A Study of *King Richard II*

—Richard’s Pathos Overshadows the Play—

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to analyse the structure of Shakespeare’s History *Richard II* and to consider Richard’s process of losing the English crown and his feeling of sorrow and pathos. There are many thematic and historical connections between the *Henry IV* and this play. This play raises the problem of the meaning of the legitimacy of a king in England. The problem of the usurpation cannot be avoided in seeing the play, but Shakespeare deliberately and carefully diverts our attention from it. He does not fully define the status of Bolingbroke in the play. This is because in the Elizabethan Age, as Northrop Frye says, there might be an official nervousness about showing or printing of a scene of deposition. Shakespeare’s design is shaped to set out the passion of the deposed monarch, rather than the struggle between Richard and Bolingbroke. He emphasises Richard’s poetry more than Bolingbroke’s terse comments in the play.

As John of Gaunt, who is an uncle to Richard, says that a king is

> God’s substitute,
> His deputy anointed in His sight,
> (1. ii. 37-38)

no one can resist the absolute power from heaven. The King has such power that no one can defy it. His words tell us how divine justice works on people. This theory has been and is still our common understanding of what the legitimacy of a king was in the feudal age. It has some connection with the suggestion of what the ideal and lawful king is because the problem of the quality of the righteous king often occurs in this play. And Shakespeare delicately touches upon the theme of usurpation in the play. He paints the aspect of the Bolingbroke’s usurpation in pale colour. In contrast the playwright emphasises the legitimacy of a king and then describes how a king loses it in the course of events in history. Richard naturally recognises himself as an anointed king from the beginning of the play and he says,

Not all the water in the rough rude sea
Can wash the balm off from an anointed king;

(III. ii. 54-55)

We have to notice that Richard necessarily tends to rely upon the power of the name and the title of king in the play. His kingly attitude is based on the concept of his supreme being under heaven. He habitually behaves with great dignity. He believes that the crown has an omnipotent power. As the symbol of power and rule, the crown was often used on the Elizabethan stage in purely conventional action.

The bishop of Carlisle gives an enthusiastic support to Richard’s reliance on that concept and says,

> Fear not, my lord. That power that made you king
   Hath power to keep you king in spite of all.
   The means that heaven yields must be imbrac’d
   And not neglected;

(III. ii. 27-30)

He rightly emphasises Richard’s legitimacy and his kingly power.
The murder of Woodstock, who was one of King Edward's seven sons, has only a slight connection with this play because this murder was committed before this play begins. It just creates the image of the first crime. Cain's murder of his brother, Abel. Without a clear reference to the crime, the Duchess of Gloucester (1. i. 11-15) explains to the audience the family tree of the English crown, though she grieves over her husband's death. Again here we find that Richard is the righteous heir to the throne.

A trial by combat between two nobles, Bolingbroke and Mowbray, takes place at the beginning of the play. It is about their participating in the plot of the murder of Woodstock. It probably creates an atmosphere of a deadly duel in the Middle Ages. In it the judgment of God, as Rossiter explains, might exercise a great influence on the persons concerned. The winner is judged to do justice in knightly trial. It doesn't matter whether the winner is right or not, though the loser might really have a more righteous cause. In this play we see Bolingbroke's passionate accusation of Mowbray who he calls "a false traitor and injurious villain" (1. i. 91). Mowbray retorts the same kind of insulting words. Their words are full of hostility. We do not think that it is truly chivalrous. To the audience, both seem to be traitors and liars, and to be equally blamed for the suspected treason. Their conflict actually does not progress beyond the exchange of spoken threats and insults.

