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**The Sad Death of a King:
The Legacy of Richard the Second**

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by

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Abstract of the Thesis

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The Tragedy of Richard II is the most influential play to emerge from Shakespeare's dramas. This thesis explores how this one particular history play not only influenced the genre but served as a mirror to contemporary political events.

This thesis begins with an analysis of the source material Shakespeare utilized for his depiction of Richard II. Holinshed's *Chronicles*, Samuel Daniel's epic *The First Fowre Bookes of the Civile Wars*, *The Chronicles of Froissart*, as well as other sources were used to piece together the life of Richard II. This portion examines the stylistic choice Shakespeare may have taken in incorporating or omitting specific events.

The thesis continues with an examination into the manner in which Shakespeare portrayed Richard II in his play. The flaws Shakespeare incorporates into the character of Richard, his failure as a king, and his departure into the realm of abstract thought are discussed here. This portion explores the nature of identity as it pertains to a king.

Richard emerges as a tragic figure because he is unable to divorce his concept of self with his royal title.

Richard II's deposition and murder lingers over Shakespeare's second tetralogy. The thesis examines how the removal of a divinely sanctioned king becomes the catalyst for civil insurrection in the subsequent *Henry IV* and *Henry V* plays. The rebellion of the Percy family and Prince Hal's unruly conduction are discussed as being attributed to the initial act of rebellion featured in *Richard II*.

The thesis concludes with a discussion of how the reign of Queen Elizabeth paralleled the reign of Richard II, as depicted in the Shakespearean tragedy. This portion details how Mary Queen of Scots and Robert Devereux the Earl of Essex, each challenged Elizabeth's authority and threatened her with deposition. This portion of the thesis examines the corollaries between the historical events of the Elizabethan era and the themes presented in *Richard II*.

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Introduction

Shakespeare's history plays appealed to the audience's appetite for historical fact, to its patriotism, and to its need to find moral order beneath the shifting and often catastrophic play of political forces. *The Tragedy of Richard II* is by far the most influential drama to emerge from this genre. This thesis will examine the manner in which Shakespeare drew upon existing sources material to depict a king whose inherent character flaws made him unworthy of his crown. These flaws which gave depth and dimension to Shakespeare's first tragic hero cost Richard his crown and this thesis will explore how the legacy usurpation and insurrection resonates in the subsequent *Henry IV* and *Henry V* plays.

The influence of *The Tragedy of Richard II* extends beyond the Elizabethan stage. *Richard II* was an extremely controversial piece presented at a time of great political upheaval. This thesis will examine how the events which unfolded in *Richard II* paralleled the rein of Queen Elizabeth; how the themes of inheritance and sovereignty would manifest themselves when her power would be threatened by her cousins Mary Queen of Scots and Robert Devereux, the Earl of Essex. This thesis will examine how this play existed as a subversive element in Elizabethan England and how its production would be the inspiration for rebellion. Shakespeare's *Richard II* is a stunning example of how history's influence over art can create a work so dynamic that its presentation reshapes history. It is in that regard that the Tragedy of Richard II stands apart from all other Shakespearean dramas.

Historical Sources Pertaining to the Life of Richard II

The birth of Richard II on January 6, 1367 in Bordeaux is described in the third volume of Holinshed's *Chronicles*. Richard was the son of Edward the Prince of Wales and Joan of Kent. He became his father's successor when his elder brother died in infancy. Samuel Daniel's epic *The First Fowre Bookes of the Civile Wars* published in 1595 describes the succession of Richard to the throne following the death of his grandfather, Edward III, in 1377. Daniels recounts how the boy-king was left under the protection of his uncles and how England was ruled by a council of nobles under guidance of his uncle John of Gaunt. As the sons of Edward III and the brothers of the king's father, Edward the Black Prince, they fragmented the kingdom into separate factions. Daniel's epic describes how Richard's uncles abused their power and as a result England was besieged by war and plague.

The Black Death created economic hardships as the demand for a workforce caused wages and prices to increase. Parliament attempted to remedy the problem by passing legislation limiting wages, however by failing to regulate prices; the peasantry was driven to the brink of starvation. The details concerning the Peasant's Revolt of 1381 Shakespeare could have obtained from his exposure to *The Chronicles of Froissart* written by Jean Froissart in 1369. Froissart's *Chronicles* describes how the fourteen year old king faced his first political crisis. The uprising erupted in Kent in response to a

highly unpopular poll tax. As the angry mob made its way towards London, officials connected with the tax were summarily executed. The rebel leader, Watt Tyler, called for the abolition of serfdom and a general pardon for all participants in the uprising.

Froissart describes Richards meeting with Tyler at Mile End where the king ordered that charters be drawn up granting all of Tyler's requests. When it appeared that Richard had the mob appeased, the Mayor of London, William Wadsworth, stabbed Tyler to death. Froissart details the Mayor of London's displeasure at Tyler conduct before the king as being his motivation for killing him. "Yes truly,' quoth the mayor, 'thou false stinking knave, shalt thou speak thus in the presence of the king my natural lord? I commit never to live, without thou shalt dearly abyte it.'"¹ Seeing Tyler surrounded by the King's entourage, the rebel army did not know what to make of this scene. The young king rode out to the mob and gave his personal assurance that the situation was under control. With the mob temporarily appeased, Richard hastily gathered the nobility and squashed the rebellion brutally. The leaders were executed and their heads were put on pikes as the terms they had fought for were quickly rescinded.

Holinshed's *Chronicles* describes the events following the Peasant Revolt as Richard began to assert his royal authority. He began delegating authority through personal advisors. Richard elevated personal friends to key positions of authority; chief among them was Michael de la Pole, whom Richard made Earl of Suffolk, and Edward de Vere, to whom he gave the exalted title of Marquess of Dublin. The court that Richard kept relied extensively upon the king's personal favor. Richard showered his favorites

¹ The Chronicles of Froissart, translated by John Bouchier. Electronic Text Center, University of Virginia Library. <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/conditions.html>. accessed 11/6/07.

with lavish gifts and they utilized their confidence to drive a wedge between Richard and the nobility.

