SHAKESPEARE'S *RICHARD II*

Reflections on the Downfall of a King

Ismail Serageldin

Bibliotheca Alexandrian
2013

Note

Dr. Ismail Serageldin is a lover of literature , and has always liked Shakespeare, finding in him a multi-layered complexity that speaks to us beyond the beauty of words and the power of the poetry.

Being a great admirer of the genius of Shakespeare, he decided, that as a trend, the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, would hold an Annual Shakespeare Conference to discuss and analyze one or more of his plays and the different facets of the characters.

In his creations Shakespeare continues to intrigue and beguile us by not being completely determined, by having that element of contradiction that not only surprises but also opens up the possibility for further and novel interpretations.

In *Richard II* we observe the craftsmanship and mastery of language that this great poet and dramatist possessed. Shakespeare could indeed see the feet of clay in his mighty heroes, and never lost sight of the human dimension of historical dramas. He also recognized the humanity that is in the frailty of his weaker heroes.

Dr Serageldin was requested by many to record these lectures and make them available. Accordingly, he has re-read Richard II at the Bibliotheca Alexandrina Studio, in Alexandria, Egypt, 19 September 2013.

Reflections on the Downfall of a King

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a privilege to address you one more time on the theme of literature generally and the genius of Shakespeare more specifically. There is so much to say about that unique protean imagination and the craftsmanship and mastery of language that this great poet and dramatist possessed that we must perforce choose one narrow facet of his monumental contributions. Let me today focus only on one example of how he used language in his plays, how the language served the play and enabled him to open new avenues in the theater of his day. I will speak of *Richard II*.

Indeed, Shakespeare could see the feet of clay in his mighty heroes, and never lost sight of the human dimension of historical dramas, he also recognized the humanity that is in the frailty of his weaker heroes. He gives them some of the most important and beautiful lines of the English language, and invites the audience to recognize these multiple facets of their very human personalities.

But Shakespeare was skillful in leaving enough ambiguity in his material so that his audiences would be able to participate in filling out his creations. That is why he speaks to people from different cultures who, as they do not speak English, are not as sensitive to the power of his language, and across time despite the enormous changes that have occurred in our societies. So we can find an Egyptian Lear, a Russian Hamlet, a Japanese Macbeth… his creations continue to intrigue and beguile us by not being completely determined, by having that element of contradiction that not only surprises but also opens up the possibilities for further and novel interpretations.

So, let us discuss one of these frail and weaker heroes, and go to Shakespeare's history plays, to see how he chose to present Richard II, a weak and capricious king who gets deposed by his cousin. It is one of the least performed of Shakespeare's history plays, although it repays a careful reading.

So:

First: Allow me to introduce the bare facts of the historical person of Richard II.

Second: I would like to discuss the main levers of the play as I see them;

Third: We can proceed with a brief analysis of the play's highlights;

Fourth: A discussion of how the complex character of Richard is developed with the participation of the audience;

Finally: I will end with some general observations on what makes this play so interesting to me.

I. Richard II: The Historical Figure

Richard II (1367–1400) was the eighth and last King of England of the House of Plantagenet. Ascending the throne as a child of ten in 1377, he was deposed at the age of 32 in 1399.

The first major challenge of the reign was the Peasants' Revolt in 1381, which the young king handled well, playing a major part in suppressing the rebellion. In the following years, however, the king's dependence on a small number of courtiers caused discontent in the community of men who had political power, and he lost effective control of the government to a group of noblemen for a few years. In 1397, he took his revenge on the appellants, many of whom were executed or exiled. The next two years have been

described by historians as Richard's "tyranny". In 1399, after John of Gaunt died, the king disinherited Gaunt's son, Henry of Bolingbroke, who had previously been exiled, and who then invaded England in June 1399 with a small force that quickly grew in numbers. Meeting little resistance, Bolingbroke deposed Richard and had himself crowned as King Henry IV. Richard died in captivity early the next year.

