Richard II is one of Shakespeare’s Player Kings. He wants all the performance of kingship, the play of monarchy, but is not the slightest bit interested in the rather tawdry day-to-day horse-trading, cautious preservation of balance and all-round tedium incumbent upon the governor of a nation. He is, to deploy a more colloquial expression, all flannel and no trouser.

Up against this luminous figure of King Richard stands his cousin Henry Bolingbroke. More political, more intelligent, more popular. Richard banishes Bolingbroke early in the play, but by the time the curtain comes down Bolingbroke is King Henry IV. This patch of history pivots around Bolingbroke’s invasion of England and his usurpation of King Richard’s throne, a deposition in which power outguns majesty and the old world is compelled to give way to the new.

How does Shakespeare turn this chronicle into a work of art? The full title of this play is The Tragedy of Richard II, though in the first collected works it appears in the section marked History. If we treat the title as referring exclusively to the character, we have an answer to my question. King Richard thinks he’s in a Tragedy. Everybody else knows they’re in a History play. Shakespeare brings together the characteristics of these genres with the historical record to produce a play that is partly about Richard II and Bolingbroke, partly about the political upheavals of his own time, but which really speaks to any situation where a regime is told to wake up and smell the coffee because it’s time for you to go.

I readily admit to having had to dig this idea out of the play. The script can look like a fairly unremarkable piece of high camp story-telling on a first and second glance, but it occurs to me that this cordonning off of Tragedy and History may go some way to explaining why people so often remark of Richard II, ‘Great part, rubbish play’. The real drama of this play is in the attrition of one on the other. I shall treat Richard’s journey first and show in an unashamedly chronological fashion that he exists in his own private tragedy, before moving on to demonstrate how time and again the rest of the characters face the music with more brains and brawn than he ever manages.
So, King Richard. He spends most of the play in his own tragic paradise. The chief hallmark of this tragic mindset is his over-confidence that different rules apply for him and that he may over-reach without consequence. The technical name for this is hubris.

Richard’s ability to govern is derided by many of his courtiers, but few speak out. The first man to challenge him is his dying uncle John of Gaunt, who in impassioned verse indicts Richard’s abysmal management of England. It is Richard’s reaction that must interest us here. His first reaction is a petulant and arrogant attack on Gaunt’s impertinence:

A lunatic lean-witted fool,
Presuming on an ague's privilege.
Darest with thy frozen admonition
Make pale our cheek, chasing the royal blood
With fury from his native residence?

Once Gaunt has left, this mellows to disdain. Reversing the rhymes of Gaunt’s departing couplet, Richard wishes him death:

And let them die that age and sullens have;
For both hast thou, and both become the grave.

This is the stuff of tyrants, of French kings and Roman emperors, not sovereigns of England, surely? But Richard, armoured in his own tragic psychology, careers blindly on with no real regard for the respect of his advisors.

He soon departs to put down a rebellion in Ireland, which leaves the English throne unoccupied. His cousin, the banished Bolingbroke, seizes his chance. When Richard returns, we witness one of the most melodramatic scenes in Shakespeare. Richard weeps for joy

To stand upon my kingdom once again.
Dear earth, I do salute thee with my hand,
Though rebels wound thee with their horses' hoofs
And so it goes on. But the more troubling aspect of this scene for his character is his confidence that the mere sight of him will drive Bolingbroke back into the sea.

When this thief, this traitor, Bolingbroke,
Who all this while hath revelled in the night
...
Shall see us rising in our throne, the east,
His treasons will sit blushing in his face,
Not able to endure the sight of day,
But self-affrighted tremble at his sin.
...
God for his Richard hath in heavenly pay
A glorious angel: then, if angels fight,
Weak men must fall, for heaven still guards the right.

The horde of angels does not come, would you believe, and as it emerges that Richard will struggle to hold on to his crown, we see him at his most pathetic, trying to perform his way out of a corner, back to glory. In a proper tragedy this would count for something. Antony and Cleopatra may lose the war in their play, but they win the drama by being such extraordinary characters. Not so for Richard, isolated in an English History play. The forces of genre are overpowering. Consumed by despair, he wallows in his own pity on a magnificent scale;

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 poisoned by their wives: some sleeping killed;
All murdered.

He is so reflective in this scene, but surrounded by nobles waiting for him to take command, waiting for him to snap out of his tragic passionating, come back into the History aesthetic and get a grip on the situation. But, alas, no. He hides in a castle
until Bolingbroke’s forces arrive outside. He then appears on the battlements and has the temerity to speak to them as if he holds all the trump cards;

We are amazed; and thus long have we stood
To watch the fearful bending of thy knee,
Because we thought ourself thy lawful king:
And if we be, how dare thy joints forget
To pay their awful duty to our presence?

One again, Richard’s contempt, his hubristic confidence that acting like a king will mean he is treated like one, has all the political subtlety of a runaway bulldozer.

Richard is finally brought to ground in what is known as the deposition scene. But Richard must have his tragic grandeur. His vanity reaches its height when he requests a mirror. Staring at himself, he remarks that

A brittle glory shineth in this face:
As brittle as the glory is the face;

*He dashes the mirror against the ground*

For there it is, cracked in a hundred shivers.
Mark, silent king, the moral of this sport,
How soon my sorrow hath destroyed my face.

