

VI

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‘The Cult of Gloriana’¹ and the challenges it faced

In the 1590s, the ‘cult of Gloriana’² emerged publicly to promote the divinity of the monarch through official portraits and miniatures. Through his ‘Mask of Youth’³ portraits Nicholas Hilliard provided the official depictions which emphasised that Elizabeth was God’s deputy on earth and that the institution of monarchy was eternal and godlike. This article will discuss the challenges to this ideology of the divine right through considering the key messages behind William Shakespeare’s *Richard II*.⁴ In *Richard II* Shakespeare asks the audience to question this belief of the divine right and presents an alternative view of kingship, based on hereditary rights and lawful conduct.⁵ A comparative analysis of *Richard II* and the portrait *Queen Elizabeth I* (1599) figure 1) known as the *Hardwick* portrait by the workshop of Nicholas Hilliard, will be undertaken to illustrate what the nature of these differing interpretations of monarchy were and how Elizabeth’s court responded.

By 1601 the political ideology of the divinity of the monarch, who was seen as God’s deputy on earth and so whose rule was only accountable to God, was beginning to be challenged. It was becoming increasingly clear that the discrepancy between the dream of peace and justice and the realities of the political world was not being addressed by Elizabeth’s government.⁶ In 1601, this culminated in open rebellion led by her previous favourite the Earl of Essex. Six months after it was suppressed, Elizabeth I is reported by William Lambarde as providing this response to his chronicle *Pandecta Rotulorum*⁷ when they came to discuss one of her predecessors, Richard II who had faced a similar situation:

I am Richard, know ye not that. He that will forget God will forget his benefactors: this tragedy was played forty times in the open streets and houses.⁸

¹ John Guy *Elizabeth: The Forgotten Years* (London: Random House 2016) p.345

² *Ibid.*

³ Roy Strong, *Artists of the Tudor Court: The Portrait Miniature Rediscovered 1520-1640* (London: Victoria and Albert Museum 1983) p.128 please note this will be known as the ‘Hardwick’ portrait throughout the rest of the article

⁴ Stanley Wells ‘Introduction’ in *Richard II* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2011) Please note this is the version I will be using throughout this article 1-118

⁵ *Ibid*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Guy, *Elizabeth* p.345

⁸ *Ibid.* p.345

Guy suggests that Elizabeth believed that the Earl of Essex, by criticising her rule as well as rebelling, had forgotten to respect the divine royal status and through doing so, had sinned against God. Guy argues Elizabeth is recognising that like Richard, due to her childlessness, she was vulnerable and the question of succession was still unresolved which had led to instability in the realm.⁹



Figure 1. *Queen Elizabeth I*, Workshop of Nicholas Hilliard (1599) Oil on Canvas, 88" x 66.5", Hardwick Hall reproduced with permission of the National Trust

This political world which it seems Elizabeth and her government were largely ignoring was, as Guy suggests, one of the most unstable in history.¹⁰ This was due to the unresolved question of succession as well as the social and economic crisis of the time, with high food prices due to several harvest failures as well as the long war with Spain.¹¹ During this period there were areas of contention with her closest advisers

⁹ William Shakespeare 'Introduction' in *Richard II* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2011) Please note this is the version I will be using throughout this article 1-118

¹⁰ *Ibid*

¹¹ *Ibid*

especially William Cecil. Cecil's priority at this time was more about ensuring the security of the Protestant realm whereas Elizabeth was more focused on securing the rights of the divinely appointed monarch. The granting of Royal Monopolies became one area where the policy of the monarch was questioned by the wider public, especially in parliament. This controversy, fuelled by public opinion led Elizabeth to take a course of action that was anathema to her, that of having to make concessions regarding these monopolies to parliament, so she could secure the finances needed to continue the war in Ireland. These finances were only granted once these concessions were agreed. Elizabeth found herself being held accountable to public opinion for the conduct of her ministers and councillors to ensure the funding she required.¹² Guy suggests that after this episode there were still some councillors who were unhappy and 'Elizabeth might not have believed herself accountable to the people but the problem now was that others did.'¹³

