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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..."

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William Shakespeare: *King Richard II*

Michael Hattaway

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'Hans Holbein, "Death and the Emperor",
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The Author

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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.[1] 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

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 preliminary sense of plots and dramatic structures. Reading poets and historians, 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 persuasion. 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 contexts. 'Forgive and forget', for example, appears at 1.1.156. Many of these phrases became proverbial: there are at least seventy-two proverbs 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 essays 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 *Heroides* 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-

tives 'accused' (1.1.17) 'amazing' (1.3.81) and 'blushing' (3.3.63) were, according to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, first used in his *Richard II.* Like all of his contemporaries, he enjoyed setting words into unusual or pleasing patterns ('schemes') and into 'tropes' or figures of speech (such as metaphors) in which the sense of the words is changed. When Richard uncrowns himself, Shakespeare uses simple rhetorical figures of repetition (both of words and of clause-length) and of opposition (the verbs 'broke' and 'unbroke' and, in the final couplet, the pronouns 'me' and 'thou'):

> Now, mark me, how I will undo myself:
> I give this heavy weight from off my head,
> [*Gives crown to Bolingbroke*]
> And this unwieldy sceptre from my hand,
> [*Takes up sceptre and gives it to Bolingbroke*.]
> The pride of kingly sway from out my heart;
> 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;
> My manors, rents, revenues I forego;
> My acts, decrees, and statutes I deny.
> God pardon all oaths that are broke to me;
> God keep all vows unbroke that swear to thee;
> Make me, that nothing have, with nothing grieved,
> And thou with all pleased, that hast all achieved!
> (4.1.203–216)

The patterned forms of this speech offer pleasure to educated and uneducated alike, and are entirely appropriate to a ritual of state played out in public.

Like most Elizabethans, Shakespeare enjoyed puns (the rhetorical figure of *paronomasia*). This is a little exchange between the king and his dying uncle:

> KING RICHARD What comfort, man? How is't with aged Gaunt?

> GAUNT O, how that name befits my composition!
> Old Gaunt indeed, and gaunt in being old. (2.1.72–4)

We tend to associate puns with laborious jokes: here the puns structure the old man's musings, his contradictory feelings of self-pity and a desire to rebuke his nephew. Coleridge, in a discussion of this passage, defended punning on psychological grounds against those who, like Dr Johnson (see below), had taken offence at the importation of word-play into tragedy:

> Is there not a tendency in the human mind, when suffering under some great affliction, to associate everything around it with the obtrusive feeling, to connect and absorb all into the predominant sensation?[1]

Puns are one of the means by which Shakespeare focuses on the relationships between thoughts and experiences on the one hand and words and speech on the other. Devices like these turn language from a 'medium' to a theme, and, throughout his career, language was to remain one of Shakespeare's major preoccupations.

A couple of generations earlier, the Italian humanist Castiglione in his widely read courtesy book, *The Book of the Courtier* (1528), had written of the need for writing to be possessed of 'grace' or naturalness, for a work to display *sprezzatura*. What is important for a good style is

> to eschew as much as a man may, and as a sharp and dangerous rock, too much curiousness [inquisitiveness, strangeness], and (to speak a new word) to use in everything a certain 'disgracing' [disfiguring or imperfection] to cover art withal, and seem whatsoever he doth and saith to do it without pain and (as it were) not minding it.[2]

Over-profuse displays of copiousness or over-ingenious imagery on the one hand or studied perfection on the other offend against the

1 'Samuel Taylor Coleridge, on *Richard II* and the history play', in Charles R. Forker, ed. '*Richard II': Shakespeare: The Critical Tradition* (London: The Athlone Press, 1998) 98.

