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RITUALISTIC DEPOSITIONS: THE MONARCHS' DEATH SCENES IN *RICHARD II* AND *HENRY IV PART TWO*

One result of Shakespeare's experiment of seeing history as a collection of tragedies (despite the conspicuous presence of numerous humorous scenes in *Henry IV Part One* and somewhat fewer in *Henry V*) is that episodes, sometimes widely spread episodes, echo each other producing a structure based on connected images rather than on connected action, drawing out the meaning of history on the level of ideas rather than on the level of story. In Shakespeare's Henriad such images appear in the form of the prescribed order and the world of regal ceremonies, and they are practiced regularly in a set manner. Though departed in time and location, they reverberate throughout the history plays, repeating their motifs and mirroring each other.

The dominance of ceremony in Shakespeare's historical tetralogy is not new to us: the Dauphin's tennis-ball insult and Henry's skillful "return-of-service" is a memorable moment in *Henry V*. It seems more interesting, however, to focus on another aspect of the royal ritual – the monarchical deposition as, in both *Richard II* and *Henry IV Part Two*, the kings' deposition scenes coincide with and/or anticipate the monarchs' deaths. Moreover, in both plays the royal secular ceremonies share the qualities of a religious ritual. Finally, in *Richard II* and *Henry IV Part Two*, the focus on the characters whose death is defeat for the nation (as well as the audience), makes the scenes a communal welling up of grief, a sheer "ritual" experience.

Richard II opens with the forceful accusation of embezzlement, treason, and murder. In the presence of the King, John Gaunt, Gaunt's son Henry Bolingbroke throw these charges in the face of Thomas Mowbray. Later, Gaunt expressively declares that Richard was responsible for the Duke of Gloucester's death.

The reasons of murder are never discussed, but the underlying assumption of the play is obviously that Gloucester was an innocent victim of

tyranny and malice. This is definitely Bolingbroke's contention in maintaining that it was Mowbray who bears responsibility for the Duke's death:

did plot the Duke of Gloucester's death,
Suggest his soon-believing adversaries,
And consequently, like a traitor coward
Sluic'd out his innocent soul through streams of blood (1.1.100-103).

The "streams of blood," of course, are Shakespeare's literary contribution to the crime and foreshadow the manner of Richard's own death. And yet, there are more explicit events which stand as a premonition of his tragic fate.

Gloucester's death haunts Richard; the next time we hear of the Duke's death is when Bolingbroke reopens the murder case just before the deposition of Richard; according to Samuel Schoenbaum what largely contributes to the King's ultimate annihilation as a monarch and as a man, "is Richard's limitation in that he never grasps the significance of Gloucester's death to his own tragedy" (Schoenbaum 13). Derek Traversi, likewise, gives ample attention to the Gloucester's plot in considering the opening of *Richard II*, and even calls the murder of Gloucester "the mainspring of the following tragedy" (Traversi 15). In Act II Scene IV, the Welsh captain speaks of omens and signs which "forerun the death of fall of kings," and the gardener in Act III Scene IV, too, prepares us for the final death scene by his talk of lopping away superfluous branches:

Had he done so to great and growing men,
They might have lived to bear, and he to taste,
Their fruits of duty. Superfluous branches
We lop away, that bearing boughs may live (3.4.61-65).

Furthermore, in his speech, before the Deposition Scene, the Bishop unites the scenes of "blood" (being itself a ritual "fluid"), which in his words becomes the sign of inheritance and death:

The blood of English shall manure the ground,
And future ages groan for his foul act,
Peace shall go sleep with Turks and infidels,
And, in this seat of peace, tumultuous wars
Shall kin with kin, and kind with kind, confound.
Disorder, horror, fear, and mutiny,
Shall here inhabit, and this land be call'd
The field of Golotha and dead men's skulls -
O, if you raise this house against this house,
It will the woofullest division prove
The ever fell upon this cursed earth (4.1.137-147).

The abdication, or rather the abnegation scene that follows, is painted movingly in *Richard II*. The King overburdened with the cares of the kingship, sinks to the ground and wishes he could trade places with the lowliest and most abject of his people. In his speech Richard employs the language and tone of ritual. The theme of divine rights and of the sacredness of royalty, certainly imparts to the central figure and to the ethos that surrounds him; the ethos that Samuel Taylor Coleridge would later conceive as an "attention to decorum and high feeling of the kingly dignity" (Raysor 231).