The disaffected nobles formed the Lords Appellant, which was led by Thomas Woodstock Duke of Gloucester, the Earl of Arundel, and the Earl of Warwick. The Earl of Nottingham and Richard's cousin the Duke of Hereford, the future Henry IV, were also members of this group. The Lords Appellant wanted to use their influence in Parliament to diminish the authority of Richard's advisors. These lords held Richard's favorites responsible for his reluctance to continue warring with France. The Lord Appellants were more concerned with greed than the actual good of the kingdom.

These nobles believed that continued warfare with France would expand their holdings. In 1386, the English Parliament, under pressure from the Lords Appellant, demanded that Richard remove his unpopular councilors. The Holinshed Chronicles describes Richard's refusal to comply with Parliament's edict and how the king was forced to relinquish his royal authority. Parliament declared him to be still a minor and the Council of Government was constructed to rule in his place until he came of age. Outraged, Richard immediately had the Earl of Arundel, leader of the Lords Appellant, arrested for treason. In November of 1387, an armed conflict between factions loyal to the king and those loyal to the Lords Appellant ensued. Richard's small army led by de Vere was overpowered by the forces of the Lords Appellant at Radcot Bridge, outside Oxford. Richard was imprisoned in the Tower of London. Richard remained effectively the puppet of the Lords Appellant until the return of John of Gaunt from his Spanish campaigns in 1389.

Richard embarked on an expedition to Ireland in 1394. *The Holinshed's Chronicles* notes that Richard was able to establish strong political ties with four Irish kings who swore fealty and accepted knighthood from him.² This had been Richard's most notable accomplishment since his pacification of the Peasant's Revolt. In the summer of 1397, he decided to move against those that had challenged his reign earlier in his career. That July, Richard had Thomas Duke of Gloucester arrested and sent to Calais. Gloucester's chief supporters all suffered similar fates. The Earl of Arundel was beheaded that September and his brother, Thomas Arundel, Archbishop of Canterbury was sentenced to perpetual banishment for his role in the Merciless Parliament of 1388. Warwick's life was spared because his confession implicated Gloucester for his part in the rebellion. Those associates of the Appellants who were able to escape the executioner's ax were levied heavy fines.

The fate of Gloucester remains somewhat of a mystery. Gloucester was said to have died while in prison of natural causes, however Shakespeare's history play and the anonymous play *Woodstock*, suggest that Gloucester was smothered to death by orders of the king. *Holinshed's Chronicles* also substantiates this claim: "The king appointed one of his owne servants, and certain other that were servants to the other lords to go with him to see the said duke of Gloucester put to death..."³ *Holinshed and Hall's* account of the event concur that Thomas Mowbray was responsible for the murder of Richard.

On April 29 1398 Bolingbroke formally charged Thomas Mowbray with the murder of Thomas Woodstock. The fact that Shakespeare begins his play with the quarrel

² Joseph Satin. *Shakespeare and His Sources*. (New York, 1966). pg.72.

³ Allardyce & Josephine Nicoll. *Holinshed's Chronicle: As Used in Shakespeare's Plays*. (London, 1955). pg. 25.

between Henry Bolingbroke and Thomas Mowbray as the starting point suggests that Shakespeare drew upon Hall's account of the event, for it too begins at the same point of reference. Shakespeare's depiction of the confrontation is also featured in Holinshed's Chronicles, though Shakespeare altered some details slightly. There is no evidence from any of the sources to substantiate that John of Gaunt was present that day. Shakespeare omits Mowbray's confession of conspiring to take the life of Gaunt on a previous occasion.

Bolingbroke and Mowbray mainly maintained their hostility and refused all the King's attempts at a peaceful reconciliation and it was decided that the quarrel would be settled through trial by combat. Richard would stop the proceedings before the two combatants could be joined. Holinshed attributes Richard's motivation for stopping the contest and assigning the punishment of banishment as a desire not to see royal blood spilt. Richard's hesitation presented in the Shakespearean drama suggests his complacency in the murder of Gloucester.

Richard's "farming of the realm" to finance his expedition to Ireland in May of 1399, is featured in the *Holinshed Chronicles*. "The spiritualitie alledged against him, that he, at his going to Ireland, exacted manie notable summes of monie beside plate and jewels, without law or custome."⁴ John of Gaunt's death proved to be serendipitous for Richard who was looking for additional revenue to supplement his Irish campaign. Richard revoked the license that would have allowed Bolingbroke's attorneys the right to claim the Lancastrian inheritance on behalf of the exiled heir. In seizing Bolingbroke's inheritance Richard had made a powerful enemy out of Bolingbroke and alienated the nobility that was loyal to the House of Lancaster.

⁴ Allardyce & Josephine Nicoll 30.

The Duke of York was charged with the task of defending the realm while Richard was in Ireland. Richard's departure afforded the then banished Bolingbroke the opportunity to reclaim his inheritance. Holinshed's Chronicles describes how the nobility looked to Bolingbroke as an alternative to Richard's reign: "Diverse of he nobilities, as well prelates and like wise many... sent to urge the Duke of Lancaster, promising him their aid, power and assistance, if he expelling K. Richard, as a man not meet for the office he bare, would take upon him the scepter, rule and obedience of his native land and religion."⁵ Shakespeare may have also used Jean Creton's *Histoire du Roy d' Angleterre* to describe the manner in which the nobility flocked to Bolingbroke following his arrival on July 4, 1399 at Ravenspur near Bridlington: "Then might you have beheld young and old, the feeble and the strong, make clamor, and regarding neither right nor wrong stir themselves up with accord...they began to flee towards the Duke...he brings both young and old under subjection." Holinshed expresses a similar sentiment in depicting the manner in which the nobility embrace Bolingbroke as a liberator: "and banished the realme by king Richard, got him downe to Britine, where he was joyfullie received of the duke and duchesse."⁶

With the majority of England's forces already committed in Ireland, the Duke of York could do nothing to stop Bolingbroke's army from advancing. Holinshed thought York remained neutral because the soldiers under his command refused to fight against Bolingbroke. Richard landed with troops from Ireland at Haverford West, but by then York had already surrendered. The King's forces soon abandoned him when they discovered that Bolingbroke had amassed a considerably large army. Richard surrender at

⁵ Bullough 397.