Richard commands the powers which ought to belong to the sovereignty. In the quarrel he fully tries to use king's power of words and says, "We were not born to sue, but to command." (1. i. 196) He must possess the irresistible power in the world. Richard decisively tries to force the quarreling nobles to make peace and stops their combat after enjoying the spectacle of their mutual hatred. He at last arbitrates and declares of both men to be exiled from England. When he suddenly changes the years of Bolingbroke's banishment from ten to six, we find that the breath of king is symbolised as the power of king. At this time, Bolingbroke says with a deep and helpless sigh,

How long a time lies in one word
Four lagging winters and four wanton springs

End in a word: such is the breath of kings.
(1. iii. 213-15)

We notice that Richard's decision brings Bolingbroke's bitter realisation of Richard's capricious power. Bolingbroke makes no protest against the sentence of banishment in this scene.

Shakespeare probably intends to show Richard playing the part of majesty with just efficiency in the early part of the play. But the seizure of Gaunt's property and the depravation of Bolingbroke's heritage by which Richard contrives to control everything is to be seen as the deepest folly. It is the main factor in creating the revolt by which Bolingbroke hopes to recover his status and property. It is a striking demonstration of Richard's unfitness for his kingly office, though he is still the king.

There are many expressions anticipating Richard's reign becoming disorderly and confused and, as a result, Richard falling from the throne before the actual rebellions occur against him. We can find them skillfully scattered about and prepared for in the play.

Gaunt tries to console his son, Bolingbroke, when his banishment is decided, and says,

Think not the king did banish thee,
But thou the king.
(1. iii. 279-80)

Gaunt's words, however, sound empty to Bolingbroke, who at first would like to show his obedience to Richard. At this scene Gaunt stands on two opposite positions at the same time; one is as Bolingbroke's father who has to make excuses for the sake of his son, and the other as a judge who has to make a relentless decision of which person is to be blamed. From another view of the dramatic development, Gaunt expresses, without realising it, that Bolingbroke will replace Richard's position in the future. And he makes a warning like a prophecy to Richard as he uses the word "depose".

Deposing thee before thou wert possess'd,
Which art possess’d now to depose thyself.
(II. i. 107-8)

The word "depose" delicately indicates that the plot of the story will directly unfold toward the fall of the king. And Gaunt’s words in two scenes cause us to feel anxious anticipation.

Northumberland violently blames Richard for his ridiculous reign,

The king is not himself, but basely led
By flatterers;
(II. i. 241-2)

He, as a political realist, will prominently play an official role in the unpleasant aspects of the deposition scene. Northumberland, the father of Hotspur, as Frye explains, "is a bully in this play and is a coward in Henry IV: In history, he is a traitor to Richard, then a traitor to Bolingbroke and ends his life by betraying his own son." Willoughby also accuses Richard of the terrible financial situation in England, saying "The King’s grown bankrout like a broken man." (II. i. 257) And Gaunt’s words also have the same tone when accusing Richard’s flatterers,

A thousand flatters sit within thy crown.
Whose compass is no bigger than thy head.
(II. i. 100-1)

He clearly judges that Richard himself and his flatterers mainly cause society thus to become corrupt and wanton. He purposely describes Richard "Land lord of England art thou now, no king." (II. i. 113) Gaunt’s bitter form of address, using the word "lord" four times in the play, is directly given to Richard who resents him and takes no humble attitude nor accepts his advice with reverence. Richard makes no attempt to conceal his levity and wounded pride even by Gaunt’s deathbed. The words “depose”, “lord” and “bankrout” give us great hints that disastrous and sinister things will surely come true as the plot develops further.

Richard makes a grievous comment on the ancient kings who were dethroned and cruelly killed in various ways.

tell sad stories of the death of kings:
How some have been depos’d, some alain in war,
Some haunted by the ghosts they have deposed,
Some poisoned by their wives, some sleeping kill’d,
All murthered
(III. ii. 156-)

It may be apt that his turn will surely come when he is sadly murdered in the same way as his ancestors were. There is a dreary endlessness in this sample of kingly and human affairs, sometimes with a cyclical pattern. It may be regarded as a kind of a dramatic irony because he himself describes the way of his dethronement in advance when nothing serious is happening around him. He unconsciously anticipates his inauspicious future to come.

