

Towards a European History of *Richard II*

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Shakespeare's *Richard II* is often read as a play about domestic issues involving England and about the broader political issues involving England and its relation to the rest of (a largely imagined) Britain. Many of these issues hinge on the famous monologue in Act 2, scene 1, in which King Richard's uncle, John of Gaunt, seems to celebrate the island nation:

JOHN OF GAUNT Methinks I am a prophet new inspired,
And thus, expiring, do foretell of him.
His rash fierce blaze of riot cannot last,
For violent fires soon burn out themselves;
Small showers last long but sudden storms are short;
He tires betimes that spurs too fast betimes;
With eager feeding food doth choke the feeder.
Light vanity, insatiate cormorant,
Consuming means, soon preys upon itself.
This royal throne of kings, this sceptred isle,
This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars,
This other Eden, demi-paradise,
This fortress built by Nature for herself
Against infection and the hand of war,
This happy breed of men, this little world,

This precious stone set in the silver sea,
Which serves it in the office of a wall
Or as a moat defensive to a house
Against the envy of less happier lands,
This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England,
This nurse, this teeming womb of royal kings,
Feared by their breed and famous by their birth,
Renowned for their deeds as far from home
For Christian service and true chivalry
As is the sepulchre, in stubborn Jewry
Of the world's ransom, blessed Mary's son;
This land of such dear souls, this dear dear land,
Dear for her reputation through the world,
Is now leased out — I die pronouncing it —
Like to a tenement or pelting farm.

England, bound in with the triumphant sea,
Whose rocky shore beats back the envious siege
Of wat'ry Neptune, is now bound in with shame,
With inky blots and rotten parchment bonds.
That England that was wont to conquer others
Hath made a shameful conquest of itself.

Ah, would the scandal vanish with my life,

How happy then were my ensuing death! (*King Richard II*,
2.1.31-68)

In recent years, the ideology of this speech has also, appropriately, been deconstructed. When John of Gaunt speaks of the island nation (“this sceptred isle”) as “this England,” does

he not automatically subsume both Scotland and Wales under that very term?

Despite the politically-charged criticism that has been levelled at Shakespeare's *Richard II* in recent years, the play continues to exert its patriotic appeal, and both audiences and readers in England and the US continue to refer to it as if it were a model. In his recent biography of *John of Gaunt* entitled *The Last Knight* (2004), Norman F. Kantor still calls Gaunt's monologue "the most patriotic speech in the English language" (13). And in his millennium study entitled *England: An Elegy*, Roger Scruton still quotes from the "Scept'red Isle" speech without even a hint at the inconsistency regarding the island nation depicted there, at the fact that England does not cover all, but is only one part of it (Scruton, 211-12). This is curious, certainly since Scruton's book was written in the face of the flourishing Scottish, Welsh and Irish nationalisms, and at a time when England's traditional institutions were being challenged from inside by the political elite and from outside by the European Union.

In this essay, I shall approach *Richard II* not from an English point of view, but from a continental European perspective. In doing so, I hope, if not to challenge, at least to complement some of the notions that continue to prevail both in England at large and within the narrower, Anglo-oriented Shakespeare industry when it comes to *Richard II*. In short, I argue that the play will fail to yield its vital concerns if we do not adopt an alternative or broader European approach to what are some of the play's main interests. And when I speak of the play's "main interests" I mean

in Shakespeare's time as well as today, historically speaking and in terms of its afterlife.

1. Shakespeare's Foreign Histories

Before looking at the play and John of Gaunt's pivotal speech in greater detail, however, it seems worth noting first that my ideas on *Richard II* were developed within the context of a comparative study of Shakespeare's English history plays. On the one hand, it considered the English history plays as English texts, read, performed and adapted in Britain since the earliest times. On the other hand, it considered the English history plays as "foreign" texts, read, performed, adapted as well as translated the world over, from the early seventeenth century to the present day.