⁶ Bullough 397.

Conway Castle and the discussion of his terms of his surrender with the Earl of Northumberland were featured in Holinshed's *Chronicles*. Richard was again placed in the Tower of London, where he was remanded to Bolingbroke's custody.

Richard signed his deed of abdication on the 30th of September of that year. Parliament formally deposed Richard and transferred his royal powers to Bolingbroke, now King Henry IV. Stripped of title and left in disgrace, Richard was placed in Pontefract Castle where he spent the remainder of his life. He is believed to have died from the combination of starvation and exposure on February 17, 1400. Shakespeare's depiction of the deposed monarch being attacked by multiple assailants killing before finally perishing at the hands of Sir Pierce of Exton borrows from the tradition set forth by Holinshed and Daniels. His remains were however examined in 1871 by Dean Stanley of Westminster and no conclusive evidence that Richard was the victim of foul-play was ever produced. The mysterious circumstances of Richard's death led many to speculate that the King had somehow escaped his confinement and was able to live the remainder of his life in exile, under the protection of the Scottish government. Henry issued a decree that anyone who believed in Richard's escape was guilty of high treason. But no doubt it was the real Richard who was buried without state in 1400 at King's Langley, and honorably reinterred by Henry V at Westminster in 1413.

The annals of history regard Richard as ineffective king whose abuse of power resulted in his deposition. The legacy of his deposition and death would however echo on the Elizabethan stage.

Shakespeare's Depiction of Richard II

Shakespeare manipulated his sources to portray his Richard II as a caricature of a monarch. He is an archaic relic of the medieval world; a figure that has never had to question his role or suitability for his station. Productions of *Richard II* often present Richard in the opening scene as being raised above the court, either by placing him on a throne, or by having him stand far removed from the other actors. Shakespeare undoubtedly borrowed from Holinshed and Froissart to present a Richard obsessed with ceremony and ritual. He relies on this formality as a means of distancing himself from his subjects. It is this void that Richard has created between him and his subjects that opens a path to the crown for young Henry Bolingbroke.

In the *Chronicles*, Holinshed attributes Bolingbroke's banishment to Richard's inability to quell the quarrel between Bolingbroke and Mowbray. Shakespeare's speech adds a sinister connotation to Richard's motivation for imposing the sentence of banishment on Bolingbroke.

When time shall call him home from banishment,
Whether our kinsman come to see his friends.
Ourself and Bushy, Bagot here and Green
Observed his courtship to the common people;
How he did seem to dive into their hearts
With humble and familiar courtesy;...
As were our England in reversion his,
And he our subjects' next degree in hope.
(*Richard II* I.ii.19-36)

The act of banishment is Richard's attempt to remove the kingdom from a would-be usurper who has ingratiated himself with the masses. Richard's pettiness is displayed in his desire to simply rid himself of the threat, rather than striving to emulate his cousin.

The prospect of usurpation is completely inconceivable to Richard because he derives his authority from God. “The royal office was assumed to be divinely instituted, it was the necessary guarantee of order in a state nationally and patriotically conceived; the political thought in this play combines the fervent nationalism of the day, fostered for practical ends by the ruling dynasty, with sacramental notions of monarchy more venerable than itself.”⁷ Richard’s belief that he does not have to answer to any earthly authority fosters a sense of complacency that causes him to abuse his power.

At the end of act one, Richard expresses anticipation upon hearing news that John of Gaunt has taken ill. Richard’s lack of compassion towards his uncle demotes his status as king to that of a grave robber.

Now put it, God, in the physician's mind
To help him to his grave immediately!
The lining of his coffers shall make coats
To deck our soldiers for these Irish wars.
(I.iv.59-62)

Richard’s mismanagement of the realm resulted in England becoming bankrupt. In Gaunt’s monologue at the beginning of act two we learn how Richard’s royal mismanagement of the realm has brought it to the brink of ruin.

This royal throne of kings, this scepter'd isle,
This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars,
This other Eden, demi-paradise,
This fortress built by Nature for herself...
Is now leased out, I die pronouncing it,
Like to a tenement or pelting farm
(I.i.40-60)

Shakespeare derives this speech from Froissart for in his chronicles Gaunt expresses a similar sentiment of disdain:

⁷ J. Dover Wilson. *Shakespeare’s Henry VI and Richard II*. (Cambridge, 1929).

Our nephew, the King of England, will shame all ere he cease.
He believeth too lightly in evil counsel who shall destroy him;
and simply, if he live long, he will lose his realm, and that hath
been gotten with much cost and travail by our predecessors and
by us.

The only regret Gaunt harbors is that he knows that upon his death Richard will seize Bolingbroke's inheritance for himself. York attempts to make Richard aware of the very real repercussions that will ensue if he attempts to circumvent the law. He tells Richard that by robbing Bolingbroke of his inheritance, he risks upsetting the other noble families.

You pluck a thousand dangers on your head,
You lose a thousand well-disposed hearts
And prick my tender patience, to those thoughts
Which honour and allegiance cannot think.
(II.i.205-208)

Richard's hubris blinds him to the true limitations of his power. He ignores York's warning and seizes Lancaster's estate in the presence of the Earl of Northumberland and the other lords. It is apparent that Richard has lost touch with his heads of state so Bolingbroke's arrival at Ravenspurgh offers the nobility an alternative to Richard's tyrannical rule.

