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The Problem of Loyalty and Rebellion in Shakespeare's Richard II and Henry IV

The cycle of Shakespeare's Chronicle plays forms a coherent group submitted to issues pertaining not so much to history but rather to the conception of monarchy. They are not strictly political nor historical, for although Shakespeare presents historical reality of the period, he, nevertheless, submits it to his own artistic vision of the nobility, not being in accordance with historical facts. Out of its artistic assumptions, the Chronicles deal with the person of a monarch as a nobleman, a ruler, and a man. Accordingly, the whole set of problems pertaining to and affecting a ruling monarch is presented in the Historical plays.

Out of these problems, the problem of rebellion and loyalty of a nobleman to his sovereign is indubitably one of the most prevailing issues in the dramas, virtually constituting the background topic in each play, and makes a spring-board for any further turns of the plots. The problem of revolt and loyalty should be examined in close relation to the understanding of the renaissance aristocratic ethos among Shakespeare's contemporaries. It is especially significant that the problem in question has an important bearing on the dramatic construction of the plays and motivates its structural composition. The issue of loyalty of a nobleman to the code of honour and to his king, appears in all the Chronicles, with the principles of that code used or misused in their dramatic practice. Shakespeare's conception of aristocratic honour and honesty creates the moral base for all the "Histories, and in relation to this Shakespeare unfolds various plots concerning different issues.

It is, therefore, the aim of this paper to dwell upon the problem of loyalty and rebellion in the two, modal for this purpose, Historical dramas - Richard II and Henry IV - and see how Shakespeare accounts for its significance in relation to particular characters in the plays. The issue under discussion will be examined in the light of the then common beliefs and convictions regarding the nature of the aristocratic power.

Consequently, owing to the social and political implications of the renaissance code of value, whose principles followed or violated by the characters, ultimately create the basis for moral judgement in the plays, and to the prevailing image of the nobility in the Renaissance, the most rudimentary and crucial "function" of an aristocrat was his attitude to the king. It reflected, and had its roots, in the medieval social and political relations. Therefore, whilst talking of the aristocracy, the problem of the attitude of a nobleman to his sovereign must be given priority over any other issue, inasmuch as it is very important in all Shakespeare's dramas, in consideration of both their structure and range of plots.

To talk about loyalty and rebellion, it is really indispensable to set off two weighty factors which have important bearing on the problem: the origin of the royal power and its execution by the monarch. The prevailing opinion of the period in question favoured the conviction that the prince raised to the position of a king, no longer primus inter aristocratic pares but someone over and higher in status and dignity, is henceforth an absolute monarch and has arbitrary power over the estates and lives of his subjects. Though privileged to have his councillors from whom he may seek and demand advice, the king as a sovereign upon whom the people conferred all their rule and power, need not acknowledge any superior but God. The king's will and reason is therefore absolute law; he is above civil law and only under the law of God. The king thus endowed with supreme power is nevertheless cautioned against using it ungodly, since otherwise trouble would follow and even lead to the loss of the throne.

In relation to such an interpretation of the origin of the royal power there remains another significant theory pertaining to the way in which the king rules; the theory embracing the problem of justice ans sin in the execution of royal power. The king as a God's servant and representative of his will on the earth is, notwithstanding his top position in the hierarchy, exposed to sin and evil which may result in evildoing, since "the palaces of princes are ever open to great evils".[1] The question which arises now is who and when is em-

powered to punish the monarch who happens to tread the path of sin. Is it one of his subjects who may take a burning sword in his hands and set out to exercise justice and punish a sinner, or is it God and only God, who may pay his subjects for whatever injury they have done to their inferiors. This question is in strict keeping with a deeply rooted conviction, medieval in origin, that God plagues evil rulers, and that punishment always follows sin. Those in high places are apt to regard themselves as above or outside human law, and the unduly passions which find their way their hearts may make them do wrong. It was then assumed that God punishes evil monarchs, and people of humble or noble origin should refrain from attempts to take God's justice in their hands as "he that judgeth the King layeth hands on God, and he that resisteth the King resisteth God... The King is in this world without law, and he may at his lust do right or wrong and shall give accounts but to God only." [2] So was it put by Wiliam Tyndale, and similar a message carried the Tudor homilies: "Concernyng Good Ordre and Obedience to Rulers and Magistrates" /1547/ and "Against Disobedience and Wilful Rebellion" /1574/. It was precisely the problem of rebellion which constituted the greatest concern of the Tudors who, taught by the painful experience of the past, did everything to discourage those who were apt or up to rebel.

