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From Legal Document to Monolog

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FROM LEGAL DOCUMENT TO MONOLOG

Robert B. Pierce

C. L. Kingsford, a judicious historian of England and English historiography from an older generation, has pronounced, “*Richard II* remains in a sense the best history of the reign which we possess.” (12) Unpacking that “in a sense the best history” has been our concern for years: what might it mean for us modern readers of the history plays and for his own time to think of Shakespeare as a historian, the writer of a piece of historiography? No one who has looked even casually at how he alters and manipulates his sources would mistake him for an objective, empiricist or positivist historian, that Aunt Sally of Marxists and New Historians; but I am not sure that any one version of Shakespeare the historian in Early Modern or contemporary terms is plausible; no model of historical writing matches the sheer variety of representational modes and possible aims in his history plays, English and Roman. Still, closely examining his act of composing history as he restructures and rewrites his source material can suggest a bundle of meanings and understandings of the past that seem to have shaped his dramatic handlings. Shakespeare is among other things a historian, however inadequate our specific definitions of the historiographical craft may be for capturing his infinite variety.

One can see the historiographer at work as Shakespeare adapts his sources, especially the material that he draws from Holinshed’s *Chronicles*. Of course one should not see in Holinshed an undistorting mirror of pure historical fact, in contrast with the artistic or ideological deformations of a play like *Richard II*. The book Shakespeare took up as his primary (though not his only) source for that play, presumably the 1587 edition of Holinshed’s *Chronicles*, was a

constructed historical text, at its own removed from the actualities of the fourteenth century. The composite authorship of the *Chronicles*, its assimilation of older texts, its revision between the 1577 and 1587 editions and further revision under censorship, the putative impact of its audience and of contemporary theories of historiography: all these have left their mark on the text we read (as does its alteration from the sixteenth to the twenty-first century—for example, the Holinshed we are now likely to read is not a free-standing historical text because it has been shaped and condensed to serve as a sourcebook for readers of Shakespeare). But again it is easy to oversimplify the shaping of Shakespeare's main source text even in its own time. Thus the judicious analysis by Annabel Patterson may impose a more coherent pattern of aims and methods on Holinshed than the diverse original justifies. Patterson (ix and frequently) describes the *Chronicles* as a text employing a policy of "indifference"—Holinshed judiciously holding up different interpretations of a controversial issue for our judgment rather than choosing one for its superior claim to the truth. But there may well be equal plausibility in the older explanation of it as the product of packrat compilers lumping together material from diverse other previous sources rather than a deliberate weighing of probabilities.

At any rate, looking closely at one piece of Shakespeare's historiographical craft can suggest what kind of historian he is, at least at one point in his dramatic exploration of the past. Though drawing carefully on his sources for *Richard II*, he famously invents the deposition scene itself in Act Four, Scene One, while using elements from Holinshed's report of encounters between Richard and Bolingbroke's emissaries as well as the description of the Parliament meeting that deposed Richard and recognized Bolingbroke as the new king.¹ Let us study one part of that crucial scene, in relation to the text in Holinshed that clearly inspired it.

Richard has entered under the reluctant guard of his uncle York, and as often before he thwarts a planned ceremony, here a formal abdication, to create a ceremony of his own. For this moment, as elsewhere in the play, Shakespeare gives his Richard an attribute that the chronicles do not justify, acute self-consciousness: Richard is the first audience for every act and speech that he makes. With his opening words at 163 ff.ⁱⁱ he imagines himself in the new role that he faces, a man stripped of royalty. Then, characteristically, he looks around at his audience and pulls them into an improvised ceremony in a way that causes them to feel shame at their guilt, along with embarrassment at his melodramatic emotionalism. Echoing the Bishop of Carlisle's previous speech of intervention (itself not from Holinshed but from another source, the *Traison et Mort*), Richard takes up Carlisle's association of divinely ordained royalty with Christ the King, and characteristically he adds an edge of hysterical shrillness to Carlisle's choric pronouncement. Of course Richard has not heard Carlisle's speech. This independent echo gives some religious authority to his claim to royal sanctity—king and church speak with one voice; yet the shrillness in Richard subjectivizes that voice. Is this utterance to be heard as the voice of God or of hysteria?

