“By the choise and inuitation of al the realme”: Richard II and Elizabethan Press Censorship

Cyndia Susan Clegg

Shakespeare’s Richard II has come to serve as a touchstone for discussions of state authority in early modern England, either, as Annabel Patterson has suggested, as “one of those puzzling incidents of noncensorship”¹ or, as literary histories (old and new) have maintained, as a representative event in a narration of control and subversion. The play’s representation of either Bolingbroke’s usurpation or Richard’s deposition (depending on the critical interest) has been seen to threaten authority as, on the one hand, the specific model for Essex’s 1601 rebellion or, on the other, a general assault on the ideology of political order. While no convincing evidence has been set forth to suggest that the authorities employed censorship to prevent any improper use of Shakespeare’s play subsequent to 1601, the “new additions of the Parliament Scene and the deposing of King Richard” in the 1608 printed play (after their absence from the play’s three Elizabethan quartos) has long engendered debate on whether or not Richard II was censored during the reign of Elizabeth I.² The most recent voices in this conversation—David Bergeron’s, Janet Clare’s, and Leeds Barroll’s—while they fail to resolve the debate, serve to delineate its terms.³ Bergeron rejects political censorship principally on the grounds that, unstable and carnivalesque, the entire text of Richard II and not simply the deposition scene “mocks tidy assumptions”; for modern editors to account for the 1608 addition of the deposition scene as a restoration of censored text is to attempt to order carnival.⁴ Barroll rejects political censorship of Richard II because historical evidence does not support “a narrative in which the monarch-as-authority-figure views drama as a special and vital medium with potentialities for subversion, or for the enhance-

² Both Q4 (1608) and Q5 (1615) carry the title-page advertisement for the additions, though a variant title page exists for Q4 which lacks the advertisement. For this study, unless otherwise stated, I quote from the Q4 text. On the lack of evidence for censorship of RII, see, among others, Richard Dutton, Mastering the Revels: The Regulation and Censorship of English Renaissance Drama (Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 1991), 126–27.
⁴ Bergeron, 42–43. Bergeron’s essay offers a nuanced expansion of his earlier conclusions in “The Deposition Scene in Richard II” (Renaissance Papers [1974]: 31–37) that censorship lacked “concrete basis in fact,” since the Elizabethan quartos were published “without . . . violence to the text,” and the Q1 text “makes dramatic sense without lines 154–318” (37).
ment of the royal image, or for intellectual entertainment." Janet Clare argues the case for censorship, accepting a government interest in drama rejected by both Barroll and Bergeron. According to Clare, Shakespeare understood that the "intractable political issues" he was dealing with "demanded cautious representation," but he left off in the deposition scene the caution he exercised elsewhere. Clare concludes that "the explicit portrayal of deposition and usurpation was a risk which elicited the interference of the Master of the Revels and the suppression of the most theatrical moment in the play." The recent contributions of Bergeron and Clare do little to change the terms of the traditional debate. Bergeron's recognition of the play's carnivalesque quality may invert Ernest Talbert's conclusion that "Shakespeare's artistry was purposefully equivocal," but for both Bergeron and Talbert, the deposition scene's aesthetic consonance with the rest of the play argues against political censorship. Nor does Clare add much to conventional views on the dangers of representing usurpation. Barroll alone, in his exposure of the ahistoricity of new-historicist assumptions and methods and his call for a genuine "new history" free of preconceived ideology, shepherds the conversation to a different plain. I would like to suggest that the paradigm for investigating Richard II's potential censorship during the reign of Elizabeth I be relocated in the local history of texts certainly censored and the practices that suppressed them rather than in the prevailing narratives of political hegemony—of authority and subversion. From this perspective one can argue that the so-called "deposition scene" was perceived as dangerous and was thus absent from the Elizabethan quartos not because it represented usurpation or deposition but because, as the "Parliament Scene," it corroborated late-sixteenth-century resistance theory.

Despite persuasive arguments that "no trouble with the authorities was connected with its publication," Richard II's editors have long had to contend with the fact that in Act 4, scene 1, of the Q4, Q5, and F texts are 164 lines not found in the first three quartos. In textual matters modern editors accept Q1 as the authoritative text for the play except for 4.1.154–318, for which they rely on F, which, since the work of Charlton Hinman, is generally regarded as having possibly been checked against an independent manuscript. A like consensus accounting for the deposition scene's absence from sixteenth-century quartos, however, has not been reached. David Bevington advances the deposition scene as illustrative of government censorship: "The scene of Richard II's deposition (4.1) was considered so provocative by Elizabeth's government that it was censored in the printed quartos of Shakespeare's play during the Queen's lifetime." Following Peter Ure, Andrew Gurr attributes the scene's absence to censorship invoked by the play's "politically sensitive" subject, but he attributes the suppression to the press censors since the "pattern of censorship in playtexts" was quite different from that of other printed books.

5 Barroll, 468.
6 Clare, 93 and 94. See also Janet Clare, 'Art made tongue-tied by authority': Elizabethan and Jacobean Dramatic Censorship (Manchester, UK: Manchester UP, 1990).
8 Talbert, 194.
The bishops who descended on the verse satirists in 1599, the Archbishop of Canterbury in particular, had a sharp and sophisticated eye for anything dangerous in theology or politics. Their record in the last years of Elizabeth is a tribute to their sensitivity. Not so the censor of stage-plays. . . . The different records of the two kinds of censor make it entirely possible that a scene not acceptable to the bishops might be allowed by the Master of the Revels.11

He further concludes that dramatic censorship was unlikely, since “the restoration of a cut made through censorship in a performed text would have been unique, so far as we know, in the history of the drama at this time.”12 Wells and Taylor are far more cautious. Although they admit the possibility of a “controversial original version,” they assign neither a motive for censorship, nor a certain agent: “. . . the actors themselves, the Bishop of London as licensor, or the printers or publishers may have cut the original version of the abdication scene from the papers which served as copy for Q1.”13 Although lacking a unanimous voice on either the motive or mechanism for control, Richard II’s editors are remarkably consistent in holding censorship responsible for the deposition/abdication scene’s sixteenth-century absence. Most, apparently, subscribe to the view so succinctly articulated by Annabel Patterson, that Elizabeth and her ministers engaged in a general “public surveillance” to assure “that the cultural forms of late Elizabethanism took the form they did because the queen and her ministers were watching.”14

