

From the Editor: Paradigm Shift

Why *Richard II, Part 1* is Even More Important Than You Think

This issue of *Shakespeare Matters* features an extended article by Dr. Michael Egan, one of the longest and most detailed in the history of our publication. Egan's article catalogs the editorial practices of three generations of Shakespeare scholars who edited successive editions of the curious Elizabethan history play, *Richard II, Part 1* (hereafter sometimes referred to by its more traditional name, *Thomas of Woodstock*, or *Woodstock* for short). Part editorial exegesis, part exposé, and part morality lesson, Egan's article pursues with relentless single-mindedness an editorial history of "intellectual sloppiness...cavalier disregard for the truth...manipulation of the evidence" and "editing of the most incompetent sort" that has plagued the history of this unique and perplexing treasure of Elizabethan literary history. Echoing the caustic words of former Folger Library Educational Director Richmond Crinkley in his 1985 *Shakespeare Quarterly* review of Charlton Ogburn's *The Mysterious William Shakespeare*, Egan concludes: "If this is the state of Shakespeare scholarship, and there is no reason to believe that it is not, the whole field is in serious jeopardy."

But there is reason to believe that even more is at stake in Egan's work on *Woodstock* than the revelation of this sordid history of scholarly incompetence and mendacity might suggest. *Woodstock* is, in critical respects, a wild card in the Shakespearean authorship question. And that is precisely, I believe, why Egan's own fastidious edition of the play, published in 2005 by The Edwin Mellen Press, has received the indifferent (and sometimes hostile) reception it has so far gained from the English literary es-

tablishment. This is not to say that the dangers posed by this brilliant little history play are grasped with full consciousness by the guardians of the Shakespeare mystery; it is rather to suggest that there is something deeply disturbing about this play for an orthodox literary sensibility which eschews the relevance of censorship – and self-censorship – as factors in the development of Elizabethan poetics.

Woodstock, in fact, is double trou-

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ble. First, it is a play that self-consciously explores the dramatic implications of early modern censorship, going so far as to stage the comical arrest of an innocent man for "whistling treason," because the king's mercenaries allege that the words to the tune he's whistling contain treasonous innuendo. On top of this, it is a history play that takes curious, and ultimately *subversive* liberties with the known history on which it is based. On

this score, Egan's commentary is appropriately conservative in its premises and arguments. Because *Woodstock's* alleged factual distortions have played a significant role in shaping conceptions of authorship,¹ Egan is anxious to exonerate the playwright from charges of historical misconception: "long-standing, carelessly repeated complaints about *I Richard II's* historical inaccuracy are simply unfounded," according to Egan. "In its fundamentals the play is a remarkably sound portrait [of] Richard's reign and the personalities defining it, as scholars are beginning to accept" (I 157). But if scholars are really beginning to accept the play as a "remarkably sound" portrait of Richard's reign, then they have badly misconceived either the history, the play, or both.

Such confusion, on the other hand, is understandable – a predictable consequence of the play's carefully contrived rewriting of the history of Richard's reign, a reconceiving which is in essence *historiographical* in the proper sense of the term: "the nature of History itself is one of the drama's themes," remarks Egan, and the playwright "comments implicitly on issues of historical semantics still unresolved" (438-39).

The foregrounding of historiography is most obvious in scene 2.1, lines 75-115 (Egan, II.1.244-115), in which Richard is being read to from the English chronicles and discovers through simple arithmetic (he believes) that he is actually eleven months older than his advisors have told him, and therefore has achieved the age of his majority without notification from them. Needless to say, he's not happy about it. The

(Cont. on p. 26)

(Paradigm Shift, cont. from p. 3)

critical exchange comes in lines 109-11:

Rich. What year is this?

Greene. 'Tis now, my Lord, 1387.

Rich. By that account, the third of April next/our age is number'd [two and twenty years].

By that same account, so foregrounded in the text, the time is out of joint: to any Elizabethan schooled in Holinshed's narrative, the date would have supplied an unambiguous referential frame, and with this frame in mind it is obvious that the play achieves dramatic coherence only by invoking a tectonic shift in the actual sequence of events (as represented in the chronicles and by modern historians).

