

KINGSHIP AS DIVINE RIGHT IN SHAKESPEARE'S KING RICHARD II

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ABSTRACT: *Shakespeare's King Richard II is not a great man, rather a little, or quite ordinary one. Shakespeare himself dwells as attentively as the royal blood comes and goes in the face with his rapid changes of fortune. Through King Richard II, Shakespeare shows us though anointed, but a man guilty of his uncle's murder which culminates in the usurpation of his throne by his cousin Bolingbroke, Henry IV. So, it is about the fall and deposition of a righteous king which is exposed through various imageries. Despite having weakness, and misrule, the uprising against him, his deposition and his death, Shakespeare points out that rebellion is a sin. He has given importance to order or discipline in nature, so as a king should keep himself aloof from flatterers and suppress the rebels to keep order and discipline in the country. The subjects should obey even a weak king otherwise they must suffer from nemesis or famine, epidemic or war fare. In this writing, I want to emphasize Shakespeare's advocacy for divine right of kingship in King Richard II and to explore the ideal to be king as one who does his duty to God and to his country and who is also a man of spotless personal integrity.*

KEYWORDS: Kingship, Divine Right, Shakespeare's King Richard

INTRODUCTION

William Shakespeare, the Bard of Avon, was an eminent English poet widely regarded as the greatest writer in the English language and world's pre-eminent dramatist. Shakespeare's *King Richard II* is the first of the four historical plays, *Richard I*, *Henry IV*, *V*, *VI*. This drama deals with the dethronement of King *Richard II* and the usurpation of his throne by Henry Bolingbroke. The other three plays present the consequences of that usurpation. His early plays were mainly comedies and historical genres which he roused to the peak of sophistication and artistry by the end of the 16th century.

The material of the drama is taken almost entirely from Holinshed's "Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland." The period covered by the drama extends from 1398 to 1400. Richard II, the son of Edward, the black prince, ascended the throne at the age of eleven. The king aroused great discontent by imposing heavy taxes by favoritism and arbitrary rule. In 1397 Richard's uncle Duke of Gloucester was arrested on charge of conspiracy. He was sent to Calais where he was murdered. This death causes the ultimate catastrophe in this play. In 1398 Richard banished Henry, the duke of Hereford (Bolingbroke), son of John of Gaunt. Richard confiscates the property of Gaunt after his death. When Richard goes to Ireland to suppress a revolt, Henry lands in England with some supporters. The nobles and courtiers inside England also join Henry. Richard yields to Henry without any struggle or protest finding no alternative. On September 1399, the throne is abdicated which is confirmed by the parliament in West Minister Hall. Ultimately the king is assassinated in the prison. It is assumed that the king starved himself to death, or he escaped to Scotland and died there as a lunatic. Shakespeare assumes that Richard was murdered. The editors point out that

Shakespeare's Richard II is close to History. All important events and characters are taken from history. He has faithfully depicted the courtly pomp, pageantry, the ceremony and ritual of medieval times. The medieval faith in kingship, the hierarchy or chain of being and the consequences of any deviation have been truly presented. Shakespeare has modified and ordered his material in the interest of dramatic effectiveness. He has treated history imaginatively. In History, the queen is merely a child of twelve years. In order to reveal some aspects of the king's character, Shakespeare has presented her as a grown up woman. The queen's love and pity for the king not only add pathos to the atmosphere but also brings out sweeter and softer aspects of the king's character. The Queen's meeting with the king and their parting point out how loving gentle and kind the king is.

