A number of commentaries on Shakespeare's *Richard II* are devoted to the dialectical nature of the play, stressing the opposition of many of the elements in the drama. Studies have been written which demonstrate that the play is concerned with the opposition of the medieval order, represented by Richard, and the emerging modern order, represented by Bolingbroke. Similarly, other critics see the play as a conflict between a man of action and a man of words. Others see the play as a statement on the power of the king versus the powers of the aristocracy. Some see the play as the opposition between a king verging on madness, and a cold, calculating member of the peerage represented by Bolingbroke. More recent criticism has focused on the play as an allegory for the tyrannical rule of Elizabeth, or as a suppression of the freedoms of speech and press during Elizabeth's reign.

The diverse theories which delineate the dialectical nature of the work are both informative and well-reasoned. Rather than viewing the play as a series of dichotomies, I will argue that the play views both Richard and Bolingbroke as essentially failed rulers for having limited the liberty of their subjects and exposed the state to unnecessary questions relating to the legitimate uses of power and of monarchical succession. Finally, I will argue that the play, presented in this light, would serve as a warning to Elizabeth regarding the use of her power and her inability to provide a successor to the throne.

The notion that the play represents a conflict between the medieval values of Richard and the more modern views of Bolingbroke is summed up by Henry Jacobs in his paper "Prophecy and Ideology in Shakespeare's Richard II" as follows:

> It is a commonplace to observe that Shakespeare's *Richard II* traces out a fundamental shift in the nature of kingship and the justification of rule. This movement, which reflects both Tudor perspectives on history and Elizabethan political theory, signifies the transition from a medieval to a Renaissance concept of kingship and power. In this theoretical matrix, Richard II plays the role of the unsuccessful medieval monarch while Bolingbroke acts the part of a successful Renaissance prince. (3)

In a similar vein, R. Morgan Griffin in his paper "The Critical History of Richard II," writes that traditional readings of Richard as a proponent of medieval values, and Bolingbroke as a proponent of Renaissance values, persisted through the mid twentieth-century to the exclusion of the exploration of other themes in the work, and notes that:

> Tillyard in particular loads the dichotomy of Richard and Bolingbroke with contrasts and goes so far as to suggest that each king represents a distinct historical era, Richard the end of the Middle Ages and Bolingbroke the arrival of the Renaissance. (24)

Critics have viewed Bolingbroke as a man of action, while Richard is seen as an ineffective man of words, or a poet. William Stubbs, bishop of Oxford in the nineteenth century, wrote what was considered to be a definitive biography of Richard II. Stubbs is responsible for the characterization of Richard as a man of contemplation and ineffective leadership, as George Osborne Sayles notes in his paper "King Richard of England: A Fresh Look." Sayles notes that: "To Stubbs, Richard was 'habitually idle' and 'loved pleasure and ease,' and this is now the conventional story in all our history books" (29). Discussing Richard's attributes as a leader, Sayles remarks that "The same contention that the King was incompetent in the governance of his realm is attached to him throughout the years" (29-30). Sayles later goes on to develop a thesis that Richard was, in fact, a much more effective leader than is generally acknowledged. Noting that conventional readings of the play emphasize the differences in the personalities of Richard and Bolingbroke, R. Morgan Griffin notes that: "According to the conventional scheme,

Richard is the weak, effeminate poet-king, a medieval relic who relies on language and ceremony to rule; Bolingbroke is the taciturn, violent, and politic representative of a new Machiavellian style of leadership" (25).

The antipathy between the king and the aristocracy is frequently cited in criticism of the play. Historical fact lends additional credence to this line of criticism, since Richard and the "Appellants" as well as other members of Parliament, were frequently at odds during the king's reign. George B. Stow, in his paper "Stubbs, Steel, and Richard II as Insane: The Origin and Evolution of an English Historiographical Myth," once again citing Bishop Stubbs, makes the following point concerning Richard's relation with the aristocracy:

> (According to Stubbs) 'There can be little doubt that the proceedings of 1397 and 1398 were the real causes of Richard's ruin…He had resolutely and without subterfuge or palliation, challenged the constitution.' This 'grand stroke of policy,' continues Stubbs, 'has remarkable significance. It was a resolute attempt not to evade but destroy the limitations which for nearly two centuries the nation, first through the baronage alone and latterly through the united parliament, had been laboring to impose upon the king.' (608-9) [(1)]

