

“How Art Thou a King?”: Machiavelli and the Failure of Shakespeare’s Richard II

Ethan Gibson, Simon Fraser University

Abstract

This paper was originally written for Dr. Torsten Kehler’s English 311 course *Shakespeare and the Politics of Dissembling*. The assignment asked students to evaluate the errors of Shakespeare’s Richard II, with regard to the political advice outlined by Niccolò Machiavelli in *The Prince*. The paper uses MLA citation.

As an apparent proponent of what might now be called ‘realist’ or ‘power politics’, Niccolò Machiavelli is often seen as “usher[ing] in the modern age” (Wooton xxxiv). His most famous work is *The Prince*, ostensibly a book of advice to rulers. As David Wooton asserts, in *The Prince* Machiavelli “attacks the traditional hierarchy of [humanist] values...In place of ornate eloquence he offers simplicity...in place of words, deeds; and in place of integrity, deception” (xxxiv). Given this emphasis on realistic action over idealistic speech, *The Prince* is relevant to the events of Shakespeare’s *Richard II*. The play depicts the fall from power of a legitimate, but incompetent king. His deposer, Bolingbroke, is a taciturn man of action and few words, and his thoughts, unlike those of the expressive King Richard, remain undisclosed throughout the play. Richard and Bolingbroke are almost representative of pre- and post-Machiavelli worlds, respectively, and Machiavelli’s political advice is directly relevant to Richard’s errors. By squandering his ideological advantage as ruler by divine right, spending irresponsibly and harshly taxing his country, and violating the inheritance of Bolingbroke, Richard makes himself a relatively easy target for deposition.

Richard’s first error is to misuse the power he possesses by default as the legitimate monarch, according to the ideology of divine right. As Machiavelli explains, this should be a great advantage: “A ruler who inherits power has few reasons and less cause to give offence...as long as he does not have exceptional

vices that make him hateful, it is to be expected he will naturally have the goodwill of his people” (7). However, soon after the play begins Richard publicly demonstrates weakness: “We were not born to sue but to command; / Which since we cannot do to make you friends, / Be ready as your lives shall answer it...” (1.1.196-8). He has attempted to force Mowbray and Bolingbroke to forget their quarrel and failed, despite apparently having the authority to do so. Unwisely, Richard calls attention to his failure by explicitly framing his next decision as resulting from an inability to “command” the two subjects before him. By allowing Bolingbroke and Mowbray to duel as they wish, Richard publicly contradicts his own previous command: “Wrath-kindled gentlemen, be ruled by me” (1.1.152). This comment proves ironic, for Bolingbroke, who is not “ruled” by Richard here, will eventually rule over Richard. In this first scene, Richard has demonstrated that his real, practical authority is less than he assumes.

Richard’s displays of vacillation proliferate as the play progresses, contributing to his unpopularity and undermining his legitimacy. As Machiavelli warns: “You become contemptible if you are thought to be erratic, capricious, effeminate, pusillanimous, irresolute...when it comes to the private business of your subjects, you should aim to ensure you never have to change your decisions once they have been taken” (56). As discussed above, Richard allows Bolingbroke and Mowbray to disobey his command to “forget, forgive, conclude and be agreed” (1.1.156). Relenting to their truculence, he orders that they will duel to settle their dispute (1.1.200-1). This already indicates that this king’s authority is not absolute; for Richard then to change his mind again and, as if to exemplify caprice, stop the duel at the instant of its commencement is the sort of “erratic” behaviour Machiavelli proscribes (1.3.118). Later, having set Bolingbroke’s term of banishment at ten years, Richard reduces the sentence to six years, as if on a whim (1.3.209-11). In dealing with the quarrel between Bolingbroke and Mowbray, Richard has changed his decisions three times, all but ensuring that he will “be thought erratic, capricious,” as Machiavelli warns. Gaunt later informs Richard that he “lieth in reputation sick,” aligning Richard’s poor repute with the physical danger he faces (2.1.96). His public displays of weakness and caprice demonstrate an impotence that could easily be challenged.

While his poor reputation could have been confined to courtly society, Richard’s mismanagement of expenses and taxation make him unpopular throughout the kingdom. He imposes taxes to pay for a lavish courtly lifestyle: “for our coffers with too great a court / And liberal largesse are grown somewhat

light, / We are enforced to farm our royal realm” (1.4.43-5). Ironically, that court of Richard’s, which was “great” in expense, will prove weak in the face of Bolingbroke’s military power and popular support. He adds that if taxing the commons will not supply sufficient funds for war in Ireland, he will extort further money from the wealthy with “blank charters” (1.4.48). Machiavelli advises that once a ruler has gained a reputation for generosity, “he will be obliged...if he wants to preserve his reputation, to impose crushing taxes upon the people...This will make him hateful...the slightest danger will imperil him” (49). Indeed, complaints are voiced before long; Ross describes the state of the country: “The commons hath [Richard] pilled with grievous taxes, / And quite lost their hearts, The nobles hath he fined / For ancient quarrels, and quite lost their hearts” (2.1.246-8). Richard’s incompetence is so complete that he has managed to alienate both the lower classes and the nobility. Later, Bagot will echo Machiavelli’s advice: “[the commons] love / Lies in their purses; and whoso empties them, / By so much fills their hearts with deadly hate” (2.2.128-30). Richard has overestimated the loyalty of his subjects, for whom economic austerity outweighs the symbolic authority Richard is supposed to bear. The danger inherent to Richard’s displays of erratic governance is compounded by the hatred he earns through severe taxation.

