

Richard II

W.Shakespeare

April 10-12, 2013

As usual the main outline of the plot can be effected in a few words. There is Richard king, son of the legendary Black Prince, grandson of Edward III, both of whom raided the French during the Hundred Years War. Richard himself on the other hand is not a martial fellow, and during his time the English lie low across the channel. This is of course not part of the play, but supposedly the background information everyone in the audience is supposed to be privy to. The play starts with the king supposed to mediate between two dukes embroiled in conflict. One is the Duke of Hereford, a cousin of the king, son of his uncle - John of Gaunt, the other the Duke of Norfolk, a certain Mowbray. It is decided that the two of them should fight it out at a tournament, but when it comes to it, the king calls it off and instead banishes them both from English soil. His cousin for ten years, an amount of time he is made to reduce, the other for life, and of Mowbray we will hear no more in the play. Soon thereafter the king is brought to the deathbed of John of Gaunt who pleads for the sake of his son. The king, of no martial temperament, then goes to Ireland, supported by the bounty he has extracted from Gaunts estate and appoints the Duke of York as his deputy in England, his cousin now also Duke of Lancaster seizes the opportunity and lands in England, much to the horror of Richard, his situation becoming more and more desperate, as his allies, one after the other, either are killed, or as in the case of the Duke of York, changing sides. The castle in which he dwells is besieged, and his cousin offers to prove his fealty to his lord in exchange for having his banishment annulled. The king readily agrees, and soon he is disposed, and during some sort of skirmish during confinement he is killed by one of the underlings of the new king Henry IV, who is stricken by remorse by the deed.

Plot is one thing, execution is everything. One can liken a play by Shakespeare to a picture gallery, not one with painted images displayed, but one in which verbal gems of words strung like pearls are exhibited. The plot only provides suitable pegs and give the visitor a path to follow during inspection.

We can stop first at the death-bed at John of Gaunt, the passage to which inspires him to the following reflection.

John of Gaunt

O, but they say the tongues of dying men

Enforce attention, like deep harmony

Where words are scarce they are seldom spent in vain

For they breath truth that breathe their words in pain

He that no more must say is listened more

Than they whom youth and ease have taught to glose

The King then stops at it and the following interchange follows

King Richard

What comfort, man? How is't with agèd Gaunt?

John of Gaunt

O, how the name befits my composition!

Old Gaunt indeed, and gaunt in being old.

Within me grief hath kept a tedious fast,

And who abstains from meat that is not gaunt?

...

Gaunt am I for the grave, gaunt as a grave,

Whose hollow womb inherits naught but bones.

King Richard

Can sick men play so nicely with their names?

John of Gaunt

No, misery makes sport to mock itself.

Since thou dost seek to kill my name in me,

I mock my name, great king, to flatter thee

King Richard

Should dying men flatter those that live?

John of Gaunt

No, no, men living flatter those that die.

King Richard

Thou now a-dying sayst thou flatt'rest me.

John of Gaunt

Oh no: thou diest, though I the sicker be.

King Richard

I am in health; I breathe, and see thee ill.

And now follows a longer speech by the dying Gaunt, in which we may mark passages such as the following

...

Thy deathbed is no lesser than thy land,

Wherein thou liest in reputation sick;

...

A thousand flatterers sit within thy crown,

Whose compass is no bigger than thy head,

And yet, encaged in so small a verge,

The waste is no whit lesser than thy land.

O, had thy grandsire [Edward III] with a prophet'e eye

Seen how his son's son should destroy his sons,

From forth thy reach he would have laid thy shame,

Deposing thee before thou wert possessed,

Which art possessed now to depose thyself.

To which Richard responds angrily, as to be expected.

And thou, a lunatic lean-witted fool,

*Presuming in an ague's privilege,
Dar'st with thy frozen admonition
Make pale our cheek, chasing the royal blood
With fury from his native residence.*

John of Gaunt is not to be bested. He discharges arrows such as

*... That blood already, like the pelican,
Hast thou tapped out and drunkenly caroused.*

...

