

CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE IN CONTEXT

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Marlowe and Shakespeare revisited

Thomas Cartelli

Approached, as it often is, as an analogue of Christopher Marlowe's *Edward II* (1592–3), Shakespeare's *Richard II* (1595–6) is usually interpreted along similar lines, as dramatising a weak king's inevitable loss of his crown through successive acts of misgovernance, in this instance to a stronger successor, Henry Bolingbroke, who better deserves to wear it. But however fertile the correspondences between the two plays are, *Richard II* is also representative of a more comprehensive (and complicated) reckoning with other works of Marlowe's that Shakespeare undertook in the immediate aftermath of Marlowe's death, particularly *Tamburlaine the Great* (c. 1588–90) and *Doctor Faustus* (1592–3). We may find therefore that conventional lines of interpretation need to be altered to accommodate a *Richard II* that both displays and interrogates the neo-Tamburlainean presumption Bolingbroke brings to bear against the established order of royal succession, while it forges formative dramatic ties between Marlowe's *Faustus* and Shakespeare's 'plume-plucked' king, especially as they embark on the downward incline of their fortunes.

Richard II's commerce with *Tamburlaine the Great* commences in the third scene of the play as Richard is about to bid farewell to his powerful antagonist, Henry Bolingbroke, when his sudden decision to abbreviate Bolingbroke's exile from ten to six years evokes the following response from the exiled duke: 'How long a time lies in one little word! / Four lagging winters and four wanton springs / End in a word; such is the breath of kings.'¹ Although this passage has elicited little commentary from scholars and directors, it not only helps confirm Richard's suspicion that 'the eagle-winged pride / Of sky-aspiring and ambitious thoughts' (1.iii.129–30) has motivated Bolingbroke to enter the lists against Richard's loyal supporter, Thomas Mowbray, but marks the emergence of the boundless presumption that will soon prompt Bolingbroke to abridge the already abbreviated term of his exile and mount an unanswerable challenge against Richard's royal pre-eminence.

Bolingbroke's reaction to Richard's reduction of his sentence operates as a kind of revelation or epiphany, designed not to be heard or noted by anyone apart from the audience. The awed fascination with power that Bolingbroke displays here retrospectively helps explain – not only to his audience but quite possibly to himself – what he was about in attempting, in Richard's words, 'to wake our peace' (I.iii.132) by accusing Mowbray of a crime that was just as much Richard's. To put it as plainly as possible, when Richard, prompted by seeing 'in the glasses of [John of Gaunt's] eyes' his 'grieved heart' (I.iii.208–9), summarily dissolves four years of Bolingbroke's sentence, what Bolingbroke witnesses is the power of kings to alter time itself, indeed, to swallow it up with a 'breath'. So 'rapt' is he that Bolingbroke is not party to the ensuing dialogue that takes shape around him between Richard and his father, Gaunt, who has a very different take on what kings can and cannot do about the passage of time.

In describing Bolingbroke as 'rapt', I allude, of course, to Macbeth's entrancement at being newly designated Thane of Cawdor, as he distractedly dwells on the apparent fulfilment of the witches' prophecy – instead of attending to the conversation of his comrades – in the third scene of *Macbeth*.² But a closer analogue to Bolingbroke's reverie/revelation is that defining moment in the first part of Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great* when Tamburlaine eloquently elaborates on Cosroe's resolve to 'ride in triumph through Persepolis' (II.v.49):

TAMBURLAINE: And ride in triumph through Persepolis?

Is it not brave to be a king, Techelles?

Usumcasane and Theridamas,

Is it not passing brave to be a king,

And ride in triumph through Persepolis?

TECHELLES: O, my lord, 'tis sweet and full of pomp.

USUMCASANE: To be a king is half to be a god.

THERIDAMAS: A god is not so glorious as a king.