Even once Richard has been imprisoned in Pomfret Castle, reduced to utter impotence, he continues in his self-dramatising vein. Whilst it can be endearing, we also see it for the rather pathetic, rather naive, rather stupid attitude that it is:

I have been studying how I may compare
This prison where I live unto the world:
... sometimes am I king;
Then treasons make me wish myself a beggar,
And so I am: then crushing penury
Persuades me I was better when a king;
Then am I kinged again: and by and by
Think that I am unkinged by Bolingbroke,
And straight am nothing.

He’s in his own little world, always playing the king, and the tragic hubris that he has exhibited since the first scene of the play is now a self-fulfilling prophecy. Behave like a tragic character in a History play and others will see to it that you end up a tragic character, not even given a glorious death, just left to rot in Pomfret Castle.

So, that is Richard’s journey. What about all the other characters? They are without exception more politically astute than Richard. They know they are in a History play, where there are few certainties at the best of times, and that in this drama in particular a wind of change is blowing through the land. Time and again, their pragmatism may not have the beauty of Richard’s personal paradise, but they look their circumstances square in the face without flinch or tremble. They have a sense of generic reality.

Perhaps the supreme example of this is Richard’s uncle, the Duke of York, left in charge whilst Richard is in Ireland. When Bolingbroke lands with an invading army, York’s attitude is certain. He may have had his differences with Richard in the past, but now is not the time to start splitting hairs, now is the time to call up the militia and go and see if he can’t bluff Bolingbroke into retreat. He catches up with him in Gloucestershire and tears a strip off him:

    YORK        Show me thy humble heart, and not thy knee,
                 Whose duty is deceivable and false.

    BOLINGBROKE My gracious uncle –

    YORK        Tut, tut!
                 Grace me no grace, nor uncle me no uncle:
                 I am no traitor’s uncle; and that word ‘grace’
                 In an ungracious mouth is but profane.
                 And you that do abet him in this kind
                 Cherish rebellion and are rebels all.
In the event, his bluffing fools nobody and he ends the scene admitting that he is powerless to stop Bolingbroke and stating that he will therefore remain a neutral force.

But the outcome is less important than the fact that he neither gave up all hope at the first sign of danger nor rode stupidly into battle, tossing away his own life as well as those of many of the poor bloody infantry, both of which one can imagine Richard doing for the sake of his own tragic glory.

Once Bolingbroke is in control, and just after Richard has resigned the crown, the Bishop of Carlisle prophesies in ferocious terms that there will be civil conflict if the throne is usurped. He is proved right by the Wars of the Roses, of course, but is also proven right even before the end of this play by the conflict between the Duke of York and Aumerle, father and son. Whilst this episode is often played for laughs, which provides some light relief for the audience, the bare facts of it have got written all over them the divided family and political loyalties that make the History plays such dangerous places to be.

York discovers that Aumerle and others are planning to kill King Henry. York and Aumerle race to get to the king; York to accuse his son of treason and Aumerle to beg the king’s forgiveness for his treasonous intentions.

A father originally loyal to his nephew King Richard argues to the new King, who is also his nephew, that his son should be executed. His wife argues the opposite. Aumerle, their traitorous offspring whose life is in question, sues to his cousin Henry IV, who deposed his cousin Richard II, for mercy. Though he is merciful to Aumerle, he orders that the other conspirators be executed.

It is very easy to imagine how within fifty years of history this scene would spin itself into Shakespeare’s Henry VI plays, in which malicious faction reigns and thousands, noble and serf, prince and bondman, lose their lives on the muddy, bloody fields of Towton, Tewkesbury and Bosworth. Richard II does not belong here.

And the final movement of this play is the murder of Richard in Pomfret Castle. Overhearing a remark made by King Henry, Sir Piers Exton sets off to rid him of this troublesome ex-king.

In the final moments, and with the eleventh-hour realisation usual to a tragic hero, Richard realises all of sudden that he is in a history play. Shouting all the blood and thunder rhetoric we would expect, he nonetheless kills two of the regicide’s
accomplices before Exton strikes him down. Exton immediately regrets his deed and King Henry repays him by banishing him from the royal presence. King Henry did not, after all, seek Richard’s death.

Shakespeare’s uses of features of Tragedy and History in the same play matters because it makes Richard II an eternal character, in the same way that King Lear and Hamlet and Othello are eternal characters, struggling with their surroundings. Richard’s surroundings are those of a History play, and he has it brought home to him with lethal force.

Can you think of a circumstance, past or present, to which this rude awakening of a regime and dictator trapped in its own insane fiction, might be relevant? You have already thought of at least one, and I suspect you will go on thinking of them in the hours and days after this podcast is over.

But hang on a second, sometimes tyrants are just replaced by other tyrants! Well, the play accounts for that as well. In 1973, John Barton directed a production of Richard II at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre. Ian Richardson and Richard Pasco alternated the roles of Richard and Bolingbroke, swapping parts every evening. This theatrical decision rightly blurs the dichotomy I have so carefully set up between Richard and his play, because history is never quite that clear cut, is it?

Thank you for listening to Richard II. Brace yourselves for a slight change of schedule. The next main episode, on The Taming of the Shrew, will be published in three weeks’ time. Because I feel we’re in the rhythm of weekend publishing, I will be doing two Short Sheldrake on Shakesperes in the meantime. The first of these will be a review of the Globe Theatre’s current production of Titus Andronicus. Until then, farewell.