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# Shakespeare's *Richard II* and *Henry V* and Political Rebellions in the Reign of Queen Elizabeth I

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Shakespeare's *Richard II* and *Henry V* and Political Rebellions in the  
Reign of Queen Elizabeth I

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## I. Introduction

Although she was beloved by her subjects during her reign, Queen Elizabeth I was not immune to attacks and conspiracies against her rule. There were a number of treasonous plots to usurp her, but perhaps the two most memorable incidents involved the attempts by Mary, Queen of Scots and the failed coup by the Second Earl of Essex, Robert Devereux. These two events left a strong impression on the queen as well as her subjects, and they inevitably made their way into the literature of the time. William Shakespeare, a well-educated and well-connected playwright, often used contemporary events or popular sentiments in his plays – sometimes for comedic effect or sometimes to create a critical commentary on the government or the country. His plays *Richard II* and *Henry V* are especially good examples of such uses. While outwardly these plays may appear to be simple dramatizations of England's tumultuous history, they actually contain not-so-subtle critiques and approvals of the men and woman in power.

Despite the arguments of some scholars who believe that Shakespeare's plays do not contain these potentially troublesome sentiments,<sup>1</sup> I find that I must agree with Evelyn May Albright's observation: "His characters are treated as sheer creations who live in a sort of vacuum. But there are numerous indications that Shakespeare was not utterly detached from the life that was going on about him" (Albright 1927, 686). Indeed, Shakespeare could not have been oblivious to the important matters of state in his country, especially when one considers that he enjoyed the patronage of the nobility, from the Third Earl of Southampton to the Lord

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<sup>1</sup> Heffner, Ray. "Shakespeare, Hayward, and Essex." *PMLA*. 45.3 (Sept. 1930): 754-780. Heffner writes: "...there is no evidence of any connection between either Hayward and Shakespeare or Shakespeare and Essex" (754). Although Heffner makes some convincing arguments, namely about which work came first – Shakespeare's *Richard II* or Hayward's book on Henry IV – his statement that there is no connection seems naïve. He appears to assume that the censorship of Shakespeare's plays was mere coincidence and that Shakespeare was not influenced in the slightest by the political intrigues of his time.

## Chamberlain to King James I.

Through this essay, I intend to demonstrate how Shakespeare was well aware of the political turmoil in England during his time due to his connections to the nobility, and that the first and fourth plays of Shakespeare's *Henriad* contain material that the government considered dangerous or subversive during the 1590s and early 1600s. To provide cultural context for the two plays, I will give a brief summary of the last two greatest internal threats to Elizabeth's throne: Mary Stuart and the Earl of Essex. I begin by looking at the relationship between Mary, Queen of Scots and Elizabeth, focusing mainly on the final years of Mary's life during her imprisonment in England and at the Babington plot; Mary's constant plotting and eventual execution for treason remained in the collective conscience of the English people for years after her death. Next, I will briefly examine the role the Earl of Essex played in the wars in Ireland, which figures prominently in Shakespeare's *Henry V*. From this point, I follow with observations about the relationship between Shakespeare and his patron, the Earl of Southampton. I hope to demonstrate how Southampton's connections to Essex further my argument that not only was Shakespeare aware of the political turmoil among the English nobility, but that he implies through *Richard II* and *Henry V* that if Essex were to mount a rebellion against Elizabeth, he would not oppose it.

After establishing how the environment in which Shakespeare was living influenced his writing, I will examine *Richard II* and *Henry V*. I have elected to approach the plays chronologically, discussing first how there were numerous associations between Elizabeth I and the historical Richard II. Shakespeare's play on the historical king seems to support usurpation, a troubling topic for Elizabeth and her supporters, especially in the wake of Mary's treasonous plotting and Essex's rise to power and prominence. As a result, select scenes – namely the

deposition scene from *Richard II* – were never performed in public during Elizabeth’s lifetime. I therefore argue that Shakespeare’s play was the controversial play that was performed for Essex’s supporters on the eve of his rebellion in 1601. *Henry V* suffered a similar fate as *Richard II* at the hands of the censors. I begin this section by analyzing how the attitude towards war in *Henry V* is a clear reflection of the anxieties of the English people during Essex’s campaign to Ireland. Through analysis of the differences between two editions of the play – the First Quarto of 1600 and the First Folio of 1623 – I illustrate how the play contains seditious material that supports Essex as a usurper. This material was stricken from the First Quarto, published in 1600, and later restored in the First Folio, published in 1623. In conclusion, I hope that this paper demonstrates how in *Richard II* and *Henry V*, Shakespeare references the past troubles surrounding Mary, Queen of Scots, and alludes to the growing tension between Essex and the crown; Shakespeare suggests in these two plays that he would not have been against usurpation of the English crown, should it occur.

## II. Mary Stuart: “The daughter of debate”

Queen Elizabeth was never free from plots against her person and authority, and one of the most dangerous threats to the English throne during her reign was her first cousin once removed, Mary Stuart – more commonly known as Mary, Queen of Scots. The relationship between the two women vacillated between familial affection and political rivalry. As Wallace MacCaffrey accurately describes the situation, “Her [Elizabeth’s] attitude towards Mary had always had a schizophrenic twist to it. Fear and distrust of a rival who had asserted her claims from the first days of the reign and had never ceased to pursue them were inherent in their relationship” (350). Nevertheless, many of Elizabeth’s early letters to her cousin demonstrate a

genuine desire to guide the young woman. When Mary's husband, the Earl of Darnley, was killed, Elizabeth wrote to her cousin: "O madame, I would not do the office of faithful cousin or affectionate friend if I studied rather to please your ears than employed myself in preserving your honor."<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth's letter offers both condolence and advice: sorrow over the death of Darnley and a warning against associating with the suspected murders. Mary's persistence in ignoring Elizabeth's advice, however, began to frustrate and infuriate Elizabeth, and her tone grows more severe from the late 1560s to the years right before Mary's execution. For example, we can see the transition from cordiality to sternness in Elizabeth's next letter to Mary in the summer of 1567: "...we have thought it meet, both for our profession and your comfort, in these few words to testify not only by admonishing you for the worst but to comfort you for the best."<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth's cold civility towards her cousin grew even more severe as Mary demonstrated that she was a dangerous neighbor and prisoner.

Elizabeth's experiences under Mary Tudor's reign had taught her that if English subjects were unhappy with the present ruler, they would have no qualms about supporting the person with the next best claim to the throne if they believed this claimant would represent their interests. Thus, when Mary Stuart fled Scotland after her forced abdication and sought refuge in England, Elizabeth was immediately wary of housing her cousin within her borders. Although Elizabeth and her Catholic subjects had lived in relative tolerance of each other for most of her reign,<sup>4</sup> the possibility of restoring a Catholic power to the throne of England was incredibly tempting for some devout papists. Mary, Queen of Scots presented such an opportunity, and her imprisonment in Northern England, the last real Catholic stronghold in England, proved a

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<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth I, Queen of England. "Queen Elizabeth to Mary, Queen of Scots, February 24, 1567." *Elizabeth I: Collected Works*. Ed. Leah S. Marcus, Janel M. Mueller, Mary Beth Rose. Chicago: Chicago University, 2000. 116-117.

<sup>3</sup> "Queen Elizabeth to Mary, Queen of Scots, June 23, 1567." *Elizabeth I: Collected Works*. 117-119.

<sup>4</sup> MacCaffrey 327-336.

dangerous situation during the failed Northern Rebellion of 1569. Weir remarks, “There is no doubt that this rebellion constituted the most dangerous threat to her throne that Elizabeth had encountered since her accession” (Weir 208).

After the disastrous uprising, Mary was kept under even tighter surveillance by Elizabeth’s spymaster, Francis Walsingham. In 1585, he uncovered the Babington plot, and Mary’s involvement in the conspiracy was finally enough to convict her of treason. Unbeknown to the conspirators, however, “Walsingham’s agents were shadowing every move they made from the very inception of the scheme” (MacCaffrey 347). The plot, which aimed to depose or even assassinate Elizabeth and replace her with Mary, earned Mary her death sentence when the evidence of her compliance was presented to English officials. Mary’s trial was quick affair, as the English were already convinced of her guilt.<sup>5</sup>

Elizabeth was then presented with the most difficult decision of her life: either she could pardon her treasonous cousin, who posed a serious threat to Elizabeth’s authority, or she could condemn a divinely-appointed queen to death, an action that would surely incur the wrath of Catholic foreign powers.<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth’s final letter to Mary seems reluctant, yet resigned; Elizabeth was unwilling to sign the death warrant but also knew Mary had given her little choice. Elizabeth explains to her cousin in a letter, “And to the end you may have no just cause (lying as you do within our protection, and thereby subject to the laws of our realm and to such a trial as by us shall be thought meet, agreeable to our laws).”<sup>7</sup> Thus, Elizabeth placed the blame for her reactions to Mary’s plotting squarely on Mary and on the laws of England: Mary had engaged in treason against Elizabeth, and the laws of the land now dictated a trial and execution. Ultimately,

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<sup>5</sup> MacCaffrey 348-350.

