A Poised Crown:  
Rival Monarchs in Richard II

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Abstract: Richard II portrays the dethronement of an unsuitable anointed monarch by an illegitimate but more able one. The central paradox at the heart of the play is that, of the two claimants to the throne, one possesses legitimacy yet shows himself to be unfit to rule, while the other, lacking legitimacy, demonstrates the political skills, self-control and kingly qualities that his opponent lacks. The play presents the abuse of the freedom of the crown at the hands of an unjust but lawful heir. The concepts of law and divine order that define king and body politic in Richard II are the same standards that many of Shakespeare’s contemporaries applied to assess their own monarch. Hence, he employs King Richard II as the accepted pattern of a deposed king to set forth the political ethics of the Tudors regarding the rights and duties of a king.

Keywords: Shakespeare, kingship, divine order, legitimacy, hereditary right, deposition

Richard II marks an exciting advance in the development of Shakespeare’s artistry. Its unusual formality of structure, tone and the impressive eloquence of its style express the mystique of kingship more emphatically than any of the earlier histories. The play portrays the dethronement of an unsuitable anointed monarch by an illegitimate but more able one (Forker 2002, 1). As the first play in a tetralogy, the play is central to the “Tudor myth of sacramental kingship and divinely ordained order in the state and the universe” (Chernaik 91).

In his plays on the Wars of the Roses Shakespeare has already shown the chaotic horrors of civil war and the displacement of weak kings by stronger ones. What is unique and fresh about Richard II is the stress on the divinity that was thought to hedge kings, the abandonment of historical diffuseness and the probing not merely of divine right as a concept but of the unstable personality of a king who puts his whole trust in its theoretical protections (Forker 2002, 1).

Henry Bolingbroke is a complete contrast to Richard II. He possesses the kingly qualities that Richard lacks whereas Richard possesses those that lead to certain failure. While Richard has been described as imaginative and theatrical with a poetic sensitivity to language, Bolingbroke has been seen as ambitious, calculating and brave. He is a good politician and diplomat; a king by nature. Where Bolingbroke is adequately competent and strong, Richard is appallingly incompetent; “where Bolingbroke earns our rational admiration and at times our moral approval, Richard commands our deepest emotions” (Rabkin 1967, 90). Shakespeare displays Richard’s weakness and unfitness for the throne by indicating his preference for words over action. Whilst Richard employs speech to relieve his feelings and pours all his thoughts in poetic language, Bolingbroke either avoids speech altogether or uses it to conceal his emotions.

Bolingbroke’s political wisdom and practical common sense are contrasted with Richard’s folly and recklessness. He is a politician who subordinates everything to his ambition. He possesses none of Richard’s sentimentalism for he is cool, calculating and wise. This contrast between the two characters is maintained throughout the play. Richard
II provides many illustrations of Bolingbroke’s discretion, foresight and political diplomacy. First, he shakes Richard’s position by putting himself forward as the avenger of Gloucester. In his accusation of Mowbray as the play begins, Bolingbroke is covertly attacking the government of Richard since he knows that Richard is as responsible for the murder of Gloucester as Mowbray and “all his passionate speeches are merely the rhetoric of a politician assuming a pose” (Newlin 97). Moreover, Bolingbroke “enlists the good will of the common people upon his side” (Ribner 180). Richard describes his behaviour towards the common people as he seems, “to dive into their hearts”, wooing their favour “with the craft of smiles”:

With ‘Thanks, my countrymen, my loving friends’,  
As were our England in reversion his,  
And he our subjects’ next degree in hope. (Richard II 41)

