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## The Poet King on Stage and Page

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## The Poet King on Stage and Page

### Review

- Margaret Healy. *William Shakespeare: Richard II*. [Writers and their Work.] Plymouth: Northcote House Publishers Ltd., 1998. Pages 88. £6.99, paperback. Frontispiece. Bibliography. Index. 0-7463-0845-0
- Margaret Shewring. *King Richard II*. [Shakespeare in Performance.] Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996. Pages 206. US\$29.95, paperback. Appendices. Index. 0-7190-4626-2.

by SAMUEL SMITH / Messiah College, Pennsylvania

Anyone who teaches Shakespeare's *Richard II* will profit from careful readings of both Margaret Healy's and Margaret Shewring's study of this play. Both of these books can be read and digested rather quickly (Healy's almost in a single setting), but this does not mean readers should take them lightly. Both books are also one volume in a defined series: Healy's book is one of the 'Writers and their Works' titles and Shewring's is part of the 'Shakespeare in Performance' series. The parameters for books in these series are clearly established, but with a small measure of flexibility with respect to the author's particular focus and position on the play. I believe both writers succeed at their given tasks, providing significant insight into Shakespeare's *Richard II* by way of a particular approach (literary historicism, theatre history) to the play.

Readers familiar with Northcote's 'Writers and their Works' series will not be surprised by the slimness of Healy's volume: most texts in this series are under 100 pages. Books in this series are designed to introduce undergraduates to a particular text of a canonical author. However, the best books in this kind also tend to prove engaging and illuminating to teachers of this undergraduate audience, and Healy's book is one of these gems. Healy prefaces her reading of *Richard II* by indicating that she wishes to take 'the unusual step of relegating the history chronicles [Holinshed and Hall] to the margins . . . re-situating Shakespeare's play back firmly amidst the sixteenth-century humanist political debates' about the nature of ruling power and its authority (x). And she indicates that she will do this as an historicist who is engaged by and sympathetic to the New Historicism (Greenblatt's 'cultural poetics'), post-structural theories of language, and feminist criticism: 'Through a thorough historicizing approach, and through adopting and explaining recent theoretical perspectives on Shakespeare's play, I hope I have succeeded in bringing a small but important piece of the past into a meaningful dialogue with us today' (xi). This promises the relevance that

any student of Shakespeare desires for his texts, and Healy delivers on that promise.

The opening chapter, entitled 'Political Voices,' fully situates the play within the Renaissance humanist debate about the nature of political power and authority. Healy references Erasmus's *The Education of a Christian Prince* (1516), Thomas Elyot's *The Book Named the Governor* (1531), John Calvin's *The Institution of the Christian Religion* (both pre- and post-1559 editions), and George Buchanan's radical *The Powers of the Crown in Scotland* (1579), drawing clear parallels between humanist metaphors for governance and those employed and examined in Shakespeare's text, especially gardening and diet (physic). Healy identifies questions that are clearly shared both by Shakespeare's play (and audience) and these humanist texts: 'Does sovereignty exist in 'care' (office), in a crown, in a name, in popular support, in an anointed body? Are events determined by Providence, Fortune, or by mere mortals invoking deities for their own ends? Were the civil wars of Henry IV's reign divine punishment for his opposing of God's ordinance, or the legacy of Richard's 'surfeit'? Can a bad, yet anointed king 'yield' his authority to another as Erasmus suggested he should' (15)? Healy articulates these questions after clearly identifying different voices for different positions in response to (or anticipation of) such questions in the text of the play. But she concludes that Shakespeare's play remains an open text, refusing to cast its lot definitively with any one position: 'If Shakespeare's play encourages a heightened sceptical consciousness in the face of the persuasive political rhetoric its voices deploy, it simultaneously refuses to authorise any of those voices, ultimately plunging its audience into a sea of ethical quandary' (13). Perhaps this is why this debate remains unsettled among contemporary critics of the play as well. But the real significance of this chapter lies in the clear and judicious way Healy has introduced students to an issue that will enable them to begin to comprehend the play and its relevance for their own cultural situations.

Healy continues to pursue this issue in her next two chapters, developing her thesis in relation to historical meaning and theatrical meaning. In each of these chapters, Healy begins with a contemporary critical method and moves beyond it. The first, 'Shaping History,' identifies the importance of *Richard II* for New Historicist and Cultural Materialist critics. But Healy finds readings by Greenblatt and Dollimore unsatisfactory; they tend to mark the subversive potential in Shakespeare's play 'outside' the text, notably in its performance situation (especially its notorious use on the eve of the Essex rebellion). In these scenarios it is not Shakespeare's play that is subversive, but the way in which it is employed or experienced. Healy notes that Greenblatt in particular comes close to re-affirming the old contention that the playtext itself reinforces the 'Tudor myth', and she takes issue with this: 'I