<sup>6</sup> MacCaffrey 350-351.

<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth I, Queen of England. “Digest of Elizabeth’s Letter to Mary, Queen of Scots, October 6, 1586.” *Elizabeth I: Collected Works* 287-288.

Elizabeth signed the warrant and Mary was executed on February 7, 1587; it was a decision that would haunt Elizabeth for years to come.

### III. Essex: The Ireland Campaign and After

Only a little over a decade passed between Mary's death and the botched rebellion of Essex. The Earl of Essex had been regarded as one of the Elizabeth's favorites, and he was also incredibly popular among her subjects and many of her courtiers.<sup>8</sup> Despite his popularity, Essex had many faults that became more pronounced as time passed. As Alison Weir explains, "He could be moody, imperious, petulant and difficult, and, when his temper was roused, he tended to be rashly impulsive" (Weir 385). This kind of attitude was tolerated by the queen for a time, but eventually Essex crossed a line that made it impossible for the queen to excuse him, even if she had wanted to.

Essex, always convinced of his military prowess and determined to have the opportunity to be a great war hero, pleaded with the queen to be sent to Ireland, where it was becoming clear at the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century that the rebellions in Ireland demanded immediate attention. Late in the summer of 1598, Queen Elizabeth received reports of "the annihilation of English troops at Blackwater in Ulster" (Shapiro 51). The queen was reluctant to send Essex to Ireland; she was well aware of his rashness after his foolish attempt to draw his sword in anger after she had hit him for being impudent. Unfortunately, no one else wanted the position in Ireland, and the Elizabeth had no other option but to send Essex.<sup>9</sup> The Earl left for Ireland in March 1599 on a mission he could not win for "The queen was too miserly to pay the huge price to subdue Ireland" (Shapiro 52). Although Essex still envisioned a great military victory to add to his name

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<sup>8</sup> Weir, Alison. *The Life of Elizabeth I.* New York: Ballantine, 2008. 401.

<sup>9</sup> Weir 434-439.



and reputation, in reality he was commanding a force reminiscent of Falstaff's soldiers in *Henry IV*. As Falstaff himself describes them:

I pressed me none but such toast-and-butter, with hearts in their bellies no bigger than pins' heads, and they have bought out their services; and now my whole charge consists of ancients, corporals, lieutenants, gentlemen of companies – slaves as ragged as Lazarus in the painted cloth, where the glutton's dogs licked his sores, and such as indeed were never soldiers... (4.6.20-27)

Thus Essex departed for Ireland, along with his loyal friend, the Earl of Southampton, who was also out of favor with the queen and who had been expressly forbidden from accompanying Essex.<sup>10</sup>

Essex's campaign in Ireland was a disaster. Weir states that "Whilst Tyrone was blazing his conquests throughout Christendom, Essex could only write letters boasting of his supposed prowess, when in fact he had squandered men, money and resources" (Weir 442). After receiving charged and critical letters from the queen, Essex grew increasingly paranoid that his rival factions at court were eroding his position of power and influence back home. As a result of his paranoia, he abandoned his troops in Ireland and returned to England determined to reestablish his status at court. This act only propelled Essex's fall from favor and marked the beginning of the end of his reputation and life. His impertinent return to the palace, where he surprised the queen in her bedchamber, was understandably ill-received, and Essex earned himself house-arrest.<sup>11</sup> Confinement did not agree with the impatient Essex, who began to plot against the queen. Believing he was still in the right and a victim of the Elizabeth's unfair anger, Essex gathered his friends and supporters for meetings during which their plan for the 1601 rebellion slowly materialized.

The Earl's assumptions about his popularity with the English people were greatly

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<sup>10</sup> Falocco, Joe. "Shakespeare, Essex, and Machiavelli." *Journal of the Wooden O Symposium* 2 (2002): 68-69.

<sup>11</sup> Weir 444-455.

different from the reality. His overconfidence resulted in his embarrassing attempt to storm the Court and place himself in charge. Carole Levin writes, “With his supporters, who numbered less than 200, Essex marched through London expecting the populace to throng out to join him....None of the citizens joined him and most of his supporters melted away” (Levin 102). Before even reaching the Court, Essex, realizing his plan had failed miserably, retreated back to his house where he was arrested later that evening. Within two weeks, he was found guilty of treason and was executed at the Tower of London.<sup>12</sup>

#### IV. Shakespeare’s Patron

Throughout all of this turmoil, Shakespeare was under the patronage of the Essex’s right-hand man – Southampton. Southampton was also related to Essex by marriage; he covertly married to Essex’s cousin, Elizabeth Vernon, in 1598.<sup>13</sup> Essex had a most devoted friend in Southampton. A quotation from Charles Danvers, a fellow supporter of Essex, demonstrates the deep fidelity Southampton had for Essex: “...my Lord of Southampton...made me knowe how far he would adventure himselfe for my Lord of Essex, that he would adventure his lyfe to save him and enter into banishment with him if need were...” (qtd. in Albright 1928, 729). Such a promise was fulfilled when Essex and Southampton were jointly tried for treason, although Southampton’s sentence was commuted to life imprisonment in the Tower, from where he was later released under King James I.<sup>14</sup>

While there is clear evidence demonstrating the friendship between Essex and Southampton, the same cannot be said for Southampton and Shakespeare. Unfortunately for

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<sup>12</sup> Shapiro 332.

<sup>13</sup> Weir 433-439. Southampton’s marriage precipitated his fall out of favor with Elizabeth, who was always angered when courtiers married without her consent. Thus, Elizabeth did not want him to accompany Essex to Ireland.

<sup>14</sup> Levin 102.

modern scholars, time has not been kind to many records we would now consider valuable, making it nearly impossible to establish the exact extent of the relationship between patron and playwright. As G.P.V. Akrigg explains, “If in the files [of Southampton’s personal correspondence] there were letters from an actor named Shakespeare they were presumably deemed unimportant and not preserved” (Akrigg 72). Despite this setback, there still remains a plethora of literary evidence that suggests a close bond between the two men. Doing justice to the abundance of material and research on this subject would require a separate thesis; however, in order to fully understand how Shakespeare’s plays were products of his environment, I must briefly broach the topic.

A quick search for information on Shakespeare’s sonnets invariably leads one to countless scholarly discussions and articles suggesting that Southampton is the mysterious man to whom Shakespeare addresses many of his poems. Such a claim is difficult to substantiate beyond the simple fact that Southampton was Shakespeare’s patron, although one key example of “evidence” cites the dates of composition for Shakespeare’s first sonnets and for *The Rape of Lucrece*. Written in 1594, *Lucrece* is prefaced by a dedication “To the right honorable Henry Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton, and Baron of Titchfield.” Shakespeare then continues his dedication by declaring his devotion to the Earl.<sup>15</sup> Shakespeare’s eloquent praise for his patron makes the theory about the subject of the sonnets more plausible. Arthur Acheson takes this conjecture a step further and contends that if the first sonnets “can be proven to have been produced in 1594 and 1595, [they] must also have been addressed to Southampton” (Acheson 52). Again, this is merely educated speculation, but it is a compelling argument that certainly helps explain facets of Shakespeare’s *Richard II* and *Henry V*, as I will explain later.

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<sup>15</sup> Shakespeare, William. “The Rape of Lucrece.” *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*. 6<sup>th</sup> ed. Ed. David Bevington. New York: University of Chicago, 2009. 1674.

