

The History Plays : A Reminder

Shakespeare wrote two main cycles of History Plays, but they cover a broad sweep of time from the reign of Richard 11 (1377-1399) to the end of the reign of Richard 111 (1485). The first cycle covers the Henry VI plays and Richard 111; the second covers the technically earlier period from Richard 11 to Henry V.

We need really to start – paradoxically - with Richard 111. His reign, according to Tudor political propaganda, was seen as God’s curse on England, which was redeemed by the accession of Henry VII. The situation was made complex by the fact that there were *two* usurpations. Henry IV “stole” Richard 11’s throne, and Henry VI was deposed by Edward IV (or really by Richard of York - later Richard 111 - who murdered him). Richard 111 also committed the heinous sin of the murder of the two princes in the Tower, including Edward IV’s legitimate heir, Edward V. So Richard 111 was a kind of double usurper. He had killed two kings – one of Lancaster (Henry VI) and one of York (Edward V).

Richard 111 was both a punishment and a scourge for England’s sins. He was evil in himself but was also an instrument of God’s punishment – a kind of devil (or “Vice”) to be removed by God’s sanction. Henry Tudor redeemed the country with God’s blessing. This ushered in the great Tudor dynasty under which the History Plays were written.

The simplified pattern suggested above was used by Shakespeare but obviously did not fully represent his vision. No single view of the development from Richard 11 to the Tudors is possible because the Tudors who avenged Henry VI and Edward V were themselves supporting usurping dynasties. Henry VI's grandfather was, after all, the one who took the throne from the lawful king, Richard 11. Edward IV had himself seized it from a usurping family.

The complexity of royal genealogy and the political cross-currents of betrayal and treachery meant that no one was really Richard's obvious successor. The Earl of March was his nearest relevant relation but he was kept under house-arrest by Henry IV and, after a chequered career including involvement in some rebellious activity, died of plague in 1425. Richard himself had died childless. In view of all this, no clear line dynastic line is easily discernible. Shakespeare's tendency is to see all rebellion against a *de facto* king as dangerous for the country. But his kings have a poisoned legacy and may have to hold on to their thrones by questionable means.

To suggest some of the complexity of the dynastic picture, Shakespeare uses at least two notions of pattern in life. One suggests order and the other potential chaos. The Elizabethan World Picture – hierarchical and with everything ideally in place according to the system of DEGREE – is balanced by the Mediaeval notion of blind FORTUNE'S WHEEL with an emphasis on flux and randomness.

Another traditional idea followed by Shakespeare is that of reverberations or ripple effects. The *proper* order of things is like an intricate dance or musical pattern. It is also like the ordered lives of the bees and the workings of an intricate clock. In “Richard 11” the clock idea is voiced by Richard in Pomfret Castle. Order by this time has, however, broken down - and this disorder continues to reverberate through the cosmos.

The running down or dislocation of a clock reminds us indirectly of the intricacy of Elizabethan timepieces. Society is like this. It is (and has) a delicate mechanism and the disrupting of one cog can bring chaos to the whole. This in turn links up with ideas of reverberations extending from a central fault throughout the mechanism of the universe. The machinery breaks down. Yet the effect is not so much mechanical as metaphysical and even religious. Earth, heaven and the wider cosmos are as intricately related as the strands in a spider’s web. In “Macbeth”, on the night of Duncan’s death, there are wild and unnatural happenings - the heavens are angry and this is reflected across Scottish society and landscape. Even in the History Plays there is a strong sense that the usurpation of a rightful king leads to unrest in the heavens. The complicating factor is that Richard has been a bad king and has abused the country he should be nourishing.

The macrocosm of the Universe relates to the microcosm of the individual man. Madness, for instance, can be a mirror of disorder in the state. Man’s mental kingdom breaks down, as does order in the wider world (and cosmos). In “Richard 11” the King does not exactly go mad but even from the first he is neurotic and unstable.

This is a threat to England which is seen as a sea-walled garden. England in fact is a microcosm of the original Eden but is now in a doubly fallen state.

Shakespeare's History is, of course, slanted - and some of the individual plays also have aspects of fully fledged tragedy. In Greek Tragedy the protagonist is brought down by a "hamartia" (flaw or character fault) but may reach "anagnorisis" (some form of recognition or greater awareness) through his suffering. It is hence not a wasted experience. Shakespeare's long-suffering kings do reach some degree of greater self-knowledge, but in many (e.g. Henry V1) the suffering mainly serves to confirm an already latent attitude to the world, or religious and social point of view. Some of the Kings, like Richard 111, have a high degree of self-knowledge from the start. Richard 11 is a middle case because he *does* come to recognise that he "wasted Time" but has no lengthy soliloquy of self-analysis, focussing on where he went wrong. Increasingly indeed the play presents him as a victim undergoing a "Passion" which is more agonising than he deserves.

