

Modern Critical

INTERPRETATIONS

Edited and with an Introduction by HAROLD BLOOM

William Shakespeare's
Richard II



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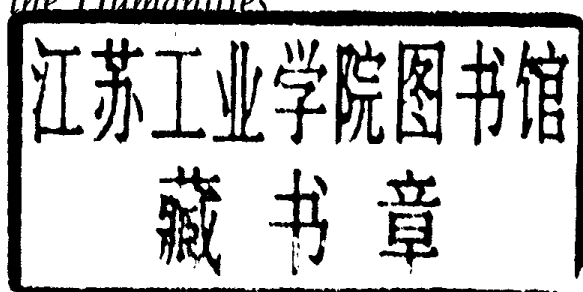
William Shakespeare's
Richard II

Edited and with an introduction by

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Editor's Note

This book gathers together a representative selection of the best modern critical interpretations of Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of King Richard II*. The critical essays are reprinted here in the chronological order of their original publication. I am grateful to Cornelia Pearsall for her erudite assistance in editing this volume.

My introduction suggests that there is a double Marlovian element in Shakespeare's Richard II; while he subsumes Marlowe's Edward II, there remains a likeness between the rhetoric and psychology of Shakespeare's character and those of Christopher Marlowe himself. Ruth Nevo begins the chronological sequence of criticism with a study of *Richard II*'s genre that develops into an illuminating discussion of what is and is not tragic about Richard.

John of Gaunt's "deathbed eulogy of England" is analyzed by Maynard Mack, Jr., as a study of the nostalgias of kingship. The rhetorical strength of the play's syntax is traced in Gaunt and in Richard by Stephen Booth.

Bolingbroke's usurpation is related by James L. Calderwood to Shakespeare's own sense of "the fall of speech," which the poet-playwright's art must transcend. The opening scenes of *Richard II* are read by Harry Berger, Jr., in a remarkable mode of his own that he calls "psychoanalyzing the Shakespeare text," which is not so much Freudian as it is a shrewd demonstration that current Gallic modes of deconstructing textuality are both anticipated and called into question by Shakespeare's writings.

Something of the Gallic way of reading helps inform Susan Wells's discussion of the theme of subjectivity in *Richard II*. The great Canadian critic Northrop Frye fittingly concludes this volume with a masterly exegesis of Richard II and his play, an exegesis that eschews all textualization, new-fangled and old, in favor of a sense of the wisdom that lies beyond method and theory of language, the wisdom critics once called imagination.

Contents

Editor's Note / vii

Introduction / 1
HAROLD BLOOM

The Genre of *Richard II* / 7
RUTH NEVO

This Royal Throne Unkinged / 37
MAYNARD MACK, JR.

Syntax as Rhetoric in *Richard II* / 47
STEPHEN BOOTH

Richard II to *Henry IV*: Variations on the Fall / 67
JAMES L. CALDERWOOD

Psychoanalyzing the Shakespeare Text: The First
Three Scenes of the *Henriad* / 79
HARRY BERGER, JR.

The Typical Register in Shakespeare's *Richard II* / 101
SUSAN WELLS

Richard II and Bolingbroke / 111
NORTHROP FRYE

Chronology / 125

Contributors / 127

Bibliography / 129

Acknowledgments / 133

Index / 135

Introduction

There is a general agreement that Shakespeare represents Richard II as a kind of spoiled adolescent (in our terms, not Shakespeare's, since adolescence is a later invention sometimes ascribed to Rousseau). I suspect it might be better to term Shakespeare's Richard II an almost perfect solipsist. He is certainly, as everyone sees, an astonishing poet and a very bad king. The puzzle of the play, to me, is why Richard II is so sympathetic. I do not mean dramatic sympathy, such as we extend to Macbeth, overwhelmed as we are by his intense inwardness. Macbeth is anything but humanly sympathetic. Richard II is, despite his self-pity, his petulance, and a veritable hoard of other bad qualities.

