

SHAKESPEARE LECTURE

## Was Shakespeare an Essex Man?

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SIR GELLY MEYRICK, steward to the Earl of Essex, had a busy day on Saturday, 7 February 1601. We do not know his exact movements in the morning, though he gave a man named Bucke forty shillings, part of a former debt, for scouring and oiling muskets. About a hundred of these weapons were being prepared at Essex House, the Earl's London home, on the north side of the Thames in the legal district along what is now the Strand, centrally positioned with the court at Whitehall and Westminster to its west, the city and the Tower to the east and the Globe Theatre directly across the river.

Dinner was taken in the middle of the day. Sir Gelly went the short distance from Essex House to the much humbler dwelling of a friend named Gunter, who lived by the Temple Gate. His companions at table were Sir William Constable, Lord Mounteagle, Sir Christopher Blunt, Sir Charles Percy, Henry Cuffe, Edward Bushell, Ellis Jones and perhaps Sir John Davies and Sir Joscelyn Percy. It must have been a fairly early—and quick—dinner, because by two o'clock most of them were ensconced in the theatre.

Between dinner and the play, Sir Gelly seems to have returned briefly to Essex House, presumably to check on business and tell his men where he could be found if required urgently in the course of the afternoon. He accordingly arrived some time after the performance had begun. 'The play', he later told his interrogators, 'was of King Harry the fourth and of the killing of King Richard the second, played by the Lord Chamberlain's players.'

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The group dispersed after the show, some going to their homes and others to Essex House. Meyrick returned to Gunter's place for supper. Suddenly, though, in the middle of the meal, he left for Essex House, where he learned that his master had been summoned to the court—an alarming development to have occurred after dark on a Saturday. The Earl had received an official demand for his immediate attendance before the Privy Council, but also a private message warning him not to go because there was a plot to entice him to the Lord Treasurer's house, where he would be murdered. There was also a rumour that Sir Walter Raleigh and Henry Brooke, Lord Cobham, were on their way to assassinate him in his bed. Essex accordingly refused to go, even when a second summons arrived, delivered in person by Dr John Herbert, secretary to the Council. At a frenzied meeting in the withdrawing room, Essex and his followers considered their possibilities. An immediate nocturnal assault upon the court? A retreat to Wales and thence out of the country? For the Earl, running away was not an option, but he did not want to make his move without the support of the city of London. Best wait until the morning.

Through the night, his men were busy leaving messages with supporters, telling them to assemble at Essex House in the morning. As steward in charge of the household, Sir Gelly hurried between the courtyard and the gallery in a fever-pitch of conferences, instructions to servants, preparation and speculation. Between one and two in the morning, his man was seen carrying a bag of pellets and a leather bag of gunpowder into the garden.

It would have been very late when Meyrick retired to his chamber, where he lay for the rest of the night with Sir John Davies, one of his master's most loyal followers, a military hard man of humble origins. A rival once described Davies as 'a shepstar's son, hatched in Gutter Lane', a shepstar being a woman who cuts up cloth for dressmaking. Sir Gelly and Sir John must have talked: about the events that had led to this sorry pass, about their expectations for the morrow. We might expect them also to have talked about the play, but there is fairly strong evidence that they did not: one member of the theatre-going party said that he thought Davies was with them, but was not sure, whereas Sir Gelly later told his interrogators that he could not remember whether or not Sir John was there, though he had said that he would attend if he could. Unless Sir Gelly was covering up for his friend, his inability to remember whether Davies attended suggests that they cannot have seen each other at the Globe and are unlikely to have debated in their bed upon the merits, or

the relevance, of the performance. Having seemed for a moment to be the centre of the day, an event of great importance, the play of the killing of King Richard II drifts into seeming insignificance. This is a pattern that we will see repeated. Paradoxically, though, this fading into the background, like the invisibility of Shakespeare's name in the investigations into the events of that fateful weekend, leads us to the real interest of the story.

Essex's followers began arriving soon after daybreak. Bustle in the courtyard, spectators at the gate. At ten o'clock a small delegation arrived from court, led by the Lord Keeper of the Great Seal and the Lord Chief Justice. After some hostile exchanges in the yard, Essex led them to his study, where he left them under the protection of hard man Davies, with another of his captains guarding the door in company with three musketeers and a caliver, matches for powder at the ready.

Once a man, even if he ranks as an Earl, has taken it upon himself to detain such senior officers of state, he has no way to go but forward. Some in the yard cried 'To the court' but Essex headed east into the city in order to muster the support of the Lord Mayor and the sheriff. Between a hundred and two hundred lords, gentlemen and gallants followed behind as he headed down Fleet Street and under Ludgate. They were not fully armed: the whole adventure was unpremeditated, positively shambolic. The Earl's cries that he was acting for the protection of the Queen and the city, that his enemies had betrayed the country to Spain, seem to have been met with bemusement. There was no spontaneous uprising of the citizens in his support, only a light skirmish with the forces of the court at Ludgate in mid-afternoon, an ignominious retreat by water back to the stairs of Essex House, some half-hearted attempts to secure the building and destroy evidence of conspiracy. Then at dusk, surrender to a small but well-organised force under the authority of the Lord Admiral and Baron Burghley, half-brother of Essex's great adversary Robert Cecil. Over the previous weeks, Essex and his closest allies had hatched a half-baked plan to march on the court, protect the Queen's person, arrest his enemies and commit them to trial. They never got near the court. Queen Elizabeth serenely continued with her Sunday routine as if nothing had happened. The rebellion was over almost before it had begun.

Arrests, investigations and interrogations began immediately. Eleven days later, Robert Devereux, second Earl of Essex, and his most senior lieutenant, Henry Wriothesley, third Earl of Southampton, were tried for high treason at Westminster and found guilty. Essex had sported a bright

red waistcoat for his trial but he went to the scaffold dressed in a gown of wrought velvet, a satin suit and felt hat, all black. Southampton was reprieved and confined to the Tower.

Five others were tried for high treason at the beginning of March: Sir Christopher Blunt, Sir Charles Danvers, Sir John Davies, Sir Gelly Meyrick and Henry Cuffe. All were found guilty. The nobly descended Blunt and Danvers were given the privilege of being beheaded on Tower Hill, while Meyrick and Cuffe were hung, drawn and quartered at Tyburn. Davies 'saved his life by telling first who was in with the deepest'.<sup>1</sup> Blunt, Meyrick and Cuff had seen King Richard killed in theatrical play on 7 February. Just over a month later, they were themselves killed in ritual earnest.

The case against Meyrick had three parts. First, his leading role at Essex House on the day. A witness had seen him up on the leads over the hall porch, with a musket laid over the wall ready to shoot towards the street gate when Burghley was approaching. Secondly, he had thrown certain gentlemen out of their lodgings near Essex House some days before, in order to accommodate divers of Essex's followers and accomplices. This was taken as evidence of his part in the premeditation of the rebellion. So, by implication, was his third treasonable act:

It was also proved that the afternoon before the rebellion, Meyrick with a great company of others, who were all afterwards in the action, had procured to be played before them the play of deposing King Richard the Second; neither was it casual, but a play bespoke by Meyrick, and when it was told him by one of the players that the play was old, and they should have loss in playing it, because few would come to it, there were forty shillings extraordinary given for it, and so it was played.<sup>2</sup>

The first published account of the trials of Essex and his associates, written in their immediate wake by Francis Bacon, is explicit about Meyrick's purported motive in procuring the performance: 'So earnest he was to satisfy his eyes with the sight of that Tragedy, which he thought soon after his Lord should bring from the Stage to the State, but that God turned it upon their own heads.'<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Calendar of State Papers: Domestic Series of the Reign of Elizabeth 1601–1603*, ed. Mary Anne Everett Green (London, 1870), p. 18.