The implied close nature of the relationship between the playwright and the Earl is further argued by Joe Falocco in his analysis of how Shakespeare's plays changed during the 1590s. Plague outbreaks, which caused the temporary closing of the theaters, were a common feature of Elizabethan life. As a result, Falocco argues, Shakespeare may have lodged in Southampton's home while he was momentarily out of work during a series of outbreaks. It was during this time period that Shakespeare began setting his plays in Italy, which may have been for a variety of reasons. One explanation is that Italy was foreign, giving the plays a taste of the exotic that would hopefully lure crowds. Such a setting would also allow the playwright to subtly critique and satirize England. By placing his characters somewhere other than England, Shakespeare made it harder for censors to pinpoint direct criticism of England and the crown. According to Falocco, however, this trend of Italian settings was a direct consequence of Shakespeare's proximity to Southampton. Since his patron was "the most Italianate of Elizabethan courtiers" (Falocco 66), Shakespeare might have begun to incorporate the Italian aspects of his current residence into his plays.

Although one might argue that the first two reasons for Shakespeare's change of setting – the exoticism and the possibility for satire – are more plausible, I would counter that Shakespeare could have accomplished these goals with nearly any other foreign country. The question of why Italy specifically might best be answered by a combination of the first two reasons plus the presence of an Italianate environment pervading Shakespeare's imagination. If we give credence to Falocco's interpretation of events, then Italian play settings are a further indication of a familiar relationship between Shakespeare and Southampton. Such a connection supports my argument that Shakespeare was influenced by his environment, an environment that was not always pro-Elizabeth; I will illustrate later just how this influence impacted Shakespeare's

*Richard II* and *Henry V*.

It is logical to assume that the presence of Southampton can explain various attributes of Shakespeare's works; it is therefore equally probable that through his patron, Shakespeare was associated with Essex. Thus, Shakespeare's writing was almost certainly influenced by such connections. Since Shakespeare was under the patronage of Southampton when Essex was becoming more involved with the politics of state and the wars in Ireland, we should not be surprised to discover references to Essex's campaigns within Shakespeare's plays, notably in *Richard II* and *Henry V*. I would argue that the still-raw memory of the execution of Mary, Queen of Scots for treasonous plots in conjunction with persistent rumors that Essex intended to usurp Elizabeth – which culminated in his failed coup – meant that any literature that even hinted at support of a new ruler was highly controversial and censored by the government. As we will see, Shakespeare's plays, particularly the beginning and end of his second tetralogy, were not immune to such treatment; as a result, different versions of the plays were published and performed at different points in history because of the extremely charged material they contained. Even though the historical context of these plays is far removed from the modern reader, we cannot forget that for Shakespeare and his contemporary audiences, these political topics were incredibly important and pervaded much of their literature.

Shakespeare's use of a usurper who brings an end to the correct hereditary lineage in his tetralogy of *Richard II*, *1 + 2 Henry IV*, and *Henry V* would have been an incredibly poignant scenario for Elizabeth audiences. According to one theory, the stratification of people on earth was supposed to adhere to the model of the Great Chain of Being, where monarchs were chosen by God to rule over common men and women (McDonald 319). The Great Chain of Being model relates to Queen Elizabeth's reservations about executing Mary, Queen of Scots: she

believed it would be wrong for her to kill one of God's anointed queens as such an act would completely disrupt the natural order of the world.<sup>16</sup> Troublingly for proponents of the Great Chain of Being, Shakespeare's plays sometimes challenge this system: "The usurper is not punished for this offense to the Great Chain of Being, but instead prospers and is...a model of effective kingship" (Falocco 64). Essex and his supporters ascribed to the view that Essex could also become "a model of effective kingship" based on his charisma and leadership qualities. Falocco suggests that this mentality is Machiavellian in that men like Essex believed a monarch had the right to lead "not because he was born a king, but rather because...he understood the practical requirements of kingship" (Falocco 67). While the common people may have embraced a leader who "represented a vision of new political order" (67), the nobility and the queen were surely unwilling to relinquish their authority. I argue that, Shakespeare incorporates the general populous' perception of Essex and his faction in his plays, regardless of how popular such ideas were among Elizabeth and her court.

## V. Elizabeth and Richard II

The connections between *Richard II* and the contemporary politics are quite complex. It is easy simply to read the deposition scene as a reference to the Essex conspiracy, but such a reading does not take into account all of the other factors contributing to the environment in which Shakespeare was writing. Such a reading also does not consider the date the play was first published and the dates of Essex's conspiracy and rebellion. The First Quarto publication of *Richard II* was produced in 1597; whereas, Essex's rebellion did not occur until 1601. Although Robert Cecil claimed during Essex's trial that Essex "had been devising five or six years to be king of England" (qtd. in Albright 1927, 699), which would place the start of the conspiracy

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<sup>16</sup> Levin 98.

around the same time as the creation of *Richard II*, this does not necessarily mean that Shakespeare was writing with Essex in mind. I do not mean to suggest that Shakespeare's play was completely innocent of containing potentially seditious material, as I will illustrate later, but that we must be careful with our analysis of the play. As Rebecca Lemon keenly observes, "Texts formerly perceived as moderate, popular, scholarly, or at least unremarkable are suspected of prompting, in a time of crisis, the treasonous action of the state's opponents. Essex's fear that his books would tell tales...stems precisely from his awareness of such retrospective interpretation" (77-78). *Richard II* is fascinating when read with the historical context in mind, as it recalls earlier troubles in Elizabeth's reign and eerily foreshadows future plots.

The story of Richard II was always a troubling one during the rule of Elizabeth. Throughout her reign, there were numerous plots against the Crown, notably those of Mary, Queen of Scots and, later, the Earl of Essex. Thus, many in England – including Elizabeth herself – associated the queen with the historical king. In one of the most oft-quoted passages from a manuscript by William Lambard, Queen Elizabeth declares, "I am Richard II, know ye not that?" (qtd. in Albright 1927, 692). Scholars speculate over whether or not Elizabeth was further alluding to her connection to the former king in her poem "The Doubt of Future Foes." In the final stanza, Elizabeth writes:

My rusty sword through rest  
Shall first his edge employ  
To pull their tops that seek such change  
Or gape for future joy.<sup>17</sup>

The editors of *Elizabeth I: Collected Works* note that in other manuscripts, the third line of the stanza uses the word "poll" rather than "pull," where "poll" would mean "to cut off"; this might

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<sup>17</sup> Elizabeth I, Queen of England. "The Doubt of Future Foes." *Elizabeth I: Collected Works*. Ed. Leah S. Marcus, Janel M. Mueller, Mary Beth Rose. Chicago: Chicago University, 2000. 134.

be a reference to *Richard II* 3.4.<sup>18</sup> In 3.4, the gardener espouses his negative views on Richard II through an elaborate garden metaphor. He tells a man that he should “Go thou, and like an executioner / Cut off the heads of too-fast-growing sprays / That look too lofty in our commonwealth” (*Richard II* 3.4.33-35). This first instruction is merely in reference to actual gardening, yet the gardener turns the act of pruning into a metaphor for what should be done with Richard. The gardener continues the comparison:

Superfluous branches  
We lop away, that bearing boughs may live;  
Had he done so, himself had borne the crown  
Which waste of idle hours hath quite thrown down. (*Richard II* 3.4.63-66)<sup>19</sup>

In other words, the gardener believes Richard is dead weight to the government, preventing a stronger king or government to prosper. As such, Richard must be removed or killed like the “superfluous branches.” Elizabeth’s poem indicates her fear that other claimants to the throne will think in the same manner as Shakespeare’s gardener: Elizabeth is no longer beneficial to England, therefore, she must be removed from power. Considering her experience with Mary, Queen of Scots, as well as various other potential usurpers<sup>20</sup>, it should be unsurprising to us that Elizabeth found similarities between her situation and that of King Richard II.

Other prominent figures in the country perceived the same connection between Elizabeth and Richard II. Interestingly, one of the surviving records that refers to Queen Elizabeth as Richard II comes from Sir Francis Knollys, the grandfather of the Earl of Essex. Concerned for the queen’s safety, Knollys was frustrated that Elizabeth would not heed the advice of her counselors in regards to taking measures against plots to overthrow her. Knollys wonders who

<sup>18</sup> Footnote 8 to “The Doubt of Future Foes,” *Elizabeth I: Collected Works*. 134.

<sup>19</sup> *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*. 6<sup>th</sup> ed. Ed. David Bevington. New York: Pearson, 2009.