Before Richard embarks on his campaign to Ireland, York is charged with the impossible task of defending the kingdom while he is away. The fact that Richard does not leave York with sufficient military force to repel Bolingbroke's invasion, further reveals his ineptness as a ruler. Richard's departure provides Bolingbroke with the perfect opportunity to launch a full-scale invasion with minimal resistance.

One of the most astonishing features of this Shakespearean tragedy is the righteous indignation Richard exudes when he returns and hears word of Bolingbroke's army. Richard believes his mere presence will be enough to subdue the rebellious Bolingbroke.

Shall see us rising in our throne, the east,
His treason will sit blushing in his face,
Not able to endure the sight of day,
But self-affrighted tremble at his sin.
(III.ii.50-53)

Richard believes that his regal appearance is like the sun and that Bolingbroke and his confederates will scurry back into the darkness when confronted by such illumination. This blind faith in one's own presence not only denotes a monarch that has lost touch with his subjects, it describes a figure that is completely blind to his present situation. This concept is further substantiated when Richard attests that Heaven itself will aid him in this indignation.

The breath of worldly men cannot depose
The deputy elected by the Lord.
For every man that Bolingbroke hath pressed
To lift shrewd steel against our golden crown,
God for his Richard hath in heavenly pay
A glorious angel, then, if angels fight,
Weak men must fall, for heaven still guards the
right.
(III.ii.56-63)

Walter Pater comments that "the sense of divine right in kings is found to act not so much as a secret power over others, as of infatuation to themselves."⁸ Richard's self-infatuation has blinded him to the reality that he now stands on his country as a king undone. Richard's confidence evaporates upon hearing how easily the kingdom was

⁸ Walter H. Pater. *Appreciations: With an Essay on Style*, 1889 (New Variorum edition, 528).

surrendered. His resignation into despair replaces his pomp and arrogance with self-pity and sorrow.

Mine ear is open and my heart prepared;
The worst is worldly loss thou canst unfold.
Say, is my kingdom lost? why, 'twas my care
And what loss is it to be rid of care?
(III.ii.92-96)

This confrontation with reality delivers Richard to a world he can't comprehend. Richard's fear causes him to seek solace in a world he can better understand, one dictated by abandonment and ill-regard. Richard's grandiose language betrays something more than simple contentment or even resignation. "If he must fall, Richard will not go quietly. Lacking an army, he defends himself with poetry, singing songs about himself that he hopes others will sing long after he is dead."⁹ Richard becomes the composer of his own tragedy:

For God's sake, let us sit upon the ground
And tell sad stories of the death of kings
(III.ii.155-156)

Though Richard derives his kingship from God it is significant to note that throughout the course of the play, Richard never blames God for his own failings:

our holy lives must win a new world's crown,
which are profane hours here have thrown down
(V.i.24-25)

His self-blame is not evidence of a newfound self-reliance but merely Shakespeare's attempt to enhance Richard's character as a tragic figure. Richard's devotion to a god that has clearly forsaken him makes Richard appear all the more pitiful. Stripped of his title,

⁹ Spiekerman, 77.

Richard seeks solace in martyrdom; he compares his own suffering to that of Christ's as a way of adding grandiosity to his own suffering.

So Judas did to Christ. But he, in twelve,
Found truth in all but one, I, in twelve thousand, none.
(IV.i.170-171)

Drawing the comparison of Christ's desertion at the cross with the loss of his title, elicits more contempt than it does sympathy. Richard undergoes a process of progressive isolation as all the trappings of being king forsake him. His court, his followers, his queen, even his idea of self slowly erodes away. Unable to resolve his current statuses Richard attempts to devote his life to philosophy, to sober observation and the detached acceptance of what is. He soon learns however that contentment cannot be derived from misfortune, and that this realm of abstract thought can only fill his existence with nostalgia and despair.

And so I am: then crushing penury
Persuades me I was better when a king;
Then am I king'd again: and by and by
Think that I am unking'd by Bolingbroke,
And straight am nothing.
(V.v.34-38)

This experience has made Richard aware to the fact that his situation is completely without hope and that the only satisfaction he can obtain will come from his own annihilation.

Richard obtains a moment of clarity right before his murder. It is in this moment that Richard takes responsibility for his own demise: "I wasted time, and now doth time waste me..." (V.v.49) This concept of loss not only pertains to the loss of Richard's

kingdom as much as it does to the loss of his life. It is at this moment that we are most sympathetic to Richard. His epiphany creates a glimmer of hope that Richard might survive and learn from this experience; however that hope is snatched away by his untimely assignation.

Richard II concludes with Henry IV regretting any possible encouragement he may have given for the murder of Richard II. He believes that a pilgrimage to the Holy Land will wash his hands clean of Richard's blood. The stain of Richard's murder tarnishes his reign as king in the *Henry IV* plays.

The Legacy of Insurrection in the Second Tetralogy

The spirit of Richard II looms over Shakespeare's second tetralogy like Lord Hamlet's Ghost over Denmark. In the first scene of act four of *Richard II* the Bishop of Carlisle warns the future King Henry IV of the dangers of unseating a divinely ordained king. Carlisle's speech haunts the reign of Henry IV and his son Henry V.

And if you crown him, let me prophesy:
The blood of English shall manure the ground,
And future ages groan for this foul act;
Peace shall go sleep with Turks and infidels,
And in this seat of peace tumultuous wars
Shall kin with kin and kind with kind confound;
Disorder, horror, fear and mutiny
(*Richard II* IV.i.137-142)

“From the moment of Richard's murder, the royal office, its reputation is already tarnished by the unworthiness of its legitimate holder, ceases to confer upon a decaying unnatural, spontaneous right to allegiance; if it's necessary authority will be restored, if at all, on the basis of a more conscious, deliberate estimate of political realities, and only after the consequences of the original crime has worked themselves out through the body politic in disintegration and bloodshed.”¹⁰ In the opening act of *Henry IV Part I* it is apparent that Carlisle's prophesy has come to fruition. The newly crowned Henry IV is unable to embark on the crusade that would atone for his role in the death of Richard II because his kingdom riddled with insurrection. In Holinshed's *Chronicles* the pilgrimage is proposed only in the last year of the King's life and is not connected with the death of

¹⁰ Derek Traversi. *Shakespeare: From Richard II to Henry V.*(Stanford, 1957).pg22.