Shakespeare has presented Duke of Gaunt as a patriot and nationalist. But in History Gaunt is found as an ambitious, selfish and crooked politician. Shakespeare has done this to compare the king with the duke of Gaunt. He has also introduced new characters like the gardener and the groom. Shakespeare's Richard II is a political tragedy. It shows how the tyranny and misrule of the king alienated him from the Barons and the Commons. Henry Bolingbroke takes this opportunity and revolts against the king. The king finds himself practically helpless. Ultimately, he is deposed and killed. Like all other Shakespearean tragedies Richard II is a tale of suffering and ending in the death of the hero. It shows the fall of the hero from prosperity to adversity. The fall is brought about by some tragic flaw in the hero's character. It is the error or guilt of the hero which leads to his wrong actions. He is himself responsible for his own fall. Since the hero is highly placed, his suffering and fall arouse the catharsis of pity and fear. The play narrates the tale of the suffering and death of King Richard. He is guilty of the murder of his uncle, The Duke of Gloucester. He commits the fatal error of confiscating the estate and property of John of Gaunt who was his guardian in his early age. He banishes Henry Hereford without striking at the root of his strength that is his popularity with the common people. He provokes Bolingbroke's revolt. Richard is guilty of misrule and tyranny. He is surrounded by base flatterers. As a result, he has lost the love and good will of the commons. He is weak and emotional. He surrenders his crown to Bolingbroke even before he asks for it. Such a weak character can not arouse pity and fear. But at the end of the play, Shakespeare has skillfully heightened the human interest of the play by drawing our sympathy for the king. Palmer comments: "Richard II is the story of a sensitive, headstrong, clever foolish man, graceless in prosperity, in calamity gracious."(1)

The **divine right of kings**, or **divine-right theory of kingship**, is a political and religious doctrine of royal and political arena. It asserts that a monarch is subject to no earthly authority, deriving the right to rule directly from the will of God. The king is thus not subject to the will of his people, the aristocracy, or any other estate of the realm, including (in the view of some, especially in Protestant countries) the Church. According to this doctrine, only God can judge an unjust king. The doctrine implies that any attempt to depose the king or to restrict his powers runs contrary to the will of God and may constitute a sacrilegious act.[2]

The remote origins of the theory are rooted in the medieval idea that God had bestowed earthly power on the king, just as God had given spiritual power and authority to the church, centering on the Pope. The immediate author of the theory was Jean Bodin, who based it on the interpretation of Roman law. With the rise of nation-states and the Protestants, Rory justified the king's absolute authority in both political and spiritual matters. The theory came in to force in England under the reign of James I of England (1603–1625, also known as

James VI of Scotland 1567–1625). Louis XIV of France (1643–1715) strongly promoted the theory as well.

The theory of divine right was abandoned in England during the Glorious Revolution of 1688–89. The American and French Revolutions of the late eighteenth century further weakened the theory's appeal, and by the early twentieth century, it had been virtually abandoned. In the sixteenth century, both Catholic and Protestant political thinkers began to question the idea of a monarch's "divine right".

Towards the end of 16th century, Richard II became a legendary figure. His deposition got a mystical significance. To poets and historians both in England and in France, he stood for a supreme example of the tragic fall of the princes. To some people he was a martyr and his abdication was a sacrilege. Those who had a mystical view of this fall, regarded him as Christ. He was a symbol of the instability of human fortune for all. Richard II shows the suffering soul of Richard when he says-

“You may my glories and my state depose

But not my grieves; still am I king of those.”

And he again says-

“Alack! why am I sent for to be a king
Before I have shook off the regal thoughts.

Wherewith I resign; I hardly yet have learned

To insinuate, flatter, bow and bend my limbs.”

Here we find a regeneration of Richard's character as we find the same in Lear in the storm scene. Lear realizes that as a king he lived in luxury and did not care to mitigate the misery and poverty of his people. Similarly as a king, Richard was surrounded by flatterers. When he abdicates the throne, he realizes that a courtier's art is flattery and not loyalty. He asks the courtiers whether they are not his own people who always hailed him by shouting----

God save the king: Will no man

Save the king!.....amen.”

Richard's sufferings in the prison and his death heightens the tragic grandeur and we forget his follies and his crimes. His talk with the groom shows his gentle nature, his power to arouse affection and his human kindness for his horse. At the end of the play we forget his follies, hate the murderer and love the murdered. Richard II is the tragedy of circumstances. Richard commits the murder of his own uncle, the Duke of Gloucester. Thus he is a traitor to his kingly office. The commons dislike him for his levying heavy taxes upon them. They do not support him. The nobles who formerly were his flatterers, turn against him. His sins, or follies bring about his fall. Thus he is easily deposed and murdered. But his opponent also is guilty of the sin of usurpation.

