

Shakespeare's *Richard II*: a Historical Reading

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This paper is intended to be a re-reading of the one I submitted to the SELIM Conference at Valladolid¹. Since then I have reviewed my ideas about historicism. How to take up positions when your formation has been influenced by critics like E.M.W. Tillyard², Lily B. Campbell³, G. Wilson Knight⁴, J. Dover Wilson⁵, F.R. Leavis⁶, etc.? And how to take up positions when you have been bombarded in the 1970s and 1980s by new theories about historicism and re-readings of Shakespeare's history plays? Greenblatt's New Historicism⁷ has become so influential that a new attitude should be proposed for the reading of Shakespeare.

It should be realised that Shakespeare wrote for his time, but he became a classic and some of his plays can be considered "contemporaries" of any period of history. As a result, different readers at different times have proposed different readings. The reading of Graham Holderness' *Shakespeare Recycled: The Making of Historical Drama*⁸ and J. Dollimore & A. Sinfield's "History and ideology: the instance of *Henry V*"⁹ led me to change the introduction of the first copy, keep the corpus, add more bibliography and propose at this Conference the thesis that history is written by the winner, that Shakespeare was very much on the winning side and that he contributed to the formation of the Tudor Myth.

Shakespeare wrote ten historical plays with an English theme, eight of which form two sequences of four. The first was written early in his career, and consists of *Richard III* and the three Parts of *Henry VI*, which cover the period of the War of the Roses between the Houses of York and Lancaster. The second is formed by *Richard II*, the two Parts of *Henry IV* and *Henry V*. In this tetralogy, as Northrop Frye points out, "each play does look back to its predecessors, so there is a unity to the sequence, whether planned in advance or not. And, as the Epilogue to *Henry V* tells us, the story ends at the point where the earlier sequence began."¹⁰ The eight plays cover the period between the reigns of Edward III¹¹ and Henry VII. The other two historical plays are *King John* and *Henry VIII*.

Shakespeare manipulates history. Northrop Frye says that Shakespeare writes chronicles and not histories. In *Richard II* he narrates courtly plots to overthrow the king and enthrone another. There are no references to the history of the period. The king becomes a subject of the literary. A look at some important events in his long reign will confirm this.

King Edward III died in June 1377. The accession of his grandson Richard II (1377-1400) ended the regency of his powerful uncle John of Gaunt. The duke was excluded from the new government, formed by friends of the king's mother. A few weeks after Richard came to the throne, when he was only ten, the French launched a new series of attacks on the English coast, such as England had not known for a generation.

The Church, already unpopular in England, was shaken by John Wycliffe's reform¹². He accused the

Church of accumulating riches and having moved away from her origins based on poverty. There was an outcry against the Church's wealth. Wycliffe attacked the doctrine of Transubstantiation, which he claimed had been invented by the clergy and to be no more than a superstition. He sent his disciples, the Poor Preachers, to spread his doctrine throughout England. In 1380 he began the translation of the whole Bible from Latin into English. They were persecuted, although it is said that the king himself, and especially the queen, Anne of Bohemia, were thought to regard the Lollards with tolerance. In the 16th century the secret cells of the Lollards were the first supporters of the reformers.

Richard II had to face the breaking up of a system of production (the *manorial system*), and the *Peasants' Revolt* (1381). The measure that actually started the revolt was the levy of a poll-tax of a shilling in order to meet the cost of the French War, but large scale frauds were uncovered. When the serfs took London the king faced them with heroism. Once the rebellion was over the king revoked all the charters of freedom he had previously granted: "*Villeins ye are, and villeins ye shall remain.*" Parliament, whose members were the Lords of the lands, would not agree to the king re-distributing their lands.