The garden scene also gives us a hint that Richard’s reign is becoming out of order and will soon collapse. In Shakespeare’s plays, a garden is often compared to the state of a kingdom. It sometimes shows both Utopia, or Eden, the ideal state of land, and a rigid political world. The garden scene, act III scene iv, produces a comical atmosphere which echoes the weed image in it. Gardeners speak in set rhetorical terms. They begin their works to root away (pluck) “The noisome weeds” (III. iv. 38) that suck the fertility from “ wholesome flowers.” (39) They make concrete examples concerning the intimate relation between the garden and the state of kingdom. They also explain to the audience what will become of Richard and his followers. When the banished Bolingbroke returns and lands at Gloucestershire, the shore of England, without completing his exile period, he says,

The caterpillars of the commonwealth,
Which I have sworn to weed and pluck away.
(II. iii. 165-6)

His description has a close connection with the weeds that grow in the best-kept garden. The condition of England for Bolingbroke seem to be the worst of all. He believes that it is due to Richard’s awful reign.

Some critics, on the other hand, point out that the
garden scene is very relevant to the sestet of Sonnet 94 and that the ironic analogy is obvious. A neat garden can change to a wasteland. The rambling weeds, of course, represent the awful situation of Richard’s reign.

In the later part of the play, the bishop of Carlisle, who is arrested and placed in the custody of Abbot of Westminster, makes this accurate prophecy,

The blood of English shall manure the ground,
And future ages groan for this foul act,
(IV. i. 137-38)

And he continues to warn to Bolingbroke that the disastrous things will occur in the future if he forcefully deposes Richard.

The woe’s to come: the children yet unborn
Shall feel this day as sharp to them as thorn.
(IV. i. 322-23)

The woe never ceases. Their descendants will appear to suffer from it. This speech also seems to be a simple explanation of the disorder and violence in Henry IV which has an intimate connection with this play. In Henry IV, we can find that King Henry IV, now Bolingbroke, honestly utters his sense of guilt for his usurpation of the throne.

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.
(2 Henry IV. IV. i. 183-6)

His speech might be an ironic reflection of his political ambition in Richard II.

All these expressions, described above by both Richard’s supporters and opponents, indicate that disastrous and disordered things will surely prevail the world in the future on the stage. And they include an anticipation of Richard’s fall from the throne. Shakespeare might clearly show Richard’s unfitness for kingly status in the play. But it can be said that Richard’s fall is not due to his specific deed but his being swallowed by the wave-like fortune in the relentless course of events in history.

Gaunt’s makes a long speech, highly praising the glory of England and the English crown.

This royal throne of kings, this scept’red isle,
This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars,
This other Eden, demi-paradise,
This fortress built by Nature for herself
Against infection and the hand of war,
This happy breed of men, this little world,
This precious stone set in the silver sea.
(II. i. 40-46)

The Elizabethan audience, who in history received the news of defeating the Invincible Armada with great exaltation, might well have been fascinated to his speech, and might have given it great applause in the Wooden O. But his conclusion is utterly far from praising. He concludes that such a world, as he describes, “Is now leas’d out” (59). The sober truth behind his remark is now revealed. It suggests that Richard’s reign is unfortunately becoming tossed into confusion and disorder. His speech continues to sound bitter and disappointed to the audience. His stern admonition like a prophecy is directly given to Richard who foolishly pays little attention to it. Richard believes that nothing can be changed as long as he is the king.

When the news of Bolingbroke’s rebellion is brought to Richard’s camp, we realise that Richard’s power swiftly slides from him with the speed of an avalanche. Salisbury’s despair shows it well,

Ah, Richard! with the eyes of heavy mind
I see they glory like a shooting star
Fall to the base earth from the firmament.
(II. iv. 18-20)

when a Welsh Captain decides to “disperse ourselves” (4) because he “hears no tidings from the king” and thinks that “the king is dead”. We see that Richard has lost his forces and hopes. At this point, Fortune’s Wheel begins to turn. The Grand Mechanism of history, as Jan Kott describes it, relentlessly works on Richard himself. At first he
triflingly judges that the treacherous Bolingbroke will immediately collapse, but he soon abandons his resistance to the rebels and says,

let them go
To eat the land that hath some hope to grow;
For I have none.