Northrop Frye eloquently calls Richard's "overreacting imagination that sketches the whole course of a future development before anyone else has had time to figure out the present one" a weakness. Pragmatically this is a weakness because it makes Richard doom-eager, but it also renders him curiously attractive, particularly in contrast to the usurper, Bolingbroke. Harold Goddard, whose readings of Shakespeare never leave me, termed Richard "a man of unusual, though perverted, gifts," the principal perversions being sentimentalism and narcissism. Since Shakespeare's most original quality, in my judgment, was the representation of change through a character's self-overhearing, I would call Richard II the first major manifestation of that originality, and I suspect that is why he moves us to a very troubled sympathy. He is indeed a mimesis that compels more of reality to divulge itself than we could have seen without him.

A. D. Nuttall, in his remarkable *A New Mimesis*, the best study of Shakespeare's representation of reality, also emphasizes Richard II's proleptic stance towards his own catastrophe:

Richard II is plagued not so much by Bolingbroke as by his own capacity for conceptual anticipation: Bolingbroke does not force Richard from the throne, he moves into spaces successively vacated, with elaborately conscious art, by Richard.

A Freudian reading would find Richard an instance of "moral masochism," the collapse of the ego before the superego, sometimes related to strongly manifested bisexuality. But Freud seems to me a codification of Shakespeare, so that a Shakespearean reading of Freud is more enlightening, and shows us that moral masochism is a theatrical tendency in which the ego dramatizes its doom-eagerness in order to achieve a priority in self-destructiveness, so as to anticipate the severity of the shadows of early and abandoned object-affections. Richard II assists at his own crucifixion because he desires a firstness in the exposure of a reality that he knows he cannot master. His perverse, final trace of the royal is to be strong only in his own overthrow.

Since Richard is the anointed king as well as much the most interesting personage in his drama, we are compelled to take his poetry very seriously indeed. There is no one else in Shakespeare's dramas up through 1595 who is anything like his imaginative equal. Had Shakespeare died in 1595, then Richard would have been his principal study in a dramatic consciousness, with Shylock, Falstaff, Rosalind, and Hamlet still to come in the five years subsequent. Until the advent of Hamlet, there is nothing like Richard's eloquence in Shakespearean verse. The edge of that eloquence first troubles us when Richard first despairs:

No matter where—of comfort no man speak:
 Let's talk of graves, of worms, and epitaphs,
 Make dust our paper, and with rainy eyes
 Write sorrow on the bosom of the earth.
 Let's choose executors and talk of wills;
 And yet not so, for what can we bequeath
 Save our deposed bodies to the ground?
 Our lands, our lives, and all are Bullingbrook's,
 And nothing can we call our own but death,
 And that small model of the barren earth
 Which serves as paste and cover to our bones.
 For God's sake let us sit upon the ground
 And tell sad stories of the death of kings:

How some have been depos'd, some slain in war,
 Some haunted by the ghosts they have deposed,
 Some poisoned by their wives, some sleeping kill'd,
 All murdered—for within the hollow crown
 That rounds the mortal temples of a king
 Keeps Death his court, and there the antic sits,
 Scoffing his state and grinning at his pomp,
 Allowing him a breath, a little scene,
 To monarchize, be fear'd, and kill with looks,
 Infusing him with self and vain conceit,
 As if this flesh which walls about our life
 Were brass impregnable; and humor'd thus,
 Comes at the last and with a little pin
 Bores thorough his castle wall, and farewell king!
 Cover your heads, and mock not flesh and blood
 With solemn reverence, throw away respect,
 Tradition, form, and ceremonious duty,
 For you have but mistook me all this while.
 I live with bread like you, feel want,
 Taste grief, need friends: subjected thus,
 How can you say to me I am a king?