In the course of my research, it appeared fairly easy to chart the history of the histories, and of *Richard II* in particular, across the Channel (still seen from our continental perspective, of course). In Britain, *Richard II* originally appears to have been a means of writing the nation, and continually seems to have served as a means of boosting an English and later also a British sense of national self-identity. As in the late 1590s, when the ink of the play was hardly dry, Shakespeare's complex representation of the monarchy in *Richard II* has also inspired more subversive staging attempts, but they have really been incidental. It is easier to understand that *Richard II* is one of the few Shakespeare plays that were not burlesqued in the course of the nineteenth century. Or that G. Wilson Knight's 1941 "dramatisation of Shakespeare's

call to Great Britain in time of war” should have been entitled *This Sceptred Isle* (*Shakespearian Production*, 312-14).

A major change in attitude towards the play occurred during the last three decades of the twentieth century. It was then that, both in academe and on the theatre stages around Britain, the history plays, and with it *Richard II*, became a means precisely of interrogating this homogenizing process, of the tendency to gloss over differences of region while imagining a British super-state, run from London. In the course of the 1980s and 1990s, therefore, new ways were developed to recount the individual “English,” “Irish,” “Scottish,” and “Welsh” histories somehow stranded together in Shakespeare’s stage chronicles. Since the 1590s, when they were written, the history plays had never been as popular as they were to become during the 1980s and 1990s, when – aided by a rather left-wing and revisionist academy – a homogeneous British Shakespeare devolved into multiple regional Shakespeares.

In my research, it seemed fairly unproblematic to chart the shifting cultural status of Shakespeare’s English history plays in England and Britain, but it was many times more difficult to answer the question what the “English” history plays mean and meant to the rest of the world where they were really “foreign” histories. The main reason was the academic’s neglect of the genre of the history play in its international context.

Even though during the final decades of the twentieth century the traditionally anglo-centred Shakespeare Studies expanded on an unprecedented scale internationally, and, on the grounds of equality, recognized new discussion partners including

individual nations (French Shakespeare, German Shakespeare, Italian Shakespeare), as well as federations like FOREIGN SHAKESPEARE, INTERNATIONAL SHAKESPEARE, and EUROPEAN SHAKESPEARE, these newly empowered nations and federations worldwide turned out to display a remarkable preference for the *Comedies* and the *Tragedies*, but showed little or no interest in the English *Histories*.

Since the genre of the English history play only enjoyed such a marginal status in the discussion of Shakespeare among academics abroad, the impression had come to prevail that Shakespeare's English history plays had no international following, be it on stage, or in the broader texture of the various national cultures. This seemed to be confirmed even by Dennis Kennedy's landmark study entitled *Foreign Shakespeare* (1993), the book which effectively put the European continent on the map of Shakespeare Studies. Alas, it devoted little or no attention to the history play, even though, ironically, the dust jacket carried a most impressive photograph of Peter Palitzsch's German production of *Henry VI* (dating from 1967). The dust jacket merely revealed what the contributors had largely ignored.

The impression that the history plays had no afterlives abroad was false. Wherever one looked abroad, the Shakespearean history play proved to have been a regular genre. It is true that the history play was never as popular in France or Germany as the other two main Shakespearean genres – comedy or tragedy – but this situation is also characteristic of the situation in Britain. The real point was that the “English” history

play proved to be popular and politically relevant also outside England, and that no research into this was being done.

No-one, for example, seemed to have wondered what could have motivated a German composer like Richard Wagner not just to read and like the history plays but even to put them high on a pedestal. Just look at what Cosima Wagner, his second wife, recorded in her diary on 14 September 1880. To appreciate the quotation more fully it is perhaps worth realizing also that it was written at the very time when Wagner was finishing his last opera, *Parsifal* (1882), that ultimate fusion of the composer's ideals of art and religion:

[Wagner] brings up Shakespeare and says people ought to perform one of his plays and then, having thus been brought into very close contact with the horrors of life, go to Holy Communion. And especially the historical plays – they ought to be seen every year.