2 Baldassare Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier,* trans. Sir Thomas Hoby, ed. W. H. D. Rouse. (London: Dent, 1928) 46.

criterion of this kind of liveliness or grace. In 3.3, after has descended from the walls of Flint Castle, Richard delivers a plangent and 'curious' inventory:

> I'll give my jewels for a set of beads,
> My gorgeous palace for a hermitage,
> My gay apparel for an almsman's gown,
> My figured goblets for a dish of wood,
> My sceptre for a palmer's walking staff,
> My subjects for a pair of carved saints
> And my large kingdom for a little grave,
> A little little grave, an obscure grave;
> Or I'll be buried in the king's highway,
> Some way of common trade, where subjects' feet
> May hourly trample on their sovereign's head;
> For on my heart they tread now whilst I live;
> And buried once, why not upon my head? (3.3.146–59)

This defies the widespread classical and Renaissance assumption, invoked by Castiglione, that a crucial function of art was to conceal art – Richard's mannerism and over-long enumeration defeats the purposes of the speech, which was to create pathos in the King's listeners.[1]

Shakespeare did not make a career as a logician or philosopher. It may be, however, that some of Richard's dialectical musings are built upon memories of formal logic, the third component of the trivium:

> BOLINGBROKE Are you contented to resign the crown?
> KING RICHARD Ay, no. No, ay; for I must nothing be.
> *Therefore*, no 'no', for I resign to thee.
> (4.1.200–02, emphasis added)

The 'therefore' stakes a claim for logic in jingle. And, at the end of his life:

> … whate'er I be,

1 The tag *ars est celare artem* ('art consists in concealing art') is often quoted, but its exact origin is unknown.

> Nor I nor any man that but man is
> With nothing shall be pleased, till he be eased
> With being nothing. (5.5.38–41)

These quibbling speculations are complicated by puns, by focussed thoughts about words that sound the same, 'ay' and 'I', and 'nothing' (pronounced at the time 'noting') and 'noting' (the hearing of musical notes). Elsewhere, those parodic sequences of 'chop-logic', generally put into the mouths of clowns (the interchange between the grave-digging clowns in *Hamlet* 5.1 is the best known), indicate that Shakespeare had mastered the use of the discipline sufficiently to exemplify its abuses.

One of the features of *Richard II* is the number of 'passions' or long emotional speeches put into the mouth of the king. This has led some commentators to attribute to Richard the attributes of a 'poet' and to imply that this is an unmanly quality. It might be more profitable to think of Richard as a skilled rhetorician, one who understands the relationships between the persuasive powers of language and the production of political power. When he is tactically out-manoeuvred by Bolingbroke he speaks in the hope that his eloquence might yet save the day; alone in Pontefract Castle at the end of the play (see below) his rhetoric serves not only to hammer out verbal instruments for self-consolation but to persuade the playhouse audience to ascribe to him a kind of nobility.

It is certain that at school Shakespeare not only studied but also acted in classical plays and read texts like Erasmus' *Colloquies*. Like the philosophical works of Plato, these are dialogues: they are almost playlets, designed to teach students how to speak lively Latin and analyse a philosophic or moral topic. They would have also offered students models for the formal disputations or debates that formed part of their syllabus, and which drew upon both logical and rhetorical skills. When participating in these, students had to be prepared to argue on either side of the debate (*in utramque partem*), an admirable training for a dramatist who has not simply to set out what he thinks about particular matters but also show how characters holding radically different opinions might confront each other.

In the case of a play like *Richard II* this technique may have gener-

ated a typically Shakespearean even-handedness. The sixteenth century witnessed a growth towards, or a growing awareness of, monarchical absolutism, generated in part by changes in the aristocracy.[1] In many ways *Richard II* is a problem play that explores both the advantages (stability, an obvious source of authority) and the disadvantages (the dangers of tyranny) of a hereditary and sacral monarchy. As we shall see, the play implicitly contrasts this with a contractual model of kingship. A king must be under and not above the law, a maxim that has roots in medieval political theory.[2] On a personal level, moreover, there is no reason why audiences should sympathise more with one of its two antagonists than the other.[3]

It is probable that this debating skill aided the development of Renaissance drama—drama tends to be based on conflict or debate. This is important, because for a long time there was a tendency to present drama of the period as moral, if not moralistic, as supportive of the 'order' desired by those in authority. If we remind ourselves of these rhetorical structures of opposition, the rules of this play of mind,[4] we may be more able to see how the plays of Shakespeare and his contemporaries were as deliberative or interrogative of causes and institutions of the period as they were supportive of them.

