History and tragedy in richard ii

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How valid is the distinction between history and tragedy in Richard II? An attempt to sort Shakespeare's plays into neat categories may appear to have its benefits when striving to understand his work, but even a superficial reading of Richard II indicates that this approach is largely futile and sometimes misleading. While it cannot be doubted that the play is of a historical nature, based on events recorded in Holinshed's Chronicles of 1577 and named after an actual king, a sense of true Shakespearean tragedy is also present throughout. Instead of trying to analyse or appreciate the differences between these two forms, it is more interesting to understand how they complement each other. Shakespeare vividly brings the past to life in Richard II, and it is surely the careful mingling of historical fact and tragic elements that is responsible for the great dramatic value of the play. Knowledge of the period of history from which the play is drawn means that the audience is prepared for Richard's fate, for example, and this only serves to illuminate the tragic inevitability of his downfall. The audience is aware that Richard II is only the first in a series of history plays, and will be followed by Henry IV (parts one and two) and Henry V. In this sense Richard could be viewed in a potentially unemotional light, as a component of English history whose reign simply linked the reigns of two others. The fact that he was usurped from the throne and murdered is not overwhelmingly tragic when seen in the context of world history, especially if his reign is being viewed with cold hindsight. However, Shakespeare's colourful portrayal of Richard and his fate means that the audience can in many ways appreciate the king in terms of a tragic hero; Coleridge asserting that ' the play throughout is an history of the human mind' (p. 128). The fact that the majority of the play's characters can predict Richard's downfall almost as accurately as the

omniscient audience creates a sense of inevitability, which is central to the notion of tragedy. His friends and enemies are united in their experiences of negative presentiment, from which only Richard seems to be immune. The Queen relates that, Some unborn sorrow, ripe in fortune's womb, Is coming towards me; and my inward soulAt nothing trembles.(II. ii. 10-13)Despite the ambiguity of these lines regarding the nature of the ' unborn sorrow', there is an overwhelming sense of unavoidability. The passiveness of the Queen is notable (the sorrow is ' coming towards' her), and the emphatic positioning of ' Is' at the beginning of the second line suggests that there is no escape from this looming disaster. The dramatic irony of the audience knowing that her intuition is correct can only lead to increased pity for her situation. Meanwhile the tragic inevitability of Richard's plight is touched on with the image of ' fortune' giving birth from her ' womb': the King and Queen are going to be presented with their decided destiny and they cannot change it. The fact that they cannot create their own children only adds a cruel irony to this idea of enforced passivity. Later in the scene Green also predicts the inevitability of Richard's downfall, sympathetically likening his task in overcoming Bolingbroke to ' numb'ring sands and drinking oceans dry' (II. ii. 146). The grand scale of this language emphasises the king's lack of control: only a god could accomplish these universal feats. Similarly, Salisbury declares that he envisages Richard's ' glory, like a shooting star,/ Fall[ing] to the base earth from the firmament' (II. iv. 19-20). Like Green's metaphor, this use of exaggerated simile is reminiscent of Richard's limitations, the use of ' shooting star' particularly appropriate in describing the brief drama of his reign. Once again, the historical knowledge of the audience can serve to enhance appreciation of this description. Most fascinating are Bolingbroke's

comments regarding Richard's imminent downfall, and once again the sense of inevitability dominates his sentiments. Intriguingly, he does not boast of his own confidence in overpowering Richard, but instead sends messages of ' kind commends' (III. i. 38) to the Queen. This rather unexpected gesture of sympathy seems to imply that Richard is suffering from an incurable disease. It is as if Bolingbroke is completely uninvolved in the matter of Richard's downfall and is instead witnessing it from a distance, marvelling at the king's misfortunes like everybody else. The fact that, ultimately, Richard brings about his own collapse is what makes this peculiar image of Bolingbroke seem plausible. Shakespeare depicts the king like one of the heroes of ancient Greek drama, whose blindness to fate means that nobody can convince them to act rationally and for their own good. The Aristotelian notion of the ' tragic flaw' can often be recognised in Shakespeare's characters: it tends to be a weakness of a casual nature which escalates to disaster, such as Hamlet's habit of procrastination. Richard's main flaw is his reluctance to recognise and address the problems surrounding him. From the beginning his ear is ' stopped with flattering sounds' (II. i. 15) which distance him from reality. He is particularly unimpressed with the power of logic, as can be seen from his haphazard conduct when dealing with Mowbray and Bolingbroke at Coventry. John of Gaunt, who enjoys reminiscing about England as ' This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars,/ This other Eden, demi-paradise' (II. i. 41-42), is disliked by Richard. The king's reaction to his death, ' So much for that' (II. i. 155) is disrespectful in its apathy. Holderness provides an explanation to Richard's behaviour by suggesting that he is ' hopelessly overwhelmed by the overbearing authority of that patriarchal past, [and] simply rejects history altogether' (p. 187). His sense of discomfort