And later in the same entry Cosima records:

[I]n Shakespeare there is neither mood nor purpose, a veil is torn aside, and we see things as they are. Particularly in the histories. (*Cosima Wagner's Diaries*, 14 September 1880).

But there were many other examples of a Shakespeare history play culture abroad, like the example combining France and the Low Countries: as I looked around, no-one seemed to have wondered why, in 1889, so a year before his untimely death, the

Dutch painter Vincent van Gogh should have chosen to read *Richard II* (as well as *Henry IV* and *Henry V*) in a French madhouse. Van Gogh had written to ask his brother Theo to send him these plays at St. Rémy, and after devouring them he described the experience to his brother with the words: “It is so much alive that you think you know them and see the thing” (Letter 597, St. Rémy, 2 July 1889, in *After Shakespeare*, 161). Given the fact that these words come from a painter, the emphasis on the plays’ visual impact is particularly striking.

Looking around to see if the English histories had a foreign afterlife, I was amazed, together with my Spanish colleague Keith Gregor, to find that no-one in academe had really asked the question whether it was at all relevant that the national premiere of *Richard II* in Spain should have occurred only in 1998, that it should have occurred exactly one hundred years after the loss of Cuba and the Philippines. No-one seemed to have wondered whether it was relevant that 1998 also saw the 25th anniversary of the death of fascist General Franco. Was it relevant for international readers of *Richard II* that Franco’s ideal of national unity had since given way to the emergence in Spain of ever so many more or less “autonomous” communities, each with their own claim to regional self-identity? Was it relevant to international readers of *Richard II* that 1998 also saw the 25th anniversary of the restoration of the monarchy in Spain? And all this in the year that saw the Spanish première of *Richard II* (after 400 years)?

Finally, as I looked around, it seemed as if no previous readers had considered it relevant that someone like Marcel Proust should have drawn on his memory of the Shakespearean

histories, and of *Richard II* in particular. In fact, he did so in an attempt to express his disappointment about the soft and anti-climactic peace that ended the Great War on 11 November 1918 with the escape into Dutch exile of the German emperor, Wilhelm II. It was two days later, on 13 November 1918, that Proust wrote to Madame Straus (the mother of his lifetime friend Jacques Bizet): “I, who am so much the friend of peace because I experience man’s suffering too deeply, I believe, just the same, that since we wanted a total victory and a hard peace, it would have been better had it been a little harder” (*Letters of Marcel Proust*, 261). Proust illustrated his point with reference to Shakespeare, and it is difficult, it seems to me, in his discussion of Wilhelm II *cum suis*, to miss the reference to the abdication and assassination practice in *Richard II*:

Only in the plays of Shakespeare does one see all the events culminating in a single scene. Wilhelm II: “I abdicate.” The King of Bavaria: “I am the heir of the most ancient race in the world, I abdicate.” The Crown Prince cries out, signs his abdication, his soldiers assassinate him. (261)

What the real war lacked, argued the French novelist who was uniquely occupied with time, history and memory, was the very sense of tragic closure that might be found in fictional Shakespeare, that sense of an ending as the orderly culmination of a series of events.

Clearly, the afterlife of the Shakespearean histories in continental Europe was almost as sizeable as its neglect by the

academics, and this applied to *Richard II* as much as to the other plays. In her introduction to *Richard II* in performance, Margaret Shewring records how it was not until after the Second World War that Shakespeare's *Richard II* found a significant place on the professional continental stage, particularly in France (where the play's rather bold experiment with monarchy and merit would have played a decisive role) (Shewring, 154). It may be true that the stage history of *Richard II* is a rather recent affair, but the play's afterlife in European culture at large (to limit ourselves for the time being) is considerably older.