Elizabeth and her government recognized that much of her power came from being able to sanctify her persona through using imagery and unauthorised images challenged this power base. The mythologising of her virginity was also utilised as part of a 'calculated projection of her unique place and role.'¹⁴ Elizabeth's government issued various proclamations throughout her reign to try and control the royal image such as in 1563, where controls over anything that 'gave royal offence'¹⁵ led to only authorised prototypes being used. These authorised prototypes provided a standard depiction of Elizabeth which included 'a head of hair loaded with crowns and powdered with diamonds, a vast ruff or farthingale and pearls.'¹⁶ This control was tightened in the 1590s as it was recognized that the realistic image of Elizabeth would need to be abandoned. It was thought that any lifelike depiction would emphasise the fact that the succession had not been secured as Elizabeth was childless.

There was also a general hostility to the idea of an unmarried female who was childless having any power.¹⁷ In 1594 a decision was taken that the official image of Elizabeth would be one of ageless beauty. The standardised face pattern for royal portraits was then developed by Nicholas Hilliard and his workshop based on this image. These pictures produced in the 1590s onwards have been given the title 'the Mask of Youth'¹⁸ as they were used to promote this ideal of eternal youth and beauty rather than any form of reality. The key of any depiction was to highlight the glory of the nation through emphasizing the magnificence of the dress and the jewels that Elizabeth wore rather than focusing on Elizabeth as an individual. The primary aim of the state portrait was also to invoke an image of immortalisation of the monarch which

¹² Ibid

¹³ Ibid p. 361

¹⁴ Howard Maurice, *The Tudor Image* (London: Tate Gallery 1995)

¹⁵ Roy Strong *Gloriana: The Portraits of Queen Elizabeth I* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1987) p. 147

¹⁶ Ellis Waterhouse *Painting in Britain 1530-1790* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books 1953) p. 22

¹⁷ Carole, Levin. 'Gender, Monarchy and the Power of seditious words' in *Dissing Elizabeth: Negative Portrayals of Elizabeth* Julia Walker (ed) (London: Duke University Press 1998) p. 77-99

¹⁸ Strong, *Artists of the Tudor Court*

reflected the humanist appeal to antiquity where Elizabeth became the embodiment of kingship.¹⁹

Royal portraits were owned by a narrow section of society and were often commissioned by prominent nobles, such as the *Hardwick* portrait. This portrait exemplifies the desire of the nobility to highlight the power and social standing of the buyer as well as portraying this 'Mask of Youth' imagery.²⁰ It was commissioned by Elizabeth, Countess of Shrewsbury and completed in about 1599.²¹ It was hung at Hardwick Hall in the Long Gallery where it would have had the most impact on visitors, becoming a focal point as it was becoming fashionable to assemble these portraits as part of a collection. At this time the portrait had already become what Strong calls the 'outmoded aesthetic and typifies how out of touch this official version of the glory of kingship had become. This can be seen by the fact that the portrait is characterized by a 'rigid, hieratic expression and almost depicted as an impersonal image.'²² This is reinforced by the emotionless face which is part of this 'mask of youth'. Instead the sacred nature of the monarch as well as the glory of the nation is the most prominent feature. The ornate dress and the jewels along with the fan are all part of the symbolism used to promote this message.²³ The gown incorporates the imagery of royal celebration as well as dominance. Two illusory messages of peace and youth are symbolized by the fan with is a possible allusion to Cynthia, the moon goddess, who was the symbol of youthful regeneration.²⁴ The naturalistic animals in the gown do seem to contrast with the mask-like face but this could, instead of portraying any form of realism, be sending out a political message. The message is that the peaceful realm of England provides refuge against any threat or monster and the monarch is implacable against this threat. The portrait also contains pearls, symbols of purity, emphasising monarchical chastity and virtue. The other standard symbols of the Tudor monarchy are present, including the white and red flowers which seems to emphasise the unity that the Tudors have brought to the nation.