Bolingbroke turns his banishment to account in winning the hearts of the people since before leaving England; he obtains the good graces of the common people as well as the sympathy of most of the nobles. Richard on the other hand, lives a life of pleasure and self-indulgence. He is surrounded by flatterers who misguide him. The question that Richard II poses is what to do about a king whose continuance on the throne is essential to the continued order of a state of government by hereditary monarchy, but who is obviously unfit personally for what is required of him as a king. Richard shows disrespect to his royal blood. He is indifferent and callous to the dying John of Gaunt. Followed by the disgraceful dishonouring of the dead Gaunt, whose whole concern was the preservation of England, Richard’s behaviour at the beginning of the play confirms our sense of his unfitness for his kingly office as well as his misgovernment of the kingdom. Richard’s shortcomings make him unpopular amongst his own people and leads to his downfall. He is involved in Gloucester’s murder; takes a wrong decision when he banishes Bolingbroke without a fair trial; and confiscates Bolingbroke’s inheritance, denying him his hereditary right. Hence Bolingbroke does not return from his banishment as a traitor but as a man who suffers from the king’s injustice. York tries to warn Richard of the consequences of his chaotic rupture of divine and human laws:

Take Herford’s rights away, and take from time  
His charters and his customary rights.  
Let not tomorrow then ensue today.  
Be not thyself. For how art thou a king  
But by fair sequence and succession? (Richard II 57)

In this fashion, York warns the king that failing to heed the laws of inheritance is similar to undermining the very laws upon which his right to the throne depends. Through this reminder that the law is what makes Richard king, York emphasizes that royal disregard for the law also gives license for subjects to disobey the law. Richard H. Jones comments:

How could the king [...] insist on the untouchable sanctity of his own inherent rights and not, at the same time, adhere to the obligation to respect, indeed to defend, the unquestioned inherent rights of others? How could the fountainhead of justice itself frequently violate the most cherished and widely recognized principles of justice without undermining the very foundation upon which it presumed to stand? (7)
Richard does not realize that his injustice has served to mobilize various strata of the commonwealth against him. He demands recognition of his right to rule while denying his subjects’ rights; he wants to be recognized as king despite his unkingly conduct. Bolingbroke, contrary to Richard, finds overwhelming support from the nobility, whereas on his return from Ireland Richard finds that all his forces have deserted him. Therefore, there was no battle, no bloodshed and Bolingbroke did not have to seize the crown by force (Knowles 64).

On the other hand, the play is full of allusions to sacred kingship, “the sanctity of monarchy and the enormity of rebellion” (Chernaik 91). Nevertheless, by disregarding the law, Richard destroys his own authority as Donna Hamilton puts it; “a king who ruled by divine right was also, in theory and in practice, subject to the law; he was to rule according to the law, and his power derived from the law” (6). Nonetheless, John of Gaunt is not the only advocate of order and tradition who stresses the sacred position of the king and that any attempt to rebel against God’s deputy on earth is a sin:

God’s is the quarrel, for God’s substitute,
His deputy anointed in His sight,
Hath caused his death, the which if wrongfully
Let heaven revenge, for I may never lift
An angry arm against His minister. (*Richard II* 21)

The Bishop of Carlisle also supports the ideology of Divine right and the sanctity of tradition is prominent in his reaction to Bolingbroke’s decision to “ascend the regal throne”:

What subject can give sentence on his king,
And who sits here that is not Richard’s subject?

[...]
And shall the figure of God’s majesty,
His captain, steward, deputy, elect,
Anointed, crowned, planted many years,
Be judged by subject and inferior breath [...] (133)

Not only does the Bishop of Carlisle condemn Bolingbroke’s action, but he also predicts the sequence of events that would advance the Wars of the Roses that are the result of Bolingbroke’s deposition of Richard:

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 called
The field of Golgotha and dead men’s skulls. (135)

Richard is deposed for abuse of office. In the eyes of his enemies, he has demonstrated his unfitness for the title of king. Nevertheless, Richard resists the idea that a distinction can be drawn between the office of king and the man who holds it. As far as he is concerned, kingship has the merit of Divine Right, which means that Richard conceives
of himself not as the right king, but the king. For him the name “Richard” and the title “king” are one entity since the king is the “deputy elected by the Lord” and “God’s substitute”. Hence, at issue is whether King and Richard are one word and whether the metaphors so royally taken for granted are true (Calderwood 127). Shakespeare charts Richard’s dramatic experience by the coordinates of name and person, thrusting him from a belief in the monistic divinity of name:

Not all the water in the rough rude sea
Can wash the balm off from an anointed king.
The breath of worldly men cannot depose
The deputy elected by the Lord.
For every man that Bolingbroke hath pressed
To lift shrewd steel against our garden crown
God for his Richard hath in heavenly pay
A glorious angel. Then if angels fight
Weak men must fall, for heaven still guards the right. (Richard II 93)

— to a recognition of dualistic separability—:

What must the king do now? Must he submit?
The king shall do it. Must he be deposed?
The king shall be contented. Must he lose
The name of king? A God’s name let it go. (111)

— to an ultimate loss of name and a consequent dissolution of personal identity and meaning:

I have no name, no title,
No, not that name was given me at the font,
But tis usurped. Aack the heavy day
That I have worn so many winters out
And know not now what name to call myself. (141)

Richard lives only so long as his royal name is honoured; once he loses that, he becomes according to his own words “nothing”, even before his actual death. That is to say, Richard’s hereditary title as a king defines who he is. As long as he keeps his name associated with and inseparable from the title “king”, his identity rests firmly. The moment he realizes he has lost his title, this consequently leads to a loss of name and eventually to a loss of identity. In Pomfret Castle, however, he realizes that “the name of king is merely arbitrary”, that he has an identity apart from the name. Yet, this realization is more likely to destroy than sustain him (Calderwood 128). The tragedy of Richard’s reduction to nothing becomes associated with the loss of title for “Richard assumes that his title is indistinguishable from his identity” (Forker 2001, 205).

Moreover, Shakespeare’s Richard reviles himself, not for betraying the people’s trust while king, but for betraying his own majesty in surrendering the crown:

Mine eyes are full of tears; I cannot see.
And yet salt water blinds them not so much
But they can see a sort of traitors here.
Nay, if I turn mine eyes upon myself,
I find myself a traitor with the rest,
For I have given here my soul’s consent
T’undeeck the pompous body of a king,
Made glory base, and sovereignty a slave,
Proud majesty a subject, state a peasant. (Richard II 141)

A king who abdicates, who draws a distinction between his person and the office of his kingship and between his weakness and its duties thus compromises the sanctity of kingship. Richard discovers that “his kingship is but a word and he simultaneously becomes a king of words, voluble in his distress”. His laments confess the change in his fortunes; they constitute the domain to which he withdraws and from which he is no longer willing to try reversing the course of events, for the sanctity of the crown no longer saves him (Philips 170-1).

On the other hand, Bolingbroke who has no hereditary right to the throne wants to paint himself to the crowd as a man of virtue, coming in submission to kingly authority, merely to plead a just cause. Bolingbroke’s dilemma is that he must be seen not as a usurper but as responding to the consensus of the body politic (Knowles 65).

Henry Bolingbroke
On both his knees doth kiss King Richard’s hand
And sends allegiance and true faith of heart
To his most royal person; hither come
Even at his feet to lay my arms and power.
Provided that my banishment repeal’d
And lands restored again be freely granted. (Richard II 105)

Unlike Richard, Bolingbroke regards words as mere vocal conveniences whose substance lies not in themselves but in what they designate. Thus, he “employs words as promissory notes in gathering followers in his venture of kingship, and reinforces the few words he utters in material force”. At Flint Castle, where Richard descends to the base court with many words and few soldiers, Bolingbroke listens politely and says little: his twenty thousand soldiers are all the eloquence he requires. Hence, if Richard is a regal name that is gradually divested of its meaning, Bolingbroke is a kind of material force in search of the name that will give him public expression (Calderwood 130). Consequently, the Richard who has played at being king suddenly finds himself stripped of his royal robes. Prior to his deposition, Richard yields his royal right to Bolingbroke:

Cousin, I am too young to be your father,
Though you are old enough to be my heir.
What you will have, I’ll give, and willing too;
For do we must what force will have us do. (Richard II 115)

