Nationalism and Poor Law are not usually mentioned in the same breath, and to add Shakespeare and Wordsworth is to invite bafflement. I’d like to begin by suggesting a number of similarities between the ages of Shakespeare and Wordsworth, though their social and political conditions were two hundred years apart, in the 1590s and 1790s. Both poets wrote with unusual empathy about the poor in times when capitalism came into conflict with the traditional Judaeo-Christian view of the poor. Both poets saw the legitimacy of welfare questioned, in opposition to the spirit of Jewish law and Christian love. Both were part of historical debates on state responsibility, Shakespeare at a time when the so-called Old Poor Law evolved and was codified for the first time in secular legislation; Wordsworth, when the Old Poor Law was made obsolete by the Industrial Revolution, ultimately to be replaced by the New Poor Law in 1834.

Both Shakespeare and Wordsworth lived in times of protracted war. In the 1590s as in the 1790s, England was threatened with invasion, by Spain in the Elizabethan period, and by France in the time of Napoleon after the French Revolution. Between the early 1600s and the late 1700s, England faced no comparable existential threat. Also, between the ages of Shakespeare and Wordsworth (and perhaps before and after as well) there was not much English poetry as good as theirs at its best. So, the 1590s and 1790s, when Shakespeare and Wordsworth reached the height of their poetic power, were ages of threatened invasion and heightened English nationalism. National unity was a government priority. War, in both cases paid for by higher taxes, brought inflation and increased poverty, which was already a serious problem, made worse by crop failure and famine.

Shakespeare and Wordsworth were eyewitneses of these worsening conditions in wartime. They wrote with exceptional sympathy for the poor. Often they recall biblical passages which, without exception, stress the need to protect the poor. In their poetry - for example, in Shakespeare’s King Lear and Wordsworth’s Margaret, or The Ruined Cottage - they go against the current of contemporary opinion on the poor.

In general, outside the world of the Bible, total sympathy for the poor is rarely maintained in economic crisis. In both the 1590s and the 1790s, the poor were
exceptionally vulnerable. Resources fell short in wartime conditions. The image of the poor was transformed for the worse by the growth of capitalism in 16th century Europe and, later, by the Industrial Revolution. Capitalism, spurred by international trade and the voyages of discovery, was accompanied by economic disruption, food shortages, famine, epidemics, and high taxation. The new Protestant doctrine of the wealthy elect meant that poverty was now associated not solely with the prospect of redemption through charity - but also with sin. Biblical law is based on the love of the poor and the hope for salvation from sin. In contrast, 16th century European Poor Law is based on fear that multitudes of homeless, destitute men and women will swamp vulnerable parishes with their vast, chronic needs and threaten the existing order.

In the 16th century, for the first time since the Black Plague in the 14th century, there was famine in England. Many parishes could not cope. In these conditions, poverty was associated less with Christian love than with fear of disorder, dissent and threat posed by growing numbers of the landless, hungry poor, including many war veterans, diseased and maimed, crippled and blind, ugly and covered with sores, and on the road. Dissidence among the poor could be a major destabilizing element, as it had been in various European countries, including England, in the 1520s and 1530s. Lay intervention, centralization, and the creation of new institutions characterized Poor Laws in Catholic as well as Protestant countries.

The English poor were especially hard hit as the dissolution of the monasteries in the 1530s cut off a major source of poor relief and forced the responsibility onto an unwilling government. The needs of the poor were subjected to humiliating scrutiny, questioning and denial. The poor were often blamed for their own distress. They were seen as idle parasitic vagrants and criminals, a threat to society, a burden to be controlled by law. Poor Law was often hardhearted and punitive, designed to shame the poor and make them work. Poverty became a major national concern of 16th century government, as much to suppress dissidence and maintain national unity as to provide humanitarian aid.