Ongoing assumptions about the repressive control of theater and print in early modern England have derived largely from the work of Glynne Wickham and Fredrick Siebert. Wickham envisioned in the Tudor state a “whole machinery of censorship and control” whose evolution Siebert traces in Freedom of the Press in England, 1476–1776.15 Although Richard Dutton has recently forced a reconsideration of the repressiveness of mechanisms for controlling the drama, Siebert’s understanding of press censorship remains influential. According to Siebert, “The rapid rise of the government control of printing took place during the reigns of Henry VIII and Elizabeth,” with Elizabeth I’s reign serving as “the high point of the entire three hundred-year period in the average pattern of the three factors, number and variety of controls, stringency of enforcement, and general compliance with regulations.”16 The impact of this assessment has largely been felt through the tremendous influence of Annabel Patterson’s Censorship and Interpretation.17 While “those famous puzzling incidents of noncensorship” (such as what

12 Gurr, ed., 10.
14 Annabel Patterson, Shakespeare and the Popular Voice (Oxford and Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 81. Barbara Mowat and Paul Werstine, editors of the New Folger Library Shakespeare Richard II (New York: Washington Square Press, 1996), depart from editorial tradition by stating only that “These lines may have been cut from the text for early performances and printings, or they may have been written later and added to the text” (160).
16 Siebert, 2.
17 Patterson defers to Siebert in matters relating to the mechanisms of control. My own approach to censorship focuses only occasionally on law and the formal institutions and mechanisms whereby the press or the pulpit or the theatrical companies were theoretically made subject
Patterson sees as Elizabeth I's recognition of topicality in *Richard II* may suggest a chink in the monolithic structures described by Wickham and Siebert, Patterson's notion of functional ambiguity depends not only on the machinery being intact but on its operation in the shaping of discourses whose intentions were understood equally well by authors and authorities. Though he offers some corrective to Patterson in his *The Later Tudors: England, 1547–1603*, Penry Williams likewise subscribes to Siebert's views of institutional censorship. This reliance on Siebert poses a problem, since his work accounts for the documents of control but fails to locate adequately their inception in the specific economic, religious, and political events that provoked them. Consequently, he assumes that the whole cloth of censorship was woven entirely from the mechanisms of control. Furthermore, he glances only superficially at censored texts and the strategies they employed that prompted their censorship.

My recent work on press censorship during the reign of Elizabeth finds not only a government far less effective in maintaining controls and surveillance of the press but also one far less interested in these matters than many critics have assumed. In *Press Censorship in Elizabethan England*, I reconsider the practice of press censorship by recontextualizing the documents of control and the actual instances of government suppression and by examining the rhetorical strategies of texts actually censored. The following conclusions from my work bear particularly on *Richard II*. Between 1558 and 1603, statutory prohibitions articulated the government's principal areas of concern—treasonous writing, writing on the succession, and libel. When texts violated statutory prohibitions, legal action was taken against their authors and printers (if their authors and printers were English). The Elizabethan religious settlement instituted preprint official authorization that was certainly ecclesiastical in its administration and largely ecclesiastical in its intent. Despite

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18 "Elizabeth I recognized the topical meaning of a production of *Richard II* in 1601, the year of Essex's rebellion and two years after she had imprisoned Sir John Hayward for presuming to publish a prose history of Richard that appeared to encourage Essex; yet the players, after questioning, went free" (Patterson, *Censorship and Interpretation*, 17).


21 By the late sixteenth century, parliamentary statute was regarded as the highest law of the land binding on every subject, though, in its interpretation within the law courts, it was subject to the equity, that is, the divine law and the law of reason. See Samuel E. Thorne's introduction to *A Discourse upon the Exposicion & Understandinge of Statutes* (San Marino, CA: Huntington Library, 1942); and Glenn Burgess, *Absolute Monarchy and the Stuart Constitution* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1996), 174–90.

22 The company licenses issued by the London Stationers have been misinterpreted as mechanisms of preprint censorship. Such misinterpretations assume that the Stationers were government "henchmen." While Queen Mary may have granted a royal charter to the London Company of Stationers in 1557 as a "suitable remedy" to seditious and heretical printing against the Catholic Church, the charter, in practice, created in the Stationers' Company an entity that functioned with considerable independence from the Crown and whose principal interest was in securing exclusively for its members the benefits of a growing economic market. It was to secure such member benefits that the Company issued licenses giving exclusive manufacturing rights to printers and publishers for the titles they registered with the Company. Licenses were often
this, never more than half the books printed in England during Elizabeth’s reign received official scrutiny, nor were unauthorized texts treated as transgressive per se by the government. Even many Continental books were neither confiscated nor suppressed. Eleven royal proclamations were the means by which the majority of texts censored between 1559 and 1603 were controlled. Six of these proclamations addressed Catholic texts issued by Continental presses, one an English political work, and four related to texts associated with radical Protestantism. Furthermore, on a few exceptional occasions agents of Elizabeth’s government took extraordinary actions to censor printed texts.23 These instances and the censorship proclamations argue that press censorship between 1558 and 1603 principally responded ad hoc to religious and political discourses that proved offensive in their reception far more often than in preconceived standards of acceptable discourse. (Indeed, it should be remembered, particularly in theological matters, that the chief means used to control opposition was to answer it in print in texts that often restated the oppositional discourse.) There exists, then, a surprisingly small number of texts written and printed in England that the government deemed transgressive, and these locate Elizabethan press censorship quite precisely in the politics of personality, patronage, and national interest.