There was, however, still another way of interpreting the view on the sole right of God to chastise the sovereign, namely that it was the people whom God empowered to exercise his will and punish those who misruled. That belief was now and then virtually sanctioned by the deputy of God among the mortals, by the pope. Papal bulls made it legal and decreed that anyone who rebelled against the excommunicated king was blessed in his action and approved of by the pope, and thus by God himself. The way such bulls were understood had it that if the ruler was in opposition to God, thus rebelling in his rule against God, then it is the right of the people to punish him. The Tudors stood on a different ground in their explanation of that problem, as for them "the Crown once possessed, cleareth and purifies all manner of defaults or imperfections"[3] and held that in no circumstances might the king be judged by his subjects or be submitted to the execution of judgement in any form and manner, especially by rebelling.[4]

The anxiety which the Tudors manifested in the homilies and their dealings with the problems discussed resulted from their awarness of the danger brought about by rebellion, the picture of which is so amply found in Shakespeare's Richard II.

The play must have been written to serve as a background and a starting-point for a four-play-long discussion of the valid issue of deposition of the king and, remaining in the closest link with it, the problem of loyalty and revolt.

Richard II is the only king in the whole cycle of the Chronicle plays whose right to the throne is not questioned or frowned at by the other noble characters. He is the last king of the truly medieval order, as A. B. Steel has it,

> ...the last king ruling by hereditary right, direct and undisputed from the Conqueror. The kings of the next hundred and ten years...were essentially kings de facto not de jure, succesful usurpers recognized after the event, upon conditions, by their fellow-magnates or by parliament.[5]

Of the Black Prince, Richard is the son whose ancestral background is so explicitly stated by Shakespeare in Henry IV Part Two:

...Edward the Black Prince died before his father;
Anf left behind him Richard, his only son,
Who, after Edward the Third's death, reign'd as king,
Till Henry Bolingbroke, Duke of Lancaster,
The eldest son and heir of John of Gaunt,
Crown'd by the name of Henry the Fourth,
Seiz'd on the realm, depos'd the rightful king,
Sent his poor queen to France, from whence she came,
And him to Pomfret, - where, as all you know,
Harmless Richard was murder'd traitorously[6]
/2HVI,II,ii,18-27/

With Richard II's ancestry and history so shortly summed up, let us brood for a while on the charcter of the said king and wonder what actually brought about his misfortune.

Shakespeare seems to have pointed to the fact that in spite of the Thomas of Woodstock, Duke of Gloucester affair, Richard's crimes never amounted to tyranny. Yet, as all other kings of the Historical plays, he had his hands stained with blood; it being in this case the Duke of Gloucester's blood. Historically,

Richard avenged himself in 1397 on Gloucester who ten years earlier led a faction to oust Richard's sycophants. Gloucester was consequently imprisoned in Calais and murdered apparently by Richard's orders.[7] Though not the immediate root of the conflict in the drama, that event is nevertheless referred to and lies at the base of the opening Mowbray - Bolingbroke dispute, since they had originally joined Gloucester but then quarreled among themselves, Mowbray having become an adherent of the king, and each accusing the other of treason and challenged him to battle.

