

# EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



**Two *Richard II* films, directed by Rupert Goold (2012) and Gregory Doran (2013)**

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*Richard II*, episode 1 of the BBC mini-series *The Hollow Crown*. Directed by Rupert Goold. With Ben Whishaw (Richard II), Patrick Stewart (John of Gaunt), Rory Kinnear (Henry Bolingbroke), David Suchet (Duke of York), Tom Hughes (Duke of Aumerle), James Purefoy (Thomas Mowbray), David Morrissey (Earl of Northumberland).

*Richard II*. Based on a production by the Royal Shakespeare Company. Directed by Gregory Doran. With David Tennant (Richard II), Michael Pennington (John of Gaunt), Nigel Lindsay (Henry Bolingbroke), Oliver Ford Davies (Duke of York), Oliver Rix (Duke of Aumerle), Jane Lapotaire (Duchess of Gloucester), Antony Byrne (Thomas Mowbray), Sean Chapman (Earl of Northumberland).

Gregory Doran, director of the Royal Shakespeare Company's 2013 film of *Richard II* starring David Tennant, has noted that between the Stratford and London runs of the original stage production and the multiple worldwide cinema showings, his production has a plausible claim to being the single most-watched Shakespeare production in history.<sup>1</sup> Producers of Rupert Goold's *Richard II* starring Ben Whishaw, screened as part of the *Hollow Crown* mini-series shown on the BBC and PBS, might challenge that claim. Both are now available on DVD and both will likely find their way into classrooms. Since the films were directed with almost diametrically opposed visions, teachers may want to use clips from both by way of contrast when discussing interpretations of the play with students. It is thus worth considering the strengths and weaknesses of each.

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<sup>1</sup> DVD commentary on *Richard II*, dir. by Gregory Doran (Opus Arte, 2013). DVD.

The BBC film, made directly for television without being based on a pre-existing stage production, is richly cinematic, which may make it more accessible to younger students more used to seeing CGI blockbusters than they are to seeing bare theatre stages. Rupert Goold's vision, inspired partly, he said, by his lead actor's personality, is of an otherworldly Richard, politically oblivious and too ethereal and spiritual to connect with anyone around him. In the DVD extra feature, 'The Making of *Richard II*', Goold says, "I wanted [...] someone who was distant, poetically, in their soul", and star Ben Whishaw adds, 'One of the people that Rupert talked about was Michael Jackson. Something about Michael Jackson's nature and the way he was always performing, and his eccentricity and his love of spectacle, his otherworldliness.'<sup>2</sup>

In contrast, Doran's production for the RSC, by setting the opening scene at Gloucester's funeral rather than at court, showcases Richard's complicity in Gloucester's death and gives us a politically engaged (if fatally miscalculating) king. Doran's main vision, however, is about the way the embodiment of status on stage can be used to create commentary about characters and about the spiral of history, emphasizing the way the play begins with a weak king implicated in a murder and ends with the same situation.

These extremely different interpretations of the central character are the most immediately obvious difference between the films, and are embodied in Whishaw's weepy (sometimes giggly), ethereal Richard, who contrasts with Tennant's fierce, charismatic, quicksilver one. Although Whishaw's haunting performance won him a BAFTA Award for Best Actor, I find the RSC production to best represent the Richard of the play, as the BBC film creates its interpretation only through some odd, seemingly pointless cuts and alterations and a directorial vision that weakens some of the play's sharp political maneuvering.

When Richard is presented as politically uninvolved, much of the early acts are rendered confusing. In the BBC production, Richard kisses Bolingbroke before the abortive duel (here a joust) with Mowbray. As seen by a camera shot from over Richard's shoulder, Rory Kinnear's Bolingbroke smiles lovingly, beatifically, up at Richard, as though he has no clue about Richard's involvement in Gloucester's death. This approach makes Richard's paranoia about Mowbray and Bolingbroke meeting in exile a non sequitur. It blunts Aumerle's cynical account of Bolingbroke's departure. John of Gaunt's bitterness seems almost arbitrary. We get no sense that Richard has done anything at all in the way of governing. This approach ultimately weakens even the sceptered isle speech, which is about Gaunt's frustration with the way England has suffered under Richard's ruinous fiscal policies.

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<sup>2</sup> 'The Making of *Richard II*', *The Hollow Crown*, dir. by Rupert Goold, Richard Eyre, and Thea Sharrock (BBC, 2012). DVD.