As an individual, Richard was tall, good-looking and intelligent. Richard's posthumous reputation has to a large extent been shaped by Shakespeare, whose play Richard II, focused on the last two years of Richard's reign and portrayed Richard's misrule and Bolingbroke's taking over of the throne as responsible for the 15th century "Wars of the Roses". These were a series of intrigues, plots and battles that pitted two branches of the Plantagenet lineage: the House of Lancaster (starting with Henry IV) under the heraldic banner of the Red Rose against the House of York under the heraldic banner of the White Rose. All that was to end with another Richard (the infamous Richard III) who would be deposed by another Henry, this time Henry the VII who would establish the House of Tudor on the throne of England, and whose son, Henry VIII would be one of the most famous monarchs in history.

II. Richard II: The Shakespearean Creation

Written in 1595, *Richard II,* is close in date to *Romeo and Juliet.* It was politically sensitive. It treated of a king deposed by another and the end of the house of Plantagenet, and the start of another dynasty, the house of Lancaster. Sitting monarchs did not like discussion of the possibilities of usurping the throne. But the play was allowed, it was popular and it was published as a Quarto in 1597. But it was out of theatrical performance by 1601[1].

[1] Not all plays reached publication, even when the companies had given up performing them, and of those that did appear as books, not many went into the editions beyond the first that made the stationer-publisher his profit. But this play had five editions in the author's lifetime and another in 1634. The deposition scene, at first omitted, appeared in the fourth edition of 1608, and thereafter. The play was evidently popular as a reading text. But, as we gathered from the testimony of the actor of the inquiry into the production commissioned for Essex, it was out of theatrical use by 1601. The subject—the usurpation of a weak and self-indulgent monarch, who happened to be the last to have an undisputed claim to throne—was a dangerous one to enact, even allowing for the fact that the censor was on the whole generous in his response to history plays that might perhaps have been expected to upset him. As always, Shakespeare drew on various chronicle histories, but he must also have had in mind Marlowe's Edward II (1591–92), another account of the fate of a weak king in the power of favorites. Marlowe's play was also popular, and an edition had appeared in 1594. It is not difficult to understand the interest shown in these kings, both thought homosexual and both indulgent to favorites.
Frank Kermode, *Shakespear's Language*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, first paperback edition, 2001.

First is the story. It is about the rise of the future Henry IV and the decline of Richard II. The play however focuses only on the last two years of King Richard's life, when the early successes are forgotten, and we see the capricious monarch making many unjust and unpopular decisions in a very arbitrary manner. We also see the emergence of Henry Bolingbroke, son of John of Gaunt, who will depose Richard and become the future Henry IV. This part of the structure is beautifully captured by the image of the buckets in Act IV.

Second is the evolution of the character of Richard, which is constructed by the interaction of the audience with the successive appearances and speeches of the King. The playwright's words are very skillfully deployed to allow Richard to evolve as a person, so that he becomes a well-rounded character, but at the same time – and that is the difficult *tour de force* – the audience feels for him as a human being, but considers him unworthy of keeping the throne.

Third: the passages that reflect on what it means to be a king. Here some of the most beautiful poetic statements in the English language are deployed to question the divine right of kings, are they not mere mortals like the rest of us,

after all? And it opens the door a crack to the idea that the throne should go to the person who has the most merit (in this case, Henry Bolingbroke).

Fourth: is the emergence of the Soliloquy as an important part of Shakespeare's toolkit. It will be further developed, reaching its ultimate expression in the great Soliloquy of Hamlet, but it is here a powerful tool that Shakespeare deploys to establish a new kind of direct link between the character of Richard and the audience.

So how are all these levers deployed in the play? Let us proceed with a brief analysis of the play's highlights.

III. How the Play Evolves

As we said, the play is composed of five acts covering only the last two years of Richard's life, which were called "Richard's tyranny".

The first Act sets the stage by starting with King Richard sitting on his throne in full regalia, exuding pomp and majesty. The King is to judge a dispute between his cousin Henry Bolingbroke and a certain Thomas Mowbray whom Bolingbroke accuses of murder of the Duke of Gloucester, although Bolingbroke's father, John of Gaunt, believes that

the king himself is involved in the murder. Richard fails to make a firm decision or to quiet the antagonists and they decide to fight a duel. But King Richard interrupts the duel at the very beginning and sentences both men to banishment from England. The king's decision can be seen as the first mistake in a series that will lead eventually to his overthrow and death.

