

to exaggerate the impact of such a crisis on a society totally reliant on primitive agriculture; three centuries later, in a much better regulated economy, Shakespeare was still driven to evoke unforgettable images of similar natural catastrophes.⁸ The effect on the medieval mind-set, a full generation before the ultimate misery of the Black Death, was powerfully apocalyptic: the world appeared afflicted, the horrors compounded by supernatural portents in which ‘the hand of God appears raised against us’. Already the comet of 1313, it was said, had signalled the English *débâcle* of Bannockburn, and now an even more dazzling comet trailing across the bitter winter of 1315-16 seemed to testify to a general pestilence:

*Finally there appeared a huge comet, conspicuous above the four regions of the earth, enthroned near the North Pole, shedding its rays all night long and holding its course from Christmas Eve until Twelfth Night, and foretelling later misfortunes to many parts of the world. And in the Year of Our Lord 1316 there occurred in the realm of England cruel and horrible deaths afflicting the people so far as to cause a splitting asunder of the spirit and the flesh...*⁹

The more concrete results of a medieval famine, at a time when England’s population was probably unsustainably high, have often been described: high mortality, derelict homes, vacant holdings, land reverting to waste around dying villages and, inevitably, unparalleled inflation and

Series, 1890, iii, pp. 174, 340-43; *Vita Edwardi Secundi*, ed. N. Denholm Young, London 1957, pp. 69-70. For excellent modern analysis, Kershaw, ‘The great famine’; J.E. Thorold Rogers, *A History of Agriculture and Prices in England*, 7 vols, Oxford 1866-1902, i, pp. 197-201; E. Miller and J. Hatcher, *Medieval England: Rural Society and Economic Change, 1086-1348*, London 1978, p. 60; and for statistics, A. Briggs, *A Social History of England*, London 1983, p. 84.

⁸ The sense of universal collapse and the malevolence of ‘wreakful heaven’ (*Timon of Athens*, IV.3) are powerfully evoked in the storms of *King Lear* and *The Tempest*, the supernatural portents in *Julius Caesar*, *Macbeth* and *Antony and Cleopatra*, Titania’s speech in *Midsummer Night’s Dream* etc. The parallels between Shakespeare’s *Richard II* and Marlowe’s *Edward II* have often aroused comment: John of Gaunt’s dying accusations could as easily have been levelled at Edward as at Richard.

⁹ *Vita Edwardi Secundi*, p. 64. The quotation is a free translation of *Flores Historiarum*, pp. 173, 340. The 1315 comet is historical, extensively observed December 1315-March 1316: G.W. Kronk, ed., *Cometography*, Cambridge 1999, pp. 233-5; cf. R. Holinshed, *Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland*, 6 vols, 1807-08, ii, p. 554. One chronicler adds for good measure eclipses, earthquakes, floods and, in 1317, a plague of giant water mice: *Le Livre de Rois de Engleterre*, ed. J. Glover, Rolls Series, 1865, pp. 331-3, 337.