

Nahum Tate's *Richard II* and the Late Stuart Succession Crisis

Professor Paulina Kewes in conversation with Dr Joseph Hone

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Joseph Hone: I'm sitting here in the Bodleian Library with Professor Paulina Kewes, and we're looking at some plays from the Restoration, particularly adaptations of Shakespeare made after the Restoration. Now, Paulina, why exactly did these Restoration playwrights turn to Shakespeare and adapt his plays for their audiences?

Paulina Kewes: Theatres reopened in 1660 after an eighteen year hiatus, and there was a huge demand for new plays. obviously there were no playwrights because there had been no theatres before. so there was push to adapt older plays in order to make them effective on the new stage. And there were three key requirements: (a) to have more parts for women, because this is the first time when we have actresses. Secondly, to take advantage of movable scenery which again appeared for the first time. And, thirdly, to take advantage of special effects of machines. So just to give you an example: *Macbeth* adapted by having more parts for women. In addition to Lady Macbeth we have a larger part for Lady Macduff, and more witches. The witches are now *flying* across the stage. But adapting Shakespeare also gave the opportunity to play right to address political themes. Immediately after the Restoration, early after the Restoration, we have for example a version of the *Tempest* which revisits the themes of rebellion and regicide in the tragicomic mode whilst also adding more parts for women. Even Ariel has a girlfriend in this version. The practice of adapting Shakespeare became an especially important vehicle for voicing political concerns as political divisions in the country deepened, especially towards the end of the 1670s, and came to a climax during the period which is known as the Succession Crisis.

JH: Okay, so can you tell us a bit more about that Succession Crisis, Paulina? What triggered it and how did it unfold?

PK: There was mounting dissatisfaction with Charles II's arbitrary style of government and his pro-French policies. The concern about religion also came to the fore. that had to do with the fact that the next in line with James, Duke of York, the younger brother of Charles II, who was by then known to be a Catholic. and there were extraordinary worries that if James were allowed to take the throne, he would attempt to return England to the popish fold. And these concerns were triggered especially by the revelation or fabrication of the so-called Popish Plot of Titus Oates.

JH: And we have discussed the Popish Plot in another of our films. But how is it relevant here, Paulina?

PK: The Popish plot triggered massive anti-Catholic hysteria. and it also brought to the fore the question of the succession. Now historians often talk about the Exclusion Crisis. In fact it's more

proper to think about the period as one of a Succession Crisis, because exclusion was not the only remedy sought by those concerned about the possibility of James taking the throne. Some contemporaries thought of limiting the powers of monarchy. Others considered persuading Charles II to divorce his wife, Queen Mary, and have an heir of his own. Ultimately, in the sequence of Parliaments which took place between 1679 and 1681, it was excluding the popish successor, excluding James the Duke of York from the succession, that became a primary consideration. And alongside that we find this amazing polarisation of public opinion. Public media of various sorts: prints, newspapers, images engaging with the questions of the day. And naturally that polarisation affected the theatres too. We find the emergence of political parties (the Whigs and the Tories). And whilst many of the playwrights tried to capitalise on that crisis, inevitably in addressing it they were trying not to alienate a greater part of the audience by coming down too heavily on one side or the other.

JH: So it didn't make commercial sense to be too partisan, else you're going to alienate whole swathes of the paying public.

PK: Yes. I mean we find that perhaps the most immediate way of addressing the rapidly changing political situation was through topical prologues and epilogues, which teased the audience with references to recent events, but didn't necessarily declare for one side or the other. So there was a commercial incentive to address politics. But there was also the fear of alienating half of the paying audience. And we shouldn't forget about censorship. Plays had to be licensed for performance. And sometimes they were withheld not just because they would have been seen as dangerous by the government, dangerous and subversive, but also because the government might fear that in being too royalist the plays might actually have played into the hands of the opposition.

JH: So was this political crisis, this Succession Crisis, good or bad for the theatre? Were audiences on the up or were people losing interest?

PK: It was both. In one sense it challenged playwrights to engage with politics in creative and imaginative ways. but in another sense it was bad because during political crises the last thing people want to do is actually go to the theatre. so one of the many dire effects of the crisis was the shrinking audiences and the fact that in the wake of the crisis the two acting companies in London were compelled to merge. and for a number of years afterwards London, a growing metropolis, had only one theatre.

JH: So why was Shakespeare so useful in this moment for playwrights?

PK: Well there are actually several reasons. One is: here were ready made plays which address political themes. So it would have taken relatively little time to tweak and adapt them. Secondly, you could always hide behind Shakespeare and pretend that you haven't done very much. So why were you being criticised for being too subversive or too political? And in his plays Shakespeare addressed fundamental political questions by using history. So his history plays and his tragedies were among those that were especially ripe for adaptation during the Popish Plot and the Succession Crisis.

JH: So were there any adaptations that were particularly significant in this moment of crisis?

PK: Yes, several. But I think one which we should look at is the adaptation of Shakespeare's *Richard II*. This was a play doubly important. It was important as a political play back in the mid-1590s, when it addressed questions related to the accession of Elizabeth I. But the reason it was so important for Nahum Tate, the adapter in the later seventeenth century, is that the

Shakespearean original features scene set in parliament in which King Richard II is forced to relinquish the crown, was forced to abdicate. And given the parliamentary pressure on King Charles II to exclude his younger brother from the succession, this was a play which (even without being tweaked) would've spoken to contemporary anxieties.