This reassessment of censorship practices bears on Richard II in two ways. It argues the unlikelihood of Richard II’s deposition scene being censored for the press for any of the reasons that studies of the play have to this point argued: namely, implicitly libelous parallels between Elizabeth’s reign and Richard’s misgovernment of England or the danger inherent in representing rebellion during the unsettled 1590s. With regard to the latter, no record exists of a printed text having been censored during the reign of Elizabeth for its mention or representation of deposition or rebellion generally,24 even though statutes clearly deemed as treasonous anything advocating rebellion against Elizabeth’s government or “compass[ing] imagin[ing] invent[ing]” “bodily harme” against the queen.25 Although libels that identified Eliza-

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23 The Privy Council twice ordered to be recalled and “reformed” editions of Raphael Holinshed’s Chronicles, the 1587 edition of which had been printed under royal privilege. The Archbishop of Canterbury and the Bishop of London—who had burned books outlawed by royal proclamation—in 1599 issued an order banning satires and epigrams, an action Richard Dutton has appropriately described as quite outside ordinary legal procedure; see “Buggeswords: Samuel Harsnett and the Licensing, Suppression and Afterlife of Dr. John Hayward’s The first part of the life and reign of King Henry IV,” Criticism 35 (1993): 305–39, esp. 309.

24 Holinshed’s Chronicles was censored but certainly not for its representation of rebellion and usurpation. Edmund Tilney’s demand to “Leave out the insurrection wholly & the Cause ther off” from the play Sir Thomas More has been too often applied generally to the literature of the period as an epitome of official censorship. Richard Dutton more appropriately associates Tilney’s anxiety about the representation of riot with anxieties about theater and disorder. Even so, Dutton suggests that the sticking point may have been More’s role in quelling the riot rather than the riot itself. Dutton credits the censorship to Tilney’s “determination not to have a man shown as popular, even heroic, who by the end of the play was to be executed on the orders of the Queeni’s own father” (Mastering the Revels, 84–86, esp. 85).

beth with Richard did circulate, Richard II neither libeled the queen nor treasonously represented rebellion and deposition. Neither did the play violate the statutory mandate against writing about who should succeed Elizabeth.26 While it might be objected that censorship of the deposition scene was a cautionary measure, the fact that its absence does not remove from the play all representation of bad government, rebellion, deposition, or, indeed, “bodely harme” to the king argues against the motives conventionally attributed to the censor. Indeed, if the censor were truly interested in the play’s representation of royal weakness and deposition, would it not have been enough to suit his cause, as Bergeron so aptly puts it, “to glimpse the weak Richard coming down like glistering Phaeton and then next see him ignominiously on his way to prison and certain death?”27

While this understanding of the practice of press censorship during the reign of Elizabeth reinforces Bergeron’s and Barroll’s view that the sixteenth-century quartos of Richard II were not cut by the censors, a qualification is important: although the scene was not censored because of its representation of misguided kingship, rebellion, or deposition, it may have provoked suppression through its representation of Parliament, a representation paralleled in A conference about the next succession (1595) by Robert Parsons, a work that Elizabeth’s government regarded as highly seditious and that was the object of an active censorship campaign. Having said this, I must concede, as have generations of Shakespeare scholars, that no positive evidence exists that 4.1.154–318 was actually suppressed.28 Lacking that evidence, my arguments, like those of my predecessors, are circumstantial. But before I hazard a rationale for the mechanism of the “Parliament Scene’s” suppression—or a circumstantial argument for suppression itself—the circumstances, that is, the local events of 1597–98 that may be seen as relevant to Shakespeare’s play, require revisiting.

In 1595 William Cecil, Lord Burghley, received intelligence about the printing of a book on the Spanish claim to the English throne; the report included a letter written by Catholic William Gifford referring to Robert Parsons as the book’s author and objecting to the book as “the most pestilent ever made.”29 In the same year Burghley wrote out his own notes on this dangerous book about the rights of the infanta, clearly A conference about the next succession written by Robert Parsons under the pseudonym “R. Doleman.”30 Reports of books seized at ports of entry during these years reveal that books about the

26 The parliamentary statute 13 Eliz., c. 1, made it treason to print, bind, sell, or otherwise publish books or scrolls declaring that Elizabeth “is not or ought not to be Queene of this Realme . . . or that any other person or persons ought of Ryght to be King or Queene of the sayd Realmes” (526).
27 Bergeron, “The Deposition Scene in Richard II,” 35.
28 The question of censorship, however, looks very different if approached from the perspective of the 1608 title page’s “With new additions of the Parliament Scene, and the deposing of King Richard.” The words “Parliament Scene” rather than deposition hold pride of place in the title-page advertisement.
29 Addressed to Thomas Throgmorton and dated June 1595, this letter (PRO, SP 12/252.66) offers a description of the book’s contents that identifies it with Parsons’s A conference about the next succession to the Crowne of Ingland, divided into two partes. . . Where unto is added a genealogie. Published by R. Doleman [R. Parsons, R. Rowlands, and others] ([Antwerp], 1594 [1595]). Citations will follow this edition.
infanta’s claim, including Parsons’s, were the object of rigorous searches. Parsons’s *A conference* was objectionable on many grounds—and to many parties—and continued to be so until the end of the decade. Certainly, as J.H.M. Salmon recognizes, Parsons’s work subscribed to the central tenets of Continental Catholic resistance theory, particularly the secular nature of political society and the monarch’s subjugation under law. Its offense in the 1590s, however, rested more on its particular arguments about the English succession than on its general subscription to resistance theory, as Salmon’s consideration implies. This was not a book on why English Catholics might resist Elizabeth’s authority; it was a book legitimating a Spanish claim to the English throne. It not only flouted English statutory prohibitions against writing on the succession; it violated every statutory definition of treasonous and seditious writing. We can best appreciate government reaction to Parsons’s book by considering it against the background of succession and resistance writing.