In the second Act, John of Gaunt, uncle of the King, dies and Richard II seizes all of his land and money (which rightfully belongs to his son, Henry Bolingbroke, the king's cousin), and we learn from an angered nobility that Richard is mismanaging the country: he is wasting England's money, fining the nobles for crimes their ancestors committed, confiscating properties, as he did with Gaunt's legacy, and he is taxing the commoners, and all of that to fund his lifestyle and his desired war with Ireland.

The enraged nobles help the banished Bolingbroke return to England and plan to overthrow Richard II. King Richard leaves England to administer the war in Ireland, and Bolingbroke takes the opportunity to assemble an army and invade the north coast of England and wins over the Duke of York, whom Richard has left in charge of his government during his absence.

Act III is the turning point of the play: We see Bolingbroke becoming stronger and stronger as the support for Richard melts away. Tellingly, Act III also contains the moment when Richard offers his belief that Kings rule by divine right and cannot be deposed, for they are anointed by an irremovable balm, as he tells those around him:

"Not all the water in the rough rude sea
Can wash the balm from an anointed king"

— III.ii.50–51

Yet it is also in Act III that Richard begins to see the end coming and recognizes the unstoppable rise of Bolingbroke, and that he muses about the real meaning of being a king…. It has some of the finest poetry in the play or any other play… Listen to this great speech by King Richard II, reflecting on the frailty of worldly power and the mortality of kings:

For God's sake, let us sit upon the ground
And tell sad stories of the death of kings;
How some have been deposed; some slain in war,
Some haunted by the ghosts they have deposed;
Some poison'd by their wives: some sleeping kill'd;
All murder'd - for within the hollow crown
That rounds the mortal temples of a king

Keeps Death his court and there the antic sits,
Scoffing his court and grinning at his pomp,
Allowing him a breath, a little scene,
To monarchize, be fear'd and kill with looks, 165
Infusing him with self and vain conceit,
As if this flesh which walls about our life,
Were brass impregnable, and humour'd thus
Comes at the last and with a little pin
Bores through his castle wall, and farewell king! 170
— III.ii.155–170

FAREWELL … KING !

The pause and emphasis on the word "king" changes the sense of "farewell" and turn what could have been a pathos verging on bathos into a hard edged sarcasm that underlines the thrust of mockery that runs through the whole passage…

Now hear him in this eloquent conclusion to this remarkable passage:

Cover your heads and mock not flesh and blood
With solemn reverence; throw away respect,
Tradition, form and ceremonious duty,
For you have but mistook me all this while:

I live with bread like you, feel want,
Taste grief, need friends: subjected thus,
How can you say to me, I am a king?

— III.ii.171–177

By the end of the act, Bolingbroke has moved from his first claims which were limited to getting his land back and now additionally claims the throne. Richard gives in and we are now – for the rest of the play – to witness the continued rise of Henry Bolingbroke and the continued decline of Richard II.

In Act IV, the actual transfer of power occurs, and Shakespeare gives Richard some very beautiful lines, including the abdication speech where Richard is foregoing the trappings and symbols of power that he hands over to the new king Henry, and he says:

Mark me how I will undo myself,
I give this heavy weight from off my head
And this unwieldy sceptre from my hand,
The pride of kingly sway from out my heart;
With mine own tears I wash away my balm,
With mine own hands I give away my crown,
With mine own tongue deny my sacred state,
With mine own breath release all duty's rites:

All pomp and majesty I do forswear;
My manors, rents, revenues I forego;
My acts, decrees, and statutes I deny:
God pardon all oaths that are broke to me!
God keep all vows unbroke that swear to thee!
Make me, that nothing have, with nothing grieved,
And thou with all pleased, that hast all achieved!
Long mayst thou live in Richard's seat to sit,
And soon lie Richard in an earthly pit!
God save King Harry, unking'd Richard says,
And send him many years of sunshine days!
What more remains?

— IV.i.202–221

The transfer of power has been chronicled throughout the play, with the rise of Bolingbroke and the decline of Richard, and is beautifully captured in another great poetic image, where Richard in a speech in Act IV sees the process as two buckets one rising and one falling…

Give me the crown. Here, cousin, seize the crown;
Here cousin:
On this side my hand, and on that side yours.
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.