Most of the cuts in the Goold BBC production support the notion of an unworldly Richard who contrasts strongly with the much savvier Bolingbroke. The entirety of 1.2 is cut, removing the Duchess of Gloucester's accusation that Richard is responsible for her husband's death. Nearly every indication of Richard's connection to other people is likewise missing. At first blush, this looks as though Goold may have wanted to tone down the 'gayness' of Richard—when the pretty young boy modelling as St. Sebastian gives Richard an inviting look, the king quickly turns away, and when Bolingbroke accuses Bushy and Green of breaking 'the possession of a royal bed' (3.1.13)<sup>3</sup> Bushy shakes his head in a violent 'no'. But it turns out that this is not in the service of making Richard more heterosexual: the queen's loving worry for her husband in 2.2 is also heavily cut, as is their affectingly tender final parting. There is simply no one with whom Richard has a deep emotional bond. By comparison, the production intensifies the wary, shrewd nature of Rory Kinnear's Bolingbroke. When Aumerle bursts in in 5.3 to confess his abortive treason, the newly-crowned king asks merely if his cousin's fault was 'intended or committed' (5.3.32) before granting an automatic pardon for the former. In Goold's production, these lines are cut so that Bolingbroke strategically withholds his pardon for a while, while the short scene 5.4, in which Exton is persuaded to Richard's murder, is retained, emphasizing the new king's machinations).<sup>4</sup> Goold's rather heavy-handed Christ/St. Sebastian imagery also serves to underscore Richard's otherworldliness, creating a Richard so remote from ordinary humanity that it becomes difficult for us to care about him.

A few of the cuts and alterations in the BBC production seem simply clumsy and inexplicable. In the garden scene (3.4), the camera takes pains to give us a tight close-up on Clémence Poésy's Queen Isabella as she sheds a tear for her deposed husband. But the gardener's lines

Here did she fall a tear. Here in this place  
I'll set a bank of rue, sour herb-of-grace.  
Rue even for ruth here shortly shall be seen  
In the remembrance of a weeping queen. (3.4.105-109)

are cut, rendering that close-up and Poésy's ability to weep on cue fairly well pointless. Similarly, 'Pomfret' is consistently relocated to the Tower of London. This means that after Henry ends the deposition scene by ordering Richard to be conveyed to the Tower,

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<sup>3</sup> Act, scene and line references are to *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. by Stephen Greenblatt and other (New York: Norton, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> 5.4 is missing from the RSC production, although in both films Exton-the-murderer becomes Aumerle.

Northumberland then appears in 5.1, at the Tower, to say that Richard should be held prisoner ... at the Tower, thus reiterating Henry's orders and making his appearance there completely nonsensical. Undergraduates are unlikely to notice these moments, but their teachers will, and after a few viewings, they tend to grate.

Greg Doran's vision for his RSC production centres on the embodiment of status on stage. Doran, David Tennant, and Nigel Lindsay (as Bolingbroke) get the embodiment of status brilliantly, unexpectedly right. Tennant's Richard enters as a weak king. He is afforded little personal space—in fact is crowded about with the pernicious retainers Bushy, Bagot, and Green—and must push his way through groups onstage who do not respect him enough to move aside. In 1.1, he huddles upstage, whispering with his advisors, while Bolingbroke and Mowbray strut about centre stage, posturing competitively with one another and directing their lines to the audience. But the weak king will become a powerful ex-king, and the strutting challenger will become, surprisingly, another weak king.

This physical embodiment of status is illustrated particularly well in consecutive scenes. In 3.1, Lindsay's Bolingbroke strides onstage. He takes centre stage, arms raised, issuing the order for Bushy and Green's execution in a loud voice, while his followers hang back around the edges of the stage. They respond to jerks of Lindsay's head or flickers of his eyes, as courtiers would to a king, or soldiers to a commanding officer.

The following scene is Richard's return from Ireland. Tennant enters from the darkened back of the stage, in a half-run, half-stagger, and collapses to the stage to greet the earth of England. His followers enter much the same way he does. No one attends on Richard, and there is virtually no distinction, other than the hollow crown itself, to mark him as the king.

Tennant and Lindsay are each working their way through an *inverse* arc of status: the more temporal power each has, the less commanding he is physically. Richard the reigning king is physically unimposing, while Bolingbroke, in the early scenes, possesses the exaggerated masculinity of an alpha male—a would-be king. Doran observes in his DVD commentary, '[Lindsay's 'hard, strong, bluff' physicality is] who Bolingbroke is. He's a kind of 110% heterosexual figure. [...] He gives you a sense of an absolute other side of the coin to Richard. [...] I think the polarity of the characters was what was most interesting to me.'

