

"Hark What Discord Follows"

Ian Linklater

"Richard II" is the first play in the second Tetralogy or group of plays broadly about the history of England from 1399 to 1415. It is followed by the two parts of Henry IV and climaxes in the so-called English Epic play Henry V. The first Tetralogy, obviously written before, comprises the three parts of Henry VI and culminates in "Richard III" and deals with the period of the Wars of the Roses from 1420 to the accession of Henry Tudor in 1485, which final date marks the beginning of the Tudor Dynasty.

The first question that we need to consider is why Shakespeare chose to write eight plays (ten, if we include King John and Henry VIII) based upon English History. We may adduce three main reasons. The first is the renewed interest in the past (deriving from the classical historians) and the desire to learn from it. Sir Walter Raleigh confidently asserts the educative discipline of History, which was axiomatic at the Renaissance, and maintains that there are certain general propositions that may be culled from past records, which may, if men will only heed them, prevent the recurrence of disaster. Certainly, as we shall see, the Elizabethans took an almost pathological interest in the period of the Wars of the Roses, which had been particularly disastrous for England. Secondly, the retelling of the history of a country made part of the assertion of the new nationalisms, which had been subsumed for so long a period of time under the sway of the universal church, and form a perceptible part of the humanism of the time, with its emphasis on individuality. Thirdly, Shakespeare was writing his histories when England was isolated from Europe and under constant menace of external intervention - and sharply aware of her own danger as a beleaguered identity - a time persistently troubled by fears of rebellion and a disputed succession.

Finally, the characteristic features of the Tudor historiography (this includes the drama) were the deliberate creation of Henry VII and his advisers. There was an imposition of a special reading upon recent English History, which represented the troubles of the fifteenth century as a prelude to deliverance. A century of civil wars had been God's punishment for past crimes all stemming from the

deposition and murder of Richard II, but in final token of forgiveness He had brought Henry VII to the throne and sealed the country's peace in the symbolic marriage of Henry and Elizabeth, thus uniting the warring houses of Lancaster and York. Indeed, at the close of "Richard III", and the chronological end of the Tetralogies Henry Tudor, Earl of Richmond, appears more as a symbolic figure than a man, as if sent by God. Shakespeare owed a particular debt to Edward Hall, who may be called the historian laureate of the Tudor house.

Irvin Ribner in "The English History Plays in the Age of Shakespeare" has usefully defined the true historical play as one in which the moral choices of the characters are determined by national and political concerns which the dramatist accepts and does not try to alter. He may vary details and draw his own conclusions, but the "plot" is essentially pre-determined. But as M.M. Reese has said so well, referring to the History Plays: "through imagery, the ordering of the plot, the silent manipulation of the source material, we become aware of layers and refinements of meaning so rich and subtle that the bare prose paraphrase is seen to be no more than a partial revelation of Shakespeare's mind."

Let us return briefly, then, to the total structure of the second Tetralogy. "Richard II" constitutes the prologue, where the deposition of the true King, however unfit he was to rule, is seen as a besetting sin which will finally plunge England into 65 years of civil turmoil. The two parts of Henry IV show how Bolingbroke's reign as king was never a peaceful one, and how the memory of his sins dogs him into the grave. It also shows us the education of Prince Hal (the future king Henry V) with his low companions in Eastcheap-particularly of course Sir John Falstaff - an elaborate portrait of the common life of the time. The legend of Prince Hal's sudden change from wildness to an acceptance of his royal burden was firmly established in popular opinion, but Shakespeare makes plain the Prince's real intentions from the start. He has put on a kind of moral disguise in order to know his people better and one day rule them better. The final play of the "Tetralogy" - the English epic-shows us Prince Hal as Henry V, his victory over the great French armies at Agincourt - the complete portrait of what the King should be - the King who could give strong, disciplined leadership to a finally united country.

The other three plays in the Tetralogy are called histories, but the full title of "Richard II" is "The Tragedy of King Richard the Second". This, then, is a Tragedy and has the form and shape of such a play. Richard, the anointed King, is to be seen as the victim of a flaw in his own mind. His fall is to be precipitate, the moment

of peripeteia is sharply marked, and the play continues through anagnorisis to final self knowledge. The language and imagery of the play are formal and elaborate, and reflect a concern to show the downfall of a traditional conception of royalty and its replacement by a political force constructed on a desire for power. Richard's voice is always the poetic voice of the imagination, his opponent, Bolingbroke's, more prosaic and calculating and rooted in reality. The two main characters, Richard and Bolingbroke, are opposing mirrors of the other's vices and virtues, strength and weakness. At the end of the play we are able to perceive that Henry Bolingbroke's triumph as King of England is at the same time his moral downfall as a man, in the same manner Richard's downfall as a King leads to his regeneration as a man.

