God, Earthly Might, and Politics in Richard II

Richard II is one of a series of plays on English history, which scholars believe Shakespeare wrote around 1595, when Elizabeth I was Queen. Although Shakespeare uses a sixteenth century account of the historical king Richard II as his major source, the play is a representation, a selecting and shaping of events and characters, from a certain perspective. That perspective is colored by a very controversial issue in Shakespeare's own time: namely, should an obviously bad king be removed from office?

The "official" position on this (of Elizabeth and that of her father Henry VIII) was clear, since we know of a lengthy sermon, ordered to be read over and over in all churches of the land (titled, "An Homilie Agaynst Disobedience and Wylful Rebellion"). Basically, it says: no, under no circumstances. And that message is bolstered by the following argument: if a ruler is good, the people should be grateful to God for their having such a good ruler; if he is bad, then it must be because the people have been wicked, and they deserve the ruler they have. To support this, the sermon appealed to the idea that God, in his providence, watches the ruler (variously called, "God's minister," "God's deputy," "God's anointed," etc., in the play) and it is only God who ultimately judges and decides the fate of his "representative." In other words, only God can remove him and replace him with another. The obverse side of this notion is that no subject, however noble or mighty, may judge his ruler.

Although this was the official position, it's also quite clear from books and pamphlets written at the time, there were opposing opinions. One such dissenter, Robert Parsons, writes (in 1594), "princes [i.e., rulers] have oftentimes by their commonwealths been lawfully deposed for misgovernment, and that God hath allowed and assisted the same." He goes on to argue that when rulers break their oaths (to God) to govern "justly, according to law, conscience, equity, and religion," then the commonwealth is not only "free from all oaths made by her of obedience and allegiance to such unworthy princes, but is bound. . .to resist, chasten and remove such evil heads. . . ." Let's say, then, Shakespeare approaches his subject, the deposing of a king about 200 years before he wrote his play, with such a controversy in mind.

In the first half of the play, Richard is shown to be a bad ruler (e.g., he has wasted money, most lavishly on himself and his friends; he has oppressed the "commons" with taxes; he has favored and rewarded, at least according to several powerful feudal lords such as Northumberland, unworthy persons [see Act 2, scene 1, lines 224 and following]. This situation seems to be augmented by Richard's capricious and politically heedless actions in the first two Acts of the play. His callous attitude toward his uncle Gaunt, his wilfull pocketing of Gaunt's wealth for his war against Irish rebels; and perhaps most important, his

shunting aside his uncle York's observation that by, in effect, annuling his exiled cousin Henry Bolingbroke's right to wealth and title after Gaunt's death, and so seriously damaging the traditional law of hereditary right, he is digging his own grave. For, as York, says, how else can he justify his own kingship, except by "fair sequence and succession? (2.1.186-208). The only answer, which Richard does not give in this scene, but certainly banks on and expresses repeatedly later, is that God guarantees his kingship.

The price he pays for all this is deposition, profound personal suffering, and finally, death. Some of that suffering is depicted in his anguished yo-yoing in 3.2, between confident claims about God's intervention on his side and his despairing lamentations, since God seems not to lift a finger for Richard's cause. And, in most of the second half of the play, Shakespeare represents Richard as lacking courage, passive, indulging in seemingly endless talk, and sentimental, although capable of making at least one politically prophetic observation (see 5.1.55-68).

Reading the play this way, we would say it supports the opinion of Robert Parsons, mentioned earlier. Such a message is, given the "official" position, subversive: for it says, in effect, a bad king can be judged to be so by his subjects and be replaced by another. In the play, the most vocal proponent of this attitude is Northumberland (in the scene mentioned above in paragraph four: see line 240, "The king is not himself [i.e., the king is not what a king should be], and lines 291-6). Later on, it becomes quite clear (see the scenes in which he accompanies Bolingbroke when he meets York, and then Richard) that Northumberland equivocates and lies to both York and Richard in order to make Henry the new King. Northumberland is represented as "broker" of power; he certainly expects a "commission"; and, though Shakespeare doesn't make him say it explicitly, he may very well argue, with Parsons, that Richard has broken his own oath; according to such reasoning, by that act, all oaths due to Richard are annuled. But without Bolingbroke's consent, Northumberland can hardly depose Richard. We must, therefore, turn to Richard's real adversary (perhaps from the beginning of the play), Bolingbroke, and how he is represented after he returns, cutting short his term of exile.

