THE DIVINE RIGHT OF KINGS
AND SHAKESPEARE'S RICHARD II

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ADVISOR: DR. TETSUMARO HAYASHI
ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH

BALL STATE UNIVERSITY
MUNCIE, INDIANA

by
JOHN W. MORRIS

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The historical Richard II always occupied a special place in the Elizabethan mind. Until he relinquished his crown of thorns to Charles I in the year 1600, he was the archetypal English martyr; no other medieval king aroused such compassion for his fate, not even Edward II, who like himself was deposed and cruelly murdered. That he was the last of the Plantagenets, the last direct descendant from William the Conqueror, gave him a particular sanctity. The unbroken line that was severed in his fall has never been restored.1

Richard II is a political play in that it went to the heart of a burning topical political question and to Shakespeare's audience its political significance was immediate and tremendous. Ministers of State wrote letters about it; it was years before the censors of books would allow the most famous of its scenes to be printed; and it was once the subject of a state trial which resulted in executions. John Palmer, in his book Political Characters of Shakespeare, outlines the problem very well:

The ordinary Englishman who saw Shakespeare's tragedy in 1595 had lived in peace under a strong Government—and, what is even more important, an incontestably
legitimate Government—for over a hundred years. But he still remembered the government of the house of Lancaster, which had neither been strong nor legitimate, and the hideous interim of civil war before Henry of Richmond married Elizabeth of York and provided England with a dynasty acceptable to God and man. In the years following 1595 the whole kingdom was on tenterhooks. Who was to succeed Elizabeth Tudor? All that the Englishman held most dear had found a satisfying symbol in the Tudor monarch, ruling by divine right, holding a sacred office, to question whose authority was treason, to trouble whose peace was an impiety. But the Tudor monarch was about to die childless. Was England to fall back into the old disorder, horror, fear and mutiny which had followed the usurpation of 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 is foretold with eloquence and particularity. *Richard II* is Shakespeare's comment on his times and in *Richard II* there are certainly deeper implications than the simple issue between a good king and a bad king. *Richard II* is the tragedy of a private individual as well as a tragedy for England. Shakespeare was giving a verdict on a contemporary situation upon which, for all anyone knew in 1595, the future peace of the country might depend.

Richard of Bordeaux had towards the end of the sixteenth century become a legendary figure. His disposition had acquired a mystical significance. For over two centuries he had stood to poets and historians, both in England and in France, for a supreme example of that tragic fall of princes which appealed so strongly to the imagination and conscience of the post medieval world. In fact, the Middle
Ages may be said to have ended with Richard, and although they would not have used those terms about it, the men of the sixteenth century were able to perceive that something had passed which they would never know again. To the legitimists Richard was a martyr and his enforced abdication a sacrilege. It did not seem to them that the harshness of his fate was merited by the sum of his misdeeds. To the Lancastrians, a dynasty launched in blood, his removal was a necessary act of providence. To all alike he was a tragic symbol of the instability of human fortune. Those who took the mystical view of his fall did not hesitate to compare his passion with that of Christ. Even those who, in deference to the house of Lancaster, affected to regard his deposition as a salutary act of state, were deeply affected by this saddest of all stories of the deaths of kings and tended to regard its protagonists as blind agents of divine purpose rather than conscious masters of the event. Bolingbroke and Richard, in the Tudor imagination, played their parts as in a mystery, Richard accepting his humiliation as a cup that might not pass away and Bolingbroke, unconscious instrument in bringing about a record fall of man, achieving his triumph as a thing pre-ordained.  

It is worth noting here that the English, in dealing faithfully with their kings for over a thousand years of history, have contrived to retain a mystical respect for the royal office without in any way forgoing their right of judgment on the royal person. The waters of the rough rude
sea of English politics have washed the balm from half a
dozenn anointed kings without in any way detracting from
the consecration of their successors. God save the King--
but God help him if his subjects should find him trouble-
some. When the occasion arises--and it has arisen no less
than four times since Richard died at Pomfret Castle--the
English people can always be trusted to demonstrate that a
sincere reverence for monarchy is compatible with a dis-
tinctly uncivil treatment of the monarch. Nothing in fact
so signally illustrates the force of English sentiment for
royalty than its successful survival of so many royal per-
sons who have left their country for their country's good.
The emotions aroused in an Elizabethan by the enacted de-
position of a king have outlived two revolutions and the
importation of two foreign princes.⁴

With these preliminary observations in mind, let us
consider what divine right is and its use in Richard II.