<sup>2</sup> *State Trials* (London, 1719), vol. 1, p. 203.

<sup>3</sup> *Practices and Treasons attempted and committed by Robert, Earl of Essex, and his Complices* (London, 1601), sig. K3r.

The case of Sir Gelly Meyrick is the first instance on record of a person being executed for commissioning the performance of a Shakespeare play. It was also a minor injustice, though one that has gone unnoticed by most commentators. Meyrick was not the man who 'procured' or 'bespoke' the revival of the old play of *Richard II*. So who did bespeak it and with what intention and why did the prosecutors—Mr Secretary Sir Robert Cecil, Attorney-General Sir Edward Coke and his junior counsel Francis Bacon—wish to pin the commission on Meyrick? Why, for that matter, did they consider something so frivolous as a stage-play worth invoking in a treason trial?

Historians sometimes find it valuable to play the game of counterfactuals, of 'what if?' What if, like Henry Bullingbrook in the play, the Earl of Essex had garnered support in the city? If he had then marched on the court and provoked a blood-bath in which the Queen's person had been threatened? Because the rebellion proved so farcically ineffective, Elizabeth and her counsellors were able to show wide clemency. A handful of ringleaders were executed as an example, but most of Essex's followers got away with, at worst, brief imprisonment and a fine. Had the threat been more serious, the response would have been draconian. The performance of the play would then have been pursued further. One can imagine the line of questioning. Were not a majority of the ringleaders present? Blunt, Meyrick, Cuffe, Davies? Did the tragedy enacted at the Globe not bear striking resemblances to a treasonous book dedicated to Essex that had already provoked extreme measures, Sir John Hayward's *History of King Henry IV*? At this point, the author of the play would surely have been interrogated. It would have been discovered that though he was now the servant of the unimpeachably loyal Lord Chamberlain, Lord Hunsdon, his printed poems had been dedicated to none other than Essex's right-hand man, the Earl of Southampton. Henry Brooke, Lord Cobham, a leading figure in the anti-Essex faction, might have chipped in with the information that this same filthy play-maker had written a so-called stage-history full of gross insult towards his revered ancestor, the Lollard martyr Sir John Oldcastle. Shakespeare had been forced to change the name to Falstaff.

A few years before Essex's act of rash rebellion, the theatres had been closed down and the playwright Ben Jonson imprisoned on the far lesser provocation of some few seditious lines in a play called *The Isle of Dogs*. Surely in this case, Cecil would have argued, the Globe must be closed, the acting company disbanded and Master Shakespeare, tarred with the Southampton brush, thrown in the Tower.

Imagine this: Shakespeare's career coming to an ignominious end in February 1601. Not only would *Measure for Measure*, *Othello*, *Lear*, *Macbeth*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *The Tempest* and the other later plays never have been written, John Hemings and Henry Condell would not have hung around to create a collected Folio of the plays that had been. The only survivals would have been a few quarto editions: the narrative poems, half a dozen history plays (some in garbled texts), four comedies and two tragedies. No *Hamlet* or *Twelfth Night*, no *Julius Caesar* or *As You Like It*. The whole course of English literature, indeed of western culture, would have been different.

The performance of *Richard II* at the behest of Essex's men forms a brief set-piece in every biography of Shakespeare and most accounts of theatre and politics in the Elizabethan age. But it has been persistently, damagingly, misreported. The standard account assumes that 'the strategy, it seems, was to plant the idea of a successful rebellion in the minds of the London crowd'. Thus Stephen Greenblatt in his biography *Will in the World*, repeating the view of dozens of previous commentators. 'This at least', he continues, 'is how, in the wake of the arrests, the authorities regarded the special performance, and this is how the queen herself seems to have understood it. "I am Richard II," she fumed. "Know ye not that?"'<sup>4</sup> But how can the strategy of those who commissioned the performance have been to plant the idea of a successful rebellion in the minds of the London crowd when they had not themselves planned a rebellion? The trigger for Essex's march into the streets only came *after* the show, with the evening summons from the Council. Nowhere in the subsequent investigations was it explicitly claimed by Cecil and his team that this was how they regarded the performance. As for the Queen's comparison of herself to Richard II, which is usually quoted together with her subsequent purported remark that 'this tragedy was played forty times in open streets and houses', the authenticity of this episode is highly suspect. Even if she really did say something of the sort, the meaning of the latter phrase has probably been misinterpreted. And it is crucial to remember that, insofar as Essex was plotting action, it was to remove from court those who had caused his downfall and exile from court following the failure of the Irish expedition, not to overthrow the Queen. It was, however, the strategy of his enemies—the Cecil faction—to create

<sup>4</sup> Greenblatt, *Will in the World: How Shakespeare became Shakespeare* (London, 2004), p. 309.

the impression that he had been plotting to overthrow the Queen. Before examining this bigger picture, let us go back to the bespoke performance.<sup>5</sup>

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It seems to have been Sir Charles Percy's idea. Towards the end of the first week of February 1601, together with his brother Sir Joscelyn Percy, Lord Monteagle and about three others, he went to find the players at the Globe. Actor and company manager Augustine Phillips testified that Sir Charles and his friends asked 'to have the play of the deposing and killing of King Richard the Second to be played the Saturday next, promising to get them forty shillings more than their ordinary to play it'. Phillips and his colleagues initially resisted, 'holding that play of King Richard to be so old and so long out of use as that they should have small or no company at it'.<sup>6</sup> But the gentlemen were insistent and the players eventually yielded.

The Chamberlain's Men 'play of the deposing and killing of King Richard the Second', as Phillips calls it, was by their house dramatist, William Shakespeare. Written and first performed in 1595 or 1596, it had been published in quarto format in 1597 and reprinted twice in 1598. The printed text excluded a sequence of about 160 lines in which King Richard formally hands over his throne, inverting the sacred language of the coronation ceremony and smashing a mirror. Scholars usually assume that this omission was because the scene was too politically sensitive for print, but there is no evidence of active censorship. The idea that it must

<sup>5</sup> This performance, and in particular the tricky question of its relationship to Sir John Hayward's *History of Henry IV*, has been a matter of scholarly debate ever since an ill-tempered exchange of views between the American scholars Evelyn May Albright and Ray Heffner in the journal *PMLA* between 1927 and 1932. My detailed reassessment is based on a return to primary sources, but has also benefited from the following articles: Leeds Barroll, 'A new history for Shakespeare and his time', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 39 (1988), 441–64; Cyndia Clegg, 'Archival poetics and the politics of literature: Essex and Hayward revisited', *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, 32 (1999), 115–32, and 'The untried treason case against Robert Devereux, the Earl of Essex' (unpublished); Arthur Kinney, 'Essex and Shakespeare versus Hayward', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 44 (1993), 464–6; and Rebecca Lemon, 'The faulty verdict in "The Crown v. John Hayward"', *Studies in English Literature*, 41 (2001), 109–32. On completing the typescript, I had the benefit of seeing Paul Hammer's excellent essay, 'Shakespeare's *Richard II*, the play of 7 February 1601 and the Essex Rising', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 59 (2008), 1–35, which arrives independently at some very similar conclusions to mine.

