Writing the Tragic Self: *Richard II's* Sad Stories

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Summary: *When Shakespeare has Richard II call for the telling of “sad stories” he is not merely alluding to a tradition of medieval *de casibus* tragedy, but rather engaging with a well-known vision of historical teleology, popularized in Shakespeare’s time by narrative historical tragedies. Shakespeare’s audience, largely ignorant of the basic facts of English history, were familiar with this tragic form of history. Richard is a “self-authored subject” who finally brings his represented self into continuity with the *de casibus* vision.*

In Shakespeare’s *Richard II* the king returns from Ireland to be confronted with the news of his troops’ desertion and the death of his supporters, Bushy, Greene, and the Earl of Wiltshire. Richard’s reaction is to sink on the beach in a self-indulgent funk:

For God’s sake let us sit upon the ground
And tell sad stories of the death of kings:
How some have been depos’d, some slain in war,
Some haunted by the ghosts they have deposed,
Some poisoned by their wives, some sleeping kill’d,
All murdered —

(3.2.155-60)¹

Footnotes point out the allusion here to the “medieval” Christian tradition of *de casibus* tragedy and move on.² If, however, we view the passage not merely as a reference to a quaint pre-Shakespearean literature, but as an engagement with a vital and well-known vision of historical reality, the passage resonates on several levels.

Richard is summoning a narrative aggregate that will prove the tragic nature of history and therefore validate his own experience. This tragic teleology, proven by a massive concatenation of biographies, was first given literary form in Boccaccio's *De Casibus Virorum Illustrium*. That work structured annal-type biography around a pervasive tragic metabasis to present a broad teleological perception of history. When Shakespeare was writing, the *de casibus* tradition had been revived by the popular *Mirror for Magistrates*. William Baldwin, the chief editor of the first editions of the work, tells us that

Whan the Printer had purposed with hym selfe to printe Lidgates booke of the fall of Princes, and had made priuye thereto, many both honourable and worshipfull, he was counsailed by dyuers of them, to procure to haue the storye contynued from where as Bochas left, vnto this presente time.³

The *Mirror*, then, was to have extended Lydgate's *Fall of Princes*, which was a second-hand translation of Boccaccio.

But the tragic teleology of the *Mirror* tradition was not merely an independent popular tradition, cut off from the processes of "serious" history writing. When Thomas Blundeville translated the Italian writers Francisco Patricio and Accontio Tridentino in his *The true order and Methode of wryting and reading Hystories* (1574), England's first historiographical study, his second point suggests the narrative form that he assumed history would manifest:

And bycause euery thing hath hys beginning augmentacion, state, declinacion, and ende: The writer ought therfore to tell the things, so as therby a man may perceiue and discerne, that which apparteyneth to euery degree, and that, not onely as touching the Countrie or Citie: but also as touching the rule or dominion thereof. For the beginning, augmentacion, state, declynacion, and ende of a Countrie or Citie, and of the empire thereof, be not all one, but diuers things (sig. A2r).

And certainly a tragic narrative can be discerned in such early serious histories as the depiction of Jane Shore in Sir Thomas More's *History of King Richard the thirde*.

When Shakespeare has Richard invoke "sad stories," then, he is tapping a popular concept of the process of history: all kings die tragically; Richard will too. A tragic metabasis dominates history; Richard's story is one more proof of this teleology. Shakespeare will hint at this pattern over the whole course of the Henriad. As Richard sees himself as one example of a pre-existing pattern, within the plays he introduces the pattern; his fall dominates the Henriad as

surely as his coffin dominates the last scene of his play. The beleaguered Henry IV, Hotspur and Falstaff all add their sad stories after Richard's. If we take both of Shakespeare's tetralogies and run them together in chronological order, we find a macroscopic rise and fall pattern, from Richard II, through Henry V, and down to Richard III that itself may be described as tragic.

This model of history determines the nature of the representation of historical character in the play. When Richard invokes the *de casibus* precedent, he is moving towards a construction of an historical self around a popular vision of the form of history. To use Marshall Grossman's term, he is a "self-authored subject":

The self-authored subject . . . accumulates experiences through a series of judgments and choices that extend over the period of its life. As a fully historical conception of the self, it faces the problem of changing in response to temporally unfolding events while maintaining an essential continuity with its own past. Self-authorship, therefore, may be understood as the temporal recuperation of the tension between the self-fashioning and self-cancellation — the alternating experience of oneself as mastering and mastered — described by [Stephen] Greenblatt.⁴

However, the represented self maintains a continuity, in this play, not to the facts of history, but to the perceived shape of history. The "historical" King Richard, as he was known to Shakespeare through his study of Holinshed and other sources, is not of primary significance here, for two reasons. First, because Shakespeare changed the facts of the story. And second, because it is not clear how much the audience knew of the historical past of Richard.

