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DOMINIQUE GOY-BLANQUET\*

## “Noble in body and judicious in mind like Homer”: Enacting Richard II

Abstract

Richard II aimed to be an absolute king, and took pains to impress future generations with his royal image, yet the acting tradition has steadily moved away from the historical character, endowing him with a poetic talent that stripped him of other powers, as if poetry rhymed with incapacity. This article will explore his metamorphoses.

KEYWORDS: Shakespeare; Richard II; acting tradition

Prudens et Mundus, Ricardus iure Secundus,  
per fatum victus iacet hic sub marmore pictus.  
Verax sermone fuit et plenus ratione,  
Corpore procerus, animo prudens ut Omerus.  
Ecclesiae fuit, elatos suppeditavit,  
Quemuis prostravit – regalia qui violavit.  
Obruit hereticos et eorum travit amicos.<sup>1</sup>

### In One Person Many People

Richard II, played by Jean Vilar, made the opening of the first Avignon festival in 1947.<sup>2</sup> By setting his production in the Cour d'honneur of the Popes'

<sup>1</sup> [“Prudent and elegant, Richard by right the second, / conquered by fate, lies here portrayed, under marble; / truthful in speech he was and full of reason; / noble in body and judicious in mind like Homer; / he favoured the church, cast down the proud; / and laid low those who violated the royal prerogative; / he destroyed the heretics and scattered their friends”, Richard II’s epitaph, trans. by Nigel Saul]. Richard’s Latin epitaph in King Edward’s Chapel, Westminster Abbey, is reproduced in Fabyan’s *Chronicles* with his own English translation of the first two stanzas (1811: 569).

<sup>2</sup> *Richard II*, translated for the occasion by Jean-Louis Curtis. Vilar performed again in autumn at the Théâtre des Champs Elysées, and in Avignon until 1953, Gérard Philipe from 1954 to 1956, first in Avignon, then the TNP (Théâtre National Populaire, Paris). I am indebted to Cécile Falcon’s review of reviews (2007: 19-37). Translations are mine unless otherwise stated.

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Palace, with minimal props, Vilar was aiming to recreate an Elizabethan space, away from the *boîte à l'italienne*, the illusionist Italian box: Richard's prison needed no locks, just a stool on which to sit and a jug of water. The dispossessed king was jailed on other stages of Europe at the time: Rudolf Bing's production of the play opened the Edinburgh festival in August of the same year, and a year later Giorgio Strehler staged it at the Piccolo Teatro in Milan.

Vilar went on playing the title part every year in Avignon until 1953. Reviewers were deeply troubled when Gérard Philipe took his place in the revival of 1954. He and Vilar performed such different characters that some felt they were like the negative and positive of the same image (Kemp 1954). To Jean Jacquot, "It seemed that no dimension of the play had escaped Vilar" but when Gérard Philipe succeeded him in the part, "Richard shrunk down to the size of a crowned minion, a lucid but effete profligate who turns hysterical when he meets adversity".<sup>3</sup> Elsa Triolet, wife of the poet Louis Aragon, expressed her dismay at seeing two great actors perform the same text so at odds with each other: "A tone of voice, a gesture, and everything the author meant to say turns into its opposite".<sup>4</sup> According to the reviews, Vilar had a "tough attitude" and a "steely look",<sup>5</sup> whereas the much younger Philipe, pale, willowy, his eyes flickering with anxiety and doubt, played a "handsome degenerate" (Kemp 1954), evocative of Lorenzaccio or the last Valois king. Even when Vilar's Richard came close to madness, he remained every inch a king. Philipe toyed with his crown like a kid with his rattle, he performed the comedy of power whereas Vilar believed in it, giving a tragic dimension to his fall (July 1954). Roland Barthes (2002: 65, 67) was highly critical of the changes the "star" actor had imposed on Vilar's scenography and direction. The change was so thought-provoking that Vilar himself felt he was watching a play he no longer recognized. Seven years after creating the part, he wrote a long paper on the construction of the character and its variants (Vilar 1953).<sup>6</sup> He did not want to choose between Richard's facets, nor clarify the "secret" of his multiplicity, but preferred to leave it open to the spectators' imagination. They must let themselves be "brassés", brewed, by the poem (Vilar 1953).

