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Topics in the Representation of Richard
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Censorship and Self-censorship: Taboo Topics in the Representation of Richard II

ABSTRACT

Rooted in Polynesian origins, the term “taboo” expresses concepts relating to both sacredness and danger which, as Freud and Frazer have shown, also apply to figures of authority. This paper investigates how these taboos are manifest in the representation of Richard II in three plays: *The Life and Death of Jack Straw*, Shakespeare’s *Richard II*, and the anonymous *Thomas of Woodstock*. These texts, while all dealing with the same controversial monarch, offer different approaches to the depiction of royal authority, rebellion, and censorship. This paper examines the ways in which boundaries of political discourse were shaped by both explicit censorship and self-censorship, particularly in relation to the depiction of the king’s failures and the social consequences of his rule. It highlights the role of taboos in early modern political theatre, revealing how the sacred and dangerous nature of kingship was negotiated on stage and how these themes were managed through complex strategies of language, silence, and omission.

KEYWORDS: Censorship; taboo; *Richard II*; *Thomas of Woodstock*; *Jack Straw*.

The term ‘taboo’ has been attested in English since 1777 (*OED*) as referring to Polynesian religious practices and beliefs. Even though I will be mainly using the word taboo in its more modern and extended sense (“2. Of a word, expression, or topic, esp. in social conversation: widely considered to be unacceptable or offensive, and therefore avoided or severely restricted in use by

social custom”, *OED*), the origin of the term is paramount to understanding its relevance in depicting politically charged issues in plays.

In Freud’s *Totem and Taboo*, the term is used in its etymological sense, underlying its Polynesian origin. However, Freud notes that the concept was present in ancient Rome as well:

‘Taboo’ is a Polynesian word. It is difficult for us to find a translation for it, since the concept connoted by it is one which we no longer possess. It was still current among the ancient Romans, whose ‘sacer’ was the same as the Polynesian ‘taboo’. [...] The meaning of ‘taboo’, as we see it, diverges in two contrary directions. To us it means, on the one hand, ‘sacred’, ‘consecrated’, and on the other ‘uncanny’, ‘dangerous’, ‘forbidden’, ‘unclean’. (Freud 1913, 21)

Freud also deals with taboo in relation to Kings and Monarchs (Taboo upon rulers): since these are sacred figures, they are themselves at the centre of multiple interdictions, designed both to protect the ruler and to protect others from him.

A ruler ‘must not only be guarded, he must also be guarded against’. (Frazer, 1911b, 132.) Both of these ends are secured by innumerable taboo observances. We know already why it is that rulers must be guarded against. It is because they are vehicles of the mysterious and dangerous magical power which is transmitted by contact [...]. (Freud 1913, 48)

The reason for the protection of the ruler is also obvious:

The second reason for the special treatment of privileged persons – the need to provide protection for them against the threat of danger – has had an obvious part in creating taboos and so of giving rise to court etiquette. [...] The need to protect the king from every possible form of danger follows from his immense importance to his subjects, whether for weal or woe. It is his person which, strictly speaking, regulates the whole course of existence. ‘The people have to thank him for the rain and sunshine which foster the fruits of the earth, for the wind which brings ships to their coasts, and even for the solid ground beneath their feet.’ (Freud 1913, 50-51; the quote is from Frazer 1911, 7.)

The sacred nature of Kings is therefore the origin of the taboos and interdictions surrounding their figures. As clearly demonstrated by several scholars (Kantorowicz 1957; Ciocca 1987; Bezio 2015; and others), from the Tudor Era onward an increasing emphasis is placed on the anointed figure of

the King or Queen: the sovereign, according to this political vision, rules by divine right, his/her power is transmitted by hereditary right, he/she is accountable to God alone and is due obedience by all subjects: resisting the King's will is a sin (Bezio 2015, 25).

Given these circumstances, the way one speaks to a king and of a king cannot be neutral and is subjected to restrictions and prohibitions. Similarly, the way a king is represented on stage is constrained by boundaries. Censorship and self-censorship are thus indicative of a tabooed subject, pertaining to the sacred figure of the ruler. This is apparent in the representation of the stage kings and queens in the several histories performed and published in Elizabethan and Jacobean times. According to the Freudian interpretation of taboo issues connected to figures of power, the necessity of protecting the monarch (the way he or she is addressed; the way he or she is represented) and of protecting oneself from the monarch (from accusations of treason, seditious behaviour, and so on) are both aspects of the interdictions and taboos pertaining to speech, print and visual depictions of the King.