In this scene, when deposed by Bolingbroke, Richard, denying any possibility of a split between persona and role, the king's two bodies, sees himself erased, transformed into a shadow or a ghost of himself: "I have no name, no title, [...] / And know not now what name to call myself / O, that I were a mockery king of snow," (4.1.250-253).

The meaning of the Deposition Scene, however, should be discussed in much broader sense. A "deposition" is both a forced removal from the office and a piece of testimony taken down for the use in the witness' absence, as well as the term describing the lowering of Christ's body from the cross - this is certainly Richard's view of events. By comparing himself to Christ, Richard is not only claiming a supreme metaphysical status and authority, he is also anticipating his own martyrdom. Like Christ, he clearly does not hope to repossess an earthly kingdom; he expects to be murdered. But he is also preparing, like Christ, to leave behind on his departure from this world a powerful myth of divinity violated and innocence slaughtered.

Richard's legitimacy is the main point in his favor. But he seems to rely too much on the sacredness of his kingship, and he does not admit, until suffering the aches of humiliation, that sacredness may be forfeited by the human incumbent of the kingly office. In this sense, it is perhaps too easy to draw the parallels between Richard and Christ as a way of emphasizing the martyrdom aspect of the king's downfall. It is rather more natural to see at least his own comparison of himself to Christ. On the other hand, setting aside Richard's royalty and considering him solely on a human level, without any uneasiness about political right or wrong, our sympathy is in the main for Richard, the murderer who becomes a murder victim, while the avenger is, paradoxically, left with the burden of guilt which the first murderer never assumed.

Thus and so, Richard makes the transfer of the "heavenly crown" into his own chosen ritual using the physical object, the crown itself, as a prop in a dramatized tableau of unwilling deposition. He obliges Bolingbroke to hold the crown with him as he hands it over, and thus incorporates the reluctant usurper into a ritual display expressing the deposed king's grief, disappointment, and sense of injustice. Neil Taylor

offers a further interpretation of the "ceremony." Emptied of its usual significance by both reiterative language and alternating possession, the crown itself has been "carnivalized," trivialized to nothing but game piece (Taylor 72-84). Further he claims that castles and thrones, as well as the monarchy the king symbolizes are deconstructed out of history when the king refuses to play.

Richard's symbolic gesture is a detailed inversion of the rituals employed to confer power and authority on a king – the rituals of coronation and investiture. He publicly "unkings" himself, literally and metaphorically removes from himself all the ceremonial signs of majesty, undoing all the rites by means of which a king's authority is usually vested in his person. He removes the crown, gives up the scepter, symbolically washes away the balm, forgoes all his property and removes and cancels his laws. From this moment on he has been dead as a monarch. Once again he refers to his fate to that of Christ when he compares his traitors to Pilates who will wash away from their hands his royal blood. His mention of shedding innocent blood is soon incarnated in the scene of his death.

Nay, all of you that stand and look upon
 Whilst that my wretchedness doth bait myself,
 Though some of you, with Pilate, wash your hands,
 Showing an outward pity, yet you Pilates
 Have here delivered me to my sour cross,
 And water cannot wash away your sin (4.1.227-232)

Richard's last scenes reveal him alone, in prison. His solitary confinement, however, a world without people, a kingdom without subjects, is the space which can be filled with Richard's own personality. Here he can imaginatively populate his own kingdom by playing, in fantasy, many parts. Here also, "the prisoner develops the image of a clock at length, his finger becoming the hand, his face the dial (from which he is wiping his tears), and his groans the bell; while the gay motion of organic life is transferred in his imagination to the coronation of his supplanter" (Muir 64). Here Richard refuses his meal, again referring his persona to Christ for whom the last supper indeed became his final meal. Here too, Shakespeare "ritualizes" Richard's death, representing him as being struck down and slaughtered by Sir Exton, who had heard an exasperated King Henry ask if there was no friend who would get rid him of this "living fear." Although, according to John Julius Norwich's claim, there was widespread reluctance to shed the blood of an anointed king, Richard's blood is spilt in Pomfret (Norwich 69-82). Yet it is still while Richard's temporary imprisonment in London, when the curse of innocent and royal bloodshed reverberates within the ancient walls. Here the Tower of London makes its baneful appearance, where the Queen calls it "Julius Caesar's ill-erected tower," the place to

which King Richard is briefly sent before he is redirected to Pomfret and to his death (Garber 111–130). Paradoxically, the Caesar's name is synonymous with "ruler." Thus so, Richard becomes the voice from the past, and his disembodied voice will haunt the rest of the Henriad with increasing power.