<sup>3</sup> "Aucune dimension de l'œuvre n'avait, semble-t-il échappé à Vilar . . . Quand le regretté Gérard Philipe lui succéda dans le rôle, Richard fut réduit aux proportions d'un mignon couronné, d'un débauché clairvoyant, mais veule, et que l'adversité faisait sombrer dans l'hystérie" (Jacquot 1964: 111).

<sup>4</sup> "Une inflexion de voix, un geste, et tout ce que l'auteur a voulu dire, se change en son contraire" (Triolet 1954).

<sup>5</sup> "Dureté de gestes" and "regard d'acier" (July 1954).

<sup>6</sup> Vilar had performed the part twenty-seven times in the past three months when he wrote this paper. He mentions his perplexity in a note of 3 February 1954 in his *Memento*.

Since then, the acting tradition on both sides of the Channel has left us memories of variously weak Richards. Deborah Warner's, played by Fiona Shaw at the National Theatre in 1995, was a capricious child who sucked his thumb while telling himself sad bedtime stories of his dead ancestors. Patrice Chéreau played the monarch as a provocative hedonist, more youthful than royal, disoriented and vulnerable. Mnouchkine's impersonal characters, distinguished only by their costumes, and masks indicative of age, were ruled over by a godlike, hieratic figure, seated ten feet above the ground on a slim bamboo structure – in reference to the Vietnam war – that would become his prison when Bolingbroke took over his kingly attributes. More recently, Denis Podalydès, a shy, sickly clown, walked with tiny steps "like a geisha" (Héliot 2010), or a bird fallen from the nest, trying to escape the terrifying world of adults.<sup>7</sup> In *The Hollow Crown* on BBC 2, Ben Whishaw plays "an airy and effeminate Richard" who loses "his grip on both reality and his throne to the advancing Henry Bolingbroke" (Genzlinger 2013), "a nebbish and fey Richard, flitting about and making cataclysmic decisions on a whim", who whines and screams on the beach in Wales, "throwing a tantrum of disbelief that anyone would defy succession" (McFarland 2013). To *The Telegraph* reviewer, "He was camp, fretful and feeble throughout" (Crompton 2012). As Michael Dobson (2011) points out in his brilliant review of British performances since the '70s, the high camp tradition is an enduring one: "some of the greatest Richards in the theatre have been gay or bisexual". The transfer from Vilar to Philippe had marked a point of no return in his impersonations.

### The Rise of the Poet-King

The fortune of the play varied no less in the course of centuries. It was very successful in Shakespeare's own time, judging by the number of performances and reprints; at least until its last recorded performance at the Globe in 1631. After the Civil War, when the continental stage and its classical repertory took over, *Richard II* had only a few severely cut productions through the next century. George Steevens observes in 1780 that successive audiences usually sleep through those rare occurrences, and strongly advises Garrick not to revive it. Even Coleridge, one of its earliest admirers, writes in 1813 that it is rarely performed. Inflamed by Schlegel's lectures, he declares it "the first and most admirable of all Shakespeare's *purely* historical plays" as opposed to *Henry IV* "which may be named the *mixt* drama" (Coleridge

<sup>7</sup> Chéreau played the title part in his own production, Nouveau Gymnase, Marseille, 1970, Théâtre de l'Odéon, 1971. Georges Bigot, dir. Mnouchkine, Cartoucherie, 10 December 1981, Avignon, 1982. Denis Podalydès, dir. Jean-Baptiste Sastre, Avignon, 2010.

1989: 123-4). In his view (1971: 126-7), *Richard II* fulfills the function of historical drama, “namely, of familiarizing the people to the great names of their country, and thereby of exciting a steady patriotism, a love of just liberty, and a respect for all those fundamental institutions of social life, which bind men together” (1989: 126). But Coleridge found *Richard II* too subtle and sublime a poem for the crudities of the stage, he preferred to read it than hear it in the theatre. Indeed, he protests, he has never seen “any of Shakespeare’s plays performed but with a degree of pain, disgust, and indignation”: Shakespeare’s proper place is “in the heart and the closet; where he sits with Milton” (119). Concerning the eponymous character, he agrees that Richard is “weak and womanish”, but Shakespeare did not want to make him a vulgar rake, just to give him “a wantonness in feminine show, feminine *friendism*, intensely woman-like love of those immediately about him” (134).<sup>8</sup> A number of writers shared Coleridge’s distrust of the theatre. Hazlitt for one, did not recommend “the getting-up of Shakespeare’s plays in general”, even when performed by the best actors: “Not only are the more refined poetical beauties and minuter strokes of character lost to the audience, but the most striking and impressive passages, those which having once read we can never forget, fail comparatively of their effect, except in one or two rare instances indeed” (1818: 55). He does grant some quality to the performance of *Richard II* by Edmund Kean, but still, he insists, “we believe that in acting Shakespear there is a greater number of good things marred than in acting any other author” (57).