He also had unfortunate relationships with some of his uncles. John of Gaunt came to Spain to claim the throne of Castile. Edmund, Duke of York, counted for nothing. But Thomas of Woodstock¹³, Duke of Gloucester, the youngest of his uncles, showed himself to be an unscrupulous man who intended to take the government out of his hands as soon as he could. The threat of a French invasion and the king's personal expenses gave Gloucester his opportunity. He reminded his nephew that kings could be deposed, citing the ominous case of Edward II. In 1387, after a short struggle, Gloucester defeated the king's army at Radcot Bridge. The Lords Appelant, as those who had accused the king's friends of treason called themselves, now took control. Among them was Henry, Earl of Derby, son of John of Gaunt and the future Henry IV. Their rule only lasted a year. But the king never forgave the men who had banished or murdered his friends. When Gaunt returned from Spain, Gloucester retired and the king governed his kingdom for a peaceful period that lasted until his warlike uncle's death in 1397. The rest of the story resembles Shakespeare's version, but in a different context and with different purposes.

Richard II (c. 1597) seems to have made a strong impression on the Elizabethan public. Six Quartos of it were made, five of them within the author's lifetime. The first three omitted the deposing scene at the end of Act IV. The fourth and fifth, which retained it, appeared five years after the queen's death. The omission of that scene could have happened anyway, because of the official nervousness about showing or printing such matters.

There is evidence that the play was revived when the conspiracy of Essex against Elizabeth was under way, possibly in order to accustom the public to the idea of deposing a monarch, something the censors worried about. The queen herself was aware of the connection, and is reported to have said: "*I am Richard II, know ye not that?*" But I do not think there was any relationship between the reckless Richard and the cautious Elizabeth. Shakespeare introduces the allegorical and sentimental garden scene, where the gardener says it is advisable to cut out the dead wood. In the same way the king should get rid of the ambitious Lords before they become dangerous:

... and Bolingbroke
 Hath seized the wasteful king. O! what pity is it
 That he had not so trimmed and dressed his land,

As we this garden! We at time of year
 Do wound the bark, the skin of our fruit-trees,
 Lest being over-proud in sap and blood,
 With too much riches it confound itself.
 Had he done so to great and growing men,
 They might have lived to bear, and he to taste,
 Their fruits of duty: superfluous branches
 We lop away, that bearing boughs may live:
 Had he done so, himself had borne the crown,
 Which waste of idle hours hath quite thrown down.
Richard II: III, iv, 55-66.

If the Essex group was responsible for the revival of the play, for propaganda purposes, this scene would have backfired on them.

The theme of the deposition of a king runs through the four plays of the tetralogy. But it certainly would not have been advisable for the author to raise doubts about the Tudors' rights to the throne. Some writers before him had justified the rebellion against a king. Thomas More, for example, writes the first biography of Richard III, the last English medieval king, defeated by Henry Richmond, later Henry VII, the first Tudor king. More stresses the atrocities and crimes committed by Richard in order to obtain and secure his throne. But, how many were committed by others, such as Henry VIII? Shakespeare takes up the theme again in *Richard III*, which becomes an authentic apology of the Tudor myth. At the beginning of the play there is a personal description of that monster:

But I, that am not shap'd for sportive tricks,
 Nor made to court an amorous looking-glass;
 I, that am rudely stamp'd, and want love's majesty
 To strut before a wanton ambling nymph:
 I, that am curtail'd of that fair proportion,
 Cheated of feature by dissembling Nature,
 Deform'd, unfinish'd, sent before my time
 Into this breathing world scarce half made up -
 And that so lamely and unfashionable
 That dogs bark at me, as I halt by them -
 Why, I, in this weak piping time of peace,
 Have no delight to pass away the time,
 Unless to spy my shadow in the sun,
 And descant on mine own deformity.
 And therefore, since I cannot prove a lover
 To entertain these fair well-spoken days,
 I am determined to prove a villain,
 And hate the idle pleasures of these days.
Richard III: I, i, 14-31.