— IV.i.184–192

In Act V, the final act, we see King Henry IV putting down latent rebellions and punishing the rebels. Richard is in prison in the castle of Pomfret. Exton, an ambitious nobleman, goes to the prison and murders the former king. King Henry repudiates the murderer and vows to journey to Jerusalem to cleanse himself of his part in Richard's death. A statement that some see as a Machiavellian effort to appear pious before the populace, with which Henry is already popular.

But it is telling that the transfer of power, which has been chronicled throughout the play, is symbolically recaptured by the parallel between the beginning and the end of the play: like bookends, the play that opened with Richard sitting on the throne in pomp and majesty, now ends with Henry IV sitting on the throne in pomp and majesty.

Shakespeare was to continue the story in his plays about Henry IV (parts 1 and 2) where we meet Falstaff and the young prince Hal, who will then become Henry V, subject of a separate play by Shakespeare, but it is clear that the plays cover a continuing story, and there are some references here and there in the later plays that resolve some minor points left hanging in the earlier plays.

IV. Building the Character of Richard II

The play is really a lot more about the character of Richard II than it is about the events and plot, which is rather simple: the decline of Richard and the rise of Henry. Far more interesting is the multi-faceted creation of Richard, a weak king, endowed with the soul of a poet…

Seen from that angle, the play is important in several respects. It is not dominated by the plot, the external events that shape the conditions leading to this dramatic turn of events: the deposition of a king. It is not so much about the story as it is about the character of Richard II. The play not only dissects the enigmatic personality of the king, it does so with the full participation of the audience as the playwright skillfully brings forth the inner thoughts of his protagonist. Indeed, as Greenblatt observed: "Richard

II marked a major advance in the play-wright's ability to represent *inwardness*"[2].

So now we have a play that will present a complex character, and that invites the audience to focus on the character of the king. That is a task that requires exceptionally good acting. Good actors are needed to create complex characters. Thus, the skills of a Burbage enabled Shakespeare to create complex characters. Indeed, acting, called "personation" was being recognized as such at that time[3]. But good actors too, needed to be liberated from the sing-song delivery of totally metered and rhymed verse, they needed a new dramatic language to explore the minds of the characters they represented. Shakespeare

---

[2] Stephen Greenblatt, *Will in the World: How Shakespeare became Shakespeare*, United States of America: W. W. Norton; Reprint edition, 2005, pp.300-301.

[3] The word …"personation", a word that, along with "personate", seems to have come into use at this time, and is first found in John Florio's Italian dictionary, *A World of Words* (1598). Shakespeare probably knew Florio, who was Southampton's secretary and, as a keen theatergoer, may have picked up the word in theatrical circles. It is tempting to think that it was a new refinement in acting style, facilitated by and encouraging a new flexibility in dramatic verse, that made this word necessary.
Frank Kermode, *The Age of Shakespeare,* Modern Library, New York 2004, p.64

was able to throw convention to the winds, to use meter and rhyme when he wanted, as well as blank verse where it served his purpose. And thus, out of this collaboration between great actors and great writing : "A new manner of great acting had been created"[4], and it would keep "acting Shakespeare" at the top of the ambitions of aspiring actors to this day.

But Shakespeare gives us much more than beautiful words. He builds the character of Richard II in collaboration with the audience, through the talents of the actor. He shows us complexity and evolution of the character through the play.

Richard II is the first dramatic hero where Shakespeare actively promoted the duality of his inner soul and his public self. Richard has a habit of studying himself from the outside, as it were, a habit emblematized in the scene where he sends for a looking-glass (IV.i). When he smashes his reflection, his "shadow", it is as if he was destroying his substance. In a sense he is always calling for a mirror, finding in his reflection a king stripped of all his belongings (III.iii.142), seeing himself as an analogue

[4] Frank Kermode, *The Age of Shakespeare*, Modern Library, New York 2004, p.122

of Christ, betrayed by Judases and condemned by Pilates (IV.i.239–40), developing, in a beautifully appropriate style, the figure of the two buckets (IV.i.184).

Richard II is complete in itself, and the king is virtually the first of the tragic heroes of whom we discover an inner as well as a public life.