Shakespeare's view is that usurpation is necessary for England but England must suffer for it. It is a necessary evil. A strong and efficient king without legal right to the throne can not be preferred to a weak but lawful king. The pity for the king points to the tragedy of the world itself. It draws our focus into the universal issues of life. It exalts while it saddens. This is a tragedy of guilt and nemesis in which Richard is

involved .Bolingbroke makes it his mission to avenge. Shakespeare believed in the divine right of the kings .This sentiment expressed in_

“Not all the water in the rough rude sea
Can wash the balm from an anointed king.”

Richard II displays a hero who enchants everybody with poetical speeches. Shakespeare points out that rebellion is a sin .There is a chain of all being. A child must obey his father, father has responsibility for his child and the subject for his king. A king has responsibility for his subjects. The higher the position, the greater is the responsibility. Shakespeare does not approve of deposition however weak he may be.

Richard II is full of lyric poetry. This drama is a long lyric in which the characters sing in different tones. The play starts with the quarrel between Henry Bolingbroke and Mowbray about the murder of Gloucester. Both of them accuse each other of this murder. Richard II orders them to decide the matter in a duel fight according to medieval chivalric fashion. When the fighting was going in full swing ,Richard abruptly stops the fight and banishes Mowbray, his friend, for life and Henry, his enemy, for ten years. Actually he wants to stop inquiry into the murder of Gloucester as he himself was involved in it. Shakespeare’s exquisite lyric poetry is uttered through the mouth of the great patriot Mowbray. Here he laments that he will have to live in a foreign country forever where he will never be able to use his native language. So he says___

The language I have learned these forty years
My native English, now I must forgo.
And my tongues use is to me no more
Than an unstringed viol or a harp.”

Here the meaning of the imagery is clear as he compares himself to an unused harp. In the ‘garden scene’ the queen and her attendants overhear the gardeners’ order to the servants. The garden stands for England and the gardener is like that the king. The gardener orders the servants to weed out like an executioner otherwise the weeds will destroy the big trees. He means to say that the king should have given up the company of flatterers who are like weeds and suppress the rebels mercilessly for the sake of good government. When he again says—

O! What pity is it
That he hath not so trimmed and dressed his land
As we, this gardener,

The queen herself is a poetic creature .When she sees king Richard going to the tower, she sadly says to her ladies---

But soft, but see, or rather do not see
My fair rose, wither; Yet look up, behold,
That you in pity may dissolve to dew,

And wash him fresh again with true love tears.

Here the queen compares the king to a beautiful rose .

As the rose becomes fresh with dew drops, the tears out of pity for the king will make him more fresh and beautiful. When Richard passes on the road, she compares Richard to old Troy-

Ah, thou, the model where old Troy did stand

Thou map of honour, thou king Richard's tomb

And not King Richard; thou most beauteous inn.

The parting scene between the king and the queen is highly poetic. The king advises the queen to go to France. She is astonished to see the King in his grief. She says---

What !is my Richard both in shape and mind

Transformed and weakened! Hath Bolingbroke deposed

Thine intellect ?Hath he been in thy heart?

The lion dying thrusteth forth his paw.

And wounds the earth, if nothing else ,with rage

To be overpowered; and wilt thou pupil like

Take thy correction mildly, kiss the rod,

The queen urges the king to fight with Bolingbroke like a dying lion.

Even the Archbishop (Carlisle) is a minor poet. In the deposition scene, he compares Richard to Jesus Christ. He speaks truth in the presence of Bolingbroke and his council. Truth is poetry, and Carlisle, like a poet, prophesies:

And if you crown him---

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?

The king is full of poetic sensibility. Adversity brings out the perfume of the fair rose. He regards himself a Christ and the accusers as many Pilates

You Pilates

Have here delivered me to my sour cross

And water cannot wash away your sin.

In the mirror scene, we come across his poetic fancy-----

Was this the face

That, like the sun, did make beholders wink?