(III. ii. 211-13)

The tone of his speech suddenly becomes meek. Richard’s self-pitying tone of speech becomes absorbed in the pathos of his own situation in this phase. His disposition is utterly different from that of his ancestors. York wisely describes his ancestors as a “lion in war” (II. i. 173) and “a lamb in peace”(74). But Richard is too mild and helpless to make a fierce challenge and struggle against his enemy as if he were a lamb in war.

The pattern of rise and fall, which typically draws the picture of the rising Bolingbroke and the falling Richard, is caricatured in the deposition scene by the image of “the bucket in the well”.

Now is this golden crown like a deep well
That owes two buckets, filling one another,
The emptier ever dancing in the air,
The other down, unseen, and full of water.

(IV. i. 184-7)

This is an interesting description of the situation of both men. Winny points out that Richard’s application of the simile is typically mistaken. He says,

The empty bucket could only represent the shallow frivolity of Richard, who even at this moment of disaster hunts after literary conceits, as weight and fullness of the other symbolised Bolingbroke’s political mastery.

This is a persuasive and keen insight into Richard’s political condition in the play. It is in sharp contrast with the rising Bolingbroke. Bolingbroke’s mastery in the kingly office is much emphasised in the challenge scene of IV. i. and the whole of V. Richard tends to avoid his battle and conflict against Bolingbroke. Of course, Richard is not a coward. When Richard has to be confronted by the rebels, he is by turn both defiant and submissive where his reflective nature is shown well. We can fully understand Richard’s pathos, feelings of sorrow and woe for his miserable situation. He is not a child of destiny in the play.

He magnificently obeys Bolingbroke’s request to go down from the wall of Flint Castle and says, using a fantastic image.

Down, down I come, like glist’ring Phaeton,
Wanting the manage of unruly jades.

(III. iii. 178)

In the play he must say what he feels all the time about his situation, which we can see in his appearance on the walls of Flint Castle, his abdication, his parting with his queen, Isabel, and his death in the prison. There are a lot of expressions concerning Richard’s pathos and woe. It is his characteristic way of expressing his feelings to others and himself. He has no inclination to delude himself at any time. As a king, he is too honest and frank to conceal his thoughts and feelings: It probably shows his taste for frivolity which manifests itself in his swift decision to make an expedition to Ireland without regarding the bad financial state of the kingdom. He loves poetry more than power and more than any person in the play. As he gradually admits his incompetence, he has to use words, or poetry rather than power.

When Bolingbroke decisively asks “Are you contented to resign the crown?” (IV. i. 200), Richard makes an ambivalent reply, using an elaborate and inextricable pun. “Ay, no; no, ay;” (IV. i. 201) His words, as Talbert points out, surely show his vacillation to the question. It can be said that he experiences the dizzying alternation of hope and despair in the conflict between them. He swings between the contradictory impulses in this scene though he once said to Bolingbroke “Your own is yours, and I am yours, and all.”( III. iii. 197), displaying his resignation of all. His dethronement is due not only to his folly but also to Bolingbroke’s revolt which articulately means his usurpation of the crown.
Richard's dignity is thoroughly offended though he still insists upon his divine right to kingship. The balm cannot be washed off. And an anointed king cannot become a man who lives "with bread like you" (III. ii. 175). As a monarch, he must either rule or die.