Edmund Kean was using Richard Wroughton’s adaptation of the text. Wroughton had cut about a third of the lines, and replaced them with extracts from other plays, or new speeches of his own, which made Richard more heroic, and the play generally more moralizing. The actor was criticized for what Hazlitt thought was excessive ardour: “Mr Kean made it a character of *passion*, that is, of feeling combined with energy; whereas it is a character of *pathos*, that is to say, of feeling combined with weakness” (58). Wroughton’s version was the standard one until the mid-nineteenth century, when Charles Kean, Edmund’s son, gave *Richard II* new life with a text quite as ruthlessly cut, costly scenery and costumes, in a production that Queen Victoria would attend five times.<sup>9</sup> Here enters Richard “the poet-king”, saluted by Walter Pater as “the most sweet-tongued” of all Shakespeare’s eloquent row of kings: “In the hands of [Charles] Kean the

<sup>8</sup> Review for the *Bristol Gazette*, 18 November 1813, and marginal notes on his copy of the text for his “Lecture 2” of the 1818-19 series.

<sup>9</sup> Princess’s Theatre, 1857, Royal Archives reference VIC/MAIN/Z/115. Charles Kean’s *Richard II* was performed with large cuts and a well-documented spectacular scenery which pleased the public’s taste for history.



play became like an exquisite performance on the violin" (1924: 201). The elegiac version was taking the upper hand, the confusion between Shakespeare's poetic talent and his character's near complete. Now writers adopted Richard as a brother artist who prefers poetry to action, and is too good a poet to be a good king. Only Swinburne protests that a poet is not necessarily effeminate and childish, but he does not argue with this portrayal of Richard: in his view, "the interest taken by the young Shakespeare in the development or evolution of such a womanish or semivirile character" can only be explained by the playwright's "dramatic immaturity". His play is full of imperfections, betraying "the struggle between the worse and the better genius of the author" (1909: 59, 85).

Nowadays, compared with Edmund Kean's muscular performance, Nicholas Brooke notes, "most modern Richards have moved so far in the other direction that they look ridiculous every time it is remarked how much he *looks* like his father, the Black Prince" (1973: 14). Harold Bloom sums up a widely spread feeling among critics, when he defines the play as "the tragedy of a self-indulgent poet" (2005: 113). So, what happened to the English Solomon depicted in Richard II's epitaph as "noble in body and judicious in mind like Homer", who "cast down the proud; / and laid low those who violated the royal prerogative", "destroyed the heretics and scattered their friends"? What happened to the man who, at age fourteen, had gallantly faced the Peasants' Revolt without a tremor? It is often said that his posthumous reputation was shaped to a large extent by Shakespeare. A historian like Palmer (1971: 76) argues that the historical character had nothing to do with "the pale poetic aesthete of Shakespeare's drama". But is this metamorphosis truly Shakespeare's work, or the actors' and directors'?

## The End of Feudalism

Today's productions often base Richard's weakness on the fact that he gave up his throne without fighting. Yet, as a closer look at the sources will confirm, neither Shakespeare nor the chroniclers claim he submitted willingly. What does happen on page and stage is a chain of events Richard could not divert: the duel between Bolingbroke and Mowbray, which causes a political dilemma, and his return a day too late from Ireland, which creates a military one. In Hall's chronicle (1809: 19), the murder of Woodstock is the initial cause of the disaster. In Holinshed's (1587: 498-9), it is the delayed landing. Shakespeare's "Call back yesterday" (2002: 3.2.69), "Unhappy day too late" (3.2.71) stresses the king's impotence against the irreversibility of time which makes his errors fatal:

But now the blood of twenty thousand men  
 Did triumph in my face, and they are fled;  
 (3.2.76-7)

At the opening of the play, Richard's belief that his royal words have a performative power is ironically endorsed by his cousin:

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)

This is the last time he can believe it, and soon Gaunt reminds him of its limit: "But not a minute, King, that thou canst give" (1.3.226). Nor can he trust in divine protection any longer when God's army of angels fail to rush to his defense. The sequence of events will further deny his vision of monarchy. Time, the major dramatic agent of the play, will never again obey Richard, yet obsessively returns to nag him:

I wasted time, and now doth Time waste me;  
 For now hath Time made me his numb'ring clock.  
 (5.5.49-50)

To the king's tragic errors, Shakespeare adds another important factor, supported by all the sources: Richard's financial extorsions are a sure way of alienating his subjects, as Bagot points out, "for their love / Lies in their purses" (2.2.128-9).<sup>10</sup> Patrice Chéreau had made this the basis of his production. His Richard was trapped in a major political change, when the old feudal class begins to retreat before the rise of a new power, money: instead of occupying the political centre of the realm, monarchy becomes its banker, inventing new ways of spending and wasting, new taxes to pay for pleasures. The theft of Bolingbroke's inheritance, the last of many abuses, makes the wealthy nobility eager to stop the haemorrhage. Chéreau noticed an important fact, seldom pointed out before: Bolingbroke has planned his return from exile before he learns the loss of his inheritance, though he swears that all he wants is his dukedom back, and the discontented lords are only too happy to make him their leader. Indeed, in the play there is no scene break between the death of Gaunt, Richard's capture of his possessions, and the news of Bolingbroke's return. The chronicles show he did have designs on the crown from the start: his friends have

<sup>10</sup> Blank charters and other exactions play a significant part in the anonymous *Woodstock*. Thomas Walsingham (2005: 298) reports that in 1397, Richard began to tyrannize his people. On his evolution at the end of his reign, which alienated the contemporary chroniclers, see Saul (1997: 270, 366-8, 388-91).

written to him, promising him their support "if he expelling K. Richard, as a man not meet for the office he bare, would take vpon him the scepter, rule, and diademe" (Holinshed 1587: 497).<sup>11</sup> Once he has landed, no one opposes him, the few royal supporters are taken and executed, and his troops increase as he marches to the throne because "those that came not, were spoiled of all they had . . . And thus what for loue, and what for feare of losse, they came flocking vnto him from euerie part" (498). Now that Richard's friends have been killed, there can be no turning back for the Lancastrians, and Richard knows it: those who have taken up arms for Lancaster "would rather die than give place, as well for the hatred as feare which they had conceived at him" (499). On the stage Bolingbroke's methods are reflected at 3.4 in the gardeners', which are uncritically held up as models of good government by those critics who find nothing wrong with their brutal programme: cut off lofty sprays, pluck up noisome weeds, lop away superfluous branches.

Last element in their posthumous construction of a weak, ineffective king: "the enigma of Richard's behaviour after his return to Wales" could only be explained by the collapse "of a poetic introvert" (Bullough 1960: 379).<sup>12</sup> The enigma? Holinshed's narrative clearly states that Richard was beaten before the fight, and that he was shrewd enough to know it: "he euidentialie saw, and manifestlie perceiued, that he was forsaken of them, by whom in time he might haue béene aided and relieued, where now it was too late" (Holinshed 1587: 499). His delayed return "gave opportunitie to the duke to bring things to passe as he could have wished, and tooke from the king all occasion to recover afterwards anie forces sufficient to resist him" (*ibid.*). When Richard does arrive, he is informed that all the castles of the marches from Scotland to Bristol have surrendered, "that likewise the nobles and commons, as well of the south parts, as the north, were fullie bent to take part with the same duke against him" (*ibid.*).

The news leaves him "so greatlie discomforted, that sorowfullie lamenting his miserable state, he utterlie despaired of his owne safetie, and calling his armie together, which was not small, licenced every man to depart to his home" (*ibid.*). Here one question remains: why did he make no attempt to resist? His own soldiers were ready to fight, "promising with an oth to stand with him against the duke, and all his partakers vnto death: but this could not encourage him at all" (500-1). With good reason. Bolingbroke sends to him the Earl of Northumberland, accompanied by "foure hundred

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Shakespeare 2002: 2.1.289-90.

<sup>12</sup> Bullough is one of many, Ann Barton, Winny, Van Laan, Potter, Berger, Siegel, Bloom, Calderwood, Hodgdon, to name a few. On the historical character, see Palmer (1971: 75-107) and Saul (1997: 411, 421, 460-4).

lances, & a thousand archers”, while his own troops are “hid closelie in two ambushes, behind a craggie mounteine, beside the high waie that lea-deth from Flint to Conwaie” (ibid.). Richard “being inclosed with the sea on the one side, and the rocks on the other, hauing his aduersaries so néere at hand before him, he could not shift awaie by any meanes . . . And thus of force he was then constrained to go with the earle” (ibid.).