Richard’s final, and most dire error is to violate Bolingbroke’s rightful inheritance through the seizure of the deceased Gaunt’s possessions. Inhabiting his usual tone of ceremonial authority, Richard states: “Towards our assistance we do seize to us / The plate, coin, revenues and moveables / Whereof our uncle Gaunt did stand possessed” (2.1.160-2). This is behaviour Machiavelli emphatically forbids: “Above all else, keep your hands off other people’s property; for men are quicker to forget the death of their father than the loss of their inheritance” (52). In fact, Bolingbroke never voices grief for the death of Gaunt, but he does swiftly return to England, to “lay [his] claim / To [his] inheritance of free descent” (2.3.135-6). Bolingbroke is careful to frame his return from exile as a legitimate act of legal complaint: “If that my cousin king be King in England, / It must be granted I am Duke of Lancaster. / ...I am a subject, / And I challenge law” (2.3.123-134). In other words, by seizing Bolingbroke’s inheritance Richard has created a legal pretext for the banished Bolingbroke to return with “ostentation of despised arms,” as York puts it (2.3.95). Bolingbroke also touches on the ideological implications of Richard’s actions. In violating Bolingbroke’s right to inheritance, Richard calls into question the mechanism of inherited power which gave him the throne. York also warns him of this, asking:

“how art thou a king / But by fair sequence and succession?” (2.1.198-9). To violate inheritance is to violate the ‘proper’ order of succession, as this king will learn. York also predicts Richard’s fall from favour: “If you do wrongfully seize Hereford’s rights... You pluck a thousand dangers on your head, / You lose a thousand well-disposed hearts” (2.1.201-6). This offence to Bolingbroke is also an offence against the norms of the nobility. Bushy unambiguously describes Richard’s position: “the King stands generally condemned” (2.2.131). By violating the principle of inheritance—an ideological assumption essential to the continuity of both the nobility and the monarchy—Richard all but ensures that he will lose support from the ruling classes.

Richard’s actions violate some of Machiavelli’s clearest advice in *The Prince*, and he is effectively de-legitimized as a result. Machiavelli asserts that “a ruler should make himself feared in such a way that, if he does not inspire love, at least he does not provoke hatred” (52). Fundamentally, this is what Richard fails to achieve. Even before Bolingbroke re-enters the drama, Northumberland sees in him the opportunity to “Redeem from broking pawn [Richard] the blemished crown... And make high majesty look like itself” (2.1.293-5). Richard has ceased to represent “high majesty,” no longer commanding the confidence of the nobility. Later, Scroop describes a revolt across social divisions: “Whitebeards... boys with women’s voices... distaff-women... Both young and old rebel, / And all goes worse that I have power to tell” (3.2.111-20). In short, Bolingbroke finds general support in his claim against Richard. Later, the gardener learns sooner than the queen that Richard is defeated, and to her indignation he replies: “I speak no more than everyone doth know” (3.4.91). This implies that Richard’s defeat is common knowledge throughout the kingdom, and has been accepted as fact—only the Queen herself remains ignorant of political reality. Later, York describes Bolingbroke’s reception: “all tongues cried, ‘God save thee, Bolingbroke!’” (5.2.11). The reaction to Richard, he claims, was unanimously scornful:

As in a theatre the eyes of men,
After a well-graced actor leaves the stage,
Are idly bent on him that enters next,
Thinking his prattle to be tedious,
Even so, or with much more contempt, men’s eyes
Did scowl on gentle Richard. No man cried God save him! (5.2.23-8)

This passage presents Richard as an unpopular, or failed performer, especially significant given Richard’s reliance upon the ceremonial and symbolic power of

the throne. The people do not ask God to save Richard because they recognize, on some level, that Richard's assumed 'divine right' to rule has been superseded by the demand for a competent and popular ruler. Richard has undone his legitimacy, enabling Bolingbroke to sidestep the ideology of divine right.

Richard's failure in Machiavellian politics arises from his sincere faith in his divine right to be king. He summarizes his worldview in verse typical of his performative, lyrical affect:

Not all the water in the rough rude sea
 Can wash the balm off from an anointed king;
 The breath of worldly men cannot depose
 The deputy elected by the Lord. (3.2.54-7)

In these lines, Richard echoes Bolingbroke's recognition of the monarch's authority: "How long a time lies in one little word...such is the breath of kings" (1.3.213-15). Yet Bolingbroke, a more "worldly" man than Richard, is the one on the throne at the play's end. In this one may see a transition, from a world of religious belief in the monarch as "deputy elected by the Lord," to a world closer resembling that of Machiavelli. That world, embodied by the quiet, realistic, and successful Bolingbroke, is one of early modernity. It is a world in which, as Machiavelli asserts, one must "know how to conceal how crafty one is, to know how to be a clever counterfeit and hypocrite" (54). Ignorant of this new, realist politics, Shakespeare's credulous, tradition-reliant and transparent Richard II facilitates his own downfall. With Richard, a traditional political paradigm is swept aside, and a more Machiavellian one takes its place.

Works Cited

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