



## HISTORY IN SHAKESPEARE'S RICHARD II

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### ABSTRACT

*The topic - History in Shakespeare's Richard II appears a deliberately ambiguous one as it can have two possible interpretations. It could mean the depiction of history by Shakespeare in his play - Richard II OR it could mean a sense of history as revealed by Shakespeare's play Richard II. I am dealing with the former and my primary concern is to analyze the way Shakespeare has handled history in his play - Richard II. The reason why Shakespeare chose such a topic for his play is not quite difficult to grasp while watching a history play like Richard II, the audience is reminded that what they are watching on stage, is the re-enactment of a historical moment that passed many years ago, and survives for them only in the form of oral tradition & historical records. Allusions within the context of a history play to the existence of that record creates an illusion of presence: by invoking the audience's present, stepping out of their historical situations to meet the audience in a neutral one where all time is eternally present. A major attraction that draws an audience to a history play is the desire for just an experience of presence. History plays like Edward II were already rousing immense enthusiasm because of the fervour of Armada patriotism. The English audience was basking in the glory of the defeat of the Spanish Armada & they wanted to celebrate their victory by re-enacting the glorious English past. Shakespeare knew what his audience wanted, and he gave them precisely the same thing by means of his play - Richard II.*

### INTRODUCTION

Even while searching for the reason, one cannot but notice the tremendous contemporary relevance that this play carried for Shakespeare's age. Whether or not Shakespeare wished it

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to be so is a highly debatable issue; but there is no denying the fact, that Richard II had a tremendous relevance to Shakespeare's age. To a modern reader, the topic of the play might not be of much significance; but for Shakespeare's audiences it traced claims that had been written in blood. The ordinary Londoner, who saw this play, had lived in peace under a strong Government for over a century. In the years following 1595, however, the whole kingdom was worried: who was to succeed Queen Elizabeth? For the Tudor Queen was about to die childless. Was England to fall back into the old disorder, fear and anarchy, which had preceded & followed the usurpation of the throne by Bolingbroke?

Shakespeare chose this moment to write a play in which a legitimate king is deposed and the dreadful consequences of a disputed succession to the crown are foretold with eloquence. Besides, Queen Elizabeth was often identified with Richard; like him she too, was allegedly surrounded by flatterers and she too had to face trouble in Ireland. The Earl of Essex who rebelled against her was identified with Bolingbroke.

That the topic of Richard II was highly relevant to Shakespeare's age is further clarified by the fact that just a day before the Essex's rebellion in 1601, his agents bribed the company at The Globe to put on Richard II, then an old play, but with the deposition scene; which was hitherto censored, to suggest ideas to the audience. The Queen was furious. 'I am Richard II, know ye not that? This tragedy was played 40 times in open streets and houses.

Shakespeare's main source for writing this play Holinshed, tells us that Richard II, the grandson of Edward III and the son of the Black Prince, ascended the throne in 1377, when a mere child of 11 years. His uncles, John of Gaunt and Edmund of Langley acted as Regents during the King's minority. As soon as Richard came of age, he assumed full powers of the king and ended the regency. Very soon he offended both the powerful nobles and the commons by his extravagance, highhandedness and heavy taxation. This resulted in widespread dissatisfaction against the king and his favourites. Richard banished Henry Bolingbroke - son of John of Gaunt and seized his estates and properties on his father's death. It was a fundamental mistake on Richard's part to have withheld Bolingbroke's inheritance from him; it created a sense of insecurity throughout the governing class, sufficiently alienated by Richard's misrule already, and gave them an able leader to overthrow his irresponsible rule. The nobles and the common man-both rallied around Bolingbroke. Richard was dethroned and kept a prisoner at Pomfret castle. Following the Oxford conspiracy, which was enacted on his behalf, Richard was put to death in 1400. Thus, the play deals with the last two years of Richard's reign and depicts the events which led to his deposition and death.

As the editors of the Arden Shakespeare point out, "In no other historical play does Shakespeare keep so closely to Holinshed's chronicles." The entire important events and

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characters have been taken from history and Shakespeare has succeeded in capturing the very spirit of the times in which the action is placed. The pomp and pageantry, the tradition, ceremony and ritual of the remote, medieval times, have been faithfully depicted.

With regards to the deviations made by Shakespeare from history, we need to remember a few things: history is not drama; events do not shape themselves in the best order. They must be reshaped to be theatrically effective and significant. Shakespeare's purpose was, through his imagination, to quicken into life the dry bones of history. From the dry narrative of chronicles, he had to recreate living people and make them speak. And so deviations from history were inevitable for Shakespeare. Let me state one thing very clearly: when I talk of deviations from history, I mean the deviations from the historical sources available to Shakespeare in his time - namely Raphael Holinshed's 'Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland' and Edward Hall's 'The Union of Two Noble and illustrious families - York and Lancaster'.