The king is a bad ruler and a weak person. His bad performance as a ruler is truly noted, and Bolingbroke deposes him with relative ease. Yet Richard seduces the audience with the tune of his voice and the beauty of his language. Sometimes affected and self-pitying, it nevertheless imposes itself on the audience's mind:

What must the King do now? Must he submit?
The King shall do it. Must he be depos'd?
The King shall be contented. Must he lose
The name of king? A' God's name let it go.
I'll give my jewels for a set of beads,
My gorgeous palace for a hermitage,
My gay apparel for an almsman's gown,
My figur'd goblets for a dish of wood,
My sceptre for a palmer's walking-staff,
My subjects for a pair of carved saints;
And my large kingdom for a little grave,

A little little grave, an obscure grave—
Or I'll be buried in the king's high way,
Some way of common trade, where subjects' feet
May hourly trample on their sovereign's head;
For on my heart they tread now whilst I live,
And buried once, why not upon my head?

— III.iii.143–59

Now here we have a turning point in the play, a point that requires incredible skill in writing and acting, as it fulfills a double purpose: it allows us to feel for Richard and sympathize with him as a human being, someone who has suffered a savage loss, who falls from the uppermost reaches of power and majesty and is cast down into the abyss; but – and therein lies the skill – to make us feel that he was unworthy of keeping this high office. For Shakespeare gives the king elegant lines to speak, but they show us a weak, peevish self-pity, rather than the dignified posture of one who deserves to bear a crown, one who would by his demeanor in this difficult moment show how to confront the disastrous turn of events with stately nobility. Why does the passage work? Because it underlines that Richard considers that he is "owed" all that a king has, but does not show the slightest sense of obligation or responsibility that we all expect a Monarch to have

towards his duties. Kermode puts it succinctly when he says: "…this pathos serves a double purpose: it touches the hearers but at the same time convinces them that self-pity is not a quality to be admired in a monarch. It is founded in a sense of violated privilege, with no thought whatever of obligation"[5].

Now that we talk of a collaboration between author and audience, we must underline an additional complexity. That is the duality of the audience that Shakespeare was writing for. On one level, he had the educated and sophisticated aristocrats and gentry, whose taste and even language was special to them, and then there were the masses, largely uneducated and illiterate, that filled the ground of the theater. They spoke a different language. And if Shakespeare relied on the aristocrats for sponsorship and political support, he relied on the "groundlings" for his financial survival. As Ted Hughes observes:

> "Shakespeare's audience made certain demands that no audience has repeated since…. They comprised two distinct audiences. Along the upper edge sat the aristocracy, the intellectual nobility, in some ways as formidably educated and as exactingly cultured as Englishmen have

[5] Frank Kermode, *Shakespeare's Language*. p.122.

> ever been. And along the lower edge, in large numbers, were the common populace, the groundlings, many of whom could neither read nor write."[6]

How Shakespeare's language and dramatic formulations solved that problem has been splendidly elaborated by Hughes[77] and he even talks of a formula that Shakespeare used in his writing to be able to reach both parts of his audience and unite them in their desired interaction with the play.

But wait! For there is another aspect to this complex rhetorical maneuver by Shakespeare. Yes, this kind of language is admirably suited to show the weak and vain side of Richard, one that would alienate the audience from him, but at the same time, it also lays the foundation for the audience to relate to him more later in the play, as we are invited to share in the evolution of his thinking as he overcomes his peevish self-pity and develops a more reflective and philosophical posture… It does so by establishing the technique of **the soliloquy** as a verbal link

---

[6] Ted Hughes, *Essential Shakespeare*, (selection and introduction by Ted Hughes copyright 1991), Harper Collins, New York, Ecco paperback edition, 2006

[7] Ted Hughes, *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*, Faber & Faber; 1st edition, 1992

between the character's inner thoughts and the audience, and by exposing his weakness it also exposes that he has indeed been wronged, and thereby creates the necessary mental posture to appreciate him when the wrong remains and the weakness is transformed into reflection and thoughtful interaction, if not acceptance, of his unfortunate condition.

And indeed, when we see him at the end of the play, the effect is changed. Here the King speaks thoughtfully. Although Shakespeare had made use of soliloquies before Richard II, this would be the first to produce this effect of serious meditation[8]. It is a long meditation, where in a stolen, frozen moment of time, the character is allowed to share with the audience his torment, his inner thoughts and the struggle of his conscience and intellect[9].

