

How does
shakespeare's
richard ii put politics
on



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stage? OnLiterature in History 2: Richard II

Due14/05/99

Richard II is a play of sensibility, which is unique in Elizabethan literature for two reasons; firstly it looked to the 14th century for inspiration and secondly it emphasised the importance of emotions. This switch in narrative focus makes Richard II a play, which is concerned with the exploration of personality and intrigue, as opposed to merely dramatically relating historical action. Shakespeare was writing in the Elizabethan age; which preceded the demotion of the monarchy to status of figureheads¹. For this reason then England's entire political system was autocratic and revolved around the present King or Queen, they had absolute power². For this reason an evaluation of monarchy, was an evaluation of politics. Hereditary and divine rights endorsed their power. Shakespeare employs the tragedy of King Richard II to offer us a political critique of his contemporary sovereign, Queen Elizabeth I. He raises the question of whether hereditary title and supposed divinity of office are legitimate foundations for a just political system. In this way Richard II not only

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puts politics on stage, but on trial.

The importance of lineage is prevalent throughout the text; in the character index each individual is defined in relation to their ancestral extraction 3. This can be seen clearly as the characters interact

Mowbray:" Setting aside his high blood's royalty

/I do defy him, and spit at him." (I. I. 58-60).

As I have said above Richard II is being employed in this play to offer us

a critique of the legitimacy of hereditary rule, the controversy

surrounding his own coronation makes him the perfect candidate for

dramatisation. He became King of England at the age of eleven, in

accordance with the legal doctrine of primogeniture. 4This meant that

his older and wiser uncles had to step aside to let a young boy rule. The

tension created by this genealogical chance happening can be seen, along

with many other instances, in the conversation between John of Gaunt, one

of Richard's discontented uncles, and the Duke of York. Despite Richard's

lineage and 'divinity' he is criticised for his youthful impatience and

economic exploitation of the lords, both are factors that suggest bad

governing.

Gaunt:“(Kings are) Feared by their breed, and famous by their

birth.” (II. I. 52). 5

“(To Richard) Landlord of England are you now, not King”.

(II. I. 104).

York: “ The king is come, deal mildly with his youth.

Young hot colts being raged do rage the more”. (II. I. 69-70).

The importance of Gaunt's words are heightened by the fact that they are

his last; it was a commonly held view amongst the Elizabethan's that a

dying mans words were prognostic⁶. By having a dying man criticise

Richard's inherited reign, Shakespeare is reinforcing the attack. It is

clear that hereditary rule has led to jealousy and inappropriate government

from the outset. This jealousy has a violent reciprocal effect and it

establishes the stimulus for the first action of the play; when Henry

Bolingbroke accuses Thomas Mowbray of murdering Richard's uncle, The

Duke

of Gloucester.

Bolingbroke:” Further I say, and further will maintain,

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That he did plot the Duke of Gloucester's death". (I. I. 98-100)

The genealogical significance of this murder is rooted in the fact that

Gloucester was a potential threat to Richard's power, because he too was

undone by Richard's coronation. York alludes to the fact that Richard

himself had ordered the execution. The truth of this is still under

debate.

York:" The king (would) cut off my head with my brother's"

(II. II. 102-103).

Despite, or maybe because of, his familiar relation to Mowbray and

Bolingbroke Richard asks them to swear on the King's sword not to rebel

against him and his decision to banish them both.

Richard:" Return again and take an oath with thee/

(Never) To plot, contrive, or complot any ill" (I. III. 178&189).

For our purposes this act signifies two important things; firstly that

Richard's political power is in doubt, otherwise his decree would have been

enough, and secondly that Richard is aware of it. Not only are Richard's

ability as a ruler and authenticity being questioned in the play, so is the

second constituent of his kingship, his Divinity.

The second part of my essay is concerned with tracing the progression of Richard's divinity from Act 1 to 5. In Act I we can explore aspects of Richard's divinity through an examination of action and language. Richard acts as god's representative on earth, or in John of Gaunts words " God's Substitute". In the duel between Bolingbroke and Mowbray it is clear from the outset that individual talents would have little or no part to play in the outcome, the battle had transcended mortal restrictions and taken on a more metaphysical importance. It became a chivalric fight in which truth and justice will decide the winner. The interaction of Richard in the fight is similar to that of God in the biblical tale Bolingbroke makes an allusion to in his attack on Mowbray.

Bolingbroke:"(Gloucesters) blood, like sacrificing Abel's cries".

(I. I. 106). 7

Only Richard can stop or decide this battle on earth, in the same way only God can decide good or evil in heaven. In Cain and Abel's instance the punishment was banishment from his land, in Mowbray and Bolingbrokes case,

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the same.