Writing about the succession to Elizabeth was not always illegal. The earliest text on the succession to provoke government concern was John Leslie’s 1569 *A defence of the honour of the right highe, mightye and noble Princesse Marie*, which defended Mary, Queen of Scots, against accusations of immoral conduct in matters related to the murder of her husband, Lord Darnley; defended female rule generally; and specifically justified Mary’s claims to the English crown following Elizabeth. Leslie advocated deciding the succession in favor of Mary during Elizabeth’s lifetime in order to prevent the civil unrest that would inevitably occur at the English queen’s death. While the text itself may not have been seditious, Lord Burghley (then Cecil) associated it with the seditious activities of the duke of Norfolk and stayed the London printing. The only part of Leslie’s *Defence of the honour* that could have been seen by Burghley as prejudicial to Elizabeth’s right was a passage related to Henry

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31 See a letter from Edward Holmsden, et al., to Sir Robert Cecil, dated 22 July 1595 (PRO, SP 12/253/28). Also, for means of excluding objectionable printed books, see an anonymous query (PRO, SP 12/261/94). I can find no corroboration in *Statutes of the Realm* or parliamentary journals, however, for the Dictionary of National Biography’s claim that “Parliament made it high treason for any one to have a copy [of Parsons’s book] in his house” (53:415). No treason statutes were passed after 1581, and Parliament did not meet between 1593 and 1597. It appears that the DNB misread Tierney’s notes to Dodd’s Church History of England (5:xcv), which mention high treason in relation to *A conference*. Actually, *A conference* was at the center of the fierce division of English Catholics during the Appellant (or Archpriest) Controversy; one faction supported the Jesuits and their interest in securing a Catholic England under a Spanish monarchy, and the second supported James VI’s claim in exchange for religious toleration. Tierney’s note makes it clear that the pro-James faction accused the pro-Spanish faction of high treason in writing *A conference*. See also T. G. Law, *A Historical Sketch of the Conflicts Between Jesuits and Seculars in the Reign of Elizabeth* (London: David Nutt, 1889).


34 Phillips suggests that the later versions increasingly oppose Elizabeth because they appeal to the Catholic princes of Europe: “in the hope that, moved by pity for the plight of a suffering coreligionist, they will come to her aid with either political or military pressures, or preferably both” (104). Phillips here misreads Leslie’s appeal to the Catholic princes, which actually asks that they come to Mary’s aid “that shee be not defeated of her right”; he publishes his treatise that they might know the “full discourse of the whole cause” (*A treatise touching the right, title, and interest of the most excellent Princesse, Marie, Quene of Scotland* [London, 1584], A4).
VIII’s third act of succession, a passage that denied the validity of Henry’s will. Because the statute of 35 Henry VIII established the succession, Leslie argued, the will was moot, useful only to those who wished to deny Mary Stuart her right to the succession. Leslie’s contention that there were problems with Henry’s will was correct. Two versions existed; neither was signed. While Elizabeth’s own succession was secure by statute, the messy issue of Henry’s wills, departing as they did from common law—as Leslie points out all too clearly—placed royal succession in Chancery’s hands rather than God’s. On the other hand, to concede Leslie’s point that the will was invalid in the case of Mary Stuart’s succession was to invite challenges to Elizabeth’s right to rule from parties who would happily argue that she was illegitimate and therefore excluded from the succession. Further, even if Leslie accepted that Elizabeth held statutory right to the succession, by rehearsing the proliferation of statutes that repeatedly altered the succession during Henry’s reign, he assigned to Parliament an authority over the Crown that Elizabeth was unwilling to recognize.

Leslie’s *Defence of the honour* points to the complex issues that could be, and were, raised in any discussion of the succession. Burghley and Elizabeth may well have agreed with Leslie that Mary Stuart and her heirs were entitled to the English throne when Elizabeth died. To discuss the succession, however, as Leslie demonstrated, inevitably led to privileging one line of inheritance over another, one legal principle over another, or one court—royal, Chancery, or parliamentary—over another. The Tudor succession was never so unsullied—despite its propaganda to the contrary—that it could rest easily under this scrutiny. In 1569/70 Leslie’s book surely led both Elizabeth and Cecil to realize the implications of arguments about the succession—a realization that could have contributed to the 1571 statutory prohibition of written works on this topic.

After Mary’s death in 1587, the Catholic cause looked elsewhere for a successor. The Elizabethan *State Papers* are filled with intelligence about manuscripts and books, largely Continental, advancing various Catholic lines against the claim of the Protestant James VI. A letter dated 31 March 1593 reported to Lord Burghley that Verstegan was printing a book entitled “News from Spain and Holland” which argued for the Spanish right to the English throne. Two years later Parsons’s *A conference about the next succession* appeared. Not only did *A conference* arouse the concerns of Burghley and other English statesmen, it offended many English Catholics, both at home and abroad, who hoped to secure toleration in exchange for their support of James VI. English Catholics openly denounced the Jesuit party, and their

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55 As G. R. Elton has pointed out, the role of Parliament in underwriting royal authority offers an interesting conundrum. On the one hand, Tudor monarchs claimed supremacy over the Church and authority to rule by divine right; on the other, they employed Parliament to issue acts of supremacy to legitimate their authority ("Les Terrae Victrix: The Triumph of Parliamentary Law in the Sixteenth Century" in D. M. Dean and N. L. Jones, *The Parliament of Elizabethan England* [Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990], 15–36). For a discussion of the use of divine-right theory to counter Catholic resistance theory, see Burgess, 91–123.

56 See *Calendar of State Papers, Scotland 1547–1603*, 13 vols. (Edinburgh: Longmans, Brown, Green, Longmans and Roberts, 1858), 4:34–35. In a letter to Cecil, John Leslie (Bishop of Ross) tells of sending "the principal copy" of his *Defence*, "in which I am assured there is nothing to offend her majesty," to "the Queen’s majesty to be ‘consider’d.’"

objections to *A conference* became central to their overall objections to the Jesuits. This book became for them a litmus test of Jesuit support for Spanish interests in England. Henry Neville brought this situation to Robert Cecil’s attention in a letter of 27 June 1599, in which he claimed that the Jesuit party was violently taking the side of the infanta, especially since the publication of Parsons’s book. Neville proposed that the infanta’s claim advanced in *A conference* should, in turn, be used as a test for the national loyalty of English Catholics. He recommended that “Priests and recusants, when apprehended, should be examined whether they have not been solicited or solicited others to subscribe to the infanta’s title.”\(^{38}\) Though Cecil appears not to have followed Neville’s advice (at least officially), Neville’s letter suggests one of the reasons Parsons’s book was perceived as particularly dangerous: it provided in its claims for the infanta a new figure in whom English Catholics, prompted by the Jesuits, could place their hopes for a Catholic monarch in England. According to a letter written by Parsons, William Cardinal Allen had supported *A conference* because “he hoped that on sight of the book, the wise and Catholic part of our nation would join with him, and his friends, in some good means for saving themselves and their country.”\(^{39}\)