There are no certain records of how Shakespeare was employed after he left school at the age of fifteen or sixteen. It pleased previous generations of critics to create romantic narratives for the young 'genius': travelling in Italy, holding horses outside the London playhouses. Milton cultivated the myth that Shakespeare had been uncontaminated by advanced education:

> Then to the well-trod stage anon,
> If Jonson's learnèd sock be on,

1 Derek Cohen, 'History and the Nation in Richard II and Henry IV', *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900* 42 (2002): 293–315.

2 A. D. Nuttall, *Shakespeare the Thinker* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007) 140–3; Michael Hattaway, 'Tragedy and Political Authority', in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespearean Tragedy,* ed. Claire McEachern (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) 103–22.

3 See Phyllis Rackin, 'The Role of the Audience in Shakespeare's *Richard II*', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, (1985): 262–81.

4 Joel B. Altman, *The Tudor Play of Mind: Rhetorical Inquiry and the Development of Elizabethan Drama* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978).

Or sweetest Shakespeare, Fancy's child,
Warble his native wood-notes wild.
(*L'Allegro*, 131–34)

More recently, scholars have revived arguments that Shakespeare was born into a recusant (covertly Roman Catholic) family as well as suggestions that the Hoghtons, noble recusants in Lancashire, may have hired the young Shakespeare as a tutor and musician at Hoghton Tower for a year or so during what have been called his 'lost years'.[1] (Much of Lancashire was comparatively untouched by the Protestant Reformations of the sixteenth century.) There he might well have consorted with learned priests and scholars, so enhancing his acquaintance with important texts. An early comedy, *Love's Labour's Lost*, is a satire on the life of learning and celibacy but is astonishingly full of arcane references to iconological mysteries.

Shakespeare's studies of grammar, logic, and rhetoric obviously served him well as a writer. When, in about 1586, he joined his first professional London troupe, possibly Lord Strange's Men, where he worked as a 'hireling' player as well as a writer, he must have drawn upon what he had learned from the fourth and fifth of the faculties of rhetoric, memory and delivery. A basic technique for memory involved building in the mind a 'virtual' house or building, in each room of which the orator laid topics prepared for a speech. When making the speech the orator imagined himself moving through the house, methodically retrieving the material for his oration. Renaissance players worked what we would now call a repertory system, often performing a different play every day and adding a new dramatic work every two weeks or so during the playing season, so it is likely that either their schoolboy training or this art of recall supported them in what would seem to us to be almost impossible feats of memorising. This of course did not prevent them from 'drying' or forgetting their lines (in Elizabethan English, being 'out'), and they often improvised their way out of trouble. Clowns particularly were given to improvising, speaking 'more than is set down for them' as Hamlet (3.2.32) complained.

1 E. A. J. Honigman, *Shakespeare: The 'Lost Years'* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), 1985.

Techniques for delivery involved learning a number of conventional hand gestures. We can deduce what some of these may have been from books of hand gestures like John Bulwer's *Chirologia* of 1644**.** For the prince's advice to the players in the rehearsal scene (3.2) of *Hamlet*, it is legitimate to conjecture that Shakespeare drew upon his experience of bad actors who bellowed their lines merely for sensational effects and strutted the stage as they mechanically deployed a whole battery of gestures:

> Speak the speech, I pray you, as I pronounced it to you, trippingly on the tongue; but if you mouth it as many of your players do, I had as lief the town-crier had spoke my lines. Nor do not saw the air too much with your hand thus, but use all gently; for in the very torrent, tempest, and, as I may say, the whirlwind of your passion, you must acquire and beget a *temperance* that may give it smoothness. Oh, it offends me to the soul to hear a robustious, periwig-pated fellow tear a passion to tatters, to very rags, to split the ears of the groundlings, who for the most part are capable of nothing but inexplicable dumb-shows and noise. I would have such a fellow whipped for o'erdoing Termagant – it out-Herods Herod. Pray you avoid it … Be not too tame, neither; but let your own discretion be your tutor. Suit the action to the word, the word to the action, with this special observance, that you o'erstep not the *modesty* of nature. For anything so overdone is from the purpose of playing, whose end both at the first and now, was and is to hold as 'twere the mirror up to Nature; to show *Virtue* her own feature, *Scorn* her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure. (3.2.1–20.)