The defeat of Richard is shown as a liberation, the end of an era and the beginning of another one under the Tudors. This long final speech shows how the Tudor myth was born:

Proclaim a pardon to the soldiers fled
 That in submission will return to us;
 And then, as we have ta'en the sacrament,
 We will unite the white rose and the red.
 Smile, heaven, upon this fair conjunction,
 That long have frown'd upon their enmity.
 What traitor hears me and says not Amen?
 England hath long been mad, and scarr'd herself:
 The brother blindly shed the brother's blood;
 The father rashly slaughter'd his own son;
 The son, compell'd, been butcher to the sire.
 All this divided York and Lancaster -
 Divided, in their dire division.
 O now let Richmond and Elizabeth,
 The true succeeders of each royal House,
 By God's fair ordinance conjoin together,
 And let their heirs, God, if Thy will be so,
 Enrich the time to come with smooth-fac'd peace,
 With smiling plenty, and fair prosperous days.
 Abate the edge of traitors, gracious Lord,
 That would reduce these bloody days again,
 And make poor England weep in streams of blood.
 Let them not live to taste this land's increase,
 That would with treason wound this fair land's peace.
 Now civil wounds are stopp'd; peace lives again.
 That she may long live here, God say Amen.

Richard III: V, v, 16-41.

In order to have a clear idea of this process we must bear in mind the intermarriages of English royalty between the reigns of Edward III and Henry VII as they are shown in Fig. 14. We can begin by considering the former's five sons. The eldest son and heir, Edward the "Black Prince", died in 1376, a year before his father did. The laws of succession brought his son, Richard, to the throne when he was still a boy. The saying: "*Woe to the land that's govern'd by a child*"¹⁵ is applicable here, and yet his reign lasted for twenty-two years (Shakespeare's play covers only the last year of his reign), as many years as Henry IV and Henry V together. When Richard II died in 1400 without an heir, the next in line of succession was Edmund Mortimer, third Earl of March, who was also nominated, according to the conspirators in *Henry IV*, by Richard II as his successor.

Henry Bolingbroke was the son of John of Gaunt, the third son of Edward III, and so not the next in line to the crown. However, he succeeded in establishing the House of Lancaster as the royal family, and

was followed by his son and grandson. He was only a boy of five when his father made a second marriage to Constance, daughter and heir to Pedro the Cruel, and sister of Isabella, Duchess of York. John of Gaunt was determined to press his claim to the throne of Castile for him and his wife. He repeatedly tried to invade Castile but always in vain. In 1388 those claims and disputes ended with the marriage of his daughter Catherine to the person who later became Henry III of Castile and Leon.

In 1402 Henry IV, widower of his first wife, married by proxy the Spanish Princess Joanna, one of the daughters of Charles II the Bad, of Navarre. The wedding ceremony was held on 7th February 1403. She did not bear him a son and had to agree to be the stepmother of those Henry had had with his first wife, Mary Bohun.

The Yorkist line came from Edmund, Duke of York, the fourth son of Edward III. We can see him in *Richard II* in a dramatic switch of loyalties from Richard to Bolingbroke. The resulting conflict with his son Edward, called Aumerle, is the real narrative point of the play. The line was not consolidated until the marriage of Aumerle's brother, Richard, to a descendant of Lionel produced Richard, Duke of York, who began the War of the Roses.

The Duchess of York, who so fervently defended her son Aumerle in Act V, is, as I have pointed out, the Spanish Princess Isabella of Castile, daughter of Pedro I the Cruel. Her husband, first Duke of York, served in several campaigns in Spain between 1359 and 1378. He was also in command of the expedition of 1381-2 in favour of the King of Portugal against Castile. Isabella takes part in Act V, ii (the whole scene) and also in V, iii, 73-145 with beautiful words and a moving action asking her husband and the king for her son's forgiveness. In those words she mentions her origins when she tells her husband that their son resembles him and not her, but that she loves him:

... Hadst thou groaned for him
 As I have done, thou wouldst be more pitiful.
 But now I know thy mind, thou dost suspect
 That I have been disloyal to thy bed,
 And that he is a bastard, not thy son:
 Sweet York, sweet husband, be not of that mind,
 He is as like thee as a man may be,
 Not like to me, or any of my kin,
 And yet I love him.

Richard II: V, ii, 102-110.