With that the play begins, and, as it is gradually unfolded, it reveals the king's character and the nature of his rule. For Richard firmly set on the throne by the hereditary title, the crown is essential, an irrelevant possession. Likewise, as in King John, there is frequent recurrence to the theory of divine origin of the royal power asserted both by the king and by others, all epitomised by the Princess of York in her utterance pertaining to the old belief that,

A god on earth though //the king// art /RII,V,iv,135/

Not in the nature of his royal power must be, therefore, sought causes of Richard's downfall. It is rather his very character, his way of ruling, that incites the crisis of a natural sanctioned conception of royalty, and the betrayal of the office he holds. As the king, Richard regards nothing the counsel of the sage and wise men of his realm but surrounds himself with flatterers who wrap his character and mind. This finds its vent in the king's disregard to his old uncles and in the unduly lavishness of the court. It is Northumberland who speaks that the king is not himself, being in his words,

...basely led
By flatterers; and what they will inform
Merely in hate, 'gainst any of us all
That will the king severely persecute
'Gainst us, our lives, our children, and our heirs
/RII,II,i,242-246/

In this particular statement one must look for the reasons urging the nobles to revolt against the king; to defend their rights and existence of their houses. Brought low by his and others' folly and hypnotized by the glamour of his state, embedded in vanity and hypocrisy, Richard makes his great mistake which proves so soon to be fatal for him. He is deaf in what he does to the warning given him by the dying Gaunt, nor does he pay any attention to York's laments, who still totally loyal, forwarns the king against employing such a course of action which might make York,

...prick //his// tender patience to those thoughts
Which honour and allegiance cannot think
/RII,II,i,208-209/

York tells Richard explicitly that by seizing Bolingbroke's estates he will bring hundreds of problems on his head.[8] To this, however, the king is indifferent.

Richard's offences commited by him as a monarch and a nobleman may be now summed up. First of all he parts with justice, the rudimentary virtue o. a governing prince. The lack of justice in the king's rule inevitably breeds disorder and antagonizes his subjects impairing king's authority. Another blunder, no less grave, is greediness and neglect of the virtue of prudence, which together with hypocrisy make a ruler utter false verdicts and hurt his inferiors. As a God's deputy on the earth, Richard proves disloyal to his princely oath of faithfulness to God's commandments, and exposes himself to attacks from his subjects, the right to which he seems to have given them himself.

The problem of loyalty of the nobles to their senior which, in view of the above statement, is especially relevant in the play has been hit at that moment. Shakespeare appears to make a clear division in his characterization of the nature of behavior of the aristocrats. It is Gaunt, on the one pole of it - an experienced custodian of the old order. There is Bolingbroke, on the other end, Gaunt's son, who by turning to rebellion seems to embark on the line of the tragic flaw. In between there is York - a transient figure in this respect, whose understanding of loyalty and faith to ancient virtues is moulded according to the circumstances he faces.

To begin with Gaunt, one must consider him a guardian of the principles of the traditional aristocratic ethos; a nobleman who in Richard sees, regardless of his sins and crimes, an association of heaven's monarch with the earthly king. Aware of Richard's true nature, murder of Gloucester and other offences, Gaunt confines himself to uttering complaints against Richard, in God seeing the only power to take revenge for Richard's misrule.[9] Severe as they are, Gaunt's rebukes never extent beyond

the verbal form, and he is all the time loyal to the king as the anointed leader of the nation.

It is Bolingbroke, Lord Hereford, Gaunt's offspring, who takes upon himself the quarrel that was God's, as his father would not do. Bolingbroke's belief springs from the conviction that God is the faunt of justice, even of loyalty, and for Bolingbroke any violent change may be within God's purposes. An usurper seizing power by force, he may fulfil God's intention by ruling well and punishing the evildoing prince and king, while a legitimate monarch may flout God's plan by proving a tyrant. It is in the name of God that he breakes his promise, putting at the stake his noble honour and princely word. His first promise not to come back to England before the expiry of his banishment, uttered by himself[10], was in keeping with the rules of the aristocratic honour. But the moment Richard plays false, Bolingbroke feels right in assuming God's mission to punish the rule-breaker. His initial intention was not, however, to depose the king, perhaps not even to exercise justice upon Richard, but rather make the king hear and redress his own grievances and dispose of the king's sycophants, in whom Bolingbroke sees the source of evil.[11] He virtually does so himself assuming the role of God's emissary in administering justice to Green and Bushy.[12] Once again before he deposed the king - or rather before the king deposed himself - one may see Bolingbroke enacting the same role as he adjudicates the quarrel between Aumerle and Bagot over the responsibility for the death of the Duke of Gloucester.