Richard’s ‘free consent’ to resign, like Bolingbroke’s ‘show of duty’ is exactly that, a show, the official version of the deposition that all must accept as fact. If he agreed, according to the chronicles, it was in the vain hope to save his life. At Flint Castle, Shakespeare’s Richard anticipates Hamlet:

Shall we call back Northumberland and send  
Defiance to the traitor, and so die?  
(2002: 3.3.129-30)

His reluctance to waste his and his soldiers’ lives in a lost cause would probably earn him praise nowadays, but in his own time, such irenism was condemned as cowardice unworthy of his great ancestors.<sup>13</sup> Walsingham, for instance, memorably complained in his *Chronica maiora* that the king’s men were “knights of Venus rather than of Bellona” (Ormrod 2004: 290). On stage it is one of Northumberland’s early grievances: “More hath he spent in peace than they in war” (Shakespeare 2002: 2.1.255).

Shakespeare obviously knew his sources well, even if he does not feel tied to them when they do not fit his design. Nowhere does he paint a ‘weak’ Richard, unless providing him with some of the best poetry in the histories is to make him weak. Poetry, as in the “sad stories of the deaths of kings” (3.2.156), is out of character, more, it transcends the character, who becomes the mouthpiece of an enlarged vision of the movement of history.

### **Positively Last Performance**

Once defeated by superior armed strength, did Richard ‘willingly’ abdicate? It was a tricky point. The medieval and Tudor chroniclers were well aware that the case against him was fairly light, touching a king of undeniable legitimacy. Edward Hall adds to his predecessors’ accounts a willing confession made by Richard of his faults, for which he expresses due remorse, but which the stage character skillfully evades. Holinshed retreats

<sup>13</sup> See Philippe de Mézières’ *Epistre au roi Richart*, pleading with him to make peace with France (1975: 60-2) and Saul (1997: 206-10, 387-8) on Richard’s abhorrence of war.

behind official reports, the thirty-three articles of impeachment summed up "by maister Hall as followeth", the testimony of sixteen commissioners who speak sometimes as a multiple "we", sometimes as a singular "me the said earle", Northumberland. According to these witnesses, Richard, having confessed his inability to govern, promised "he would gladlie leaue of and renounce his right and title", a promise he is ready now "to performe and fulfill". Thus "he desired to haue a bill drawne of the said resignation, that he might be perfect in the rehearsall thereof" and was determined to read it himself "with glad countenance" (Holinshed 1587: 503).

Perform, seem, rehearse... Embedded in this testimony, a document in the first person, "I Richard" frees his subjects from their allegiance and renounces all his titles. The witnesses state he then expressed the wish to have Bolingbroke succeed him, and he put his gold ring on his cousin's finger. Then they carry the "voluntarie renunciation" from the Tower to Westminster Hall where it is confirmed by the two Houses. This is but the first phase, which continues with other documents, speeches, and proclamations. Richard himself remains invisible throughout the proceedings. Henry Bolingbroke who has remained silent so far, now presents his titles to the crown, reported again through an official document, "I Henrie of Lancaster claime the realme of England and the crowne", which is granted him straightaway (502-6). He then summons a new Parliament, where he hears the challenges between rival factions, orders a new enquiry into Woodstock's murder, and has the bishop of Carlisle arrested, all episodes which *Richard II* stages *before* the actual deposition (4.1), with the pretender visibly usurping the royal prerogative. In the chronicles, divine monarchy takes on the shape of a vaguely constitutional monarchy, with Parliament raised to an unprecedented role. Edward II had likewise been deposed, but to be succeeded by his son and lawful heir.

The play does not discuss the cause of Woodstock's murder, the outcome of an episode that strongly affected the historical Richard. The Merciless Parliament dominated by the Lords Appellant had convicted his court of treason, and executed several of his favourites. But Richard fought back: in July 1397 three of the Appellants were arrested. The Revenge Parliament of September revoked their commission to govern and declared them guilty of treason. The Earl of Arundel was tried and executed. His younger brother the Archbishop of Canterbury was exiled. Woodstock was imprisoned and murdered in Calais. The quarrel between Hereford and Mowbray erupted the following year, during the Parliament session of Shrewsbury. On stage, the fall of medieval divine monarchy begins then. Richard cannot allow a trial by combat that would point him out as the real culprit.