---

[8] Frank Kermode, *Shakespeare's Language*. Kermode considers it the "first of Shakespeare's great soliloquies… It tells of a man trying to understand his place in a world that is no longer his to play with. Still impregnated with self-pity, the speech is nevertheless the first that at least hints at the range and power of Hamlet's soliloquies, or Macbeth's or Angelo's".

[9] The wonderful long soliloquy of the King in prison is truly transitional, for the occasion of such a lament resembles others in the earlier plays, until it becomes clear that something else is happening, that the elaborations of figure are not simply prefabricated and laid out neatly before us but hammered out. He goes on to reflect that

after all it was better to be a king than to be in his present state of penury, but that to resume his kingship, move back in time, would be to be once more unkinged by Bolingbroke, and so to be nothing. In conclusion:

> *Nor I, nor any man that but man is,*
> *With nothing shall be pleas'd, till he be eas'd*
> *With being nothing.* *(39–41)*

No other speech in Shakespeare much resembles this one, in which "the word" is truly set "Against the word". The tone is quietly meditative, but the arguments are hammered out. There is none of that furious thinking we associate with some of Hamlet's soliloquies, much less is there any promise of the tumult of Aufidius's thought in *Coriolanus* (IV.vii). Richard establishes an equation between thoughts in the little world of man's mind, generated by the interaction of female brain and male soul, and people in the greater world, generated in the usual way. Then he begins to describe different categories of thoughts as if they were people, all discontented. The "better" thoughts concerned with religion are troubled, when they set one word against another, by apparent contradictions in the Gospels (Matthew 19:14, 24). As it happens, the Duchess of York has just used the expression "sets the word itself against the word" (V.iii.122), and the poet may have been struck by the other sense of "word", meaning the word of God, an association that tempted him to introduce this comment on the conflict between the Gospel texts. Now he illustrates other sources of mental discontent: ambitious thoughts and stoical thoughts. These "still-breeding" thoughts are again compared to "many people"; and Richard sees himself as playing all their parts, again, even in this moment of quiet contemplation, seeing himself from the outside, as an actor who once played the king. Such is his discontent that nothing can ease it except the nothing that is death.

Here are a few lines from that meditation:

I have been studying how I may compare
This prison where I live unto the world:
And for because the world is populous
And here is not a creature but myself,
I cannot do it; yet I'll hammer it out.
My brain I'll prove the female to my soul,
My soul the father; and these two beget
A generation of still-breeding thoughts,
And these same thoughts people this little world,
In humours like the people of this world,
For no thought is contented. The better sort,
As thoughts of things divine, are intermix'd
With scruples and do set the word itself
Against the word:
As thus: "Come, little ones," and then again
"It is as hard to come as for a camel
To thread the postern of small needle's eye."…

A comparison of this soliloquy with those Shakespeare wrote earlier (say, of Richard III) and later (of Hamlet and Macbeth) shows it to be very much in the middle. Like Bushy's consolatory speech, it has little tangles in it, signs however of high intelligence at work, signs of a language formidably changing to meet greater challenges.
Frank Kermode, *Shakespeare's Language,* pp. 43–45

Whate'er I be,
Nor I nor any man that but man is,
With nothing shall be pleas'd, till he be eas'd
With being nothing. V.v.1–41

Note the complexity, with its suggestion of self-regard, in the rhymes and antitheses of the last few lines. It may be that the need to represent—to provide for the personation of—a king full of tender self-regard made the inwardness of those later Shakespearean soliloquies possible. It opened up a new rhetorical range, a range that Shakespeare was to explore almost alone[10]. The grammatical concision of the lines prefigures greater things in the future[11]. The art of the great soliloquies was born[12].

---

[10] Frank Kermode, *The Age of Shakspeare*. Among the dramatists writing in Shakespeare's hey-day were Ben Jonson, John Marston, Thomas Heywood, Thomas Middleton, John Webster, and George Chapman. Of these, Jonson and Chapman were the most distinguished poets outside as well as inside the theater. Chapman was the translator of Homer ("never before in any language truly translated"). His fame now rests largely on that translation, which he himself described as "the work that I was born to do". He never wrote for Shakespeare's company, but his dramatic works include some strong tragedies, notably Bussy d'Ambois (1604).