This lack of reality began to fuel an alternative view of how the monarch should be portrayed.²⁵ It can be argued that Shakespeare's *Richard II* was part of this questioning of the official portrayal. Shakespeare's historical sources included Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland* (1577)²⁶ but historical accuracy was not his primary aim. He was more focused on considering the contemporary political situation. A special performance *was* commissioned by the supporters of the Earl of Essex just before the rebellion in 1601. It was seen to have resonance with some of the

¹⁹ Strong, *Gloriana: The Portraits of Elizabeth I*

²⁰ Strong, *Artists of the Tudor Court*

²¹ Strong, *Gloriana: The Portraits of Elizabeth I* p.150

²² Hardwick Hall *Hardwick Hall* (National Trust 1996) p.65

²³ Strong, *Gloriana: The Portraits of Elizabeth I*

²⁴ Hannah Betts 'The Image of this Queen so Quaynt': *The Pornographic Blazon* in *Dissing Elizabeth: Negative Representations of Gloriana* (Post Contemporary Intervention) ed. Julia Walker (London: Duke University) p. 153-185

²⁵ Andrew, Hadfield. *Shakespeare and Republicanism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2008)

²⁶ Hadfield. *Shakespeare and Republicanism* p.150

key aims of the rebellion, such as the removal of bad councillors. Wells sees *Richard II* as the ‘Divine Right Play’²⁷ as the crucial debate revolves around the question as to whether it is acceptable for the monarch to rule outside the law, even if they are God’s deputy on earth.²⁸ Initially Shakespeare seems to endorse the view, as Gaunt warns the Duchess of Gloucester that she cannot take revenge on God’s appointed for the murder of her husband,

GAUNT God’s is the quarrel, for God’s substitute,
His deputy anointed in his sight
hath caused his death, the which if wrongfully
let heaven revenge, for I may never lift
An angry arm against his minister. (I. 2. 36-41.)²⁹

It can be argued that as the play progresses the divine right is questioned by what Hadfield calls Republicanism.³⁰ Republicanism was at the time an intellectual conviction that it was necessary to control the power of the monarch by establishing a means of ensuring that there were virtuous advisers, who would have the constitutional right to counsel the monarch and influence his or her actions, so they acted within the limits of the law.³¹ This form of republicanism was propagated in the universities, as well as the Inns of Court, and was promoted through theatrical productions such as Marlow’s *Tamburlaine the Great part I*.³² Hadfield argues that even if Shakespeare was not directly influenced by this group, he was potentially interested in exploring how political institutions function. He was also interested in how individuals came to occupy offices of state, whether it was by virtue or favouritism.³³ These interests are highlighted throughout *Richard II* but they are used specifically as justification for Bolingbroke’s rebellion. Richard’s reliance on favourites, ‘the Caterpillars of the Commonwealth’ (2.3.165),³⁴ and the lack of wise counsel to control his power has led him to ignore the law, threaten traditional hereditary rights and thus has brought about the current disorder within the realm. Bolingbroke makes it clear, that the removal of these councillors will restore the nation to its former glory. This is then explored in more depth through the prolonged metaphor which goes to make up the Garden Scene, as Shakespeare promotes the idea of England as the Garden of Eden which is being destroyed by corrupt councillors.³⁵ This then supports Hadfield’s argument that Shakespeare was willing to explore the ideas of republicanism within his work as it is only through virtuous councillors that the balance of power can be restored. Wells proposes Shakespeare is asking the audience to think about the

²⁷ Wells ‘Introduction’ p.16

²⁸ Stanley Wells, ‘Introduction’ in *Richard II* p.16

²⁹ Shakespeare, *Richard II* p.147

³⁰ Hadfield, *Shakespeare and Republicanism* p.17

³¹ Hadfield, *Shakespeare and Republicanism*

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid. p.53

³⁴ Shakespeare *Richard II* p.200

³⁵ D. Traversi *Shakespeare: From Richard II to Henry V* (London: Hollis Carter 1957)

nature of political authority and under what circumstances is it legitimate to resist, which is something that the Duke of York will not allow himself to do.³⁶ This was part of the idea being expounded at the time, that individual conscience could allow the demands of political obedience to be overturned when there was a need to carry out a higher service regarding the individual's salvation.³⁷ The papacy reinforced this message from 1570 onwards when the pope legitimized, as far as Catholics were concerned, the right to resist the monarch. This was further supported by Catholic writers such as Cardinal William Allen, who in the *Declaration of the Sentence of Sixtus V*,³⁸ incited Roman Catholics in England to rise up against Elizabeth. Protestants were also writing about this issue of legitimacy, with the potential need to rise up against a Catholic monarch due to the continuing perceived threat of invasion from Spain. In *Richard II* it can be argued that resistance is not just about individual salvation but the nation's, thus lending plausibility to the idea that it is the nation that is the embodiment of the divine and not the monarch. Even this concept could be construed as a challenge to monarchical legitimacy or at least to the official political doctrine of the time, which was that it was a sin against God to rebel against the monarch even if it was to restore order to the realm.³⁹