2. Ten Oorlog / Into Battle

Let us look at several continental European examples of *Richard II* in greater detail. For my first example, I turn to a continental stage adaptation of the history plays which premiered in the Belgian city of Ghent, in 1997. I am referring to the highly successful 3-part adaptation of Shakespeare's two tetralogies of histories by the Flemings Luk Perceval and Tom Lanoye. Their product was entitled *Ten Oorlog* ("To War" or "Into Battle"). The specific example that I want to focus on is Lanoye and Perceval's representation of Richard the Second together with his queen in the early scenes of the first part of *Into Battle*. Unlike Shakespeare, who first presents the queen in the famous garden scene where she expresses her apprehensions about the fate of her husband (2.2), Lanoye and Perceval introduce her as "La Reine" in the play's third scene, which is a simplified rendering of

the events at Coventry. The Flemish adaptors further foreground and draw attention to the queen by turning the young but mature wife of Richard into what is best called an infant bride. By turning Shakespeare's queen into a child bride, Lanoye and Perceval confront the audience with curiously disturbing sequences like the following:

LA REINE (*whispering affectionately in Richard's ear*) Richaar,
Je vous en prie, laissez-moi faire pipi.

RICHAAR DEUZIÈME (*whispers back*) Ma chère enfant,
N'attends que pour un tout petit instant. (*kisses her
forehead*)

(*Ten Oorlog*, I, 21)

This dialogue in the adaptation is provided in French, and it obviously serves to underline both the helplessness and the isolation of the mono-linguist Isabella who is too young to have already learnt a second language. But the dialogue also rehearses childlike innocence, affection, physicality, and age difference. It further dramatises a mode of senior male domination symbolized in the forms of address (*vousvoyer vs. tutoyer*), which is also supported by the combination of the queen's use of a request and the monarch's response by means of a command.

The representation of the queen as a child bride, however, does not end here. Distressing is the way in which, on the eve of his departure for Ireland, Richard wants to sleep with her, and puns on his wife's title ("La Reine"), thus simultaneously activating the French meaning of "queen" and the Dutch

meaning, which is “innocent” or “pure” (I:37). This then leads to the shocking scene that follows where the sexually initiated queen, still humming a French nursery rhyme (2.3), has her first period, and speaks her version of Shakespeare’s famous lines about “Some unborn sorrow, ripe in Fortune’s womb” (2.2.10), which expresses her premonition of Richard’s fall, the onset of civil war and of national chaos.

To appreciate this representation of the young French queen in Lanoye and Perceval’s adaptation of *Richard II*, it is important, on one level, to know that *Into Battle* served to rehearse the apprehension over the Belgian monarchy at the sudden death, in 1993, of the dreamer-King Baudouin and the succession of his perhaps less colourful but infinitely more effective brother Albert the Second. More important for an insight into the representation of the French queen, though, is the fact that Lanoye and Perceval rewrote the histories to draw attention to a series of related concerns about the political, legal and moral misrule of the Belgian nation. These concerns had been activated overnight by the discovery, in the mid-1990s, of a network of child abuse across Belgium, centring on the figure of Marc Dutroux (Hoenselaars, 1999).

The representation of the French Queen Isabella in the Ghent version of *Richard II*, then, unambiguously addressed the notion of child abuse, just as did their representation of all the other children who are so conspicuous in Shakespeare’s dynastic tales of the English aristocracy: like Prince Hal (whose troubled relationship with Henry Bolingbroke is first announced at the end

of *Richard II*), and like the famous two princes who are murdered in the Tower at the request of Richard III.

But let us look at the example of Isabella, the French queen in *Richard II*, a little longer. As we witness Lanoye and Perceval rather drastically rewriting Shakespeare on this occasion, it may be worth noting also that, in this way, their representation of history is really closer to Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles* (Shakespeare's primary source for *Richard II*) than Shakespeare's play itself. In their adaptation, Lanoye and Perceval show up how Shakespeare – who obviously needed one extra mature female speaker in the play – as he raised the queen's age also edited out of western Europe's patriarchal history the very child abuse that for centuries had served diplomatic ends and guaranteed political stability.