*Live in thy shame, but die not shame with thee.
These words hereafter thy tormentors be.*

after which he turns to his attendants and asks them to first convey him to his bed and than to his grave, upon which the King is inspired to pronounce

*And let them die that age and sullens have,
For both hast thou, and both become the grave.*

Soon the death of old Gaunt is announced by the attending Northumberland

*His tongue is now a stringless instrument
Words, life and all, Old Lancaster hath spent.*

How bitter is not enmity between close relatives. The bitterest there is. Thereafter Richard usurps the wealth of Gaunt in order to finance his Irish campaign. Hardly a move to make him more popular. It is not feasible to proceed such close a rendering of the play, as I have just performed. Suffices it to pluck, more or less randomly, a few more flowers from the bed.

When Richard returns to invaded England from Ireland, he is moved to utter

*Needs must I like it well. I weep for joy
To stand upon my kingdom once again.
Dear earth I do salute thee with my hand,
Though rebels wound thee with their horses' hoofs.
As a long parted-mother with her child
Plays fondly with her tears, and smiles in meeting,
So weeping, smiling, greet I thee my earth,
And do thee favours with my royal hands.*

...

*This earth shall have a feeling, and these stones
Prove armèd soldiers, ere her native king
Shall falter under foul rebellion's arms.*

But Richard is beset by worries of his status as a King, seeking reassurance and confirmations.

...

*All souls that will be safe fly from my side,
For time has set a blot upon my pride.*

...
Say, is my kingdom lost? Why 'twas my care,
And what loss is it to be rid of care?

...
The worst is death, and death will have its day.

...
And yet no so, for what can we bequeath
save our deposèd bodies to the ground?
Our lands, our lives, and all are Bollingbroke's [the cousin, the Duke of Lancaster
and the future Henry IV];
And nothing can we call our own but death,
And that small model of the barren earth
which serves as paste and cover to our bones.

Then follows a longer litany of how kings have come to grief, how they have been
deposed, slain in war, poisoned by their wives, killed in their sleep, for...

*All murdered. For within the hollow crown
That rounds the mortal temples of a king
Keeps death his court; and there the antics sits,
Scoffing his state and grinning at his pomp,
Allowing him a breath, a little scene,
To monarchize, be feared, and kill with looks,
Infusing him with self and vain conceit,
As if this flesh which walls about our life
Were brass impregnable, and humored thus,
Comes at the last, and with a little pin
Bores through his castle wall: and farewell king.*

There are still some acts to follow before the inevitable, involving the more or less
voluntary unkinging of the king. The deposed king in his prison is to be overpowered.

*The devil take Henry of Lancaster and thee!
Patience is stale, and I am weary of it.*

While killing a few assassins he exclaims

*What means death in this rude assault?
Villain, thy own hand yields thy death's instrument.
Go thou, and fill another room in hell.*

He is himself struck and his last words are

*That hand shall burn in never-quencing fire
That staggers thus my person. Exton, thy fiece hand
Hath with the King's blood stained the King's own land.
Mount, mount, my soul; thy seat is up on high,
Whilst my gross flesh sinks downward, here to die.*

When King Henry hears from Exton about the death he is stricken with remorse.

*Exton, I thank thee not, for thou has wrought
A deed of slander with thy fatal hand
Upon my head and all this famous land.*

Exton predictably protests. Was he not asked to do the deed, straight from the mouth of his sovereign. The King concludes.

*They love not poison that do poison need;
Nor do I thee. Though I did wish him dead,
I hate the murderer, love him murdered.*

...

*Lords, I protest my soul is full of woe
That blood should sprinkle me to make me grow.
Come mourn with me for what I do lament,
And put on sullen black incontinent.
I'll make a voyage to the Holy Land
To wash this blood off from my guilty hand.*

And that is it!

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