In *Richard II*, as N. Frye points out, Shakespeare had to make a marriage of convenience between the facts of medieval society, so far as they filtered down to him from his sources, and the Tudor mystique of loyalty. The War of the Roses brought about the ruin of England. Fortunately a new royal house had succeeded in establishing a new order based on obedience to a central sovereign as the only way of preserving peace. The civil war was considered divine punishment for the murder of a legitimate king and the usurpation of power, and also an unnatural rupture. All the components of a kingdom should co-exist in perfect harmony. Just as when the heavenly order is altered chaos is produced, so the civil war is the result of the interruption of earthly order, in which the crown is the symbol of power blessed with the divine right to royal succession. The Tudor myth means that they represent the conjunction of the

two enemies and that, after such a disastrous civil war, they had inaugurated the Golden Age. The garden represents the cosmic order of nature, where the king is the gardener and the kingdom is the garden. In history we find the bad gardener who does not take care of his garden: this is an allegory of disorder, the horrors of civil war, where son kills father or father kills son, where brother kills brother. The problem of the legitimacy of power is presented to us. The king is the Lord's anointed. But who can designate a king? Shakespeare becomes ambiguous: the king is the image of God's majesty on earth but designated by the people. The Tudors were despots supported by the people¹⁶.

In *Richard II* we have a rebellion against a legitimate king, the Lord's anointed. The king himself in the abdication scene offers a parallel between his judgement and that of Christ. He does not compare himself with Christ but he admits that the same circumstances are repeated, especially the rejection of the Lord's anointed by the people:

Not all the water in the rough rude sea
 Can wash the balm off from an anointed king.
 The breath of worldly men cannot depose
 The deputy elected by the Lord.
Richard II: III, ii, 54-55.

A legitimate king, as Shakespeare presents the situation, can be cruel and without scruples and still remain a king. As J. Kott says: "*there are no bad kings, or good kings; kings are only kings. Or let us put it in modern terms: there is only the king's situation, and the system*"¹⁷. But if he is weak or incompetent he may create a power vacuum in society, where the order of nature and God's will demand a strong central power. The central theme of *Richard II* is precisely the problem put to the nobles when they had to choose between a weak king *de jure* and a *de facto* power formed somewhere else. Richard was known by his contemporaries as a king who would not accept good advice. Shakespeare shows him ignoring the warnings and advice of his uncles John of Gaunt and York. His long reign was a series of errors and oppressions and Shakespeare did not need to go into detail. In the scene of his own death, John of Gaunt accuses him of one of the worst administrative sins: of having sold the right of collecting taxes to individuals the central power could not control. He was also shown as a king surrounded by undesirable favourites, as somebody who wasted money on his own pleasures and kept up a war in Ireland that contributed to empty the royal coffers. Above all he is shown as an incompetent administrator. In the demoralized state of the nation a *de facto* power begins to gather around Bolingbroke, although he was an unscrupulous usurper.

This forms part of what begins as a superbly patriotic speech. If Shakespeare makes the old ruffian John of Gaunt a wise and saintly prophet it was undoubtedly because he was the ancestor of the House of Tudor. As we can see in Fig. 2¹⁸, one Owen Tudor married Catherine of Valois, widow of Henry V. Edmund, their heir and first Earl of Richmond, married Margaret Beaufort, a descendant of John of Gaunt and his third wife, Katherine Swynford. Their son Henry, afterwards Henry VII, was the first king of the dynasty of the Tudors after the defeat of Richard III. He married Elizabeth, daughter of Edward IV, uniting the Houses of York and Lancaster. The Tudor myth was born.

The rest of the play is the working out of this *de jure* and *de facto* dilemma. Some, like the Duke of York, come over to Henry's side and transfer the loyalty owed to the Lord's anointed to him. So, when

York's son, Aumerle, conspires in favour of Richard, York accuses his son of the same treason and sacrilege he had previously accused Bolingbroke of before changing sides. In the scene where York insists on the king's trying his son for treason and the duchess pleads for pardon, Bolingbroke is at his best, because he is aware of the significance of what is happening. He has made the transition from being the *de jure* king as well, and after that all he needs to do is to get rid of Richard.

From Act III on we witness a transformation of these two characters, a king without a throne and a powerful man without a crown. "*One land, one king*," was the cry of the Knights of the Round Table. One of them had to disappear. Shakespeare disparages King Richard in the first Acts, but the figure of the king is exalted afterwards and becomes the central figure of a secular Passion. When Northumberland reports Bolingbroke's wish for Richard to come down and parley with him in the "base court", the symbolism of the whole operation flashes at once through his mind:

Down, down I come, like glist'ring Phaeton:
 Wanting the manage of unruly jades ...
 In the base court? Base court, where kings grow base
 To come at traitors' calls, and do them grace.
 In the base court? Come down? Down, court! Down, king!
Richard II: III, iii, 178-82.