Even in this invented moment of an invented scene, Shakespeare draws on the material and general purport of his sources. Richard's absolutist ideas of royalty are substantially those of the historical King Richard as modern historians see him, a politics reasonably to be inferred from Holinshed; and these royalist ideas confront a political landscape very similar as well to what recent historians portray. As the embodiment of that political environment so contrary to Richard's perspective, Shakespeare's great dramatic antagonist to Richard, the laconic Bolingbroke, neatly captures the ambiguous motivation and ruthless efficiency of the figure in

Holinshed and the other sources. In a way the dramatic image is even more expressive of the historical Bolingbroke as we now understand him than his actual historical behavior as reported to us. In interpreting him, Shakespeare offers a plausible way to make sense of the more or less factual data available to us from the chronicles. Furthermore, this fictional ceremony of deposition represents the sort of ritual that presumably occurred and that Holinshed loves to report when he can--Parliament's confirmation of Richard's resignation, and the subsequent coronation of Henry, for example. But in this invented dramatic ceremony the ritual goes crazily awry as Richard improvises his own little emblematic ritual with the crown.

At this key dramatic moment Shakespeare draws the heart of Richard's central speech of abdication from a passage in Holinshed, "The tenor of the instrument whereby king Richard resigneth the crowne to the duke of Lancaster," though what Shakespeare makes of the whole text is an amazingly rich and different thing. The document as recorded in Holinshedⁱⁱⁱ is as follows:

In the name of God Amen: I Richard by the grace of God, king of England and of France, &c; lord of Ireland, acquit and assoile [absolve] all archbishops, bishops, and other prelates secular or religious, of what dignitie, degree, state or condition so ever they be; and also all dukes, marquesses, earles, barons, lords, and all my liege men, both spirituall and secular, of what manner or degree they be, from their oth of fealtie and homage, and all other deeds and privileges made unto me, and from all manner bonds of allegiance, regalitie and lordship, in which they were or be bounden to me, or anie otherwise constreined; and them, their heires, and successors for evermore, from the same bonds and oths I release, deliver, and acquit, and set them for free, dissolved and

acquit, and to be harmelesse, for as much as longeth to my person by anie manner waie or title of right, that to me might follow of the foresaid things, or anie of them. And also I resigne all my kinglie dignitie, majestie and crowne, with all the lordships, power, and privileges to the foresaid kinglie dignitie and crowne belonging, and all other lordships and possessions to me in anie manner of wise pertaining, of what name, title, qualitie, or condition soever they be, except the lands and possessions for me and mine obits [memorials; masses for his soul?] purchased and bought. And I renounce all right, and all manner of title of possession, which I ever had or have in the same lordships and possessions, or anie of them, with anie manner of rights belonging or appertaining unto anie part of them. And also the rule and governance of the same kingdome and lordships, with all ministrations of the same, and all things and everie each of them, that to the whole empire and jurisdictions of the same belongeth of right, or in anie wise may belong.

And also I renounce the name, worship, and regaltie and kinglie highnesse, clearelie, freele, singularlie and wholie, in the most best manner and forme that I may, and with deed and word I leave off and resigne them, and go from them for evermore; saving alwaies to my successors kings of England, all the rights, privileges and appurtenances to the said kingdome and lordships above said belonging and appertaining. For well I wote [know] and knowledge and deeme myselfe to be, and have beene insufficient and unable, and also unprofitable, and for my open deserts not unworthy to be put downe. And I sweare upon the holie evangelists here presentelie with my hands touched, that I shall never repugne to [oppose; resist] this resignation, demission or yielding up, nor never impugne [resist; find fault with] them in anie maner by word or deed, by my selfe nor none other: nor shall I not suffer it to be impugned, in as much as

in me is, privilie or apertlie [openly]. But I shall have, hold, and keepe this renouncing, demission, and giving up for firm and stable for evermore in all and everie part hereof, so God me helpe and all saints, and by this holie evangelist, by me bodilie touched and kissed. And for more record of the same, here openlie I subscribe and signe this present resignation with mine owne hand.