The scene of deposition is especially significant here as it is only then that Bolingbroke's enacting the role of God is bluntly opposed to. It is Carlisle who, leaving no doubts whatsoever, points to the fact that Bolingbroke becomes the king by conquest, but never in "God's name" [13] does he ascend the regal throne. Carlisle answers two vital questions of whether Richard is justly deposed and if Henry should succeed him. By asking,

What subject can give sentence on his king?
And who sits here that is not Richard's subject?
/RII,IV,i,121-122/

Carlisle answers the first question, again confirming the belief that only God may judge the king.

He answers the second question with a plain accusation that,

My Lord of Hereford here, whom you call king
Is a foul traitor to proud Hereford's king
/RII,IV,I,134-135/

He concludes with a prophecy addressed mostly to the rebelling nobles that if they crown Bolingbroke king the soil of England will be trodden by armed troops in morderous, tumultous wars, and,

Disorder, horror, fear, and mutiny,
Shall here inhabit, and this land be call'd
The field of Golgotha and dead men's skulls
/RII,IV,i,142-144/

There are here two interpretations of the problem of loyalty. First comes Bolingbroke's sense of loyalty to the knightly ethos, the implication of which is his understanding of justice and, in effect, his return to England. Second comes Carlisle's understanding of Bolingbroke's disloyalty, as clear violation of the fundamental rules against God and the code of value.

Which of these two holds a more convincing evaluation of the issue under discussion is really difficult to determine, because the matter itself is most subtle and invites varied interpretation. One of the solutions may be that Bolingbroke exercises in all his proceedings the right of a stronger one, the right to force his interpretation, which nonetheless works so deeply on his mind that it leaves there incurable wounds of a moral nature. That is why in Bolingbroke one may see visible marks left on his conscience owing to his deeply-felt sense of guilt. According to the saying that sin breeds sin and violence begets violence, one may define the unrest of Bolingbrike's conscience-stricken rule, teeming with rebellions and treacherous plots. This is the inevitable effect of the disorder aroused by his revolt and, most of all, by his crime of murder. It is by getting rid of Richard, no matter how veiled it is, that Bolingbroke ultimately seals his unfortunate fate. Futhermore, this is what made him see in every misfortune experienced by him the hand of God who now comes to punish him in turn.

Another way of understanding the problem of loyalty may be noticed in York who appears to have learnt to his skin all possible moral implications of being in keeping with the code of honour and value. York belongs to the old caste of nobles

who unshakingly guard the principles of the aristocratic ethos. Yet, he is subjected to a more difficult lesson, the necessity of experiencing which was so conviniently spared to Gaunt.

York is introduced in the play as a spotless defender of royalty, though not blind to all Richard's follies. The more the dramatic conflict between Richard and Bolingbroke commences, the more York appears to be torn between his sense of loyalty and law. It is in him that the conflicting values of the political dilemma are presented; the dilemma manifested on the one hand by his desire to maintain peace in England, of which his loyalty to the king is a quarantee; on the other, his recognition of the law to which any wronged subject has the right to appeal.

During the first encounter of Bolingbroke with York, the latter appears to depart from his deeply-rooted loyalty to Richard, as if Bolingbroke's lengthy address[14]; a list of his grievances to the king, made York to have second thoughts on the real nature of the conflict. Reconciled, as he is, to the thought of becoming Bolingbroke's ally in crime, York undergoes a peculiar transformation in the way he understands the quality of the virtue which used to bound him so closely to Richard. But it is the different York who comes to offer the crown to Bolingbroke, and who, which is most significant of all, makes his plea in Richard's name[15]? What change must have occured in York's conscience if he decides to oppose the Divine Right of kingship, so expressively stated by himself.[16] Or is he perhaps just prudent in what he does? York seems to give up his hitherto crystal interpretation and application in life of the moral code. But by viewing his transformation from a somewhat different angle, it may also appear that he simply begins to reinterpret the values he was so ardent a follower. And it lookes like he is not convinced to the fullest in his new self, as though being still, and after all, haunted by a bitter sense of guilt. He wants to look for consolation in the contemptous attitude of the mob towards Richard, a deposed king, noone's lord and master. York views in the dust and curses of the street thrown at Richard a justification of his own treachery, and moreover, in God's will he fancies Richard's plight to which he gives too clear a statement,

But heaven had a hand in these events,
To whose high will we bound our calm contents.