In the view of several critics, Bishop Stubbs was also responsible for the first characterization of Richard as being insane. John M. Theilmann, addresses this issue in his paper entitled "Stubbs, Shakespeare, and Recent Historians of Richard II," when he notes that "Richard II, one of the most puzzling kings of late medieval England, has been the subject of controversy ever since his abdication in 1399. He has often been portrayed as a tyrant or, at

(1) In his paper, Stow stresses that Stubbs' views of Richard II were colored by his Whig leanings. As a Whig, Stubbs favored the views of Parliament over those of the Monarch, and subsequently painted Richard in a less than favorable light.

times, a *madman* by historians" (107) (italics mine). In his paper, Stow stresses that Stubbs' views of Richard II were colored by his Whig leanings. He further notes Stubbs' influence in the development of the theory of Richard as insane when he states that:

> Stubbs' contemporary, J.R. Green, took much the same approach, stating that 'the brilliant abilities which Richard shared with the rest of the Plantagenets were marred by a fitful inconstancy, and *insane pride*, and a craving for absolute power.' (109) (italics mine)

In contrast to Richard's "insanity" is the view of Bolingbroke's cold, logical personality which is pointed out in R. Morgan Griffin's paper: "Hence, in one essay, Bolingbroke is the embodiment of the 'new, effective,' and Machiavellian way of governing…" (26). [(2)]

Considerations that the play may, in fact, be a commentary on the reign of Elizabeth I are supported by the acknowledgement, made by the queen herself, that aspects of her reign were similar to those of Richard. Samuel Schoenbaum, in his paper "Richard II and the Realities of Power," notes that the queen remarked to one of her courtiers, Thomas Lamberde:

> Such considerations (that they play may have served as a commentary on Elizabeth's reign) serve only to whet pursuit and the trail, in truth, is not an utter blank. 'I am Richard II, know ye not that?' the Queen declared in Lamberde's presence, and she was not the first to make the comparison. (49)

(2) Griffin points out the dichotomy between Richard and Bolingbroke in his paper, and posits that the focus on the dichotomy between the two personalities has limited discussion of other aspects of the play. The paper referred-to in the above quotation is by Katherine Eisaman Maus, "Richard II," *The Norton Shakespeare*, 946-7.

Theories that the play may have been a comment of Elizabeth's reign find support in the fact that Richard's deposition scene was missing from the published copies of the play during the queen's lifetime. Similarly, critics point to the performance of the play by members of the Duke of Essex' party on the day before the aborted revolution staged in 1601, and the prohibition against publishing speculation on the succession, as indications that the play was seen as a comment on Elizabeth's reign. Phyllis Rackin, in her paper "The Role of the Audience in Shakespeare's Richard II," notes that English audiences would have drawn parallels between the action in Richard II and current events during the reign of Elizabeth:

> But history is also presented in *Richard II* as a current action, a living process that directly involves and implicates the audience in the theatre. Queen Elizabeth's often-quoted comment, 'I am Richard II, know ye not that?'; the suppression of the deposition scene during her lifetime; the fact that Essex's followers saw fit to sponsor a performance of *Richard II* on the afternoon before their rebellion - all these things indicate that for Shakespeare's contemporaries this play was not simply an exercise in historical recreation or nostalgia. (262) [(3)]

While the review of critical literature which posits that the play is engaged in a dialogic process between opposing factions is not exhaustive, I believe that enough of the literature has been presented to establish that this line of scholarship has met with success. Rather than arguing against this scholarship, I acknowledge that several useful insights can be gained in viewing the play in this manner. As R. Morgan Griffin argues, however, viewing the play as a dialectic between Richard and Bolingbroke (or as a series of dialectics) can lead readers to

(3) Several critics challenge the theory that the play is a commentary on censorship during the Elizabethan era, or that censorship was not as prevalent as was once thought. Among these critics is Cyndia Susan Clegg, who argues that the evidence for censorship of the plays is not conclusive.

overlook other aspects of the play "…in accentuating the differences between the two kings, critics sometimes reduce Richard and Bolingbroke to mere diametric opposites and hence unwittingly recapitulate the grand theories of Elizabethan culture…" (24).

