
Richard II, 1 Henry IV and 2 Henry IV: Unveiling the Theme of Rebellion and its Consequences

In William Shakespeare's Richard II, 1 Henry IV and 2 Henry IV, the idea of kingship undergoes radical transformation produced by Bolingbroke's rebellion. Before this rebellion, the king is regarded as sacred, inviolable and divinely ordained. Despite the grievous misdeeds committed by King Richard, many leading noblemen continued to defer themselves to this divine image of kingship and condemn the idea of rebellion. However, Richard's blatant abuses of his kingly authority caused several noblemen to abandon this divine image of kingship and embrace open rebellion. This act of rebellion produces several dramatic and radical consequences. It legitimizes the act of rebellion as a reaction against the abuses of the king, and turns rebellion into the natural and inevitable consequence of monarchical tyranny. It destroys the divine image of kingship, introducing the idea that kings are made by men rather than by God and thereby removing the most powerful source of protection for the king's authority. It establishes the dangerous precedent that any man could become king, so long as he obtains enough physical support. As a result, King Henry IV's reign is filled with fresh rebellion and civil unrest. In these plays, rebellion is depicted as the natural and understandable consequence of tyranny and power abuses. It shows that a king can't safeguard his reign against rebellion by solely relying on the concept of the divine right of king; he must instead act in a just and responsible manner by winning respect from his subjects. Rebellion is depicted as an extremely dangerous activity because it could destroy the order and stability of a kingdom and fills the realm with quarrels, slaughter and bloodshed.

The act of open rebellion towards the monarch is initially condemned by most of the characters in Richard II. Despite the fact that several people, such as John of Gaunt and the Duke of York, are outraged by Richard's unwise policies and reckless behavior, they do not support the very act of open rebellion towards him. This is because that the concept of the divine right of kings is the dominant political ideology of this era. The divine right of king preaches the philosophy that king's authority derives solely from god. The king's power is therefore divinely sanctioned. No matter how grievous his earthly offenses may be, no earthly mortal could stage a rebellion against his divine authority. This ideology is endorsed even by the people who hold the most bitter grievances against Richard, indicating that it is a widely accepted ideology which is firmly entrenched in people's consciousness.

John of Gaunt is someone who is obviously outraged towards Richard's blatant abuses of his kingly power. He accuses Richard for besmirching England's glorious reputation with his disastrous policies. Gaunt is acutely conscious that Richard is directly complicit in his brother

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Gloucester's murder. He is also painfully aware of the fact that Richard is "leas[ing] out" (Shakespeare, 998) England's sacred sovereignty through his questionable economic policies. Even though Gaunt is not afraid to openly condemn Richard's misconduct, he refuses to stage an open rebellion against him; while Gaunt believes that kings must act in a responsible manner, he still believes in the divine right of kings. He tells the Duchess of Gloucester that he can't avenge her husband's death through rebellion because he believes Richard to be the God's "substitute" (989), his "minister" (989) and his "deputy anointed" (989). By which he means that the king is God's representative on earth. Therefore, no earthly mortal could disobey Richard's authority and punish his crimes, and only God has the responsibility and the power to punish the king's trespasses. Similarly, the Duke of York is also deeply conscious of Richard's misdeed, he nevertheless frowns upon the act of rebellion and accuses Bolingbroke for being a traitor who disturbs civil peace with his "despised arms" (1009) against the rightful "anointed king" (1009). York even raises a small army to defend Richard's kingship against Bolingbroke's rebel armies, and who only unwillingly yields himself to the rebel armies under their duress.

Even though both York and Gaunt are conscious to the fact that Richard is unfit to rule, neither of them questions his legitimacy to rule. Their faith in Richard's legitimacy as king compels them to swallow down their many grievances and to remain as Richard's obedient subjects. By highlighting the doctrine of the divine right of kings, Richard II shows that outright rebellion is no easy matter, because the rebels are challenging a legitimate sovereign who is generally viewed as being divinely appointed. In addition, the very act of rebellion in Richard II seeks to overthrow the long established ideology on the divine right of king and to replace it with a new-fangled idea which claims that a king must be accountable to his subjects by behaving in a responsible manner. Therefore, rebellion in Richard II entails revolutionary ideological change which seeks to undermine the very foundations of divine kingship. Henry IV's turbulent reign indicates that such a drastic ideological change introduced by rebellion cannot happen without bringing about further chaos and upheaval.