[11] Frank Kermode, *The Age of Shakspeare*, pp. 88-91.

[12] Ibid. p.161. Kermode says: The art of soliloquy, much developed in Hamlet, now acquires a new force as the means by which a man trapped in that temporal interim can convey the almost frantic exercise of equivocating conscience and intellect. "This supernatural

Indeed, in this meditation we see some interesting dualities: beyond the obvious one of the inner and public self, there is the dialogue between the mind and the soul, there is the ability of Richard to look at himself as if from the outside and discuss his own condition, and finally there is also the duality in the play, between Bolingbroke and Richard, a duality well-captured in the image of the two buckets.

VII. Poetry across Culture, Time and Space

At the outset, I did say that Shakespeare was the universal genius that creative minds keep turning to time and again. An Egyptian Lear, a Russian Hamlet, a Japanese Macbeth… all possible, for great works of art allow others to take from them and build the new artist's own creations. They have

---

soliciting / Cannot be ill, cannot be good," reasons Macbeth (I.iii.130–31); and in his most celebrated soliloquy:

If it were done, when 'tis done then 'twere well
It were done quickly. If th' assassination
Could trammel up the consequence, and catch
With his surcease, success; that but this blow
Might be the be-all and the-end-all—here,
But here, upon this bank and shoal of time,
We'ld jump the life to come (I.vii.1–7)

There is little of comparable intensity in all of Shakespeare.

that studied ambiguity and that peculiar imagery and powerful mystery that invite such interaction.

Let us go back to Richard II and one of the great passages of that play: the two buckets and its concluding line:

…

That bucket down and full of tears am I,
Drinking my griefs, whilst you mount up on high.

HENRY BOLINGBROKE

I thought you had been willing to resign.

KING RICHARD II

My crown I am; but still my griefs are mine:
You may my glories and my state depose,
But not my griefs; still am I king of those.

This last line is the line taken as a refrain in the beautiful poem of Aragon about occupied France after 1940, called "Richard II 40" where the refrain is "je reste roi de mes douleurs" [I remain the king of my pains (griefs)]. He uses it as the closing fifth line after a quatrain rhyming a,b,a,b, and b, then c,b,c,b, and b, and then d,b,d,b and b, etc. Listen to the powerful lines of Aragon:

RICHARD II QUARANTE

Ma patrie est comme une barque
Qu'abandonnèrent ses haleurs
Et je ressemble à ce monarque
Plus malheureux que le malheur
Qui restait roi de ses douleurs
Qui restait roi de ces douleurs…
[Who remained king of his pains (griefs)].

VI. Conclusions

Ladies and gentlemen,

In conclusion, we have to note several important aspects to this play:

- It sets the stage for Shakespeare's subsequent History Plays, and certainly can be considered the first in a tetralogy of the Henry plays;
- It raises questions about the right of kings to rule by simple hereditary right, and introduces the Machiavellian concept of government by an able prince;

- It invites the audience to interact with the writer in defining the character of Richard, and establishes a remarkable evolution in the personality of the King;
- It deals with dualities in interesting and intriguing ways;
- It introduces the art of the soliloquy to enable the audience to share in the character's inner thoughts; and
- It has some very fine thoughts and excellent poetry to boot.

Above all, I think, the skill deployed in showing the evolution of Richard's character, and the ability to get the audience to feel for him as a human being as he becomes more reflective and thoughtful, while still recognizing that he was a bad ruler is an achievement, a *tour de force*, that makes this play deserving of more recognition than it has received.

Through the work of the pioneers of semiotics, we have learned that text is a construct of both author and reader. We bring to it our aspirations and our fears, our hopes and our dreams, our concerns and our memories. The skillful writer is one who opens up possibilities. Shakespeare is more than skillful. To use words Seamus Heaney used in another context, Shakespeare's language is seductive by

the run of his verse; it is distinctive by its posture in the mouth and in the ear, remarkable in its constant drama of tone and tune[13]. But more importantly, the temporal and the didactic passes away with time, the work that engages us intellectually and emotionally is the one that remains. And Shakespeare's work certainly remains, and so does the *inwardness* of his characters.

