

Staging a Shakespeare History Play in
Twenty-First Century England:
Gregory Doran's 2013 Production of *Richard II*

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[Abstract]

This paper examines issues related to the theatrical presentation of Shakespeare's *Richard II* in contemporary England, with a special focus on the 2013 Gregory Doran's production of the play. First, it shows how the play's controversial issues, such as deposition and regicide in the late fourteenth century, were perceived by Shakespeare's contemporaries. Second, it points out the fact that different ages have interpreted the play's sensitive issues in their political, moral, social or educational climate. Finally, this paper tries to evaluate Doran's staging choices through his presentations of Richard and Aumerle. In particular, Aumerle's betrayal of Richard was staged so as to invite comparison with Judas' betrayal of Jesus. Though the play's political issues are remote from the lives of a twenty-first century audience, Shakespeare's concern with the theatrical quality of this flawed king still has much to say on the English stage.

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"*Richard II* on stage presents a peculiar difficulty in that its political significance for its own time has been lost for modern audiences," wrote Andrew Gurr in the introduction to his Cambridge edition of the play.¹ As he suggests, the play contains controversies that were politically sensitive in Shakespeare's time. When *Richard II* was first staged in 1595, Elizabeth I had been on the throne for nearly forty years. As she aged, she became increasingly identified with Richard II for several

¹ Andrew Gurr, ed., *King Richard II*, by William Shakespeare, updated edn. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003), 58.

reasons. The first one derived from a perception among Shakespeare's contemporaries that flattering favorites were able to control her policies adversely. The second reason was the unsettled succession. Neither of the monarchs had children, creating popular uncertainty about the stability of their reigns.² Another reason was that the play's topicality was increased by events surrounding the Earl of Essex's rebellion in 1601. On the eve of his rebellion in February of the year, a group of his followers commissioned the Chamberlain's Men to stage "the deposing and killing of King Richard II" by Shakespeare at the Globe theatre, as "effective propaganda for their treasonable enterprise."³ Although the rebellion failed and Essex was beheaded, the scene of Richard's deposition was omitted from all the editions of the play published in Elizabeth's lifetime.

King Richard reigned over England from June 1377 to September 1399. He died in February 1400. In the play, Shakespeare's account of Richard focuses on the events during the last few years of his reign: Richard's abdication and his cousin Bolingbroke's ascension to the throne as Henry IV. The play opens with the quarrel between Henry Bolingbroke and Thomas Mowbray over the assassination of Richard's uncle, the Duke of Gloucester, in which Richard was deeply implicated. Although Shakespeare alludes to it vaguely, this dispute, which happened in April 1398, actually arose from earlier conflicts between Richard and a group of lords led by Gloucester. In 1388, those lords, who resented the king's authoritarian approach and his exclusive dependence on favorites, sentenced many of them to death. However, Richard took his revenge in 1397, banishing, beheading, or arresting three of his opponents. Among them was Gloucester who mysteriously died in the fortress at Calais. At that time, he was being tried and was guarded by the Duke of Norfolk, Thomas Mowbray.⁴ Saccio observes that Elizabethan theatergoers would have known who Gloucester was and why his death precipitated a political crisis and "they would have found analogies from the reign of Richard II to their own political problems."⁵ In particular, as Gurr points out, Richard's killing of his uncle, suggested

² Charles R. Forker, ed., *King Richard II*, by William Shakespeare (London: Thomson Learning, 2002), 5-8. All quotations from the play are from this edition.

³ Forker, 10.

⁴ Peter Saccio, *Shakespeare's English Kings: History, Chronicle, and Drama*. 2nd edn. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000), 24.

⁵ Saccio, 5.

indirectly but never doubted, was “uncomfortably close to Elizabeth’s execution of her cousin Mary Queen of Scots.”⁶

In the opening scene of the play, Bolingbroke charges Mowbray with treason which includes his plotting the death of Gloucester and misappropriation of money. Mowbray denies all the accusations. Failing to reconcile them, Richard orders a trial by combat. However, Richard calls it off just before they begin to fight and banishes both of them: Mowbray for life; Bolingbroke for ten years, which he reduces to six after seeing the distress of Bolingbroke’s father, John of Gaunt. Thus, Richard, totally ignoring the claims of the combatants’ honor, manages to “make his problem literally go away.”⁷ Richard’s absolute power as a king is sarcastically referred to by Bolingbroke: “How long a time lies in one little word! / Four lagging winters and four wanton springs / End in a word; such is the breath of kings” (1. 3. 213-15). If a king proves corrupt, what should his subjects do? The conflict between obedience to royal authority and protest against it is also seen in Gaunt’s reply to the Duchess of Gloucester who asks him to take his revenge for his brother’s death. Though the king is in the wrong, Gaunt chooses to be loyal to him even against the interests of his own son and brother:

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. (1. 2. 37-41)

Richard II shows us a medieval Christian hierarchical society where a king was regarded as God’s deputy on earth and, therefore, a rebellion against him was considered sacrilege. Richard himself professes his most confident affirmation of the inviolability and sacredness of his position: “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” (3. 2. 54-57). Ironically, his belief in the divine right to rule can be considered the very cause of his abusing power and his inability to maintain it.⁸ Thus, he illegally

⁶ Andrew Gurr, *The Shakespeare Company, 1594-1642* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004), 178.