This paper focuses on representations of Richard II in three plays depicting different moments of his reign: the anonymous *The Life and Death of Jack Straw*, *Richard II* by Shakespeare, and the anonymous *Thomas of Woodstock*.

1. *Jack Straw*

The first play will only be referred to briefly, as a starting point for this analysis as it represents a different political point of view on Richard II: the plot revolves around the Peasants' Revolt (1381) and the young King, the then 14-year-old Richard, is invariably depicted as a positive figure. On the other hand the rebels, whose actions are justifiable at the beginning of the play, become increasingly avid and mutinous as the events unfold, with their requests far outweighing their reasonable original demands. There is scant information about this minor text as to censorship, but “[t]he structural imbalance and textual anomalies in the printed edition of *Jack Straw* are [...] suggestive of censorship.” (Clare 1990; 27) According to Clare, the exposition of the rebels' motivations is minimal, and the rebellion is depicted in fragmented scenes, suggesting that significant content may have been censored prior to publication.

Notably, the lack of political depth in the portrayal of themes like tax abuse and hostility towards foreigners (present in *Holinshed*, which is a source of the play, but absent from the text), was likely due to the intervention of a censor. The structure emphasises the play's political and hierarchical commentary over the rebels' plight, which diminishes the vitality of the rebellion compared to the lengthy discussions of royal authority: the King is a saintly figure and the sacred nature of royal office is upheld obsessively throughout the short play. Overall, the play's compressed narrative and its focus on loyalty to the monarch may reflect constraints imposed by censorship. (Clare 1990; 37-39) Dutton also considers *Jack Straw* "effusively loyalist in [its] deprecations of riot and rebellion" (Dutton 1991: 85), regardless of whether this comes from the anonymous author's political views or from censorship.

2. *Richard II*

In contrast to *Jack Straw*, Shakespeare's *Richard II* raises several questions about the depiction of royalty and the limits of expressing open criticism or accusations against the King.

In *Richard II* the first act is a masterpiece of self-restraint and meditations on the possibility of saying what one wishes to say. In scenes 1 and 3, for example, the character of Mowbray is depicted in a subtle balance between being outspoken and prudent; he must prevent himself from uttering certain sentences that can suggest any wrongdoing on the part of the Crown. The Duke of Norfolk's speech is rife with references to self-censorship from the very beginning: when responding to Bolingbroke's accusations – in particular that he had murdered the Duke of Gloucester – provoked on the subject, he says: "Yet can I not of such tame patience boast / As to be *husbed* and naught at all to say. / First, the fair reverence of your highness *curbs* me / From giving reins and spurs to my *free speech*" (R2, 1.1.54-57, my italics). Mowbray is here hinting at a necessity to restrain his speech so as not to offend the King by accusing his kin. But as sources and scholars have amply demonstrated, the part Mowbray played in the death of the King's uncle, Thomas of Woodstock, was far from clear-cut; be that as it may, the Elizabethan audience was quite convinced of the King's implication in the execution. When he is openly

accused of being the cause of the Duke of Gloucester's death ("I say, and further did maintain / [...] That he did plot the Duke of Gloucester's death" R2, 1.1.98, 100), his answer can be considered a form of equivocation, as he replies: "For Gloucester's death, / I slew him not, but to my own disgrace / Neglected my sworn duty in that case" (R2, 1.1.132-34). In the footnote to these verses, Forker states:

Was Gloucester's execution for treason the sworn duty that Mowbray neglected? Or does Mowbray mean that his duty was to save Gloucester's life and that in this he failed? [...] The phrase *slew him not* may also be taken as an equivocation – a way of saying that Mowbray's servants rather than Mowbray personally carried out the killing. Although we cannot know Mowbray's veracity when he denies that he slew Gloucester, it seems clear that he is signalling Richard to come to his rescue; Mowbray implies that he cannot honourably defend himself unless the King restores his dignity by admitting his own role in the death of his uncle. (Forker 2002, 192n)

So, from his first appearance on stage, this character is the bearer of the very idea of a speech that is restrained by self-censorship, while at the same time hinting at the very possibility of speech. One other famous example of devious speech, which is even more telling in terms of this interpretation, is when in scene 3 Mowbray insistently refers to impeded speech: the topic is Mowbray's inability to speak English, having been exiled permanently by the King, but if we bear in mind the fact that according to popular knowledge, and in part to the sources – Mowbray was acting on the King's behalf and on his direct orders – the whole speech can be seen as a desperate attempt to win the King over to his side, while at the same time hinting at his ability to speak up, if he wished to do so.