In *Engendering a Nation*, Jean Howard and Phyllis Rackin, whom one turns to for advice on matters of this kind, merely state that “Shakespeare transform[ed] the child into a mature woman and the dynastic marriage into a loving affective union in order to provide a retrospective ratification of Richard's patriarchal authority,” and they only seem to worry about the fact that the queen is as nameless as she is powerless (Howard and Rackin, 157). I am not arguing that what Howard and Rackin have to say about *Richard II* is false; the point I wish to make, however, is that they unfortunately ignore the fact that Shakespeare is whitewashing his king by remaining silent about the horrific realities of his office.

What we can say is that as Lanoye and Perceval rewrote *Richard II* to expose the horrors of the secret network of child

pornography in Belgium, they were also indicting Shakespeare who, like the Belgian authorities, had kept a comparable truth from reaching the light of day. Surely, one may contest the degree of Shakespeare's involvement or complicity, but the fact remains that after watching *Richard II* in the continental mirror that Tom Lanoye and Luk Perceval hold up to the Shakespearean original, it is very difficult indeed, if not impossible to forget the dark realities they bring to light when we read or see the Shakespearean play again. Tom Lanoye and Luk Perceval would be the first to admit that there is a degree of conscious iconoclasm or Bard-bashing involved in their rewriting of *Richard II*, but this does not undermine the validity of their stupendous insight or their genuine moral commitment (Hoenselaars, 2004, 244-61).

3. Pas de Calais

I now move on to my second continental European example of *Richard II*, and return from the Ghent premiere of *Into Battle* in the late 1990s to a discussion of John of Gaunt's great "England" speech in the late 1590s. Although I am moving to a new topic, there is also a degree of continuity: this is because I am moving from the city of Ghent to the character known as John of Gaunt who acquired the name of "Gaunt" because, as you may know, he was born in the same Belgian city that saw the premiere of *Into Battle*. The association of John of Gaunt with Ghent is much like the association in our play of Richard the Second with his

birthplace Bordeaux; for this is how Exton presents the corpse of Richard to Bolingbroke:

Great King, within this coffin I present
Thy buried fear. Herein all breathless lies
The mightiest of thy greatest enemies,
Richard of Bordeaux, by me hither brought. (5.6.30-33)

See also *Richard II*, 3.2.25 where Richard refers to himself and the country as “her native king” (meaning: legitimate by right of birth). England’s “native king” is not native born. A comparable reference may be found in *Woodstock*, the history play that is also referred to as the first part of *Richard II*: “And England now laments that heavy time” (*Woodstock*, 5.3.97-104). These associations remind us of the conspicuous presence of the English aristocracy on the European continent during the later Middle Ages, certainly following Edward the Third’s marriage to Isabella of Hainault, the Crécy victory of 1346, and the famous capture of Calais in 1347. The phenomenon of the so-called toponyms in *Richard II*, I hope to argue, plays a pivotal role in our assessment of Gaunt’s great “England” speech. If anyone were in doubt about the relevance of this phenomenon, it seems worth recalling the famous speech in which John of Gaunt, like a true maniac, puns on his own toponym of “Gaunt,” to produce one of the most untranslatable passages in all of Shakespeare:

KING RICHARD: How is’t with aged Gaunt?

JOHN OF GAUNT: O, how that name befits my composition!

Old Gaunt indeed, and gaunt in being old.
Within me Grief hath kept a tedious fast,
And who abstains from meat that is not gaunt?
For sleeping England long time have I watched;
Watching breeds leanness, leanness is all gaunt.
The pleasure that some fathers feed upon
Is my strict fast – I mean my children’s looks,
And therein fasting hast thou made me gaunt.
Gaunt am I for the grave, gaunt as a grave,
Whose hollow womb inherits naught but bones.

KING RICHARD: Can sick men play so nicely with their names?
(2.1.72-83)

Like King Richard who wonders how “sick men [can] play so nicely with their names,” I continue to wonder why an obviously decrepit, old man like John of Gaunt should play so nicely with a continental toponym which, as the biographies of his life record, he carried only until the age of three.