The play opens with Henry Bolingbroke, son of John of Gaunt, and Richard's cousin, accusing Thomas Mowbray, Duke of Norfolk (and a friend and servant of Richard's) of being concerned in the murder of Richard's uncle, the Duke of Gloucester. Mowbray retorts by calling Bolingbroke "a most degenerate traitor". All this in the presence of King Richard, who orders a trial by combat, but at the last moment exiles Mowbray for life, and Bolingbroke for then years. It would have been plain enough to the audience that Bolingbroke was indirectly defying the King, for Richard had been implicated in the murder of this Duke, his uncle. Richard must see his cousin, then as presenting a threat to his position.

In the following scenes we see Richard at his worst, in his flippantly callous treatment of the dying John of Gaunt, and immediately on the news of his death the announcement of his decision to seize the dead man's possessions to finance his military expedition to Ireland, and ignores his uncle York's warning.

"Take Hereford's rights away, and take from Time
His charters and his customary rights; Let not to-
morrow then ensue to-day; Be not thyself; for how
art thou a king
But by fair sequence and succession?"

This is most astonishing miscalculation. He thus turns Bolingbroke into an implacable enemy, who shortly afterwards, whilst Richard is away in Ireland, returns to England to claim his inheritance and is joined by the Earl of Northumberland and other dissident nobles.

When Richard returns from Ireland, he finds England already

menaced by rebellion, and enters into a kind of existential crisis, as if everything that he so totally believed in has suddenly been put to the question. He seems incapable of action, and passively surrenders himself into Bolingbroke's hands:

K. Rich. 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 Bolingbroke'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 depos'd,
 Some poison'd by their wives, some sleeping kill'd;
 All murder'd: for within the hollow crown
 That rounds the mortal temples of a king
 Keeps Death his court, and there the antick 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 humour'd thus
 Comes at the last, and with a little pin
 Bores though 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?

In this speech, and again and again through the play, a powerful image appears, that of the king as actor - the mere idea of Death, the mocking antic grinning audience turns the King into an

actor - and his reign as a scene. We may see that a King, at his coronation partakes of the AEVUM, becomes the symbol of things which are timeless, beyond the limitations of a single, human personality. An individual human nature which is of necessity transient has become the embodiment of an eternal impersonal ideal. The position of the King as a symbol is emphasized by ritual ceremony, pageant and spectacle. He moves about his kingdom in the midst of a continual drama.

At the moment of death, or deposition (which, as we will see, and as Richard soon acknowledges to himself, means imminent death) the King is parted from his role, with which he had been so totally identified, and his drama comes to an end. Richard for the rest of the play, through suffering, has to learn to be a man.

The climactic point of the play is to be found in the deposition scene. Bolingbroke has demanded, after his proclamation as King, that Richard should publicly renounce his crown in Westminster Hall. Henry Bolingbroke, in this scene, shows his lack of comprehension of the mystical nature of Divine right. He stands by in silent contempt while Richard enacts his martyrdom. But Richard is aware of who he is and what he is doing. He knows that he is the anointed holder of a sacred office. He knows that God will demand atonement for the wrong done to his deputy elect. This assurance enables him to steal the scene in which he is brought before Bolingbroke to be formally deposed. What had been planned by Henry and his main accomplice, the Earl of Northumberland, had been a ritual of confession and abdication "so that" as Henry says. "we will proceed without suspicion." The Bishop of Carlisle is the first to change the direction with his passionate protest against the condemnation of an anointed King by one of his subjects before the arrival of Richard.

Car. Marry, God forbid!

Worst in this royal presence may I speak,
 Yet best baseeming me to speak the truth.
 Would God that any in this noble presence
 Were enough noble to be upright judge
 Of noble Richard! then, true noblesse would
 Learn him forbearance from so foul a wrong.
 What subject can give sentence on his king?
 And who sits here that is not Richard's subject?
 Thieves are not judg'd but they are by to hear,
 Although apparent guilt be seen in them;
 And shall the figure of God's majesty,

His captain, steward, deputy elect,
 Anointed, crowned, planted many years,
 Be judg'd by subject and inferior breath,
 And he himself not present? O! forfend it, God,
 That in a Christian climate souls refin'd
 Should show so heinous, black, obscene a deed.
 I speak to subjects, and a subject speaks,
 Stirr'd up by God thus boldly for his king.
 My Lord of Hereford here, whom you call king,
 Is a foul traitor to proud Hereford's king;
 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
 Shall here inhabit, and this land be call'd
 The field of Golgotha and dead men's skulls.
 O! if you rear this house against this house,
 It will the woefullest division prove
 That ever fell upon this cursed earth.
 Prevent it, resist it, let it not be so,
 Lest child, child's children, cry against you
 'woe!'