It is an astonishing outburst, and Richard is crucially changed by it. We may not like him any the better for it, but he is highly conscious of the gap between his royal legitimacy and the luxuriance of his despair. His sense of "the king's two bodies" is more dialectical than that doctrine should allow. Shakespeare's sense of it is very clear; you can celebrate England and its soil if the rightful king is in power, however inadequate he is, but the celebration turns sour if a usurper, however capable, reigns. Richard is both his own victim, or rather the victim of his own imagination, and the sacrifice that becomes inevitable when the distance between the king as he should be and the actual legitimate monarch becomes too great. The shock of his own increasing consciousness of that distance is what changes Richard from a rapacious and blustering weakling into a self-parodying ritual victim. In this change, Richard does not acquire any human dignity, but he does begin to incarnate an extraordinary aesthetic dignity, both lyrical and dramatic. I think he becomes Shakespeare's first implicit experiment in representation, which is to risk identifying poetry and a national ritual sacrifice. The risk is not that Richard will fail to be persua-

sive, but that he will put poetry and its powers of representation into question.

His rhetoric of pleasurable despair is more than oxymoronic, and enforces the lesson that Nietzsche learned from the poets; what makes representation memorable is pleasurable pain, rather than painful pleasure. I know of many readers and students who agree with Dr. Samuel Johnson in his judgment that *Richard II* "is not finished at last with the happy force of some other of his tragedies, nor can be said much to affect the passions, or enlarge the understanding." Yet even these recalcitrants thrill to the justly famous cadences of: "For God's sake let us sit upon the ground / And tell sad stories of the death of kings." I think of Hart Crane's marvelous variation upon this in *Voyages VI*:

Waiting, afire, what name, unspoke,
I cannot claim: let thy waves rear
More savage than the death of kings,
Some splintered garland for the seer.

Crane shrewdly interprets Shakespeare as associating the death of kings and the splintering of poetic wreaths. Dr. Johnson, best of critics, was too unmoved by *Richard II* to achieve an accurate sense of the king's transformation:

It seems to be the design of the poet to raise Richard to esteem in his fall, and consequently to interest the reader in his favour. He gives him only passive fortitude, the virtue of a confessor rather than of a king. In his prosperity we saw him imperious and oppressive, but in his distress he is wise, patient, and pious.

In his fall, Richard is not wise but eloquent, not patient but driving towards death, not pious but a kind of Christ-parody. His wounded narcissism is augmented by the turning of his aggressivity against himself, and he overgoes Marlowe's Edward II as a rhetorician of self-pity:

They shall be satisfied. I'll read enough,
When I do see the very book indeed
Where all my sins are writ, and that's myself.
Give me that glass, and therein will I read.
No deeper wrinkles yet? Hath sorrow struck
So many blows upon this face of mine,

And made no deeper wounds? O flatt'ring glass,
 Like to my followers in prosperity,
 Thou dost beguile me! Was this face the face
 That every day under his household roof
 Did keep ten thousand men? Was this the face
 That like the sun, did make beholders wink?
 Is this the face which fac'd so many follies,
 That was at last out-fac'd by Bullingbrook?
 A brittle glory shineth in this face,
 As brittle as the glory is the face,
 [*Dashes the glass against the ground.*]
 For there it is, crack'd in an hundred shivers.
 Mark, silent king, the moral of this sport,
 How soon my sorrow hath destroy'd my face.

The outrageous parody of Marlowe's Faustus celebrating Helen is scarcely an accident in a play that subsumes Marlowe's *Edward II*. By associating Richard with two of Marlowe's antiheroes, Shakespeare suggests a likeness between his Richard and the self-destructive, narcissistic great poet who was Shakespeare's closest precursor. It may seem fantastic to suggest that the aura of Christopher Marlowe seeps into the rhetoric and psychology of Richard II, but this was a complex trick that Shakespeare was to play again. The fine symbolic gesture of dashing the mirror to pieces is wholly appropriate for the Marlovian protagonists, and for Christopher Marlowe's own fate. Here as elsewhere Shakespeare is warning himself (and us) that Marlowe's way was not to be taken up.