<sup>20</sup> The Duke of Norfolk was one of these potential usurpers. Norfolk was eventually executed for plotting to marry Mary, Queen of Scots in 1572. As the first peer in England, Norfolk’s marriage alliance with Mary would have given him a considerable claim to Elizabeth’s throne. The decision to execute Norfolk was not easy for Elizabeth, however, and she would again illustrate her reluctance to execute family members for treason when Mary was caught in the Babington Plot. (MacCaffrey 136-139.)



would be willing to “play the partes of King Richard the Second’s men” if to do so would incur the displeasure of the queen (qtd. in Albright 1927, 691). Knollys’ recognition of the connections between Elizabeth and Richard suggests that we cannot read Shakespeare’s *Richard II* as a merely historical play. Shakespeare’s plays are a reflection of the time in which they were written; thus, with Elizabeth and subjects already drawing the connections between Richard and the queen, we must assume that the well-connected Shakespeare was also making these connections and consequently wrote *Richard II* with the story’s political significance in mind.

The threat of usurpation is not the only reason to connect Elizabeth with Richard II: the issue of succession and heirs also creates an interesting comparison. Unmarried, childless, and defiantly opposed to declaring a successor, Elizabeth often battled her Privy Council over the issue of marrying and producing an heir.<sup>21</sup> Richard II was similarly childless, leaving the matter of succession unclear. Lemon argues that Richard’s failures as a king – his tyrannical acts and misconceptions about his role as a monarch – are a kind of metaphorical impotence. Richard’s inability to “produce and support healthy subjects” (Lemon 65) is mirrored by his lack of an heir: “Shakespeare’s play highlights such a literal failure of the childless Richard through the two father-son foils of Gaunt and Bolingbroke, and York and Aumerle” (Lemon 65). Elizabeth was likewise faced with examples of claimants to the throne who had heirs; Mary, Queen of Scots had a son, James, and Katherine Grey, whom the queen fiercely disliked for marrying without permission, produced two sons while imprisoned in the Tower.<sup>22</sup> Clearly, the similarities between the reign of Richard II and Elizabeth were far from obscure; while the connections to Essex did not come until much later, the treacherous events associated with Mary, Queen of Scots provided plenty of material for those wishing to compare the past and present sovereigns.

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<sup>21</sup> MacCaffrey 95-96.

<sup>22</sup> MacCaffrey 83.

As I argued earlier, in agreement with Albright, Shakespeare's plays are most certainly a reflection of the times in which they were written; thus, there are multiple instances indicating that Shakespeare was writing for a contemporary audience with a contemporary England in mind rather than Richard's England of the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Albright notes, for instance, that Shakespeare's York refers to the fabulous fashions in Italy: "Report of fashions in proud Italy, / Whose manners still our tardy-apish nation / Limp after in base imitation" (*Richard II* 2.1.21-23). Albright contends that this is a deliberate anachronism: Shakespeare would most likely have been aware that France was the country to which England looked for new styles during the reign of Richard II, not Italy as in Shakespeare's day. I speculate that this might also be a reference to Shakespeare's "Italianate" patron, Southampton. In either case, Shakespeare's mention of Italy belies his attention to contemporary events, despite the historical subject matter with which he is working. And even more obvious, and troubling to Elizabeth's supporters, is how Shakespeare parallels Richard's failings as a king with recent events in Elizabethan history.

A mere ten years had passed between the execution of Mary, Queen of Scots and the publication of *Richard II*. The English people and Queen Elizabeth had quite opposite reactions to the death of Mary: "When news of the execution reached London, the people went wild with joy....The celebrations lasted for a week. But the Queen did not rejoice...She erupted, not only in a torrent of weeping, but also in rage against those who had acted on her behalf and driven her to this" (Weir 380). Giving the order to kill Mary was the most logical option given the circumstances, but Elizabeth was still haunted by the fact that she was ordering the death of not only a relative but an anointed queen.<sup>23</sup> Within the first scene of the play, the connection between Elizabeth and Richard is prominent, as Richard and some of his lords debate the legality of the death of Gloucester, which occurs prior to the action of the play. Bolingbroke argues that

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<sup>23</sup> MacCaffrey 350-354.

Mowbray is a traitor for committing the order, while Mowbray counters that questioning the orders of a monarch, as Bolingbroke does, is the real act of treason.<sup>24</sup> Caught in the issue of legality and treason is Richard himself. As Lemon remarks, “Having commissioned Gloucester’s murder, Richard cannot have his courtiers raise the issue in a court of law” (59). To avoid any further debate on the matter, Richards orders Bolingbroke and Mowbray to leave court so that:

...your swords and lances arbitrate  
 The swelling difference of your settled hate.  
 Since we cannot atone you, we shall see  
 Justice design the victor's chivalry. (*Richard II* 1.1.200-203)

In contrast to the celebratory attitude the English had regarding Mary’s death, Shakespeare’s dialogue in the first scene echoes Elizabeth’s own struggles with the decision to sign the death warrant. The decision to kill or not kill Mary had both political and personal ramifications. As I noted earlier, Elizabeth was personally tormented at the prospect of shedding royal blood, even if Mary was a convicted traitor to the English crown. Politically, Elizabeth was trapped between her councilors and foreign powers. Her councilors, similar to Richard’s Mowbray, were eager to do her bidding and eliminate the threat to their queen. In opposition, “[b]oth the Scottish and French kings were interceding for Mary’s life. To alienate either of them was a risky business” (MacCaffrey 350). Richard II and Elizabeth both ultimately order the death of their relative, and although Richard II does not seem to feel any personal remorse, the question of the legality of the action did not sit quietly for either of them.

Shakespeare most likely was not writing with Essex as usurper in mind, unless we take Cecil’s assertion that Essex had been plotting for years as conclusive. Nevertheless, Shakespeare’s play does allude to contemporary events, as I have explained above with the connections to Elizabeth and Mary, Queen of Scots. One current event that figures prominently

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<sup>24</sup> *Richard II* 1.1

in *Richard II*, and will appear even more strikingly in *Henry V*, is the war in Ireland. Relations with Ireland had never been easy, and they worsened drastically when Hugh O'Neill, the earl of Tyrone, revolted in 1595.<sup>25</sup> Shakespeare features Ireland as a hotbed of rebellion within his play. His characters constantly refer to affairs with the neighbor island: King Richard derisively remarks, "Now for our Irish wars: / We must supplant those rough rug-headed kerns" (*Richard II* 5.2.155-156). Shakespeare's play suggests that affairs abroad distract rulers from troubles at home. While Richard is on campaign in Ireland, Bolingbroke seizes the opportunity to gather enough support to overtake the King upon his return to England. When Richard learns of the situation at home, he fumes, "...this thief, this traitor, Bolingbroke, / Who all this while hath reveled in the night / Whilst we were wand'ring with the Antipodes" (*Richard II* 3.2.47-49). Interestingly, the reverse happens with Essex and Elizabeth. Essex returns from Ireland frustrated with his queen and begins plotting against her not long after his less-than-triumphant homecoming. It is easy to see why this play became so controversial as the years passed and Essex became a dominant force in Elizabethan politics.

With the treasonous conspiracy of Mary, Queen of Scots fresh in the memories of the English people, the play was controversial from its conception. The controversy over certain aspects of the play extended well into the turmoil with Essex, ending only after Essex's execution and Elizabeth's death in 1601 and 1603, respectively. The portion of the play that suffered the most censure was the deposition scene in which Richard relinquishes his crown in Act 4; here, the natural order of monarchy is disrupted when Richard admits his defeat and allows Bolingbroke to seize his position as both the mortal king and the divinely-appointed monarch. Bolingbroke summons Richard, who agrees to forfeit his royal rights. Richard instructs the usurper, "Here, cousin, seize the crown" (*Richard II* 4.1.181), yet it is clear that Richard

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<sup>25</sup> Weir 437.

laments his fate. He explains, "...full of tears am I, / Drinking my griefs, whilst you mount up on high" (*Richard II* 4.1.189-190). Richard's diction is extremely telling in this passage. The phrase "mount up on high" has a distinctive biblical resonance that suggests that the divinity of kings is easily overthrown. Bolingbroke's ascension demonstrates that a monarch is not infallible and that usurpation is a very real threat and possibility. Reminders of a defeat such as the one Richard suffers are disturbing for any established monarchy; and sure enough, Elizabeth and her supporters perceived this material to be potentially seditious. Consequently, the Quarto version of 1597 does not include this scene at all. The scene does not appear in any publications of the play that we know until 1608, five years after the death of Elizabeth.<sup>26</sup> One might argue that Shakespeare or another writer could have added the scene later, but this theory is not consistent with other lines in the play that appear in the 1597 Quarto. As Albright demonstrates, without the deposition scene, subsequent lines in the play lose their significance and relevance. She writes: "For without the 'parliament scene' the passage which should follow it (IV, i, 321), 'A woeful pageant have we here beheld,' is meaningless" (Albright 1927, 688). Therefore it is logical for us to assume that Richard's abdication was censored from the original and then later restored.