Here Richard compares himself to the sun which makes the beholders wink.

Richard's fall is expressed through a suitable imagery:

One captain sees Richard's

-----glory like a shooting star

Fall to the base earth.

Richard says to Bolingbroke in poetic way----

Up ,cousin , up-your heart is up ,I know,

Thus high at least-----

When Richard comes back to England from Ireland ,we find the beautiful imagery of mother-child relationship .-----

I weep for joy

To stand upon my kingdom once again

Dear earth, I do salute thee with their horses hoofs

As a long parted mother with her child.

The deposition scene is Shakespeare's own invention. The scene falls into three parts. In the first part Aumerley is accused by Bagot for the murder of Gloucester. The nobles begin to take sides. Bolingbroke at once controls the situation. This shows Bolingbroke's capacity of management which Richard lacks.

Part 11 contains the protests of Bishop Carlisle against deposition. Duke of York enters to announce Richard's willingness to abdicate in favour of Bolingbroke who pronounces "In Gods name, I will ascend the regal throne." Bishop Carlisle protests that a subject cannot judge an anointed king. He pictures Richard as Christ betrayed by Judas. Shakespeare makes this comparison in order to point out that Christ's death resulted in man's redemption .Similarly, Richard's fall is necessary for England's happiness. After this deposition, civil war in England came to an end.

In part 111, Richard is asked to abdicate the throne and surrender publicly to his rival. His purpose is to win the approval and support of the people. In the deposition scene, we find Richard a poet king .Here he is a man with more than usual organic sensibility. His extremely

sensitive nature results in lyrical outburst. Both Walter Pater and W.B. Yeats call Richard an executive poet.

From the beginning of the play, we find a man with poetic imagination. In the duel scene, he says to Bolingbroke

“We are not born to sue, but to command”

In the deposition scene, he says that it is unfair to bring him into the parliament before he has learnt to behave or bow like a subject or to pronounce “God save the king”. The Duke of York asks him to give the crown to Bolingbroke. Richard holds one side of the crown and Bolingbroke grasps the other. He renounces all the rights and privileges to Henry. The Duke of Northumberland asks Richard to read out the lists of his crimes. Richard protests and accuses Northumberland of treason because he has helped the overthrow of a legitimate monarch. Richard laments that he is no longer the king, he has become nothing; he is not even a name.

“O! that I were as great as is my grief ,or lesser than my name
.....Or that I could forget what I have been ,.....
.....Or not remember what I must be now “.....

The last soliloquy of Richard is the best poetry that comes out of his lips. It is a mine of metaphors, symbols and images. His brain becomes a female to the soul. With the matting of the two , only agonies, sorrows and pains are produced.

“My brain I’ll prove the females : and these two beget .A generation to breeding thought,”

He laments that sweet music is now sour to him since he has lost his title. There is self-realization like King Lear who in the storm scene realizes that he did not look after the welfare of the people –“the houseless poverty” in a stormy night when he was King. So Richard criticizes himself – ‘I wasted time and now doth the time waste me, . for now hath time make me his numbering clock.’

The striking sounds of the clock are sounds of sighs and tears and glooms .The watchman enters and informs him how Bolingbroke rode on Richard’s horse very proudly. Richard laments that his horse should have protested Bolingbroke –

“That jade had eaten bread from my royal hand .This hand hath made him proud with clapping hand”

“Would he not stumble? Would he not fall down since pride must have a fall and break the neck of that proud man that did usurp his back?”

When the assassins strike him down, Richard utters – Mount, mount, my soul! Thy seat is up on high whilst my gross flesh sinks downward, here to die.

It is the poetry which makes him admired and beloved of all .

The divine right to rule is an important issue in all Shakespeare’s historical plays. In each play by Shakespeare, the kings are prone to making a series of mistakes or succumbing to certain weaknesses and are judged by their peers both in terms of human error as well as how

their actions fit into the concept of divine right to rule. For example, throughout Shakespeare's *Richard II*, the concept of divine right remains prominent and is questioned by some characters, including Richard himself, as the play progresses.