While Leslie’s books had been perceived to support Mary Stuart’s claim by prejudicing, though not denying, Elizabeth’s rights, Parsons’s book effectively denied the validity of the entire Tudor line by asserting the primacy of the Spanish claim by way of John of Gaunt. Privileging this old, direct Lancastrian line against the York claim definitely compromised Elizabeth’s right by maintaining that the York claim was subordinate to the Lancastrian and Elizabeth’s indirect Lancastrian claim far weaker still. Parsons argued for the strength of the Lancastrian line by demonstrating that Richard II was legally deposed:

\[\ldots\] for that an kingly authority is giuen them only by the common wealth, \\& that with this expresse condition, that they shal gouerne according to law and equity, that this is the cause of their exaltation aboue other men, that this is the end of their gouer[n]ment, the butt of their authority, the starr and pole by which they ought to direct their sterne, to witt, the good of the people, by the weale of their subiects, by the benefite of the realme, which end being taken away or peruerted, the king becommeth a tyrant, a Tigar, a fearse Lion, a rauening wolfe, a publique enimy, and a bloody murtherer, which were against al reason both natural and moral, that a common wealth could not deliuer it selfe from so eminent a distruction.\(^{40}\)

The deposition itself was justified:

First for that it was done by the choise and inuitation of al the realme or greater and better parte thereof as hath bin said. Secondly for that it was done without slaughter, and thirdly for that the king was deposed by act of parlament, and himselfe conuinced of his vnworthy gouer[n]ment, and brought to confesse that he was worthy depriued, and that he willingly and freely resigned the same.\ldots\(^{41}\)

With regard to the legitimacy of the Lancastrian succession over that of the York, Parsons says,

\(^{38}\) Letter from Sir Henry Neville to Robert Cecil with enclosed letters by W. Tresham and Charles Paget, 27 June 1599 (PRO, SP 12/271.29).

\(^{39}\) Letter from Robert Parsons, 1599 (PRO, SP 12/271.29).


And first of all it is to be understood, that at that very time when King Richard was deposed, the house of York had no pretence or little at all to the crown, for that Edmond Mortimer earl of March, nephew to the lady Phillip, was then alive, with his sister Anne Mortimer married to Richard earl of Cambri[d]ge, by which Anne the house of York did after make their claim, but could not do so yet, for that the said Edmond her brother was living.42

Parsons here privileges the elder brother’s claim over the younger’s and male inheritance over female. Henry IV claimed his right to the crown through his father, John of Gaunt, duke of Lancaster. Any York claim was subordinate to this, first, because the duke of York was younger than the duke of Lancaster and, second, because his actual heirs made the York claim through the female.43 Whatever his objectivity in discussing the York claim, Parsons finally concludes that York kings proceeded to the throne by bloodshed and enjoyed violent reigns while Lancastrians were good kings. Since he identifies Henry VIII as a York king who “passed all the rest in cruelty, toward his own kynred,”44 he doubled his offense to Elizabeth.

The nature of A conference’s offense is complex. Parsons refrains from directly attacking Elizabeth’s personal right to rule at the same time that he discredits the entire Tudor succession. Furthermore, the book’s rhetorical restraint, particularly its disinterested and objective tone, lends credibility to arguments entirely untenable to the queen. Not only would any Tudor monarch reject Parsons’s succession argument, but Elizabeth surely would have objected to his characterization of her Tudor predecessors. And even more important to Elizabeth was the issue of Parliament. When, in 1563 and again in 1566, Parliament had pressed the queen to decide the succession, she had made it clear that Parliament was not to address the matter. She alone would determine the succession at a time she deemed convenient. It was, she said, “monstrous that the feet should direct the head.”45 In 1593—when, according to J. E. Neale, the succession was “so notoriously taboo that it had passed out of parliamentary politics”—Peter Wentworth was treated severely by the queen for his efforts to renew parliamentary pressure on her to settle the succession. (Wentworth was sent to the Tower for circulating his manuscript “A Pithie Exhortation to her Majestie for establishing the successor to the crown” and urging Parliament to address the succession.)46 The queen was not merely being arbitrary since, as Joel Hurstfield points out, settling the succession would have deprived her of considerable political leverage.47 To have Parliament decide or even discuss the succession was out of the question.

42 Parsons, A conference, Pt. 2, 72.
43 While Parsons pretends to objectivity by tracing the York claim that Richard had an Act of Succession passed in Parliament in favor of Edmund Mortimer, heir to the duke of Clarence, through his daughter, Parsons dismisses the legitimacy of this claim of the nephew over the uncle by rehearsing instances favoring the uncle.
45 Quoted here from J. E. Neale, Elizabeth I and Her Parliaments, 1559–1581 (London: Jonathan Cape, 1953), 150.
46 Neale, 251. Wentworth’s “Pithie Exhortation,” together with his response to A conference, was printed in Scotland by Robert Waldegrave, the king’s printer, after Wentworth’s death.
It is against this backdrop that Parsons’s *A conference* and Shakespeare’s *Richard II* were written.

The associations between *Richard II* and Parsons’s tract are striking, but I do not intend to suggest that Shakespeare’s play—with or without the Parliament scene—should be read as a roman à clef to Elizabethan arguments on the succession. Indeed, each time I read and teach the play, I am struck by the degree to which Shakespeare’s *Richard II* creates an uneasy dialectic between alternative views of succession, alternative views of kingship, and alternative views of the actions of both Richard II and Bolingbroke. Any resolutions the play makes of this dialectic are tentative and tenuous, ultimately leaving judgment to the audience. The play’s one element that does not participate in this dialectic is Parliament.

The version of the “Parliament Scane” that appears in Q4 (1608) differs in many details from that printed in the Folio and is worth our attention. The Q4 stage direction that opens the scene containing the deposition is “Enter Bulingbrooke, Aumerle, and others” (G3v)—no mention is made of Parliament, despite the fact that several lines later the summoning of Richard makes it clear that the deposition is taking place in Parliament.48 After Northumberland arrests Carlisle for his condemnation of Bolingbroke, Northumberland turns to the lords with the request that they take action on an appeal from the commons.