To Bolingbroke are we sworn subjects now,
Whose state and honour I for aye allow
/RII,V,ii,37-40/

Also, in his intended sacrifice of Aumerle, his only son, York wants to recognize the price he desires to pay to expiate his sin of disloyalty and betrayal.

But not only in York may be discerned the stigma of guilt. Both Bolingbroke and all his closest adherents, with Northumberland, the ladder "wherewithal/The mounting Bolingbroke ascends //the// throne"[17], belong to the same set of victims of the tragic flaw. Once they have sinned against God and the code of manners, they will be for ever bothered by misfortune and stricken by the effects of the disorder of which thay have been so unfortunate founders.

The troubles filling Bolingbroke's reign to the brim and bursting with frequent rebellions will be always thought of by him as an execution of God's wrathful will and a punishment for his crime of murder and usurpation.

Bolingbroke, now king Henry IV, tormented as he is by the insecurity of power achieved by violence, owes too much to the friends who helped him up on the way to the top - helping themselves at the same time - and all uniting in treachery and disloyalty. Henry IV's troublesome reign in a disordered kingdom is even more difficult, for Henry is really aware of the great debt he has to pay, with the debtors no less conscious of what they may demand from the king. Now, they are only too glad to have their share and, following Henry's own example, they revolt against the monarch so hastily, for as Worcester puts it,

...'tis no little reason bids us speed,
To save out heads by raising of a head;
For, bear ourselves as even as we can,
The king will always think him in our debt,
And think ourselves unsatisfied,
'Till he hath found a time to pay us home:
And see already how he doth begin
To make us strangers to his looks of love
/1HIV,I,iii,284-291/

The king, however, has already made a mistake, a fatal one, as it gave the nobles, Hotspur in particular, a sound pretext to revolt. Hotspur, a hot-tempered and boisterous royal liege, rejects the king's demand to surrender the prisoners he took at

Holmedon. Instead, he asks the king in return to redeem his kinsman, the Earl of Mortimer, who is a prisoner to Glendower. And here Henry IV plays short, bringing upon his head unexpected burden. He refuses to do so because Mortimer has a better right to the title, having been proclaimed by Richard II to be his heir. This effects in another rebellion with the king-Bolingbroke at the other side this time.

It is Northumberland who appears to bear the greatest responsibility, moral at least, for the ensuing rebellion. Having in mind Richard's prophesy, Northumberland - a ladder and a stepping-stone for Bolingbroke - seems to experience the same moral hesitation to which York was subjected. Loyal in disloyalty, Northumberland falters and makes an elaborate slope from having to take part in the revolt. He is also, as the king is, sick in conscience. He faces the dilemma of the be loyal to the usurper, who after all is the king now and for whom Northumberland once violated his personal ethos, or not to be loyal to Henry, which virtually would mean the final abandonment of any sense of aristocratic honesty. For Northumberland to rebel would be like for a thief to rob himself of what was left to him. In Hotspur, his son, Northumberland views the image of his own guilt. There is an interesting symmetry which emerges here upon the analysis of the motives and morals of the nobles. Like Henry IV his son, Prince Hal, so Northumberland regards Hotspur as punishment for his past deed - the revolt against Richard II. Though Hotspur, seemingly at least, is aketched by Shakespeare to appear as an embodiment of virtue and honour, he is all the same considered by his conscience-stricken father as an impetous fool, who is into the bargain totally unaware of his father's opinion of him. That is why Northumberland's refusal to participate actively in rebellion signifies a desperate attempt to save the shattered remnants of his strained sense of aristocratic honour.

Another trace of the symmetry can be found in the archbishop of York's participation in the revolt, who actually may be compared to Carlisle, the only difference being that the latter strongly opposed the rebellion. The archbishop of York makes the revolt a holy enterprise, and,

...turns insurrection to religion:
Suppos'd sincere and holy in his thoughts,
...