when around Gaunt, a painful reminder of England’s past glory, stems from this unwillingness to acknowledge his duties and responsibilities as king. The most frustrating aspect of Richard’s flaw is his inability to recognise it, despite the advice and help of others. Whatever happens, he is destined to be oblivious of his imminent downfall until it has actually occurred, when it will be too late to prevent it. York becomes aware of Richard’s inability to make rational decisions, and (in vain) tries to enlist the understanding and support of others: I have had feeling of my cousin’s wrongs, And laboured all I could to do him right. But in this kind to come, in braving arms, Be his own carver, and cut out his wayTo find out right with wrong – (II. ii. 140-144)Although York is still attempting to sound hopeful, there is a sense of finality about his words and a real frustration in ‘ laboured all I could’. This aggravation is similarly apparent in Bolingbroke when he is condemning Bushy and Green to death. He accuses them of ‘ mis[leading] a prince, a royal king,/ A happy gentleman in blood and lineaments’ (III. i. 8-10). Bolingbroke seems confused in looking for someone else to blame, as if he cannot bring himself to accept Richard’ foolishness. This acceptance comes later on, however, when he is asking Northumberland to pass on his demands to Richard: Be he the fire; I’ll be the yielding water. The rage be his, whilst on the earth I rainMy waters: on the earth, and not on him. -(III. iii. 57-59)This sudden personal attack conveys Bolingbroke’s loss of patience with Richard. His fire and water analogy describes his view of the king’s passionately destructive nature, while his emphatic ‘ the rage be his’ indicates his frustration with Richard’s troublesome character. The pun on ‘ rain’ (reign) indicates his desire to become king and deal logically with all the problems Richard has created, but he does not want to ‘ rain’ on Richard

himself. This is presumably because Bolingbroke does not have the tolerance to deal with Richard's self-destructive problems: he has finally come to terms with the king's tragic flaw. Richard only begins to recognise his shortcomings once he has lost the throne to Bolingbroke, and this adds to the tragedy of his situation. When looking in the mirror, he expects to find physical evidence ' where all my sins are writ' (IV. i. 265) but is surprised by the pleasant reflection. He exclaims, ' O flatt'ring glass,/Like to my followers in prosperity,/Thou dost beguile me!' (IV. i. 269-270). It is only now that he begins to acknowledge his own weaknesses, which means he can be pitied more readily. The moment when he refers to himself as ' a traitor with the rest' (IV. i. 238) for causing the downfall of the king, is particularly poignant. Now the all-knowing audience can empathise with Richard as he tries to live with the consequences of his actions, for which it is still hard to believe he was ultimately responsible. Shakespeare's emphasis on Richard's poetic and dramatic qualities undermines the potent historical nature of the play. It is very difficult to take serious note of the actions and thoughts of a king who seems more interested in acting out the role of king, almost satirically, than attending to his duties. For instance, when in trouble he appeals poetically to nature for help: Feed not thy sovereign's foe, my gentle earth, Nor with thy sweets comfort his ravenous sense; But let thy spiders that suck up thy venomAnd heavy-gaited toads lie in their way, Doing annoyance to the treacherous feetWhich with usurping steps do trample thee.(III. ii. 12-17)The lyrical beauty of these lines is effective in showing the power of Richard's language. The content matter, however, suggests that he does not have an equally impressive grasp of reality. His address to ' my gentle earth' suggests that he views himself as a god-like figure capable of controlling

nature, despite the fact that he is about to lose his throne. His beautiful language is juxtaposed with a complete lack of logic. Richard's mention of ' treacherous feet' and ' usurping steps' indicates that his problems are clearly troubling him, but his solution centres around venomous spiders: hardly practical. Even Isabella tends to create a distance from reality, asking ' What sport shall we devise here in this garden, /To drive away the heavy thought of care?' (III. iv. 1-2) when awaiting news of Richard. This very human trait of failing to accept everyday reality can endear the couple to the audience, but does not lead to much respect for the pair. Later, Richard mocks the public ritual of handing over the crown to Bolingbroke by turning the whole event into a farce and refusing to read out his sins, making himself out to be the victim (which, arguably, he is). This can only be described as childish behaviour, not something which is generally associated with royalty. Richard's failure to accept the usurpation is, however, another crucial element of the tragic: the protagonist's protests against his fate make him all the more pitiful. Shakespeare has added a tragic dimension to historical fact by positioning Richard's wrongdoings regarding Bolingbroke against a context of inevitability. The fact that Richard clearly never had the qualities of a good king is seen as a tragedy in itself, rather than a simple historical statement. As Coleridge puts it, ' We cannot help – pitying [Richard], and wishing he had been placed in a rank where he would have been less exposed, and where he might have been happy and useful' (p. 128). So while Richard II does display signs of a typical history play, such as the extensive number of personages, the scenes of parliament and the ambivalent ending, the character of Richard means that the audience is concerned with his plight in a tragic, personal manner rather than as a representation of history.

For this reason, despite knowledge of his ultimate fate, the spectators can experience pity and fear for the tragic Richard as the play develops, and thus appreciate history in a new, more colourful light.