The beginning of *Henry IV Part One* links up fairly closely with the ending of *Richard II*. It is true that we hardly expect King Henry "shaken" and it is true that he now speaks of a crusade to the Holy Land which he had planned at the end of *Richard II*. In fact, he no longer speaks of washing the blood off from his guilty hands, but at least he has an interval of peace at home, and the Jerusalem theme is renewed.

The intended crusade is not mentioned again but it is reverted to in the second play several times and finally resolves itself in Henry's death in the Jerusalem chamber, where his monarchical fate takes ironic twist; as Derek Traversi concludes: "When the Jerusalem of the king's living thoughts is transformed from the Holy Land to the Westminster chamber in which he is destined to die, it confers upon his life, as he takes leave of it, a sense of ironic fatality" (Traversi 15).

Yet even the pathos of the final rejection of Jack Falstaff, Prince Hal's longtime fellow, by the newly crowned king is nothing when compared with the one of Henry Bolingbroke's dying, after a brilliant youth, disappointed and disillusioned. He passes away a broken and pathetic figure, lacking alike the tragedy of his predecessor and the dazzle of his son.

The Prince, watching alone by the bedside of his father, picks up the crown from the pillow, places it on his head and leaves the chamber. The sick king suddenly awakes, sees that the crown has vanished and summons the attendants. They find Hal in the adjoining room and bring him back. After Harry's "I never thought to hear you speak again" (4.3.220), the King launches an attack on Hal's riotous lifestyle and the apparent haste with which he would seize the power. Hal protects his innocence of such accusations. Norman Holland, however, claims that the "implication is that Hal's speech, which consciously deals with the cares of kingship, makes an unconscious wish for his father's death" (Muir 137). Holinshed, on the other hand, tells us how the "real" Hal tried to reassure his father that there was no plot against him by offering a dagger and inviting him to kill him (Taylor 69).

The king's complaint against his son is revelatory in its imagery. In the first place, he proclaims himself a self-made man (as opposed to Richard who was "assigned by God") in the bourgeois-capitalist tradition, aligning himself with those fathers who labor to acquire gold and invest the "engrossments." Henry's speech, which eventually becomes his self-deposition speech, is full of disillusion. He interprets Hal's removal of his crown as

“hunger” for political ambition. For him, the throne, like the hollow crown and the journey to Jerusalem, symbolizes the futility of desire in both men’s lives (Smidt, 204). His disillusion manifests itself in his cynicism, laced with streams of paranoid hysteria when he imagines Hal’s digging his father’s grave himself, thus substituting the ritual of coronation for the ritual of funeral:

Then get thee gone and dig my grave thyself,
 And bid the merry bells ring to thine ear
 That thou art. Crowned, not that I am dead.
 Let all the tears that should bedew my hearse
 Be drops of balm to sanctify thy head (4.3.238–243).

The King describes his acquisition of the crown in three different ways – he actively snatched it, he passively “met” it, and he commercially “purchased” it. However, with the King’s death the crown, rather than being purchased, “falls upon” Hal since he has it by succession.

Eventually, employing the tone of a sermon, the King offers to his son “the very last counsel / That ever I shall breath.” For him the crown still imposes its load of guilt but this will be explained at his death:

To thee it shall descend with better quiet,
 Better opinion, better conformation,
 For all the soil of the achievement goes
 With me into earth (4.3.316–320).

While passing the crown onto his son the King confesses the guilt over the usurpation of Richard’s throne and warns Hal against trust in political supporters.

With no doubt, in *Richard II* and *Henry IV Part Two* the rituals of the kings’ depositions are distant in time and place, they also appear in entirely different historio-political context and familial circumstances. The correlation between them, however, seems undeniable. While Richard is forced to deprive himself of monarchical power, Henry, apparently on his own terms, in fact deposes himself of his crown having been “urged” by his own son who has already reached for it. Both scenes involve highly ritualistic language, adorned with spiritual imagery and religious tones. Most importantly, the scenes reveal Shakespeare’s view about history as a series of individual stories that, at the same time, are the stories of a group, in which no one finally suffers alone – the blows that kill Richard also destroy any chance for Henry IV’s peaceful reign. Indeed, kings live in history, because what happens to them matters beyond the years of their lives.

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