(II.v.50–7)³

Tamburlaine's question – 'Is it not passing brave to be a king, / And ride in triumph through Persepolis?' – is both more and less rhetorical. Although directly addressed to his three associates, it emerges as a clarification of what had possibly been his unrefined motive in helping Cosroe achieve the Persian crown. And it becomes one of the most memorable lines uttered in the annals of Elizabethan drama, so perfectly does it rhapsodise on what is arguably the central fantasy-content of the age, transforming worldly ambition into both an ethic and an aesthetic of heroic aspiration.

In the economy of *Richard II*'s first three scenes, Bolingbroke's 'discovery' of what the breath of kings can do clarifies his formerly inchoate motivations in just the way the earlier passage serves Tamburlaine. Both characters set out to do something bold and daring. Both have 'aspiring minds'. But in the first flush of action (on Bolingbroke's part) and achievement (on Tamburlaine's), neither is quite ready to identify the destination that he has been moving towards.⁴ That destination only becomes evident as it is named or proclaimed by the current possessor of the power each craves. 'Persepolis' is the metonymic embodiment of that destination (the Persian empery) for Tamburlaine; 'the breath of kings', the touchstone of the place to which Bolingbroke aspires, namely, Richard's throne. When Richard peremptorily abridges time itself in reducing Bolingbroke's sentence, he sets the course for his destruction just as surely as Cosroe does when he announces that he is setting off for Persepolis. At that point, both characters have their objectives, and destinies, clarified for them, becoming fully aware, as if for the first time, of what likely motivated them in the first place.

Tamburlaine the Great, of course, is not the first play of Marlowe's one thinks of when considering the intertextual correspondences of *Richard II*. Other Marlowe plays that *Richard II* mines more deeply include, as noted above, *Edward II*, but also *Doctor Faustus*, especially in terms of the rich textual echoes of *Faustus* found in *Richard II*'s parliament (or deposition) scene.⁵ From *Edward II* Shakespeare drew on established precedents of plot and characterisation to model his own representation of a 'misgoverned' king's response to the aggressive challenges of ambitious aristocrats. But it may well have been the daring of the antagonists as much as the weakness of the protagonists that attracted Marlowe and Shakespeare to these chronicle accounts to begin with, especially given the established notoriety of Marlowe's 'proud Mortimer' and the historic challenge to political orthodoxy mounted by Henry Bolingbroke.⁶ In *Edward II*, the sporadically Machiavellian Mortimer will defeat Edward and his minions but fail to reckon with the decisive response of the boy-king Edward III, the father's tragedy ceding to the son's triumph. In *Richard II*, the more Tamburlainean Bolingbroke – who notably returns to England at the head of an army *before* he can possibly know that he has been dispossessed of his inheritance – both unmakes Richard's royal authority and makes himself king and the father of a dynasty, becoming in the process as much the object of the play's dramatic scrutiny as Richard is.

Bolingbroke is, admittedly, Tamburlainean more on the level of presumption than in the one area where the overlap is greater between

Richard and Tamburlaine – that is, with respect to their shared belief in the working power of words. Indeed, where Tamburlaine is as much a talking machine as he is a ‘desiring machine that produces violence and death’,⁷ Bolingbroke is more consistently the ‘silent king’, the still, stolid point around which his ambitions take concrete shape. Yet Bolingbroke demonstrates a decidedly Tamburlainean assurance in the power of his name alone to conjure the force necessary to execute his designs that is far from the wishful, merely ‘poetic’ nature of Richard’s bouts of magical thinking. While Richard commands the ‘breath’ to mitigate Bolingbroke’s exile, having already ‘breathe[d] against’ Mowbray the ‘hopeless word of “never to return” ... upon pain of life’ (I.iii.152–3), Richard’s word is far less efficacious than is Bolingbroke’s when the latter issues the following command to his ally and henchman, the Duke of Northumberland:

Noble lord,
Go to the rude ribs of that ancient castle;
Through brazen trumpet send the breath of parley
Into his ruined ears, and thus deliver:
Henry Bolingbroke
On both his knees doth kiss King Richard’s hand
And send allegiance and true faith of heart
To his most royal person, hither come
Even at his feet to lay my arms and power
Provided that my banishment repealed
And lands restored again be freely granted.
If not, I’ll use the advantage of my power
And lay the summer’s dust with showers of blood
Rained from the wounds of slaughtered Englishmen –
The which how far off from the mind of Bolingbroke
It is such crimson tempest should bedrench
The fresh green lap of fair King Richard’s land
My stooping duty tenderly shall show.