Richard's reign was marked by the ascendancy of two very distinct sets of favorites at different times: In the 1380s the most prominent were Sir Robert Tresilian, created Lord Chief Justice in 1380, and Robert de Vere, the 9th Earl of Oxford. In the later period, during the 1390s the court favorites included Sir Henry Greene, Sir John Bushy, and Sir John Bagot. Scholars have long recognized that Anon's representation depends on the historical anachronism of transporting Bagot, Bushey, and Greene, favorites who belong to a later period of Richard's reign, backwards in time to become actors in the events of 1387-88 alongside Chief Justice Tresilian. Bushy's announcement of the date in the earlier scene confirms the direction of the manipulation. Correspondingly, Robert de Vere, with Tresilian the other true agent of the play's period, has been airbrushed from the play, as Daniel Wright recognizes in his recent synopsis of Anon's deft historical revisionism:

The author [has]... inexplicably determined that Robert de Vere neither be seen, heard nor indicted in this play ...[he] transports Sir Robert Tresilian forward in time to become ... the principal agent of the King's corruption ... Bushy ... Bagot ... and Greene ... were not leading courtiers of the 1380s ... the leading courtier

of the 1380s ... was Robert de Vere. Bushy, Bagot and Greene came into the King's service much later—after the Duke of Gloucester's death.

(Wright 15)

Although this shift in personnel has thus not passed entirely unnoticed, its significance for evaluating the play's contribution to matters of "unresolved historical semantics" has been radically



Figure One: Robert de Vere escapes the battle of Radcot Bridge in an illuminated illustration from Froissart's Chronicle. The illumination reveals how large the account of de Vere's flight loomed in the early modern historical imagination, confirming its relevance to the historical liberties take by the author of Richard II, Part 1. Image copyright the Bibliothec Nationale de France.

underestimated. The playwright's conspicuous violation of historical accuracy in portraying Henry Green as Richard's sexual favorite (in 1387) disguises Anon's transparent awareness of the King's actual relationship with de Vere, according to Rainbow Saari (2002). There can be no doubt that in 1387, precisely the period of Anon's play, de Vere was the King's most notorious favorite as well, allegedly, as his homosexual lover. He had excited the hostile envy of the commons and the implacable hatred of Richard's uncles, the Lords Appellant, by being created Marchioness of Ireland in 1386. The appointment exacerbated an already existing alienation of Richard from both the aristocracy and the commons and led eventually to open civil war. On December 20, 1387, overpowered by the superior forces of the Lord's Appellant, de Vere, with Tresilian, met his fate at the battle

of Radcot Bridge. Their forces in disarray, Tresilian was arrested and executed, but de Vere leapt into the Thames river and fled to Holland, dying five years later, it is said, from wounds inflicted by a wild boar.

Not surprisingly, given this history, de Vere is the aristocratic bogeyman of every historical narrative—Froissart, Polydore Virgil, Holinshed, Stow, and Grafton, to name only the most obvious—of the middle years of Richard's reign. In all the chronicles his story takes up a great share of the events of 1387. Holinshed devotes

many paragraphs to his promotion by the king, his quarrels with the Lords Appellant, his mustering of troops for the Radcot battle, and his subsequent flight from the battle. Of his unexpectedly swift and crushing downfall, Polydore Virgil remarks: "Marquis Robert had no idea that his power and authority could come to naught so quickly, for originally he imagined he could touch the sky with his finger, because Richard entrusted everything to him, and nothing to anybody else" (II 14). So important a figure is de Vere in Froissart that at least some manuscripts contain an elaborate illuminated illustration of his flight across the English channel to Brabant (Figure One). But Anon has erased him from *I Richard II*, as surely as Stalin airbrushed his murdered enemies from photographs (though doubtless with less sinister motives).

A close reading of the play alongside its historical sources suggests that this erasure of de Vere, and the allocation of his historic role to other characters, is systematic and structural, not incidentally related to a single character. Saari herself observes that Anon has also interpolated into the play de Vere's wife, the Duchess of Ireland, a figure of no consequence in the Chronicles. Apparently the Duchess is introduced for the sole and express purpose of being a mouthpiece to exculpate her (missing) husband from the historical accusation of committing sodomy with the King:

My husband Ireland, that unloving lord,/(God pardon his amiss, he now is dead)²/King Richard was the cause

he left my bed.

(II.iii.10-12)

Surely this combination of historical alterations is suggestive. Not only has Green been substituted for de Vere as Richard's favorite (recalling Shakespeare's *hapax logemena* in the Sonnets, "so you o'ergreen my bad, my good allow" (112.4), but as a corollary de Vere's wife is introduced, apparently for the almost exclusive purpose of audaciously attributing the cause of her husband's sexual indiscretions (and in the presence of the Queen!) to King Richard – a bizarre violation of early modern decorum. Surely this constitutes a pattern requiring some explanation. Saari accordingly speculates that "the writer may have changed the character to avoid offending the contemporary Oxford, Edward de Vere" or his father-in-law, the powerful Lord Treasurer William Cecil, Lord Burghley (in Egan, III: 345). Whether such a desideratum is sufficient to account for the liberties taken by the playwright may, however, be worth further consideration.