This second point raises problems. There seems to be a consensus on the part of many critics of Shakespeare's history plays that Shakespeare's audience not only knew their history, but also that they had sufficient historical knowledge to be able to spot anachronisms: they knew the real age of Richard's wife, that benevolences were not introduced until the reign of Edward IV, and that rapiers were not a medieval weapon.⁵ In other words, this argument assumes that the audience, which was radically heterogeneous, had a fairly homogeneous historical consciousness. It assumes that the general populace, that 95% of the population who were not noble,⁶ the majority of whom could not read,⁷ all had a similar, more than rudimentary historical knowledge: they knew their kings and queens, knew the big facts and dates.

These assumptions seem to be inferred from the explosion of historical writing and increased historiographic sophistication that marked Elizabeth's reign. Critics such as Irving Ribner begin their studies of the Renaissance

English history play by examining the “new birth of historical writing in England.”⁸ Shakespeare’s history plays were popular, it is argued, because they were part of the flood of chronicles, chronicle epitomes, popular histories, historical broadsheets, and historical poems that were published in the second half of the sixteenth century. They rode the crest of the increased historical consciousness.

Certainly there was an increase in history reading and writing in this period.⁹ But to what degree was the general public, London citizenry, Shakespeare’s audience, caught up in this revolution in historiography? Perhaps not much at all. What did the unlettered, the sailors and apprentices, yeomen and barbers who attended the theatres,¹⁰ know of the facts of history? Here the evidence is very slight. Illiteracy would not necessarily prevent the purchase of broadsheets, which could feature decorative woodblock prints of royalty and family trees.¹¹ There were many ballads on historical subjects and they were often censored for their topicality.¹² But those same ballads usually addressed an immediate political crisis. There is no reason to believe that the ballad would still be sung in the same form a generation later, and so it would not necessarily act as a repository of historical fact. Most of the ballads on historical figures were more romanticized fictions — featuring, for example, Good King Hal pretending to be a commoner — than historical records. They offer nothing in the way of information except for the name of the monarch in question. In like fashion, chapbooks tended to use historical figures primarily for their folk appeal.¹³ Nor were there, except in some villages in Wales, anything like “village remembrancers.”¹⁴

One of the most obvious venues for the transmission of historical fact was through a trickle-down from the literate. Tessa Watt discusses the country recreations of reading aloud among village and parish members.¹⁵ But one might wonder what gentry, no matter how altruistic or wealthy, would lug a folio volume of Holinshed to the alehouse for the education of his honest neighbours. A popular history, like the anecdotal and sententious *Mirror*, would be much more accessible.¹⁶ The more obvious place for the illiterate to receive their history was in the church sermon. But, as Daniel Woolf has argued,

For most ordinary people, the Creation, the Flood, and the story of Christ were much more familiar historical landmarks than the Norman Conquest or Magna Carta . . . In his notes for a homily on rebellion, Archbishop Cranmer, for instance, listed Old Testament examples such as Dathan and Absalom side by side with the architects of more recent “tumults in

England," Jack Cade and Jack Straw. Even if he regarded all of these names as being equally historical, Cranmer would likely have understood the temporal distance between them. But to an ordinary churchgoer, listening to such examples, the nuances of time and place would be lost, and the illustrative material would blur into a vague and fuzzy but very real past.¹⁷

This unintentional process of anachronism, combined with oral culture's tendency to "telescope" past chronology,¹⁸ seems to have resulted in a knowledge of the historical past that was selective, riddled with anachronisms and folklore, and often wildly incorrect.

Certainly, the continual comparisons to Richard that plagued Elizabeth I, comparisons that emphasized, at least in the first part of her reign, her dependence on flatterers, would seem to indicate a general knowledge of Richard as dissolute.¹⁹ But Richard does not seem to have made a great impression on popular culture elsewhere; he is not a mainstay of the chapbooks or ballads, as were such heroes as Henry V. The one event of Richard's reign that we might assume lived in the popular historical consciousness, the Peasant's Rebellion, is not mentioned in Shakespeare's play. And the depiction of Richard II in the *Mirror For Magistrates*, which was one of Shakespeare's sources for the play, is crude and reductivist. The king, "mangled, with blew woundes, lying pale and wanne al naked vpon the cold stones in Paules church" (111) confesses to having being "ruled all by lust":

I set my minde, to feede, to spoyle, to iust,
Three meales a day could skarce content my mawe,
And all to augment my lecherous minde that must
To Venus pleasures alway be in awe (113).