Shakespeare and Wordsworth, in contrast, insist on the humanity of the poor. They reject negative stereotypes. Their concern with the poor is based on a universalist compassion - often with a Judaeo-Christian slant - but at the same time national. England’s Poor Laws were part of a unique surge of nationalism which began in the 15th century and reached its peak in the reign of Elizabeth. The poor were part of the nation. Their needs could not be ignored. Shakespeare tends to emphasize universal humanistic values, compatible with national unity. Shakespeare’s humanism reflects political reality. If the poor could not be represented in government, they could at least be represented on stage. They
had a voice in the theatre which they lacked in government, and the theatre, where rich and poor mingled, helped shape public opinion.

In its Poor Law, Elizabethan England stood out in being better off than most other countries, including France. English Poor Law, for all its failings, was ‘a major achievement’ according to the historian, Paul Slack: England was the only 16th century country with a system of poor relief paid for by taxation. In the history of English Poor Law, the most intensive legislative period was in the time of Elizabeth, a time, as I have said, of exceptional military, economic and religious threat, not to speak of the constant worry about the succession.

Nationalism was a primary motive in Elizabethan theatre too. In the theatre as in the Poor Law, one senses at times an overlapping motive in drawing the poor into the nation in time of crisis. This is not infrequently the case, for example the Education Act of 1918, and the Beveridge report of 1942.

Yet nationalism was also a tool of Tudor survival. The Tudors drew together many forces of national cohesion: a national Church of England headed by the monarch; a vernacular Bible translation and a Book of Common Prayer based mainly on the work of Tyndale and Cavendish, which helped create a standard English; Poor Law and the building of alms houses and hospitals for the poor; and a national literature and theatre.

With growing poverty in wartime, the danger grew that public discontent controllable in peacetime might turn into mob rule. Shakespeare was sensitive to the vagaries of crowds and power in crisis, in *Julius Caesar* or *Coriolanus*, for example. As a protégé of the aristocracy, including the monarchy, Shakespeare was expected to spread pro-monarchical public opinion in the theatre. From the time of the first purpose-built theatres, in the 1570s, theatres and playwrites had to have aristocratic patronage. They were financially bound to pro-monarchic venture capitalists. Shakespeare was himself a successful capitalist, whose wealth came mainly from his ownership of shares in The Globe. Yet most of Shakespeare’s audience were poor men and women who paid a penny to see his plays; and the poor must have had it hard as the price, until the puritans closed the theatres in 1642, never went up.

Nationalism contributed both to a more sympathetic view of the poor, a determination to improve their lives; and also, through greater awareness of the poor, fear of their power to disrupt society and a consequent determination to control poverty and the poor on a national legislative basis. This is the background to the Poor Laws of 1598 and 1601, passed at the same time when Shakespeare’s *Henry V* -the most nationalistic of his plays - was first performed.
The Poor Laws of 1598 and 1601 are among the most important and far-reaching achievements in the history of welfare legislation. These lasted, in fact, until Wordsworth’s time, when they were superseded by the New Poor Act of 1834. While Shakespeare’s portrayal of the poor reflects conditions of the Elizabethan age leading to new legislation, Wordsworth’s portraits of the poor in the 1790s are a radical indictment of Poor Law as it existed in the context of the Industrial Revolution and the Napoleonic wars. This poetry was part of a public debate, leading to governmental reform.

War is usually more costly to the poor than to the rich as higher taxes affects them more, and they form the bulk of recruits. This is almost an historical axiom: conditions of the poor become a heightened issue in wartime. In wartime, the poor are most needed, but their needs are greatest and are most vulnerable to questioning because of stringency.