The Divine Right of Kings is the belief that monarchs
get their right to rule directly from God, rather than from
the consent or wish of their subjects. The king is God's
deputy on earth, and therefore, under this principle, "the
king can do no wrong" as far as the people are concerned.
Consequently, it will be up to God to punish a wicked king,
not man. As we shall see Richard II relied heavily on
this doctrine and misuses it.

The notion of divine right seems to have been developed
by the Romans after their conquest of the Greek city-states.
Julius Caesar's nephew, Octavian, who became the Emperor Augustus and clothed himself in all the appurtenances of divinity, was probably the first Roman emperor to bring this change in the character of the imperial office, which had been patterned on the Hellenistic democratic model of monarchy. Although it is doubtful that Augustus ever permitted the offering of divine honors to his person during his lifetime, it is known that soon after his death both he and his uncle Julius Caesar were both deified, and within a half-century the Emperor Caligula (A.D. 37-41) had himself worshiped as a God.\(^5\)

This "absolutist theory" of monarchy was carried to England through the Roman conquests, and the doctrine of divine right was then expounded by Royal lawyers, who appealed to Roman imperial jurisprudence to find support for their masters claim to a "plenitude of power."\(^6\) James I was probably the first English monarch to seize upon Roman law and abandon the patrimonial conception of his office. The idea of divine right was at its height in England during the reign of the Stuarts and, out of all the medieval kings of England, only Richard II is said to have attained "a complete sovereignty," while being only the second king (Edward II was the first) of England since William the Conqueror to assume the throne without the necessity of being elected.\(^7\)

Not until the fourteenth century in England was the doctrine of primogeniture, or determination by birth, the
sole and unchallenged factor in determining the succession of kings and, with it, an absolute divine right. Prior to this time the principle of kin-right prevailed; that is, the new king was chosen by vote from the near relatives of the lately dead king. However, as Robert Reed has pointed out, in late medieval times primogeniture had come to be regarded as the strongest and only acceptable prerequisite to the throne for a very simple reason:

Succession by primogeniture was determined by the will of God, not by the voice of the people. If the king were to be God's agent, as he was thought to be, then it was essential that he be appointed by God, and only by God.

Of all Shakespeare's kings only Richard II can claim for himself an absolute divine right. He owes his position entirely to God (being "first born") and, in no sense, to the people. Since the people did not elect Richard he is in no way indebted or answerable to them. Unfortunately, Richard takes advantage of his position and breaks his sacred oath to God.

Historically, Richard II was the son of Edward Prince of Wales, known since Elizabethan times as Edward the Black Prince. The Black Prince, the son and heir of Edward III, died before his father, and young Richard succeeded to the throne under the doctrine of primogeniture in 1377 at the age of ten. Shakespeare's Richard II is a history play, as well as a tragedy. It covers the period from April 29, 1398, until March 12, 1400, the last of Richard's reign. Shakespeare was fascinated by the problems and theories
of kingship and he studied kingship from a strictly Tudor point of view. Who, first of all, had the right to be king, and once a king was rightly and justly crowned, could he do wrong? As already mentioned, this was a particularly timely topic in Shakespeare's era because as he was writing his history plays Elizabeth had already been on the throne for thirty-five years. Having never married, she provided no heir to the throne. The question of succession haunted her subjects, for it was this very question which had led to the bloodshed of the civil wars between York and Lancaster just a little more than a century before.10

No other of Shakespeare's kings is so conscious of divine right as is Richard II. Richard, as we shall see, time and again calls to mind the fact that he is chosen by God as King of England and cannot be deposed. He speaks of himself as "the deputy elected by the Lord," and elsewhere, contends that only God can dismiss him from his "stewardship." That Richard's divine right is thought to be absolute is also attested by the words of Gaunt, York, and Carlisle. A closer study of Richard II will reveal how Shakespeare explores, employs, and continually stresses, the doctrine of The Divine Right of Kings.

Early in Richard II, the Duchess of Gloucester urges her brother-in-law, old John of Gaunt (father of Bolingbroke), to take some action against King Richard, who has been largely responsible for the murder of her husband. But Gaunt, although he is Richard's uncle and recognizes how
just her accusations are, will not strike out against God's anointed, even to avenge a murdered 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.
                        (Richard II, I., ii., 1. 37-41) II

Similarly, at the end of Act II, the Duke of York, another of Richard's uncles, refuses to join the group of rebel nobles who want to force Richard to return to Bolingbroke those lands which he confiscated after Gaunt's death. Even though he is vastly outnumbered he states:

    Well, well, I see the issue of these arms.
    I cannot mend it, I must needs confess,
    Because my power is weak and all ill left:
    But if I could, by Him that gave me life,
    I would attach you all, and make you stoop
    Unto the sovereign mercy of the king.
                        (II. iii. 151-156)

These two old men were acutely conscious of their duty to the king, but at the same time, they were painfully aware of Richard's shortcomings, especially in comparison to their own Father Edward III. Hence, the two men who most clearly acknowledge the divinity of Richard's right, will eventually issue the sharpest rebukes for his failure to fulfill the obligation and duty which goes with that right. Even on his deathbed, while calling Richard only the "landlord" of England—not king, old Gaunt does not preach rebellion.