## VI. *Richard II*: Performance, and Censorship

Whether or not the complete play was ever performed during Elizabeth's lifetime is subject to debate. Queen Elizabeth was exceptionally conscious of her public image and feared anything that would cause her people's loyalty to waiver. If a troupe of players were made to perform a play such as *Richard II* in its entirety in front of the Elizabeth, she would have surely

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<sup>26</sup> Albright 1927, 688.

seen the play as a critique on her character and rule.<sup>27</sup> Even performances in public theaters were not safe from Elizabeth's paranoia. Marcus argues that Elizabeth's statement that she is Richard the II is "interesting because it suggests that Queen Elizabeth considered plays performed in the public theater to be as charged with political intensity as the plays performed in her presence" (Marcus 1986, 144). Despite the strict censorship practiced by the queen and her government, there were ways to circumvent this system for private audiences; although the private performance of *Richard II* eventually became a damning piece of evidence in the trial against Essex and his supporters, the Lord Chamberlain's Men were hired for the express purpose of performing a play that was never allowed to be played in full in the public theaters.<sup>28</sup>

As we know, the deposition scene was censored from the publications during Elizabeth's lifetime, indicating that the scene was most likely never performed in the public theaters. In private, however, there is evidence that suggests that Shakespeare's play was performed by the Lord Chamberlain's Men for Essex's faction the night before the failed rebellion in 1601.

According to the testimony of Augustine Philips, an actor who also owned a part of the troupe:<sup>29</sup>

He [Philips] sayeth that on the Fryday last was sennyght or Thursday Sr Charles Percy Sr Josclyne Percy and the L. Montegle with some thre more spak to some of the players in the presans of thys examinate to have the play of the deposing and kylling of Kyng Rychard the second... (qtd. in McDonald 140).

While Shakespeare's play is never mentioned by name, we can safely assume that this is the play to which Philips refers. First, the testimony reveals later that the players were reluctant to perform the play as it was "so old & so long out of vse" (qtd. in McDonald 140). This hesitance implies two things. First, that the unnamed play was written long before 1601, which makes Shakespeare's play a likely candidate. Two, the players' reluctance "is doubtless due to a wish to

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<sup>27</sup> "The Queen herself seems to have assumed a direct application of the plays she saw to her own person and circumstances. Even the commonest of theatrical conventions took on political specificity" (Marcus 1986, 144).

<sup>28</sup> Shapiro 332.

<sup>29</sup> McDonald 140.

make the most of the fact that the play, having been written some years before the actual attempt of Essex, could not have been composed with any such uprising in view” (Albright 1927, 690). Shakespeare and his men had so far escaped having any plays completely banned, but censorship was still a serious concern; and the Lord Chamberlain’s Men were well aware of the potential dangers of performing certain plays or passages.<sup>30</sup>

Philips’ testimony does not conclusively prove that Shakespeare’s *Richard II* was in fact that play performed, leading many scholars to debate if it was not perhaps another text that was commissioned by the Essex faction. I find myself in the Shakespeare camp, due to the lack of convincing evidence to support the theory of a different play. Ray Heffner argues extensively against any connection between Shakespeare and Essex, mostly in reply to Albright’s assertions that *Richard II* was indeed the play performed that night in 1601.<sup>31</sup> He suggests that the text in question is possibly John Hayward’s book *The Life and Raigne of King Henrie the Fourth* (commonly known as *Henry IV*). Lemon also acknowledges the ongoing debate but argues quite logically, “...while the scholarship of Leeds Barroll and Blair Worden has helped to turn our attention away from Shakespeare’s play toward Hayward’s *Henry IV* as the more likely candidate for the February 7 performance, Shakespeare’s version is the only dramatic text on Richard II that stages the king’s murder” (52). Hayward’s book, while enormously popular at the time<sup>32</sup> – and subject to intense scrutiny by the censorship authorities – was not a dramatic work, and therefore it would have been unsuitable for performance. Furthermore, we cannot forget that the Lord Chamberlain’s Men was Shakespeare’s acting troupe; thus, it is far more probable that they would be performing a work by their own playwright, not that of another company or author.

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<sup>30</sup> Shapiro 137.

<sup>31</sup> Heffner 1930, 754-780.

<sup>32</sup> Lemon 23-24.

An in-depth analysis of Hayward's text would require more space than this thesis allows, yet the book does merit mention as further evidence showing how dangerous any writings on Richard II were during Elizabeth's reign. Part of the debate about Shakespeare versus Hayward regarding the night before the rebellion stems from the numerous similarities between the two works, as well as the dedication Hayward gave his book. The title of Hayward's book is misleading: the focus of the history is on Richard II. Like Shakespeare's play, Henry only becomes king near the end of the account. Choosing such a title might have been deliberate; the connections between Richard II and Elizabeth were present long before Hayward published his book in 1599, so giving prominence to Henry in the title might have been in an effort to deflect any trouble.<sup>33</sup> If this were Hayward's intent, however, he certainly ruined it with his dedication. Lemon remarks, "The history's topic, its immense popularity....and its dedication to the earl of Essex led the crown to suspect Hayward of treason" (23-24). Weir offers an anecdote that demonstrates the significance of Hayward's book:

'Cannot this John Hayward be prosecuted for treason?' [Elizabeth] asked Francis Bacon.

'Not, I think, for treason, Madam, but for felony,' he replied.

'How so?'

'He has stolen so many passages from Tacitus!' smiled Bacon. But Elizabeth was in no mood for jests. (Weir 441)

Since Weir does not provide a clear source for this conversation, I cannot say that I trust it completely. The veracity of the quotation, however, is less important than the sentiments it implies. There was a great uproar from the government over the publication of Hayward's texts, and Hayward was forced to stand trial to defend his work. Shapiro argues that Hayward claimed he was innocent of treason and that his dedication to Essex was not intended to indicate his

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<sup>33</sup> Albright 1927, 701-702.



support of a rebellion should one occur.<sup>34</sup> Hayward's book was deeply indebted to Shakespeare's *Richard II*<sup>35</sup> and further illustrates how a historical account or dramatization could cause such a disturbance during the time period. Even though Shakespeare's play was written long before Essex made his disastrous attempt for the throne, the play *Richard II* was considered dangerous and possibly seditious as the political atmosphere shifted towards the turn of the century. Hayward's misfortunes certainly demonstrate why the Lord Chamberlain's Men were unwilling to perform anything on the subject.

If the above evidence is still not enough to convince one of Shakespeare's polarizing use of current events and politics, one should examine the character of the Duke of York in *Richard II*. While we scholars often try to find Shakespeare's representation of himself in his works, with varying degrees of success, in York we find an interesting glimpse into the life of an observer during great upheaval. York is a loyal man. Yet, his loyalties do not necessarily lie with one man or ruler but rather the abstract authority of the Crown. He attempts to occupy a dangerous middle ground between the old king and the prospective new power. One scholar remarks, "When Bolingbroke returns to England, York attempts to remain 'as neuter' (2.3.159), housing the rebel while maintaining respect for the king" (Lemon 72). In her chapter entitled "Shakespeare's Anatomy of Resistance in *Richard II*," Rebecca Lemon argues that York's unquestioning loyalty to whomever is in power is a parallel to the precarious position of a writer in the midst of political unrest. Although she never explicitly names Shakespeare as the author in mind, Lemon's argument suggests that Shakespeare is a possible model for York. When Richard returns, he does not receive the same welcome as Bolingbroke. York describes the homecoming:

As in a theatre the eyes of men,

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<sup>34</sup> Shapiro 118-123.

<sup>35</sup> Shapiro 122-123. For example, Shapiro compares two passages, one from Hayward and one from Shakespeare, that demonstrate Henry's popularity among his people. The similarities in both tone and theme are striking.