Shakespeare’s age was a time of misery and migration from rural to urban centers. Scholars estimate that in the century prior to Hamlet (1600), the price of grain in England went up six times while wages increased only three times (the same trend was found elsewhere in Europe); and whereas London in the 1590s is estimated to have had twelve times as many beggars as it had in the early years of Henry VIII, its population rose only four times during this period. The wars against Spain and Ireland were paid for by increasing the tax rate. Harvests failed in 1595-8, and there was famine in the north of England and in parts of the south. Poverty became the main issue in parliament. Shakespeare’s audience would have recognized these conditions in Titania’s attack on Oberon’s evil magic, in A Midsummer Night’s Dream, dating from the late 1590s:

The ox hath therefore stretch’t his yoke in vain,
The ploughman lost his sweat, and the green corn
Hath rotted, ere his youth attain’d a beard:
The fold stands empty in the drowned field,
And crows are fatted with the murrion flock,
The nine men’s morris is fill’d up with mud;
And the quaint mazes, in the wanton green,
For lack of tread, are undistinguishable:
The human mortals want their winter here;
No night is now with hymn or carol blest…
(II i 93-102)

In these hard times, the Poor Law of 1598 and 1601 were an outstanding achievement of Elizabethan social policy. By 1600, London’s population
reached about 200,000; but the civil parish of rural England consequently became a microcosm of state authority. Legislative recognition of state obligation to the poor is perhaps reflected in *King Lear* (1606), written between the death of Elizabeth in 1601 and the consolidation of the rule of James I. Lear, made homeless by his cruel daughters, is forced to live like a beggar in the open fields. On the heath, Lear becomes aware for the first time of the ‘poor naked wretches’, a large part of his kingdom. The king, now no better than they - perhaps worse, being unaccustomed to life as a ‘bare, fork’d animal’ - enters their lives in his fall to their level, a true king, ironically, when he gives up the crown. Lear’s fall into poverty enables him to feel for the poor, opening the way for his reconciliation with his daughter Cordelia, the embodiment of love. There is implicit irony that Lear, speaking of Christian charity and love to a wholly Christian audience, is a pagan king in a pre-Christian age. His compassionate outpouring is human rather than specifically Christian and has particular resonance in an age when responsibility for the poor had shifted from the Church to government:

Poor naked wretches, whereso’er you are,  
That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,  
How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,  
Your loop’d and window’s raggedness, defend you  
From seasons such as these? O! I have ta’en  
Too little care of this. Take physic, Pomp;  
Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,  
That thou mayst shake the superflux to them,  
And show the Heavens more just.  
(III iv 28-36)

The question of state responsibility for the poor figures prominently in the opening of Shakespeare’s Roman tragedy, *Coriolanus* (c. 1608), a scene which those who remembered the 1590s would have recognized in their own lives: a society brought down by famine and war. The Romans are desperate with hunger. Menenius, a nobleman, insists that the state cares for its people. The people answer him back in language that could not be heard in parliament. By putting the criticism in the vanished Roman era, Shakespeare slips in a critique of his own age, with its failures to deal effectively with the needs of the poor. This is the voice of a non-existent Labour party:

‘Care for us? True, indeed! They ne’er cared for us yet: suffer us to famish, and their storehouses crammed with grain; make edicts for usury, to support usurers; repeal daily any wholesome act established against the rich, and provide more piercing statutes daily to chain up and restrain the poor. If the wars eat us not
up, they will; and there’s all the love they bear us’ (I i 75-81),

Such eloquent condemnation, though directed at the government of a long-dead empire, might have contributed to improvements in English poor relief. From the early 17th century, famine in England was rare; it was the Industrial Revolution in the late 18th century, when Wordsworth wrote many of his greatest poems, that revived many of the issues that the Elizabethan Poor Law was thought to have resolved.

Wordsworth

The enormous current gap between the rich and the poor worldwide is thought to have begun around 1800, in Wordsworth’s time. Wordsworth is usually remembered as a Nature poet, a poet of childhood and, perhaps most of all, of daffodils. But he was also a radical, inspired by the egalitarian spirit of the French Revolution, which he witnessed in 1792-3. Wordsworth championed the poor at a time of increasing economic hardship, war and inflation, in the late 18th and early 19th century. He put the poor, the beggars, widows and orphaned children, among whom he grew up in the Lake District, at the heart of his poetry, not as objects of pity and charity but as human beings with rich personalities and dignity. He believed that the poor, suffering more than the rich, have much to teach about endurance and independence.