But let us return to the “Sceptred Isle” speech, and note, by way of a paraphrase, that the speech represents John of Gaunt’s nostalgic praise of a piece of earth that has all the makings of a geographically powerful nation, a nation which is therefore also rich in royal and military history. Gaunt’s nostalgic praise is evoked because an irresponsible King Richard has reduced it to no more than a tenanted estate, yes, even to a trivial farm. And a nation that is internally divided, the subtext runs, faces a serious threat from the outside world, faces the threat of being conquered by other nations.

On the whole, the apparent glorification of England in Gaunt's speech and its ideologically biased, self-defensive, and centripetal dream of national unity has tended to receive more critical attention than the old man's brief allusion to a centrifugal "England," which, as John of Gaunt himself puts it, "was wont to conquer others" (2.1.65). This remark may be rather brief in comparison with the rest of the speech, but it certainly does not deserve the nearly total eclipse it has suffered at the hands of the critics who have primarily tended to focus on England's domestic politics and its national defence.

It seems to me that the preoccupation with a failure in foreign politics in Shakespeare's *Richard II* here, cannot be dissociated from the traumatic loss of England's continental European territories. I am referring here of a combined late-Medieval and early modern process of "decolonisation," a process which, on 8 January 1558, culminated in the surrender to France of Calais, England's last toehold on the European Continent.

As Jonathan Baldo reminds us in his fine article devoted to "Wars of Memory in *Henry V*," the loss of Calais during the first year of Elizabeth's reign was traumatic because it heralded, as Christopher Hill put it, "the only period in English history since 1066 when the country had no overseas possessions (except Ireland)" (Baldo, 137). Throughout her reign, Baldo notes, Queen Elizabeth was "preoccupied with retrieving England's last Continental possession" (137). Baldo then continues to illustrate how, in order to fulfill "Elizabeth's dream of repossession" (137), Shakespeare achieved an instance of "geographical confusion" by

conflating associations of the historical and the contemporary Calais in *Henry V*.

Richard II may be seen to represent a similar type of conflation of past and present, equally involving traumatic memories of Calais. On the one hand, we have the historical, fourteenth-century John of Gaunt in Shakespeare's play speak about an "England, that was wont to conquer others," typically following the murder of Thomas of Woodstock which, symbolically, sets off the action of Shakespeare's history play. By using a phrase that refers to "England, that was wont to conquer others," Gaunt also, on the other hand, activates Elizabethan memories of the traumatic loss of Calais that signified the ending of the era of conspicuous English presence on the European continent to which the names or toponyms of both John of Gaunt and Richard of Bordeaux continue to allude. This is, of course, still an assumption, but there is clear support for it in the continental European sources that Shakespeare drew on for John of Gaunt's prophetic speech.

It has long been known that Gaunt's description of England derives, in part, from *La Seconde Sepmaine* (1584), the second part of Guillaume de Salluste du Bartas' creation poem, which in the French original ran as follows:

Ha, France [...] O mille et mille fois terre heureuse et
feconde!
O perle de l'Europe! ô paradis du monde!
France, je te salue, ô mere des guerriers,
Qui jadis ont planté leurs triomphans lauriers

Sur les rives d'Euphrate, et sanglanté leur glaive
Où la torche du jour et se couche et se leve.

Shakespeare is likely to have known a translated version of the text, which could well have been John Eliot's French language manual entitled *Ortho-Epia Gallica* (1593), which provided, in parallel text format, the French original and the English translation that appealed to Shakespeare so:

O Fruitfull France! most happie Land, happie and happie
thrice!

O pearle of rich *European* bounds! O earthly Paradise!

