

F.S. Boas: A Non-Shakespearean *Richard II*

Following World War I, academic opinion began cautiously accepting Keller's oblique hint that Shakespeare was indeed a presence in the '*Erste Teil*' of *Richard II*'s history. The terrain was thus well prepared for the drama's first major professional study in English, F.S. Boas's *Shakespeare and the Universities* (Blackwell, 1923). In a widely read and well-received book, Boas expressed high regard for the anonymous dramatist's skill, especially his comic scenes, but adamantly opposed any suggestion of Shakespeare's authorship, the question everyone was dancing around. Even Halliwell's and Keller's titles, *A Tragedy of King Richard the Second* and *Richard II, Part One*, were, Boas felt, too suggestive of a close literary relationship. He insisted rather on *Thomas of Woodstock*, and by way of emphasis titled his essay, 'A Non-Shakespearean *Richard II*.' Boas's discretion seemed to Shakespeareans in the universities to be the better part of valor after all, and *Woodstock* became again a vaguely interesting literary curiosity, little more.

The manner of Boas' argument may be gauged from his observation that Richard's coronation oath includes the words 'Superiour lord of Scotland,' which have been deleted. 'This may have been a precaution on the part of the manager,' Boas remarks,

but if (as is more probable) that erasure was made by the Master of the Revels when the manuscript was presented to him for his licence, there can be little doubt that the play dates from after the union of the English and Scottish crowns.

This describes the manuscript, but not necessarily the earlier drama of which it appears to be a copy. In a seminal 1964 essay, orthographist A.C. Partridge showed that the censor's hand was probable enough but Boas's inferences about the compositional date less so. What seems likelier is that 'Superiour lord of Scotland,' was included in the play's first iteration, ca. 1592, when such affirmations were routine, and then dutifully recopied when it was prepared for revival thirty years later. James I and VI having succeeded to the throne by then, this deletion actually confirms the likelihood that the MS is a reworked version overlaid, as it were, upon an earlier original. In the same way, most of the text's religious invocations have been deleted, doubtless reflecting the 1606 'Act to Restrain Abuses of Players' which prohibited subjects that 'jestingly or profanely' invoked 'the holy Name of God or of Christ Jesus, or of the Holy Ghost or of the Trinity.'¹ So the MS was copied before 1606 but edited afterwards.

The first part of Boas's influential essay summarizes *Woodstock*'s plot in some detail; the rest is excerpted below.

From '*Thomas of Woodstock: A Non-Shakespearean Richard II*' in *Shakespeare and the Universities*, by F.S. Boas (Blackwell, 1923) pp. 143-166

These closing scenes cover roughly the same period of Richard's reign as the first two Acts of Shakespeare's play,² and we are thus brought to the question of the relation of the two pieces. Halliwell-Phillipps, when he printed the anonymous play, called it 'A Tragedy of King Richard the Second. . . A Composition anterior to Shakespeare's Tragedy on the same Reign.' Bullen dates it about 1593. Prof. W. Keller, who calls it *Richard II, Erster Teil*, takes a similar view, placing it after *King Henry VI, Part II* and Marlowe's *Edward II*, and before Shakespeare's *Richard II*.

¹ Alain Cabantous: *Blasphemy: Impious Speech in the West from the 17th to the 19th Century* (trans. Eric Rauth, Columbia U.P. 2002).

² Completely untrue, no matter how generously one reads 'roughly.' The statement is especially egregious since *Woodstock*'s conclusion is missing.

The parallelisms of phrase that he quotes between the MS play, *2 Henry VI* and *Edward II* are striking. Taken by themselves they suggest that the piece belongs to the group of Chronicle histories, in which the years following the defeat of the Armada were so prolific. The somewhat monotonous end-stopped verse and the considerable proportion of rhyme are also in favor of an early date.

Hence it was tempting to conclude that the play preceded *Richard II*, and that Shakespeare was acquainted with it. Some of his lines seemed to be echoes of passages in *Thomas of Woodstock*. Thus, in Act IV, Scene i, of the anonymous play, Richard speaks of himself as renting out his kingdom—

like a pely[n]g ffarme,
That erst was held as fair as Babilon,
The mayden conquerris to all the world.

And in Act V, Scene ii, Lancaster cries reproachfully to him:

And thou no king, but landlord now become
To this great state that terrour christendome.

Might not Shakespeare have had these lines in his memory when he too makes Lancaster lament—Act II, Scene i—

This dear, dear land...
Is now leased out, I die pronouncing it
Like to a tenement or pelting farm...
That England that was wont to conquer others,
Hath made a shameful conquest of itself;
and upbraids Richard with the words,
Landlord of England art thou now, not king!

And when, in the same scene, Lancaster alludes regretfully to ‘my brother Gloucester, plain, well-meaning soul,’ we seem to have a reminiscence of the kindly ‘plain Thomas’ of the earlier play—a character, as we have seen, essentially different from the stern Duke of the chronicles.

The conclusion that Shakespeare knew the anonymous piece and could count upon his audience’s familiarity with it, would go far to explain some puzzling features in his own work. It would, to begin with, solve the problem why, out of the rich dramatic material offered by the ‘casualties’ of Richard’s reign, he confined himself to those of its last eighteen months. And it would suggest a reason why the element of popular humor, present, more or less, in all his other historical plays, should be so curiously lacking in his *Richard II*. For even Shakespeare might have hesitated to work again over the ground covered so admirably by the anonymous writer in the comic prose scenes of the earlier piece.