God: " You will be a restless wanderer on the earth"(Genesis

IV. IV. 12).

Richard:" We banish you from our territories (to) tread the stranger

paths" (I. III. 139&143).

Bolingbroke's response is a very relevant line from the lord's prayer:

Bolingbroke " Your will be done (On Earth as it is in Heaven)" (I. III. 144).

The language employed by Richard and those who address him also reinforces

his divinity. Bolingbroke sums up the power of Richard's language perfectly in the phrase " Such is the breath of kings".

Richard, as do all monarchs, refers to himself in the plural⁸. The reason for this is that the King was said to be composed of two halves, the body natural and the body politic; coronation being the act of unification.

The body natural is human and fallible, the body politic divine and infallible. It would appear then at this stage Richard's body natural is being seriously criticised by most parties, but as yet his body politic is unblemished.

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In-keeping with the Romantic tradition, Act III scene two, explores

Richard's inner emotions. Having been overthrown by Bolingbroke and his supporters, Richard must now concede his un-kingly fallibility.

Richard:" I live with bread, like you feel want

Taste grief, need friends. Subjected thus,

How can you say to me I am a king." (III. II. 167).

As was the case between Bolingbroke and Mowbray, Richard's fate lays in the

hands of god. Having lost, Richard beginstoquestionhisown

spirituality, and in doing so question his own political legitimacy.

Despite this self doubt; in the following scene Richard relies on the divinity of his political office to substantiate his worth. Having been

proven to be administratively incompetent, he attempts to prove himself worthy by virtue of the fact that his position is divinely ordained.

Richard:"(If I am not your king) show us the hand of god/

For well we know no hand of blood and bone

Can grip the handle of our sceptre". (III. III. 78-80)

Act Five scenes five and six, provide us with a huge insight into the state

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of politics once Richard has been forced to abdicate. As I have said

before the king, whoever it may be at the time, should refer to himself in

the plural. It is important, then, to note that Richard ceases to do so.

This can be interpreted as an acknowledgement by Richard that his political

kingship is not sacredly ordained and for this reason that he should have

been more prudent and less extravagant. However, in the following scene we

see that neither does King Henry Bolingbroke also refrains from using the

royal 'we'.

Bolingbroke:" High sparks of honour in thee have I seen/

Though I did wish him dead,

I hate the murderer." (V. VI. 29&39-40).

No form of political consensus is reached; Richard forsakes the divinity of

kingship whilst Bolingbroke maintains his respect for it by not employing

the royal 'we'.

The political complexity of Richard II leads to no consensus; and in

this way it offers us more of a critique than a criticism of monarchical

politics⁹. I have suggested that Richard II is being subtly employed to

comment on Elizabeth I. The choice of Richard II is based on the similarities between the two monarchs. Due to the Queen's celibacy, around which a cult was formed, there was a debate raging in Shakespeare's time about who was to succeed her; as was the case with Richard. The detrimental effect of placing importance in sycophantic, and duplicitous courtiers was also an issue that Elizabeth was, or rather should have been, concerned about. Elizabeth was aware of the potential of the play to incite rebellion, and so the deposition scene was removed from the production, whether or not she was conscious of Shakespeare's intent is another matter. Richard II seeks to dramatise political history by enlightening the audience, and potentially the Queen herself, as to the flaws of an autocratic monarchy. This notion is encapsulated by Richard's ominously moralistic realisation: " I wasted time, now time doth waste me".

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1 The establishment of Oliver Cromwell's parliament in 1648 led to the
execution of King Charles; and from then on monarchical political power
diminished.

2 An example of this power would be when Queen Elizabeth had Mary ' Queen

of Scots' executed for insinuating that Elizabeth was a bastard daughter.

3 For example " Harry Percy: The earl of Northumberland's son.

4 Essentially this means that the oldest living son or the immediate male
heir of the King at time of death is the rightful heir. Because Edward the
Black prince, who was Richard's father, died before he could become King
the duty fell to Richard as his immediate male heir/son.

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5 There is an irony here, in that John of Gaunt, as did each of his brothers, gained power and wealth through inheritance.

6 Gaunt himself begins the speech with the lines " I am a prophet new-inspired"

7 Cain kills his brother Abel; God banishes him for it.

8 For example : " Such neighbour nearness to our sacred blood" (l. 1. 119)

9 Adding to the complexity of characterisation; Richard is not portrayed

as outright evil, nor Bolingbroke pure. Empathy is felt for Richard in the

deposition scene, as is contempt for Bolingbroke's betrayal of his oath of obedience discussed earlier in the essay.