The Devil's Lawyer

Although several characters in *Woodstock* are translocated in time or otherwise given a position that bears little or no relation to their historical role in the Chronicles to accommodate the dramatist's erasure of the Marquis of Ireland, only one major character is wholly invented: "Nimble, the lawyer's devil." Viewed historically, the character descends from the vice figure of the medieval moralities, but this generic ancestry should not conceal his unprecedented semiotic function in *1 Richard II*. Like Anon's Sir Henry Green, Nimble bears a paradoxical relationship with the missing de Vere: both become agents of Anon's systematic and self-conscious rewriting of the actual events of 1387 to exclude him. While Green assumes the role de Vere played in history as the King's male lover, in Act 5 scenes 2-6 Nimble imitates his notorious cowardice on the battlefield at Radcot Bridge. Close comparison with Holinshed leaves little room to doubt the premeditated character of the parody. A running joke of the Radcot Bridge scenes in the fifth act of *Richard II.1* is that

Nimble and Tresilian will take off their armor to more swiftly escape the scene of the King's defeat. This is a direct parody of Holinshed's account of de Vere's flight:

striking his horse with spurs, [the Duke of Ireland] fled from them for fear had set wings on his heels.... In the mean time the Duke of Ireland (as ye have heard), seeking to escape by flight, came to the

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rivers side; but finding the bridge broken, he galoped till he found an other bridge, where he found a number of archers readie to stop his passage. When he saw that he was thus inclosed with his enemies on the one side, and the river Thames on the other, he thought to put all in adventure; and *casting away his gantlets, and sword (to be the more nimble) gave his horse the spurres, and lept into the river.*

(461: Wvi: emphasis supplied)

De Vere's purpose for removing his armor in Holinshed's narrative – "to be...*more nimble*" (emphasis added) in

negotiating the Thames – may elicit a shock of recognition; that the passage is indeed the origin of the name of Anon's witty vice character is suggested by iterated references to Nimble's encumbering armor:

Enter Tresilian and Nimble with armour... (5.2)

Tress. Where art thou, Nimble?

Nim. So loaden with armour, I cannot stir, my lord (5.2.4-5)

Nim. It is the wisest course [to flee], my lord, and I will go put off mine armour that I may run lustily too. (5.2.41-42);

Tress. Where are thou, Nimble?

Nim. As light as a feather, my lord, I have put off my [armour]³ that I might run lustily.

(5.5.1-3, emphases supplied).

The repetition is a sign of comedic intent, and the joke depends, at least in part, on the reader's awareness of de Vere's infamous cowardice in fleeing from the battle, a flight dramatized – but without the episode's historic principal – by the scenes in which these jests occur. Strikingly, Nimble's repetition of the joke also marks the specific locus of the name's origin in Holinshed, as if the armor has literally been exchanged for the character, the character bloomed from Holinshed's word. It seems difficult to avoid a deeply heretical conclusion of the sort unpublishable except in the pages of a rag like *Shakespeare Matters*: not only is Nimble's imaginative genesis intricately interwoven with Holinshed's account of de Vere's fate, but Anon's erasure of him has also been carefully premeditated to coincide with the drama's systematic exploration of principles of historical (mis)representation, a focus that anticipates by three centuries, in a distinctly "Shakespearean" turn, the Freudian principle of the return of the repressed.

As we have seen, Rainbow Saari (an independent Shakespearean scholar) has suggested that the noted anomalies might be accounted for on the hypothesis that

(Cont. on p. 28)

(*Paradigm Shift, cont. from p. 27*)

the dramatist wrote to please powerful patrons such as the 17th Earl of Oxford or his powerful father-in-law. Saari was probably not aware that she was revisiting territory onto which the haplessly honest Seymour Pitcher, in his edition of *The Famous Victories of Henry V*, had been forced to tread in 1958. In that play, Pitcher was attempting to account for the lionized role of the 11th Earl of Oxford, who is unhistorically portrayed as a close confidante of Henry IV and major player

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on the historical stage (Pitcher 182-195).