Formally, *Richard II* is a tragedy, as Johnson took it to be, but it is the tragedy of a self-indulgent poet rather than the fall of a great king. The dashing of the glass is also the destruction of the legitimate royal countenance, yet when Richard is murdered we do not experience the shock of a monarch dying. Hamlet, who never ascends a throne, dies more than royally, but Richard's apparent courage when he kills the attendants is precisely what Goddard called it: "the reflex action of a man without self-control in the presence of death." There is aesthetic dignity in Richard's rhetoric of decline and fall, but not in the actual way that he dies. It is the death of the poet who has not matured into the possession and representation of wisdom.

The Genre of *Richard II*

Ruth Nevo

Beyond the woeful or happy outcome brought about by the catastrophe Elizabethan dramatic theory did not distinguish between the structure of tragedy and comedy; neither were the dramatic practitioners possessed of a theory of genre which would enable them to distinguish with any rigor between tragedy and history. Polonius's familiar puzzlement is not only his own but the age's failure to achieve radical definitions. Thus the "chronicle" plays of the period, which deal with the fall of princes, great changes of fortune, tyrannical intrigues, and Machiavellian betrayals, based upon no clear generic principle of either tragedy or history, based, indeed, at best upon a *de casibus* interpretation of events indifferent to the distinction, present a bewildering medley of hybrids, a spectrum of mixed or intermediate tints. And whether any given instance is an example of "tragicall historie" or historical tragedy or of English Seneca requires a more systematic philosopher than Polonius to determine. Both *Richard III* and *Richard II*, though integral parts of their respective historical tetralogies, are called "tragedies" in the Folio and in the Quartos upon which it was based.

Shakespeare, therefore, found few clear conceptions of genre ready to hand. Nor did he possess a theory of tragic character. He invented as he went along; and as he proceeds from the histories to the tragedies, his exploratory, creative deployment of his art discovers and establishes the distinctions that he needs. The chief distinction between

history and tragedy rests in the restructuring the narrative undergoes in order to bring out the protagonist's personal responsibility for events and his personal response to them. It is his distinctive aspiration, will, or purpose that becomes salient. In the history plays the protagonists are exhibited as struggling for freedom to initiate events. Even that artist in villainy, Richard III, has not fully escaped from the destined role of a scourge of God. If they are made vivid, it is by a degree of idiosyncrasy in their response to their destined roles, but they are nevertheless governed by an overall ironic process of history. If we may imagine them as figures in bas-relief compared to the sculptures in the round of the tragedies, they may also thus be compared with the tapestry figures of pure chronicle. But in *Richard II* the providentialist view of events which dominated Shakespeare's historical sources gives way to a rival concern. In *Richard II* Shakespeare's tragic idea takes the form of a development in the dimension of character that is decisive for future directions.

The play's overt conflict is between the strong and successful Bolingbroke and the vain and vacillating Richard; and looked at from the point of view of the management of events, the play is well made, Richard's decline and Bolingbroke's rise crisscrossing effectively in the center. But the simple fall-rise pattern does not exhaust the potentialities of the dramatic material as Shakespeare presents it. The play is not contained without remainder, so to speak, within the historical pattern. The remainder inheres in the characterization of Richard, in which the play's distinction lies. It is this study of the complex figure of the tragic hero that exerts pressure upon the shape of the play, so that from within the episodic chronicle form we perceive the emergence of what we can recognize, in the light of our knowledge of the later tragedies proper, as the distinctively tragic structure. The play does not exhibit the consummate articulation of phases of the great tragedies. The first two acts are episodic and the study of tragic character does not really get under way until the peripeteia of act 3. And when it does it is almost, though not quite, independent of the content of acts 1 and 2. But the play does possess a movement which approximates to that of the great tragedies. Coleridge's remark concerning Richard's "continually increasing energy of thought, and as constantly diminishing power of action" takes on an added significance when to Coleridge's psychological interest in character portrayal is added an interest in the structure of tragedy that directs us to search for the principle informing this movement.