(III.iii.31–48)

It could be argued that Bolingbroke is not speaking of himself in the bombastic third person here so much as dictating in the first a message that he wants Northumberland to deliver. But his intermixing of first and third persons with overweening pride (‘the mind of Bolingbroke’) and false humility (‘on both his knees’), combined with a preference for degrading and threatening formulations (‘ruined ears’, ‘showered blood’), plainly indicate the boundless presumption of a character whose belief in himself has all the assurance of Tamburlaine’s ‘will and shall’.

This is not to suggest that *Richard II* is ‘a *Tamburlaine* play’ in the manner of such earlier exercises in emulation as Robert Greene’s *Alphonsus of Aragon* (1590), George Peele’s *Battle of Alcazar* (1591), and the anonymous *Selimus* (1592). Whereas Tamburlaine operates on a stage freed from the constraints of likelihood and history alike (however much Marlowe may have mapped his drama on historical accounts), Shakespeare contextualises Bolingbroke’s will to power in a thicket of political realism, if not of faithfully recorded fact. As Richard notes, Bolingbroke is as much a figure of the modern politician, reserving the thunder of his boasts for his royal opponent while doffing ‘his bonnet to an oyster-wench’ (I.iv.31) to gain favour with commoners. Although Bolingbroke’s Tamburlainean aspirations will inexorably drive the character forwards to the goal he desires – the ‘fruition of an earthly crown’ – that fruition will never taste as sweet to Bolingbroke as it does to Tamburlaine, so qualified will his gain of the crown be by Richard’s embodiment of its cost and loss, so long will the taint of the crown’s acquisition remain the prevailing theme of his reign.⁸ It is, moreover, far from an incidental irony that the words that inspire Bolingbroke’s ascent to the crown are contrastingly echoed by those Richard utters on ‘the death of kings’ as he begins orchestrating his precipitous descent. Nor does it seem merely incidental that as he acts out that descent, Richard will adopt a similarly self-reflective position in relation to another Marlovian overreacher, namely, Doctor Faustus.

Given the didactic import of so much that Richard has to say about the limits and lies of kingship, it hardly seems rash to claim that *Richard II* – like *Doctor Faustus* – is as much a cautionary text on the corrosive effects that ambition visits on those who harbour ‘sky-aspiring and ambitious thoughts’ as it is a play about the delusions and misdeeds of a king too self-indulgent and reckless to sustain what he takes to be his royal mandate. In light of *Richard II*’s critical reception as a play focused on a king too weak even to rise above pathos to the level of tragedy, such a conclusion may seem counterintuitive. Ostensibly emblematic moments like the famous garden scene presumably confirm John of Gaunt’s early identification of Richard as ‘landlord of England’, and Richard himself, the quondam lord of time, later testifies movingly to his own failure to use time wisely. But – as noted above – the play from first to last also concentrates its anatomising gaze on a character sufficiently presumptuous to use his name as a line of blank verse – ‘Henry Bolingbroke’ (III.iii.35) – and sufficiently hypocritical to ‘protest my soul is full of woe / That blood should sprinkle me to make me grow’ (V.vi.45–6) as he walks behind a funeral bier of his own most persistent making at play’s end.

The critical gaze that fastens on Bolingbroke from the moment he makes his premature return to England closely resembles the scepticism with which the transparently self-serving actions and motives of Mortimer Junior are presented in *Edward II*.⁹ Bolingbroke's subjection to the play's critical gaze is particularly pronounced in *Richard II*'s parliament scene, which is orchestrated (if not controlled) by Richard, though not for his benefit alone.¹⁰ The most powerful effect of Richard's performance comes towards the end of the scene after he has already dispossessed himself of his crown and sceptre. Richard asks for a mirror, looks into it, moralises on what he sees, and then breaks it into 'an hundred shivers':

Give me that glass, and therein will I read.

