr. Crosby’s “No one with a high respect for housewifery could
have written that line,” the passages just quoted would justify us
in concluding that the author of them despised and loathed courts
and courtiers, and thought them the vilest creatures living. All
things considered we wonder at the poet’s fearlessness in his dark
portrait of court life. We might almost think that the poet meant
to tell us that “there’s no motion that tends to vice in man but
is is the ‘noble’s’ part: be it lying, flattering, deceiving, lust and
rank thoughts, revenges, ambitions, covetings, cowardice, etc., all
faults that may be named, nay, that hell knows, are his.”

Posthumus on finding a book by his side exclaims:

A book! O, rare one!
Be not, as is our fangled world, a garment
Nobler than that it covers: let thy effects
So follow, to be most unlike our courtiers,
As good as promise. (V.4, 133-137)

When he wakes from his sleep he says:

Poor wretches that depend
On greatness’ favor, dream as I have done,
Wake and find nothing. (V.4, 127-129)

Nothwithstanding all this Shakespeare is charged with “discriminating against a common person in favor of a lord,” of
“despising the common people,” of not having a single good word
to say for them, of not crediting them with courage, honor, etc.
“Cymbeline” is in itself sufficient to disprove these charges, to
prove their authors guilty of the most flagrant and wanton dis-
regard of the truth and distortion of the evidence in their
possession. As bearing on these topics we shall only refer to what
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has been said in the preceding pages and to the following passages. Speaking of the impending war with Rome, Posthumus says,

Our countrymen
Are men more order’d than when Julius Caesar
Smil’d at their lack of skill, but found their courage
Worthy his frowning at: their discipline,
Now mingled with their courage, will make known
To their approvers they are people such
That mend upon the world. (II.4, 20-26)

Cymbeline has this to say on the subject of paying tribute to Rome:

Caesar’s ambition
Did put the yoke upon’s; which to shake off
Becomes a warlike people, whom we reckon
Ourselves to be......I am perfect
That the Pannonians and Dalmatians for
Their liberties are now in arms; a precedent
Which not to read would show the Britons cold:
So Caesar shall not find them. Our subjects
Will not endure his yoke: and for ourself
To show less less sovereignty than they, must needs
Appear unkinglike. (III.1, 2, & 5)

Other reflections bearing on the same point are the following:

Plenty of peace breeds cowards; hardiness e’er
Of hardiness is mother. (III.6, 21-22)
Our courtiers say all’s savage but at court:
Experience, O, thou disprov’st report! (IV.2, 33-34)

The only passages in this play which lend themselves to the support of those who claim that Shakespeare attributes cowardice to the common people are those dealing with Posthumus, who, having donned the “silly habits” of “a Britain peasant,” in a resolve to die fighting for his country says:

Let me make men know
More valor in me than my habits show.
To shame the guise o’ the world, I will begin
The fashion, less without and more within. (V. I, 29-33)
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Belarius thus comments on Posthumus' conduct in the battle:

I never saw
Such noble fury in so poor a thing;
Such precious deeds in one that promis'd naught
But beggary and poor looks. (V.5, 7-10)

But this argument is very easily disposed of, and on close examination proves a boomerang which returns to plague its inventor. They would have us infer from the above passages that Shakespeare did not associate valor with a mean exterior; whereas he actually makes a mean man in mean habits perform striking deeds of heroism. Not to leave any doubt on the matter the poet calls shame on the world for judging of the interior from the exterior. There is no art to read the heart's construction in the doublet. On the other hand the nobility in this play are conspicuously lacking in patriotism as well as in valor, as is very emphatically brought out in the scene following the battle, in which there are some unequivocal flings at the British nobility:

Lord. Cam'st thou from where they made the stand?
Post. I did:

Though you, it seems, come from the fliers.

Lord. I did.

When Posthumus has described the gallant behaviour of "an ancient soldier, with two striplings," the lord in an ironical comment indicates his indifferent patriotism, which provokes from Posthumus the following gird at the "nobility:"—

You are made
Rather to wonder at the things you hear
Than to work any. (V.3, 53-55)

After the Lord is gone, Posthumus says,

This is a lord! O noble misery (i. e. miserable nobility)
To be i' the battle field, and ask "what news" of me (i. e. peasant)!
To-day how many would have given their honors
To've sav'ld their carcases! took heel to do't,
And yet died too! (V.3, 64-68)
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“The appearance on Shakespeare's stage of a man of humble birth who is virtuous without being ridiculous, is so rare an event that it is worth while to enumerate the instances... The noblest quality which Shakespeare can imagine of in a servant is loyalty. ... In Cymbeline we are treated to loyalty *ad nauseam*. The king orders Pisanio, a trusty servant, to be tortured without cause, and his reply is,"

Sir, my life is yours,
I humbly set it at your will." (IV. 3.)