⁷ Tim Spiekerman, *Shakespeare’s Political Realism: The English History Plays* (NY: State Univ. of New York Press, 2001), 62.

⁸ Spiekerman, 70.

confiscates the Lancastrian estates upon Gaunt's death to help finance his Irish expedition, resulting in Bolingbroke's return to England to claim back his inheritance. The king himself undermines the established order of inheritance, as the Duke of York protests in vain:

Take Hereford'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? (2.1.195-99)

This is a fatal mistake Richard makes, turning Bolingbroke into an irreconcilable enemy, and profoundly alarming every powerful lord in England.⁹ His subsequent departure for Ireland in such political unrest also proves his incompetence as a ruler, which could be also attributed to his own misperception of kingship, as Spierkerman explains:

His instinct for political survival is softened by his belief in the very doctrine that was designed to assure his survival. When he meets a true challenge, he is so surprised and unequipped to defend himself that he seeks refuge in a fantasy world where angels come to his rescue. In short, Richard falls to Bolingbroke because he has fallen for himself.¹⁰

Bolingbroke returns to England after Richard has left for the Irish wars. Shakespeare does not tell us exactly when Bolingbroke decides to seize the crown itself. He appears to proclaim that he seeks only the recovery of his patrimony, as he says to the king: "I come but for mine own" (3.3.195). Nevertheless, Richard's abdication is the subtext. After his return from Ireland, he has experienced desertion of the Welsh, the loss of his favorites, and the loss of support of his uncle York, Lord Governor of England, who has sided with Bolingbroke. Thus deprived of power, he eventually realizes that divine right is useless. Shakespeare presents the shifting balance of power and the psychological politics between the usurped and the usurper as central to the story, and these elements would later receive plenty of attention in politically oriented productions

⁹ Saccio, 27.

¹⁰ Spiekerman, 76

staged in the twentieth and twenty-first century, when the play's story had lost applicability to the present.¹¹

Richard II maintained its political topicality after the Restoration. Nahum Tate's *The Sicilian Usurper*, an adaptation of *Richard II* in the context of the Exclusion Crisis in the 1680s, was banned after few performances in 1680 and 1681 and led to the closure of his theatre.¹² According to Susan L. Powell, to eighteenth century audiences and producers, the play about a bad king seems to have been of little interest. However, in the following century, "it became a focus of historical rather than political interest and Richard's character was seized upon as a star vehicle."¹³ Interestingly, a national education policy at that time seems to have helped playgoers. As Gurr observes,

The New Education Code for England of 1882-3 laid it down that the study of English history was an essential part of a British education and, specified the reading of a history play by Shakespeare as the best way of ensuring it. In the nineteenth century that usually meant studying *Richard II* or *Henry V*, since neither has the difficulty that the Eastcheap scenes in the *Henry IV* plays were thought to have for innocent schoolchildren. Modern playgoers, lacking the knowledge of Shakespeare's historical sources and the politics of monarchy that go with them, are left finding their pleasure in the characterization of Richard, and sometimes his interplay with his antagonist, the shadowy Bullingbrook.¹⁴

Beginning in the twentieth century, stagings of *Richard II*, the first play of the second tetralogy, which covers the years from 1398 to 1422, have been incorporated as a prelude to the others which follow—the two parts of *Henry IV* and *Henry V*—and the central confrontation between Prince Hal and Falstaff.¹⁵ The most recent example of this tradition is seen in Gregory Doran's productions of all four plays, which started with his *Richard II* in October 2013.¹⁶ *Richard II* was also the first play of the

¹¹ Gurr, *King Richard II*, 60.

¹² Margaret Shewring, *Shakespeare in Performance: King Richard II* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1996), 31.

¹³ Susan L. Powell, *Shakespeare in Performance*, eds. Keith Persons and Pamela Mason (London: Salamander, 1995), 176.

