

Study on shakespeare richard ii drama essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The opening scene of *Richard II* is illuminating on several counts. On the one hand, Richard II, as king, appears to be acting out in full, his role as supreme arbiter of the land, by presiding over an appeal for treason. This medieval trial requires the presence of the king as both ruler and immediate dispenser of justice.

On the other hand, as the scene unfolds, we gradually learn that what is being undermined is not simply the respective reputations of the rival nobles, Bolingbroke and Mowbray, but the very claims of the king himself to his Divine Right to rule. We learn that what they are fighting about is the murder of Thomas of Woodstock, Richard II's uncle. Bolingbroke appears to know that Richard had secretly ordered Woodstock's death. Obviously, it is impossible for Bolingbroke to accuse Richard directly of his own crime.

Nevertheless, his solution, amounts to a thinly-veiled accusation: he accuses Mowbray of murdering Woodstock while under his custody - knowing full well that Mowbray himself was carrying out Richard's instructions. Meanwhile, for the same reason, Mowbray cannot publicly name the guilty man and resorts to a perfectly traditional game of returning Bolingbroke's insults and accusations. The otherwise perfectly conventional solution proposed by the king, a joust, is as much deployed in defense of his royal power, as presented as an honorable solution for noblemen.

At the very moment when the king appears to be at his most powerful, we can already discern how precarious this hold on power really is and on what it rests: a conflation of political and divinely ordained authority.

The implication of the concept of the Divine Rights of Kings is that any challenge to royal power is unthinkable because it is not merely treason, as viewed in other cultures, but also tantamount to blasphemy. This becomes clear in scene 3 when Richard realizes that he may soon lose his crown. Richard refuses to acknowledge that royal power relies on human, rather than divine intervention:

Not all the water in the rough rude sea

Can wash the balm from an anointed king.

The breath of worldly men cannot depose

The deputy elected by the Lord. (3. 2 50-53)

The notion that the ceremonial anointment of the king is divinely ordained and cannot be outdone is acted out in its full pathos when Richard II literally uncrowns himself in Act 4 in a bizarre mirror-ceremony.

On the face of it, Henry V as a character could not be more different from Richard II. Unlike Richard who merely ignores his subjects and provokes their rebellion through unwise policies, Henry is much more charismatic and popular, while at the same time, politically much more astute. Through a combination of eloquence and bravery he is able to inspire and unite his kingdom against an external enemy in a way that Richard could only have dreamt of.

Henry's political skills are most in evidence in 2. 2 when he plays a rather Machiavellian trick on the plotters Cambridge, Grey and Scrope. Henry asks

their opinion on whether he should be lenient to traitors. Having received the expected, hypocritical responses, Henry pretends to hand them their written military commissions - to be carried out as his faithful subjects. In fact, they are letters informing them that Henry knows of their plot. They are promptly arrested.

This is far from being an isolated instance of Henry's cunning side. During a pause in the battle in 4. 1, he disguises himself as a common soldier and mixes with his infantry, engaging them in conversation. Their talk centers on the respective roles of king and subject. Henry maintains that despite the apparent gulf, the king is fundamentally the same as the common man:

I think the King is but a man, as I am. The violet smells to him as it doth to me;

the element shows to him as it doth to me His ceremonies laid by, in his nakedness he appears but a man, and though his affections are higher mounted than ours, yet when they stoop, they stoop with the like wing. (4. 1. 99-104)

Yet a few lines later, he contradicts himself by countering Williams and Bates' (the common soldiers) argument that the king also has greater moral responsibility that comes with power. Henry repudiates his earlier assertion of shared humanity by asserting his special position as king:

Twin-born with greatness: subject to the breath

Of every fool, whose sense no more can feel

But his own wringing. What infinite heartsease

Must kings neglect that private men enjoy?

(4. 1, 216-219)

The implication is that because of his divinely ordained kingship, Henry's actions cannot be held to account and scrutinized on the same level as commoners. Henry wants to maintain a problematic and dubious distinction between his own kingly violence and the violence of common men, which is merely criminal. It becomes clear that Henry not only likes power games, but wants to write the rules of the game too. This becomes apparent later, when he pardons Williams's (unintentional) challenge to himself as the king.

This scene is then deployed to illustrate royal magnanimity. To these examples can be added Henry's wooing of Catherine in 5. 2. Whether or not Catherine is won over is frankly irrelevant because in fact, the French King had already, in scene 3, offered Catherine to Henry before his invasion of France. The wooing scene is thus, strictly, superfluous.

Back to: Example Essays...

Conclusion

We have seen how in both plays, the notion of the Divine Rights of Kings is mobilized to defend and extend royal prerogatives. In *Richard II*, Bolingbroke's rebellion is portrayed as inherently unnatural because it is both treacherous and blasphemous. Yet it is plain how ineffective a monarch Richard is. In *Henry V*, royal power is likewise portrayed as god-given but as we have seen it deployed we are forced to confront the gulf between

virtuous kingship and successful statecraft based on the Machiavellian model. Both plays raise the question that what makes someone an effective king may be very far removed from what makes a morally admirable one.

Bibliography:

King Henry V - Arden Shakespeare, 1995

Richard II - Arden Shakespeare, 2002

Hamilton, Donna, The State of Law in Richard II Shakespeare Quarterly 34 (1983): 5-17

Greenblatt, Stephen, Invisible Bullets: Renaissance Authority and its Subversion, Henry IV and Henry V. Political Shakespeare: New Essays in Cultural Materialism. Ed Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985.