Although the divine right of king is generally accepted in this play, Richard II shows kings cannot safeguard their reign entirely on this principle. This play shows that even in a society which accepts the divine right of kings, rebellion can become the natural and inevitable consequence when its monarch abuses his absolutist power. The divine right of kings can be used to legitimize and strengthen a monarch's reign against possible acts of rebellion, but Richard II indicates that the sole reliance upon this principle is an ineffectual way to ward off civil disobedience. King Richard is a blind pursuer of the divine right of kings by believing that his "divinely sanctioned" authority possesses some magical power which can protect his crown against any attempts of rebellion. He naively believes that "not all the water in the rough rude sea can wash the balm from an anointed king, [and that] the breath of worldly men cannot depose the deputy elected by the Lord" (1013). Even when he learns the desertion of his

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troops, he continues to believe that his divinely ordained name is worth “forty thousand names” (1014), and that he can easily defeat Bolingbroke’s rebellion through the divine power of his name. Richard’s repeated appeals to the nonexistent divine protection become increasingly ludicrous and pathetic when it becomes clear that he has lost all physical support in his kingdom. This play shows that it is the earthly physical support that truly protects a king from rebellion, rather than any mystical heavenly forces. As king Richard’s medieval society is about to be replaced by the upcoming Renaissance world, which displaces the divine absolutism of kings with worldly pragmatism and political virtues; Bolingbroke’s rebellion indicates that the doctrines on the divine right of kings and monarchial absolutism have become increasingly impractical and are in need of modification in order to adapt themselves to a changing world.

In Richard II, the king himself is the true instigator of the rebellion. The reason that rebellion occurs is because Richard fails to realize that in order to safeguard his reign against possible revolts, he does not only need to be a legitimate king, he also needs to be a just king. This play shows that when a king loses all forms of popular support through his persistent misconduct, rebellion becomes the natural outcome even in a society that values the divine right of kings. Although a king possesses the divine political title, he also possesses an earthly body, which means that he can be prone to earthly imperfection and failings that prevent him from living up to his divine image. King Richard illustrates this point perfectly. Although he outwardly assumes the title of the divinely anointed king, his private self is characterized by earthly greed, corruption and moral irresponsibility. In Richard II, King Richard himself is entirely the source of rebellion. Although this play is centered on Bolingbroke’s rebellion, the play actually highlights the king’s misdeed rather than Bolingbroke’s rebellion. Bolingbroke is not portrayed as the unscrupulous and ruthless traitor who is determined to rebel against the king’s authority. His rebellion is portrayed as a grim necessity which is instigated by the king’s gross injustice towards him. In Richard’s deposition scene, Bolingbroke remains mostly silent, which betrays his guilty conscience and moral uneasiness. He is only a reluctant traitor who is propelled onto the path of rebellion by the king’s mistreatment towards him. Therefore, the king is the cause and the origin of Bolingbroke’s rebellion. Although Richard is deposed through rebellion, he is brought down more by self-destruction rather than by rebellion. Richard himself confirms his self-destruction by saying that he finds “[him]self a traitor with the rest, for [he has] undeck[ed] the pompous body of a king” (1029) through his misconduct. Because Richard has destroyed himself through his blatant misuse, he literally undid himself in his deposition scene as he “wash[ed] away [his] balm” (1028) with his “own tears” (1028) and “gave away [his] crown” (1028) with his “own hands” (1028). In Richard II, rebellion is depicted as a reaction towards Richard’s behaviour rather than an act of Bolingbroke’s ambition. This act of rebellion is the result of Richard’s greed rather than Bolingbroke’s ambition. Bolingbroke’s rebellion indicates the flaws and the limitations of a political system which preaches the doctrines of monarchial absolutism. Since the king is perceived as divine, he cannot be held accountable to the people. In such a case, the only way to punish his misdeed is through open rebellion.

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Bolingbroke's rebellion produces several short term and long term effects. In the short term, it destroys civil peace in England. The rebellion destroys the tranquil harmony within England and produces hostile factions between Bolingbroke and Richard's supporters. Immediately after Bolingbroke mounted the throne, this factionalism within England nearly erupted into bloody violence as a group of Richard's supporters seeks to assassinate the new king. This violent plan is a foretaste of a series of violent conflicts which will unfold in 1 Henry IV and 2 Henry IV. As Carlisle correctly prophesies, this act of rebellion will destroy peace and stability in England, it will unleash "disorder, horror, fear and mutiny" (1027) and shall make "kin with kin and kind with kind confound" (1027). Civil peace "shall go sleep with Turks and infidels" (1027), and that future generations with "groan for this foul act" (1027) and "cry against your woe" (1027). In 1 Henry IV and 2 Henry IV, King Henry IV becomes truly embattled. His reign is characterized by a series of domestic rebellion and civil unrest. The noble house of Northumberland, his cousin Mortimer, the Welsh nobleman Glyndwr, and the Archbishop of York all rose up against him. In the long term, this rebellion produces a radical ideological change with regard to kingship. It completely destroys the king's association with divine forces. It shows that as long as one has sufficient physical support, virtually anyone can become king, with or without the useless seal of divine approval.