Yet, appropriately for this play, the polarity becomes a mirror, another form of parallel. As the production develops, Tennant and Lindsay each embody status in a way that could be graphed as an X, an inverse relationship between power and stature. They also turn out to be moving in another, larger X relative to one another. After 3.1, which showcases Bolingbroke at perhaps his most kingly, and 3.2, which shows Richard at his weakest, seasick and reeling

from bulletin after bulletin of Bolingbroke's revolt, the following scene is the confrontation between the two at Flint Castle. This is where their respective paths cross, exactly in the moment of the play that they should, in a tense and virtually equal competition for physical status, with all its language about kneeling and descent. And this is where Doran's vision begins to make itself clear: Richard does not know what royalty is until he loses it, and Bolingbroke discovers that royalty is nothing like he expected. From this scene on, Tennant gains more and more physical power, taking control of the stage, while Lindsay begins to shrink and to amass retainers who hover around him and hem him in. The Xes have crossed. Having gained the throne, Lindsay's Bolingbroke will never again move as powerfully as Tennant's Richard, having lost it, now begins to; as his crown and kingdom slip from his grasp, Richard discovers that he possesses an indestructible, un-usurpable *personal* royalty.

This framework lends even more depth and power to the deposition scene. Bolingbroke sits on the throne with evident discomfort, making self-interrupted moves to both sit and stand, shifting uneasily. When Bolingbroke and Richard share centre stage as they both grip the crown, Richard warns his cousin of precisely the sudden, unexpected *weight* of being king that Bolingbroke is discovering (and that Lindsay is embodying): 'Your care is gain of care by new care won' (4.1.187). Kingship, as it turns out, is not about simply being the alpha male. It means suddenly needing retainers. It means ordering one cousin to murder another cousin. This warning follows Richard's 'Your cares set up do not pluck my cares down' (4.1.185). Tennant delivers this line with a sudden flash of scornful irritability. In tone of voice, it is a colossal breach of royal etiquette; yet in Doran's vision, the delivery is perfect—'unkinged' Richard has found himself far above newly-crowned Bolingbroke in emotional and dramatic stature.

Tennant takes centre stage on his entrance in the deposition scene, and does not relinquish it until he takes the even more powerful position of standing before Richard's usurped throne for his unnerving reversal of the coronation ceremony. Richard coolly violates Bolingbroke's royal personal space when he says, 'Now mark me how I will undo myself' (4.1.193). The shift in status underscores the arch lines in which Richard witheringly reduces the king to a sycophantic 'flatterer':

Fair cousin? I am greater than a king;  
For when I was a king my flatterers  
Were then but subjects; being now a subject,  
I have a king here to my flatterer. (4.1.295-299)

After Richard exits, Lindsay's Bolingbroke stands and looks about hesitantly, shifting his weight from foot to foot, uncertain what to do next, thoroughly rattled.

This version of the deposition scene is more powerful and tense than the BBC's version, in which Wishaw's Richard rather dreamily surrenders his crown. It must be said that Gould's directorial vision does yield its best results in this scene: Wishaw's Richard enters self-pityingly, but as the deposition progresses and Richard warns his cousin about the cares that accompany the crown, Wishaw moves delicately from self-pity to a Christ-like pity for Kinnear's Bolingbroke. Wishaw's Richard smiles tenderly and lovingly at his cousin, forgiving him both the usurpation and the ambition which he can see but to which Bolingbroke is blind. His deep, knowing sadness seems to come not from losing his crown, but from an otherworldly power to foresee the troubles to come for England. The scene is affecting, but it loses much. The deposition scene can be read as invoking a demonic reversal of sacred ritual: a powerful Richard uses his un-coronation to raise doubts about the legitimacy of Bolingbroke's reign even as he appears to endorse it on the surface; a weak Richard appears merely to endorse it. Tennant succeeds in capturing the volatile, dangerous energy of the reversal, while Wishaw's Christ-like Richard almost specifically erases this dimension, making the un-doing of his coronation seem a sacred gift to his usurper. Again, the performance matches the vision, but at the cost of undercutting the political dimension.

Ultimately, the RSC production presents a more dynamic play, especially in the way that Richard and Bolingbroke move through a developing arc from weakness to strength and vice-versa. The BBC production remains static with an unchangingly languorous Richard and doggedly strong Bolingbroke throughout. Doran's powerful vision depicts ascending the throne as a move from strength to weakness, and deposition as a move from royal weakness to nearly supernatural strength. The physical work Tennant and Lindsay do sets them up as both parallel and opposite to one another. Their commitment to the physical embodiment of Doran's vision creates a production that richly and rewardingly plumbs the play's parallels as well as its polarities, the 'heavy weight' (4.1.194) of the hollow crown.