Richard 11 : Plot :

The play was probably written and first acted in 1595. It was an immediate success and the first quarto of 1597 was followed by two more in 1598. A fourth quarto was issued in 1608. This contained the first printing of the deposition scene, previously suppressed because of the politically contentious subject. The scene was included in the First Folio (1623). The main source is Holinshed's *Chronicles*, but the play *Woodstock*, Samuel Daniel's *Civil Wars* and some French sources may well have been also consulted. (The first four volumes of Daniel's work appeared in 1595 but Shakespeare may have known of them by the time of writing *Richard 11*. They are in eight-line stanzas and are of a patriotic, philosophical cast. The first book deals with the period from the Norman Conquest to Richard 11's overthrow.)

The play begins with the quarrel between Henry Bolingbroke, son of John of Gaunt, and Thomas Mowbray, Duke of Norfolk. Richard resolves this arbitrarily by exiling Mowbray for life and Bolingbroke for ten years. There are suspicions that Mowbray was involved, on Richard's orders, in the death of his (Richard's) uncle, the Duke of Gloucester.

When John of Gaunt dies, Richard confiscates his property, partly to pay for his Irish Wars, for which he leaves England. Bolingbroke returns to claim his inheritance and takes Berkeley Castle which the Duke of York (as Regent) yields to him. King Richard arrives back in Wales to hear that his Welsh supporters have deserted him and that Bolingbroke has executed his favourites,

Bushy and Green. Accompanied by York's son, Aumerle, Richard withdraws to Flint Castle.

At Flint Richard is forced to surrender to Bolingbroke. In London he relinquishes his crown to Bolingbroke, who sends him to the Tower. Aumerle becomes involved in a plot to kill Bolingbroke who has now proclaimed himself Henry 1V. This is foiled by York, Aumerle's father, now feeling the need to show loyalty to the new dispensation. Richard is transferred to Pomfret Castle where he hears of Henry's coronation and is murdered by Sir Pierce of Exton.

The play contains many striking scenes - most of them not historically accurate. The deposition scene in which Richard is stripped before the nobles of regalia and kingly identity never happened. A notable garden scene is purely emblematic - its concern is the proper government of the "garden-state" - the demi-Eden of England.

Bolingbroke seizes the current in aiming for the throne but it is not clear whether this was in his sights from the moment he made his return in the King's absence. There is a sense of a kind of on-going momentum, which possibly sweeps Bolingbroke along with it, rather than his totally controlling it. This differs from the more calculated planning of Prince Hal, his son, who is later seen plotting a future course with the final outcome already mentally mapped out.

The play is written almost entirely in Blank Verse. On the day before the Earl of Essex's planned revolt in 1601, his supporters paid for a performance of a play about Richard 11 which was almost certainly Shakespeare's.

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Character :

Neither by natural disposition nor youthful training was Richard well fitted to come through the troubles bequeathed to him by his grandfather. With the pleasure-loving temperament which he inherited from the 'Fair Maid of Kent' along with her physical beauty, Richard united a firmness of will and capacity for sustained action when roused which, under a more fortunate star, might have done England good service. He deserves the credit, at least, of seeing that her men and money were better expended in Ireland than in France. Unhappily, these qualities were diverted to schemes of revenge and arbitrary power, which lost him the allegiance of the nation. Abrupt and stammering in speech, hasty and subject to sudden gusts of passion, Richard's was a nature neither patient of restraint nor forgetful of injuries. The somewhat unmanly despair attributed by the French writers to Richard when brought to bay may not be out of keeping with his character; but it should be remembered that they professedly wrote to excite sympathy for his piteous fate. Richard carried to excess the pomp and show introduced by Edward III. Ten thousand persons, says Hardyng, were provided for in his household, which, at Christmas 1398, consumed daily some twenty-eight oxen and three hundred sheep. His master cook's 'Forme of Cury' (ed. Pegge, 1780) is one of the earliest English cookery books. He spent great sums on garments embroidered with gold and precious stones, and first began to embroider the arms or badge on the just-au-corps as well as the mantle. One of his coats was valued at thirty thousand marks.