Richard makes an emotional soliloquy in the end of the play. In it we realise, as Hill explains, that he attempts to sublimate grief by objectifying it in the picturesque hermit speech. He honestly speaks of his present misery. As a prisoner in Pomfret Castle, Richard is cut off from all relationship with the outside world. He must endure his misery in isolation. We can find his reflective nature here again. The sound of music, adapting to his soliloquy, leads him to the deep reflection upon time. He subtly philosophies time, "I wasted time, and now doth time waste me;" (V. v. 49) And he arrives at the elaborate allegory of himself as a clock (50-54). He is prone to compare himself to concrete things, sometimes opposite, as mentioned at the scene describing the bucket in the well. He makes another plain simile, in which he describes Bolingbroke like the sun and Richard like the snow. And he also produces a beggar and king theme which is often repeated in other plays. He gradually notices the fact that he is just a man and nothing, not a king. He talks about his political situation as if he was living in the world of fancy where he had the power of using words creatively. He seldom thinks that he is a worldly criminal though he notices his folly in court and the battlefield. Kelly makes an interesting comment on Richard's consciousness of his own state and explains that Richard by no means considers himself the opprobrious villain that his opponents make him out to be. Richard never refers to his offences as any more than follies. This is an important key to understand his uneasy state of mind and heart. He temporarily seems to have lost the sense of who he is. He seems to be alone occupied with composing lyrical verse in prison. He enters the prison as if he would retire into a world of private fantasy where he could continue to live as the monarch of England. He is willingly imprisoned within himself. This is because he does not patiently suffer from the pang of conscience at any time, even in prison.

The theme of the substance and shadow is skillfully repeated in the play. It interestingly echoes the episodes of woe and sorrow. The Queen's premonition of bad news springs from nothing substantial. It serves to understand the theme of appearance and reality which we can clearly notice in the tragedy. The Queen deplores her causeless grief and feels as if "Some unborn sorrow ripe in Fortune's womb" (II. ii. 10) would come to her. To the Queen, Bushy wisely makes a blunt reply,

Each substance of a grief hath twenty shadows, Which shows like grief itself, but is not so. (II. ii. 14-15)

It means that there might be nothing substantial in this play. No one, even the audience, shares her uneasiness, except Richard. A bodiless fancy has some connection with the shadow of grief. The shadows of various truths spread through the play. There may be a struggle between the substance and the shadow of kingship. And Richard is actually threatened with the shadow of assault by Bolingbroke because he lives in the world of fancy where shadows may prevail. And this is a main reason why, as Frye keenly points out, "eventually Richard comes to understand, if not consciously at first, that he is programming himself as a loser, and has thrown himself into the elegiac role of one who has lost his throne before he has actually lost it." As Richard is living in the world of fancy, there is a large element of conscious expressiveness and calculated gesture. He is prone to be an actor playing the role of suffering from his misery and he wants to dramatise himself as a tragic hero in the play. A good example is found when, at departing from his Queen, Richard asks her to "Tell thou the lamentable tale of me." (IV. i. 44) He likes to show his own pathos and to make us feel compassion for him. He does not live in the world of reality at all. But it can be said that he is no more an actor than he is a poet though he speaks almost all of his speeches in verse. So this play is said to lack a tragic impact. Another reason of the lack of a tragic impact is that there is no evil figure in the play. As Hill said neither Bolingbroke nor Richard is presented as an evil
figure, like Iago, Edmund and Richard III, and so on. No one dares to delight intriguing to torture and ruin others.

The belief that a mirror reflects the reality of a world is often represented in the theatre, but in this play, it is seldom used. At the mirror episode scene Richard says with tearful dissolution,

Let it command a mirror hither straight, That it may show me what a face I have Since it is bankrupt of his majesty. (IV. i. 265-67)

At this time, Bolingbroke scornfully makes a realistic reply to him without uttering any reasons,

The shadow of your sorrow hath destroy’d The shadow of your face. (IV. i. 292-93)

It echoes Bushy’s reply to the Queen in the previous scene, indicating the shadow of grief. The mirror is the double-edged symbol of vanity and truth telling. As Richard finds that it does not always tell him the truth, he breaks it into pieces. The behaviour of smashing it probably means to break his own world in which he lives in ease and tranquility. Richard just wants to see his pathetic face in the mirror but he only sees his ordinary face. Richard is a man full of capricious fancy. He is, in vain, apt to make a self-dramatisation here.