Intricately woven into the idea of Richard II being the king appointed by God is the somewhat parallel sense that the natural world itself revolves around the king and his relationships with others. There are several metaphors Shakespeare invokes that refer to the natural world, the most obvious of which is the analogy that suggests that Richard's roots run deep and are a vital part of the "body" of England. In Richard, the symbolic significance of blood is important as blood, in "Richard II" by Shakespeare is considered sacred and so too is the position of King that God himself has delegated to Richard's lineage and kingship.

Throughout the Shakespeare's text there is a tension between what is morally right and what is correct behavior for a king and this implicitly questions the nature of divine rule in that we must now reconsider how a king with such power is now given sanction to be violent and cruel because of his position. Even at the beginning of Shakespeare's *Richard II*, it is clear how many of those who surround Richard remain convinced of his divine right to rule England. Characters such as Gaunt, despite the protestations of the Duchess of Gloucester, are unwilling to take action against Richard because of his status as a divinely appointed King. For example, even though Gaunt appears to be convinced of Richard's involvement in the murder of his brother, he still claims that the punishment will be a matter for God to handle, not ordinary mortals. It is to this end that he states, "Put we our quarrel to the will of heaven" (*Richard II* I.ii.6) indicating that he does not wish to trespass upon that which he considers the divine will of God. He claims that Richard is but a "substitute" for God and even though he is distressed about the death of his brother, he still says, "I may never lift / an angry arm against His minister" (*Richard II* I.ii.40-41). The fact that he calls Richard "His" minister explicitly states that Gaunt sees Richard as God's ordained minister, thus for one of the first times of many, we see how the widespread belief in Richard's status as divinely appointed allows him to literally get away with murder.

This sense of Richard's protected status under the name of "divine right" seems to gain even more sanction as certain Church officials become involved with the declining king. For example, the powerful Bishop of Carlisle, when discussing Richard's fate, claims that Richard is still the God-chosen leader of England, He invokes Richard's name, calling him in one of the important quotes from "Richard II" by William Shakespeare, "the figure of God's majesty, / His captain, steward, deputy elect, / Anointed, crowned, planted many years" (*Richard II* III.ii.125-127). It should be noted that the Bishop invokes not only the religious sanctity of Richard's divine position, but he also puts it in both military and natural terms. He refers to Richard as a "captain" and thus a militaristic head or leader of divine will. Furthermore, he uses the idea of Richard's position as being "rooted" which indicates that the concept of divine right is embedded in the very soil and essence of England, almost as a tree with long roots (which are a metaphor for the roots of the sacred royal blood) that is firmly planted in the very foundations of the country.

The play is divided into five acts and its structure is as formal as its language. It has a double complementary plot describing the fall of Richard II and the rise of Bolingbroke, later known as Henry IV. Critic John R. Elliott Jr. notes that this particular history play can be distinguished from the other history plays because it contains an ulterior political purpose. The normal structure of Shakespearean tragedy is modified to portray a central political theme: the rise of Bolingbroke to the throne and the conflict between Richard and

Bolingbroke over the kingship. In acts IV and V, Shakespeare includes incidents irrelevant to the fate of Richard, which are later resolved in the future plays of the Richard II-Henry IV.

Literary critic Hugh M. Richmond notes that Richard's beliefs about the Divine Right of Kings tend to fall more in line with the medieval view of the throne. Bolingbroke on the other hand represents a more modern view of the throne, arguing that not only bloodline but also intellect and political wisdom contribute to the making of a good king. [3] Richard believes that as a king he is chosen and guided by God, that he is not subject to human frailty, and that the English people are free to do with as they please. Elliott argues that this mistaken notion of his role as king ultimately leads to Richard's failure. The play contains a number of memorable metaphors, including the extended comparison of England with a garden in Act III, Scene iv and of its reigning king to a lion or to the sun in. In his analysis of medieval political theology, *The King's Two Bodies*, Ernst Kantorowicz describes medieval Kings as containing two bodies: a body natural, and a body politic. The theme of the King's two bodies is pertinent throughout *Richard II*, from the exile of Bolingbroke to the deposition of King Richard II. The body natural is a mortal body, subject to all the weaknesses of mortal human beings. On the other hand, the body politic is a spiritual body which cannot be affected by mortal infirmities such as disease and old age. These two bodies form one indivisible unit, with the body politic superior to the body natural. [4]