The king accepts his loss of power. In the next step he looks back to himself. In the abdication scene he asks for a mirror:

Good king, great king, and yet not greatly good,
 And if my word be sterling yet in England,
 Let it command a mirror hither straight,
 That it may show me what a face I have,
 Since it is bankrupt of his majesty.
Richard II: IV, i, 263-7.

From the historical point of view Richard is finished: he has to be murdered. But from the dramatic point of view, Richard is and remains the central figure while Bolingbroke is a supporting actor. As I said before, the figure of the king is magnified over that of Bolingbroke while the latter is snatching the crown from him, and is strengthened among the nobles who behave like gangsters and all of whom, including Bolingbroke, make out that a bad king is being replaced by a good one.

The next act to establish the figure of the king takes place in Richard's great prison monologue, which in many respects sums up the play. The prison is the final actualizing of the individual world dramatized by the mirror scene earlier. Some of the thoughts expressed are ambiguous, some are resigned, but all of them are discontented:

Not I, nor any man but a man is,
 With nothing shall be pleased till he be eased
 With being nothing.
Richard II: V, v, 39-41.

These lines show us the ambiguity of the king's speech. The king is a man and a king at the same time. He will be king until he dies, until he becomes that something we call nothing. This meaning is central in *King Lear* later. It is the tragedy of the man who is invested with the attributes of a king. Without his crown a king becomes nothing and they will not be pleased until he is liberated by death. We are dealing with the medieval theory of the king's two bodies¹⁹, one as a man, an individual, and the other, his symbolic aspect as the body of his nation in an individual form.

Richard II is, as N. Frye says, in a more complex social position, and has been caught in the paradox of the king, who, we remember, possesses both an individual and a sacramental body. The latter includes all the subjects in his kingdom; the former, only himself. In prison, however, a whole world takes form within his mind: the other world he was looking for in the mirror. The king recovers his identity as a man and his magnificence as a king.

The imagery changes as music is heard in the background. Richard comments on the need for keeping time in music, and applies the word to his own life: "*I wasted time, and time doth now waste me*":

... Music do I hear?
 Ha, ha! keep time - how sour sweet music is,
 When time is broke and no proportion kept!
 So is it in the music of men's lives:
 And here have I the daintiness of ear
 To check time broke in a disordered string;
 But for the concord of my state and time
 Had not an ear to hear my true time broke.
 I wasted time, and time doth now waste me:
 For now hath time made me his numb'ring clock.
Richard II: V, v, 41-50.

It is the rhythm he has not kept, that has led him to death, while it has led Bolingbroke to power:

My thoughts are minutes, and with sighs they jar
 Their watches on unto mine eyes, the outward watch,
 Whereto my finger, like a dial's point,
 Is pointing still, in cleansing them from tears.
 Now, sir, the sound that tells what hour it is
 Are clamorous groans which strike upon my heart
 Which is the bell - so sighs, and tears, and groans,
 Show minutes, times, and hours: but my time
 Runs posting on in Bolingbroke's proud joy,
 While I stand fooling here, his Jack of the clock ...
Richard II: V, v, 51-60.

At the end of the play, Bolingbroke, now Henry IV, hints that the death of the imprisoned Richard would be most convenient for him, and his follower Exton carries out the deed, and returns expecting a

reward for his faithful service. He forgot that leaders have to dissociate themselves immediately from such acts, whether they ordered them or not, and the play closes with Exton banished and Henry saying:

They love not poison that do poison need,
 Nor do I thee; though I did wish him dead,
 I hate the murderer, love him murderéd:
 The guilt of conscience take thou for thy labour,
 But neither my good word, nor princely favour:
 With Cain go wander thorough shades of night,
 And never show thy head by day nor light . . .

Richard II: V, vi, 38-44.