Richard, in this time of disaster, has gained a new authority. He continually brings home to the assembled lords the enormity of the crime they have committed and are forcing him to commit.

K.Rich. Ay, no; no, ay; for I must nothing be;
 Therefore no no; for I resign to thee.
 Now mark me how I will undo myself:
 I give this heavy weight from off my head,
 And this unwieldy sceptre from my hand,
 The pride of kingly away from out my heart;
 With mine own tears I wash away my balm,
 With mine own hands I give away my crown,
 With mine own tongue deny my sacred state,
 With mine own breath release all ~~deuteous~~ rites:
 All pomp and majesty I do forswear;
 My manors, rents, revenues, I forego;

My acts, decrees, and statutes I deny:
 God pardon all oaths that are broke to me!
 God keep all vows unbroke are made to thee!
 Make me, that nothing have, with nothing griev'd,
 And thou with all pleas'd, that hast all achiev'd!
 Long mayst thou live in Richard's seat to sit,
 And soon lie Richard in an earthy pit!
 God save King Henry, unking'd Richard says,
 And send him many years of sunshine days!
 What more remains?

In this scene we see the two protagonists nicely balanced. Richard is the lawful King - but he has been irresponsible, indecisive and misled by flatterers - this he sees for himself reflected in the mirror. Bolingbroke is a competent ruler but he has broken his oath and exhibits some of the characteristics of the Machiavel. Richard is imaginative and voluble - Bolingbroke is prosaic and taciturn. The final act shows Richard learning from his suffering, imprisoned in Pomfret Castle and awaiting death - for a usurping monarch cannot leave alive the true King, who immediately becomes the focal point for opposition and rebellion. He achieves a new humility and a recognition of his own faults. He has become superior to Bolingbroke.

The play draws to its close. Sir Piers Exton claims to have heard Bolingbroke say "Have I no friend will rid me of this living fear?", and journeys to Pomfret Castle to murder Richard. Richard reacts as a true Pluntagenet, killing Exton's two accomplices, and dying from Exton's sword thrust, curses the murderers for spilling a King's blood.

Exton. Great king, within this coffin I present
 Thy buried fear; herein all breathless lies
 The mightiest of thy greatest enemies,
 Richard of Bourdeaux, by me hither brought
 Boling. Exton, I thank thee not; for thou hast wrought
 A deed of slander with thy fatal hand
 Upon my head and all this famous land.
 Exton. From your own mouth, my lord, did I this deed.
 Boling. They love not poison that do poison need,
 Nor do I thee: though I did wish him dead,
 I hate the murderer, love him murdered.
 The guilt of conscience take thou for thy labour,
 But neither my good word nor princely favour:
 With Cain go wander through the shade of night,

And never show thy head by day nor light.
 Lords, I protest, my soul is full of woe,
 That blood should sprinkle me to make me grow:
 Come, mourn with me for that I do lament,
 And put on sullen black incontinent .
 I'll make a voyage to the Holy Land,
 To wash this blood off from my guilty hand,
 March sadly after; grace my mournings here,
 I weeping after this untimely bier. (Exeunt)

The play, then, has come to an end. The structure is complete and Richard is safely in his grave. Henry Bolingbroke's "buried fear" is in the ground, but remains to fester in his mind. If Richard's tragedy ends in a kind of triumph, Henry's is about to begin. On this ominous note the curtain on the inner stage falls.

NOTE ON IMAGERY

In the earlier plays, the imagery was decorative rather than organic.

"...images, however beautiful, though faithfully copied from nature, and as accurately represented in words, do not of themselves characterize the poet. They become proofs of original genius only as far as they are modified by a predominant passion; or by associated thoughts or images awakened by that passion; or when they have the effect of reducing multitude to unity, or succession to an instant; or lastly, when a human and intellectual life is transferred to them from the poet's own spirit."

In "Richard II" symbolism is dominated by the related words earth, land, ground, the image of the untended garden, the iteration of blood and tongue, the sweet/sour antithesis, and of course, the Actor image. It has been said that "Thanks to its tightly interwoven imagery, "Richard II" has a poetic unity that is unsurpassed in any of the great tragedies".

The final choric undertone gives us the fusion of Richard's tragedy and England's - the speeches about exile in the first act, John of Gaunt's speeches, Richard's passionate love for the English earth - the emblematic gardener's scene -, the Bishop of Carlisle's prophecy before he ascends the throne.

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