would, however, wish to acknowledge more radical meanings secreted, and waiting to be activated, in the playtext itself; indeed, it is only by ignoring the 'just' assertions of the heterodox voices liberally punctuating at least half of *Richard II*, and by turning a deaf ear to the burning political issues of the late sixteenth century, that such a position could be tenable at all' (19). Healy goes on to identify one after another of just such 'just' assertions' by 'heterodox voices' in the playtext. In doing so she also argues that the play's subversive power is not immediate (as per the Essex rebellion) but long-term (the execution of Charles I). It is in this sense, as well as in its representation of the historical King Richard, that Shakespeare's play shapes history: Shakespeare's open colloquy on political authority eventually bears some responsibility for a more fundamental change in both popular and elitist beliefs about the nature of political power and authority: 'The road to deposition and reformation of the monarchy and government in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was a long and tortuous one which required many deeply entrenched values to be dug up along the way, and the seeds of alternative visions had to be sown: there can be no doubt that refashionings of Richard's potent tragedy . . . played a crucial part in this process, helping to shape history in the act of representing it' (30).

The next chapter, 'Unstable signs', takes a post-structuralist turn, briefly examining both Bakhtinian (carnavalesque) and deconstructive readings of *Richard II* in order to move beyond them by returning to 'Renaissance theories of language and 'right' government, to the intertextual network in which it was situated in its own time', in order to 'illuminate this oblique aspect of *Richard II* with far more clarity than the deconstructionist's modern perspective glass' (40). With this move, Healy returns to the strength of her argument in her opening chapter—an intertextual reading of the play. This is what finally makes Healy's argument illuminating and exciting to read; her strategy of reading Shakespeare's text with and through other relevant [English] early modern/Renaissance texts (Elyot, Buchanan, and Erasmus) results in a clear and convincing explanation of what is at stake in the play, even if she does not find the play definitively embracing any particular position on political authority: 'If the play leaves us uncertain about Richard's spiritual status, it also refuses to confirm whose side God is on: whilst Providence is implicated in dispersing the army of Welshmen loyal to King Richard (they are misled by conventional signs in the universe into thinking he is dead), we also know that Henry IV's reign was plagued—as Richard prophesies—by Northumberland's rebellion and civil wars' (48). It is precisely because the play leaves such final decisions to the audience/reader that it is so effective in providing genuine opportunity for fundamental changes of mind regarding the power and nature of kings in relation to their subjects; audiences can note for themselves the distance

between signs (kingly appearance) and experience (tyrannical behaviour) and draw their own conclusions.

At this point, Healy's primary argument is complete, and the appearance of a chapter on 'Gender Perspectives' appears obligatory. But Healy is persistent and careful to tie this chapter to her primary thesis, though perhaps in a less direct way. Perhaps this is simply corollary to the peripheral position of women in the play. Healy argues, however, that women are given some very powerful arguments in this play (Duchess of Gloucester to Old John of Gaunt, Queen Isobel to King Richard in their parting scene, and Duchess of York before the new king). Thus women are peripheral in number and in relation to male figures; but they are central with respect to the debate about kingly authority. Healy argues that they are also another instance of the distance between signifier and signified. She concludes that '*Richard II* breaks down rigid gender boundaries, problematizes the hegemonic stature of the medieval and Tudor patriarchal attitudes, and invites a reassessment of the meaning of 'man' and 'woman' in a changing society struggling to eschew the worst excesses of political tyranny' (56-57). This gender instability reinforces or complements political instability—the troubling distance between signs and what they represent is once again confirmed as the central preoccupation of *Richard II*' (57).

Healy's final chapter is truly an addendum, but one required by the parameters of the Writers and their Works series. 'Reinventions' focuses on changing cultural interpretations as evidenced by changing cultural productions or stagings of the play. This is the most unsatisfying part of Healy's book, primarily because she comments briefly and moves summarily from one performance to another, encapsulating in fifteen pages what Margaret Shewring elaborates in 150 pages! And perhaps Healy's review is dissatisfying only in relation to Shewring's more extensive and analytical examination of the same (and more) stagings/cultural productions. But this also reveals the fundamental difference in purpose between Healy's and Shewring's books. While Healy is largely interested in the 'original moment of production' and its relation to contemporary humanist debates about monarchy, Shewring is more interested in how *Richard II* has been played over the years so as to reflect the changing nature of its relevance to primarily British culture, and to identify the openness of the text to performance strategies. Shewring does use the first thirty pages (or one-sixth) of her text to review the 'dangerous matter' of *Richard II* in its historical political context. While she does not examine the text for the kind of detail that characterises Healy's analysis, she is in fundamental agreement about the play's contribution to contemporary concerns: 'What Shakespeare was doing in writing *Richard II* was contributing to a debate of fundamental national importance—a debate that included such topics as deposition, regicide and the right to legitimate succession' (28). Shewring's focus is

quite different, however, and likely influenced by the primary concerns of most of the stage productions she reviews: the 'juxtaposition of public role and private individual ensures that the play's focus is on the tension between the ideal of monarchy and the idiosyncratic personality of the monarch' (7). Indeed, the personality of Richard dominates most of the stagings since the eighteenth-century. Since it is impossible to examine all the performances Shewring reviews (and any reader should be ready for details with respect to every aspect of staging, from props to costuming to gesture and so on), I will highlight what she does well and then note a few weaknesses.