After a well-graced actor leaves the stage,  
 Are idly bent on him that enters next,  
 Thinking his prattle to be tedious,  
 Even so, or with much more contempt, men's eyes  
 Did scowl on gentle Richard. No man cried 'God save him!'  
 No joyful tongue gave him his welcome home (*Richard II* 5.2.23-29)

York is clearly caught between the old and the new regime. He refers to the soon-to-be-deposed sovereign as “gentle Richard,” and yet he does not break the silence to greet Richard; occupying the middle ground makes him ineffectual. In her reaction to this speech, Lemon writes, “Figuring the role of creative writer in the late 1590s England, York attempts to comment on a situation, to serve as the political historian, as the custodian of custom, but instead finds himself drawn into the political fray” (Lemon 76). Shakespeare was in a similar situation: in order to dramatize history, he would please one faction and upset another. With *Richard II*, Shakespeare demonstrates how he is trying to stay in favor with both sides of the political spectrum; to do so, he includes material that suggests a willingness to herald in a new order, even if this means government censorship of his play. As Essex rose in popularity, however, the political undertones in some of Shakespeare's works become less subtle; *Henry V* is more blatant in its support and references to Essex and usurpation.

## VII. Essex and *Henry V*

The theme of deposition in *Richard II* was certainly troubling to the queen and her supporters, although Essex is not necessarily the model for Bolingbroke; the same cannot be said for *Henry V* where Shakespeare clearly alludes to Essex as the usurper. There are numerous similarities between the fictionalized King Henry V and the Earl of Essex, similarities that are especially prominent given their respective stories and situations. Queen Elizabeth was never one to condone war; she always tried for peace and compromise until she and her advisors had

exhausted these options. Thus, Elizabethans were duly apprehensive about wars abroad. Even so, they ultimately hoped for the charismatic Essex's victorious return from Ireland.<sup>36</sup> With anxiety levels running high across the country, "Elizabethans craved a play that reassuringly reminded them of their heroic martial past. What better subject than the famous victories of Henry V?" (Shapiro 91). Shakespeare seized the opportunity and reworked the familiar story to make it more in keeping with contemporary events and concerns. Despite Essex's failings in Ireland, "Shakespeare's Henry fulfills Elizabeth's dreams of repossession, accomplishing what Elizabeth and Essex failed to do by either political or martial means" (Baldo 137).

Prior to Shakespeare's play, however, the version of the story of Henry V with which most Elizabethans would have been familiar was the anonymous play *The Famous Victories of Henry the Fifth*. Modern readers or playgoers who are familiar with Shakespeare might be surprised by the tone of the anonymous play: its author depicts war as a lighthearted affair. By contrast, Shakespeare's play, written in 1599, is a much grittier work that shows the uglier sides of war, not just the heroic endings.<sup>37</sup> From the start of *Henry V*, Shakespeare makes it clear to his audience that the subsequent theatrics will be nothing like *The Famous Victories* and that it will contain a message for the contemporary viewers. *The Famous Victories* opens with "a famous clown bantering with his prince" (Shapiro 87). In the first scene, Henry V is discussing his most recent pranks with his friends, Ned, Tom, and Sir John Old-castle (the model for Shakespeare's Falstaff):

HENRY V: Foure hundred pounds, brauely spoken Lads.  
But tell me sirs, thinke you not that it was a villainous part of  
me to rob my father's Receiuers?  
NED: Why no my Lord, it was but a tricke of youth. (*Famous Victories* 1.23-26)

Shakespeare's play has a much more somber beginning; rather than describe "a tricke of youth,"

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<sup>36</sup> Shapiro 86.

<sup>37</sup> Shapiro 86-87.

this play features a Chorus, who delivers a serious introductory speech:

O for a Muse of fire, that would ascend  
The brightest heaven of invention,  
A kingdom for a stage, princes to act  
And monarchs to behold the swelling scene!  
Then should the warlike Harry, like himself,  
Assume the port of Mars; and at his heels,  
Leash'd in like hounds, should famine, sword and fire  
Crouch for employment. (*Henry V* 1.0.1-8)<sup>38</sup>

Although followers of Shakespeare's tetralogy know that Henry was frequently involved in pranks with Falstaff and company in 1 + 2 *Henry IV*, the Chorus of *Henry V* makes it clear that this Henry has matured and become "warlike." A play of this style most likely resonated deeply with its original audiences, as many members would have had friends and family members fighting abroad. Moreover, the Elizabethan population as a whole was nervous and exasperated with the constant drafts for more men to fill the ill-equipped and ill-trained English ranks. As Shapiro comments, *Henry V* "wasn't a pro-war or an anti-war play but a going-to-war play" (92).

The harsh realities that both the earl and the young king had to face in their respective military campaigns are nothing like the glorified sentiments of *The Famous Victories*. For instance, *The Famous Victories* exaggerates the casualties of the French soldiers and seriously understates the English losses to proportions that are entirely implausible. After the battle, the Earl of Oxford reports to King Henry:

And it please your Maiestie,  
There are of the French armie slaine,  
Aboue ten thousand, twentie sixe hundred  
Whereof are Princes and Nobles bearing banners:  
Besides, all the Nobilitie of France are taken prisoners.  
Of our Maiesties Armie, are slaine none but the good  
Duke of Yorke, and not aboue fiue or six and twentie  
Common souldiers. (*The Famous Victories* 15.5-12)

Clearly, this report of casualties is intended to represent English unity and pride rather than an

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<sup>38</sup> *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*. 6<sup>th</sup> ed. Ed. David Bevington. New York: Pearson, 2009.

accurate depiction of battle. While Shakespeare also celebrates the victory of the English over the French, he does not gloss over the violence of battle. By comparison, Montjoy asks Henry for permission to bury the slain French with a rather graphic depiction of the bodies that “lie drowned and soaked in mercenary blood” (*Henry V* 4.7.75). Such an image would have resonated deeply with an English audience waiting for word from loved ones at war abroad.

Essex’s daunting mission to subdue the Earl of Tyrone and his Irish supporters with inadequate means is highly reminiscent of Henry V’s plight in his battle for the throne of France. The oft-quoted “St. Crispin’s Day Speech” from Act 4 of Shakespeare’s play bears striking resemblance in sentiment to one of Essex’s letters to the Privy Council, demonstrating again how Shakespeare’s environment greatly influenced his writing during this time. Shakespeare’s Henry describes his small army as “We few, we happy few, we band of brothers” (*Henry V* 4.3.60) and tries to dispel any fear about opposing a far larger force: “...and if to live, / The fewer men, the greater share of honor” (4.3.21-22). The young king speaks at length about how those who bravely fight with him at Agincourt will be remembered as heroes for years to come for having fought in this noble and glorious battle. Henry even goes so far as to mock those who stayed home rather than fight, claiming they “Shall think themselves accurs’d they were not here; / And hold their manhoods cheap” (4.3.65-66). Shakespeare’s Henry encourages his men in this David and Goliath situation by putting on a brave face and focusing on the honor and strength of his men. Essex had a similar view on the circumstances in Ireland. Essex’s illustrates his beliefs in a letter to the Privy Council: “To speak plainly, our numbers are inferior to those which come against us, but our cause is better, our order and discipline stronger; our courage likewise, I doubt not, shall be greater” (qtd. in Shapiro 254). Unfortunately for him, Essex did not have the

same luck abroad as Henry.<sup>39</sup> When Shakespeare composed his play, however, the English people still had hope for Essex's expedition. Even though the two campaigns had opposite outcomes, the personality traits that Essex and Henry shared, especially their desire for royal power, were enough to lead eventually to serious scandal-avoiding revisions and omissions in publications of *Henry V* to avoid scandal.

For audiences and readers who are familiar with the state of England from 1599-1600, *Henry V* offers insight into how the people of London might have perceived Essex, his relationship with the queen, and the war in Ireland. As time wore on, the queen and her courtiers realized that Essex believed himself worthy of the throne of England. This was an upsetting realization for the queen, who knew that Essex's popularity with the people, coupled with his volatile nature, could "prove dangerous when he commanded such support [after his victories at Cadiz]" (Weir 424). Thus, when Essex fled home from Ireland and surprised Elizabeth in her bedchamber, she tried her best to remain calm, all the while fearing Essex had brought an army with him to seize the palace.<sup>40</sup> To the English, then, *Henry V* would have come across as highly suggestive of how Essex should conduct himself, considering his similar qualities to the play's protagonist.

Essex's popularity with the people of London is mirrored in the character of Henry V – or Hal, as he is known in *1 and 2 Henry IV*. As Albright explains:

Hal, being historically entitled to the democratic and popular nature, is as much happier choice for comparison with Essex, who was probably the most popular of English favorites at the height of his career, his democratic spirit giving him a strong hold on men of various classes and creeds. (Albright 1928, 730).

