

## **Finding Elizabeth I in Shakespeare's *Richard II***

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### **Abstract**

William Shakespeare used sixteenth-century English historian Raphael Holinshed as a source for most of his history plays, including *Richard II*. By comparing and contrasting these two texts, and building upon contemporary historian Carole Levin's research on Elizabeth I, this essay argues that Shakespeare altered certain aspects of Holinshed's history of Richard II to draw analogies with Elizabeth and her reign. These changes reveal dissatisfaction with Elizabeth's rule, especially her favoritism and her religious policy. To illustrate the play's allusions to Elizabeth, this essay analyzes a speech by the character John of Gaunt and its multiple references to Richard II's council members and war tactics. John of Gaunt's speech never occurred in Holinshed, but Edmund Grindal wrote Elizabeth I a public document to which Shakespeare likely had access that made very close statements to what is written in the play. The play's similarities to this letter, which reprimanded Elizabeth for outlawing Grindal and his clergymen from having religious meetings and for other royal policies he felt were against the church, exposes Shakespeare's discontent with Elizabeth's rule of England. This project offers a new perspective on one of Shakespeare's lesser known plays and perhaps on Shakespeare's own politics.

**Keywords:** English Drama, Renaissance Literature, Catholicism

### **1. Introduction**

Queen Elizabeth I once called into question Shakespeare's motives behind his play *Richard II*, saying, "I am Richard II, know you not that?" Her assumption was right on target, as evidenced by a close reading of a play together with its source, Raphael Holinshed's *Original Chronicles of England*, and a letter Edmund Grindal addressed to her. This collection of texts reveals how Shakespeare changed the history of *Richard II*---the history play he altered most drastically from his source---to make his main focus Elizabeth I and his dissatisfaction with her rule.

The fact that most playwrights of the English Renaissance wrote about cultural and political situations makes it not surprising that Shakespeare, one of the most famous playwrights of the time, did so as well. Carole Levin, a historian who specializes in Elizabeth I, emphasizes a key question: "scholars have long debated the end of Elizabeth's reign: was it a time of optimism as some of these plays with their patriotic themes and successful characters demonstrate, or a time of great pessimism and anger at the aging Queen for the harsh conditions?"<sup>1</sup> During the last few years of her reign, Elizabeth was not exactly at ease with her people and taxes were astronomical, but England still managed to be a strong country.<sup>2</sup> Whether or not all playwrights agreed with Elizabeth's reign, they sought her patronage and the opportunity to perform at court and enjoyed the ability to express their social and political opinions through their plays. For example, Shakespeare used plays like *The Merchant of Venice*, *Titus Adronicus*, and *Othello* to point out how Jews and Africans (known as "Moors") were the same as everyone else, "'If you prick us, do we not bleed?...If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in

that.'... 'Is black so base a hue?' [Evidence from *Merchant*]."<sup>3</sup> These lines give the idea that Shakespeare disagreed with the discrimination of the time period. Likewise, his history plays did more than merely observe religion and politics, they argued for social change and commented on contemporary problems through the lens of history. *Richard II* is no different. While the characters were inspired by Holinshed's *Chronicles*, Shakespeare used them to make a point. When we examine *Richard II* as part of Shakespeare's canon, it is not surprising to argue that he changed Richard's history to resemble Elizabeth and therefore to show his discontent with her rule in the 1590s.

Historically, Elizabeth's and Richard's reigns were very similar. As I mentioned before, Elizabeth was uneasy with her people, but not just the commoners. Levin points out that "at the beginning of Elizabeth's reign, about half of the members of the Privy Council were nobles. As the reign progressed that group declined in number, as Elizabeth replaced them with her most trusted courtiers."<sup>4</sup> Holinshed says the same about Richard:

The king had little trust in any of the nobilitie, except in his brother the earle of Huntington, and the earle of Rutland sonne to the duke of Yorke, and in the earle of Salisburie: in these onelie he reposed a confidence, and not in any other, except in certeine knights and gentlemen of his priuie chamber.<sup>5</sup>