As act 1 proceeds we perceive, through the considered juxtaposition of scenes, the predicament in which Richard is placed. The act is composed primarily of two scenes of elaborate formal challenge between rival claimants for justice. At three points, however, the façade of highly ceremonial assertion and counterassertion between Bolingbroke and Mowbray is rent to provide a glimpse of the historical actualities that lie behind these rituals. The inserted dialogue (1.2) between Gaunt and the Duchess of Gloucester points to the hidden and ambiguous source of all the trouble: the murder of Woodstock; the final scene of the act indicates, possibly, the real import both of Richard's fear of Bolingbroke (his courtship of the common people) and of Bolingbroke's challenge of Richard. (Though Holinshed, and Bolingbroke himself, in *2 Henry IV* [3.1.72–74] deny the imputation of forethought: "Though then, Heaven knows, I had no such intent, / But that necessity so bow'd the state, / That I and greatness were compell'd to kiss.") And the dialogue between Richard and Gaunt after the sentence of banishment makes clear the nature of the political arrangement that has taken place behind the scenes to make the present solution feasible. To Gaunt's lament for his son's exile Richard replies:

Thy son is banish'd upon good advice,
 Whereto thy tongue a party-verdict gave:
 Why at our justice seem'st thou then to lour?
 (1.3.233–35)

And Gaunt's reply admits his complicity:

Things sweet to taste prove in digestion sour.
 You urg'd me as a judge, but I had rather
 You would have bid me argue like a father.
 O, had it been a stranger, not my child,
 To smooth his fault I should have been more mild.
 A partial slander sought I to avoid,
 And in the sentence my own life destroy'd.
 Alas, I look'd when some of you should say
 I was too strict to make mine own away;
 But you gave leave to my unwilling tongue
 Against my will to do myself this wrong.
 (1.3.236–46)

What is presented then is the tangential relationship between the dramatized conflict of wills and the complex reality of history, where

political morality or amorality is still further complicated by the blood relationship between the various contenders for power. Feudal rituals mask the ulterior political realities of collusion and guilt. In the predicament thus presented, power and justice are divided and disjoined. And it is in these circumstances that the King must play his allotted role. Richard must rule, in his circumstances, either by what the Elizabethans, following Machiavelli, called *virtù*, or by that older dial of princes called virtue. He must govern by either power or justice, since the breach between them already exists.

When we ask what is wrong with Richard's interruption of the lists, an act for which he has been richly and variously scolded by his severer critics, we are forced to the conclusion that it represents no more, but also no less, than simple political expediency, in circumstances which leave little other alternative. Later in the play we are given a parallel scene in which we watch Bolingbroke, at the height of his power and success, encountering a similar situation. And the comparison is instructive.

Once again the question at issue is Gloucester's death. Bagot is now the chief witness and Aumerle the accused, as Mowbray was accused by Bolingbroke in act 1. Once again the situation shapes itself in terms of the challenges and counterchallenges of honor, with the civil dissension inherent in the situation made manifest by the successive involvement on one side or the other of Fitzwater, Surrey, and Percy. The question, by an evident irony, circles back to the original contender, Mowbray, and we are only prevented from finding ourselves, so to speak, back at base, by Mowbray's death meanwhile in exile. But what is significant is that Bolingbroke, too, can do no more than shelve the whole matter, leaving the contenders under gage, "Till we assign you to your days of trial." The intransigence of the original ugly fact is a perpetual stumbling block to the house of Edward's sons, those "seven vials of his sacred blood" which has been shed. Thus the ultimate source of evil in this play and those which follow it (in the chronology of history, not by date of composition) is clearly identifiable. It is Woodstock's murder—a crime which sets up the chain reaction of violence and counterviolence, of guilt and the incurring of guilt, that scourges England through half-a-dozen reigns. But if Woodstock's death is the ultimate cause of these events, it is nevertheless not what is dramatized in *Richard II*. The play leaves this original act of Cain in impenetrable obscurity; but it presents Richard, at the outset, in precarious command of a dangerous and complex