[He takes the mirror.]

No deeper wrinkles yet? Hath sorrow struck
So many blows upon this face of mine,
And made no deeper wounds? O flattering glass,
Like to my followers in prosperity,
Thou dost beguile me! Was this the face
That every day under his household roof
Did keep ten thousand men? Was this the face
That, like the sun, did make beholders wink?
Is this the face which outfaced so many follies,
That was at last outfaced by Bolingbroke?
A brittle glory shineth in the face –
As brittle as the glory is the face,

[He throws down the mirror.]

For there it is, cracked in an hundred shivers.
Mark, silent king, the moral of this sport:
How soon my sorrow hath destroyed my face.

(v.i.277–92)

In this theatrical tour de force, Richard evokes two memorable lines from Marlowe that dramatise both an inspiring and a deluded vision of human transcendence – *Doctor Faustus*' 'Was this the face that launched a thousand ships / And burnt the topless towers of Ilium?' (v.i.99–100) – and redeploys them to mock both his own inflated sense of self-importance and the importance credited to him by his 'beholders', in the process bringing the whole notion of transcendence crashing down. Unlike Faustus, who desperately clings to a vision of Helen as the quintessence of mortal beauty and human desire before coming to a final reckoning with his vainglory and arrogance, Richard is unbeguiled by the fair face he continues to see reflected in the mirror, which he mocks with clinical detachment. Seemingly cured of the delusions of grandeur that made

him, like Faustus, think he could soar above the orbit of ordinary men, Richard offers this vision of the 'brittleness' of glory as a moral exemplum to the silent king, Bolingbroke, who remains so taken with (and taken in by) the ostensibly time-altering power of 'the breath of the kings' that his impatience seems tasked by what Richard has to show and tell. Like other ambitious men who have climbed to the top of the ladder of Fortune (*Edward II*'s proud Mortimer among them), the 'mounting Bolingbroke' does not appear to be listening, or, if he is listening, does not see how the moral spun by the 'light-headed' Richard applies to him. What, after all, can a self-styled 'mockery king of snow', spinning out self-pitying scenarios as the clock winds down, have to say to a confident heavyweight who has never lost a fight?

In one of the best essays ever written on Marlowe, Edward A. Snow contends that 'it might help to clarify Marlowe's perspective [on Faustus] if we were to think of [him] as the dialectical, ironical counterpart of Tamburlaine (rather than as a developmental, autobiographical recantation of him), and the two of them together as complementary considerations of a single human problematic'.¹¹ One may, I believe, see a corresponding dialectic played out on the stage of *Richard II* in the seemingly uneven competition between Bolingbroke and Richard, which critics have persisted in assessing in terms of the former's developmental, if not autobiographical, recantation of the latter. In *Imaginary Audition*, however, Harry Berger makes the commerce between Shakespeare and Marlowe seem considerably more resonant than the reshading of a succession of characters, though his insight into how 'the self-slandering undertone of Richard's rhetoric has no parallel in *Doctor Faustus*' seems crucial to the argument he develops.¹² Berger contends that 'if both Faustus's spiritual melodrama and the megaphonics of Marlovian theater are heard in the echo chamber of *Richard II*, they are present as a model to be corrected or repudiated, and the similarities between the heroes serve to draw attention to their differences'.¹³ He expands on this point in the following passage:

Shakespeare's citational use of *Doctor Faustus* is more than a revision. It is a parodistic representation both of Faustus's spiritual melodrama as conceived by Marlowe and of Marlowe's own rhetorical theatricality. The two are compacted into a single effect and displaced to Richard. That is, insofar as Faustus's morality play and Marlowe's, Faustus's bombastic grandeur and Marlowe's, are glimpsed in *Richard II*, they are present as an identity, a single citational system which is localized in Richard rather than in the play as a whole.¹⁴