One would argue that both sets of councils reflected poorly on Richard's and Elizabeth's choices; war was possibly one of them. In Shakespeare's *Richard II*, Richard is at war with Ireland; during the time the play was written, Elizabeth was at war—or unease—with Ireland and Spain.<sup>6</sup> Royalty tends to expect their people to support war not only with their loyalty but also with their money, which leads to mandatory taxes. Both Elizabeth and Richard were resented for these taxes, which they needed because they spent more money than they had. Holinshed points out that "when the king had spent much monie in time of this parlement, he demanded a disme and a halfe of the clergie, and a fifteenth of the temporaltie,"<sup>7</sup> therefore causing nobility to rebel and contributing to commoner uprisings. A similar happening occurred with Elizabeth:

Elizabeth and her government had to rely more and more on her subjects to finance the war. This meant not only a steep increase in Parliamentary taxation, but an even steeper increase in the other ways the Crown raised money, such as the sale of monopolies, which many people deeply resented, especially so those who were represented in Parliament.<sup>8</sup>

In short, Elizabeth and Richard shared many similarities in their politics and governing. Shakespeare likely picked up on this fact and used it to his advantage. His drastic character changes helped him emphasize parallels between the two monarchs. He added a character in *Richard II* who truly appeared in history, but was changed to resemble the Archbishop of Canterbury during the Elizabethan era, Edmund Grindal: John of Gaunt.

## 2. Gaunt and Grindal

Shakespeare gave John of Gaunt much more influence than he had in history. One example is that Gaunt begs for the banishment of his son—Henry Bolingbroke, future Henry IV—to be repealed in Act 1.3, whereas in Holinshed's *Chronicles* the king simply reduced the sentence on his own when Henry arrived at Eltham. The changes go further though. In the play, Gaunt gives an unforgettable speech on his deathbed about Richard's rule to both the duke of York and Richard himself.<sup>9</sup> John of Gaunt never gave such a speech to either man. However, before the play was written, Edmund Grindal sent Elizabeth a letter telling her he disagreed with the laws recently placed against the church.<sup>10</sup> Shakespeare was able to make Gaunt resemble Grindal using the letter which he very easily had access to. It was written in 1576, and then copies were sent out to certain personnel (such as William Bughley, Lord Cecil); these copies received even wider circulation when they were printed by the 1580s.<sup>11</sup> This gave Shakespeare approximately 19 years to have had the opportunity to have seen it, as the play was written in 1595.

A skeptical reader might argue that while Gaunt insulted Richard's entire rule, Grindal only criticized Elizabeth's decisions towards the church. However, Gaunt's wording still nearly mirrors Grindal's letter. First off, Grindal points out that he had been "placed within the diocese of York."<sup>12</sup> Here, he more than likely was able to freely discuss his discontent of Elizabeth I not allowing more religious freedom—as she outlawed his meetings with his fellow clergymen (prophesying) out of fear of mutiny. In the play, Gaunt also discussed his discontent with Richard to the duke of York. Gaunt ends the speech with York saying, "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!"<sup>13</sup> Thus Gaunt then turns his attention to Richard, which is where it becomes clearer that it is with the

same manner and tone as when Grindal addressed Elizabeth. Moreover, by Shakespeare placing Gaunt on his deathbed, he is shown to be a more firm and defying lord versus mild Grindal who still had reason to fear his Queen. Shakespeare's Gaunt is obviously more blunt in saying how ashamed Richard should be, whereas the way Grindal wrote was very passive aggressive. Again, Shakespeare likely created this difference to show his dissatisfaction, but also to imply that subjects (or simply Grindal) would have been more straight-forward had they been on their deathbeds or without fear of punishment.