<sup>6</sup> 'The Examination of Augustine Phillips', *Calendar of State Papers: Domestic Series of the Reign of Elizabeth 1598–1601*, ed. Mary Anne Everett Green (London, 1869), p. 578. Subsequent references to this volume of the *State Papers* are given with the abbreviation *CSPD* and a page number.

have been censored is an enduring misapprehension even among some distinguished Shakespeareans. The scene appeared as a 'new addition' in the 1608 reprinting of the quarto and again, in a better quality text, deriving from the theatre promptbook, in the 1623 Folio version of the play. Arguably, the sequence in which King Richard says 'With mine own tears I wash away my balm, | With mine own hands I give away my crown . . .',<sup>7</sup> makes the play *less* subversive, turning a deposition into an abdication.

The Q4/Folio addition to act four scene one runs from lines 157 to 317. The argument that it must have been in the original version, and was therefore suppressed for the first quarto, depends on the assumption that the ensuing line where the quarto picks up, 'A woeful pageant have we here beheld' (318), must be a reference back to Richard's abdication antics. But the phrase could equally well refer to York's acclaim of Henry Bullingbrook as king, the latter's ascent of the empty throne and the arrest of the Bishop of Carlisle for his protests at this treason. The awkwardness of an arrested Carlisle standing silently on stage watching the abdication, when one would have expected him to be marched straight off in the custody of the Abbot of Westminster, is an insufficiently considered piece of evidence in support of the possibility that the sequence is an addition, not a cut.

This raises the possibility, generally neglected by scholars, that Shakespeare may have written it as an addition after the real-life drama of February 1601, in order to give the impression of a formal, stately handing over of power, as opposed to the presumption and huffer-mugger of the original version that was now tarred by association with the trial of Essex and his accomplices. Nor can we wholly rule out the possibility that, to freshen up the play and as a little treat for Sir Charles Percy and his friends in return for their forty shillings above the ordinary, Shakespeare dashed off the addition on the Friday, gave it to his actors to learn overnight, allowing them to rehearse it in the morning run-through before including it in the afternoon performance. The status of the abdication sequence remains an open question, of great interest but not ultimately making a major difference to our interpretation of the events of February 1601.

Returning now to the man with whom we began: though Sir Gelly Meyrick was executed for, among other things, procuring the play, he was not mentioned in Phillips's testimony on behalf of the actors. Under

<sup>7</sup> 4.1.201–2. All Shakespearean quotations are from William Shakespeare, *Complete Works*, edited by Jonathan Bate and Eric Rasmussen (Basingstoke, 2007), based on Folio texts.



interrogation, Meyrick himself confirmed that the performance was commissioned by Percy.<sup>8</sup>

So who was Sir Charles Percy? He was a younger son of Henry Percy, eighth Earl of Northumberland, and a loyal Essex man. He fought under the Earl and was knighted by him in 1591, before Rouen, where Englishmen led by Essex had joined the Duke of Biron and Henry of Navarre in besieging the city. Sir Charles then joined the army against the rebels in Ireland, acting as colonel in command of the vanguard at the battle of the Yellow Ford on the river Blackwater in 1598. To judge from his monument in Dumbleton church, Charles Percy was short and stout. But he was a fine soldier: at Blackwater, he used a skilled manoeuvre to check the enemy and protect the retreat. When Essex took over the Irish war the following year, he gave Percy command for the assault on Cahir Castle.

After the campaign collapsed, like many of Essex's most loyal followers, Percy found himself back in England, kicking his heels. It seems to have been at this time that he took a house at Dumbleton near Broadway in the heart of the Gloucestershire Cotswolds. In a surviving letter, which according to the Victorian scholar Richard Simpson was found on his person after he was arrested following the Essex rising, he complained

I am so pestered with country business, that I cannot come to London. If I stay here long, you will find me so dull that I shall be taken for Justice Silence or Justice Shallow; therefore take pity of me, and send me news from time to time, the knowledge of which, though perhaps it will not exempt me from the opinion of a Justice Shallow at London, yet will make me pass for a very sufficient gentleman in Gloucestershire.<sup>9</sup>

The date of this letter is a matter for conjecture—Simpson's claim is uncorroborated and clearly Sir Charles *had* come to London early in 1601—but it provides firm evidence of his interest in Shakespeare's history plays. The references to Justice Shallow, Justice Silence and Gloucestershire are those of a spectator (or reader) who has greatly enjoyed *Henry IV Part 2*. His pleasure in these plays is hardly surprising, given the central role they give to his own family, the Percies. A real-life soldiering Percy would have every reason to count his ancestor Harry Hotspur as his favourite dramatic character. It makes complete sense that he was the one to lead a group of Essex men to the Globe and ask for a

<sup>8</sup> 'Sir Gelly Meyricke 17 Feb 160[1]', quoted, E. K. Chambers, *William Shakespeare: A Study of Facts and Problems* (2 vols., Oxford, 1930), 2. 324.

<sup>9</sup> *CSPD*, p. 502.

special Shakespeare performance. But why did he request *Richard II*, as opposed to one of the *Henry IV* plays, in which he would have had a more personal interest?

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Here is an account of a historical narrative, as summarised by Attorney General Coke. The author, it is claimed,

selected a story 200 years old, and published it last year, intending the application of it to this time, the plot being that of a King who is taxed for misgovernment, and his council for corrupt and covetous dealings for private ends; the King is censured for conferring benefits on hated favourites, the nobles become discontented, and the commons groan under continual taxation, whereupon the King is deposed, and in the end murdered.<sup>10</sup>

Reading this in isolation, one would have every reason to suppose that it was a summary of Shakespeare's *Richard II*. But Coke was actually referring to a different work, Sir John Hayward's prose history, *The First Part of the Life and Reign of King Henry IV*, dedicated to Essex and published to great controversy in 1599.

As Coke's summary reveals, though titled *King Henry IV*, Hayward's book is really about the reign of Richard II. It covers exactly the same ground as Shakespeare's play. It is *The First Part* of the life of Henry IV, concentrating on the period when, as Henry Bullingbrook, he rose up against Richard and took the throne. The implication is that there will be a second part, continuing through Henry's actual reign. But Hayward was not given the opportunity to write that. His book was suppressed because of its association with the Earl of Essex and he was eventually thrown in the Tower. The circumstances surrounding the publication were examined in great detail during the year 1600, as Essex's enemies at court sought to build a case against him following the debacle of his Irish campaign and the dramatic breach of protocol whereby on his return he burst into Queen Elizabeth's private chamber early in the morning before she was dressed.

Point five of the 'Analytical abstract of the evidence in support of the charge of treason against the Earl of Essex' concerns the publication of Hayward's *History*:

Essex's own actions confirm the intent of this treason. His permitting underhand that treasonable book of Henry IV to be printed and published; it being

<sup>10</sup> *CSPD*, p. 449.

plainly deciphered, not only by the matter, and by the epistle itself, for what end and for whose behalf it was made, but also the Earl himself being so often present at the playing thereof, and with great applause giving countenance to it.<sup>11</sup>

The accusation that Essex himself was ‘so often present at the playing’ of Dr Hayward’s history has led the distinguished historian Blair Worden to a startling new interpretation of the bespoke performance of *Richard II*. He reads Coke’s statement as implying that there had been a dramatisation of Hayward’s book, which Essex frequently attended and applauded. Having conjured up such a work, Worden proposes that this play, not Shakespeare’s, may have been the one performed at the Globe on 7 February 1601.<sup>12</sup>

This argument is implausible for many reasons. Even in its own terms, it has a curious illogic. Essex’s supposed presence ‘at the playing’ of Hayward’s history leads Worden to suppose that Hayward’s history was played on the afternoon of 7 February—and yet Essex wasn’t present at the play that afternoon! He had nothing to do with the commissioning of the special performance from the Chamberlain’s Men. It was Sir Charles Percy’s idea. Besides, there is no mention of a dramatisation in any of the interrogations of parties associated with Hayward’s *History of Henry IV*. Nor is there any precedent for the idea of an instantly commissioned dramatisation of this kind. The notion that Essex instigated a dramatisation and watched it frequently, and that his followers then persuaded the Chamberlain’s Men to perform it in February 1601, in no way conforms to the way in which plays were written in the period. There is no instance of the Chamberlain’s Men having two different versions of the same story on the stocks at the same time. Their version of ‘that play of King Richard’, as manager Phillips called it, was Shakespeare’s.