¹⁴ Gurr, *King Richard II*, 58

¹⁵ Gurr, *King Richard II*, 58

entire Shakespeare canon which he plans to stage for the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) in six years. It is interesting to note that in May 2013, the RSC announced a new program called “Live from Stratford-Upon-Avon” in which it would broadcast its productions live from Shakespeare’s home town into cinemas worldwide, and stream them free straight to UK schools. *Richard II* marked the first production in the initiative on 13 November 2013.¹⁷ Doran’s expertise in making lucid the complicated backstory of the play was unanimously praised. One critic wrote: “It’s always clear what’s going on.”¹⁸

Doran’s *Richard II* opened with a dirge sung by three sopranos positioned in the upper gallery, while the Duchess of Gloucester was draped over her husband’s coffin upstage center, with a Gothic-cathedral back-projection. This added funeral scene was helpful to make the audience know that Richard was responsible for sanctioning the assassination of Gloucester, as Billington observes.¹⁹ There appeared David Tennant’s Richard in flowing long velvety robes with a cross around his neck, and with hair halfway down his back, which made him look rather effeminate. He affected an air of brazen confidence while listening to the dispute between Bolingbroke and Mowbray. He was a

¹⁶ Doran is the artistic director of the RSC from January 2013. His *Richard II* ran in Stratford-upon-Avon from 17 October to 16 November 2013 (previews from 10 October), and transferred to the Barbican Theatre in London on 9 December for a seven-week run. In April 2014, Doran’s productions of *Henry IV, Parts 1 & 2* opened in Stratford-upon-Avon and then moved to the Barbican Theatre in December after a UK tour. Doran directed *Henry V* in autumn 2015, before reviving *Richard II* and *Henry IV, Parts 1 & 2* to stage all four plays together for the first time at the Barbican Theatre under the banner “King and Country” from November 2015 until January 2016, launching celebrations of the 400th anniversary year of Shakespeare’s death. <<http://www.rsc.org.uk/about-us/whos-who/gregory-doran-artistic-director>>

¹⁷ Mark Shenton, “Royal Shakespeare Company to Broadcast Productions Live from Stratford-upon-Avon into Cinemas and Schools” (28 May 2013).

<<http://www.playbill.com/news/article/royal-shakespeare-company-to-broadcast-productions-live-from-stratford-upon-205842>>

The author of this paper watched a recording of this broadcast on a Blu-ray disk which she purchased from the RSC.

¹⁸ Meriel Patrick, *What’s on Stage*, 8 October 2013.

<http://www.whatsonstage.com/stratford-upon-avon-theatre/reviews/10-2013/richard-ii-rsc_32343.html>

¹⁹ Michael Billington, *The Guardian*, 17 October 2013. As another example, he refers to the 2007 Michael Boyd production that began with a scene where Richard stepped lightly over the corpse of Gloucester.

<<http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2013/oct/17/richard-ii-review-royal-shakespeare-theatre-david-tennant>>

capricious, narcissistic autocrat, erratically winging from mood to mood, but he was “neither weak nor shallow.”²⁰ For example, Tennant gave the banished Mowbray “a piercing stare as if daring him to spill the beans about the king’s part in Gloucester’s murder.”²¹ He was also tyrannical and avaricious. When John of Gaunt admonished him, “Landlord of England art thou now, not king. / Thy state of law is bondslave to the law” (2. 1. 113-14), Richard brutally grabbed his ill-stricken uncle by the shoulders as he responded: “Wert thou not brother to great Edward’s son, / This tongue that runs so roundly in thy head / Should run thy head from thy unreverent shoulders!” (2.1.121-23). Also, immediately after Gaunt’s death, Richard’s favorites were seen to transport coffers of treasure across the stage.

Richard in the early scenes is depicted unfavorably enough for the audience to feel for Bolingbroke who invades his country with armed insurgents. Besides, it is difficult to know when Bolingbroke hatches the ambition to seize the crown, partly because he is given only a limited number of lines and he never speaks in soliloquy. His motives remain in shadow. As the real political power shifts from Richard’s hand to that of Bolingbroke, Shakespeare gradually reinstates Richard in the audience’s favor, which culminates in the deposition scene at Westminster Hall in Act 4, Scene 1. Tennant’s Richard appeared on the stage barefoot, wearing long coarse white robes with a cross hanging from his neck. In the scene, Richard compares those who are betraying him to Judases and later to Pilates, and this analogy was fully exploited by Tennant in his poignant and narcissistic identification with Christ:

Yet I well remember
The favours of these men. Were they not mine?
Did they not sometimes 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. (4. 1. 168-73)

According to Anne Barton, Shakespeare’s “flawed rulers, imperfect kings, monarchs who have been deposed or are crippled by a consciousness of blood-guilt” are “Player Kings,” and Richard II is one of them.²² In the following abdication scene, Richard “suspends the crown of

²⁰ Patrick.