Wells suggests one of the pivotal concepts to the challenge of the divine right is that Shakespeare presents two different ideas as to what monarchical rights are based upon.⁴⁰ The first idea is that the monarch is the servant of the commonwealth where their rule is assured by the common law and parliament as well as popular opinion, which is ignored at a cost. Bolan takes this view further by contrasting the attitude taken by Richard, who enslaves his people and acts if their interests are unimportant, with Bolingbroke, who recognises the need to engage with the common people and uses popular opinion to his advantage.⁴¹ The other component of kinship that Shakespeare presents to his audience, is to ask them to consider the idea that kingship did not depend on God's will, but on the legal of inheritance. Gaunt's deathbed speech lends weight to this argument as Gaunt principles suggests that Richard is a landlord of the realm not its embodiment.⁴² 'Landlord of England art thou now, not king, thy state of law is bonds slave to the law.' (2. 1. 113.)⁴³

This idea of the monarch being the servant of the commonwealth, whose rule is assured by common law is explored in more depth as an underlying theme by considering what happens when the monarch breaks this law. Bolingbroke when he rebels makes it clear from the start that his primary aim is to restore his rights,

³⁶ Wells, 'Introduction' in *Richard II* p.21

³⁷ Hadfield *Shakespeare and Republicanism*

³⁸ *Ibid*

³⁹ Wells 'Introduction'

⁴⁰ Wells 'Introduction' pp.23-24

⁴¹ Robyn, Bolam. *Richard II, Shakespeare and the Language of the Stage* in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare* History plays edited by Michael Hattaway (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) p.143 p.141-158

⁴² Shakespeare. *Richard II*

⁴³ *Ibid* p.173

which have been seized from him unlawfully. He emphasises this as justification for the rebellion when he says to the Duke of York ‘a wandering vagabond, my rights and royalties plucked from my arms perforce and given away’ (2. 3. 119-20).⁴⁴ It can be argued that Shakespeare is suggesting that there are limits to royal authority, as even the monarch’s actions have to be within the bounds of the law, respecting the hereditary rights of his leading aristocrats. Ultimately Shakespeare was making political comments which was part of the counter discussion which challenged the official stance of the time, a Betts suggests: ‘Every celebration of the Queen’s eternal reign invited a counter discussion in which her waning authority could be more accurately represented.’⁴⁵

Elizabeth’s strategy, if there was one, for addressing any challenges was to carry out various stage-managed appearances as well as expecting her court to endorse her sacred image through commissioning portraits which then fed into this ‘cult’.⁴⁶ When discussing the ‘cult of Gloriana’⁴⁷ there has to be clarification as to what is meant by this term. The most appropriate definition in this context seems to be that it denotes a system of inspiring devotion and worship attached to an individual.⁴⁸ Elizabeth did try to control her image which can be seen by the various official proclamations such as the one in 1563 which prohibited giving ‘offence’⁴⁹ as well as a standardisation of her portrayal. None of these pieces of evidence seem to indicate that there was a systematic strategy by Elizabeth or her government to promote the worship of the queen, but does point to a desire on the part of her court to control the image of kingship as evidenced by the destruction of any unauthorised portraits. Doran makes the point that a more accurate way of describing this desire to promote this immortalisation instead of using the word ‘cult’ is that authors as well as courtiers and government officials ‘commissioned and created the royal images themselves within certain prescribed limits.’⁵⁰ This was to advance their own position but with some it also indicated courtly love and loyalty to the queen.⁵¹ Doran’s interpretation seems more plausible than any desire to promote the systematic worship of the monarchy. This interpretation does need to be treated with caution as these official representations still had legitimacy and authority and were regularly manipulated to send out the required messages to the populace, otherwise there would not have been the need for the political debate or counter culture, as exemplified by *Richard II*.