The declaration in Holinshed is one of those texts that he delights in reproducing verbatim. Patterson (37) suggests that he picks up the habit from Foxe. Presumably the impulse to quote recorded texts suggests a certain delight in reporting the empirical facts when they are available, preserving the actual words that came from Richard's mouth and appeared in the document he signed on the occasion described. Even Early Modern historians sometimes reached toward the "facts as they really were." (For discussion of the early sources of these events see Duls, Sayles, and Given-Wilson.) The "Instrument," if we can give it at least provisional faith as more or less real words written at the time, is surely a legal document carefully drafted by Richard's captors in legalese--with all its redundancies in the service of legally unchallengeable precision--to make Richard's deposition final, to cover all its implications for his subjects, and especially to protect the deponents' own safety and property from its consequences. "We are all free from any obligation to Richard, and no one can later bring any charges or claims against us"—that is the message underlined with lawyerly repetitiousness. There is not much for the literary- or dramatic-minded reader to relish in this document, though we can surely find a grim irony in the avowal put into Richard's mouth that this renunciation is made "clearlie, freeilie, singularlie and wholie." Only the first and last of the adverbs are true. Frankly I am not at all sure whether Holinshed or his ultimate source intends us to see that irony. Lawyerly types are

not much inclined to put humor, even grim humor, into legal documents, and chroniclers are not always connoisseurs of irony. The style of the passage is workmanlike rather than polished. The remorseless verbal groupings of two, three, and four in the text occasionally make a gesture toward rhetorical force and animation, but more often they just seem to embody the legalistic tendency toward overkill to nail down every point.

Now let us look at the version of this speech that Shakespeare has Richard improvise without any text during the deposition scene. Bolingbroke confronts Richard with a question summarizing the title of the “Instrument”: “Are you contented to resign the crown?” To dramatize the “Instrument” as a whole in Richard’s reply would be even duller on the stage than is the text in the pages of Holinshed, and so Shakespeare has Richard break out of the set pattern of the “Instrument” as he responds, creating a monolog that is an extraordinary fantasia on themes from Holinshed’s legal document:

Ay, no; no, ay: for I must nothing be.
Therefore no “no,” for I resign to thee.
Now, 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 duteous oaths;

All pomp and majesty I do forswear;
My manors, rents, revenues I forgo;
My acts, decrees, and statutes I deny.
God pardon all oaths that are broke to me,
God keep all vows unbroke are made to thee!
Make me, that nothing have, with nothing griev'd,
And thou with all pleas'd, that hast all achiev'd.
Long may'st thou live in Richard's seat to sit,
And soon lie Richard in an earthy pit.
God save King Henry, unking'd Richard says,
And send him many years of sunshine days!
What more remains? (4.1.201-22)

(Among discussions of the speech see Traversi 41, Winny 57-58, and Leggatt 67-71.)

The endless redundancies in Holinshed would seem to have suggested to Shakespeare the four iterations of “With mine own...with mine own” and the countless other repetitions of Richard’s speech. Shakespeare cunningly varies the syntactic and metrical form of the repetitions, avoiding the monotony of the original and suggesting Richard’s imaginative copia as well as his obsessiveness. In Richard’s improvised speech, which is not just uttering a text composed by others as in Holinshed, the reiterations acquire a tone of sarcastic irony: he knows and keeps reminding everyone how far from a free agent he is. Thus he voices the irony implicit in the situation and so conveys what the performance must have felt like to the trapped king in his historical predicament, whether or not he ever articulated those feelings.

Richard's thoughts quickly turn toward a fascinated brooding on his own destruction, a fascination that has repeatedly immobilized him at crucial moments. He uses all those "I's" and "my's" to perform their own annulment, so that he becomes one who will retain nothing of all his lands and the duties owed him, who can do nothing anymore except spin words, and who therefore is no one. As he says just afterward, "I have no name, no title; / No, not that name was given me at the font, / But 'tis usurp'd" (255-57).

The passage in Holinshed obviously makes Richard a puppet mouthing his enemies' words, and that may have turned Shakespeare's thoughts to the implications of lost agency, leading to lost identity, in what Richard is doing. In the traditional language of the king's two bodies (Kantorowicz), Richard as king has a body natural joined with a body politic. The separation of the two is formally his demise, and the question is whether he then has any natural identity, having renounced his identity as king. Shakespeare's Richard does not mouth another man's words as is reported in Holinshed, but, in a similar form of words out of his own imagination, he plays fascinatedly with the paradox of undoing himself by his own words, renouncing his very being in the act of renouncing his office. The speech act of self-deposition is an act that denies its own agency. "I will freely do what you force me to do, and I will do it in a way that will disturb the scenario you have concocted for me, make it my own, even while it expresses my inability to act."