Compared with the full and free expression of what is in Richard’s mind, it can be said that Bolingbroke’s mind and motives are in shadow. Bolingbroke’s words are not suited to express his own thoughts but to command others in military and political situations. His terse and brief comment is in sharp contrast to Richard’s lyrical speech. Concerning the theme of usurpation, there are two different and opposite interpretations. One is Kelly’s comment that “Henry’s actions would constitute the sinful usurpation of God’s office of judge and avenger.” And the other is Visny’s that “Despite its lack of legality, Bolingbroke’s claim to the crown has a natural cogency.” Critics might be seriously puzzled when they deeply think of the usurpation in the play. Bolingbroke, with his sense of “Eating the bitter bread of banishment.” (III. i. 21), just says that his main purpose of his returning from exile and getting an army is to recover his lost name and his righteous paternal heritage, of which Richard forcefully deprived him. We do not notice whether Bolingbroke has a clear consciousness of usurpation or not. Shakespeare deliberately avoids the theme of usurpation in the play. As is often said, there might have been an official nervousness in performing the deposition scene on the stage in Elizabethan Age when actual rebellions against Queen Elizabeth I were likely to occur. Bolingbroke does not clearly make any comments on depriving Richard of the crown and obtaining it himself. We do not clearly know when Bolingbroke decides to seize the crown in the play.

Conflicts between pairs of nobles happen twice in the play. We have already seen a conflict between Bolingbroke and Mowbray in act I scene i. We can find an elaborate repetition of it in act IV scene i, where York’s son, Aumerle, and Bagot have the same kind of quarrel, concerning loyalty and faithfulness to their lord. In each case, their fathers, Gaunt and York, play important roles to resolve the problems in order to keep their honour and grace. The theme of father-son is elaborately woven in the play. There is a scheme of parallel episodes. As we have seen, Gaunt stands on the opposite and complicated position as a father and a judge in early part of the play. In the later part, York, who is thrown into a dilemma to prove his own loyalty, knows that his son, Aumerle, will join the faction seeking to unseat Bolingbroke. He insists that his son should be punished for committing treason. It sounds like the same accusation against Bolingbroke when he raises his rebellion against Richard. (II. iii. 86-88) York’s word “Mine honour lives when his dishonour dies.” (V. iii. 68), shows that he would abandon his own judgement but rely on the judgement of the monarch about the alternative question. We find that their valuation of personal honour and family reputation exposes the duplicity of both men. They cannot decide which they should choose in the complicated situation. In addition, when Richard and Bolingbroke have a power struggle for the English crown, York says,
“Both are my kinsmen.” (II. ii. 111) At this time we find that he stands in an ironical and difficult position in the play, too.

At the end of the play, Bolingbroke at last shows his mastery and mercy, and then gives a lenient pardon to York’s son, Aumerle, whose life is saved. It is also due to the Duchess of York’s fervent pleading for her son. Bolingbroke’s act typically leads to the decisive picture of his kingly attitude. And Bolingbroke clearly understands that he must not participate in the intrigue of murdering the monarch. He must not have any relation with the hideous deeds at all. To Exton, who eagerly expects large and tangible rewards, he says,

They love not poison that do poison need,
Nor do I thee. Though I wish him dead,
I hate the murtherer, love him murthred.

(V. v. 38-40)

Now he becomes a genuine king and succeeds the throne in this play.

Richard always seeks for what he is through the play and has to accept a bitter realisation that he is nothing when he is not the monarch of England. He has to realise that a king becomes a man and, in the end, nothing without the title of a king. He knows that he must die as the former monarch of England. After experiencing his plight and suffering from his misery, he becomes aware of his new self before his death. He certainly knows that he has nothing and is nothing. This makes a point of the new departure to live with his new self, not in despair. This can be called a tragic element in the play. It also has some connection with the situation of King Lear who obtains his new awareness of what a man is after he endured extreme mental agony through the play. With his detachment, Shakespeare only portrays how a protagonist falls to nothing, not why he does in history. This play is just about the fall and deposition of a king.

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