Richard or with Henry's desire to make expiation.¹¹ Owen Glendower leading the Welsh uprising, a year after Henry's ascension to the throne, is also featured in *The Chronicles*.

The seeds of insurrection are scattered by the manner in which Henry IV obtained his crown. The Percy family played an integral part in the deposition of Richard II and the ascension of Henry IV. They feel that they should receive preferential treatment by the King for their loyalty. The threads of civil discord present themselves when Henry refuses to make any special concessions to the family in scene three of act one. Young Henry Percy, Hotspur, attempts to establish terms with the King concerning the release of his prisoners and the ransom of his brother-in-law Edmund Mortimer. Henry acknowledges the insolence of Hotspur's demand and commands him to relinquish his prisoners. Insulted, the Percy family laments their decision in aiding Henry to the crown. Carlisle's prophesy resonates as the Percy's question their judgment in making Henry king.

That men of your nobility and power
Did gage them both in an unjust behalf,
As both of you--God pardon it!--have done,
To put down Richard, that sweet lovely rose,
An plant this thorn, this canker, Bolingbroke?
(*Henry IV Pt. I* l.iii.170-174)

The sanctity of the office of king has been undermined by the initial act of rebellion in *Richard II* so that the prospect of replacing an unpopular king becomes an alternative to obedience. The Percy family decides that it is in their best interest to join forces with Glendower and elevate Edmund Mortimer to the throne. It is important to note that the *Chronicles of Froissart* and *Holinshed* both attest that before his deposition,

¹¹ Lily B. Campbell. *Shakespeare's Histories*. (San Marino, 1968). pg229.

Richard made Mortimer the heir apparent. Shakespeare touches upon this fact as Worcester and Northumberland attribute Henry's reluctance in ransoming Mortimer as a desire to be rid of a wood-be usurper.

The two parts of *Henry IV* depict the power struggle between the factions of Glendower and the Percy Family against the King. It is important to note that the Percy's and Bolingbroke's are cousins and their strife embodies the sentiment of Carlisle's prophesy in which "kin with kind" will create "Disorder, horror, fear and mutiny".

The culmination of the action in *Henry IV Part I* will result in the confrontation of these two forces at the Battle of Shrewsbury. Before the battle, Hotspur recalls Henry IV's promise upon returning from exile. He remarks how Henry assured the nobles that he had defied the will of Richard II for the sole purpose of reclaiming his inheritance. Shakespeare borrowed this promise directly from Holinshed's *Chronicles*: "At his coming unto Doncaster...he sware unto those lords, that he would demand no more, but the lands that were to him descended from his father..."¹²

Hotspur suggests that the insurrection staged in *Richard II* was not intended to unseat the king, but to merely correct the injustice committed against Bolingbroke. Hotspur believes that in accepting the crown, Henry had overstepped his authority, and that this rebellion will reestablish the natural order that Henry has disrupted. Hotspur's justification for insurrection is invalid because in both the *Richard II* play and the Holinshed *Chronicles* the complacency in Henry accepting the crown is pronounced: "diverse of the nobilities, as well prelates and like wise many... sent to urge the Duke of Lancaster, promising him their aid, power and assistance, if he expelling K. Richard, as a

¹² Holinshed 498/2/3.

man not meet for the office he bare, would take upon him the scepter, rule and obedience of his native land and religion.”¹³

The legacy of rebellion is further substantiated when Henry compares his son’s base behavior to the valor of young Henry Percy. Hal appears as a replica of Richard II to Henry, he perceives his son’s eagerness to admonish attention on capering fools as the flaw that cost Richard his crown. Henry perceives the corruption of his son’s character as another manifestation of divine retribution.

Yea, there thou mak’st me sad and mak’st me sin
In envy that my Lord Northumberland
Should be the father to so blest a son...
See riot and dishonor stain the brow
Of my young Harry. O, that it could be proved
That some night-tripping fairy had exchanged
In cradle clothes our children where they lay,
And called mine Percy, his Plantagenet!
(I.i.77-88)

Shakespeare purposely portrays Richard II and Prince Hal as contrasting figures in the second tetralogy. Through his usage of imagery, Shakespeare conveys that Richard’s regal appearance is merely superficial, and that young Prince Hal embodies the true noble nature. Richard’s emblem was the sun of royalty emerging from a cloud. Bolingbroke refers to this imagery when Richard appears on the walls of Flint Castle:

See, see, King Richard doth himself appear,
As doth the blushing discontented sun
From out the fiery portal of the east,
When he perceives the envious clouds are bent
To dim his glory and to stain the track
Of his bright passage to the occident.
(*Richard II* III.iii.61-66)

¹³ Bullough 397.

Richard failed to live up to the emblem of his title, his advisers acted as metaphorical clouds that obscured the monarch from public view. In *Henry IV Part I*, Prince Hal adopts the sun emblem for himself however he chooses to conceal his presences in order to further his political agenda. He hopes to emerge at the moment of his ascension, as this radiant figure that was obscured by the frivolity of youth.

Yet herein will I imitate the sun,
Who doth permit the base contagious clouds
To smother up his beauty from the world,
That, when he please again to be himself,
Being wanted he made be more wonder'd at
By breaking through the foul and ugly mists
Of vapours that did seem to strangle him.

(*Henry IV Pt.1 I.ii.192-198*)

Prince Hal does not divulge his intentions to his father so Henry attributes Prince Hal's absence from court as willful disobedience. Henry believes that Hal is on the same path as Richard so he divulges his part in the usurpation of Richard II.