Interestingly, much later, in 1611, the astrologer Simon Forman *did* see them (they were now the King’s Men) perform a different *Richard II* play at the Globe, one that was conspicuously pro-Richard and anti-Bullingbrook. It had nothing to do with Hayward’s *History*. The association of Shakespeare’s play with the unfortunate events of February 1601 seems to have led his company, after the lapse of a decent period of time, to commission a new, safe *Richard II* from another dramatist. The script of this substitute Richard play does not survive, but one particular,

<sup>11</sup> *CSPD*, p. 455.

<sup>12</sup> See his essays ‘Which play was performed at the Globe Theatre on 7 February 1601?’ *London Review of Books*, 10 July 2003, and ‘Shakespeare in life and art: biography and *Richard II*’, in *Shakespeare, Marlowe, Jonson: New Directions in Biography*, ed. Takashi Kozuka and J. R. Mulryne (Aldershot, 2006), pp. 23–42.

hitherto unnoticed, detail in Forman's account of it strongly suggests that it was composed some time after 1606: 'Remember also how the Duke of Lancaster [John of Gaunt] asked a wise man whether himself should ever be king and he told him no, but his son should be a king.'<sup>13</sup> The unknown author of the new Richard play has patently borrowed this detail from the weird sisters' prophecy to Banquo in *Macbeth*, which, because of its allusions to the Gunpowder Plot, can be dated with certainty to 1606.

Even if we allow Worden his fancy that there was a dramatisation of Hayward, in what sense could it have been 'an old play and long out of use' in February 1601 when the earliest it could have been created was after the publication of the history in February 1599? And when would Essex have found time to be 'so often present at the playing thereof'? As was seen from Wolfe's testimony, he was busy preparing his forces for Ireland: not the moment to commission a play and attend a series of performances or even semi-dramatised readings of a history book. At the end of March, he crossed the Irish Sea. After his return in September, he was placed under house arrest.

The true meaning of Attorney General Coke's claim must be that the Earl of Essex was often present at *a play that told the same story as Hayward*. The fascinating inference would then be that Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex, more than once witnessed Shakespeare's *Richard II* and made a point of loudly applauding it. He may have made himself prominent in the audience watching it at the public playhouse, or he may have made a show of applause at one or more private performances.

Courtiers and gentlemen were interested in plays as the mirrors of contemporary politics. They attended the public theatres and commissioned the players to give private performances. Leading figures in the Essex circle, such as Shakespeare's patron the Earl of Southampton, were known as frequent playgoers.

Early in 1598, Sir Gelly Meyrick arranged an evening at Essex House for the Earl and his friends. 'They had two plays, which kept them up till one o'clock after midnight.'<sup>14</sup> One of the two could easily have been *Richard II*. A fortnight before, the Earl of Southampton had a play at a private feast in honour of Robert Cecil, before he left on French business. Given Essex's closeness to Southampton, he may well have been there. Given Southampton's patronage of Shakespeare, the players may well

<sup>13</sup> Forman, 'Richard the 2 at the Globe 30 April 1611', quoted in Chambers, 2. 339–40.

<sup>14</sup> *Report on the Manuscripts of Lord de l'Isle and Dudley preserved at Penshurst Place* (6 vols., London, 1914–66), 2. 90.

have been the Lord Chamberlain's Men. This could have been the occasion on which Cecil witnessed Essex loudly applauding a performance of *Richard II*.

What kind of plays would Essex have liked? He associated himself with a very particular ideology. As the historian Mervyn James has shown, the Essex rising existed at a crossroads of political culture: it was the last backward-looking, aristocratic, baronial rebellion against the monarchy.<sup>15</sup> The next generation would see something very different: discontent coming from the House of Commons rather than the Earls, talk of the sovereignty of the law as opposed to that of the king.

In medieval times, the monarchy had strictly limited powers. The great barons, especially in the north, closely guarded their autonomy. They effectively had private armies and legal control over their domains. The so-called Tudor revolution in government was a concerted attempt to put an end to all this. Increasing central control as much as Catholicism provided the impulse for the rebellion of the northern earls against Queen Elizabeth in 1569, in which the Percy family was most prominent. Legal theorists and all those educators who inculcated a Ciceronian idea of civic humanism shared the new ideology of the Tudor monarchy. Private revenge, for instance, was frowned upon. In the old chivalric code, if you insulted my honour, I would throw down my gage and we would resolve our differences in hand-to-hand combat. By contrast, Attorney General Coke and his right-hand man Francis Bacon would tell us to submit to the common law of the land and allow the Queen's law courts to sort out our problem.

The ancient aristocratic families accordingly found themselves needing an alternative outlet for their sense of honour and militaristic pride. They found it in ceremonies such as the Accession Day tilts, as well as on the battlefields of the Netherlands in the 1580s and Ireland in the 1590s. Men of this disposition despised the new pragmatic politics of the Cecils. There was no doubt as to the identity of their standard-bearer: it was Essex.

He bestrode the tiltyard and the battlefield. He gave patronage to books on war and honour. In the dedication to George Chapman's translation of Homer's *Iliad*, he is described as a modern Achilles. The poet Samuel Daniel imagined him as the man destined to lead the chivalry of

<sup>15</sup> 'At a crossroads of the political culture: the Essex revolt, 1601' and 'English politics and the concept of honour, 1485-1642', in his *Society, Politics and Culture: Studies in Early Modern England* (London, 1986), pp. 308-465.

all Europe in a new crusade against the infidel. Henry Cuffe, a former Oxford professor who was one of his secretaries and who was at the dinner on the day of the *Richard II* performance, dreamed in his scaffold speech of a society of ‘scholars and martialists’ in which ‘learning and valour would have the pre-eminence’.<sup>16</sup> That could have been the manifesto headline of the Essex faction.

Most provocatively of all, in spite of the Queen’s protests, Essex again and again used his military prerogative to confer the honour of knighthood on those who served him well in battle. This was such a powerful device for creating a chivalric ‘band of brothers’ that he even dubbed followers such as the Earls of Southampton and Rutland, who hardly had need of the lesser rank of knight. Looking again at the list of attendees at the performance of *Richard II*, a striking fact becomes apparent. What did Sir Gelly Meyrick, the Lord Monteagle, Sir William Constable, Sir Charles Percy, Sir Joscelyn Percy and Sir John Davies have in common? All had been knighted on the battlefield by Essex.

Given that Essex and his inner circle were synonymous with this backward-looking code of chivalry, it is hardly surprising that they took pleasure in Shakespeare’s great sequence of history plays concerning the pre-Tudor era. Here was the enactment of chivalry and honour in abundance, a harking back to the age when the barons were their own men. I have already suggested that Sir Charles Percy rejoiced in the sight of his ancestors Northumberland and Harry Percy, known as Hotspur, on stage. By the same account, another member of the theatregoing group was Sir Christopher Blunt, Essex’s step-father. He had been knighted on the battlefield in the Low Countries, back in the days of the Earl of Leicester’s campaigns. He would have smiled to see loyal Sir Walter Blunt dying heroically on the battlefield at Shrewsbury in *Henry IV Part 1*. As for Essex himself, he claimed descent from the Earls of Hereford—Bullingbrook’s title—and from Thomas of Woodstock, Duke of Gloucester, for whose murder Richard II is held responsible in the opening scenes of the play. That murder is indeed the initial trigger for the action.