Elizabethan theatre-goers, moreover, to whom this piece was known, would appreciate much in the first half of Shakespeare’s play that, taken by itself, hangs in the air. It has always been a crux to commentators on *Richard II* how its hearers or readers could be expected to be much moved by its opening scenes, of which the recent murder of Gloucester is the pivot, when the Duke himself was nothing more to them than a name. Again the sting in John of Gaunt’s reproach to Richard for having become landlord of England instead of king is not fully comprehensible, when the strange transaction of leasing the kingdom has never been described. And even the execution of the favorites excites little interest, when we have had no concrete evidence of their misdeeds, and their most memorable utterance has been Bushy’s fanciful comparison between the illusions of grief and of ‘perspectives.’ But all these episodes, to which Shakespeare merely alludes, are fully dealt with, as has been shown, in *Thomas of Woodstock* and would be deeply significant to those who knew it.

There are, however, considerations in favor of dating the play considerably later than *Richard II*. Even the metrical evidence does not all point one way. There is a frequent succession of lines with double endings, for example, [IV.ii.705]:

God bless good Ann a Beame! I feare hir death
Wilbe the tragicke sceane the sky foeshowes vs.
When kingdomes change, the very heavens are troubled.
Pray God, King Richards's wyld behaviour,
Force not the powres of heaven to frowne vppon vs.
My prayers are still for hime. What thinkst thou, Cheney?

This and similar passages have the ring of Jacobean rather than Elizabethan blank verse.

It has, moreover, to be borne in mind that all the plays of known date in Egerton MS. 1994 belong to the XVIIth century, and with the doubtful exception of *Thomas of Woodstock*, only one of the fifteen, *Edmond Ironside*, seems from internal evidence of style to be of earlier origin. Both *Thomas of Woodstock* and *Edmond Ironside* contain, as has been seen,³ marginal entries of the names of actors who flourished in the third and fourth decades of the XVIIth century. These names were added to the MS. by the playhouse manager, and were probably not those of the first performers of the parts. But they are *pro tanto* an argument against either of the plays having been written some thirty or forty years before the entries were made.

Was it also the manager who scored through or bracketed a number of passages in *Thomas of Woodstock*, or have we here the hand of the Censor? Had the last leaf of the MS. been preserved, we might perhaps have found a note by the Master of the Revels or his Deputy, similar to those at the end of *The Lanchinge of the Mary* and *The Lady Mother*. But the Censor's comments were not always limited to his final annotation. Thus in *Sir John van Olden Barnavelte* (Add. MS. 18653) Act I.iii, Sir George Buc, Master of the Revels 1601-22, has added the marginal criticism quoted above (p. 6).⁴ So when in *Thomas of Woodstock* we find the curt direction 'out' written twice in the margin of the MS. against a speech by King Richard, and the eight following lines, it is presumably from the hand of the Censor. In the course of the speech Richard cries [IV.i.129-32]:

All forrayne Kings will poynt at us,
And of the meanest subiect of our land
We shalbe sensurd strangly, when they tell
How our great ffather toyld his royall p[er]sone
Spending his blood to purchase towns in France.

Here objection may well have been taken to the first three lines of the quotation; and even the reference to Edward III's triumphs in France may have been banned, if at the time it was thought inexpedient to offend the French Government. This is the more probable because a passage near the beginning of the play, [I.i. 337] celebrating the victories of the Black Prince 'in mournfull France' is also crossed out.

Among other passages bracketed for omission are several alluding to extortion by the King, or to treachery and rebellion on the part of his subjects, for example, [V.i.278-81]:

³ *Shakespeare and the Universities*, Chapter V, p 104.—MEE.

⁴ Boas quotes, p. 6: 'I like not this: neith^r do I think that pr[ince] was thus disgracefully vsed, besides he is to much presented. G.B.'—MEE

The gentlemen and commons of the realme,
Missing the good old duke, their playne protectour,
Brake ther allegiance to ther soveraigne lord
And all revolt uppon the barrons syde.

and [V.i.356]:

Horror of conscience with the Kings command
Fights a fell combatt in my fearfull breast.

Such references would have been unacceptable to either a Tudor or a Stuart government, but it was under the latter that stage censorship became stricter and more systematic. And there is one significant omission that must have been made after James VI of Scotland became also King of England. In Act [II.ii.109f.] Richard proclaims that he is of age and asserts his full rights as sovereign:

...heere we clayme out faire inheritance
Of fruitfull England, France, and Ireland,
Superiour lord of Scotland, and the rights
Belonging to our great dominions.

The words ‘Superiour lord of Scotland,’ have been crossed out. This may have been a precaution on the part of the manager, but if (as is more probable) that erasure was made by the Master of the Revels when the manuscript was presented to him for his licence, there can be little doubt that the play dates from after the union of the English and Scottish crowns.

However this may be, and whether *Thomas of Woodstock* or *Richard II* was the earlier play, Shakespeare has the advantage of the anonymous dramatist in historical accuracy. He follows Holinshed in representing not Lapoole but Mowbray as Governor of Calais at the time of Gloucester’s murder, and opens his drama with Bolingbroke’s accusation of Mowbray as being privy to the crime. It is Bolingbroke, too, not his father John of Gaunt, whom he exhibits as punishing the favorites, and he omits the imaginary battle in which Greene is slain.⁵ In mastery of rhythm and wealth of rhetoric Shakespeare, too, is far ahead; and the portrait of the King in the manuscript play, effective though it is, cannot compare in psychological subtlety and wistful charm with the great dramatist’s marvelous picture of Richard as the crowned sentimentalist whose character causes his ruin. But in its breadth of canvas, its insight into popular feeling, and its abundant comic relief, the anonymous work supplies the very elements that are most to seek in Shakespeare’s drama, to which henceforth, in the study if not on the stage, it should be regarded as an indispensable forepiece.

⁵ Green was not slain at Radcot Bridge (1387), but there was nothing imaginary about this battle.—MEE