The full story of Woodstock's death, suffocated under a featherbed, would be confessed by his murderer in Henry IV's first parliament. But the records

during Richard's own reign already show strong disapproval of his behaviour. Chaucer (1987) directly advised Richard in his ballad "Lak of Stedfastnesse", giving him full instructions on the proper behaviour expected from a king:

O prince, desyre to be honourable  
 Cherish thy folk, and hate extorcion.  
 Suffer nothing that may be reprevable  
 To thyne estate don in thy regioun.  
 Shew forth thy swerd of castigacioun.  
 Dred God, do law, love trouthe and worthinesse  
 And wed thy folk agein to stedfastnesse.  
 (1987, "Lenvoy to King Richard": ll. 22-8)

The poet John Gower pleaded with him to listen to his subjects' grievances,

A king who reckons gold greater than his people's hearts  
 Straightaway must fall from the people's mind.  
 (2005, "O deus immense": 4, ll. 21-2)

He even goes further, "*Nomen regale populi vox dat tibi*", "the voice of the people gives you the royal title" (l. 60). A wise king will have ears for them if he wishes to be secure. Increasingly disgusted with Richard's rule, Gower moved over to the Lancastrians and wrote a poem praising Henry IV for a blessed act of war that rid the country of a tyrant and drove the legitimate heir to the throne, blithely ignoring the fact that Mortimer, the nearest heir, was bypassed, despite a family tree that would be rehearsed at length in Shakespeare's early histories.

One of the Tower committee, Adam of Usk, a doctor in canon law of Oxford, reports the whole sequence of Richard's fall in his *Chronicon* with a strong Lancastrian bias (Usk 1997: 20).<sup>14</sup> His sympathy goes unequivocally to the Appellants, one of whom, Archbishop Arundel, was his early patron. Richard's downfall is blamed first on his youth, and his unhappy choice of favourites, bad counsellors all, while Parliament stood impotent and ignored. In Adam's view, the confiscation of Hereford's inheritance sealed the king's fate. The French accounts, *Chronicque de la Traison et Mort de Richart deux roy Dengleterre*, Jean Créton's versified *Prinse du Roy Richart d'Angleterre*, like Froissart's chronicle (1806), strongly support Richard and cannot be wholly trusted either. The official report, the "Record and Process of the re-

<sup>14</sup> See Christopher Given-Wilson (1993: 329-35). John McCullagh (2005: 11-16) points out that his criticism of kingship goes beyond this particular king, it runs throughout his chronicle, and shows striking similarities with Walsingham's. Both chroniclers agree that taxation makes a monarch perilously unpopular with his people, yet both disapprove the Peasants' Revolt and their attack on hierarchy.

nunciation of King Richard the Second after the Conquest" ("Record and Process" 1969: 401-8) monitored by the managers of the revolution, betrays a complex state of irregularities. In this rewriting of facts, the sanction of the estates of the realm, *status* summoned by writ, is the only one invoked. The turbulent crowd of Londoners, *populus*, provide the traditional *acclamatio*. Richard gently resigns, confessing his faults, and designates his worthy cousin as successor, a well-organized ambiguity to be sorted out through the ironies of Shakespeare's dialogue, in the famously censored deposition scene. The *gravamina*, the list of faults recorded against Richard II, stress practices depriving his subjects of rights and liberties guaranteed by Magna Carta, like arrests on suspicion, persecuting the lords who sought to advise him, infringing on the "*potestas et status parliamenti*", appealing to the pope for confirmation of certain statutes "*contra coronam et dignitatem regiam*" and against the statutes and liberties of the realm. He is also charged with having alienated the property of the Crown without leave of the estates of the kingdom. The interests of the nation must be protected by Parliament against his arbitrary personal interference. The distinction between the two bodies of the monarch, royal person and dignity, first appears here, opening the split that will leave Shakespeare's "unkinged" Richard naked, and divine monarchy a corpse to be covered up under Henry V's pious cloak of "ceremony" (Goy-Blanquet 2016: 97-107).