All haile sweet soile! O France the mother of many
conquering knights,

Who planted once their glorious standards like the
triumphing wights

Upon the banks of *Euphrates* where *Titan* day-torch bright,
Riseth. (Peter Ure, 206)

But Shakespeare could also have used the translation of Du Bartas' *Devine Weeks and Works* (1605) produced by Joshua Sylvester, even though a printed version of the text appeared only in 1605:

All-haile (deere ALBION) Europes Pearle of price,
The Worlds rich Garden, Earths rare Paradiçe:
Thrice-happy Mother, which aye bringest-forth
Such Chivalry as daunteth all the Earth,

(Planting the Trophies of thy glorious Armes

By Sea and Land, where euer *Titan* warmes). (Peter Ure, 207)

Of course, since Peter Ure's Arden 2 edition of *Richard II* we knew of the peculiar phenomenon that Shakespeare's sense of the English nation had a French model. However, as we witness how it is indeed a French poem that effectively shapes Gaunt's nostalgic and inward-looking view of England, we should, perhaps, not forget the occasion which produced Du Bartas' patriotic creation poem about France in the first place: the repossession of Calais from the English after nearly 250 years. In his *Second Week*, with which Shakespeare is likely to have been familiar, Du Bartas celebrates the English dispossession of Calais by comparing it to God's expulsion of Adam and Eve from Paradise:

Sortez, dit le Seigneur, sortez race maudite,
Du jardin toujours-verd: vuidez, mais viste, viste,
Vuidez-moy ce verger, gloire de l'Univers,
Comme indigne maison de maistres si pervers,
Celuy qui fut tesmoin des soupirs et des larmes
Des Anglois, qui veincus par les françoises armes,
Quittoient leur cher Calais ...
Celuy-là peut juger quelles cruelles peines
Bourreloient nos parens ... (Hillman, 22)

The immediate Tudor context of John of Gaunt's monologue in Shakespeare's *Richard II* nicely brings into focus and amply

explains how a French text generated by the elation over the re-possession of Calais could, in *Richard II*, equally well tune the nostalgic voice of the dispossessed or, dare we say, decolonized party. And since both the English and the French national sentiments draw on the same historical event, the combined situation here is perhaps best described in terms of an image from *Richard II* itself. I am thinking here of the extended metaphor of the royal crown, which Richard the Second likens to a well with two buckets:

Now is this golden crown like a deep well
That owes two buckets, filling one another,
The emptier ever dancing in the air,
The other down, unseen and full of water.
That bucket down and full of tears am I,
Drinking my griefs, whilst you mount up on high. (4.1.184-89)

Clearly, Du Bartas is the happier and more festive, patriotic utterance of the two, and comparable to “The emptier [bucket] ever dancing in the air.” Gaunt’s is the elegiac voice, the bucket that is “down, unseen and full of water [...] full of tears.”

4. Conclusion

I have tried to approach Shakespeare’s *Richard II* not from an English but from a continental European perspective. Convinced

that the play had a long reception history, if not on stage, then certainly in the broader cultural field, I have looked at a modern-day example in the form of the Flemish adaptation of *Richard II* as part of *Into Battle*, and at a historical example, from the late-sixteenth-century poetry of Du Bartas. Shakespeare, I have argued, should not just be seen as an English dramatist writing plays at a patriotically sensitive moment, but also as a thoroughly European artist, negotiating vital Anglo-foreign issues. The Belgian adaptation of *Richard II*, better than many other texts, seems capable of questioning moments where Shakespeare, with a perhaps antiquated ideological bias, polished up the medieval history he found in Holinshed. Also, there is a vital connection between the traumatic status of Calais in the medieval history of *Richard II* (where it features as the symbolic site of the pivotal murder of Thomas of Woodstock), and its place in the early-modern mind, where Calais was either associated with the loss of empire, evoking memories of the days when England was a nation “wont to conquer others,” or with the idea of national unity following Calais’ rightful return to French rule (as in the case of Du Bartas). So far, re-contextualizing Shakespeare within a European context is likely to yield many more new insights. Research into the English history plays in their international contexts has only just begun.

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