In the century after 1750, the population of England tripled, rising from about 5 million to over 15 million by the time of Wordsworth’s death in 1850. It was not clear at the time if productivity could match the population rise. England paid dearly for its wars with France and the American colonies: in the late 1700s, when these wars were fought, the cost of poor relief increased five times; and between 1793 and 1813 prices doubled.

Wartime shortages led to increases in claims for relief. Taxpayers rebelled and parishes could not cope. At the end of 1796, in ‘Ode to the Departing Year’, Coleridge, living in the poverty-stricken West Country, wrote of England as a nation that had been cursed.

As the population grew amid economic crisis and hunger in wartime, Thomas Malthus in 1798 published Essay on Population, arguing that population increase meant an increase in hunger. Malthus’ views led to an increasingly harsh view of the poor as a burden on society, to be countered through stringent legislation. The General Enclosures Act of 1801 limited public land to which the poor had access and made their lives harder.
As industrial cities grew, many were forced by hunger off unprofitable rural land into factories. Families that had worked in a variety of trades at home were now scattered among the mills. It seemed as though a once-free people were now enslaved. Atrocious factory conditions obscured the fact that capital-driven industry could, given time, solve many problems it created: those who had work in the ‘dark Satanic mills’, as William Blake called them in the North were better-off than the unemployed poor in the South.

Though England was at war with France, there was a lot of sympathy in England for the ideals of Revolution: freedom, equality, justice. Much English literature in the 1790s was poetry of social protest as England was faced with its worst war crisis since the Spanish Armada.

Wordsworth’s poems of the 1790s have for their background the rising costs of poor relief, failed harvests and food riots, as well as privation in wartime. This, Wordsworth writes in his great poem on Margaret or *The Ruined Cottage*, was ‘a time of trouble’, when

shoals of artisans
Were from their daily labour turned away
To hang for bread on parish charity

Wordsworth admires the fortitude of the poor, their direct honest speech - qualities which he tries to catch in his poetry. In his 1800 Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, he explains why he writes about the rural poor: among them ‘the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language’. Wordsworth felt that the poor are more in touch with their feelings than the well-to-do, more eloquent than the well-educated. His feeling for the poor comes less from economic statistics and political theories than from the Bible, which insists on the responsibility of the better-off towards the poor.

As for the government, Wordsworth is scathing. He attacks government policy which treats the poor as a trouble to society to be swept into the workhouse or the grave.

Wordsworth’s feeling for the poor as individuals is especially clear in his poem on the leechgather. This is a poor, bent old man, alone in the world, who in his rock-like fortitude teaches the poet, fearful of despondency, madness and suicide, to value life:

The old man still stood talking by my side;
But still his voice to me was like a stream
Scarce heard; nor word from word could I divide;
And the whole body of the Man did seem
Like one whom I had met with in a dream;
Or like a man from some far region sent,
To give me human strength, by apt admonishment

To Wordsworth, the Industrial Revolution was a form of national suicide,
destroying the intricate web of English social life that had evolved for centuries.
He was among the first to write poetry about industry as a cause of family
disruption and break-up. Had he been born a generation or two later
Wordsworth might have become a socialist. He anticipates Marx’s attack on
factories and their owners for adding social alienation to the woes of the poor,
especially the children, universally exploited.