Hence, the fracturing of royal identity which continues in the Flint Castle episode where the figure of “controlling majesty” who reminds his beholders that “no hand of blood and bone/Can gripe the sacred handle of our sceptre/Unless he do profane, steal or usurp” (107), nevertheless descends from his royal eminence into “the base court” (113) indulging into unkindly self-pity:

I’ll give my jewels for a set of beads,
My gorgeous palace for a hermitage,
My gay apparel for an almsman’s gown,
My figured goblets for a dish of wood,
My sceptre for a palmer’s walking staff,
My subjects for a pair of carved saints,
And my large kingdom for a little grave,
A little, little grave, an obscure grave.
Or I’ll be buried in the king’s highway,
Some way of common trade, where subjects’ feet
May hourly trample on their sovereign’s head;
For on my heart they tread now whilst I live,
And buried once, why not upon my head? (111)

Richard’s transformation here is from “king” to “pilgrim”. Since Pilgrimage assumes a renunciation of earthly interests, including kingship as earthly power, the crown “jewels” are replaced by the beads of the holy rosary and the “sceptre” replaced by the pilgrim’s walking staff. Richard aspires for living an ascetic form of life characterized by abstinence from various worldly pleasures. Subsequently, his transformation from king to pilgrim, leads to the erasure of kingship. Moreover, by asserting his own agency in stripping himself of the visible symbols of monarchical power, Richard retains the upper hand psychologically; denying Bolingbroke centre stage. Yet, the effect as he fully realizes is to reduce himself to “nothing” once he stops talking, with little to look forward to:

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 duteous oaths.
All pomp and majesty I do forswear;
My manors, rents, revenues I forgo;
My acts, decrees, and statutes I deny. (139)

Richard, who had previously claimed that the king’s name was more powerful than an army of twenty thousand, is now coming to see the name of king as a burden. In the deposition episode, he characterizes himself as nameless, losing all identity once he has been stripped of his hereditary title, and calls for a mirror, to find out what shreds of identity are left of him now that his face has been “bankrupt of his majesty”:

Oh that I were a mockery king of snow
Standing before the sun of Bolingbroke,
To melt myself away in water-drops.
Good king, great king, and yet not greatly good,
And if my word be sterling yet in England
Let it command a mirror hither straight
That it may show me what a face I have,
Since it is bankrupt of his majesty. (141)

Bolingbroke’s restraint and silence is very much noticeable while Richard resigns his crown to the extent that after Richard smashes his mirror, he tells him, “Mark, silent king, the moral of this sport./How soon my sorrow hath destroyed my face” (143). The contrast between words and deeds, the expression of emotion and the control of emotion, could hardly be more marked. Each line that Bolingbroke speaks suggests self-discipline,
practicality and a desire to maintain control over the situation, “I thought you had been willing to resign [...] /Are you contented to resign the crown? (137) and finally, “The shadow of your sorrow hath destroyed / The shadow of your face” (143).

The central paradox at the heart of Richard II is that, of the two claimants to the throne, one possesses legitimacy yet shows himself to be unfit to rule, while the other, lacking legitimacy, demonstrates the political skills and self-control his opponent lacks. Hence, the audience is called upon to respond not only to the fall of an anointed king but also to the possibility that hereditary monarchy may itself be unviable. In the deposition scene, the opening lines of Richard’s speech addressed to Bolingbroke indicate the dramatization, with the two men, centre stage, and the crown poised between them:

Give me the crown. Here, cousin, seize the crown,
On this side my hand and on that side thine.
Now is this golden crown like a deep well
That owes two buckets, filling one another,
The emptier ever dancing in the air,
The other down, unseen and full of water.
That bucket, down and full of tears, am I,
Drinking my griefs whilst you mount up on high. (137)