Furthermore, the play begins with a dispute going to ‘chivalrous design of knightly trial’.<sup>17</sup> Bullingbrook and Mowbray throw down their gages and meet in the lists at Coventry. Their man-to-man trial by lance

<sup>16</sup> *Calendar of State Papers Domestic 1601–1603*, p. 15.

<sup>17</sup> *Richard II*, 1.1.81.

is then interrupted by the king, who asserts his own authority by banishing them. Chivalric combat is reduced to a game, a ritual, as it was in the Accession Day tilts of Queen Elizabeth. Honour is a leitmotif throughout the play, from Mowbray's early reference to the equivalence of his honour and his life ('Mine honour is my life: both grow in one: | Take honour from me, and my life is done') to King Bullingbrook showing mercy towards the Bishop of Carlisle late in the play because 'High sparks of honour in thee have I seen.'<sup>18</sup>

Again and again, Shakespeare's history plays enact the progress from the old code of honour to the new politics of pragmatic statecraft. Looked at from one point of view, the ruinous civil war that makes England bleed through the whole sequence of plays, only to be brought to an end with the marriage of red rose and white as Henry VII emerges as saviour at the end of *Richard III*, suggests that the plays fall in with the 'Tudor myth' of the emergence of a modern, unified nation. This was very much the reading of the Wars of the Roses in Shakespeare's sources, the chronicles of Halle and Holinshed. It explains why Henry VIII's servant Sir Thomas More, in his life of Richard III, reprinted in Halle, Shakespeare's main source for that play, should have painted Henry VII's adversary as the monstrous child-killing machiavel Crookback Richard.

But looked at from another point of view, there was plenty to applaud in these plays if you were Essex or one of his men with a nostalgic taste for the martial code. There could be no more chivalric exemplar than Talbot in *Henry VI Part I*, fighting gallantly to take Orléans, Rouen and Bordeaux (where his son is killed). He was a sensationally successful dramatic character. Thomas Nashe described how ten thousand spectators wept to see the death of 'brave Talbot, the terror of the French': the tragedian that represented him (probably Richard Burbage) was so effective that the audience imagined they were witnessing the real Talbot lying bleeding on the battlefield two hundred years before.<sup>19</sup> That was in 1592. The previous summer, the Earl of Essex and his followers, as if tracing the footsteps of Talbot, had landed at Dieppe, fought at Rouen (where Essex's younger brother was killed), and then captured Gournai with the support of Marshall Biron. Ignominious retreat ensued over the winter. A relishing of Talbot's heroism in the theatre would have been one way of providing a little compensation once back home.

<sup>18</sup> *Richard II*, 1.1.183–4, 5.6.29.

<sup>19</sup> *Pierce Penniless his Supplication to the Devil* (London, 1592), quoted, Chambers, 2. 188.

Shakespeare brilliantly kept both sides happy, offering a Talbot and a Hotspur for those of an Essexian disposition, but Falstaff's great deconstruction of the code of honour for those who were pragmatic Cecilites: 'Can honour set to a leg? No. Or an arm? No. Or take away the grief of a wound? No. Honour hath no skill in surgery, then? No. What is honour? A word. What is that word "honour"? Air. A trim reckoning! Who hath it? He that died o'Wednesday.' Sir Walter Blunt lying dead on the field: 'There's honour for you!'<sup>20</sup>

Of all the histories, *Richard II* played best to the Essex code. The initial tiltyard business; the centrality of an Irish military campaign; Bushy, Bagot and Green as self-interested flatterers bending the ear of a vacillating and effeminate monarch in the manner of Cecil and his coterie. It all fitted like a gage. It makes complete sense that Essex would have made a point of appearing prominently in the audience at performances, whether public or private, and offering great applause.

There is evidence that he liked to use the 'conceit' of reading present affairs in the light of the past history of Richard II.<sup>21</sup> He imagined himself as a Henry Bullingbrook figure, a no-nonsense military man greeted with acclaim whenever he rode through the streets of London, as he did before heading off on his French campaign in 1591. Shakespeare may well have been aware of this identification. At the climax of *Richard II*, he describes Bullingbrook in London:

the duke, great Bullingbrook,  
Mounted upon a hot and fiery steed  
Which his aspiring rider seemed to know,  
With slow but stately pace kept on his course.  
While all tongues cried 'God save thee, Bullingbrook!'  
You would have thought the very windows spake,  
So many greedy looks of young and old  
Through casements darted their desiring eyes  
Upon his visage, and that all the walls  
With painted imagery had said at once  
'Jesu preserve thee! Welcome, Bullingbrook!'  
Whilst he, from one side to the other turning,  
Bareheaded, lower than his proud steed's neck,  
Bespake them thus: 'I thank you, countrymen',  
And thus still doing, thus he passed along.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup> *1 Henry IV*, 5.1.130–3, 5.2.135–6.

<sup>21</sup> Letter from Raleigh to Cecil, dated 6 July 1597.

<sup>22</sup> *Richard II*, 5.2.8–22.



There is no precedent in Shakespeare's chronicle source for this striking image of Bullingbrook's popularity. It has been invented in order to establish a contrast with the deposed Richard, who follows in after, with no man crying 'God save him', dust and rubbish being thrown out of the windows on his head.

In the *Henry IV* plays, however, Shakespeare conspicuously drops the image of Bullingbrook, now king, as a popular figure. Far from showing himself among his people and exemplifying strong government, Henry IV skulks in his palace as his kingdom disintegrates around him, the penalty for his usurpation of the throne. The horseman and populist is his son Hal, who goes on to become Henry V, leading his men to triumph in battle. His return to London after the victory at Agincourt is described by the fifth act Chorus of his play in language that echoes that of the speech about his father at the corresponding moment in *Richard II*. As so often in Shakespeare, the wheel of history comes full circle. For our purposes, though, what is so interesting is that it is here, in a play performed in the summer of 1599 as Londoners waited to hear news from Ireland, that Shakespeare chose to make the boldest, most specific topical allusion in his entire work:

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 conquering Caesar in:  
 As by a lower but by loving likelihood,  
 Were now the general of our gracious empress,  
 As in good time he may, from Ireland coming,  
 Bringing rebellion broachèd on his sword,  
 How many would the peaceful city quit,  
 To welcome him? Much more, and much more cause,  
 Did they this Harry.<sup>23</sup>

Shakespeare does not abandon his habitual political caution. It is a 'likelihood', not a certainty, that Essex will bring rebellion broached on his sword and it is an open question how many people will turn out to cheer him. But there is still a boldness in the comparison. When 'conquering Caesar' crossed the Rubicon and returned to Rome, there was talk of him seizing an imperial crown and Brutus and his friends had to take drastic

<sup>23</sup> *Henry V*, 5 Chorus, 22–35.

action to save the republic. Conversely, there were moments in late Elizabethan court politics when exasperation with the old childless Queen's refusal to name an heir led some to wonder whether there might not be a future for England in some form of Roman-style republican government, with the Privy Council serving as its Senate and a strong man such as Essex in the role of Consul. Regardless of Shakespeare's semi-concealed political intentions in making the allusion — one gets the sense that he is only somewhere a little over halfway to being an Essex man — it is easy to see how the two remarkably similar passages in *Richard II* and *Henry V* could have been perceived as pro-Essex.