As noted earlier, Richard asserts his divine right throughout the play. He does not forget the significance
of the holy anointment ceremony which he underwent when he became king, but he makes it second in importance to the fact of primogeniture:

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.

(III. ii. 54-57)

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.

(III. ii. 60-62)

Later, in asserting his claim to absolute divine right and that he owes his position entirely to God, Richard can boast to Northumberland:

If we be not, show us the hand of God
That hath dismissed us from our stewardship;
For well we know no hand of blood and bone
Can gripe the sacred handle of our scepter,
Unless he do profane, steal, or usurp.

(III. iii. 76-80)

After Richard returns from Ireland Carlisle and Aumerle urge him to summon up his strength and take action against his enemies, for God will side with a lawful king:

(Carlisle)

Fear not, my Lord; that power that made you king
Hath power to keep you king in spite of all.
The means that heavens yield must be embraced
And not neglected. Else heaven would,
And we will not: heaven's offer we refuse,
The proffered means of succor and redress.

(III. ii. 27-32)

When Aumerle suggests that inaction is the way to deal with Bolingbroke, now "strong and great in substance and in power," Richard compares himself to "the searching eye of heaven" and speaks of when the traitor Bolingbroke:
Shall see us rising in our throne, the east,
His treasons will sit blushing in his face,
Not able to endure the sight of day,
But self-affrighted tremble at his sin.

(III. ii. 50-53)

And then in response to Aumerle's reminder, "remember who you are," Richard is again prompted to a pronouncement of security; although not backed by an unqualified confidence:

I had forgot myself: am I not king?  
Awake, thou coward majesty! Thou sleepest.  
Is not the king's name twenty thousand names?  
Arm, arm, my name! a puny subject strikes  
At thy great glory. Look not to the ground,  
Ye favorites of a king, are we not high?  
High be our thoughts.  

(III. ii. 83-90)

Richard's emblem was the sun of royalty emerging from a cloud. This sun-image occurs frequently in Richard II and corresponds to the Elizabethan conception of world order; that is, that the order which prevails in the heavens is duplicated on earth, with the king corresponding to the sun. Disorder in the heavens brings disorder on earth—the commonwealth of men. The Elizabethans saw the universe as a unity, in which everything had its place; the Great Chain of Being with the king second only to God. When Richard appears on the battlements of Flint Castle Bolingbroke himself states:

See, see, King Richard doth himself appear,  
As doth the blushing discontented sun  
From out the fiery portal of the East,  
When he perceives the envious clouds are bent  
To dim his glory, and to stain the track  
Of his bright passage to the Occident.  

(III. iii. 61-66)

However, this image quickly suggests that this sun (Richard) has passed its zenith and it is moving "to set weeping in
the lowly west."

Finally, Bolingbroke, in taking the crown and defying the doctrine of divine right, takes unto himself and to his heirs the curse so vehemently pronounced by the Bishop of Carlisle:

What subject can give sentence on his king?
And who sits here that is not Richard's subject?
Thieves are not judged, but they are by to hear,
Although apparent guilt be seen in them;
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,
And he himself not present? . . .
My Lord of Hereford here, whom you call king,
Is a foul traitor to proud Hereford's king;
And if you crown him, let me prophesy
The blood of English shall manure the ground,
And future ages groan for this foul act . . .
Disorder, horror, fear, and mutiny
Shall here inhabit, and this land be called
The field of Golgotha and dead men's skulls.

(IV. 1. 121-29, 134-38, 142-44)

Carlisle here steadfastly defends Richard, and the doctrine of divine right, and we can see that "the way of the transgressing king was shown to be hard, but no happiness was promised to the one who tried to execute God's vengeance or to depose the deputy elected by the Lord."13