To Wordsworth, the rural poor were part of the landscape, part of Nature; not a
problem to be solved, or a threat to society. Wordsworth believed, as he put it,
that ‘the extremes of poverty and riches have a necessary tendency to corrupt
the human heart’. Consequently, Wordsworth writes, ‘a system of universal
representation’ was needed, ‘the suffrage of every individual’. Wordsworth in
his early 20s when he wrote this, in the 1790s, was a radical. He believed that
failure to reduce the gap between rich and poor justified revolution such as that
in France. The Revolution, he felt, was for the hunger-bitten children of the
world. Here, too, Wordsworth anticipates Marx, whose Kapital includes a
powerful indictment of child labor.

What were the roots of Wordsworth’s identification with the poor? Here we
know a lot more than about Shakespeare. Wordsworth’s family started by being
well-off. After the early death of his parents and separation from his siblings, he
was left relatively poor. In a childhood recollection, he confesses suicidal
impulses at this time. For many years, he was cheated of his inheritance. In his
poetry, he tends not just to support those worse off than himself but also to find
fortitude in their stoicism. Cockermouth, Wordsworth’s birthplace in the Lake
District, had a workhouse which drew the poor from the countryside. As a child,
Wordsworth would have seen many types of rural poor. In ‘The Old
Cumberland Beggar,’ written in the 1790s, he presents the poor as a vital part of
society, an incentive to goodness. The beggar is familiar to the poet from
childhood, a solitary wanderer rousing charitable feelings among those who
know him.

Him from my childhood have I known, and then
He was so old, he seems not older now;
He travels on, a solitary man,
So helpless in appearance, that for him
The sauntering horseman-traveller does not throw
With careless hands his alms upon the ground,
But stops, that he may safely lodge the coin
Within the old man’s hat…

To Wordsworth, these small vital acts of charity and love were undermined by legislation. The Poor Laws, in Wordsworth’s view, deprived the poor of dignity and the better-off of opportunities to fulfil the biblical ideal of charity. Neither Shakespeare nor Wordsworth is concerned with the religion of the poor, whether they are Catholic or Protestant. To Wordsworth, true charity is expressed in personal relations - not the workhouse or soup-kitchen. He was well-aware of the dark, dirty, crowded conditions of many workhouses, as depicted by George Crabbe in his poem The Village, published in 1783. Wordsworth, writing about 15 years later, defends the old Cumberland beggar against intrusive legislation and challenges the negative perception of the poor:

… deem not this Man useless – Statesmen! ye
Who are so restless in your wisdom, ye
Who have a broom still ready in your hands
To rid the world of nuisances; ye proud,
Heart-swole, while in your pride ye contemplate
Your talents, power, or wisdom, deem him not
A burthen of the earth!

In The Prelude (Book X) Wordsworth describes the period 1795-1797, when he lived in the West Country, as the crucial period in his artistic development, when he decided to be a poet. At this time, he began writing his poem on the old Cumberland beggar. Wordsworth became a poet of the suffering poor, perhaps the first in Western poetry: the mad mother, the distraught sailor, the old woman who cannot heat her cottage (Goody Blake), the farmer forced to sell his sheep, the poor orphan girl who loses her cloak (Alice Fell), the soldier back from the wars, the old man with swollen ankles (Simon Lee), and other unfortunates and outcasts, forsaken women, convicts, and many others, reflect popular concern in the 1790s over the increasing numbers of poor people.

The poet watched as the price of staples, of oats, bread and potatoes, rose dangerously. His letters and his sister Dorothy’s journal record the wretched poverty and ignorance of the country people who seemed at times to live no better than savages, and his observations enter his poetry.

The poem ‘The Baker’s Cart’ describes a typical scene: a baker does not stop his cart outside a poor woman’s door because he knows she has no money to feed her children. ‘The Last of the Flock’, also based on an eyewitness incident,
depicts the effects of poverty in a time of austerity. The owner of a flock of sheep is forced to sell to provide for his family. This is his situation, in his own words:

‘Ten children, Sir! Had I to feed,  
Hard labour in a time of need!  
My pride was tamed, and in our grief  
I of the parish ask’d relief.  
They said I was a wealthy man;  
My sheep upon the mountain fed,  
And it was fit that thence I took  
Whereof to buy us bread:’  
‘Do this: how can we give to you,’  
They cried, ‘what to the poor is due?’