If this was a popular conception of Richard, then Shakespeare's play may be seen either as an education or an antidote. Either way, Keith Thomas is probably correct when he suggests that "perhaps the overwhelming majority, of popular beliefs about the past had literary origins."²⁰

Indeed, Thomas Nashe's defence of playing in *Pierce Penilesse his Supplication to the Divell* (1592) suggests that the historical material of the history plays was new to a good percentage of the audience:

First, for the subject of them (for the most part) it is borrowed out of our English chronicles, wherein our forefathers valiant actes (that haue lyne long buried in rustie brasse and worme-eaten bookes) are reuiued, and they themselves rayzed from the graue of obliuion, and brought to pleade their aged honours in open presence.²¹

Thomas Heywood, in his *Apology for Actors* (1612), makes the connection between historical drama and audience education even more clear:

Thirdly, playes have made the ignorant more apprehensive, taught the unlearned the knowledge of many famous histories, instructed such as cannot reade in the discovery of all our English chronicles; and what man have you now of that weake capacity that cannot discourse of any notable thing recorded even from William the Conquerour, nay, from the landing of Brute, untill this day?²²

So the factual past to which the represented self of this and other history plays might maintain some continuity may not have existed for a large percentage of the audience outside of the events represented in the play itself. Not only would they have not caught the anachronisms, they would not have noticed the errors in fact or the compression in historical time that mark *Richard II* and other history plays. The play's celebration of past historical figures such as Edward III and Woodstock, and the scenes of historical explication, such as 1.2 in which the Duchess of Gloucester reminds John of Gaunt of his own ancestry, may have less to do with the play's celebration of medieval heroism and its depiction of a nascent modern political state under the rule of Bolingbroke, than the practical consideration of constructing an historical past for audience comprehension and character reaction.

As for the shape of history, the illiterate would probably have known it only through popular representations such as *The Mirror* and Shakespeare's plays, and that shape, with a few exceptions, would have been tragic.²³ Nash defends plays in part by pointing to their dominant narrative:

they shew the ill successe of treason, the fall of hastie climbers, the wretched ende of vsurpers, the miserie of ciuill dissention, & howe iust God is euermore in punishing of murther.²⁴

So, in *Richard II* Shakespeare does not assume a nascent modern historical consciousness on his audience's part. Rather, he alludes to an historical teleology, to a notion of history's form. Shakespeare does not play to the audience's familiarity with Machiavelli or Bodin, but he assumes their knowledge of *The Mirror for Magistrates*. Behind the allusions to the tragic form in this play and in the history plays in general, lies not the classical precedent of Seneca nor the pseudo-Aristotelian critical imperatives of the Italian commentators like Castelvetro, but rather the tragic teleology of history as it was popularized in books like the *Mirror*. To be a tragic hero in the history plays is not to transcend the form, to transcend history, but rather to enter it to

become an object of historical providence.

This explains the initial instability of Richard's character in the play. Richard attempts to construct an historical self in response to changing events, and this results in his writing himself into several roles in the play, to author himself in different ways. He would be a sun king, holding his "too great a court/And liberal largess" (1.4.43-4), but the solar imagery of the play depicts his eclipse by Bolingbroke. He would be a warrior, but his campaign in Ireland leads to disaster. He would be Christ, but his self-aggrandizement — Christ "in twelve, / Found truth in all but one; I, in twelve thousand, none" (4.1.170-1) — drives him to out-Christ Christ, and makes the comparison ridiculous. He is only successful, ultimately, in his role as tragic hero.

The process by which Richard finally adopts the tragic narrative as defining his historical self is itself reminiscent of the *de casibus* form to which Richard alludes. In 3.2 Richard arrives back from the wars in Ireland confident in his ability to rid the country of Bolingbroke and the rebels by his mere presence in the realm. He says,

For every man that Bolingbroke hath press'd
To lift shrewd steel against our golden crown,
God for his Richard hath in heavenly pay
A glorious angel (58-61)

Salisbury enters to tell Richard that the Welsh troops have "dispers'd and fled" (74), and immediately Richard turns pale. He tells his followers, "All souls that will be safe, fly from my side / For time hath set a blot upon my pride" (80-1). Bolstered by his supporters, he rallies, only to hear of the death of his supporters Bushy, Greene, and the Earl of Wiltshire. He then calls for the sad stories and draws a *contemptus mundi* moral through the image of "antic Death" keeping court within "the hollow crown/That rounds the mortal temples of a king" (160-1). His spirits rise briefly when he is chided by Richmond, but when he learns of the desertion of York he rejects any further attempts to dissuade him from his adopted role, or rather narrative: "Let no man speak again/To alter this, for counsel is but vain" (213-4). The scene, with its ups and downs, its almost sadistic reversals of fortune, recalls in miniature the form of the *de casibus* collections that Richard alludes to. They too present a series of fortunes, rises and inevitable falls which, when placed together, describe what Sir Thomas Browne would later call the "serpentine and crooked line" of Fortune.