Richard compares the crown to a deep well and himself and Bolingbroke to two buckets. Richard is the bucket descending to the bottom of the well full of tears, whereas Bolingbroke is the empty one dancing in the air. Richard’s “metaphor of the two buckets implies reciprocity and mutual dependency, while at the same time denying agency to either man. He sees himself here as a passive victim of Fortune, while his adversary is the happy recipient of Fortune’s gifts” (Chernaik 98). Worth mentioning here is the vita activa/vita contemplativa juxtaposition of life concepts. We are clearly dealing here with a system of opposites: the wheel of fortune surrounded by the Fates which signifies the world of mutability and change. Such an opposition provides allusions to the human condition and life itself. Furthermore, another illustration is presented in the gardeners’ scene where Shakespeare uses a similar metaphor of weight and balance, but this time scales are employed as an allegory of justice:

Their fortunes both are weighed.
In your lord’s scale is nothing but himself
And some few vanities that make him light,
But in the balance of great Bolingbroke
Besides himself are all the English peers,
And with that odds he weighs King Richard down. (Richard II 121)

Despite the allegorical language, the Gardener conveys a practical point of view. Richard has failed because of his faults of character and his alienation of the powerful nobles who might have aided and supported him instead of Bolingbroke. Thus Richard is characterized as light because of his vanity and frivolity while Bolingbroke outweighs Richard by the support he has as well as his personal qualities that make him fit to rule. Hence, the garden scene in which the gardeners discuss the state as a garden and Richard as an incompetent caretaker sheds light on Richard’s unfitness for his kingly duties. “The well-tended garden, in which natural process properly controlled brings forth flower and fruit in their appointed season and the community of the whole lives in wholesome balance”, is the ideal to which
the disorder and disease rampant in the England of Richard II should be contrasted (Rabkin 1984, 365).

Moreover, in his deathbed speech, John of Gaunt presents Richard as a destructive force, endangering the traditions and the very life of “this royal throne of kings” and “the dear, dear land” of England (Richard II 49). He calls him “landlord of England” (53) in an attempt to refer to practices of tax-farming, devices of dubious legality by which Richard, encouraged by his parasitic courtiers, is attempting to raise money. The essence of Gaunt’s rebuke is that Richard has brought shame on the kingdom and has been an unworthy guardian of his legacy, “That England that was wont to conquer others/Hath made a shameful conquest of itself” (49). Richard’s consuming rule poses a grave threat to all that England is and represents both at home and abroad. Gaunt also directly accuses Richard of the crime of spilling royal blood and warns him that he may eventually be deposed, in the sense that Richard by his own conduct is deposing himself:

That blood already, like the pelican,  
Hast thou tapped out and drunkenly caroused.  
My brother Gloucester, plain well-meaning soul,  
Whom fair befall in heaven ‘mongst happy souls,  
May be a precedent and witness good  
That thou respect’st not spilling Edward’s blood. (53)

Yet, irrespective of all his shortcomings and failure in fulfilling his kingly duties, Richard regards his deposition as “dangerous treason” and prophesies a legacy of disaster, “bleeding war” and a deluge of blood overwhelming England (109). In fact, what Richard prophesies here is the subject of Shakespeare’s Henry IV and is also the first foreshadowing of the punishment that God will bestow upon the usurper:

Yet know: my master, God omnipotent,  
Is mustering in his clouds on our behalf  
Armies of pestilence, and they shall strike  
Your children yet unborn and unbegot  
That lift your vassal hands against my head  
And threat the glory of my precious crown. (Richard II 107)

The belief that future generations would suffer the consequences of God’s righteous anger if his anointed deputy were deposed was universally accepted in Elizabethan England and the Tudor Myth was widely accepted as the key to Shakespeare’s view of politics (Wells 391). Shakespeare was acquainted with the “Tudor Myth” whereby the Wars of the Roses were taken to signify a divine judgment upon England in retribution for the deposition and murder of Richard II (396). Accordingly, the question that poses itself now is whether the king is to be seen as a frivolous tyrant or a martyr, a trial sent by God upon the English to purge their sins, or a victim of a treacherous rebellion for which the nation must undergo a bloody penance (Friedman 280).