In the remarkable passage just quoted from Mr. Crosby¹ we find no mention or allusion to the existence of a Posthumus—a most conspicuous example of a man of humble birth who is virtuous without being ridiculous, and who puts the men of "noble" birth to shame. Pisanio is another personage of humble origin, who is "at once serious and upright" and "virtuous without being ridiculous." We can find nothing nauseating in his loyalty to the King or fidelity to his master and mistress; to us he is one of the most admirable creations of the poet. Wilkes not finding him suitable for his purpose, very characteristically forgets even to mention his name; he does not even relegate him among "the quasi instances of a faithful servant," or among the "necessarily loyal" English servants. Mr. Crosby is not more fair in his criticisms of Pisanio than Wilkes: in the passage quoted above he says that the King orders Pisanio to be tortured without cause, but a reference to the scene shows that the King had good cause for threatening to torture him:

But for thee, fellow,
Who needs must know of her departure and
Dost seem so ignorant, we'll enforce it from thee
By a sharp torture. (IV.3, 9-12)

We may be pardoned for referring to Pisanio’s lying to the King concerning his knowledge of Imogen’s absence from the court and the cause thereof as an exhibition of that excessive loyalty which so disturbs Mr. Crosby.

The only passage in this play which contains anything in derogation from the masses is that in which Imogen speaks of

¹ Shakespeare's Working Classes, p. 41
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Great men laying by
That nothing-gift of differing multitudes (III.6, 86-87).

In way of comment on this passage it is only necessary to say that the charge of fickleness is made of the multitude, without regard to the rank of the individuals composing it, and that it is the most commonplace truism. If Shakespeare is severe on mobs, we Americans must be the last ones to find fault with him for that; his mobs are never so ferocious, unreasonable and debased as those that disgrace this country.

This play is not silent even as to Shakespeare's respect for housewifery. "The mightiest and wisest scholar or teacher in the school of the human spirit" did not deem "the very crown and flower of all her Father's daughters" above praise for her "neat cookery" (IV.2, 45 and 49, 163 and 239) and her application to her needle (I.1, 168; 3, 19).

In speaking of the various purposes for which the poet employs the common people whom he brings upon the stage, Mr. Crosby says' "we might have been spared the jokes which the jailors of Posthumus perpetrated when they come to lead him to the scaffold." Presumably the conclusion to be drawn from this is that the jailors, and hence the common people, are heartless and poor humorists. But the premises are false and the conclusion unwarranted. Let us call the reader's attention, as well as Mr. Crosby's, to the fact that it was Posthumus who began to bandy words with the jailors and to pun on his fate; so that if there is any derogation in this wit-combat—if such it may be called—it is Posthumus who suffers. The scene, it is true, is not one whose loss we should greatly deplore, but it bears evidence of the master's hand, and can be defended as serving as a foil to the intensely dramatic scene which follows it and, perhaps, as Sherman suggests, "as achieving all the spiritual effect of dying, while the death is spared."

There remains now only one other matter to be examined: Mr. Crosby maintains² that the "language employed by nobility and royalty in addressing those of inferior station in Shakespeare's

¹ Shakespeare's Working Classes, p. 40
² Id. pp. 38, 39
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plays...must have been a little galling to the poorer of his auditors. It is hard to believe that Shakespeare would have so frequently allowed his characters to express their contempt for members of the lower orders of society, if he had not had some sympathy with their opinions.” This conclusion is as absurd as it would be for us to say that the poet's delineation of such villains as Iago, Iachimo and Edmund proves that he was a scoundrel. But the subjects merit careful examination, and we gather the following facts: The Queen, when speaking of Pisanio to his mistress, calls him “faithful servant,” but when she is alone, she thinks of him as a “flattering rascal,” a “sly and constant knave.” Cymbeline in his rage addresses his son-in-law as “thou basest thing,” but he also calls his daughter “vile;” notwithstanding this, in the hour of rejoicing he offers a reward to the discoverer of