Why did Essex turn right into the city instead of left for the court on that ill-fated Sunday in February 1601? Because he wanted people to come to their windows and cry out in his support, as they had for Bullingbrook. Subliminally, or even overtly, he was re-enacting the play in reality. But the whole thing was a shambles. It was only at dinner-time that his followers managed to rustle up a horse for him. The march began not on Bullingbrook's proud steed named 'roan Barbary', but on Shanks's pony. And sadly for Essex the good citizens of London did not live by the old chivalric code. Many of them were puritans. They either ignored him or were busy in church. Some actively complained of his blasphemy in marching on a Sunday. He wanted to be acclaimed like Bullingbrook, but ironically the popular reaction was like that which greeted Richard: 'No man cried "God save him", | No joyful tongue gave him his welcome home.'<sup>24</sup>

\* \* \*

Why did Sir Charles Percy and his friends commission the special performance? They knew that something was afoot. Weapons were being prepared at Essex House, though with the emphasis on defence. A confrontation was imminent, but nothing had been decided: a bonding exercise was needed, a steeling of the will, a visible show of solidarity. Dinner and a show for as many of the group as cared for it. The deposition of the Queen was the last thing on their minds: the project was to rescue the Queen from bad advisers. The notion, parroted by Shakespearean biographers and critics (including, it has to be confessed, me), that there was a conscious attempt to prepare the London public for a deposition is wildly implausible.

<sup>24</sup> *Richard II*, 5.2.29–30.

Why, then, *Richard II*, not some other play with a combination of politics and sword-fighting to stir the spirits? *Henry V*, for instance? The answer must be: because *Richard II* can legitimately be described as the ‘signature play’ of the Essex faction. A play, moreover, that had taken on extra force after Essex, like his hero and ancestor Bullingbrook, was exiled from the royal court. The signature play for the Essex code. A play applauded by the Earl himself. Could it then have been that Sir John Hayward knew this back in 1599 and that his reason for dedicating the history to Essex was that Essex liked the play? Perhaps he and his publisher went with their book to Essex House in February 1599 to request permission to dedicate it to the Earl for the same reason that Sir Charles Percy and the Lord Monteagle went with their particular request for a performance to the Globe in February 1601.

Attorney General Coke may have had even better reason than he knew for his elision of the play and the prose history. I suspect that Hayward not only made the dedication to Essex because he knew that Essex liked the play, but that he actually used the printed text of the play in the composition of the history.

Since Shakespeare and Hayward both based their works on the chronicles, strong parallels are to be expected. But the chronicles make clear that ‘benevolences’, a particular form of taxation that might better have been called malevolences, and that were much criticised in the 1590s, only dated from the reign of Edward IV, a century after Richard’s. Hayward, however, writes of the reign of Richard II: ‘Under the favourite term of benevolence, he wiped away from the people such heaps of money as were little answerable to that free and friendly name.’<sup>25</sup> In Shakespeare’s play *Lord Willoughby*, of the Percy faction, complains that ‘daily new exactions are devised, | As blanks, benevolences, and I wot not what.’<sup>26</sup> Shakespeare and Hayward both took their ‘exactions’ and ‘blank charters’ from Holinshed, but is it a coincidence that that they both backdated the introduction of ‘benevolences’ to Richard’s reign? In the play, Willoughby is adding to the complaint of Ross, another of the Earl of Northumberland’s allies, who has just said ‘The commons hath he pilld with grievous taxes.’<sup>27</sup> Hayward correspondingly reports the complaint ‘Great sums of money are pulled and pilld from good subjects to be thrown away among unprofitable unthrifths.’ Those ‘unprofitable

<sup>25</sup> Hayward, *The First Part of the Life and Reign of King Henry the IIII* (London, 1599), p. 55.

<sup>26</sup> *Richard II*, 2.1.251–2.

<sup>27</sup> *Richard II*, 2.1.248.

unthrifths' are also a close echo of the play: Bullingbrook's 'upstart unthrifths',<sup>28</sup> spoken with reference to Richard's cronies.

Early in the play, John of Gaunt delivers his memorable deathbed oration on how 'This England' is 'now leased out—I die pronouncing it— | Like to a tenement or pelting farm.' The king then enters and Gaunt accuses him in the same mode: 'Landlord of England art thou and not king.'<sup>29</sup> There is no precedent for the metaphor of the 'landlord' in any of the chronicles, and yet Hayward, too, writes 'The profits and revenues of the crown were said to be let to farm, the King making himself Landlord of his realm.'<sup>30</sup> The scene in the play is so memorable that it seems much more likely that Hayward is recalling it, even quoting it, rather than that he came up with his own landlord metaphor independently.

Consider, too, a passage specifically cited in the interrogation of Hayward, concerning the way in which Bullingbrook was 'not negligent to uncover the head, bow the body, stretch forth the neck to every mean person', thus drawing 'the common multitude' to his support. This seems to be an embroidering not of the chronicles, but of Richard's lines in the play,

Ourself and Bushy, Bagot here, and Green  
Observed his courtship to the common people.  
How he did seem to dive into their hearts  
With humble and familiar courtesy,  
What reverence he did throw away on slaves,  
Wooing poor craftsman with the craft of smiles . . .  
Off goes his bonnet to an oyster-wench,  
A brace of draymen bid God speed him well  
And had the tribute of his supple knee.<sup>31</sup>

Shakespeare and Hayward deploy the exact same image of the bending of the aristocratic body towards the common multitude. This is unlikely to be a coincidence.

There is further and, I think, absolutely clinching evidence for the connection of Shakespeare's *Richard II* with Essex: even before the publication of Hayward's book, *this passage in the play was applied to the Earl of Essex*. Everard Guilpin's 1598 satire *Skialetheia* attacked Essex as 'great Felix', who

<sup>28</sup> Hayward, p. 63; *Richard II*, 2.3.122.

<sup>29</sup> *Richard II*, 2.1.50–60, 2.1.113.

<sup>30</sup> Hayward, p. 55.

<sup>31</sup> *Richard II*, 1.4.22–35.

passing through the street  
 Veileth his cap to each one he doth meet,  
 And when no broom-man that will pray for him,  
 Shall have less truage than his bonnet's brim,  
 Who would not think him perfect courtesy,  
 Or the honeysuckle of humility?<sup>32</sup>

Here the Bullingbrook comparison is used to satirise Essex, but it was also used to praise him. A slightly later anonymous poem attacking his rival Sir Walter Raleigh contrasted the latter's disdain for the common multitude with Essex's populism by again quoting the speech about Bullingbrook from *Richard II*:

Renowned Essex, as he past the streets,  
 Would veil his bonnet to an oyster-wife,  
 And with a kind of humble conge [bow] greet  
 The vulgar sort that did admire his life.<sup>33</sup>

Several other details in Hayward are also close to Shakespeare but without precedent in the chronicles: withered bay-trees as signs of the evil times, Carlisle's potent line 'What subject can give sentence on his king?' and his scornful 'My lord of Hereford here, whom you call king', the reaction to the usurpation of the throne that it is a particular horror in a 'Christian climate', and, most notably, Henry's disavowal of Richard's murderer, Piers of Exton.<sup>34</sup>

The case for Hayward's use of Shakespeare is extremely strong, and what is striking about it is that the details shared by them but absent from the chronicles are exactly the emphases that attracted Essex to the story and established parallels with the present: favourites perverting the monarch, unjust taxation, costly and mistaken Irish policies,

<sup>32</sup> Guilpin, *Skialetheia* (London, 1598), sig. C3v.