The political fortunes of Richard so “mirrored in the cosmos are likewise paralleled in the microcosm of his soul” (Reiman 39). Richard’s longest and most complex speech is his soliloquy in prison where his self-knowledge and his elevation to tragic stature occur. He debates with himself the tragic irony of his situation:

I have been studying how I may compare  
This prison where I live unto the world,
And for because the world is populous
And here is not a creature but myself
I cannot do it. Yet I'll hammer't out. (Richard Il 173)

When Richard studies how he may compare his prison cell “unto the world”, it occurs to him that his own mind contains the entire attributes and humours of humanity. Deprived of an audience to play to and comforting illusions to deter his pain, the only companion that populates his solitude is “a generation of still breeding thoughts”. Richard contrasts “thoughts tending to ambition” with “thoughts tending to content” but finds neither satisfying for they both “flatter themselves” (173). The stage metaphor prevalent throughout the play reaches its culmination here; Richard is an actor, with no choice over the roles he is asked to play:

Thus play I in one person many people,
And none contented. Sometimes am I king,
Then treasons make me wish myself a beggar,
And so I am. Then crushing penury
Persuades me I was better when a king,
Then am I kinged again, and by and by
Think that I am unkinged by Bolingbroke,
And straight am nothing. (175)

There is “a dreamlike quality here, as everything seems to flash by, yet all is illusion: no role in the stage of the world, high or low, is lasting, and none brings contentment” (Chernaik115). Richard talks about the difference between kings and beggars and realizes that he is nothing. He concludes that the desire to be reduced to “nothing” facing the oblivion of death, is the ultimate end of vain human hopes and ambition. The bareness of the language suggests a truth learned through suffering. At this point, Richard hears music in the distance and regrets that he has not kept its concord between himself and his subjects while he was king. His failure to act positively causes him to become the victim of his own recklessness:

I wasted time, and now doth time waste me,
For now hath time made me his numbering clock.
My thoughts are minutes, and with sighs they jar
Their watches on unto mine eyes, the outward watch,
Where to my finger, like a dial’s point
Is pointing still, in cleansing them from tears. (Richard Il 175)

The intrusion of music awakens Richard to the disharmony and disproportion that have defined his reign. He acknowledges his self-indulgence as a cause for his fall. Richard has wasted time in the sense that he failed to take advantage of his opportunities and thus suffers from the consequences of not maintaining true order. Time on the other hand wastes him to the opportunism of Bolingbroke who has become the master of time while he, humiliated, has been reduced to a mechanical “Jack of the clock” (175):

So sighs and tears and groans
Show minutes, times runs and hours. But my time
Runs posting on in Bolingbroke’s proud joy
While I stand fooling here, his Jack of the clock.
This music mads me. Let it sound no more,
For though it have holp madmen to their wits
In me it seems it will make wise men mad. (175)

Hence, grief, folly, faults and defeat are all acknowledged, which suggests that Richard has gained an insight and self-awareness that make him admits, for the first time in the play, that he has been the cause of discord and disorder in the state. He does not perceive himself as an innocent victim or an object to be pitied, but rather as the author of his own misfortunes, responsible for the predicament he now finds himself in. As Richard speaks his last words while facing assassination, “[m]ount, mount, my soul. Thy seat is up on high/Whilst my gross flesh sinks downward, here to die” (179), he hopes for a world beyond death, whereas Bolingbroke who has supposedly reached the height of his ambition, makes a vow of pilgrimage to Jerusalem to wash Richard’s blood off “from my guilty hand” (183). Hence, both Bolingbroke’s and Richard’s last words are either about their souls, Heaven or the Holy Land.

In his staging of Richard’s downfall, Shakespeare depicted the tragic slippage from a unified world order in which kings, bishops, peers and commoners theoretically cohered in a cosmic harmony of linked dependencies ordained by and presided over by God. From Richard’s perspective, the deposition of a monarch signaled the irreparable violation of this order with the implication of terrible consequences to ensue, both to individuals and to the body politic. Nevertheless, Bolingbroke’s practical success as a usurper, despite the guilt and skepticism about future stability that accompany it, seems also to signify the inevitability of flux and mutation in political affairs (Forker 2001, 18).

