

Royal Envy

by David P. Gontar (January 2014)

I. Introduction: Situating Royal Envy

Successive soliloquies of Kings Henry the Fourth, Fifth and Sixth reflecting desperate envy of peasantry and proletarians are challenging for readers of Shakespeare. What do these discourses signify, and what are we to make of an apparent transmission of heterodox desire across three generations? While there may be no satisfactory answers, recent scholarship at least offers a context in which these déclassé iterations can be situated. In *King-Commoner Encounters in the Popular Ballad, Elizabethan Drama, and Shakespeare*, Rochelle Smith draws attention to the traditions of the English pastoral on the one hand and the King-Commoner Ballad on the other. Though the passages of regental envy cited below are not expressly addressed, her treatment of ballad and pastoral conventions allows us to trace a movement from fanciful rustication to a more sober-minded realism climaxing in late scenes of the *King Henry VI* trilogy. Following King Henry's encounter with the gamekeepers in Act 3, sc. 2, the glorification of the lesser ranks which had preoccupied three royal Lancastrian characters ends. As the red rose bleeds to ghastly white, such romantic conceits vanish from England, never to return.

II. Speeches of Royal Envy

a) Introit: The Anxiety of King Richard II

As Richard Plantagenet huddles in his bare cold cell awaiting fate, his mind turns to ordinary mortals not plagued by sovereign miseries. Their very lowliness has spared them.

Thoughts tending to content flatter themselves
That they are not the first of fortune's slaves,
Nor shall not be the last – like seely beggars,
Who, sitting in the stocks, refuge their shame
That many have, and others must, set there;
And in this thought they find a kind of ease,
Bearing their own misfortunes on the back
Of such as have before endured the like.
Thus play I in one person many people,
And none contented. Sometimes am I king;

Then treason makes me wish myself a beggar,
And so I am.
(V, v, 23-34)

This early evocation of pedestrian security arises in the context of Bolingbroke's confiscation of the throne. Given the hazards facing a king, is not a peasant's bovine condition to be preferred? Of course, the pendulum also swings the other way.

Then crushing penury
Persuades me I was better when a king.
Then am I kinged again, and by and by
Think that I am unkinged by Bolingbroke,
And straight am nothing.
(V, v, 34-38)

Then comes a prophecy.

But whate'er I be,
Nor I, nor any man that but man is,
With nothing shall be pleased till he be eased
With being nothing.
(V, v, 38-41)

The mention of Bolingbroke at this poignant juncture seems to imply that if Richard, the deposed King, is put in the awkward position of glancing wistfully at the peasant's hut, so one day may the usurping Henry. As we will see, that is what comes to pass in the next installment, when it becomes Bolingbroke's turn to feel reduced to nonentity.

b) *King Henry IV*

Haunted by memories of the rebellion which catapulted him to supremacy, and hedged about by truculent lords who would pull him down, Henry IV has fallen ill. Beside his sick bed, he muses on the loneliness of life at the pinnacle of puissance.

How many thousand of my poorest subjects
Are at this hour asleep? O sleep, O gentle sleep,
Nature's soft nurse, how have I frightened thee,
That thou no more wilt weigh my eyelids down
And steep my senses in forgetfulness?

Why, rather, sleep, liest thou in smoky cribs,
Upon uneasy pallets stretching thee,
And hushed with buzzing night-flies to thy slumber,
Than in the perfumed chambers of the great,
Under the canopies of costly state,
And lulled with sound of sweetest melody?
O thou dull god, why li'st thou with the vile,
In loathsome beds, and leav'st the kingly couch
A watch-case, or a common 'larum bell?
Wilt thou upon the high and giddy mast
Seal up the ship-boy's eyes, and rock his brains
In cradle of the rude imperious surge,
And in the visitation of the winds,
Who take the ruffian billows by the top,
Curling their monstrous heads, and hanging them
With deafing clamour in the slippery clouds,
That, with the hurly, death itself awakes?
Canst thou, O partial sleep, give thy repose
To the wet sea-boy in an hour so rude,
And in the calmest and most stillest night,
With all appliances and means to boot,
Deny it to a king? Then happy low, lie down.
Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown.
(*Henry the Fourth, Part Two*, III, i, 1-31)

He seems not to think here of Richard, whom he cast down as others now seek his destruction, and yet, how can he not? For even in the midst of overturning him, Bolingbroke remained Richard's subject, and never asserted any colorable claim to divest him *de jure* of the diadem. Rather, coerced abdication was his *modus operandi*. Richard's eloquence throughout his deposition in *King Richard II* is that of a poet King whose muse is catastrophe. Henry's muse is mere actuality. He lets harsh facts speak for him. But all the while that stolid circumstances were serving as Bolingbroke's heralds, his pleading attorneys, he was in thrall to Richard's soaring rhetoric, in which it seemed that nobility itself was on the rack. Having assimilated Richard's verbal pyrotechnics (as in, e.g., the well-known 'mirror scene', in which he inspects the image of his face in shattered glass) it is as though Richard's articulation of loss has infiltrated Henry's very soul and festered there, gnawing at him like a succubus, filling him with guilt if not remorse. Then, faced with his own political demise,

Henry can conveniently re-enact Richard; his ventilations are echoes of poor Richard's painful descants on dissolution.

Later, as the death of his father, Henry IV, approaches, Prince Harry slips into the bedchamber and, believing his father to be deceased, notices the crown and addresses it with these words.

Why doth the crown lie there upon his pillow,
Being so troublesome a bedfellow?
O polished perturbation, golden care,
That keeps't the ports of slumber open wide
To many a watchful night! – Sleep with it now