I was particularly impressed by the thoroughness of Shewring's research; her accounts of plays performed before her own viewing life began suggest she has left very few sources unchecked. Describing and analysing stage productions one can only read about is necessarily a tricky matter, but Shewring seems to read her sources with discernment, and she works her way from description and analysis to evaluation. In her first two chapters in the second part of the book, '*Richard II* on stage and television: 1857-1987', Shewring also employs the effective strategy of examining an older staging and a recent staging which share a similar focus in the representation of the play. For example, she examines productions that imagine *Richard II* primarily as a 'spectacle of history', looking at Charles Keans 1857 production and Barry Kyle's 1986 Royal Shakespeare Company production (featuring Jeremy Irons), concluding that while cultural situations result in differences in performance, both productions are concerned to emphasise the glamour of medieval England, especially its chivalry. Next she compares and contrasts performances by Frank Benson and John Gielgud that emphasise individual personality, especially that of King Richard himself.

By far Shewring's best work comes in her chapter on John Barton's 1973/74 Royal Shakespeare Theatre production of the play, which she titles 'Adjusting the Balance'. In fact, this is the one imbalanced chapter in the book, as she spends seventeen pages on this one production, more than she gives to any other review. But it is worth it. In fact, this is the chapter that makes the entire book worth the printing. This production was controversial due to Barton's strategy of double-starring the lead role (both Richard Pasco and Ian Richardson were prepared to perform both *Richard II* and *Bolingbroke*, and the decision was made before the audience at the rising of the curtain on any given night). Shewring takes us through Barton's thought processes as he deals with the problem of staging the Elizabethan doctrine of the King's two bodies; this is a superb example of combining literary and theatrical analysis. She is also properly appreciative of the risks Barton took in this production, and she concludes:

[it] was ahead of its time. It anticipated the even more adventurous reconfiguration of script currently being undertaken by such directors as the talented French-Canadian Robert Lepage. Such reconfiguration, by simplifying the play's complexities and ambiguities, seeks to clarify the play's theatrical identity. Of course *Richard II*, written entirely in poetry, is a rich work in its own right. But, as Cocteau maintained, a director is free to interpret the poetry of any script not just in terms of theatre, but *as* theatre. It is to such bold translation that Barton's production belongs. I have no hesitation in endorsing Peter Thomson's analysis of it as 'an intelligent and outstandingly bold attempt to give the text a life not merely *in* but *of* the theatre'. (137)

The reconfigurations Shewring speaks of include not only the usual cuts in the playtext, but also additional lines from *2 Henry IV* that served to round out Bolingbroke's role.

Shewring follows this with an equally illuminating discussion of Shakespeare on television, particularly the 1978 BBC/Time-Life production starring Derek Jacobi. After supplying a brief history of how the series came into being, and how directors and actors were chosen for *Richard II* (one of the earliest plays in the series), she analyses both this particular performance and the general advantages and disadvantages of presenting Shakespeare on the small screen, differentiating such presentations from stagings: 'There is no doubt that the medium of television, even when used in its most 'realistic' mode, offers certain opportunities which differ from stage possibilities'. Such opportunities include 'not only the frequent use of close-up, which allows for scrutiny of even the slightest facial expression or betrayal of emotion, but the extension of this intimacy into quiet, almost private, moments even within a 'public' scene' (149). Shewring points out that Jacobi is particularly adept at using the camera effectively, bringing his recent experience in *I, Claudius* to this production.

For all its riches and strengths, Shewring's book does have a few disappointments. First, the section on the English Shakespeare Company's *Richard II* and other War of the Roses plays is more or less a rehearsal of Michael Pennington's and Michael Bogdanov's book describing and evaluating their experience with this project. Their story is compelling, but their view of the production completely dominates Shewring's review—it is the only such moment where she does not keep her own analysis on track. This may be appropriate; it is clearly a different section. I couldn't help wondering whether Shewring didn't get an opportunity to see the production for herself; if that was indeed the case, then her approach makes perfect sense. My second disappointment has to do with visuals: theatre is very much a visual art form, and the number of pictures/photographs in this book are few: fourteen black-and-whites and only six colour plates. There were many moments, especially in Shewring's analysis of recent productions, where visuals would have

been an immense help. Third, there is really no conclusion which would provide a summary analysis of *Richard II* in performance. The very brief 'Afterward' at the end of the volume turns out to be a truncated review of the recent Royal National Theatre production (Cottesloe, Deborah Warner directing, Fiona Shaw as Richard); this is the one instance where Healy's own brief performance analysis (she finishes with a reading of the same performance) proves more insightful than Shewring. This may be a result of Healy's more personal touch in articulating her response to an actual performance. Finally, Shewring's text includes a few glaring errors: Essex's rebellion is dated as August 8 instead of February 8 (28) and 1641 is identified as the year of Charles I's execution! These few disappointments do not detract that much, however, from Shewring's fine performance. Both her text and Margaret Healy's will both engage and instruct their readers. And certainly anyone teaching or writing on *Richard II* must give them a careful and considered reading. ###