From the moment when he returns, by tactically appealing to the idea that he is back only to claim his rights as Gaunt's son and no more; that he has been unjustly, illegally deprived of his wealth and title (his father's title, Duke of Lancaster, should be his now that Gaunt is dead), to the point in 4.1, when he declares, "In God's name, I'll ascend the regal throne (line 113, he makes no direct reference to the problem of deposing a king. When we consider the "official" position, I can see one very serious chink in its armor of argument: if God is the ultimate judge of whether a ruler is good or bad, and if it is he who

decides when to supplant him, then how can mortals tell when he is doing it?

The Bishop of Carlisle, who is as solid a defender of the "official" Elizabethan position as Richard himself is (see Carlisle's response in 4.1, when Henry announces he will ascend the regal throne), reminds Richard earlier, when Richard is in Wales (3.2), that surely God is on the king's side, but he must act, not lament. He is answered on that occasion by Richard's most eloquently confident speech about God's provident protection of him as King (3.2.34-62). It is not that Richard overlooks the power of earthly might (his "downs" in that scene are initiated by the progressively worsening news that all the earthly forces he relied on have abandoned him), but that he believes unequivocally that God is on his side; i.e., the official Elizabethan position; in other words, no chink. But, as I have suggested, there is a chink in that position and it is through that chink that Bolingbroke slips into being King. Against Richard, the play shows that "the breath of worldly men" can "depose the deputy elected by the lord" (3.2.56-7) if it is accompanied by might and political shrewdness; and the play shows this by Bolingbroke's use of that weak point: that is, that ambiguity in the status of God's providence is turned to advantage by Bolingbroke and his supporters (through what looks like a silent conspiracy); the flood of support for Bolingbroke itself (from all quarters in the kingdom) seems to legitimate his claim to kingship and can be interpreted (as it is, explicitly by York, when in 5.2, he says to his wife, "But heaven has a hand in these events" [line 37]) as the work of God. That Bolingbroke is very much aware of the chink is clear in his response to York, just before meeting Richard at Flint castle, when York warns him not to go "further than [he] should" and reminds him that the "heavens are o'er our heads" (3.3.17): "I know it, uncle; and oppose not myself/Against their will"(line 18). Bolingbroke's answer leaves open the possibility that God may make him king. Bolingbroke combines earthly might (he has huge forces behind him) and political savvy against "the breath of kings" (1.3.215) and succeeds. In the exchange between lines 200-209 in 3.3, this is starkly made clear.

That this victory, however, will have some cost too, is hinted at in the last movement of the play. In 4.1, Carlisle, in the speech I have alluded to earlier, pulls out the trump card of the "official" position (that God will avenge the unholy act of deposing a rightful king by punishing the offspring of its perpetrators and generations of English people); but Henry is not fazed; Carlisle is arrested. Soon after, Henry is faced with a plot against him to restore Richard to the throne, but he nips it in the bud through York's now transferred absolute allegiance to him (York reveals the conspiracy by finding out about it through Aumerle, his son). In the final scene of the play, when Exton brings the corpse of Richard to Henry, Exton refers to it as "thy buried fear." Exton is referring to Henry's fear of Richard living (having a deposed king around is politically dangerous; it

may encourage further plots against the new king); but that phrase may be read in another way by the audience: here's a deep fear which Henry will perhaps never lose, even with Richard dead: the fear of God's vengeance, however small that may be in Henry's mind now. Henry makes one more move, which is at once politic and religious: he vows to "wash this blood from [his] guilty hand" by promising to make a pilgrimage (actually, a crusade) to Jerusalem.

But all these difficulties presaging trouble remain just that: both Henry and the play itself negotiate a subtle route through the crucial ambiguity in the official position. In its hinting at trouble to come, the play suggests Henry's task will not be easy (and thus brings up the bitter memory of the long civil war--the war between the "houses of York and Lancaster," which Carlisle prophecies--in the minds of its contemporary audience, perhaps reinforced through the plays Shakespeare himself wrote on this war) but its representation of the historical event of the deposing of Richard is, in my view, in line with Parsons' claim that "princes have . . .been lawfully deposed for misgovernment, and . . . God hath allowed and assisted the same."

Perhaps one detail about this play in its own time supports this view somewhat: in 1601, the Earl of Essex rebelled against Elizabeth, but the rebellion was squashed. A day or two before the uprising, some of his followers asked Shakespeare's company to play a play about Richard II (which by 1601 was no longer being performed) presumably with the hope that it would galvanize the people to support the rebellion. What was it that these men saw in the play?

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