The key words here are 'temperance' and 'modesty', kinds of moderation that will conceal the necessary art of author and player and, for the most part, eschew Castiglione's 'curiousness'. (It is also notable that in Hamlet's mirror are to be seen the images of Virtue and Scorn: these are personifications, abstractions, and not particular personalities. He who plays Richard II has to be attentive to the demands of both role and personality.)

But Shakespeare must also have learned about acting from attending plays himself. The medieval cycle of Biblical plays that originated from Coventry (about twenty miles from Stratford) was last performed there in 1579: amateurs from the city's guilds would have made up the cast. He would also have been able to see touring productions by professionals: an example is the morality play *The Marriage of Wit and Wisdom*, a performance of which is incorporated in the collaborative play of *Sir Thomas More* in which Shakespeare had a hand (see below).

In 1639, one R. Willis, who was then in his seventy-fifth year (which means that he was almost an exact contemporary of Shakespeare), wrote an account of a play he had seen as a young boy in Gloucester. Gloucester is only about forty miles from Stratford, so it is conceivable that the same play was performed in both towns and seen by the young Shakespeare:

> In the city of Gloucester the manner is (as I think it is in other like corporations) that when players of interludes come to town, they first attend the mayor to inform him what nobleman's servants they are, and so to get licence for the public playing. And if the mayor like the actors, or would show respect to their lord and master [i.e. their patron], he appoints them to play their first play before himself and the aldermen and common council of the city: and that is called 'The Mayor's Play', where everyone that will comes in without money, the mayor giving the players a reward as he thinks to show respect unto them.
>
> At such a play my father took me with him and made me stand between his legs as he sat upon one of the benches and [I] heard very well. The play was called *The Cradle of Security,* wherein was personated a king or some great prince with his courtiers of several kinds, amongst which three ladies were in special grace with him, and they, keeping him in delights and pleasures, drew him from his graver counsellors, hearing of sermons, and listening to good counsel and admonitions, that in the end they got him to lie down in a cradle upon the stage, where these three ladies, joining in a sweet song, rocked him

> asleep that he snorted again and, in the meantime, closely conveyed under the cloths where withal he was covered, a vizard like a swine's snout upon his face, with three wire chains fastened thereunto, the other end whereof being holden severally by those three ladies, who fall to singing again and then discovered [uncovered] his face that the spectators might see how they had transformed him, going on with their singing.
>
> Whilst all this was acting, there came forth of another door at the farthest end of the stage, two old men, the one in blue with a sergeant at arms [armed knight], his mace on his shoulder, the other in red with a drawn sword in his hand, and learning with the other hand upon the other's shoulder, and so they two went along in a soft pace round about by the skirt of the stage, till at last they came to the cradle, when all the court was in greatest jollity; and then the foremost old man, with his mace, struck a fearful blow upon the cradle, whereat all the courtiers with the three ladies and the vizard all vanished, and the desolate prince, staring up bare-faced and finding himself thus sent for to judgment, made a lamentable complaint of his miserable case, and so was carried away by wicked sprits. This prince did personate in the moral the wicked of the world, the three ladies, Pride, Covetousness, and Luxury, the two old men the end of the world and the Last Judgment.[1]

Although this play contains far more in the way of religious allegory than does *Richard II,* it is intriguing to consider the ways in which residual themes are to be found in Shakespeare's play. Like the nameless king, Richard is drawn into luxury by Bushy, Bagot, and Green, away from proper concern for the commonweal. Part of the play's political charge is encapsulated in the garden scene (3.4), analogous to the cradle sequence, and both protagonists deliver a 'lamentable complaint' at the end of their lives. The passage also reminds us of how important was the visual language of the production. Characters are recognised by virtue of the properties they carry on, and non-portable properties are equally important: in *The Cradle of Security* a cradle, in *Richard II* the throne (which may have stood

1 R. Willis, *Mount Tabor* (London, 1639), 110–13 (emphasis added).

on stage throughout the performance—or, alternatively, have been thrust out from the discovery space in the tiring house.

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