Just as Essex was able to connect with the common people of London despite his noble status, so too could Henry. In *1 Henry IV*, we see Hal shirking his princely duties in favor of the company

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<sup>39</sup> Weir 440-446.

<sup>40</sup> Weir 447-448.

of Falstaff and his tavern crew of petty criminals and pranksters. In *Henry V*, the young king's assertion that "...he today that sheds his blood with me / Shall be my brother" (*Henry V* 4.3.61-62) places him on the same level as his subjects. Elizabeth was also well known for being an approachable ruler: on the day of her coronation, "she demonstrated her humanity by stopping her litter to speak in the most 'tender and gentle language' to humble folk" (Weir 37). Although she tried desperately to keep her cult of popularity alive towards the end of her reign, no one could deny that she was growing older and Essex was still young. The English admired young, healthy, popular leaders; as much as they were still fiercely loyal to Elizabeth, her grandeur was waning. Essex could be a new Hal.

Queen Elizabeth had allowed Essex's impudent and childish antics to go unchecked for years, but eventually she grew tired of his petulance, and she often scolded him to reassert her authority.<sup>41</sup> The disputes between Elizabeth and Essex during the late 1590s were well-known, so it unsurprising to find similarities between these events at court and Shakespeare's *Henry V*. In an instance of art imitating life, there is a similar attempt to discredit the young English king in *Henry V*: the French royalty send an insulting gift to Henry that suggests their perception of him as inexperienced and childish. In Act 1, the Dauphin's messenger tells the English court, "He [the Dauphin] therefore sends you, meeter for your spirit, / This tun of treasure; and in lieu of this, / Desires you let the dukedoms that you claim / hear no more of you" (*Henry V* 1.2.254-257). The English open the "tun of treasure" only to find a set of tennis balls. While the French harbor fears that this young upstart will usurp their lands and authority, they also hope to make him look like a foolishly reckless youth with no real chance of conquering French territories. In this sense, the established French royalty might also represent the queen and the rules of succession. The French see th/e son of a usurper, like King Henry, as a disturbance to the natural

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<sup>41</sup> Weir 430-435.

order of monarchies, just as Elizabeth and her supporters perceived ambitious men like Essex, or even conniving women like Mary, Queen of Scots, as dangerous traitors to the queen's authority.

Though the Essex Rebellion of 1601 did not occur until after the composition and staging of *Henry V*, Essex and his co-conspirators began planning their coup not long after his return from Ireland in 1599. The plans were not a well-kept secret. Robert Cecil, Elizabeth's Secretary of State, "knew exactly what was going on, and was prepared to bide his time until Essex had woven enough rope with which to hang himself" (Weir 459). In her 1928 article, Evelyn May Albright suggests that Shakespeare was also aware of Essex's plot, given his use of the Chorus in *Henry V*. The most obvious reference to Essex within the play is at the beginning of the fifth act during the Chorus' opening speech:

But now behold,  
In the quick forge and working-house of thought,  
How London doth pour out her citizens!  
The Mayor and all his brethren in best sort,  
Like to the senators of th' antique Rome,  
With the plebeians swarming at their heels,  
Go forth and fetch their conqu'ring Caesar in:  
As by a lower but loving likelihood,  
Were now the general of our gracious Empress,  
As in good time he may, from Ireland coming,  
Bringing rebellion broached on his sword,  
How many would the peaceful city quite,  
To welcome him! Much more, and much more cause,  
Did they this Harry. (*Henry V* 5.0.122-135).

The direct reference to Ireland is quite indicative of Shakespeare's awareness of the current political situation that involved Essex; it also includes a "projected welcome...of Essex from the Irish wars" (Baldo 146). What is even more interesting is the small window through which we may catch a glimpse of Shakespeare's opinion of the situation. Throughout much of the play, Shakespeare manages to "assert that his writings were essentially apolitical" (Dutton 113) by offering contradictory perspectives: some parts of the play, such as the Chorus' speech above,



seem to embrace the change that Essex could bring to England, while his respectful treatment of the French seems to symbolize his patriotism and loyalty to Queen Elizabeth.<sup>42</sup> In this case, however, the references to Caesar, the famous Roman emperor who began his political career as a general in the army, and the “plebeians swarming at their heels,” seem to indicate that Shakespeare not only knows of Essex’s planned coup d’état, but he also would support such an uprising. Furthermore, the line “Bringing rebellion broached on his sword” can be read as encouragement for Essex. While one could see the “rebellion” as a reference to the rebel Irishmen, there is a more subversive interpretation. If one takes “broached” in the “very common sense, *set loose, begin, introduce, initiate*” (Albright 1928, 733), then it appears as though Shakespeare knew of a plan in which Essex would return from his war in Ireland with the intent of seizing power from Elizabeth.

The obvious reference to Essex by the Chorus is emphasized later in Act V. When Henry meets the Queen of France, she addresses him as “brother Ireland” (5.2.12) in the Quarto version.<sup>43</sup> Shapiro argues that “The mistake is not the nervous queen’s but Shakespeare’s, who slipped when intending to write ‘brother England’ (and whose error modern editors silently correct)” (Shapiro 88). He explains Shakespeare’s “error” as a result of the preoccupation many Englishmen and -women had with the war in Ireland. Indeed, my own edition of the play, from David Bevington’s anthology, is one of the many modern editions where “Ireland” has been replaced with “England” (*Henry V* 5.2.12). I feel I must question the assumption that this is merely a “revealing textual error” (Taylor 7); such an argument would not be consistent with the rest of the play. When we consider the other quite explicit allusions to Essex and the similarities

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<sup>42</sup> Baldo 157.

<sup>43</sup> Taylor, Gary. “Introduction.” *Henry V*. By William Shakespeare. Ed. Gary Taylor. New York: Oxford University, 1982. 7-8. Taylor gives further examples of references to Ireland in *Henry V*, demonstrating that “[w]hat can hardly be disputed is the playwright’s preoccupation with Irish affairs” (7).

between Henry and the earl, why then must we so easily dismiss this particular quotation from Act V as erratum? If Shakespeare constantly references the political atmosphere of his time throughout his dramas, then Queen Isabel's line might be intentional. Calling Henry "brother Ireland" would be yet another example of Shakespeare's attempt to draw comparisons between Essex and Henry. Queen Isabel's title refers to the place from which Henry came. Thus, in the unchanged line, she says Henry is coming from Ireland. Clearly, this is historically inaccurate since Henry is from England, as is Essex. Yet, this still could be a subtle nod to Essex's campaign. Shakespeare's Chorus before Act V says Essex is "from Ireland coming" (*Henry V* 5.0.131) and will begin his uprising upon his return. I therefore contend that if we accept the Chorus from the Folio version as an indication of Shakespeare's political awareness, then we must also accept the "brother Ireland" line as further evidence.

### VIII. *Henry V* and Early Publications

Given the potentially seditious aspects of *Henry V*, it is unsurprising that the play underwent major revision before being published. There are two main versions of the text that we must consider, and the differences between the two are extremely revealing: the First Quarto, and the First Folio, published in 1600 and 1623, respectively. While the Folio version was put into circulation much later, it appears as though it is actually an older version of Shakespeare's text.<sup>44</sup> The Quarto, by comparison, is stripped of all references to Essex and all passages that may have caused offense to the queen. One might argue that the later Folio version represents Shakespeare's later emendations to the text, but this would be incongruous with the time period. Since the additional material in the Folio is centered on "subjects which would be thought 'unsafe' ...in a play in 1599-1600" (Albright 1928, 724), there would have been no logical reason

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<sup>44</sup> Albright 1928, 723.

for a playwright or publisher to add social commentary so many years after its relevance had passed.

Even though Shakespeare died in 1616, seven years before the release of the First Folio, the sixteen years between the Quarto's publication and the writer's death offered enough time for the social and political atmosphere to change, making the censored topics passé. For example, the lack of choruses in the Quarto version indicates that it was edited so it would pass inspection by the Master of the Revels, the government's censorship authority. The character of the Chorus has been in use since the Festivals of Dionysus in ancient Greece, although its form has changed over the centuries. Its function "was to didactically instruct the audience as to the play's political message" (Falocco 72). In *Henry V*, the Chorus reminds the audience that they are, in fact, at a performance and must see the parallels between reality and drama. However, The Chorus that begins Act V, with its mention of Ireland and rebellion is missing from the Quarto text but appears in the Folio. By the time of the Folio's publication, Essex's execution was merely a memory, and Elizabeth had been dead for two decades. The question of succession had long ago been resolved with the accession of James I, Essex was no longer a threat, and there was no longer a queen who "was as inclined as ever to view plays as a political commentary upon herself" (Marcus 1986, 144). These rebellious topics and Shakespeare's chorus were no longer taboo on the English stage, and so the Folio edition could now pass by the censors unharmed.