In ‘Goody Blake and Harry Gill’, an old woman, poorly clothed and fed, lives alone in her Dorsetshire cottage, unable to afford fuel to warm herself in winter: coal is dear for it must be imported ‘by wind and tide’. Goody Blake works long hours in her cottage:

All day she spun in her poor dwelling,  
And then her three hours’ work at night!  
Alas! ‘twas hardly worth the telling,  
It would not pay for candle-light.

Yet, Wordsworth understood not just the responsibility of the better-off to the poor but also the need of the poor to give, not merely be objects of charity. The following lines recall the rabbinic injunction that the poor are also required to give charity, no matter how little they have:

… the poorest poor  
Long for some moments in a weary life  
When they can know and feel that they have been,  
Themselves, the fathers and the dealers-out  
Of some small blessings; have been kind to such  
As needed kindness, for this single cause,  
That we have all of us one human heart.

This ‘one human heart’ is, if anything, the single unifying principle of Wordsworth’s poems, as it is of Shakespeare’s plays - this is what brings both poets so close in spirit to the Hebrew Bible. The feeling of unity with suffering humankind continues in Wordsworth’s long poem, *Margaret or The Ruined Cottage*, written around the same time as ‘The Old Cumberland Beggar’, in
1797. *The Ruined Cottage* shows how a rural family slides inexorably to poverty, as war and famine take their toll, and there is no one to help. The description could apply also to the period when Shakespeare wrote *Julius Caesar* and *Hamlet*, when England, faced with a crisis of invasion, endured crop failures and hunger, compounded by uncertainty over the succession.

You may remember, now some ten years gone
Two blighting seasons when the fields were left
With half a harvest. – It pleased Heaven to add
A worse affliction in the plague of war,
A happy land was stricken to the heart.
A dearth was in the land. They were hard times,
A wanderer among the cottages
I with my pack of winter raiment, saw
What the poor suffered – Many of the rich
Sunk down as in a dream among the poor
And of the poor did many cease to be
And their place knew them not.

The humanity of the poor is stressed here, their embodiment of the divine image, enhanced by an echo of the Book of Job (7:10), ‘their place knew them not’. Margaret is loyal to her family and faith, and her story teaches us that ‘consolation springs from sources far than deepest pain’, a lesson not unlike that experienced by Lear on the heath.

**Conclusion**

Empathy with the poor in Shakespeare and Wordsworth is strikingly at odds with the history of English legislation on the poor, driven (as was legislation in other countries) more by fear of vagrancy, crime and parasitism, than by Christian love. The poets embraced the poor; legislators made brooms to sweep the poor away. While not opposing capitalism, but both warn of harmful effects of capitalism on the poor. Shakespeare’s portrayal of the poor was a powerful, though indirect, indictment of the existing system, and a warning, couched in the most diplomatic language - as it had to be - of the threat to England’s survival if allowed to continue. And it may be that the sympathy with the poor in Shakespeare’s plays reflected and influenced public opinion more than is recognized: from the Poor Law of 1598 and 1601 until the publication of the *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798, England had a relatively effective system of poor relief, in which the extremes of poverty were largely banished.

In Wordsworth’s time, the Industrial Revolution and the war with France brought extreme poverty back onto the legislative agenda, with an urgency not
known since the time of Shakespeare. The Old Poor Law no longer worked. Wordsworth’s poetry expresses his revulsion at the Poor Law and his general horror at legislation against the poor. The poet felt this legislation to be degrading, a sign of social failure as the poor were often made to feel more like criminals than the beloved of God in the Judaeo-Christian tradition. Shakespeare and Wordsworth were poets of conscience. In moments when Christian charity was questioned, they return to the unambiguous sympathy for the poor in the Bible.