By a sensational *coup de théâtre*, Shakespeare turns the deposition scene back on its organizers. As Dobson (2011) points out, it is easy to see why it was omitted from all Elizabethan printed texts: "this is a scene that sees through the whole business of political icon-making". Richard retraces in reverse mode the way to the coronation, emptying it of its symbolic worth, stressing that every step Bolingbroke is about to walk, his every gesture, will be a transgression of the sacred ritual. Bolingbroke understands too late he has been tricked. He gives the show away, "I thought you had been willing to resign", and clumsily insists "Are you contented to resign the crown?" (Shakespeare 2002: 4.1.200), which gets him an ironical "Ay, no. No, ay" (201). Now the anointment, the regalia, the oaths will all appear as parodies devoid of meaning. The royal icon holds centre stage for one masterly, positively last performance, rehearsing the tragic fall of sacred medieval majesty. The sound of footsteps on Richard's grave will echo through the next plays, under showers of English blood: these "sad stories of the death of kings" told at the fireside will still draw tears from the hearers before the common weal begins to move away from the warlike court to a world of taverns, rural towns and prosaic trade.

## The Revolutionary Poet

Even more significantly, Shakespeare deliberately departs from his sources to highlight the role of Parliament by transferring the deposition scene from the Tower to Westminster (Goy-Blanquet 2005: 99-111). Shakespeare's French translator François-Victor Hugo was the first to stress the significance of this move, actually a revolution: "In front of the wretched Westminster that divinizes tyranny, Shakespeare erects the formidable Westminster where it is unthroned". Richard deserves no sympathy and will get none, the poet Hugo's son writes. Shakespeare did not alter the work of Providence, he was just God's stage director. To the French Republican, Elizabeth who chose to identify herself with Richard deserved no better, exercising as she did "the double supremacy of pope and emperor, mistress of all consciences as of all destinies, arbiter of faith, arbiter of law". The poet Shakespeare, no weakling here, dares to stand up like a justiciar against "the almighty sultana of England" and "summon before the people's bar this imperial monarchy that claims to hold a mandate from above". His play will "establish by a famous and revealing example that law is the supreme force".<sup>15</sup>

The similarities between Richard and Elizabeth have often been stressed, though seldom with such flame. François-Victor Hugo saw here a major turn in English politics that Shakespeare shrewdly detected in the mass of chronicle material, and brilliantly staged as the resounding, heart-breaking crash of divine monarchy. Hugo's diatribe against the almighty sultana of England may seem excessive: the Tudors, who made abundant use of the royal prerogative, were wise enough not to advertise absolutist views. But their successor-to-be, young James VI of Scotland, who had to suffer from the Ruthven Raiders an oppression as humiliating as Richard's by the Appellants and their Merciless Parliament, declared his will to be "an absolute king".<sup>16</sup> Since royal power existed before there were laws, James insisted, Parliament holds its authority from the king, who holds his from God: "And so it followes of necessitie, that the Kinges were the authors & makers of the lawes, and not the lawes of the Kings" (James VI & I 1982: 70).

Against Bracton's time-honoured dogma that the King is "under God and under the law, because law maketh a king", James found a legal ba-

<sup>15</sup> "Devant ce misérable Westminster où l'on divinise la tyrannie, il élève subitement le formidable Westminster où on la détrône"; "la double suprématie du pape et de l'empereur, maîtresse de toutes les consciences comme de toutes les destinées, arbitre de la foi, arbitre de la loi"; "la sultane toute puissante de l'Angleterre"; "traduire à la barre du peuple cette monarchie impériale qui prétend tenir son mandat d'en haut"; "établir par un exemple éclatant et illustre que la force suprême, c'est le droit" (Hugo 1872: 25-30).

<sup>16</sup> From Walsingham's notes on their interview, in Read (1925: 2.213-18).



sis to his claim that "*Monarchie* is the true paterne of Diuinitie" (60) in Jean Bodin's recently published theory of the State. To Bodin, "all the princes of the earth are subject to the laws of God and of nature, and even to certain human laws common to all nations", yet the power of the State is unambiguously embodied in royal power. The king is not subject to his own laws: "For this reason edicts and ordinances conclude with the formula 'for such is our good pleasure', thus intimating that the laws of a sovereign prince, even when founded on truth and right reason, proceed simply from his own free will" (Bodin 1955: 32).<sup>17</sup> The doctrine would lead James's son, Charles I, to the scaffold, while French kings would enjoy another century and half of absolute power before they shared the doom promised by the poets, a force to be reckoned with.

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<sup>17</sup> Bodin defines sovereignty as "that absolute and perpetual power vested in a commonwealth which in Latin is termed *majestas*", "Concerning Sovereignty" (1955: 1, 8.25).

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