"Strategic opaqueness" is the key to successfully promoting this "inwardness". . If it starts with *Richard II*, and evolves in *Julius Caesar* it finds its true strength in *Hamlet*. As Greenblatt observes, Shakespeare had reinvented the tragedy by "radical excision"…

> "He had rethought how to put a tragedy together – specifically, he had rethought the amount of causal explanation a tragic plot needed to function effectively and the amount of explicit psychological rationale a character needed to be compelling. Shakespeare found that he could immeasurably deepen the effect of his plays, that he could provoke in the audience and in himself a peculiarly passionate intensity of response, if he took

[13] Paraphrasing from Seamus Heaney, "Over the Brim" in Joseph Brodsky, Seamus Heaney and Derek Walcott, *Homage to Robert Frost*, Farrar Strause Giroux, New York, 1996, pp. 70–71.

> out a key explanatory element, thereby occluding the rationale, motivation, or ethical principle that accounted for the action that was to unfold. The principle was not the making of a riddle to be solved, but the creation of a strategic opacity. This opacity, Shakespeare found, released an enormous energy that had been at least partially blocked or contained by familiar, reassuring explanations"[1414].

Shakespeare, with his poetic talent, his mastery of technique, his unerring sense of drama and his insightful understanding of human nature creates clever multi-layered plays and prismatic characters, Shakespeare opens up unending vistas, multiple mirrors and windows, images that engage our imagination and our intellect, as we find and loose ourselves in his creations, as each successive generation interacts and reinvents his text…

Ben Jonson was right. Shakespeare is indeed not of an age, but for all time.

Thank you.

---

[14] Stephen Greenblatt, op.cit. p.324.

Works Cited

Greenblatt. Stephen, *Will in the World: How Shakespeare became Shakespeare*, W.W. Norton & Co. Ltd.; Reprint edition, 2005.

Heaney. Seamus, "Over the Brim" in Joseph Brodsky, Seamus Heaney and Derek Walcott, *Homage to Robert Frost*, Farrar Straus Giroux, New York, 1996.

Hughes. Ted, *Essential Shakespeare*, (selection and introduction by Ted Hughes copyright 1991), Harper Collins, New York, Ecco paperback edition, 2006.

Hughes. Ted, *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*, Faber & Faber; 1st edition, 1992.

Kermode. Frank, *Shakespeare's Language*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, first paperback edition, 2001

Kermode. Frank, *The Age of Shakespeare*, Modern Library, New York 2004.

Ismail Serageldin, Director, Library of Alexandria, also chairs the Boards of Directors for each of the BA's affiliated research institutes and museums. He serves as Chair and Member of a number of advisory committees for academic, research, scientific and international institutions. He has held many international positions including as Vice President of the World Bank (1993–2000).

Dr. Serageldin has received many awards including: First recipient of Grameen Foundation (USA) Award for a lifetime commitment to combating poverty, (1999); Officer of the Order of Arts and Letters awarded by the government of France (2003); Pablo Neruda Medal of Honor, awarded by the Government of Chile (2004); The Bajaj Award for promoting Ghandian values outside India (2006); Order of the Rising Sun – Gold and Silver Star awarded by the Emperor of Japan (2008); Champion of Youth Award by the World Youth Congress, Quebec (2008); Knight of the French Legion of Honor awarded

by the President of France (2008); The Swaminathan Award for Environmental Protection (Chennai, India, 2010); Millennium Excellence Award for Lifetime Africa Achievement Prize, by the Excellence Awards Foundation, Ghana (2010); The Public Welfare Medal, by the National Academy of Sciences, Washington DC (2011); Commander of the Order of Arts & Letters awarded by the government of France (2011).

He has lectured widely all over the world including delivering the Mandela Lecture (Johannesberg, 2011), the Nexus Lecture (Netherlands, 2011), the Keynote Address to the First International Summit of the Book (Washington DC, 2012). He was distinguished professor at Wageningen University and at the College de France.

He has published over 60 books and monographs and over 200 papers on a variety of topics including biotechnology, rural development, sustainability, and the value of science to society. He holds a Bachelor of Science degree in engineering from Cairo University and Master's degree and a PhD from Harvard University and has received over 30 honorary doctorates.