This brings us to a central question about divine right and Richard II--can rebellion against a justly crowned ruler in certain circumstances be justified? The Homilies of the English Church, one of the first by-products of the Reformation, were compiled by the government to be read at divine service. The particular aim of the famous thirty-third Homily against Disobedience and Wilful Rebellion,
issued in 1571, was to demolish the argument that rebellion could be justified in certain circumstances. Homily 33 was issued after what was to be the last feudal uprising in England, The Northern Rebellion of 1569, and after Elizabeth was excommunicated as a heretic in 1570. This in affect freed the English Catholics from even a nominal allegiance to Elizabeth and it became their duty to contrive her death or deposition. The Homily betrayed the government's deep anxiety for the future and seems an almost panic-stricken reply to the threat of imminent rebellion. The Homily stresses the duty of obedience--and the terrible consequences of disobedience. It also stresses the belief of order in the state and the divine sanctions of government. Since man occupies such a crucial position in the Chain of Being he must not rebel against the anointed of the Lord. If the sovereign should happen to be a tyrant then the subject's duty is to submit himself to what God has ordained. His only remedy lies in prayer; or in 'sighs and tears' as James I was later to suggest. The Homily concludes that it is absurd to think that rebels, who are the worst of men, should make themselves judges of princes, and if God sends a bad ruler as punishment for a people's wickedness, to rebel is to add a new sin to those not yet expiated. If occasionally rebellion has seemed to prosper, it is only because God, to whom alone all vengeance belongs, has chosen to use rebels as instruments of His purpose, and in due time the usuper or his heirs will suffer for it.¹⁴
As mentioned earlier many people compare the fall of Richard II to the fall of Christ. This method of self-comparison to Christ is largely justified in Richard's case because of the central importance in the play of the concept of divine right. Richard's own biblical references seem to be an appeal for Christian compassion and it is possible that Shakespeare had in mind the whole problem of charity and pity. Richard compares his treacherous friends to Judas and they who show an outward pity at his fall to Pilate:

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"?
(IV. i. 170-72)

Though some of you, with Pilate, wash your hands,
Showing an outward pity: yet you Pilates
Have here delivered me to my sour cross,
And water cannot wash away your sin.
(IV. i. 138-41)

Richard has been called upon to play the scene in which he unkings himself and he plays it with a vengeance. These men have summoned him to comply with a formality in Westminster Hall and he will shame them, if it be possible. After York explains the purpose for which he has been called, "The resignation of thy state and crown to Henry Bolingbroke," and after Bolingbroke reminds him to keep to the point, Richard states:

My crown, I am (willing to resign); but still my grieves are mine.
You may my gloves and my state depose,
But not my grieves; still I am king of those.
(IV. i. 190-92)

And later when Bolingbroke demands, "Are you ready to resign
the crown?", Richard replies that he is, but after his own fashion:

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 . . .
God pardon all oaths that are broke to me,
God keep all vows unbroke are made to thee . . .
God save King Henry, unkinged Richard says,
And send him many years of sunshine days.

(IV. i. 206-10, 213-14, 219-20)

In conclusion, the Divine Right of Kings depended on the following of the universal laws of justice and retribution: loyalty, order, and authority. The coronation oath Richard took at the beginning of his reign, an oath intended to be binding on any king of England, is very significant in our final appraisal of Richard's actions. A crucial part of the significance of Richard's oath was that it had been made in the presence of God, in the Church of Westminster. Of equal significance was the fact that, in making the oath, Richard had acted as God's agent. He had not only committed himself, but also God, to the just administration of England. The sacred conditions under which Richard made this oath amply suggest that a serious violation of it would be a breach of faith, and therefore also of contract, with God. Robert Reed, in his Richard II: From Mask to Prophet, speaks of the paradox and possible fallacy that attends the doctrine of divine right: "The stronger and more unquestioned that right, the greater is the monarch's tendency to place an undue reliance upon it." Had Richard's office been
granted to him by the people, and not solely by God, we may assume a very different Richard--more tactful and circum-
spect and, in the end, a more powerful king.

Biblical teaching attests to the principle that what God has granted He may later take back or qualify, especially on conditions of breach of faith. Shakespeare's Richard, like the historical Richard, time and again takes advantage of the privilege of divine right and disregards law and justice only because he has unqualified confidence that the right is inviolable. However, by the end of this tragedy, we seem to be left with the impression that Richard finally realizes that, while God's deputy on earth, he not only had a duty to God, but also to his country and his subjects.
Addendum:

The first blow at divine right was the execution of the English king, Charles I, in 1649. The French Revolution completely repudiated the belief, and asserted the doctrine that the right to rule came from the people. But the divine right doctrine lasted long after that time. It was asserted in the early 1900s by the German emperor, Wilhelm II, as king of Prussia, and by Czar Nicholas II of Russia.\textsuperscript{16}
NOTES


3 Ibid., p. 120.

4 Ibid., p. 121.


6 Ibid.


14 Reese, pp. 39-40.

15 Reed, p. 25.
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Reed, Robert Rentoul, Richard II: From Mask to Prophet, University Park: Penn State Studies, 1968.