Many critics agree that in *Richard II*, this central theme of the king's two bodies unfolds in three main scenes: the scenes at the Coast of Wales, at Flint Castle, and at Westminster. At the coast of Wales, Richard has just returned from a trip to Ireland and kisses the soil of England, demonstrating his kingly attachment to his Kingdom. This image of kingship gradually fades as Bolingbroke's rebellion continues. Richard starts to forget his kingly nature as his mind becomes occupied by the rebellion. This change is portrayed in the scene at Flint Castle during which the unity of the two bodies disintegrates and the king starts to use more poetic and symbolic language. Richard's body politic has been shaken as his followers have joined Bolingbroke's army, diminishing Richard's military capacity. He has been forced to give up his jewels, losing his kingly appearance. He loses his temper at Bolingbroke, but then regains his composure as he starts to remember his divine side. At Flint castle, Richard is determined to hang onto his kingship even though the title no longer fits his appearance. However at Westminster the image of the divine kingship is supported by the Bishop of Carlisle rather than Richard, who at this point is becoming mentally unstable as his authority slips away. Biblical references are used to liken the humbled king to the humbled Christ. The names of Judas and Pilate are used to further extend this comparison. Before Richard is sent to his death, he "un-kings" himself by giving away his crown, scepter, and the balm that is used to anoint a king to the throne. The mirror scene is the final end to the dual personality. After examining his plain physical appearance, Richard shatters the mirror on the ground and thus relinquishes his past and present as king. Stripped of his former glory, Richard finally releases his body politic and retires to his body natural and his own inner thoughts and grieves. [5] Critic J. Dover Wilson notes that Richard's double nature as man and martyr is the dilemma that runs through the play eventually leading to Richard's death. Richard acts the part of a royal martyr, and due to the spilling of his blood, England continually undergoes civil war for the next two generations. [6]

The play ends with the rise of Bolingbroke to the throne, marking the start of a new era in England. According to historical research, an English translation of Machiavelli's *The Prince* might have existed as early as 1585, influencing the reign of the kings of England. Critic

Irving Ribner notes that a manifestation of Machiavellian philosophy may be seen in Bolingbroke. Machiavelli wrote *The Prince* during a time of political chaos in Italy, and writes down a formula by which a leader can lead the country out of turmoil and return it to prosperity. Bolingbroke seems to be a leader coming into power at a time England is in turmoil, and follows closely the formula stated by Machiavelli.[7] At the start of *Richard II* Bolingbroke accuses Mowbray and ultimately attacks the government of King Richard. He keeps Northumberland by his side as a tool to control certain constituents. From the minute Bolingbroke comes into power, he destroys the faithful supporters of Richard such as Bushy, Green and the Earl of Wiltshire. Also, Bolingbroke is highly concerned with the maintenance of legality to the kingdom, an important principle of Machiavellian philosophy, and therefore makes Richard surrender his crown and physical accessories to erase any doubt as to the real heir to the throne. Machiavelli also states that the deposed king must be killed, and Bolingbroke therefore kills Richard, showing his extreme cruelty to secure his kingly title. Since Bolingbroke is a disciple of the Machiavellian philosophy, he cannot do the killing himself and employs Pierce of Exton for the killing of the deposed king and his ex-friend whose use is no longer needed. Yet, Irving Ribner still notes a few incidents where Bolingbroke does not follow true Machiavellian philosophy, such as his failure to destroy Aumerle. Even Bolingbroke's last statement follows Machiavellian philosophy as he alludes to making a voyage to the Holy Land, since Machiavellian philosophy states rulers must appear pious.^[8] Therefore, this particular play can be viewed as a turning point in the history of England as the throne is taken over by a more commanding king in comparison to King Richard II.

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