A heavy sentence, my most sovereign liege,
And all unlooked-for from your highness' mouth.
A dearer merit, not so deep a maim
As to be cast forth in the common air,
Have I deserved at your highness' hands.
The language I have learnt these forty years,
My native English, now I must forgo,
And now my tongue's use is to me no more
Than an unstringed viol or a harp,
Or like a cunning instrument cased up –

Or, being open, put into his hands
That knows no touch to tune the harmony.
Within my mouth you have engaoled my tongue,
Doubly portcullised with my teeth and lips,
And dull unfeeling barren Ignorance
Is made my gaoler to attend on me.
[...]
What is thy sentence then but speechless death,
Which robs my tongue from breathing native breath? (R2, 1.3.154-69, 172-73)

Mowbray appears, quite evidently, to be fighting between the urge to speak and the impossibility to do so without self-accusation and without involving the King in the deed he is charged of having carried out. If the King understands what Mowbray is referring to, he refuses to admit his own involvement in the event leading to his uncle Gloucester's death. Perhaps precisely because he understands the innuendos in Mowbray's words, he condemns him to a wall-less prison where his very ability to speak is taken away: doomed to live wandering within a society that will not be able to understand him, he is reduced to a permanent, forced silence, his tongue useless and still. The accusation he addresses to King Richard, of having "engaoled" his tongue and "portcullised" his mouth, takes yet a deeper and more sinister connotation in view of their supposed complicity.

On the other hand, throughout the text of *Richard II*, any criticism of the King is counterbalanced by the proclamation of the Tudor principles on royalty: if the King is guilty, he is notwithstanding the King, and his subjects must remain faithful and loyal. In 1.2 – a scene which is not present in the sources and is an invention of the playwright – the Duke of Gaunt and the Duchess of Gloucester discuss her husband's death and her pressing request for vengeance. Gaunt's replies are an example of political orthodoxy: from the opening, he appears to be answering her plight with a first hint of the possible liability of the King, together with a strong appeal for Christian patience:

But since correction lieth in those hands
Which made the fault that we cannot correct,
Put we our quarrel to the will of heaven,
Who, when they see the hours ripe on earth,
Will rain hot vengeance on offenders' heads. (R2, 1.2.4-8)

Gaunt's position is clear: the King is responsible and we cannot expect justice from him, but we must rely on Divine justice, which will descend on the guilty at the rightful time. And when the widow insists, he even more openly accuses her and defends royal authority:

God's is the quarrel; for God's substitute,
His deputy anointed in His sight,
Hath caused his death, the which if wrongfully
Let heaven revenge, for I may never lift
An angry arm against His minister. (R2, 1.2.37-41)

God alone can avenge the Duke of Gloucester's death as the King is sacred: he is God's representative on Earth. In *Romans* 12, 19, we read: "Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord" (AKV); subjects, therefore, must never rebel but rely on divine intervention in order to obtain justice. The same concept was repeated in sermons and publications such as the notorious *Homily Against Disobedience and Willful Rebellion* (1571). Gaunt stands therefore for orthodox policy and, even if he admits the culpability of Richard, he ultimately defends the divine right of the King: if he acted wrongfully (the "if" is here a powerful distancing tool), we are still bound to obey.

Both examples of self-imposed limitation in verbal expression respond simultaneously to the two instances described by Freud: protecting the King vs. protecting oneself (author or character) from the King. In a period of growing absolutism (Bezio 2015), protecting the King is a means of protecting oneself, as exposing the Monarch can have dire consequences.

The unsolved issue regarding *Richard II's* political controversy is embodied in Act 4, which was famously published only in 1608, thirteen years after the tragedy was first written and performed. The deposition or parliament scene could not ultimately be published because it depicts a King who is either destroying his own authority or being deposed; in fact, it was only printed after Queen Elizabeth's death. The question has been long debated, as attested by Clare (1990, 47-51), Dutton (1991, 123-26), and Clegg (1997). According to these scholars, it is virtually impossible to say if the missing scene was authorised for performance but not for printing, or if it was never authorised in

the first place and was subsequently included for a later staging and publication. General opinion, as stated by both Clare (1990, 48) and Dutton (1991, 124), is that the omission of the scene concerned publication only:

The traditional explanation for its absence is censorship – that Shakespeare included the scene from the beginning, but that it was excised, either by Tilney or by the bishops' censors for the press. The strongest argument for press censorship is that, almost immediately after the excision, the Abbot of Westminster says: 'A woeful pageant have we here beheld' (311), an apparent reference to Richard's histrionics, which would surely have to be changed by the actors if Tilney had insisted on the cut for the stage. (Dutton 1991, 124)

Nevertheless, the fact that Act 4 appears as an addition, as stated in the title page of one of the 1608 Quartos, is equally puzzling: was it new to the printing or was its new material never acted before?