The first deviation from Holinshed was in the alterations affecting character. The portrait of John of Gaunt is an inauthentic one. Shakespeare has portrayed Gaunt as a great patriot, and an able administrator, intensely loyal to the king. But history tells us that Gaunt was an ambitious self-seeking man, suspected of scheming to dislodge his nephew during the early years of his reign. He was also a merciless tyrant. While altering the character of Gaunt, Shakespeare probable had a twofold objective in mind: firstly, to emphasize Richard's lack of a true patriotic sense and secondly to predispose us in favour of his son.

Equally fictitious is the character of the Queen, who was twelve years old at the time of Richard's deposition. But for greater dramatic effectiveness the Queen has been portrayed as a WOMAN. She provides an insight into Richard's character, into which otherwise, we would have only a partial insight. She is one of those characters, who are introduced not so much for their personal interest, as for the dramatic purpose they serve by showing up the more important characters, either by sympathy or by contrast.

The second major deviation by Shakespeare from his historical sources, was the insertion of certain pseudo-historical scenes as well as imaginary scenes. The scene in which Richard visits the dying Gaunt is a fictitious one having no warrant in Holinshed. The dramatic significance of this scene is that it introduces the lyrical element and enriches the play considerably by striking a patriotic note. To quote, a superbly lyrical outburst of patriotism deploring Richard's reckless and tyrannical policies. In the thunderous tones of old Gaunt's invective against the king, who has mortgaged his English realm, we can hear all the patriotic enthusiasm of young England in the days of Elizabeth.



He voices both the glory of England and her suffering; England incarnates himself in him and articulates herself through him. Nowhere in the whole range of English literature, do we find a more glorious tribute paid to England, her king and her people.

Shakespeare also creates a splendid and unhistorical scene of Richards public deposition before parliament, followed by his formal abdication. Henry obviously could not have per Brandes:

*Shakespeare has placed in the mouth of the dying Gaunt mitted a public hearing of this or any kind. Indeed, Shakespeare's theatrical scene, composed two centuries after the event, was thought so inflammatory that it was censored out of the earliest editions of Richard II. But from the dramatic part of view, it is highly significant, as it brings out fully the tragedy and pathos of fallen majesty. In this scene, attention is focused on the spiritual anguish of Richard, it depicts the pain and agency of a man reduced to nothingness. The mirror episode in which the great deposition scene culminates is a remarkable blend of artificiality, conscious self-exhibition and true self exploration.*

Not the least interesting of these imaginary scenes are those which concern ordinary workday life. The protagonists of history were the mighty of the land, but Shakespeare never forgot to dramatize the gossip of the common folk in the streets. There is "the exquisite symbolic idyll" of the honest gardeners who liken Richard's kingdom to a neglected plot which is fully of weeds, her fairest flowers choked up, her fruit trees all pruned, her hedges ruined, her knots disordered and her wholesome herbs swarming with caterpillars.

This scene not only imparts variety, but for the first time in the play, we are introduced to common people and their world. This scene provides dramatic relief by contrast. It takes us away from the artificial and suffocating atmosphere of the court to the quiet repose of nature. Coleridge emphasizes this aspect of the scene when writes, "How beautiful an islet of repose – a melancholy repose indeed is this scene with the gardener and his servant."

The third deviation from history by Shakespeare is the manipulation of time. Phyllis Rackin in his book, "Shakespeare's English Histories" argues that a critical Shakespearean strategy is the manipulation of the temporal relationships between past events and present audience and that Shakespeare uses this strategy in his history plays to dramatize the distance and the intersection between the past and present; eternity and time and to ponder over the problematic nature of history itself.

Defending the right of the playwright to manipulate time, Rackin further says:



*The playwright has the freedom to manipulate and transcend time to present the past under a variety of temporal perspectives and under the aspect of a self-consciously fictive analogue to the medieval historians' vision of eternity – a neutral zone outside of time – where the past and present can come together.*

A classic example of Shakespeare fiddling with time is the description of Bolingbroke's entry into London which is shown to coincide with Richard's conveyance to The Tower; but reality these two events took place on successive days. From the dramatic point of view, nothing however, could be more felicitously imagined, than the brilliant part of the rival kings; in which Richard acquires something of the distinction of persecution meekly borne, while Bolingbroke's astute compliance, has something of the vulgarity of popular success.