Just before his deposition Langland, a churchman, severely rebuked this extravagance in 'Richard the Redeless' (ed. Skeat). Richard was charged, in his later years at least, with turning night into day in drinking bouts, and with indulging in unnatural vice (i.e. homosexuality). The latter allegation may reflect truth but must be received with caution. His affection for his first wife admits of no doubt.

Another charge was that Richard was alleged to have had resort to divination. This, however, was comparatively common throughout the Middle Ages.

Richard was not without literary tastes. In 1379 there were bought for him a French bible, the 'Romance of the Rose,' and the romances of Percevell and Gawayn (Issues, p. 213). Gower dedicated the first version of his 'Confessio Amantis' to him, explaining that the king had met him on the river and bidden him write 'some newe thing.' This was probably in 1392-

3. Froissart in 1395 presented him with a richly bound copy of his love poems. Chaucer was high in his favour for a time, but subsequently allowed to fall into poverty.

Richard's expenditure was not always misdirected. He almost rebuilt Westminster Hall, as the numerous representations of his arms, and those of Edward the Confessor, and his device of the white hart, testify. He left a large sum to complete the reconstruction of the nave of the abbey church, which he had begun. His interments of Bishops Waltham and Waldby there began the practice which has made it a national mausoleum. Even Richard's enemies admitted that the church owed him some gratitude. The Franciscans supplied martyrs in his cause, and the Benedictines were not insensible of the special favour he showed them. He completed in 1385 Lord Zouch's Carthusian foundation at Coventry dedicated to St. Anne, and assisted the Duke of Surrey in that of Mountgrace, near Northallerton. Croyland Abbey and the Dominican friary at King's Langley assigned him the honours of a founder.

Richard's planned tomb :

The tomb was made in 1396-9 by London masons Henry Yevele and Stephen Lote, and copper smiths Nicholas Broker and Godfrey Prest cast the gilt bronze effigies. The total cost was £933. 6 shillings and 8 pence. Richard and Anne were originally depicted holding hands (as Richard had specified), but they have been broken off. This was the first double royal tomb and the effigies were cast in two sections rather than a single piece like Eleanor of Castile's effigy. The effigies are stamped all over with patterns and Plantagenet badges - the broom-pod, white hart and sun-burst on the king's figure and knots, crowned initials A and R and chained ostriches on Anne's effigy. Richard is depicted in Parliament robes while the queen wears a cote-hardi, from which the buttons are missing, an enriched girdle and long cloak. She has waist length hair.

The Latin inscription around the ledge of the tomb can be translated:

" Sage and elegant, lawfully Richard II, conquered by fate he lies here depicted beneath this marble. He was truthful in discourse and full of reason: Tall in body, he was prudent in his mind as Homer. He showed favour to the Church, he overthrew the proud and threw down anybody who violated the royal prerogative. He crushed heretics and laid low their

friends. O merciful Christ, to whom he was devoted, may you save [Richard], through the prayers of the Baptist, whom he esteemed"

Anne's part of the inscription can be translated as:

"Beneath a broad stone now Anna lies entombed; when she lived in the world she was the bride of Richard the Second. She was devoted to Christ and well known for her deeds; she was ever inclined to give her gifts to the poor; she calmed quarrels and relieve the pregnant. She was beauteous in body and her face was gentle and pretty. She provided solace to widows, and medicine to the sick. In 1394 on a pleasant seventh day of the month of June, she passed over. Amen"

Both effigies are undoubtedly portraits and the king wears a short wispy beard, as in his painted portrait. Much of the decoration, including the beasts supporting the feet (two lions at Richard's feet and a leopard and eagle at Anne's) and the jewels from Anne's dress, has now disappeared. Queen Victoria ordered new cushions to be made to support their heads. The metal table on which they lie is in two pieces diapered with lions and fleurs de lis and lions and eagles respectively. On the canopy at the back of the heads there are stamped shields with the arms of Edward the Confessor impaling France and England quarterly with chained harts as supporters and the arms of France and England impaling Bohemia with eagle supporters

The oak tester, or panel, above the effigies shows four painted scenes, the outlines of which can still be made out. Each has a background of gilt gesso work (similar to that which was originally on his portrait) and the subjects are: two angels standing on a flowered mount and supporting a shield (now defaced), the coronation of the Virgin, Christ enthroned, and angels similar to the first scene supporting a shield with the arms of France and England impaling the eagle of the Empire quartering the crowned lion of Bohemia. The ribs and cornice of the tester are painted with rosettes.

In the Abbey inventory of St Edward's chapel in 1520 it mentions a "canvas cloth stained black with a white hart to cover the tomb of Richard II".