The improbability of the Folio's extra lines being a later addition to the text is underscored by their frequent omission from modern productions. Just as the references to Essex and Ireland were no longer controversial in 1623, these same references have no resonance with modern audiences who are most likely unaware of the historical context. We lose the significance of a character who resembles a controversial Elizabethan earl. For instance,

even Kenneth Branagh – who displayed his insistence on remaining as true as possible to Shakespeare’s text with his unabridged version of *Hamlet* in 1996 – cut out the Act V chorus in his 1989 film *Henry V*. The Chorus, played by Derek Jacobi, dresses in modern attire among characters who are dressed in medieval costume, signifying the distance between the audience and the players; his costume breaks the fourth wall and reminds the viewers they are watching a performance. Since the film is already so removed from the years of the events of the play as well as its original performance and context, Branagh’s removal of the Act V introduction by the Chorus indicates that Branagh had no need to incorporate such a politically charged and topical speech, especially by a character who already stands out because of his attire. The elimination of material that is outdated in a modern adaption supports my earlier argument that Shakespeare would have also found it unnecessary to add the politically based choruses after the publication of the Quarto and the events of 1601.

To briefly return to the subject of the Great Chain of Being and its connections to the two copies of the *Henry V* text, we should examine some of Henry’s lines in Act 4.1, when he ventures among his troops in disguise. Here, Shakespeare presents us with another instance in which the theory of the Great Chain of Being is debunked by Henry’s actions in the First Folio. In this version of the scene, Henry himself denounces the concept of the divinity of monarchs. He tells his soldiers that he believes there is nothing extraordinary about a king, that he “is but a man, as I am” (*Henry V* 4.1.102). He then continues for several more lines, describing how even though a ruler may seem as though he is on a different social plane than the common man, he still feels the same emotions as the rest of human population. This argument against the special nature of the ruling class is thereby diminished greatly, as Albright demonstrates in her comparison of this speech to the one in the Quarto. In the Quarto’s text, the passage is shortened

to a mere two lines and is “written in bad verse, ‘Nay say not so, he is a man as we are. / The Violet smells to him as to us’” (Albright 1928, 731). The revisions to the Quarto indicate how controversial an attack on the model of the Great chain of Being was in such a stratified society as Elizabethan England. Again, we must accept the Folio as an earlier version of the text that was restored for later publication. Therefore, even though we cannot determine who actually made the changes for the publication in 1600, we must conclude that someone – whether it was the playwright, acting company, or publisher – was attempting to create a less offensive and obvious commentary with the Quarto edition.

Essex was not the only figure implicated in treasonous affairs by the First Folio; this edition also suggests that other prominent figures in England were potentially involved in the controversy. At the turn of the century, the political atmosphere in London became so charged and tumultuous that it was necessary for someone to remove sections and rework lines within *Henry V* to exonerate the guilty parties. One such figure is the Archbishop of Canterbury. While conducting my research, I was surprised to find no mention of one of the Archbishop’s most prestigious tasks and its significance to his role in the play: the Archbishop of Canterbury presides over royal coronations. His support of Essex would have implied that the Archbishop was no longer loyal to Elizabeth and that he would aid Essex in his endeavors to take the throne. In fact, one of Essex’s agents declared at the English Court that the Archbishop was “a staunch supporter of Essex in the Council” (Albright 1928, 737). Knowing this, I then examined the differences between the Archbishop’s lines in the Quarto and Folio versions and could see the validity of Albright’s theory, which argues that the Folio is closer to Shakespeare’s original play. In the Folio edition, with which most modern readers are familiar, the Archbishop pledges his commitment, and that of the rest of the clergy, to Henry:

In aid whereof we of the spirituality  
 Will raise Your Highness such a mighty sum  
 As never did the clergy at one time  
 Bring in to any of your ancestors. (*Henry V* 1.2.132-135)

If this play had been written at a time of relative peace, it is likely that the Archbishop's lines would not have been so drastically reduced prior to publication in 1600. The Quarto is missing this speech entirely, which further hints that the Folio preceded the Quarto.<sup>45</sup> The person or persons who censored the play and created the Quarto were clearly conscious of the repercussions they might suffer from a play that associated the contemporary Archbishop with treason. Again, after the deaths of both Elizabeth and Essex, Shakespeare and his publishers would have had no reason to delve into such comparisons and create these lines for the later Folio.

## IX. Conclusions

Through this essay, I have attempted to demonstrate how Shakespeare's plays *Richard II* and *Henry V* were greatly influenced by the political environment in which Shakespeare was living. Much of Queen Elizabeth's reign was conducted in relative peace, although it was not entirely without tension and turmoil. Despite Elizabeth's deft avoidance of many difficult situations, such as religion and marriage, she still faced opposition and the threat of deposition. Her cousin Mary Stuart provided her first real challenge for power and authority, ending, of course, in the exiled queen's execution – a decision that plagued Elizabeth. But even after the threat of Mary had passed, the memory of her conspiracy stayed strong in the memories of Elizabethans. Shakespeare, fully cognizant of these memories, uses them to convey political messages and commentary in *Henry V* and *Richard II*.

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<sup>45</sup> Albright 1928, 731.

The Earl of Essex was the last great internal challenge to Elizabeth's reign and represented an episode all the more painful because of the close relationship the two had once shared. His betrayal resulted in disaster and an embarrassingly pathetic uprising, as well as the end of any partiality the queen might have once bestowed on her courtier. Essex's charisma made him a popular figure in the minds of Elizabethan subjects. After his victories in Cadiz, "[p]reachers praised him as a champion of Protestantism, and spoke of his honour, justice and wisdom. There was no doubt that he was the most popular and important man in England" (Weir 423). Thus, when he finally convinced the queen to grant him command of the English forces in Ireland, all of England looked to him to deliver them from the misery of the Irish wars. Fortune was unkind to Essex, although his own military failings are also surely to blame, and his unsuccessful campaign in Ireland marked the beginning of his fall from power, influence, and sanity and culminated in his execution for treason.

As I have explained in this essay, William Shakespeare's plays demonstrate a keen awareness of Elizabethan culture and politics. His scheming and jocular Falstaff makes rather pointed remarks about the state of English soldiers in *1 Henry IV*, for example, but it is the first and last plays of the second tetralogy that demonstrate the greatest attention to contemporary events. Through this discussion, I have attempted to demonstrate how the story of Richard II was controversial well before the conception of Shakespeare's play, but Shakespeare was the only playwright daring enough to actually show the deposition of Richard II. With the events surrounding Mary Stuart still a recent memory and the controversy over Essex looming on the horizon, *Richard II* – and any other texts on this king, such as John Hayward's book – became quite polemical. The Lord Chamberlain's Men, doubtless aware of Hayward's plight regarding *The Life and Raigne of King Henrie the Fourth*, as well as the potentially dangerous nature of

*Richard II*, were understandably hesitant to perform Shakespeare's play in its entirety. The troupe was correct in its conviction that no good could come from staging the deposition scene; the performance was a crucial part of the damning evidence against Essex and his faction in their trials for treason.

We may plausibly argue that Shakespeare was not writing *Richard II* with Essex in particular in mind, although he was certainly recalling the recent history involving Mary. In the case of *Henry V*, however, I believe that Shakespeare was an advocate of Essex and his faction and demonstrates this throughout his play. It is not simply a play that harkens back to England's patriotic and victorious glory days; its references to Essex show a willingness to support a usurper. In analyzing the text of the first Quarto, we see that the revisions were part of a deliberate attempt to mask the seditious qualities of the original drafts of the play. The Earl of Southampton's patronage of Shakespeare also undoubtedly impacted the playwright's worldview. While some scholars disagree and believe that Shakespeare stays completely neutral in his works,<sup>46</sup> the evidence I have provided suggests otherwise. Shakespeare was a master playwright, capable of evoking great emotion and provoking deep thought. For scholars to assume that the censored scenes and lines in *Richard II* and *Henry V* were merely coincidence, and do not reflect Shakespeare's understanding of the world in which he lived, would be to insult his talent.

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<sup>46</sup> Heffner 754.



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