These two cases form an intriguing set of mirrored problems of representation. It was Pitcher's misfortune to be in the midst of making a persuasive case for the Shakespearean authorship of *Famous Victories* when he discovered the unhistorical role conferred by the play on Edward de Vere's ancestor. *I Richard II*, stylistically a more mature play than *Famous Victories*, has the opposite problem: It airbrushes out of existence another ancestor of the 17th earl, this time one whose

embarrassing role in history could only have been a source of shame to historically attuned descendents like Earl Edward.

Were these isolated incidents in the tapestry of the Elizabethan genre of the history play we might be tempted to dismiss them as mere coincidence. However, as Ramon Jiménez and Richard Desper have each noted, they are in fact elements in a larger pattern which cannot fail to provoke suspicion of premeditated intent. The same 13th Earl of Oxford who is given a leading role in *Famous Victories* is entirely missing from *Henry V*: "If *Henry V* is drawn from *Famous Victories*, as both Pitcher and Jiménez contend, then Oxford seems to have been deliberately written out in the process of the revision" (Desper 26). Exactly the same procedure seems to govern the relationship between the early anonymous play *The True Tragedy of Richard the Third* and the canonical Shakespearean play about the same tyrant. In *True Tragedy*, "in each of the three scenes in which Henry Tudor appears, the author... has placed the [13th] Earl of Oxford at his right hand, making him the leading spokesman for his supporters" (Jiménez 133-5). The same Earl has only two lines in the Shakespearean play.

Accepting as a premise the Jiménez-Pitcher theory of shared authorship of apocryphal and canonical plays, Desper suggests that the revision "may be readily explained on the hypothesis that possible clues to the playwright's identity were removed in the transition from the court version to the public stage version" (28).

The case of *Woodstock*, which arguably intervenes as a bridge between the circa 1570s apocryphal versions and their revised canonical rewritings, suggests that certain deeper motives may be at play in the excision of the Earls of Oxford from the Shakespearean history cycle than a mere attempt to tidy up the plays for public appearance. In writing *Woodstock*, the author confronted a very different problem from that posed by the historic materials for plays on the reign of Henry V and Richard III. Here was a de Vere ancestor who, unlike the 11th and 13th Earls, was not a subject for family pride, but an embarrassment and source of shame. The dramatist accordingly found clever ways to write *around* the character; those who

didn't know their history very well would never realize he was gone. Those who did, on the other hand, would not only realize that history was being tampered with, but might even be tempted to notice a pattern in the tampering. Accordingly, if Anon's intent in substituting Green and Nimble for de Vere was the utilitarian objective of flattering his Elizabethan patrons or audience, then he followed a peculiar and dangerous path to his objective. Anyone who reads Holinshed can see that what the dramatist has removed he has also conspicuously parodied; for an alert reader de Vere is most present in Anon's

Anyone who reads Holinshed can see that what the dramatist has removed he has also conspicuously parodied, and that for an alert reader de Vere is most present in Anon's text precisely when he seems most absent. Surely those who the writer was, according to Saari's theory, most concerned to avoid offending, would know their history well enough to realize the depth of the literary offense.

text precisely when he *seems* most absent. Surely those who the writer was, according to Saari's theory, most concerned to avoid offending, would know their history well enough to realize the depth of the literary offense when Robert de Vere's infamous flight is mercilessly parodied by a Nimble who can't stop talking about taking off his armour so he can run away faster.

Harold Bloom says that Shakespeare grew as an artist by "overhearing" himself – through linguistic and dramatic experiment he expanded his grammar of motives and bag of stage tricks. In writing *Woodstock*, we might suppose, he learned (or perhaps applied more vigorously something he already knew) that you can't really

airbrush out a character, however much you try. Conscience will come back to haunt you: "Killing cannot, according to Shakespeare, be a solution; because, in the final sense, killing is impossible. The ghost always comes back" (Vyvan 26). And if you understand this, and you really don't want to airbrush out your character in the first place, but instead feel that you are being compelled by some external political threat or power to conform your history to a party line, you'll find other, even more allusively clever ways, to keep him present. Such a realization would lead naturally, directly, to the historical "mousetrap" that Dick Desper has identified in Henry V, wherein the French soldiers on the eve of Agincourt unconsciously are made to refer to the death by friendly fire of the men of the 13th Earl of Oxford during the battle of Barnet.