At the end of Gaunt's speech, he declares to Richard, "Live in thy shame, but die not shame with thee!"<sup>14</sup> This insinuates that Richard should repent or suffer consequence after death, which coincides greatly with Grindal's point in the beginning of his letter: "the heavy burdening shall be thy of your own conscience before God."<sup>15</sup> Later, he wrote a Latin phrase which translates to: "And what should I win, if I gained...the whole world, and lose mine own soul!"<sup>16</sup> showing that he thought her choice of putting her rule higher than the church was morally wrong. Both Gaunt and Grindal address the fact that the monarchs were wrong in the eyes of God. The fact that the main focus is on morality seems very important. Shakespeare's Gaunt continually talks about illness, and how Richard's illness is in his soul. Grindal got more vehement further on in the letter, constantly hinting at Elizabeth's mortality and vanity, which Levin supports with her statement that "[Catholic John] Lingard described Elizabeth as someone who...was vain, excessively suspicious, and had a terrible temper."<sup>17</sup> In Gaunt's speech about Richard, he says to York, "Light vanity, insatiate cormorant / Consuming means, soon preys upon itself."<sup>18</sup> This connects also to how he reprimanded Richard of his illnesses, vanity and a lack of morals. Shakespeare uses Grindal's hint at the vanity and immorality of the Queen to create Gaunt's speech. Grindal combines both the morality issue and Elizabeth's vanity when he wrote to her, "I beseech you, Madam, if I choose rather to offend your earthly majesty, than to offend the heavenly majesty of God."<sup>19</sup> This was extremely important for him to say because he not only insulted the Queen's vanity, but he also gave subtle inclination that he did not believe in Divine Right; he only answered to God Himself. He got braver later and wrote, "Remember, Madam, that you are a mortal creature."<sup>20</sup> It is as if he was trying to not only get his church rights back, but also to try and "save" her soul. The last page states to "beware [she does] not impute the same to [her] own deserts or policy, but give God the glory;"<sup>21</sup> thereby insulting her rule by saying it is not because she was a good queen that she has lasted this long but because of God allowing it. Finally, Shakespeare had Gaunt give a speech about "sleeping England."<sup>22</sup> The word "sleeping" might connote peaceful rest or benign inactivity, but the Oxford English Dictionary reveals that it also meant "torpid (lazy) [used in 1538]" and "numb, devoid of sensation [used in 1562]" (OED). Both meanings can indicate a more religious reference. Grindal ends his letter by begging—commanding—Elizabeth to change her laws, and when he points out that, "God hath just cause many ways to be angry with you and us for unfaithfulness,"<sup>23</sup> he seems to argue all of England is at fault for this choice. It has been "sleeping" in the sense of not caring enough about the laws placed against the church.

### 3. Religion

Shakespeare knew religious stress created strife with not only the Archbishop but also the people. Elizabeth I declared England a Protestant country, yet her ambiguity of support for any certain church or religion upset all parties.<sup>24</sup> She chose a moderate path; in a way, her rule focused more on politics than on religion. Shakespeare used to his advantage that Richard's era was very focused on the church, and even though Elizabeth's reign was Protestant while Richard's was Catholic, Shakespeare added a lot of religious intonation that was neither necessary nor discussed in Holinshed's *Chronicles*. The first reference to religion relates to Thomas Mowbary's speech in the beginning of the play. In Holinshed, the speech is recorded as thus: "once I laid an ambush to haue slaine the duke of Lancaster, that there sitteth: but neuerthelesse he hath pardoned me thereof, and there was good peace made betwixt vs."<sup>25</sup> But in Act 1.1, Shakespeare changed Mowbary's speech to "once did I lay an ambush for [Duke of Lancaster's] life...But ere I last received the sacrament, / I did confess it, and exactly begged / Your Grace's pardon."<sup>26</sup> Perhaps Shakespeare changed this to spite Elizabeth because she was known to have a "dislike of religious enthusiasm."<sup>27</sup> Adding so much religious context to the play not only appeases the people but also displeases the Queen. As discussed above, Shakespeare used Gaunt in Act 2 to insult Elizabeth further by using Grindal as a reference. Also, just like Grindal bluntly stated in his letter that he would rather insult the Queen than God, by adding to the play so much religious intonation Shakespeare likely showed agreement.

Besides insulting Elizabeth's morality and pride, Shakespeare used Gaunt for another extremely useful reason: mocking her council. In the midst of yelling at Richard, Gaunt tells him that "thou, too careless-patient as thou art, / Commit'st thy anointed body to the cure / Of those physicians that first wounded thee."<sup>28</sup> As stated above, Gaunt focused on the idea that to be immoral is to be ill. What seemed to cause the illness was that Richard constantly went