One (and only one) of the ten surviving copies of the 1608 quarto has a new title page, advertising 'new additions of the Parliament Sceane, and the deposing of King Richard. As it hath been lately acted by the King's Majesties servants, at the Globe' [...]. The 'new additions' may have amounted to the restitution of material earlier cut for print. (Dutton 1991, 125; 126)

The scene in itself is not subversive: the King is formally abdicating, albeit under duress, but the simple act of showing a King being removed from office can be troubling.

All in all, the fact that *Richard II* is so well balanced between orthodoxy, self-restraint and veiled/open accusations mitigated by declarations of loyalty, testifies to the characters' – and ultimately their author's – inner struggle in navigating a taboo topic, between the need for self-preservation and the aim of safeguarding the King's authority.

3. *Thomas of Woodstock*

The anonymous *Thomas of Woodstock* is my third case in point. The only copy available, MS Egerton 1994, held at the British Library, was probably a prompt book. The pages are frayed with use and inscribed by several different hands; according to the scholars who have studied the manuscript (Frijlinck 1929; Rossiter 1946; Parfitt and Sheperd 1977; Clare 1990; Dutton 1991; Corbin and

Sedge 2002, *et al.*), the Master of the Revels, George Buc, was one of them. The interesting aspect of the censorship or self-censorship of this specific manuscript is that we have actual indication of what was to be left out in performance: lines are either struck out or marked “OUT” for deletion. The play, considered by many to be one of the most politically challenging of its time (Rossiter 1946; Axton 1976; Melchiori 1979; Stavropoulos 1988; Heinemann 1991; Tipton 1998; Jackson 2001) was processed by censors (probably both external, i.e. the Master of the Revels, and internal): a closer reading of the parts marked for deletion helps to identify the kind of taboo which surrounded power and its ramifications.

The many excised lines vary in range, from a single one to several ones together. The parts omitted, deleted or altered, appear to fall under the following few categories:

- Mention of God or swear-words (after the Act of 1606 intended to curb blasphemy or swear words¹). This category is applied inconsistently:

1.1.7 (God substituted with Heaven); 1.1.133 (Afore my God); 3.3.82 (afore my God deleted); 4.2.51 (“afore my God”, ~~my~~ deleted. It is not deleted a few lines later, (4.2.60). Elsewhere the name of God has not been crossed out: the Master of the Revels probably did not read the whole manuscript, but gave general indications to be subsequently followed by the company (Clare 1990; Dutton 1991), who may have suggested further deletions, as suggested by the different colours of ink in the various cuts.

- Sentences or descriptions damaging to the image of the King:

1.1.30-37: this excision concerns an unflattering comparison between the King and his father, the Black Prince. King Richard is characterised as wild, degenerate and wanton;

4.1.139-60: this scene deals with the farming of the land, when King Richard leases out his realm to the flatterers in exchange for a sum of money². The King’s self-criticism, veined with self-reproach, and his own admission of

¹In 1606 the Parliament passed an Act to Restrain Abuses of Players to prevent blasphemy and profanity on stage. Players and companies could be heavily fined if they did not comply.

²This is the passage containing the debated “pelting farm” reference, which induced scholars to believe *Thomas of Woodstock* to be a source for Shakespeare’s *Richard II*. The question, though still debated, is nevertheless quite settled and *Thomas of Woodstock* is now believed to have Shakespeare’s play as source.

inadequacy if compared to his warlike father, is marked for omission several times on the same page.

- Political criticism of King Richard and his Court:

2.3.27-69: this is one of the longest cuts and it concerns an exchange between Queen Anne, the Duchess of Ireland and the Duchess of Gloucester. The three women openly criticise the King and his Court of flatterers, and defend the oppressed subject. The fact that women, particularly the Queen, are seen condemning the king's actions was possibly considered particularly unsettling, even in the company's view. The cut appears to have been carried out before the manuscript was complete, as speech prefixes are not present. This can be explained either as an act of self-censorship by the company or as a pre-reading by the Master of the Revels, who may have perused the manuscript before it was completed. The passage also explores the idea of rebellion, as the Queen fears the consequences of an oppressive rule of the commoners.

- Reference to rebellion:

1.1.127-28: the passage deals with the uncertainty of Woodstock who appears unsure of the best course to take in a time that he mentions as "busy" and "dangerous".