²¹ Billington.

England between Bolingbroke and himself to create a ritual tableau,”²³ thus comparing the crown to a well in which two buckets alternately rise and fall:

Here, cousin, seize the crown. Here, cousin,
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. (4. 1. 182-89)

In Doran’s production, Tennant successfully upstaged Nigel Lindsay’s Bolingbroke with a histrionic and self-mocking performance. He challenged Bolingbroke to “seize the crown” and when Bolingbroke rose to hold it on the other side, he immediately inverted it “to suggest a falling bucket.”²⁴ Bolingbroke was obviously embarrassed by Richard’s “upstaging antics” which left him “having to force face-saving laughter in front of his followers,”²⁵ as Paul Taylor noted. Taylor continued,

Richard is a monarch who would always choose theatrical effect over political prudence. With his great gift for playfulness, Tennant runs heavily sarcastic rings round his usurper in the deposition scene. Holding the crown at arm’s length, and with his back to the assembled company, he calls out “Here cousin,” in the tones of someone inviting a dog to play fetch. This is not a Richard who luxuriates in the lyricism of grief. Tennant delivers the plaintive, self-pitying arias with a scathing irony for the most part, flecked by tiny surrenders to abject panic—as though he were at once sufferer and observer of the tragic process whereby, when the royal persona shatters, it exposes the naked, insecure person underneath.²⁶

²² Anne Richter (Barton), *Shakespeare and the Idea of the Play* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1962), 121.

²³ Barton, 124.

²⁴ Billington.

²⁵ Paul Taylor, *Independent*, 18 October 2013.

<<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/reviews/theatre-review-richard-ii-royal-shakespeare-theatre-stratford-upon-avon-8887542.html>>

²⁶ Taylor.

At the same time, the hollow crown became a powerful image of Richard's grief. Richard who was in the depths of despair made a sharp contrast with Bolingbroke at the height of power, adding pathos and tragic dignity to his downfall.

A surprising directorial innovation from Doran was found in the last scene where Richard is murdered in the Pomfret Castle prison. As principal source of the play, Shakespeare uses Holinshed's *Chronicles*, which gives several reports about Richard's death.²⁷ According to Holinshed, immediately after the earls' rebellion to kill Henry and his sons to restore the deposed Richard failed because Aumerle revealed it, Henry was said to have caused Richard's death to ensure his own safety. According to one report, Richard was believed to have died of forced famine. Another version said that Richard was so heart-broken to know the misfortunes of his supporters who took part in the rebellion that he starved himself. A third report, which Shakespeare actually chooses, is that Richard was killed by Sir Piers of Exton, who took the following words of Henry as a command to kill Richard: "Have I no faithful freend [friend] which will deliver me of him, whose life will be my death, and whose death will be the preservation of my life?"²⁸ However, Doran's decision was to use Richard's cousin, Aumerle, played by Oliver Rix, as the assassin. To serve this purpose, he had carefully created a moment which suggested an emotionally intimate relationship between Aumerle and Richard. In Flint Castle, Richard addresses himself repeatedly, anticipating his own eventual deposition: "What must the King do now? Must he submit? / The King shall do it. Must he be deposed?" (3.3.143-44) In this scene, Tennant showed a moment of compassion for Aumerle: With "Aumerle, thou weep'st, my tender-hearted cousin!" (3.3.160), he leaned close to the sobbing cousin to kiss him on the lips, then cuddled him tenderly.

Unlike the historical Aumerle who betrayed "first Richard in Wales, then Henry in London, and finally his fellow earls,"²⁹ Shakespeare's Aumerle is a loyal friend to Richard and he tries to support Richard's spirits and encourages him to take decisive action. In Act 5, pressurized by his father York, Aumerle reveals to him, and eventually to the king, the earls' rebellion in which he is himself involved. He is given a pardon

²⁷ R. S. Wallace & Alma Hansen, eds., *Holinshed's Chronicles: Richard II 1398-1400, Henry IV, and Henry V* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1978), 24-26.

²⁸ Holinshed, 24.

²⁹ Saccio, 33.

from the king thanks to his mother's desperate plea. In this scene, Oliver Rix's Aumerle deciphered a special meaning in the Henry's words: "Cousin adieu. / Your mother well hath prayed, and prove you true" (5. 3. 143-44). To prove his loyalty to the king, Aumerle murdered the imprisoned Richard. As he plunged the dagger into Richard, Richard uncovered the assassin's hood and saw his beloved cousin in bitter tears. His betrayal of Richard can be compared to Judas' betrayal to Jesus. The play closed, as it opened, with a dirge, this time sung over the murdered Richard's coffin, thus suggesting the dark side of kingship.

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