William Shakespeare

King Richard II

Michael Hattaway

“...there the antic sits,
Scoffing his state and
grinning at his pomp,
Allowing him a breath, a
little scene,
To monarchize...”
William Shakespeare: *King Richard II*

Michael Hattaway
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Preface

All quotations from *King Richard II* are taken from *King Richard II*, The Arden Shakespeare, ed. Charles R. Forker (London: Thomson Learning, 2002). Quotations from other Shakespeare plays are taken from volumes in the New Cambridge Shakespeare series, and quotations from Shakespeare’s sources for *Richard II*, the chronicles of Hall and Holinshed, are generally taken from W.G. Boswell-Stone, (ed.), *Shakespeare’s Holinshed: The Chronicle and the Historical Plays Compared* [1896] (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1966 edn), which conveniently provides extracts from these two writers under the headings of the scenes in which Shakespeare included material from them. All quotations from other early modern texts have been silently modernised, and hyperlinks have been provided to as many contemporary texts alluded to in this book as possible.
1. The Education of a Player and Playwright

It is difficult to know exactly when Shakespeare began his career as a dramatist. He had been born in Stratford-upon-Avon in Warwickshire in 1564 and may have been composing plays for professional companies as early as 1586 when he was only twenty-two. By the time he was thirty, he had composed four comedies (The Two Gentlemen of Verona, The Taming of the Shrew, The Comedy of Errors, and Love Labour’s Lost), a tragedy (Titus Andronicus), two long romance narratives in verse (Venus and Adonis and The Rape of Lucrece), and, almost certainly, a number of his sonnets. In addition, by the time he came to write his play about Richard II (reigned 1377 to 1399), he had already written four plays dealing with the troubled reigns of monarchs who came later: three plays chronicling the fortunes of Henry VI (reigned 1422–61 and 1470–71) and a moral tragedy about Richard III (reigned 1483–85).

Unlike his fellow dramatists, Christopher Marlowe, Ben Jonson, and Robert Greene, for example, Shakespeare never went to university. However, he obviously had received an excellent education at the ‘King’s New School’, the grammar school in Stratford, which he probably attended from the age of seven until he was fifteen or sixteen. Those years would have been largely devoted to the study of the first three of the ‘liberal arts’. (The word ‘liberal’ in its Latin form meant ‘suitable for free men’—as opposed to slaves.) These constituted the trivium (‘three paths’) of grammar, logic, and rhetoric. Students progressed later to the quadrivium (‘four paths’) of arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy.

‘Grammar’ at this time was largely Latin grammar with some Greek: schoolboys did not study English texts formally, but concentrated on texts from the ancient world. Schoolmasters used the Roman

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1 The best recent biography is Park Honan, Shakespeare: A Life (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).
comic dramatists Plautus and Terence to train pupils to speak in Latin, 
and studying their plays must have given the young Shakespeare not 
only a keen awareness of language (see below) but also a prelimi-
nary sense of plots and dramatic structures. Reading poets and his-
torians, Ovid and Virgil, ‘Tully’ (Cicero) and Livy, as well as Latin 
texts written in the Renaissance, would have introduced him to fine 
phrases and elegant sentence structure in verse and prose, as well 
as to many texts about history, politics, statecraft, and civil life that 
underlie western society. The Garden scene, 3.4, in which gardening 
is used as an analogue of statecraft, shows its indebtedness to texts 
like Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* and Virgil’s *Georgics*.

The study of *rhetoric* as a key subject in school curricula has now 
fallen out of fashion but, without those years of rhetorical practice in 
Stratford, Shakespeare could never have written his poems and plays. 
Rhetoric had originated in courts of law as a professional art of persua-
sion. Developed as an educational discipline in the Middle Ages and 
the Renaissance, it became a sophisticated method for the description 
of language in use, both spoken and written. As a means of absorbing 
ways in which authors of the past had put words to work, students 
used handbooks of verbal patterns, such as the great collections of 
adages, the *Adagia* compiled (and many times reissued in expanded 
editions) by the Dutch humanist Desiderius Erasmus (1466?–1536), 
and were encouraged to follow the example of Petrarch (1304–1374) 
and keep their own commonplace books. These were quarries of 
useful phrases that could be ‘commonly’ used in a variety of con-
texts. ‘Forgive and forget’, for example, appears at 1.1.156. Many of 
these phrases became proverbial: there are at least seventy-two prov-
erbs or allusions to proverbs embedded in *Richard II*.¹

Pupils also wrote ‘*imitations*‘—variations upon and sometimes 
modernisations of antique texts. (Writing in the style of a great writer 
might be more profitable than our educational practice of writing 
theses about his works.) It was certainly the best kind of exercise 
for a fledgling writer. Early in his career Shakespeare like many of

¹ Morris Palmer Tilley, *A Dictionary of the Proverbs in England in the Sixteenth 
and Seventeenth Centuries* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1950), 
806.
his contemporaries published an imitation, *Venus and Adonis*, a short erotic epic or ‘epyllion’, that derives largely from Ovid’s *Heroïdes* and Book X of his *Metamorphoses*.

Rhetorical handbooks arranged the discipline into five ‘faculties’ or ‘canons’, the first three of which were ‘invention’, ‘disposition’ or arrangement, and ‘elocution’ or style. ‘Invention’ meant not so much the ‘discovery’ of subject matter or knowledge, but its retrieval or uncovering, from the memory or from other texts. ‘Disposition’ was the art of arranging to best effect what had been uncovered. It took account of the whole pattern of a text, as well as the best ways to shape the response of auditors to an oration. The third faculty, ‘elocution’ had to do with dressing out the material in an appropriate style. Principles of *decorum* guided writers towards styles answerable to the subject in hand or to a chosen genre. Roman rhetoricians had identified three levels of style, high, middle, and low. These accorded both to the purpose of the discourse (high style was held to be best for moving auditors) and to the rank of the speaker. In the case of Elizabethan drama, courtiers and other traders in fine sentiments generally spoke in blank verse. This rhymeless form, developed by sixteenth century Italian humanists, acknowledged the absence of rhyme in Latin poetry, particularly epic, the ‘highest’ literary genre. ‘Mechanicals’ (the lowly born) spoke in prose—*Richard II* is unusual among Shakespeare’s plays in that it contains no prose, although there are significant passages in rhyming couplets. Switching between blank verse and rhyming couplets draws attention to the distinctive qualities of each form.

The art of elocution also had to do with the ornamentation of a text or speech with figures of speech, so making text or speech pleasurable. In his *Rhetoric* Aristotle had noted that ‘good style’ must deploy clear and appropriate language, but might also use unfamiliar or foreign words that audiences or readers might find striking (*Rhetoric*, 1404b). Shakespeare delighted in the unfamiliar and in the forging of new words: about 1700 English words are first recorded in his texts. Sometimes he fashioned them out of Latin roots, sometimes he made them by transferring them from one linguistic function to another—using nouns or adjectives as verbs, for example. The participial adjec-
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