Berger first sees Shakespeare conflating 'Faustus's spiritual melodrama' with the 'rhetorical theatricality' that conceives it. This conflation makes Faustus appear to embody and express Marlowe's own aesthetic agenda, thereby disallowing Marlowe a critical detachment from his surrogate's subject position. Berger then has Shakespeare 'displace' this conflated 'single effect' to Richard only to have Richard, in turn, retain the same critical distance from Faustus that allows Shakespeare to sustain a 'parodistic representation' of Faustus' plight, Marlowe's manner of presenting it, and, presumably, the 'single effect' that is 'localized' in Richard. The net result of these transactions is a Marlowe with no critical detachment from his own dramatic idiom, a Richard who both is and is not able to escape his defining medium, and a Shakespeare seeking to 'repudiate and correct' both models of authorship and character.

As suggestive as Berger's reading of this intertextual transaction is, he evinces a better feel for what Marlowe is about when he reads Faustus' singing of Helen's praises, recitation of outlandish claims, and anticipation of erotic delights as a last desperate and overcharged attempt to distract himself from his accelerating fate rather than as evidence of complete self-abandon.¹⁵ Indeed, if Snow is right in claiming that 'the words that for Tamburlaine are the cornerstones of the will to power ... betray, when Faustus utters them, the deeply conditional nature of the self and its compromises with circumstance, situation, other wills, and its own inner tensions',¹⁶ Marlowe could hardly want, much less expect, the parade of seductive conceits generated by 'Is this the face that launched a thousand ships' to arouse the answering fervour of 'Is it not passing brave to be a king[?]'. However compelling these lines may sound and seem, Faustus has already entered, by this point, a domain certainly as desperate as and considerably more ominous than the scene of impending doom and self-pity Richard experiences and elaborates on in the fourth act of Shakespeare's play. When Shakespeare has Richard call for a mirror and enact his 'parodistic' representation of Faustus and his already famous lines, he is, as Berger notes, clearly performing a likeness with a difference, but that difference is not entirely, and hence need not be construed as, a repudiation or correction of Faustus, much less of Marlowe, both of whom are always already ahead of him in packing alms for oblivion. Richard is rather summoning the ghost of Faustus here as a kindred spirit of desperation and delusion while at the same time culling out for mockery his own mistakes in (and of the extreme ego-gratifying) kind. As Faustus is to Tamburlaine, in Snow's formulation, Richard is to Faustus in mine, that is, 'his dialectical, ironical counterpart': a character made capable by defeat of

recognising what Faustus may embody and gesture towards but cannot yet fully acknowledge, namely, the 'brittleness' of earthly glory.

Like Shakespeare, Richard has the advantage of belatedness, of occupying the Marlowe aftermath and using what he finds there to drive his difference-in-sameness forwards, as Shakespeare has Richard demonstrate in his earlier response to Northumberland's relentless ministrations, 'Fiend, thou torments me ere I come to hell!' (4.1.270) (which Berger aptly terms his 'Faustian bellow').¹⁷ Here Shakespeare has Richard evoke and inhabit a Marlovian context and idiom in order to fashion his defeat by Bolingbroke in terms of an overmatched Faustus being gratuitously tortured by a sadistic Mephistopheles, agent and henchman of a silently approving king (who more than once likens himself to Jehovah). The shared affective condition of intense self-regard and self-pity – which Richard is dwelling in, dwelling on, and seeking to liberate himself from through aggressive self-assertion in the mirror scene – activates an exchange of reflections, one play, one character, reflecting, mirroring, even colliding with the other, with the differences between them enriching, rather than inhibiting, their interplay.¹⁸