The tragedy points to an end. Bolingbroke has committed a crime and with the support of the nobles is crowned king of England having promised a distribution of lands. Once again in Elizabethan times they refer to the division of England: it was a time to be united around the figure of the queen. Henry IV, the hypocrite, laments the king's death and promises to cleanse himself by going on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land:

Lords, I protest, my soul is full of woe,
 That blood should sprinkle me to make me grow:
 Come, mourn with me for what I do lament,
 And put on sullen black incontinent.
 I'll make a voyage to the Holy Land,
 To wash this blood off from my guilty hand:
 March sadly after, grace my mournings here,
 In weeping after this untimely bier.

Richard II: V, vi, 45-52.

The crusade is a ruse to keep the nobility busy, but Henry does not participate in one. His journey to the Holy Land is a journey to nowhere. He had been promised that he would die in Jerusalem, and such was the name of the room in Westminster Palace where he died²⁰. *Ironías del destino*.

NOTES

¹ Sánchez Escribano, J. 1993 (1995): Medieval into Renaissance: the case of Kings Richard II and Henry IV. Fernández, P. and Bravo J.M^a ed.: *Proceedings of the VIth International Conference of SELIM*. Secretariado de Publicaciones, Universidad de Valladolid. 1993 (1995): 325-335.

² Tillyard, E.M.W. 1944: *Shakespeare's History Plays*. London, Chatto and Windus.

³ Campbell, Lily B. 1947: *Shakespeare's Histories: Mirrors of Elizabethan Policy*. San Marino CA, Huntington Library.

⁴ Knight, G. Wilson. 1944: *The Olive and the Sword*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.

- ⁵ Wilson, J. Dover and Worsley, T.C. 1952: *Shakespeare's Histories at Stratford 1951*. London, Max Reinhardt.
- ⁶ Leavis, F.R. 1963: "A retrospect", *Scrutiny*, XX, 1963: 1-20.
- ⁷ Greenblatt, Stephen. 1988: "Invisible bullets", in *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of social energy in Renaissance England*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Also 1990: *Learning to Curse: Essays in early modern culture*. London, Routledge.
- ⁸ Holderness, G. 1992: *Shakespeare recycled: The making of historical drama*. London, Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- ⁹ Dollimore, J. and Sinfield, A. 1986: "History and ideology: the instance of *Henry V*", in Drakakis, John ed.: *Alternative Shakespeares*. London, Methuen.
- ¹⁰ Sandler, R. ed. 1986: *Northrop Frye on Shakespeare*. Markham, Ontario, Fitzhenry & Whiteside. 1986: 51.
- ¹¹ Anonimus, 1985: *Edward III*. Parfitt G. ed. Nottingham Drama Texts, University of Nottingham.
- ¹² His reformation coincides with the Popes' seventy years' residence at Avignon (1309-78), the "Babylonian captivity".
- ¹³ Anonimus, 1988: *Thomas of Woodstock*. Parfitt G and Shepherd S. eds. Doncaster: The Brynmill Press.
- ¹⁴ Ross, C. 1981: *Richard III*. London: Methuen. 1981: 238.
- ¹⁵ Shakespeare: *Richard III*: II, iii, 11. It is a popular phrase we can find in the *Ecclesiastes* (X, 15-16) and in Hall's *Edward V*, fol. xxi, 5. In that scene, three town-folk lament the death of Edward IV and the eminent dangers that menaced the kingdom because of his successor's tender age.
- ¹⁶ Wells, R.H., *Shakespeare, Politics and the State* (London: Macmillan, 1986): 1. Civilisation and the Debate on Human Nature; 2. Forms of Government; 3. The Just Ruler; 4. Rebellion; 5. Providence and History; 6. Natural Law.
- ¹⁷ Kott, J. 1967: *Shakespeare: Our Contemporary*. London, Methuen, 1967: 14
- ¹⁸ Chrimes, S.B. 1984: *Henry VII*. London, Methuen, 1984: 338.
- ¹⁹ Kantorowicz, Ernst H. 1981: *The King's two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology*. Princeton, American Political Science Review.
- ²⁰ Shakespeare: *2 Henry IV*: IV, vv 235-40.