<sup>33</sup> Printed by J. O. Halliwell in *Poetical Miscellanies* (London, 1845), p. 17; the poem belongs to the period of Raleigh's fall in 1603.

<sup>34</sup> See *Richard II*, 2.4.8; 4.1.115, 128, 124; 5.6.29–44 (compare Hayward, pp. 51, 102, 109, 115–133). The parallels were first discussed by Evelyn May Albright in her essay 'Shakespeare's *Richard II* and the Essex Conspiracy', *PMLA*, 42 (1927), 686–720. She concluded from them that *Hayward influenced Shakespeare*. This argument was patently absurd, since the play was written well before the history. Albright was duly demolished by Ray Heffner, 'Shakespeare, Hayward and Essex', *PMLA*, 45 (1930), 754–80. But neither Heffner nor most subsequent scholars considered the obvious counter-inference: that *Shakespeare influenced Hayward*. The obsession with Shakespeare means that scholars are nearly always more concerned with his possible sources than with his plays as sources—but examples of the latter are in fact exceptionally interesting as indications of the place of his plays in the culture of his time. The parallels are, however, diligently noted by *Richard II*'s Arden editors, Peter Ure (1956) and Charles Forker (2002).

Bullingbrook as a popular hero, Henry IV detaching himself from Exton and thus by implication from the actual murder of Richard. Given all this, you can hardly blame the Secretary of State and Attorney General for regarding history and play as more or less synonymous with one another.

Cecil, addressing the Star Chamber on 13 February 1601, accused Essex of ‘Making this time seem like that of Richard II, to be reframed by him as by Henry IV . . . He would have removed Her Majesty’s servants, stepped into her chair, and perhaps had her treated like Richard II.’ And again, in his directions for preachers throughout the land to deliver sermons on the Sunday after the uprising: from every pulpit, the people heard that in the greatest act of treason in English history the Earl of Essex, now safely confined in the Tower, had planned to set the crown of England on his own head, that he was ‘plotting to become another Henry IV’ and ‘If he had not been prevented, there had never been a rebellion in England since Richard II more desperate or dangerous.’<sup>35</sup> It is worth wondering what went through Shakespeare’s head as he heard that sermon (assuming that he didn’t recuse himself from church that day).

Cecil, Coke and Bacon persistently harked back to the Hayward affair. The Shakespeare performance commissioned by Percy played into their hands. By making the play and the history synonymous, they could link the old Hayward controversy with the events of the fateful February weekend.

It thus became necessary for them to pin the commissioning of the performance as closely as possible to Essex himself. That is why they falsely claimed that it was procured by Meyrick, Essex’s own steward, who had been in charge of the weaponry and who was seen in intimate conversation with his master at various times through the weekend. For Meyrick himself, the game was up—he could not deny that he had been at the theatre—so there was no point in reiterating in court what he had said under interrogation, namely that the play was not his but Sir Charles Percy’s idea.

One of the reasons why no further summons was issued to the players may well have been that Phillips had not given the investigators the names that they wanted. If he had said that Meyrick had come to them, they could have said that the steward was acting on behalf of the master, that Essex was commissioning the performance, thus doing again what they

<sup>35</sup> *CSPD*, pp. 555, 565–8.

claimed he had done with Hayward's book. But since Phillips only fingered the outer circle, they let the matter drop. It suited the prosecutors not to create a distinction between the book and the play. In short, Sir Charles Percy's commission for the Lord Chamberlain's Men in all probability lengthened Hayward's term in the Tower. He effectively took the rap on Shakespeare's behalf, leaving the dramatist free to write more plays. For that, much thanks.

Was Shakespeare an Essex man? *Richard II* was probably not written as an Essex play, but it was certainly read as one. Then, though, the elision with Hayward's history put the heat onto him, and Shakespeare was able to slip away into the background, his hands clean. On the very eve of Essex's execution, the Lord Chamberlain's Men were back performing a play before the Queen and the court at Whitehall.

\* \* \*

This story, as complicated as it is dramatic, would not be complete without its famous epilogue.

August 1601. The learned antiquary William Lambarde, Her Majesty's Keeper of the Rolls and Records within the Tower, enters the presence of the Queen in her privy chamber at East Greenwich and presents her with a copy of his *Pandecta Rotulorum*, a digest of rolls, bundles, membranes and parcels of historical documentation. 'You shall see that I can read', she says. The queen then reads aloud the epistle, the title page and sixty-four pages of text, extending from the reign of King John to that of Richard III, pausing only to demand the meaning of certain Latin terms such as *oblata* and *literae clausae*.

When she falls upon the reign of Richard II, she says to Lambarde, 'I am Richard II. Know ye not that?' He gets the point: an allusion to the Earl of Essex. 'Such a wicked imagination was determined and attempted by a most unkind Gent, the most adorned creature that ever your Majesty made.' To which Her Majesty replies, 'He that will forget God will also forget his benefactors; this tragedy was played forty times in open streets and houses.' After further discussion of a painting of Richard II held by Thomas Knyvet, Keeper of the royal picture gallery at Westminster, and of other antiquarian matters, the Queen tucks the book into her bosom and departs for prayers with the words 'Farewell, good and honest Lambarde.'<sup>36</sup> He dies a couple of weeks later.

<sup>36</sup> John Nichols, *The Progresses and Public Processions of Queen Elizabeth*, 3 vols. (London, 1823), 3. 552-3.

It is a touching story and one much cited by ideologically minded scholars of Shakespearean drama who perceive an intimate link between theatre and power politics in the period. Many commentators unquestioningly assume that Lambarde and Queen Elizabeth must have been referring to the Essex faction's commissioning of the performance of *Richard II* on the eve of his rebellion, even though that took place in a paying theatre, not an open street or house.

The trouble is, we do not know for sure that the encounter ever took place. And even if it did, there are good grounds for doubting the veracity of the dialogue. And even if the dialogue is correctly recorded, it may not have been correctly interpreted. Although most literary scholars take the story at face value, it does not have a pedigree from the period. An account of the meeting first surfaced in print in the 1780s in the antiquarian John Nichols's *Bibliotheca Topographica Britannica*. It became widely known when Nichols reprinted it in his *Progresses and Public Processions of Queen Elizabeth*.

The manuscript from which Nichols printed the story was annotated with a provenance: 'This was given me by Mr Thomas Godfrey 20 November 1650. He married Mr Lambard daughter or grandchild. Richard Berwick brought it.' And on the back there was a note signed by Thomas Lambard of Sevenoaks, an eighteenth-century descendant of the Elizabethan antiquary: 'Queen Eliza: and Mr Lambard. Given me by Sir Thos: Tysden who found it amongst his grandfathers Sir Roger's papers, with Sir Roger's remarks. Mr Tho: Godfrey married ye daughter of Wm Lambard.'<sup>37</sup>

At first sight, this is encouraging. Though out of the family for about a hundred years after 1650, the original manuscript is traced back to Lambarde's son-in-law. Thomas Godfrey, a sewer of the chamber of King James I, did indeed marry Margaret, Lambarde's only daughter by his second marriage, in 1609. She died two years later, but he survived until 1664, so there is no reason to doubt that in 1650, via a servant or friend named Richard Berwick, he passed it to his fellow Kentish gentleman, Sir Roger Twysden, who annotated it with the note at the end and kept it among his papers, where it was found by his grandson, who returned it to the Lambard family. The original manuscript is lost, but the family connections seem sufficient to rule out the possibility of complete

<sup>37</sup> *Bibliotheca Topographica Britannica*, 9 vols. (London, 1780–90), no. 42; MS provenance discussed in F. L. (a Lambarde?), 'Queen Elizabeth and Richard II', *Notes and Queries*, NS 7 (1913), 6.



fabrication in the eighteenth century. Queen Elizabeth *was* at Greenwich on 4 August 1601 and, according to Lambarde's monument, now in Sevenoaks parish church, he was indeed the custodian of the rolls and records in the Tower. Everything seems to be in order.