JH: So why would Tate want to think about these anxieties? And who was he?

PK: Tate was a prolific playwright, poet, and translator, and the collaborator with Dryden. He collaborated on the sequel to Dryden's famous poem *Absalom and Achitophel* (1681), which was itself one of the flagship interventions in the political debate. For Tate Shakespeare's *Richard II* was a useful stalking horse for political reflections. and of course it provided him, as I mentioned, with plausible deniability. You could always argue that it was Shakespeare and not you speaking.

JH: So, could we look more closely at the changes and adjustments that Tate made to the Shakespearean original?

PK: Well the key protagonists in Shakespeare are King Richard and his cousin Bolingbroke. and in Shakespeare the arc of audience sympathy changes. At the beginning we see Bolingbroke is wronged and Richard emerges in a rather negative light. By the time Bolingbroke had assumed kingship and Richard is deposed and killed, our sympathies are very firmly with Richard. And what Tate did in his adaptation was to blacken the character of Bolingbroke, as he calls him, and to whitewash the character of Richard. Now, for contemporaries Richard would very much have been associated with King Charles II, but, as we shall see, Tate hadn't whitewashed Richard II enough to make the play palatable. Or, in other words, he couldn't have whitewashed the character because neither this Shakespearean original nor history have actually allowed him to do so.

JH: So what are we actually looking at here?

PK: We are looking at their title page of the pamphlet by the Jesuit Robert Parsons (which was published under the pseudonym Robert Dolman) which was a treatise about the succession to Elizabeth published originally in 1594-5, but reprinted in 1681 at the height of the Succession Crisis. The title on that tract was *A Conference About the Next Succession to the Crown of England*. The next succession originally was about the succession to Elizabeth, but of course it was relevant to the succession to Charles II. and we are also looking (and that's a little later), we are looking at the specific page from the tract, which describes the abdication and deposition in Parliament of Richard II and the election of Bolingbroke as Henry IV in 1399.

JH: So how does this have a bearing on Tate's revision of the play?

PK: It just shows that that the deposition of Richard II, which occurred in 1399, was as live a issue in the early 1680s as it has been in the 1590s, and the Jesuit tract, which had been originally written against the succession of James VI of Scotland to the English throne, was relevant to the exclusion of his grandson James, the Duke of York, in 1681, precisely when Tate's play was performed at the Theatre Royal under the title of *The Sicilian Usurper*.

JH: Okay, so how was Tate's *History of King Richard II* received?

PK: To begin with it was simply banned. It was banned before performance because the government realised that it would be incredibly inadvisable have a play of this sort, which essentially portrays the abdication and deposition and regicide at a time when the situation was really very fraught. Now naturally neither Tate nor the company wanted to lose the money. So he very quickly reworked it. and the play was in fact performed under the innocuous title of *The*

Sicilian Usurper. But that version was also suppressed. so what we find afterwards is that Tate, a rather aggrieved author, publishes in print the adaptation under the original title of the *History of King Richard II* with a preface in which he tries to justify himself. And I think if we look at the title page we see exactly what is going on here. The title page reads: 'The History of King Richard II, acted at the Theatre Royal under the name of The Sicilian Usurper, with a prefatory epistle and vindication of the author, occasioned by the prohibition of this play on the stage'.

JH: Okay, so Tate's printing this play with a vindication of himself. How does he justify the whole enterprise? How does he justify writing political drama?

PK: This is very interesting because the later seventeenth century is actually a time when dramatic authorship gains in stature. That's where we find the emergence of criticism of the drama, and where authors actually comment on their own practice. Tate tries to give a defense of his practice by claiming that he improved the character of Richard II. Tait says for instance, 'King Richard himself is painted in the worst colours of history in Shakespeare: dissolute, unadvisable, devoted to ease and luxury. I have everywhere given him the language of an active prudent prince, preferring the good of his subjects to his own private pleasure'. Now, for starters this is not actually true, all told. And, secondly, what we find with Tate's *Richard II* is in fact the obstacle, the challenge of writing a royalist, loyalist pro-Stuart play. It's not a very easy enterprise.

JH: So what did Tate do next?

PK: He adapted other plays by Shakespeare. And in fact his adaptation of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, which has a happy ending in which Lavinia marries Edward, was one of the most successful Shakespearean adaptations of all time. It remained on the stage into the nineteenth century and Doctor Johnson thought it a great achievement.

JH: And what do these adaptations tell us about Shakespeare's reputation in the later Stuart period?

PK: Until the later twentieth century, those adaptations were seen effectively as sacrilege. How could you even touch and mangle, rewrite? How would you dare do this to Shakespeare? We actually now know that they had a very significant impact on Shakespeare's reputation. And, if we go back to Tate: it wasn't actually a bad play. It's a pretty important play, even if it failed as political propaganda. Now, the adaptations are quite revealing of contemporary artistic, political, and social sensibility in a way that modern adaptations reflect on our own ideological and artistic concerns. But what I think is the most important takeaway message is that although Shakespeare and the later seventeenth century rarely appeared unadapted on the stage, it was precisely the proliferation of the adaptations that kept him before the public eye and which contributed to his canonization. It turned him into the national poet that he is today. So paradoxically it's the process of adaptation that makes him the poet not of an age but for all time

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