Richard II has been called a 'History', but it is history shaping itself towards tragedy. As a history play, it is still concerned with political issues and historical tradition. But it also shows Shakespeare's concern with human character and circumstance, which are the very springs of a Shakespeare tragedy. The history aspect of the play is more prominent in the earlier acts. The magnificent ceremonial chivalry, its pomp and pageantry and the outburst of national enthusiasm following the defeat of the Spanish Armada – are all there.

It has almost all the aspects of a typical Shakespearean tragedy. It narrates the tale of suffering and death of the hero – King Richard. The hero suffers due to his own guilt (of having murdered his Uncle, the Duke of Gloucester) and error – of having confiscating the inheritance of Bolingbroke provoking him to revolt, and of alienating the nobles as well commoners by his heavy taxes, extravagance and surrendering his crown to Bolingbroke even before it is asked for.

We could be inclined to despise such a weak character, and his folly, however great, would not arouse our pity and sympathy. But towards the end, Shakespeare skillfully heightens the human interest in the play and thus enlists our sympathy for the King. Shakespeare bundles the narrative of cause away into the first two and half Acts, so that he might more fully set forth the drama of the sufferer constrained to reduce himself from king to man by shedding the great glory of the name. Shakespeare introduces the Queen and the groom to highlight the more loveable aspects of Richard's character.

In the following soliloquy, the dramatist has laid bare the suffering of Richard's soul:

*Alack, why am I sent for to a king,  
Before I have shook off the regal thoughts  
Wherewith I reign'd? I hardly yet have learn'd*

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*To insinuate, flatter, bow, and bend my limbs:  
Give sorrow leave awhile to tutor me  
To this submission. Yet I well remember  
The favours of these men: were they not mine?  
Did they not sometime cry, 'all hail!' to me?  
So Judas did to Christ: but he, in twelve,  
Found truth in all but one: I, in twelve thousand, none.  
God save the king! Will no man say amen?  
Am I both priest and clerk? well then, amen.  
God save the king! although I be not he;  
And yet, amen, if heaven do think him me.  
To do what service am I sent for hither?  
(Act IV Scene I)*

It is speeches like these make Richard II – a great soul's tragedy. However, it is in his suffering in person and his death that the King rises to the heights of tragic grandeur and we forget his follies and crimes. The most audacious stroke however, audacious- because it breaks one dramatic law to achieve a larger dramatic purpose, comes with the arbitrary change of character forced upon Bolingbroke in the later scenes. In the earlier stages of the play, he appears an upright honest man suffering from a tyrant's injustice to him. But in later scenes and without substantial warrant from Holinshed, he becomes the cunning political schemer who plots Richard's murder. The murder done, he dismisses the hired assassin off with a callous phrase.

As Bolingbroke thus drops in our regard, his victim Richard rises. At length, as a final decisive stroke, restoring the full involuntary esteem of the audience, Shakespeare allows him the traditional heroism of a tragic hero's death.

Richard II is not only a tragedy of character but a tragedy of character and circumstance. The King's character is certainly the cause of tragedy, but more prominently the tragedy results from his character's being at discord with the circumstances in which he is placed. A creature of thought and emotions, he is not the man to rise to the occasion and act firmly, prudently and courageously, and it results in suffering and tragedy. Richard is a creature of thought and emotion. He follows momentary impulses, like a brilliant wayward dreamer, taking no account of the laws and limits of the real world. And these laws and limits are for him personified in Bolingbroke, the representative of the people he misruled, the embodiment of that genius for action which enables a man to get the iron will of facts on his side, to make the silent forces of law and custom, of national need and claims, work for him by making himself their symbol.



## CONCLUSION:

Though Shakespeare has borrowed his material from Holinshed, he has not followed his source slavishly. Rather, he has handled history like a master, and freely ordered, sifted and modified his material in the interest of dramatic effectiveness. Shakespeare has made important deviations from history, but taken altogether, they mean very little. They do not affect, that what is essential, even from the historic point of view.

To the modern reader, Shakespeare's concept of history may appear old fashioned and outdated. But then, Shakespeare was not a man born in advance of his times nor was he was someone who could anticipate the thoughts of his future generations. In a sense, he was a man, purely of his ages, sharing the views and prejudices of his contemporaries and moving with the times.

His art and imagination were hampered by historical fact – something which could not be reshaped at the poet's will. And so sometimes the impression is created that the artist is painfully, struggling with intractable material. However, he made the best out of it, a best no one before him, had even conceived to be possible!

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