I will argue that while viewing the play as a series of dichotomies yields several valuable insights, the primary theme of the play is that neither Richard nor Bolingbroke represent effective rulers. I will further argue that the play is concerned with the limitation of baronial rights on the part of Richard, which constitutes a loss of liberty, and the unlawful succession on the part of Bolingbroke, which constitutes a breakdown in the state and loss of freedom for the populace. Finally, I will argue that while evidence of the play as a criticism of Elizabeth's realm is not conclusive, the play nevertheless presents an unfavorable commentary on aspects of her reign and that the play suggests parallels with her rule.

It will be necessary to define the term "liberty" before determining whether or not Richard abrogated the rights of the baronial parties in the play (and in historical fact). The task is not as easy as it would seem at first glance; in her paper entitled "Are Liberty and Freedom Twins," Hanna Fenichel Pitkin points out that the terms "liberty" and "freedom" are often used interchangeably, and that the definitions for the two terms involve nuances of etymology which are often confusing. Despite the difficulties associated with defining the terms, Pitkin notes that a common usage of the word liberty developed after the Norman conquest of England. She states that:

> In any case, it seems that in the first centuries following the conquest, freedom was for the conquered natives a relatively blunt, tangible, and total condition that one either had or lacked, almost an aspect of what one was, whether an external physical condition of

> unobstructed space or movement, or a legal status of not being subject to another, or a psychic state manifested in spontaneity. For the conquering elite, by contrast, *liberty was more formal and legal, a matter of degree and detail, a collection of specific rights and privileges granted or withheld even if truly appropriate only to those of high birth and correspondingly noble character.* Both the legalistic and the pluralistic connotations as well as the moralized status meaning were already found in Latin *liber-* as Raaflaub shows, but in English they became isolated in a distinct word family, no longer semantically bound, for instance, to the unimpeded movement of objects, o to actions spontaneously and gladly done. (538-9) (italics mine)

The concept of rights or privileges is central to the main theme of the play. It is after all, Richard's seizure of Bolingbroke's lands after the death of John of Gaunt, which precipitates Bolingbroke's return to England and ultimately forces Richard's deposition. The granting and inheritance of property rights was one of the cornerstones of the Magna Carta, and had been honored by all monarchs for several hundred years until the time of Richard. As York admonishes Richard:

> Take Hereford's rights away, and take from time
> His charters and customary rights;
> Let not tomorrow then ensue today;
> Be not thyself; for how art thou a king
> But by fair sequence and succession? (II.i.195-99)

A gloss of these lines reveals the magnitude of Richard's unlawful act. If Bolingbroke is not entitled to his lawful possession of land through the inheritance of his father, then how is Richard entitled to the possession of the throne through inheritance from his father? Indeed, the act is so unnatural that "tomorrow will not ensue today," i.e., the natural order of events will be violated.

Gaunt's famous lines to Richard "Landlord of England art thou now, not king/Thy state of law is bondslave to the law," (II.i.119-120) are often taken as being a repetition of the same theme, but as Donna B. Hamilton explains in "The State of Law in Richard II,"

> To arrive at a better reading of Gaunt's speech, it is necessary to recognize at the outset that the relationship of the lines to each other is not that of apposition. Rather, they express a paradox: a king who acts like a landlord instead of a king becomes in some sense a slave. (6)

This reading is better understood when viewed within the concept of liberty that acts as a guarantor of rights from a king to his subjects. When those rights are taken away, the king himself loses his "right" to govern. The concept of the king's right to govern was established by divine authority; it was this foundation that gave legitimacy to the king's rule. By acting above the law, the king abrogates the law itself, and nullifies his authority to rule. Turning again to Donna Hamilton, she notes that:

> …These notions include the recognition that a king who ruled by divine right was also, in theory and in practice, subject to the law; he was to rule according to the law, and his power derived from the law. …Significantly, the issue for Gaunt is not the matter of the king's royal prerogative, but the well-being of those the king rules. …For Richard to act like a landlord is not to diminish the royal prerogative, then, but to act as though the royal prerogative allows a king to do anything he wishes. (6 - 7) [(4)]

Richard then, violated the rights of his subjects in seizing Bolingbroke's property. But his failings were greater than this: he was also complicit in the murder of Gloucester, a point which is emphasized in the opening of the play, and is the motive behind the banishment of Mowbray and Hereford.

(4) I am indebted to Hamilton's reading of the play and share her belief that neither Richard nor Bolingbroke are seen as effective rulers.

Finally, Richard left no legitimate heir in the form of a son or daughter, which allowed Bolingbroke to sweep aside the weak claim of the Earl of March as Richard's successor.