Consider the grim punning of the first two lines. In the first two words I take him to say yes, he will abdicate, then to reverse himself with "no." Immediately he turns the same words around ("I, no; no, I" in the Folio; "I, no no I" in Quarto Four. "I" and "aye" are often spelled identically, as here). Thus words three and four assert that there is "no 'I'"—that is, "I do not

exist: there is no Richard to be able to resist this demand.” The second line of the speech I read punctuating with Peter Ure’s Second Arden Edition and the Fourth Quarto (“Therefore no no”) rather than with the Signet Edition and the First Folio (“Therefore no, no”). I take Richard to be saying that he can say no “no” to Bolingbroke’s demand because he has no “I,” no identity left to him with which to resist: “I must nothing be.”

His thoughts circle back to brood on the implications of “nothing”--what he has made of himself, here of course the implications, not for the anxious drafters of the “Instrument” as in Holinshed, but for Richard himself. Does “Unking’d Richard” still have the royal capacity to issue commands? Well, the Richard of this speech claims to have no power of command left; his imperatives have force for him only if they take the form of a subject’s standard declaration of tribute to the king—“God save King Henry”--or of a defeated soul’s wish for his own death—“Soon lie Richard in an earthy pit.” The empty stock phrase of the first—Richard sarcastically playing humble subject--yields to a vivid premonition-wish for his death, visualized with his habitual physical immediacy as his body lying in a hole in the dirt. Then in a sudden revulsion of feeling he ends the mock ceremony with an abrupt question: “What more remains?” Returning his attention to his immediate environment, he abruptly addresses his rival king and challenges him to speak for himself and finish this charade that Bolingbroke has silently stage-managed.

Thus Shakespeare exploits everything in his source that can create a personal--psychological and emotional--reality in Richard at the moment of his deposition. Whether or not it is the psychological reality of the historical Richard, at least it is a plausible underpinning for what Richard seems to have done and said, a hypothetical reconstruction of the personal within the historical. Because Shakespeare is adapting Holinshed’s third-person narration to the

dramatic form of a group of characters speaking as they interact, he is pushed to imagine the relationship between external events and the internal feelings and thoughts that express themselves through the characters' words, precisely what we find very little of in Holinshed's text. Such changes in focus, in this specific case from legal document to a public and yet very personal monolog, probably obscure the political implications of the moment in history more than they clarify them; or rather they may suggest that to think historically about what happened in 1399 demands more than any one tradition of historiography can encompass, more even than the revival of narrative history in our day, with its quasi-literary tools, can accomplish.

At least at this moment in the play, whether we side with Bolingbroke and his followers in the nobility or with the lonely Richard in his royalist claims, whether we detect the tectonic shifts of long-duration history from Medieval to Early-Modern behind the immediate events, whether we can even untangle the different threads of historical causation to arrive at an Elizabethan or some other view of history—these responses of ours as we try to find a historical framework for *Richard II* seem to me to have less to do with how Shakespeare shapes his story than with how we respond individually to the very personal drama that he creates with his own version of Patterson's "indifference." No doubt historical implications flow from this moment of emotional and psychological drama, but rigidly controlling them to demonstrate the operation of a historical theory does not seem to be one of the main goals of the young playwright. Of course Shakespeare confronts other kinds of material to adapt in other parts of Holinshed and his other sources, and his methods vary from scene to scene, even from moment to moment. Indeed the point is that we need to attend and analyze the play with great flexibility because Shakespeare as historiographer is mercurial, attending to the potentialities of a given moment more than to any

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one theory. But by insight and intuition he is indeed a good historian, who can help us to understand something of that distant world of the late fourteenth century and its puzzling main actors.

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Notes

ⁱ The conception of Richard, along with the general structure of the play is surely much influenced by Marlowe's *Edward II*, though Shakespeare's king is much more self-analytical, even fascinated with his own feelings, than Marlowe's.

ⁱⁱ Quotations from the play are from Ure's Second Arden Edition.

ⁱⁱⁱ The summary account of the events leading to the deposition in Hall includes a speech parallel to the passage in Holinshed but briefer and with fewer parallels to *Richard II*. Holinshed is surely the primary source here. See *Hall's Chronicle (The Vnion of the Two Noble and Illustre Famelies of Lancastre & Yorke . . .)*, p. 12.

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