By being seldom seen, I could not stir
But like a comet I was wonder'd at;
That men would tell their children 'This is he;'
Others would say 'Where, which is Bolingbroke?'
And then I stole all courtesy from heaven,
And dress'd myself in such humility
That I did pluck allegiance from men's hearts,
Loud shouts and salutations from their mouths,
Even in the presence of the crowned king.

(III.ii.46-54)

Hal vows to prove he is worthy of his noble blood by vanquishing his father's enemies. Hal succeeds in rescuing Henry IV from Douglas and defeats Hotspur in single combat. Though the Prince has gone far in establishing himself as a leader, the King still has his reservations concerning Hal's suitability as king. These concerns are again addressed in scene five of act four of *Henry IV Part II*. As the king lies peacefully on his

deathbed, the Prince, remorseful that the king has had to live such a tempestuous existence because of the crown, graciously places the crown on his head and vows to wear the crown graciously. Henry awakens and is alarmed to learn that the Prince has taken the crown prematurely.

Dost thou so hunger for mine empty chair
That thou wilt needs invest thee with my honours
Before thy hour be ripe? O foolish youth!
Thou seek'st the greatness that will overwhelm thee.
(*Henry IV Pt.II* IV.v. 94-98)

The dying king mistakes the young prince's woeful lamentations for unscrupulous ambition. Henry assumes that his son wished him dead in order to inherit his crown. It is ironic that Henry clings to the very symbol that has been the source of his torment. Consoled by the prince's strong denial of such wishful thinking, the king confessed his own unprincipled behavior in gaining the crown.

God knows, my son,
By what by-paths, and indirect, crook'd ways
I met this crown: and I myself know well
How troublesome it sat upon my head.
To thee, it shall descend with better quiet,
Better opinion, better confirmation:
For all the soil of the achievement goes
With me, into the earth.

(*IV.v.183-190*)

Prince Hal will emerge from the *Henry IV* plays as the ideal King. He will embark on an expedition in *Henry V* to reclaim English lands in France and upon the eve of a decisive battle in act four scene one. The legacy of civil strife established in Richard II resonates in the King's conflicted emotions. Sitting alone in his camp, disguised as a commoner, Henry reveals his self-doubt and describes the crushing responsibilities he

feels on his shoulders for staging his invasion of France. His position of power has isolated him, and this masquerade represents a genuine desire to reconnect with his subjects. With dawn approaching he laments at the transgressions committed by his father in obtaining the crown.

...Not to-day, O Lord,
O, not to-day, think not upon the fault
My father made in compassing the crown!

(Henry V.4.1.297-9)

Henry embodies a true noble soul for desires that his men be spared from any retribution that his father's actions may wrought. The success of Henry's missions may suggest that the inequities of Richard's usurpation may have been forgiven. Shakespeare attaches a bitter element to the epilogue of this play.

This star of England: Fortune made his sword;
By which the world's best garden be achieved,
And of it left his son imperial lord.
Henry the Sixth, in infant bands crown'd King
Of France and England, did this king succeed;
Whose state so many had the managing,
That they lost France and made his England bleed
(Henry V. Epilogue.7-12)

Shakespeare could not ignore the historical reality of this play. The conquest of France is one of the brightest moments in English history however the glory was extremely short-lived. The fact that Shakespeare describes the conflict that Henry's heir will inherit as "making his England bleed" denotes that the legacy set forth by Richard's deposition will continue to plague the reign of English monarchs. For it is apparent that the reign of Queen Elizabeth was haunted by this legacy of civil strife.

Richard II's Influence on the Elizabethan World

The Tragedy of King Richard the Second was an extremely controversial play for the Elizabethan era because it brought the subject of royal legitimacy to public attention. Elizabeth's claim to the throne of England was under constant scrutiny because she was the illegitimate offspring of Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn. Elizabeth's ascension to the throne was the result of Henry VIII leaving the crown to her in his will. Like Richard II her crown was in constant peril from threats both foreign and domestic. Any public production depicting the usurpation of the monarch by a powerful noble could have been perceived as being subversive, if not treasonous. Elizabeth is known to have resented comparisons between her and Richard II, who was notorious for his absolute pretensions and his dependence on favorites. "I am Richard II, know ye not that?" she asked the antiquary William Lambarde, her Keeper of the Rolls, complaining that the play had been performed "above forty times in open streets and houses."¹⁴ If the public perceived her to be a Richard II, her reign is marked as a time vigilance in which she was ever watchful against any would-be *Bolingbrokes*.

Mary, Queen of Scots existed as a Bolingbroke to Elizabeth's Richard. Mary was born in Linlithgow Palace, Scotland, on December 7, 1542. She was the only daughter of King James V of Scotland, and his French wife, Mary of Guise. Her father died only days after her birth, and the week old Mary became Queen of Scotland in December of 1542. Two years later Mary was sent to France to marry the Dauphin, Francis, the eldest son of

¹⁴ Kermode, *The Age of Shakespeare*, pg.53.

the King of France two. The King of France was killed in a jousting accident, and at age seventeen she became Queen of both Scotland and France. Tracing lineage through her Grandmother Margaret Tudor, Mary had the strongest claim to the throne of England outside the children of Henry VIII.

Mary's existence was a considerable threat to Elizabeth. Many Catholics residing in England did not recognize Elizabeth as the true Queen because they did not recognize the marriage of her mother, Anne Boleyn to her father as a legitimate union. Elizabeth was a Protestant Queen and Mary's allegiance to the Roman Catholic Church undermined the stability that Elizabeth had established following the death of her sister Mary Tudor. For many years Catholics plotted to depose and kill Elizabeth in order to place Mary on the English throne. "Mary herself did not recognize Elizabeth as the true Queen, and believed that she herself was the rightful Queen of England."¹⁵

Mary's husband died on December 5, 1560 and she returned to Scotland soon after. Mary remarried Henry Darnley, the son of Lady Margaret Douglas, the granddaughter of Henry VII. This marriage further strengthened her claim to the English throne. When Mary gave birth to James in 1566, Mary's child now stood to inherit the throne. Darnley died under mysterious circumstances and suspicion immediately fell on Mary and her close friend, the Earl of Bothwell. The Protestant lords rebelled against their queen when she married Bothwell two months later. Mary's army was defeated at the Battle of Langside in 1567. Mary was imprisoned at Lochleven Castle, and was

¹⁵ Marie Stuart Society of Scotland. (2007). *Mary, Queen of Scots*. Retrieved November 24, 2007 from <http://www.elizabethi.org/us/queenofscots/>

forced to abdicate the Scottish throne, her young son was crowned James VI in July of 1567.

