

What England Is, Has Been, and Ought To Be: Shakespeare and the Kingdom

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Abstract.

Richard II, *Henry IV Part One*, *Henry IV Part II*, and *Henry V* form the second of Shakespeare's two historical tetralogies dealing with the Wars of the Roses. This second tetralogy covers a twenty-three-year period of English history, and the kingdom that Shakespeare depicts in these plays is one that is rife with conflict. Drawing on the historical context of both the time when the plays were written, and the time where the plays were set, as well as the directorial choices of more recent productions, this research examines how the tensions that arise within families in each of the four plays reflect an ongoing argument over the kingdom's identity: from John of Gaunt's upbraiding of King Richard for his failure to cleave to England's idealised past and the conflicts over legitimacy of succession that Richard's deposition sparks, to Henry V reinterring King Richard's body at Westminster Abbey in an attempt to finally lay the past to rest. The question of what England is, what England has been, and what England ought to be lies at the heart of each of the four plays, and dominates the reign of three successive kings as the attempt to answer the question of what England stands for under their regime causes tension between an idealised past, a fractious present, and an unknown future- destabilising both the royal family and the kingdom they rule.

Introduction.

Shakespeare's second tetralogy was completed in the span of four years, with *King Richard II* having been written 1595-1596, the two parts of *Henry IV* between 1596-1598, and *Henry V* in 1599. As the plays were being written, England was in the grips of an uncertain future: it was being ruled by an aging and childless queen who refused to name her successor; faced conflict in Ireland and the Low Countries; and also the threat of a Spanish invasion, as well as political unrest at home. The England depicted in the tetralogy is similarly in the grasp of uncertainty, and for similar reasons: uncertainty concerning the line of succession, political unrest at home, and involvement in wars on foreign soil.



David Tennant as Richard II, Sarah Yardy, 2017



Prince Hal Remonstrates with the Crown, Sarah Yardy, 2019

Richard II

- The importance of blood connections is stressed repeatedly in *King Richard II*. It is 'the part [Gaunt] had in Woodstock's blood' that drives him to want justice, as it is for Bolingbroke.
- If Gaunt and Gloucester are made interchangeable by the fact that they share a bloodline- which is what the Duchess' assertion that both Gaunt and Edward III are 'slain in' her husband suggests- it follows that King Richard is equably interchangeable with his kin. The King has not only killed his relative, but in effect killed himself -and indeed, Gloucester's murder is the point at which King Richard begins to irrevocably slide towards his own deposition and murder.
- The ambiguous manner in which the Duke of Gloucester was murdered serves to demonstrate both the tensions within the royal family, and the tensions within England itself.
- Gaunt is a symbol of "the old, established, traditionalist...order" which King Richard has undermined.(Gopen)
- Historically speaking, one of the many problems facing Richard II's reign was the fact that he had no heir. Although this is not something that Shakespeare addresses directly, it is emphasised through his treatment of King Richard's Queen.
- King Richard's lack of heir also paves the way for Bolingbroke to usurp him more or less peacefully.

Henry IV Part I

- Hotspur has a brief appearance in *King Richard II*, arriving in 2.3 to join his father Northumberland in aiding Henry Bolingbroke, and remaining in the background of King Henry IV's court thereafter
- Hotspur is the son that King Henry wishes he could have. His rebellion, therefore, is not only a blow to England as the country is split in to civil war, but to King Henry on a personal level.
- The struggle over England's national identity represented by the Northern rebellion has its roots not only in the feeling that the King has overreached himself by demanding more from Hotspur that he has any right to but in the impact King Henry's actions have had on the Percy family by refusing to facilitate the return of Mortimer to the fold.
- Mortimer's greater significance as the man whom Northumberland heard "proclaimed/ by Richard, that dead is, the next of blood" emphasis the fact that the legitimacy of England's current ruler is in doubt.
- . There is something of the bastard in Prince Hal: he has "delegitimised himself by taking on an acquired second nature at variance with the 'greatness' and honour inherent in his (royal) blood" (Lake)
- If Hal is a spiritual bastard to King Henry, then Falstaff is Hal's spiritual natural father. The surrogate father-son relationship between the pair is made explicit in when, in the course of improvising a play around the rebuke Hal can anticipate receiving when he returns to his father in Court, he bids Falstaff to "stand for my father and examine me upon the particulars of my life."

Henry IV Part II

- the Archbishop of York, now heading the rebellion, has turned "insurrection to religion". England's history has been revised once again: Richard II has gone from being the deposed tyrant of *Richard II* to the sweet lovely rose of *Henry IV Part I*, and now has become a saint or a martyr.
- York's rebellion is defeated, not by King Henry, but by his son Prince John. This is an interesting deviation from history on Shakespeare's part: Holinshed reports that King Henry was present for the Archbishop's defeat, supervising over his execution. Prince John explains that "the King my father is sore sick", which suggests that he is fulfilling a role that his father is not able to.
- Hal facilitates a reconciliation that allows the crown to pass smoothly from father to son: as Hal puts it: Henry IV "won it, wore it, kept it, gave it me;/Then plain and right must my succession be."

Henry V

- In rejecting Falstaff in the name of legitimacy and respectability, King Henry has brought about his former friend's death. The England that we are being presented with is more sombre in tone without Falstaff's imaginative, colourful language to brighten things up. The fact that, by the end of the play, of all of *King Henry IV's* comic characters only Pistol has survived compounds this darker tone.
- Attempting to move on from the past is a key motif in *King Henry V*, and nowhere is that clearer than Henry V's attempts to literally lay King Richard's ghost to rest. Henry states that "I Richard's body have interred anew" referring to the reburial of King Richard II at Westminster Abbey. . In restoring King Richard to the place of rest he would have inhabited had he not lost the throne to Henry V's father; Henry V has attempted to correct a wrong. Whether he is successful, however, is a matter of debate: Richard's death still weighs heavily on him, as evinced by the fact that he raises the late King's reburial whilst at prayer.
- The marriage between Henry V and Katherine is a contentious point for critics, with the question of how willing the French princess is to marry the English conqueror colouring interpretations of the text.
- . Henry's words, however, do not suggest conquest but sharing, and equality of status: Henry will have possession of France, but it will also be Katherine's. Katherine will be his, but she will likewise possess him. Their compatibility is suggested through the fact that they can already communicate with one another despite not being fluent in each other's language

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