The forlorn soldier, that so nobly fought:
Whose rags shamed gilded arms, whose naked breast
Stepp'd before targes of proof. (V.5, 3-5)

When his children have been restored to him and all his wrongs have been righted, he again expresses a longing for

The forlorn soldier, that so nobly fought,
He would have well becom’d this place and grace’d
The thankings of a king. (V.5, 405-407)

Iachimo, when envying Posthumus' good fortune, dubs him “a beggar;” when mortified at his defeat in a hand to hand combat with him he thinks of him as “a carl, a very drudge of nature's,” a “lout;” but when he is overcome by remorse, he speaks of his “honor'd finger” and terms him “true knight” and “noble Leonatus.” The person who makes most use of contumelious epithets is—Cloten, the clown of the play and a mere caricature of nobility. To him Posthumus is a “villain,” a “beggar,” a “base wretch,” a “slave” and a “pantler;” Pisanio he styles a “precious pandar,” a “villain,” a “close villain,” an “all-worthy villain;” one who had taken him up for swearing he calls a “whoreson jackanapes” and a “whoreson dog.” The irony of the whole thing is well brought out in the forest scene where, meeting Guiderius, “the heir of Cymbeline and Britain,” Cloten applies to him such choice epithets
as "villain mountaineer," "slave," "robber, law-breaker, villain-base, varlet, rustic mountaineer," etc. Truly does Guiderius tell him "Thou art some fool." Opprobrious epithets are applied in Shakespeare's plays not only to persons of low rank, but also to persons high up in the social scale. Such terms as villain, wretch, rascal, ass, miscreant, recreant, etc. are by no means infrequently hurled at some nobleman who has offended the speaker. Although we might defend Shakespeare's practice of applying such terms to the common people, "as indicating the manners of the time, rather than as expressing his own feelings," as Mr. Crosby suggests, we believe there is more in it. The poet's object was, in this as in all things, to hold the mirror up to nature, and he shows us that the language employed by one of his personages is determined by his character, his mood, his purpose, his education and the character of the person addressed, and not at all by the prejudices of the writer. That Shakespeare did not approve of the use of abusive epithets applied to the common people is confirmed by his satire of the practice in the scene between Cloten and Guiderius, and by the second lord's telling us that such conduct "was fit for his lordship Cloten only." We are convinced that the nobility found more girds at themselves than at the common people, as they watched the progress of this play, and that those who were guilty of conduct similar to Cloten's felt the rebuke keenly. In justice to our subject, as well as to the noblemen portrayed by the poet, we must call attention to the fact that they as often bestow praise and complimentary terms on the common people as people in real life do, as the examination of any play shows. And we must not forget that Shakespeare was too great an artist to mar his work by the intrusion of any social, political, or religious convictions that he may have entertained; he kept himself entirely out of his dramas.

Business considerations, if nothing else, would have deterred so practical a man as Shakespeare from giving expression in his plays to his "abject servility to nobility" and "his contempt for the mechanical and laboring classes." It is beyond belief that Shakespeare, the actor, dramatist, manager and part owner of the theatre, would have courted the resentment of the prentices
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who filled the pit and the "greasy mechanicals" who occupied the larger part of the house and contributed each his sixpence or his shilling. Apart from all these considerations, it is scarcely credible that the man who in his youth had shared his father's anxieties and had been driven by "the cares of bread" to leave his family, could have looked with contempt and derision upon the laboring classes from whom he sprang. Nor is it possible for us to believe that the "Monarch-poet" who comprehended man more fully than any speculative philosopher, who entered into the souls of men as no other genius ever did, who sang the glory of man as only that master singer could, he who was essentially the poet of Humanity, that he could have entertained any feeling of contempt for even the humblest member of society. If Shakespeare's noblemen revile the common people, if his laboring classes are greasy, if his multitude is fickle, if his servants are not all faithful, if his noblemen are not all noble, they are so only because they are so in the great drama of nature.

It appears then that in this play the dramatist has chosen his "hero" from the rank of the common people, that he has endowed him with all manly qualities, that he has not a single expression indicative of any derision for the laboring classes, or reverence for or worship of the nobility. Nay, were we inclined to be extreme, we should find in the pasquinade of nobility in the person of the ridiculous Cloten, in the many girts of their lordship's cowardice, in the gibes at the treasonous practices of the villainous courtiers, in the portrayal of unkingly royalty, evidences of Shakespeare's contempt for the "nobility." But such a view of our poet would be as far from the truth as that maintained by his detractors.