Mary fled to England seeking asylum from her enemies in Scotland. Elizabeth was highly suspicious of the woman who in the past had claimed that she was the rightful queen of England. Upon her arrival Mary was immediately taken into custody. Elizabeth ordered an investigation into the murder of Lord Darnley and although the investigation failed to produce any corroborating evidence, Mary remained imprisoned.

In 1570, Roberto di Ridolfi, an international banker, hatched a plot to assassinate Queen Elizabeth and place Mary on the throne. Ridolfi hoped that the marriage between Mary and the Duke of Norfolk would facilitate the restoration of Catholicism to England and Scotland. The plot was soon discovered when William Cecil apprehended Charles Baillie, Ridolfi's messenger, who revealed the existence of the plot under torture. The Duke of Norfolk was arrested and sent to the tower while the rest of the leaders were executed. Furious at the attempt made upon her life, Elizabeth began persecuting the Catholics living in Northern England. Pope Pius V issued a papal bull excommunicating Elizabeth. The bull also commanded all faithful Catholics living in the realm to do all they could to depose her. Though the majority of English Catholics ignored the bull, Elizabeth could not ignore the challenge placed on her authority.

Evidence provided by Elizabeth's secret network of informants substantiated that Mary had direct knowledge of the Ridolfi Plot, Elizabeth however refused to administer any punitive measures on the imprisoned queen. As a measure to deter Mary from participating in any future plots, Parliament introduced a bill in 1572 that would bar Mary

from succession. When the bill was brought before the Queen, Elizabeth failed to give it her royal consent. Elizabeth's advisors believed that Mary was too dangerous to be kept alive however Elizabeth was reluctant to order Mary's execution. Elizabeth did not want to be responsible for the death of another queen. Her own mother Anne Boleyn had been executed in a similar manner.

Mary's participation in the Babington Plot in 1586 changed Elizabeth's resolve. The plot not only called for her assassination but it was contingent on an armed invasion by Spain. Elizabeth could no longer ignore the viper dwelling in her kingdom. Despite the numerous acts of betrayal committed against her, Elizabeth delayed signing Mary's death warrant for six months. When the Queen finally consented, Mary was beheaded on February 8, 1587.

Elizabeth's behavior following the execution mirrored that of Henry IV's at the end of *Richard II*. Elizabeth desired to be rid of Mary but she did not want to be directly responsible for Mary's death. It was easy for Elizabeth to imagine what would have happen if the roles had been reversed and she had been placed in the protective custody of her cousin. Mary's death left an indelible stain on her conscience. Following the execution she would later claim that she in fact had no intention of going through with the execution; that she signed the death only to scare Mary from taking part in future conspiracies. Reminiscent of Exton's banishment for murdering Richard at the end of Shakespeare's history, Elizabeth would have her private secretary William Davidson fined and imprisoned in the Tower of London for his role in rushing Mary's execution.

As was the case in *Richard II*, the murder of a monarch promoted future turmoil for the kingdom. Before her execution, Mary had willed her claim to the throne of England to Philip II of Spain. In July of 1588, the Spanish Armada set out to cross the English Channel to claim the English throne. Elizabeth would prevail in this conflict but her crown remained in constant for the remainder of her life.

The Essex Rebellion

The Tragedy of Richard II has the unique distinctions of being the only Shakespearean drama to have a direct influence in contemporary political events. Near the end of Elizabeth's reign many of her critics had drawn parallels between her and the deposed monarch depicted in the Shakespearean tragedy. Elizabeth received criticism for having abdicated many of her powers in favor of her advisors Robert Cecil and Walter Raleigh. Elizabeth would once again have to prove that she was no Richard II when Robert Devereux, the 2nd Earl of Essex dared to challenge her authority.

Essex was a cousin of Elizabeth through the Boleyn family line; his stepfather was the Earl of Leicester who first introduced him at court in 1584. Elizabeth soon developed a strong affinity towards this dashing youth of seventeen and he became a predominant figure in Elizabeth's court. In the spring of 1599, Essex was sent to Ireland to strengthen the position of the English government in the province. Ulster was in rebellion under the Earl of Tyrone and the office of Lieutenant and Governor-General of Ireland was conferred upon Essex. Though a large expeditionary force was placed under his command, Essex's campaign was an unsuccessful one. Essex returned from Ireland in disgrace. He had disobeyed the queen in seeking terms with the rebel Tyrone, and he abandoned his post with the object of privately vindicating himself before the queen. De Chambrun writes, "Although [Essex] succeeded in imposing conditions which were on the whole advantageous to the Crown--later, the same conditions were accepted by

Elizabeth after years of costly war--he was accused of having intelligence with the enemy."¹⁶

Elizabeth was less than forgiving for her one time favorite courtier. For the desertion of his post and his blatant insubordination, Essex was brought before a special constituted court in June of 1600. He subsequently stripped of all his titles and was placed under house arrest. The desire for rebellion was spurred when Elizabeth refused to renew Essex's patents for sweet wines which cost the crown an estimated 50,000 pounds annually. Essex was outraged and he attributed this betrayal to the Queen's advisor Cecil, who had never looked favorably upon him in court. Essex believed that only way to regain his place of favor, was to remove the Queen from the presence of these advisors.