May it please you Lords, to graunt the common suite,
Fetch hither Richard, that in common view
He may surrender, so we shall proceed without suspition.

(H1v)

Most of the critical attention that has been given to the “deposition scene” has focused either on the extraordinary ritual of the transfer of power or on Richard’s demeanor. Behind all this, however, is not Bolingbroke’s voice but, especially in Q4, the voice of Northumberland, who is apparently presenting a petition from the commons to the assembled lords.49 The “common suite” (“that in common view / He may surrender”), a vestige of Shakespeare’s source, is explained later by Northumberland when he calls on Richard to read

These accusations, and these greeuous crimes,
Committed by your person, and your followers,
Against the State and profit of this Land;

48 The 1608 and 1615 texts both lack stage directions mentioning Parliament. The Folio, however, reintroduces the stage direction “enter as to the Parliament” present in the sixteenth-century quartos, even though it contains the Parliament/deposition scene. It is notable, however, that F lacks the link made by Northumberland between the commons’ suit and the summoning of Richard (see below, n. 56).

49 At the time of Richard II, the principal business of the commons was to petition the lords and the king. Petitions were written down and sent to the lords, where they were read by a member of that body. Communication between the two bodies, which later became institutionalized in the clerk of the Parliament and other offices, would have been less formal in 1399. The procedure whereby the commons’ suit is sent to the lords in Holinshed’s *Chronicles* is similarly ill defined. It was not unreasonable, then, for Shakespeare to have Northumberland present the commons’ suit. For a discussion of the evolution of parliamentary procedure, see A. R. Myers’s *Crown, Household and Parliament in Fifteenth Century England* (London: Hambledon Press, 1985), 37–40.
According to Holinshed’s *Chronicles*, after Henry IV ascended the throne, a request came to the lords from the commons “that sith king Richard had resigned, and was lawfullie deposed from his roiall dignitie, he might have judgement decreed against him, so as the realme were not troubled by him, and that the causes of his deposing might be published through the realme for satisfieng of the people.”50 In Holinshed these causes (which are themselves published in the *Chronicles*) were first drawn up in a parliament Bolingbroke summoned in Richard’s name and in which deposition was urged.51 “[N]otwithstanding,” Richard “was easilie persuaded to renounce his crowne and princelie preheminence.”52 The commons and the lords assembled at Westminster “admitted and confirmed” the resignation. Even so, it was determined “in avoiding of all suspicions and surmis of evil disposed persons,” the causes against Richard should be read, but “other causes more needfull as then to be preferred, the reading of those articles at that season was deferred.”53 Not until after Henry IV’s accession did the commons sue for the publication of the causes. Throughout his account Holinshed emphasizes the efforts of Bolingbroke and his followers to justify the deposition by emphasizing both Richard’s culpability and his willing renunciation of the crown.54 The sequence of events in Holinshed makes clear three things about the role of Parliament. First, though it met to draw up articles accusing Richard of wrongdoing and to urge his deposition, Richard, “notwithstanding” Parliament’s action, renounced his crown. Second, Parliament’s role was not in urging deposition but in consenting to abdication. Third, the commons did not initiate any action that directly or indirectly promoted Richard’s abdication, though it did call for the publication of causes against Richard *ex post facto* to discourage potential opposition.

Shakespeare’s 1608 compression, elision, and inversion of these events serve compelling dramatic ends, and in most respects the scene follows Holinshed’s account. The ritual of Richard’s abdication enacts what Holinshed had simply reported: that Richard, “now in the hands of his enimies, and utterlie despairing of all comfort,” was “easilie persuaded” to abdicate.55 Likewise, the end of the commons’ suit was that Bolingbroke and his allies might “proceed without suspition” (“auoiding of all suspicions and surmis of evil disposed persons” in Holinshed). In Shakespeare, however, the events of at least three distinct parliamentary actions that in Holinshed represent Parliament’s voice (both lords and commons) as *consenting* to Richard’s abdication and Henry’s accession are compressed into one scene whose inverted

51 Holinshed, 3:502.
52 Holinshed, 3:503.
53 Holinshed, 3:505.
54 Despite the *Chronicles*’ documentary evidence legitimizing the deposition, the chronicler’s editorial comments in the 1587 edition commend Richard’s rule and accuse Bolingbroke of political opportunism. Thus the whole *Chronicle account* (3:500–508) participates in the kind of double vision that pervades Shakespeare’s play.
55 Holinshed, 3:503.
sequence could be read as implying that commons urged Richard’s deposition. While the Folio version separates Northumberland’s “May it please you, Lords, to grant the Commons Suit” from Bolingbroke’s “Fetch hither Richard, that in common view / He may surrender: so we shall proceed / Without suspicion,” Q4 makes this one continuous speech by Northumberland, suggesting that the common suit is to summon the king and call for his deposition.56

While the Folio text seems to diminish the commons’ role in Richard’s abdication/deposition, the Folio, Q4, and Q5 texts all contain Northumberland’s repeated demand to Richard that he should answer the articles put forth by the commons (a notable departure from Holinshed). Indeed, Northumberland presses his suit until Bolingbroke tells him to desist. To which Northumberland replies, “The Commons will not then be satisfy’d” (H3v). Northumberland’s repeated appeal to Richard achieves dramatically the emphasis found in Holinshed—namely, that the articles were intended to answer Bolingbroke’s critics by affirming Richard’s culpability; but his return to the commons’ suit before Richard has completed his abdication confers on Parliament, particularly on the commons, an authority over the monarch far more consonant with resistance theory than with the government’s understanding of parliamentary authority.58 Northumberland’s persistent call for the common suit, particularly when conjoined with Q4’s suggestion that it is the common suit not only that Richard affirm the articles condemning him but also that he be “fetched” to abdicate in common view, seems to corroborate Parsons’s statement that “the king was deposed by act of parliament, and himselfe conuinced of his vnworthy gouernment.” Parsons’s view of Parliament’s role in legitimizing sovereignty differs significantly from widely held Elizabethan commonplaces on these matters. As Ernest Talbert has pointed out, Elizabethan political thought may well have accepted that Parliament “gave the forme of succession to the crowne,” but Thomas Smith also makes it clear in The Commonwealth of England that Parliament constituted “either in person, or by procuration and attorné” the entire realm of England, including the prince “(be he king or Queene).”59 From Smith’s perspective, it was inconceivable that Parliament could act independently of the ruler, even though this was the position of Parsons and other authors of sixteenth-century resistance theory. Efforts in the mid-1560s and early 1590s to raise the

56 Most modern editors accept the Folio text, which reads:

[Northumberland.] . . . May it please you, Lords, to grant the Commons Suit?
Bull. Fetch hither Richard, that in common view
He may surrender: so we shall proceed
Without suspicion.