Yet, despite Richard's weakness and ultimate failure, Bolingbroke is not an effective ruler, either. To begin, Bolingbroke's succession presents several problems. In the first place, Bolingbroke swept aside the claim of the Earl of March as rightful successor to Richard. While it is true that the Earl was a minor at the time of Richard's abdication, at best, Bolingbroke should have acted as regent during the boy's minority. Secondly, by forcing the abdication of Richard, Bolingbroke gained the crown illegitimately and put his line of succession in peril. As Donna Hamilton makes clear, succession under the law is an important element in the play:

> This notion (i.e. that the king derives a portion of his power from the law) is important to bear in mind when one considers either Richard II or Bolingbroke-Henry IV, because both are kings *whose right to rule comes under question.* …The central issue for Bolingbroke's rule, and one to which every play in the rest of the second tetralogy will return, *is the threat to the realm when the king is not legally titled*. …Nevertheless, because the deposition is an interruption of the tradition of legal succession, Bolingbroke's power exists without the clear sanction of either the law or God, a point the Bishop of Carlisle addresses when he declares:
>
> 'And shall the figure of God's majesty
> His captain, steward, deputy elect,
> Anointed, crowned, planted many years,
> Be judg'd by subject and inferior breath. …
> My Lord of Herford here, whom you call king,
> Is a foul traitor to proud Herford's king.' (IV.i. 125-28; 134-5) (10; 15) (italics mine)

It is important to note that not only did Carlisle condemn Bolingbroke's action, but he also predicted the sequence of events that would precipitate the hundred Years' War in the same speech quoted by Hamilton:

> And if you crown him, let me prophecy

> The blood of English shall manure the ground
> And future ages groan for this foul act,
> Peace shall go sleep with Turks and infidels,
> And in this seat of peace tumultuous wars
> Shall kin with kin and kind with kind confound.
> Disorder, horror, fear, and mutiny
> Shall here inhabit, and this land be called
> The field of Golgotha… (IV.1. 142-150)

In this speech, the usurpation of the throne by Bolingbroke is seen as the proximate cause of the War; but more than that, it is seen as a violation of the natural order of things. The king, as the chosen representative of God on earth, held his office through succession and by upholding God's laws. Bolingbroke was neither the rightful successor of Richard, nor did he uphold the laws: in point of fact, he broke with law in seizing the throne. The speech by Carlisle, which presages the coming war, is the subject of remarks by Phyllis Rackin, who notes that "As the prophecies indicate, Bolingbroke's accession, far from bringing civic order to England, actually increases the disorder" (272). Later in her paper, Rackin notes that "In Act V, which takes place after the deposition, we are shown various manifestations of the disorder that Bolingbroke's rebellion has unleashed on England" (272).

While Richard threatened the liberty of his barons, Bolingbroke's action goes a step further: it threatens the freedom of his subjects. Turning again to Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, we are presented with a definition of the abuse of freedom when she claims that "freedom abused suggests something like anarchy or chaos, the loss of all boundaries" (542-3). This definition of the loss of freedom, a loss that results in the chaos of the Hundred Years' War, corresponds with Carlisle's dire prediction. Here we see that Bolingbroke's action threatens not just the aristocracy, but the general populace, as well. Far from being the "new leader" described by

some writers, Bolingbroke's action plunges the country into civil war, endangering the liberties of the nobles and the freedoms enjoyed by the general populace.

That the play dealt with the loss of liberty and freedom has hopefully been demonstrated. The applicability to Elizabeth's reign can be seen in the following ways: at the time of the writing of the plays, Elizabeth had not produced a lawful heir (nor would she at the time of her death). Elizabeth's right to rule through lawful succession was affected by her illegitimate birth; a fact which obtruded itself in her consciousness in the person of her half sister, Mary Queen of Scots. The suppression of Catholicism during Elizabeth's reign was another manifestation of the challenge of certain freedoms in the Tudor era. Finally, Elizabeth's censure of publication of any writing concerning her succession (not to mention possible censorship of other writings which, as has been previously noted, cannot be conclusively proven) points to a curtailment of freedom which was acknowledged by Elizabeth's subjects. Elizabeth's comment "I am Richard II, know ye not that?" is more than mere rhetoric. For a monarch who walked a tightrope between the granting and taking of liberties to her nobles, and the suppression of freedom to the commons, the lessons of Richard and Bolingbroke would seem ominous, indeed.

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