But who recorded the conversation, and when? It is not written in the first person. Or, to be exact, it moves suspiciously from the third person form to a single first person usage towards the end. No one claims that the original was in Lambarde's hand. He was complaining of failing eyesight by 1587 and wrote his will in 1597. His correspondence dries up well before 1603, though there is one late letter dictated to an amanuensis.<sup>38</sup> He died just two weeks after the date attached to the meeting. So we cannot be at all confident that he was the author. Godfrey is recorded as the original owner of the manuscript, so he is a candidate for its authorship, but he did not marry Margaret Lambarde until 1609. Perhaps he was writing up a brief note of Lambarde's or even recording an oral memory of his wife's. By the time of his marriage into the family, the note or the memory would have been at least eight years old. Furthermore, it belonged to a moment when Margaret was fifteen and her father on his deathbed. At this point, the precision and the technical detail in the account begin to raise suspicion. The Queen recites aloud precisely sixty-four pages of Lambarde's book. She asks the definition of terms such as *rotulus cambii* and enquires as to the legality of *rediseisnes*. Is this the sort of thing to have stuck in the memory of a teenage girl for eight years or more, or to have been meticulously recorded by a dying man who by this time relied on an amanuensis to write his letters?

There is an obvious way of checking up on all these details. Get down Lambarde's *Pandecta Rotulorum* and find the technical terms. Make sure that the records from the beginning of the reign of King John to the end of that of Richard III do run to exactly sixty-four pages. The trouble is, despite the presence of the title *Pandecta Rotulorum* (with the date 1600) on Lambarde's monument and among lists of his works in an array of bibliographies and biographies published after Nichols, there isn't a copy in the British Library. There is no copy in any of the libraries whose holdings are recorded in the comprehensive *Short Title Catalogue* of early English printed books. There is no record of anyone ever having read or seen a copy. We have to assume therefore that it was not a printed but a manuscript book, a unique presentation copy, complete with epistle and

<sup>38</sup> To a fellow Kentish Justice of the Peace, Sir John Leveson (holograph now in Staffordshire Record Office, D593/C/10/1).

title page. But if the Queen left the interview clutching the volume to her bosom, surely she would have kept it carefully and it would have turned up in a depository or catalogue of royally owned manuscripts? The closest we can get to the *Pandecta Rotolorum*, if it ever existed, is a manuscript copy that covers its ground, written on watermarked paper dating from the reign of King George II, well over a century after the event.<sup>39</sup>

And what of Sir Roger Twysden's role in all this? He was an antiquarian, perfectly capable of describing or even inventing a volume along the lines of *Pandecta Rotolorum* and of bandying around all those Latin terms and references to 'the Rolls *Romae, Vascon, Aquitaniae, Franciae, Scotiae, Walliae et Hiberniae*'. What is more, he was an ardent royalist, a leading contributor to the Kentish petition in 1642, as a result of which he was imprisoned by parliament and then forced to sequester himself in the country. The date 1650, when he received the manuscript and appended 'remarks' to it, thus takes on considerable significance: the document suddenly seems to belong to a different historical moment. A deposed and murdered king. A rebellion. A royal tragedy played out in the open street. In 1650, this surely has more to do with a comparison between Richard II and Charles I, Henry Bullingbrook and Oliver Cromwell, than the connection between Shakespeare's play, the Earl of Essex and Queen Elizabeth. A combination of nostalgia for the 'golden age' of the Queen and abhorrence at the wickedness of Cromwell and his crew could easily have led Twysden to embroider and reshape a much more rudimentary manuscript account.

So many details just do not ring true. The Queen was a highly accomplished Latinist. Would she really have asked Lambarde the meaning of such easy words as 'oblata' and 'literae clausae'? Have said to him, like a proud child, 'You shall see that I can read'? Have taken the time to read sixty-four pages of antiquarian *arcana* out loud?

There is a further problem. The note on the back of the original (lost) manuscript was purportedly signed T. L., for Thomas Lambard. The reprint of the account of the interview in *Progresses and Public Processions of Queen Elizabeth* is reported as having been 'Communicated from the original by Thomas Lambard, of Sevenoaks, Esquire.' But Thomas died in 1770. It was actually his son Multon Lambard who passed the family papers to Nichols. There are so many

<sup>39</sup> British Library Lansdowne MS 319, ff. 47r–79v. I owe this, and a number of other valuable Lambarde references, to Carl Berkhout of the University of Arizona.

intervening agencies between William Lambarde and the printed account—his daughter Margaret, his son-in-law Godfrey, Richard Berwick who ‘brought it’ to Sir Roger Twysden, Sir Roger himself and his grandson Sir Thomas Twysden, then Thomas Lambard, Multon Lambard and finally John Nichols—that we cannot say with confidence that the Queen really compared herself to Richard II on this occasion and said that ‘this tragedy was played forty times in open streets and houses’.

Besides, even if she did, there is no particular reason to link ‘this tragedy’ to Shakespeare’s play. The normal usage of the word ‘tragedy’ in the period—not least in the dialogue in Shakespeare’s own plays—was in reference to dire and lamentable events in general, not stage-plays in particular. ‘He that will forget God will also forget his benefactors’, Elizabeth says, ‘this tragedy was played forty times in open streets and houses.’ Could this not mean, even with Essex in mind: ‘Ingratitude and disloyalty are sins against both God and benefactors, but such wickedness is common enough, played out every day in both private homes and the public arena?’ It seems to me that she is more likely to be talking about the fickleness of everyday life—court life especially, given the Essex connection—than alluding to some otherwise unrecorded series of forty or more extra-theatrical performances of Shakespeare or Hayward.

It happens that there are a couple of much earlier occasions on which Elizabeth glancingly compared herself to Richard II. And the Essex/Bullingbrook connection has been coming at us from all sides. The Queen would have been intimately acquainted with the final legal proceedings against her former favourite. She had discussed the Hayward book with Bacon. So if we do decide to trust the Lambarde account, then it may well be that Queen Elizabeth interpreted the events of the fateful weekend as I interpret them: could the ‘tragedy’ played in the ‘open street’ have been a reference to Essex’s march through the city on Sunday, 8 February 1601? And could it have been made with the implication that Essex was engaged in a piece of real-life street theatre? That he was self-consciously acting out Bullingbrook’s ride into London on his hot and fiery steed in the play? The opening Chorus of *Henry V* asks the audience to let the players work upon their ‘imaginary forces’: the force of *Richard II*’s influence on what Lambarde called the ‘wicked imagination’ of Essex—and we should add Sir Charles Percy and company to that—did perhaps after all translate theatrical fiction into political life, spill over ‘from the Stage to the State’.

*Note.* This article is an expanded version of the lecture delivered at the British Academy on 23 April 2008; an even more expansive treatment, with additional evidence and a fuller account of the investigation into Hayward's *History*, appears in part four of my intellectual and contextual biography, *Soul of the Age: The Life, Mind and World of William Shakespeare* (London, 2008).