The monarch is expected to be just in terms of the application of the laws. Richard is unable to carry the body politic along with him because he is unable to establish the identity of his acts with his subjects’ feeling for the irreducibility of justice to positive law, thus he is deposed in the name of a higher justice (Philips 173). The play thus presents the abuse of the freedom of the crown at the hands of an unjust but lawful heir, “[t]he concepts of law that define king and commonwealth in Richard II and guide the audience’s assessment of Richard’s reign are the same standards that many of Shakespeare’s contemporaries used to assess their own monarch and society” (Hamilton 16). The presence of such concepts in the play would seem, then, to be incompatible with interpretations that consider the play to be about the passing of a period with a less modern kingship than that of the Renaissance, or interpretations that consider the play to be about the destruction of an era characterized by a kind of order that could never be recreated. On the contrary, “the presence of these ideas about law and commonwealth” in Richard II suggests that the dramatist saw in Richard’s story an example of incidents that had taken place in England and that might happen again over time. Shakespeare has enacted Richard’s story “in a manner that allowed it to reflect the social and political ideals” that were revered at his time (16).

Conclusively, the lawlessness of a tyrannical but legitimate successor, one who disregards all reminders of the duties of kingship, is the price that a body politic should be prepared to pay for the sake of a simple procedure for the transfer of power. Both Richard and Bolingbroke are kings whose right to rule comes under question, that is to say: Richard’s lust and disregard for law gives license for his subjects to rebel against him whereas despite Bolingbroke’s kingly qualities, his succession to the throne is unlawful and he was promised no happiness throughout his reign. In Richard II, “Shakespeare sets forth a political problem that was engaging the interest of the nation” (Campbell 212). He did not pose the question of “whether a good king might be deposed, but whether a king might be deposed for any cause” (212). Hence, Richard II not only carved out his own calamities, but
was also responsible for most of the disasters that befell England during the reigns of his Plantagenet successors. All the civil disorders that followed were the result of his reckless behaviour and his dethronement by Henry IV.

For many years of Queen Elizabeth I’s reign, there was certainly talk of the lessons to be learned from the time of King Richard II, since she was constantly accused of the same follies. The first charge that Elizabeth I was dominated by her favourites and gave them undue power over her kingdom was a focal point of the attack against her. As to the second charge, Elizabeth I too was censured for spilling royal blood in permitting Mary Stuart to die, and there were many who believed she had pointed the way to her own destruction. The third charge made against the Queen, besides alienating her subjects by heavy financial burdens imposed upon them, was that she leased out her kingdom. The Queen’s favourites became rich through her grants of lands and special privileges. In addition to this, aiding the French and the Dutch, fighting in Ireland, arming against the Spaniards cost Elizabeth much treasure. Hence, these are the three sins which represent the antecedent action of the play of Richard II; they are the sins which posed the question repeatedly asked: whether Richard II was justly deposed or not. Nevertheless, they are also the sins which were brought up time after time when the fate of Richard II was pointed out to Elizabeth I as a warning. Hence, Shakespeare used Richard II as the accepted pattern of a deposed king. He used his pattern to set forth the political ethics of the Tudors regarding the rights and duties of a king. It might equally well have served as a warning to Queen Elizabeth I and to anyone who desired to usurp her throne. In the play Shakespeare, “reiterated the charges against Richard that had been so often laid at Queen Elizabeth’s door” (Campbell 211). He has portrayed Richard as guilty of sinful folly, yet no happiness was promised to the one who tried to execute God’s vengeance or depose the deputy elected by the Lord. In Richard II Shakespeare thus offered the follies of Richard as a background for the presentation of the problem that was often discussed during Elizabeth’s reign, the problem of the deposition of a king.

Works Cited