Of course, responsible Shakespearean professors have dedicated their careers to the principle that any connection between such alterations of the historical record is tantamount to treason against the guild. The sorts of intellectual divagations and duplicities that have sustained such a pre-intellectual belief system are ably documented by Dr. Egan in this issue of *Shakespeare Matters*. Yet there seems little ground to doubt that Shakespeare understood the Freudian principle that what you try to leave out always comes back to haunt you, but the scholars dedicated to the study of his writings, in their scramble to get to the top of the academic heap, seem to have willfully missed the point. How else could Geoffrey Bullough have thought that there was any point to omitting — "mysteriously without comment, explanation or scene summary" (Egan 13) — *Woodstock* V.v, the scene which parodies Robert de Vere's flight from Radcot Bridge, from his widely consulted "edition" of Anon's play? Having read his Holinshed, Bullough must have understood what he was doing.

In fact, Bullough's duplicity is demonstrable. The "Chronological Table" which accompanies his reproduction of the redacted play is remarkably detailed and covers all of the critical events of Richard's reign from 1377 until his death in 1400 — all, that is, except one. You guessed it: The one critical event that Bullough omits is the rout at Radcot bridge and the surrender of Richard's forces to the Lord's appellant in

1387. The naive reader of Bullough's text won't know this scene has been redacted from both play and historical chronology by Professor Bullough. Conveniently, the entirety of the play's "historiographical" scene (II.i) has also been cut, along with V.v (for a complete tabulation of all the cuts, see Egan this issue, p. 13), but 1387

Harold Bloom says that Shakespeare grew as an artist by "overhearing" himself -- through linguistic and dramatic experiment he expanded his grammar of motives and bag of stage tricks. In writing *Woodstock*, one might surmise, he learned (or perhaps relearned) that you can't really erase a character, however much you try, even if you want to. Conscience will come back to haunt you: "Killing cannot, according to Shakespeare, be a solution; because, in the final sense, killing is impossible. The ghost always comes back." How much more interesting this becomes if your Shakespeare doesn't really want to airbrush out the character in the first place, but instead feels compelled by an alien political force to conform to a party line.

happens to be the one date conspicuously mentioned (II.i.103) to establish the play's historical frame. It's an irony that boggles the imagination: the one date mentioned in Bullough's play (the only specific historical date mentioned, to my knowledge, in any Elizabethan history play) is also the date

conspicuously missing from his chronology. Make no mistake, the omission has served its purpose. The naive reader will not know that it was in 1387 that Robert de Vere shed his armour at Radcot bridge and ran away, following in Nimble's footsteps, so even the reader lays hold of an unredacted text of the play, he'll never grasp the significance of Bullough's textual omissions -- unless, that is, he turns to Bullough's source for his Table, K. H. Vickers' *England in the Later Middle Ages*. That book has plenty to say about the year 1387:

Gloucester, Arundel, and Warwick gathered their forces at Waltham, whence on November 14th they sent a deputation to the King, explaining the reasons for their conduct, and charging Archbishop Neville, Vere, Suffolk, Bremsre, and Tresillian with treason....The Archbishop ultimately found refuge overseas, Tresillian hid himself in London, while Vere, audacious to the last, tried to raise an army at Chester...Thus when on December 20 Vere fell in with the enemy near Radcot Bridge, he realised that his own forces were few, and that he could not hope for reinforcements, and therefore made his escape across the river while his followers dispersed.

(274-275)

Funny how different history sounds when you're not trying to hide anything, isn't it?

Endnotes

¹Keller (1899), representatively, surmised that "given Shakespeare's careful accuracy, *Richard II*'s factual distortions would have stood out...glaringly for audiences familiar with *The Tragedy of King Richard II*" (III 243). Egan appropriately resists this misplaced romanticization of a Shakespeare dedicated to historical literalism and instead insists that the canonical histories are, in Hattaway's provocative phrase, "political plays," in which the dramatist "shifted the evi-

(Cont. on p. 31)

Paradigm Shift, cont. from p. 29

dence, rearranged sequences, and invented both character and incident, often finding the right dramatic metaphor to express – as he understood them the Chronicles' deeper truths" (I 152).

²The Duchess' claim that her husband is deceased is impossible to reconcile with any coherent theory of the play's chronology, since de Vere did not die until c. 1392, five years after the explicit date of the play's action.

³Egan's conventional emendation "shoes" misses the context suggesting that this word should in fact be "armour."

Portions of this Essay were previously presented By Roger Stritmatter, PhD, at the 2006 Annual Conferences of the Shakespeare Association of America in the Seminar on Shakespearean Apocrypha, chaired by Dr. John Jowett.

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—Roger Stritmatter

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