Derives from heaven his quarrel and his cause;
Tells them he doth bestride a bleeding land,
Gasping for life under great Bolingbroke;
And more and less do flock and follow him

/2HIV,I,i,200-202 and106-209/

Yet, he is more careful and perfidoius in interpreting his cause, blaming the commonwealth, the people, for any evil in the state as bearing impact on the minds of the nobles. The archbishop's loyalty is at least dubious, since he appears to be loyal to himself only, though he takes pains to hold that his vocation is to mend human souls, especially noble ones, and fight for the better in the country. But willy-nilly, the archbishop with his fellow-rebels falls prey to Bolingbroke's another son, Prince John.

A prevailing opinion tends to point at Prince Hal as an embodiment of vice and a living qualm of Henry IV's conscience. It is rather Prince John, however, who by his cold, sordid, conduct makes a vivid example of the devaluation of noble virtue and honour. For it is his own aristocratic honour that the Prince ultimately loses by breaking his princely word and infringing his promise to pardon the rebels. Not that by a tricky explanation does he want to wipe his blame off his conscience; his loyalty to the ethos and a sense of justice is nonetheless buried under dirty soil of hypocrisy. But small wonder it is, if it is viewed in the light of the disorderly effects brought about by the initial crime of Bolingbroke. That is why, to stress it once more, that all the characters in the plays bear the stigma of that crime and, contrary or not to their will, are involved in the implications which the usurpation gave birth to.

The questioning of the interpretation of the means whereby justice may and should be administered to the inefficient or evil monarchs will be re-opened in the other "Histories" - Henry VI and Richard III, especially. However, the general conclusion one is tempted to arrive at points to the fact that all the issues of loyal or rebellious noblemen in Shakespeare's Chronicle dramas must be seen through the prism of varied problems affecting a man; a human soul involved in, influenced and determined by a complex set of circumstances which, in keeping to the artistic conception of the plays, serves as a means of presenting political and moral implications of various attitudes represented by different protagonists.

The problem of loyalty and rebellion makes just a fraction of a large number of issues pertaining to various social, historical, political and moral questions manifested in all the "Histories." It seems though, that it is the renaissance aristocratic ethos, with all its rules and principles, which may be ultimately taken for a base upon which, and in relation to which, all those issues may be discussed and interpreted. It is difficult to determine whether Shakespeare had at the back of his mind one specific code of honour, or if he used the prevailing set of aristocratic values adding to them his own conception of the code of value. What is apparent, however, is that the ethos as a guide-book for a nobleman seems to bind all the dramas in their dramatic and structural sphere, and emerge as a line of thought along which Shakespeare's conception of an aristocrat - monarch is constructed.

NOTES

1. Lily B. Campbell, *Shakespeare's Tragic Heroes*, Methuen and Co., Ltd., p. 17
2. James L. Calderwood, *Metadrama in Shakespeare's Henriad, Richard II to Henry V*, University of California Press, 1979, p. 20
3. E. M. W. Tillyard, *Shakespeare's History Plays*, London, 1961, p. 90
4. Cf. Lily B. Campbell, *op. cit.*, p. 3ff
5. E. M. W. Tillyard, *op. cit.*, p. 253
6. All texts referred to and included in the present paper are those in *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, ed. by W. J. Craig, Oxford University Press, 1962
7. The historical account of the conflict in *Richard II* is given by A. R. Humphreys in *Shakespeare, Richard II*, London, 1967, pp. 32-33
8. *Richard II*, II,i,206-207
9. Ibidem, I,ii,4-8
10. Ibidem, I,iii,143-147
11. Bolingbroke's intentions and motives are discussed at length by Lily B. Campbell in *Shakespeare's "Histories"*, Methuen and Co., Ltd., 1970, p. 213ff
12. *Richard II*, III,iii,1-30
13. Ibidem, IV,i,113
14. Ibidem, II,iii,113-136
15. Ibidem, IV,i,108-112
16. Ibidem, II.iii,97-105
17. Ibidem, V,i,55-56

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