The next time we see Richard, in the Flint Castle scene (3.3), he rushes towards a tragic end, offering, unbidden, to give "my large kingdom for a little

grave,/A little little grave, an obscure grave” (153-4). His ability to summon up all the possible humiliations that majesty is prone to — “Must he submit? . . . Must he be depos’d? . . . Must he lose/The name of king?” (143-6) — also suggests an allusion to the *de casibus* form, with its concatenation of tragedies, rather than the facts of a particular history. In the famous mirror scene, Richard says

I’ll read enough
 When I do see the very book indeed
 Where all my sins are writ, and that’s myself.
 [. . .]
 Give me that glass, and therein will I read.

(4.1.273-6)

Richard attempts to equate the image of the physical self with the story of the self. He tries to read his history, the historical self that he has authored, into the mirror image. He fails, for the mirror lies: “O flatt’ring glass,/Like to my followers in prosperity,/Thou dost beguile me” (279-81). It also fails because the narrative is not finished. The image Richard seeks will be the totality of his life set in the *de casibus* pattern. That cannot be found in a “flatt’ring glass,” but it can be found in the *Mirror for Magistrates*. This is the mirror of history, in which all rulers may read their fates.

There are two points here. First, Shakespeare has Richard write himself into a popular conception of history. The subject he creates is the object of the *de casibus* history tradition through which his story, or at least the shape of the story, was popularly known. The process is analogous to the famous scene in *Troilus and Cressida* in which Pandarus and the lovers unwittingly project themselves into their Elizabethan reputations. Richard moves to present himself as the *representation* that made his historical existence understandable to the audience. Second, Richard writes himself into the history he has read; he is the subject objectifying itself. And, by adding to the story, or rather the narrative aggregate which proves the meta-narrative of history, Richard is at once rewriting it, by expanding it, and confirming it: his life fits the pattern, and therefore proves the teleology. In Richard’s penultimate scene he bids farewell to his wife by enjoining her to keep his story alive in a *de casibus* aggregate:

In winter’s tedious nights sit by the fire
 With good old folks, and let them tell thee tales
 Of woeful ages long ago betid;
 And ere thou bid good night, to quite their griefs

Tell thou the lamentable tale of me,
And send the hearers weeping to their beds

(5.1.40-45)

So what we have in *Richard II* is a character who moves from what is for all intents and purposes a newly created, dramatic, past towards a popular vision of the form of history, and it is this latter vision which informs the dramatic narrative and audience expectation of historical being. Between the moving from and moving towards lies the tension of the dramatic present and the unstable self. And it is in that tension that Richard experiments with roles, infuriates his followers, and loses audience sympathy. When the movement towards a tragic definition dominates, when Richard decides to become a sad story, he gains dignity and audience sympathy. This is the satisfaction of a foredrawn conclusion.

All of this suggests a disjunction between the history of Shakespeare's plays and popular knowledge. While Shakespeare will play *to* a general knowledge of the form of history, he will play *with* the content of that history, both informing and complicating existing perceptions. This disjunction between the popular perception of history and historical subject of the drama, between audience knowledge and dramatic representation, finds an image in the portrayal of the common people in *Richard II*. Except for the symbolic garden and groom scenes, the common people are not represented, but we are told about them. We know they do not love the king (2.1.246-7), and they are quick to side with Bolingbroke (3.2.112-20). We do not hear of them doing anything except preparing to fight; for the most part, they are passive. They watch Bolingbroke's ride towards banishment (1.4.23-36) and Richard's ride of disgrace (5.2.23-36). They watch the spectacle of their betters, marvelling at the rise of one and the fall of the other. Similarly, in the *Mirror*, Richard offers this post-mortem lament: "The Kyng whych erst kept all the realme in doute,/The veryest rascall now dare checke and lowte" (112). Once again the commons — and rascal at this time could mean simply "persons of the lowest class . . . a man of low birth or station" (*OED*) — gaze on their betters. They are distanced from the events of history, participating as critics, as an audience.