57 “Commons” is capitalized in Q4 and F, and Q4 and Q5 give “satisfied.”

58 It is important to note that throughout the Parliament/deposition scene, Richard refers to himself as king, even though he says “God saue the King, although I be not hee, / And yet Amen, if heauen do thinke him mee” (Hlv). The scene ends with Bolingbroke’s announcement that his coronation will be on “Wednesday next” (H3v).

issue in Parliament presumed that Elizabeth would settle the succession and Parliament would consent, not that the succession would be determined "by the choise and inuition of al the realme," embodied in Parliament. The distinction here between what was and was not acceptable is subtle. Smith may deem Parliament "the most high and absolute powere of the realme of England," but what is done by Parliament "is the Princes and the whole realmes deede."\(^60\) In Q4 Richard II, however, Northumberland’s demand that Richard respond to the commons’ suit implies that Parliament can and does act without the king, and, indeed, that Parliament takes precedence over the king and can dictate terms to him. Such apparent corroboration of views expressed in another text that genuinely offended the state suggests why Richard II’s Parliament/deposition scene may have been censored.

Representing Parliament as an agency of deposition might not in itself provoke censorship. Another Elizabethan account of Parliament’s authority, that of William Harrison in Holinshed’s Chronicles, was not censored even though Harrison wrote in “An Historickal description of the Iland of Britain” that Parliament “hath the most high and absolute power of the realme, for thereby kings and mightie princes haue from time to time beene deposed from their thrones.”\(^61\) The government’s failure to suppress Harrison’s view of Parliament in 1587, however, actually argues for the Parliament/deposition scene’s suppression in 1597. Ten years earlier the question of parliamentary deposition was not foremost in the arguments of oppositional literature. Indeed, in February 1587, when Holinshed’s Chronicles received official scrutiny and parts were suppressed or revised, the government’s principal concern was the execution of Mary, Queen of Scots, who had been tried and condemned for treason. Prior to that point Catholic opposition literature had attacked Elizabeth’s counselors, justified Catholic opposition on religious grounds, or argued for Mary’s succession.\(^62\) Not until Parsons argued that the Spanish infanta’s succession to the crown of England was legitimate because Parliament deposed Richard II did Parliament’s powers become incorporated into oppositional discourse. Parsons’s book thus created in the mid-1590s an issue where one had not existed before. Richard II’s composition is usually assigned to mid-1595, probably before A conference actually appeared in England and before the representation of parliamentary deposition would have been viewed as provocative.\(^63\) It is not unreasonable, then, to assume that Shakespeare could have penned his play, in the same way that Harrison had written on Parliament’s authority, without any sense that it participated in any way in

\(^{60}\) Smith, 45 and 46.

\(^{61}\) Holinshed, 1:173.

\(^{62}\) See, for example, A Treatise of Treasons Against Q. Elizabeth, and the Crowne of England (London, 1572); and Leicester’s Commonwealth, The copie of a letter written by a master of arte of Cambrige (1584). Gregory Martin’s A Treatise of Schism (1578) supported the secret practice of Catholic devotions, and William Allen’s True Sincere and Modest Defence of English Catholiques ... (1584) argued “That the Pope hath power to excommunicate or deprive a Prince in case of Heresie or Apostacie; and consequentlie, to absolve his subjects from their othe and obedience to him; or to stand in defence of them selves and the Catholique faith against him” (72).

\(^{63}\) It is clear from a 12 June 1595 letter that A conference had not yet made its way to England (PRO, SP 12/253). Based on Shakespeare’s reliance on Samuel Daniel’s The Civil Wars, Gurr maintains that Richard II could not have been completed before the appearance of Daniel’s poem, which Gurr places in mid-1595, even though the work was entered in the Stationers’ Registers on 11 October 1594 (1).
a discourse of resistance. Likewise, performing the play with the Parliament/deposition scene present may not have been a problem.

If the Parliament/deposition scene was indeed censored, as it seems reasonable to believe, the question remains, by whom? The alternatives are the author himself, the Master of the Revels, or a member of the panel of ecclesiastical reviewers appointed by the Archbishop of Canterbury.\(^{64}\) That the censorship was done with the broadest stroke of the censor’s pen, I believe, argues against authorial or Revels Office censorship. An entire sequence of action, not all of which is offensive, was cut. When read carefully, the Parliament/deposition scene actually argues that Richard’s abdication did not clear suspicion and therefore legitimize Bolingbroke’s actions. Despite Northumberland’s repeated appeal to Richard to read the articles, he never does. Janet Clare’s examination of Revels Office censorship of the manuscript of Sir Thomas More indicates that the Revels censor read fairly carefully, marking particular passages and thereby allowing for revision.\(^{65}\) Richard II’s loss of 164 lines does not reflect this kind of consideration. Andrew Gurr’s observation that the deposition scene was never cut from the stage version on the grounds of known playing practices may hold for Revels censorship practices as well.