By destroying the divine right of king, Bolingbroke's rebellion destroys a king's greatest source of protection. This is the most important long-term effect of his rebellion. Once he shatters the divine image of king through rebellion, all kings from this moment can be subjected to revolt and deposition. The moment Bolingbroke ascends the throne, he is immediately placed in a very untenable and perilous position, because the old doctrine that safeguards kings from revolts has been destroyed. The opening lines of 1 Henry IV confirms this, which depicts that the newly crowned king is immediately besieged by fresh civil unrest. Henry IV no longer enjoys the self-assured nonchalance of King Richard; instead, he finds himself "shaken" (1188) and "wan with care" (1188) by fresh "civil butchery" (1189). Bolingbroke's rebellion has opened the floodgate of revolts. In Henry IV's time, kings are no longer regarded as sacred and inviolable. Henry IV is no longer protected by the magical aura of kingly divinity. He can no longer afford the luxury of taking his subjects' obedience for granted in the manner of King Richard. Instead, he has to use every trick and strategy to win people's respect and affection by "plucking allegiance from their hearts" (1228). In the short term, the rebellion shatters civil peace and introduces a series of fresh rebellion. In the long term, Bolingbroke's rebellion completely reshapes the manners and the style of kingship. Since the divine image of kings is destroyed, a king from this moment has to act more as an earthly politician rather than a divine minister of God. Unlike the irresponsible Richard who has no concerns over his public image, Bolingbroke summons up all his tact and skills to construct and perform an attractive public image to make his person "fresh and new" (1228) and "wondered at" (1228). Since his rebellion has destroyed the inviolability of kingship, Bolingbroke is always in need to pamper to public opinions, because a king unprotected by a divine image will easily lose the crown when he falls out of favour with his

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subjects.

Throughout 1 Henry IV and 2 Henry IV, the newly crowned Bolingbroke has to cope with the long term effects of his rebellion. Since he is a usurper king who has attained power through “by-paths and indirect crook’d ways (1392), he suffers the consequences of his tainted image and compromised reputation throughout his entire reign, which greatly weakens his power. His noblemen, such as Worcester and Hotspur, speak to him with little reverence and often hold him in great disdain. No one worships him as the sacred anointed king. Hotspur simply calls him as Bolingbroke, which signifies his unwillingness to acknowledge Henry as king. As a king, Bolingbroke has great difficulties to find any constant and loyal supporters. Since his kingship is built on very shaky grounds, very people are willing to pledge unconditional support to him. Once Bolingbroke deposes a king, all kings can be subjected to deposition. In addition, it sets a dangerous example of civil disobedience to the people and tempts the others to perform the same act of disobedience. In King Richard’s time, most of the noblemen condemn the act of rebellion; in Henry IV’s time, the noblemen contemplate the idea of rebellion with little dread and moral scruple, since kings are no longer regarded as sacred and divine.

King Henry knows that he has stripped the divine protection factor from kingship; therefore, he is under no illusion over the instability of his reign. Throughout his reign, King Henry has to suffer the long-term consequences of his rebellion by battling a series of new rebellion. As a result of the untenability of his kingship, King Henry is subjected to great psychological distress, and becomes obsessed with the idea of visiting the holy land to atone and purify his sins. He becomes increasingly troubled, restless and unable to find peace through sleep. Henry IV has never been able to shake off the unpleasant consequences of his rebellion, and is compelled to endure his untenable kingship and his tainted personal image throughout this entire reign. For King Henry, only death can eliminate some of the unpleasant consequences of his rebellion and that only “[his] death can changes the mood” (1392) of his tainted kingship. However, even though Henry IV believes that his son who inherits the throne through natural succession will enjoy more legitimacy as a king, he is still full of apprehension and uncertainty for his son’s rule. Since his rebellion has stripped a king of his divine shield, Henry IV has to advise his son to resort to extreme measures in order to safeguard his kingship; which is to seek “foreign quarrels” (1392) and to unite the inner division of his kingdom through a common foreign enemy. Henry IV’s dying advice is a perfect indication of the extent in which his rebellion has weakened the idea of kingship. In Richard’s days, the king does not have to do anything to safeguard his reign; but after the rebellion and the collapse of the kingly divinity, a king is made extremely vulnerable and has to use every form of strategy, trick and device to secure and preserve his crown.

These three plays of Shakespeare show that rebellion can produce radical effects. Bolingbroke’s rebellion not only destroys the peace and order in England, it also forever

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changes the very definition of kingship. When Bolingbroke removes one king through rebellion, all kings from this moment onward can be subjected to deposition. The security and stability of kingship is destroyed beyond repair by this act of rebellion. The rebellion also alters the style and manners of kingship. It compels the once unapproachable king to adopt the manners of a shrewd politician who courts favours with the public in order to secure public support. The rebellion modernizes the concept of kingship by compelling future monarchs to behave in a just and responsible way or risk facing the fate of Richard II.

Works Cited

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