A similar, though more complex, effect is created by anachronism in those plays of the Henriad that do depict the lower classes. The world of the Boar's Head Tavern, where the patrons drink the sack that had not been popularized yet, is clearly Elizabethan. This is partially because Shakespeare had no sources for the history of the lower classes; social history had yet to be invented.²⁵ But it also reflects an unarticulated assumption: history, the broad

patterns of events, is something that happens to the great, not the audience watching its re-presentation. Ironically, the great, the Richards, because they are recorded as objects in the teleological plan of history, have the stability to create themselves as historical subjects. For them, the self is formed by the constraints of history: its own self-awareness of history predetermines its fate. The historical subject is trapped by its knowledge of itself as historical object. The lower classes, because they are unrecorded, do not exist as objects, do not exist as subjects. They do not author themselves, but remain unstable: at best an audience, at worst a mob.

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Notes

1. All references to the play cite *King Richard II*, ed. Peter Ure (London: Methuen, 1961).
2. See, for example, Willard Farnham, *The Medieval Heritage of Elizabethan Tragedy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1963), pp. 416-7. Farnham draws the parallel between Richard's career and the shape of *de casibus* tragedy as epitomized by the *Mirror for Magistrates*, but he sees the "sad stories" as part of another medieval tradition, the Dance of Death.
3. All references to the *Mirror* cite Lily B. Campbell, ed., *The Mirror for Magistrates* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1946).
4. "Authors to Themselves": *Milton and the Revelation of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. viii.
5. For example, see Phyllis Rackin's sophisticated argument on anachronism in the history plays in *Stages of History: Shakespeare's English Chronicles* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 86-145.
6. Peter Laslett, *The World We Have Lost*, 2nd ed. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971), p. 27.
7. On the question of literacy rates see both David Cressy, *Literacy and the Social Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980) and chapter 2 of Margaret Spufford's *Small Books and Pleasant Histories* (London: Methuen, 1981).
8. Irving Ribner, *The English History Play in the Age of Shakespeare*, rev'd ed. (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1965), p. 2.
9. *The Mirror* first made it to the book stalls in 1559, at the beginning of the decade that would see more history books produced than any other period of Elizabeth's reign. H. S. Bennett, *English Books & Readers 1558 to 1603* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 215.
10. See Andrew Gurr's list of playgoers in *Playgoing in Shakespeare's London* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 191-204.

11. See plate 10, p. 144, in Tessa Watt's *Cheap Print and Popular Piety 155-1640* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) for an example.
12. See Hyder F. Rollins, *Old English Ballads 1553-1625* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1920), pp. x-xvii, for an account of attempts to suppress ballads during the reigns of Henry VIII, Mary I, and Elizabeth.
13. See Spufford, pp. 222-4. For a discussion of the historicity of both ballads and chapbook, see Daniel Woolf, "Of Danes and Giants: Popular Beliefs about the Past in Early Modern Europe," *Dalhousie Review*, 71 (1991), pp. 181-2.
14. Daniel Woolf, "The 'Common Voice': History, Folklore and Oral Tradition in Early Modern England," *Past & Present*, no. 120 (Aug. 1988), p. 37.
15. *Cheap Print*, p. 258.
16. Baldwin tells us that the collective of writers who created the early editions of the *Mirror* read the individual tragedies aloud to each other for their opinions. *Mirror*, 101 *passim*.
17. Woolf, "Of Danes and Giants," pp. 176-7.
18. Woolf "Common Voices," p. 31.
19. For the comparisons between Richard and Elizabeth see Lily B. Campbell, *Shakespeare's Histories: Mirrors of Elizabethan Policy* (San Marino: Huntington, 1963), pp. 173ff.
20. *The Perception of the Past in Early Modern England* (London: University of London, 1983), p. 7
21. Reprinted in *Shakespeare Society of London* (Nendeln, Liechtenstein: Kraus, 1966), 9:59-60.
22. Reprinted in *Shakespeare Society of London* (Nendeln, Liechtenstein: Kraus, 1966), 6:52-3.
23. When Elizabethan dramatists looked for tragic subject matter, they turned so repeatedly to history that critics such as Irving Ribner have declared that it is impossible to distinguish the history play from tragedy as dramatic genres. *The English History Play in the Age of Shakespeare*, p. 26.
24. *Shakespeare Society of London*, 9:61.
25. See chapter 1 of Arthur B. Ferguson, *Clio Unbound* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1979).