⁴⁴ Ibid p.198

⁴⁵ Hannah Betts ‘“The Image of this Queen so quaynt” The Pornographic Blazon 1588-1603’ in *Dissing Elizabeth* ed. Walker p.176

⁴⁶ Rob Content, ‘Fair is Foule’ *Interpreting anti Elizabeth composite Portraiture in Dissing Elizabeth: Negative Representations of Gloriana* edited by Julia Walker (London: Duke University Press 1998) pp.153-185

⁴⁷ Guy, Elizabeth: *The Forgotten Years* p.345

⁴⁸ Susan Doran ‘Virginity, Divinity and Power’ in *The Myth of Elizabeth* edited by Susan Doran and Thomas Freeman (London: Macmillan 2003) p.171-200

⁴⁹ Strong. *Gloriana* p. 147

⁵⁰ Doran. ‘Virginity, Divinity and Power’ p.192

⁵¹ Ibid. p.192

Overall the presentation of monarchy to the public in *Richard II* and the *Hardwick* portrait is different in its focus but there are some common concepts. Both highlight the immortalisation of the monarch, the recognition that even though the present incumbent is mortal the institution of monarchy is not. There are the traditional features ascribed to visual depictions of the nature of kingship which include similar types of classical symbolism used through metaphorical representations of the monarch either as a God or Goddess. Richard often alludes to himself as the Sun God, as the sun image was often linked to royalty, and Elizabeth is portrayed with symbols of Cynthia the moon goddess. This symbolism suggests that the monarch is the source of light and regeneration for the realm. Both, it can be argued, depicted the idealisation of the nation rather than the individual, so that the identity of the monarch almost becomes incidental.

One of the main challenges to this prescribed image making, was that outside the court the impact of this official imagery such as that depicted within the *Hardwick* portrait would have been limited, as Guy argues the Queen was no more than a distant name to many ordinary people.⁵² Elizabeth's government did try various ways of promoting and responding to any negative imagery or criticism. This included regular proclamations which were to be read out in every parish church, but this did not always occur. Sharpe suggests that despite these official messages, there were still rumours and criticism that circulated against Elizabeth especially in the last decade of her rule. There were also the beginnings of the more widespread production of commemorative medals which helped to present her image and the monarchy to a wider audience. Sharpe highlights that there was still a desire for those with money to possess images of the monarch and the medals were one of the most accessible way of obtaining her likeness.⁵³ The court also responded by predominately focused on the production of miniatures which promoted this ideal of courtly love and sacred monarchy, thus reinforcing the message that the monarch was divine. Doran highlights that all of these visual presentations would have only reached a small population especially the miniatures. The coins were an exception but she suggests any imagery on these coins would have been largely ignored.⁵⁴ This contrasts with *Richard II* which could have been seen by as many as a thousand people at any one time, including those who were not part of those that could afford any of the other visual representations of monarchy. Wells sees *Richard II* as Shakespeare looking to educate the audience in the practice of debating and judging the issues of the day, which he would have been able to do with these numbers.⁵⁵

In the last decade of Elizabeth's reign, despite this official desire to promote the continued sacredness of monarchy it had become open to question, both politically

⁵² Guy, *Elizabeth: The Forgotten Years* p.402

⁵³ Kevin, Sharpe. *Selling the Tudor Monarchy: Authority and Image in Sixteenth - Century England* (London: Yale University Press 2009)

⁵⁴ Doran 'Virginity Divinity and Power' p.19

⁵⁵ Wells 'Introduction'

and culturally. Neither of these depictions were aiming to overthrow the institution of monarchy but the chivalric and ceremonial symbolism in both exemplifies the fundamental ideological differences between these two depictions of kingship. The *Hardwick* portrait is part of this desire to hide the unpleasant truth and preserve this illusory image of the divine power of kingship, whilst *Richard II* highlights how these ceremonies and rituals hide what is truly going on within the state at the time. Shakespeare provides his audience with a different version of the nature of monarchy and it is not necessarily divine.

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Illustration

Figure 1. *Queen Elizabeth I*, Workshop of Nicholas Hilliard (1599) Oil on Canvas, 88” x 66.5”, Hardwick Hall reproduced with permission of the National Trust