to his council even though they gave him only bad advice, in Gaunt's opinion in the play, as well as Holinshed's. Holinshed shows sympathy for Richard constantly, most notably when he says, "for sith they saw how the king (abused by the counsell of euill men) abstained not from such an heinous act."<sup>29</sup> While Shakespeare did the opposite, possibly one of his most critical changes, he still illustrates the council as rotten from the beginning. A prime example being that Holinshed's *Chronicles* states that the story of why Bolingbroke and Mowbray are fighting--the trigger for much of the action in Shakespeare's play---is told right to the king. The play, on the other hand, has it told to the king by his council. This alteration shows the favoritism and reliance on the council along with the politics of Richard's decision on the matter; the use being that Elizabeth got most of her information from Lord Burghley, who would manipulate the information and sometimes attempt to refrain it from getting to her.<sup>30</sup> Therefore, *Richard II's* beginning being changed as such reflects the way Elizabeth's court really was. Also, while Holinshed merely describes court as an immoral place, there have been arguments that Shakespeare makes Richard's court relationships seem homoerotic, mainly being from Bolingbroke's speech that the council "with [their] sinful hours / Made a divorce betwixt his queen and him, / [and] Broke the possession of a royal bed."<sup>31</sup> The homoerotic reading is that the king has been leaving his wife unsatisfied while he sleeps with his most trusted men. It is believable that Shakespeare would have written this scene in such a way as to make Richard appear that much more like Elizabeth. Levin makes note of the fact that "[Elizabeth's] relationship with [Sir Robert] Dudley [one of her council] was based on personal affection, and for a number of years he tried, though unsuccessful, to convince her to marry him."<sup>32</sup> There would have been, no doubt, forms of sexual tension at court from Dudley and the others who sought after her as well. Because of this, she might have used these feelings to manipulate her council by doing what one of the subjects might suggest and therefore stimulating him. Shakespeare easily showed his discontent for this sexual manipulation with his beheading of Bushy and Green—Richard's favorite council men—being right after accusations of sexual misconduct.

#### 4. Conclusion and Afterword: Mary, Queen of Scots?

As shown above, Shakespeare molded Richard's character to resemble that of Elizabeth I through speeches, historical facts, and relationships with the royal council. But what if Shakespeare went even further than that? Perhaps Shakespeare not only made Richard resemble Elizabeth, but he did so with whoever was in power during the play. At the end, Bolingbroke has become Henry IV. Richard is captured and placed under castle-arrest, just as it is written in history, but that is where the similarities end. The roles then switch; Henry IV becomes Elizabeth I and Richard becomes Mary, Queen of Scots, showing that Holinshed was merely used as a guide. While Holinshed—and other historical documents—does not clarify Richard's death (we are left with only the range of possible starvation to possible murder), the play emphasizes on how Sir Pierce Exton believed Henry IV wanted Richard dead. Act 5.4 opens with Exton quoting the new king, "Have I no friend will rid me of this living fear?"<sup>33</sup> Exton then stabbed Richard in the tower—where Richard was being held captive—and brings the body to Henry IV. The new king was not pleased, however, and said, "Though I did wish him dead, / I hate the murderer, love him murdered"<sup>34</sup> and thus banished Exton. Coincidentally, this is the exact way that Mary's death came about. Mary was killed based on the Bond of Association which was distributed all over England and stated that anyone who would possibly endanger the Queen or plot against her was to be killed. Elizabeth of course took back the policy, but only once the document was already distributed.<sup>35</sup> A few years after the Bond was dispatched, William Davison beheaded Mary. Levin shows the confusion around this subject as "Elizabeth [assured] that her Secretary William Davison had sent on the death warrant without her permission."<sup>36</sup> Later, Levin goes into further detail, pointing out the death warrant had been signed by Elizabeth. The argument Elizabeth made here was "that the warrant was dispatched without her knowledge or consent. The Queen publicly expressed her grief and anger over the execution."<sup>37</sup> This is exactly how Shakespeare had Henry react, which, in Holinshed's *Chronicles*, never happened.

It has been noted that Elizabeth caught on to the fact that Richard was modeled after her, but did she notice this connection between herself and Henry IV? Shakespeare shows his dislike of politics and royalty in *Richard II*, and Elizabeth I was his muse. By using Grindal's letter and Holinshed's *Chronicles*, Shakespeare was able to artistically manipulate the characters in his play to better suit his needs. By using the letter, which was a religious criticism, and referring to Mary's death, he also showed how his dissatisfaction with Elizabeth was at least partially based on her lack of religious enthusiasm. Levin points out that Elizabeth's problems with her people were not only from her taxes, but also from never fully committing to one side of the Protestant/Catholic/Puritan debate. Even if this was not Shakespeare's main issue with Elizabeth, *Richard II* clearly shows his resentment towards her rule.

## 5. Acknowledgements

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37. Ibid., 99.