Essex gathered a band of discontented gentlemen to plan a coup d'état which would restore their fortunes. Essex wrote to Charles Blount, Lord Mountjoy, the commander who had replaced him in Ireland, and asked him to bring the army over from Ireland to support his military action. Essex also met with the Sheriff of London, Sir Thomas Smythe, hoping that he would use his position as captain to raise the city to his support. He was also relying on the 1,000 loyal men that were at Smythe's disposal to bolster his numbers.

On February 7, 1601 supporters of the Earl of Essex paid for a special performance of *Richard II* at the Globe Theatre on what was to be the eve of their armed rebellion. The Earl of Essex believed that the play would serve as adequate propaganda for the events to follow. In attendance at the performance were Charles and Joclyn Percy,

¹⁶ E.K. Chambers. *William Shakespeare: A Study of Facts and Problems*. (Oxford, 1930). pg. 226.

the younger brothers of the Earl of Northumberland. A total of eleven of the Essex Rebellion conspirators are said to have witnessed this performance. Barroll explains: “...of the eleven conspirators known to have attended the performance or who could be considered connected with it, all were punished for their involvement in the uprising as well as for whatever was offensive about their attending the play. Four of those associated with the performance were executed, but they had been closely involved in the Essex conspiracy as a whole.”¹⁷

“An important element in staging the play lied in the fact that Essex himself was descended from the Duke of Gloucester, whose murder lies behind the action of the play and through him traced a line of descent to the throne.”¹⁸ What is remarkable is how Essex failed to learn from the lesson of his ancestor. Gloucester was successful in removing the reigning monarch’s advisors by force, however in doing so he incurred the wrath of Richard II some years later. Gloucester’s actions ended up costing him his life. Essex’s attempt to depose the reigning monarch was far more disastrous than that of his ancestor.

The following Sunday morning, Essex led a band of nobles from Essex House through Ludgate and into the City, shouting, “Murder, murder, God save the Queen!” Essex expected that the people of London would rally around him when he declared that England was being sold to the Spanish. Essex for some time suspected that Robert Cecil was in secret negotiations with the King of Spain concerning the succession of the

¹⁷ Barroll, Leeds. “A New History for Shakespeare and His Time”, *Shakespeare Quarterly*. Volume.39, Issue 4. (Winter, 1988) p.441-464.

¹⁸ Evelyn May Albright. *Shakespeare’s Richard II and the Essex Conspiracy*. PMLA, 42 (1927), p.695.

English crown. Essex was hoping that the fear of a common enemy would rally the people of London around him. He wore his normal clothes not his armor, to signify his peaceful intentions.

The rebellion was a complete and utter failure. The city of London failed to heed Essex's call to arms. Mountjoy ignored Essex's request for soldiers and Smythe refused to betray his post. Essex abandoned his small band of followers in order to return back to his home so he could burn whatever incriminating documents he had in his possession. Forces led by the Earl of Nottingham captured Essex at his home.

At his trial Essex pleaded that his motivation in starting this uprising was a desire to protect the Queen from advisors who he believed were leading her towards ruin. "I protest upon my soul and conscience I do believe she should not have long lived after she had been in your power. Note but the precedents of former ages, how long lived Richard the Second after he was surprised in the same manner? The pretense was alike for the removing of certain counselors, but yet shortly after it cost him his life." ¹⁹ Through his affiliation with Sir John Hayward, Essex should have known that such a comparison would prove detrimental to his case. Hayward was under interrogation at that very moment for publishing *The First Part of the Life and Raigne of King Henrie IV* in 1599, a book that discussed the misdeeds of Richard II. Hayward had dedicated his book to the Earl of Essex before being committed to the Tower of London. His crime was creating a subversive text that drew parallels between Richard and Elizabeth. He remained imprisoned until Elizabeth's death in 1603.

¹⁹ E.K. Chambers. *William Shakespeare: A Study of Facts and Problems*. (Oxford, 1930). pg.189.

After a brief trial Essex was found guilty of treason and on the 23rd of February 1601, Robert Devereux, the 2nd Earl of Essex was beheaded. The sentence was executed on Tower Hill while his old rival, Sir Walter Raleigh, who was captain of the guard, looked on. Essex's rebellion was the last attempted coup to take place during the reign of Queen Elizabeth.

As for the Lord Chamberlain's Men's part in the Essex Rebellion; there is no record of punishment being handed out to Shakespeare or to any members of his company, though they may have received some sort of royal rebuke. *The Tragedy of King Richard the Second* remained as part of the Lord Chamberlain's Men's performance pieces well into the reign of James I. Its popularity was noted as it was warmly received at the Curtain, Swan, and Globe theatres. After the first Globe burned down, *Richard II* remained in the repertoire of the Lord Chamberlain's Men and was apparently performed at the second Globe on June 12, 1631.

Conclusion

Shakespeare presented a Richard II that was more than just a bad king and astonishing poet. He created a haunting figure whose demise cursed the crown of England for future generations. His fall from grace make us inquire into the nature of kingship and question the concept of legitimacy and divinely derived authority.

The *Tragedy of Richard II* demonstrates that plays depicting historical events not only make for good theater, but can offer crucial insight into the world around us. This knowledge can help us circumnavigate the pitfalls of the past. Queen Elizabeth was able to preserve her crown because she heeded the warnings featured in *Richard II* concerning the threat of would-be usurpers. It is in this regard that we see how a working understanding of the past can give us a glimpse into the future.

The Tragedy of Richard II would also mark a turning point with regards to drama depicted on the Elizabethan stage. The Richard presented in this play would be Shakespeare's first example of a tragic hero, a figure who is the architect of his own calamity. The characters of Macbeth, Hamlet and King Lear will arise from this tradition established in *Richard II*. These characters will emulate Richard for they embark on a journey of self-exploration and in the process become lost when confronted with reality.

The Tragedy of Richard II is by far the most fascinating piece to emerge from the canon. The play evokes analysis, for one cannot be truly content interpreting this play from a purely dramatic interpretation. For in every way our lives are the product of history and by understanding the unique dynamic that exist between art and history can we gain a greater understand of ourselves.

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