If the allusion to Mephistopheles carries, as I think it does, more than the strain of Richard's offended vanity and desperation, and conveys the impression of inexorable force pressing against an already defeated subject, then we may also be witnessing here something Marlowe seldom allows us to witness in his *Tamburlaine* plays, namely, the human consequences of Tamburlaine's will to power. Indeed, except for the light, virtually comic scenes in *Richard II*'s closing movement – which Shakespeare seems to have designed to set the scene for *1 Henry IV* – Bolingbroke is positioned here and elsewhere as carrier of a contagion of Tamburlainean ruthlessness that promises to poison the well of 'this new world' (IV.i.79) he has brought into being at the beginning of the play's fourth act. By contrast, as we witness Richard's fifth-act conversion into an introspective philosopher-sage and compare that figure with the all too morally mobile self-crowned 'King Henry' (IV.i.221) who, in the end, 'hate[s] the murderer, love[s] him murdered' (V.vi.40), we may find that it is the neo-Tamburlainean Bolingbroke – not Marlowe, Faustus, or Richard II, his neo-Faustian counterpart – that stands corrected, if not repudiated, by Shakespeare.

Notes

- 1 William Shakespeare, *Richard II*, 1.iii.213–15. All quotations from Shakespeare are drawn from *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, ed. David Bevington, 6th edn (New York: Longman, 2008).

- 2 Wilbur Sanders is, to my knowledge, the only other critic to note the resemblance between the unspecified motives of Bolingbroke and 'the somnambulist power-lust of a Macbeth', in *The Dramatist and the Received Idea* (Cambridge University Press, 1968), 165.
- 3 All quotations from Marlowe are drawn from Christopher Marlowe, *The Complete Plays of Christopher Marlowe*, ed. Irving Ribner (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1963).
- 4 As he explores Bolingbroke's possible motives, Sanders claims that 'Shakespeare can have seldom thrown so little light on a key motivation as he does on the process by which Bolingbroke moves towards his goal'; Sanders, *The Dramatist and the Received Idea*, 164.
- 5 The play's most sustained intertextual commerce with *Doctor Faustus* occurs in this scene (IV.i.155–318), which was omitted from the first three quarto editions of the play (Q1–3) published in 1597 and 1598, possibly for reasons of formal censorship or anticipation of the same, and appeared for the first time in the quarto edition of 1608.
- 6 Marlowe's contemporary Michael Drayton would move Mortimer to the forefront of literary concern, first, in *Mortimeriados* (1596) and later, in revised form, in *The Barons' War* (1603).
- 7 Stephen Greenblatt, 'Marlowe and Renaissance Self-Fashioning', in *Two Renaissance Mythmakers: Christopher Marlowe and Ben Jonson*, ed. Alvin Kernan (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 47.
- 8 As the dying Henry IV will say to Prince Hal in 2 *Henry IV*, 'For all my reign hath been but as a scene / Acting that argument' (IV.v.197–8).
- 9 For a fuller account of the critical remarks made here about Marlowe's *Edward II*, see the chapter on the play, entitled 'King Edward's Body', in my book, *Marlowe, Shakespeare, and the Economy of Theatrical Experience* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991); or its reprinting in Richard Wilson, ed., *Christopher Marlowe* (London and New York: Longman, 1999), 174–90.
- 10 In an incisive essay that problematises everything from the name normally given to this scene to whether or not its absence from the Elizabethan quartos can properly be called an omission, Emma Smith contends that its inclusion in Q4 fairly radically alters the terms of engagement in Richard's favour insofar as the scene 'endorses Richard's kingly authority even at the moment when that authority is most under threat', in 'Richard II's Yorkist Editors', *Shakespeare Survey* 63 (2010): 37–48 (40).
- 11 Edward A. Snow, 'Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* and the Ends of Desire', in Kernan, *Two Renaissance Mythmakers*, 70–110 (98).
- 12 Harry Berger, Jr, *Imaginary Audition: Shakespeare on Stage and Page* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989), 66.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 65.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 66.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 69.
- 16 Snow, 'Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*', 99.
- 17 Berger, *Imaginary Audition*, 67.

- 18 In light of the array of possibilities generated by this collision, I find it curious that Shakespeare's sustained engagement with Marlowe's most provocative play should have been consigned to textual oblivion for over ten years after *Richard II*'s initial publication, and I wonder what – if anything – Faustus' linkage to the deposition material might have had to do with the scene's censorship or omission.