The censor’s broad penstrokes, however, do resemble the little we know about press censorship practices. According to ecclesiastical authorizer Samuel Harsnett, the “custome and vse” was “for eny man that entended in good meaning to put a booke in print, the Author him selfe to present the booke vnto the Examiner and to acquaynt him with his scope and purpose in the same.” Even so, Harsnett admitted that when appealed to by a member of the Bishop of London’s household on an author’s behalf, he “sett to his hand sodeinlie as mooued by his freind neuer reading (vppon his saluation) more then one page of the hedlesse pamphlett.”\(^{66}\) Harsnett’s remarks are revealing. Apparently, rather than scrutinizing a text in the quiet of a library, the authorizer discussed the text with the author.\(^{67}\) According to Greg, “such converse between author and examiner, if it was really customary, carries with it a suggestion that a book might be allowed without further scrutiny upon the author’s assurance regarding his motive in writing it.”\(^{68}\)

Even when the ecclesiastical authorizers read texts, what precisely they were looking for is not altogether clear. Many of the satires banned by the Archbishop of Canterbury in 1599 had received ecclesiastical approval. Some of

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\(^{64}\) Wells and Taylor suggest that the Bishop of London may have been the censor. As heads of the High Commission, both the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Bishop of London served as ecclesiastical authorizers. In 1588 Archbishop Whitgift had appointed a panel of junior and senior authorizers to whom texts were taken for review prior to printing. In 1597, of the forty-seven books entered in the Stationers’ Registers with notice of ecclesiastical authorization, the Bishop of London authorized only two.


\(^{66}\) This record (PRO, SP 12/275.31) is reprinted in full in W. W. Greg, “Samuel Harsnett and Hayward’s ‘Henry IV,’” *The Library*, 5th ser., 11 (1956): 1–10, esp. 4–5. Given the circumstances of this interrogatory, Harsnett may be overstating the uniqueness of the situation. Harsnett’s testimony sought to justify himself against Hayward’s attempt “to excuse his publishinge the sayd pamphlett, as being allowed and approved” by Harsnett (4). I concur with Greg’s conclusion that “it is nevertheless impossible to avoid the impression that at the end of Elizabeth’s reign ecclesiastical licensing for the press was more casual and less effective than the authorities can have intended or perhaps realized” (8).

\(^{67}\) Greg rightly observes that members of the Stationers Company frequently sought authorizations as well (6).

\(^{68}\) Greg, 7.
what the authorizers sought is suggested by the kinds of texts that did and did not receive ecclesiastical authorization. As we have seen, the kinds of works that were most likely to receive ecclesiastical scrutiny were religious and political texts, and either foreign-language texts or their translations. Indeed, in 1597 nearly three quarters of the authorized texts fell into these categories. Statistics conceal an important consideration: political and religious texts in the 1590s were often one and the same. While Samuel Harsnett may have protested himself “a poore divine unacquainted with bookes and arguments of state, and with consequences of that nature,” colleagues in the ecclesiastical establishment, such as John Aylmer, Thomas Bilson, and John Bridges, were actively engaged in rejecting claims of papal authority over secular rulers and rejecting Catholic views of resistance. These certainly would have been matters with which ecclesiastical preprint review would have been concerned, particularly since the kind of Catholic works these clerics were responding to were the books that were being censored by the state, particularly Parsons’s A conference. It is, then, not difficult to imagine that an ecclesiastical authorizer, reading quickly through Shakespeare’s text while someone from the Lord Chamberlain’s Men or the printing house stood by, would require summarily that the play be printed without the Parliament scene.

In Richard II’s Parliament/deposition scene’s gross corroboration of Parsons, we have a motive for censorship; in the persons and concerns of the ecclesiastical authorizers, we have a means. The historical record, however, offers no clear evidence of a link between the two. The Stationers’ Registers records Andrew Wise’s company license for Shakespeare’s Richard II “by appoyntment from master Warden man.” Shakespeare’s play may have been one of those anomalies found by W. W. Greg in Richard Robinson’s “Eupolemia”: that is, it may be one of those works for which “failure on the part of the Clerk to mention by whom the license [i.e., authority] was granted did not imply an absence of license.” The ecclesiastical authorizers did not often concern themselves with literary texts, but in this instance, even without notice of their authority in the Registers, circumstances argue that they did.

In “A New History for Shakespeare and His Time,” Leeds Barroll issues a cautionary warning about overreading government anxieties about politics and playing in early modern England. As Barroll notes, there is considerable evidence that the emerging print culture presented the state with both challenges and opportunities of a different kind. The state responded to the

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69 According to the Registers, never more than fifty percent of books printed in a given year received ecclesiastical scrutiny. In 1597 only fifty-one percent of the books entered in the Registers were entered with notice of ecclesiastical authorization. With regard to the reliability of the Registers, see W. W. Greg, “Richard Robinson and the Stationers’ Register” in W. W. Greg, Collected Papers, ed. J. C. Maxwell (Oxford: Clarendon, 1966), 413–23, esp. 421.

70 See Burgess, 99–100.


72 Greg, “Richard Robinson and the Stationers’ Register,” 421. Actually, for the seven titles Robinson mentions that were entered in the Stationers’ Registers, only one received an ecclesiastical authorization that went unrecorded. (Another entered without notice of ecclesiastical authorization was anomalous in that Henry Denham printed Robinson’s translation of Melanchton’s prayers “cum privilegio” under William Seres’s patent, so entry was not required.)

73 That government patronized printers and authors through royal monopolies and that it employed the printed word to counter challenges to its authority reflect its understanding of the promise of the printed word.
challenges by suppressing printed discourse that threatened its authority; at the same time, it engaged the opportunities by answering in print the very texts that offended. In identifying censorship with suppression rather than censure or self-censorship, and in finding the locus of suppression in politics, I am effectively denying a condition of writing in early modern England that has long been assumed and that is usually described as “repressive.” From this perspective, the imaginative writer worked under precisely the same constraints as the Catholic apologist or the religious reformer. Since the treason statutes, the religious settlement, and libel laws were the principal dictates of those constraints, the imaginative writer probably enjoyed considerably more freedom than scholars have heretofore allowed. Reports of literary censorship exist, but in nearly every instance the condition of repressive writing has been vastly overstated by later analysts. The censorship of the Richard II Parliament/deposition scene must not be seen as representative of the conditions under which Shakespeare or any other imaginative writer worked. The scene participated, probably unwittingly, in a representation of parliamentary authority that became objectionable after Parsons’s politically offensive text appeared. Richard II’s Parliament/deposition scene is one of a relatively small number of figures on an expansive (and expanding) landscape of print culture, figures that cast long shadows because they appear in relation to a moment of political crisis attendant on a rising or setting political sun.