5.1.287-90: "The gentlemen and commons of the realm, / Missing the good old Duke, their plain protector, / Break their allegiance to their sovereign lord / And all revolt upon the barons' sides." Here Lapoole explicitly refers to a rebellion caused by the actions of the King, and the passage is considered too dangerous to be maintained. According to Clare:

The deletion of these episodes suggests an attempt to diminish the elements and language of insurrection as part of the fabric of the play. [...] In particular, allusions to the commons' grievances against the King brought about by exorbitant taxation and the political influence of flatterers may well have been perceived as carrying dangerously contemporary associations. (Clare 1990: 44-45)

Clare is convinced the play dates back to 1592-3, while according to more recent studies it is to be dated at the beginning of the 17th century (Lake 1983; Jackson 2001, 2007, and 2010); nevertheless, the preoccupation about "contemporary associations" can still be deemed true.

- Politically sensitive subjects:

2.2.110: the fact that Richard refers to himself as “Superior Lord of Scotland” may have been considered offensive to James I who had united England and Scotland under his crown.

5.1.21-27, 34-35, 41-43: Lapoole’s pangs of conscience when faced with the task of murdering Woodstock are deleted. Interestingly, the culpability of the King is not obscured: Lapoole states very clearly that he must act on the King’s orders and kill Gloucester or be killed himself. It is the distress of his interior struggle that is omitted, and thus the representation of the consequences of Richard’s rule on the individual subject’s mind is lost. If the audience sympathises with Lapoole, and he is not to be considered a flat-out villain, King Richard’s choices appear even more reprehensible. (Clare 1990, 45)

5.1.278-79: “Drag the bodies; hurl them in the sea. / The black reward of death’s a traitor’s pay.” Lapoole refers to the murderers who have just killed the Duke of Gloucester as traitors, therefore, since they acted on the King’s order (albeit indirectly), the same could be said of the sovereign, thence the cut.

5.3.10-21: After the opposing forces (King and barons) face one another at the end of the play, the minions try to come to terms with the King’s uncles, and reciprocal accusations of treason are exchanged. The Lords demand to be cleared of all accusations and to know what happened to their brother Gloucester. Again, the open clash of power between King and nobles is a politically sensitive topic, and one that can be considered safer to avoid on stage.

- Random cuts:

3.2.105 “On earth, I fear, we never more shall meet.” This is the foreboding Woodstock experiences when he sees his brothers off from Plashy House. The passage does not appear particularly dangerous, especially if compared to a sentence which comes only a few lines later: “O vulture England, wilt thou eat thine own? / Can they be rebels called that now turn head?”. This last sentence is *not* marked for deletion.

3.3.88-90 from the Farmer’s speech: “we are not all one man’s son [...] for, I assure you”. The sentence does not appear particularly offensive.

5.1.3-4 “the room is voided / No one can hear his cries”, uttered by Lapoole moments before Woodstock is murdered. Again, not an offensive remark, given that we actually see the murder on scene.

Generally speaking, what is subjects to censorship or self-censorship is both open criticism of the Court and of the King. Either the Master of the Revels or someone in the company expunged the scenes where the King behaves inappropriately, or is represented as unfit or unable to reign; open references to rebellion are also expunged. In contrast, the commoners’ speeches are not considered dangerously offensive. Neither the complaining commoners’ complaints, nor the Sheriffs of Kent’s and Northumberland’s appeal to the law against abuse of power are touched (4.3). Even the libellous ballad by the schoolmaster is left untouched: the character’s reliance on plausible deniability (“God bless my Lord Tresilian” is the incriminating sentence) ensures his apprehension should appear inequitable. On the other hand, commoners tend to self-restrict their speech; less so the nobles.

4. Conclusions

The comparison between these three texts dealing with the same controversial sovereign provides us with a partial but significant vision of censorship and tabooed subjects in print and performance. It is impossible to establish if the brief, possibly mutilated *Jack Straw* is so starkly orthodox because of censorship or if it was simply planned to be so. *Richard II* by Shakespeare is certainly a masterpiece of ambiguity and anamorphic speech, everchanging according to the point of view of the listener/reader/audience. Taboo subjects, such as the King’s guilt or inadequacy, are craftily avoided, deviously uttered or counterbalanced with professions of loyalty and obedience. *Thomas of Woodstock* represents yet another instance, being the most openly unorthodox and subversive in its political stance of all three. All in all, commoners are rarely restricted in their speech by the censor, be it (possibly) because the author has them speak in milder, less inflammatory tones when compared to the noble uncles of the King. On the other hand, a subversive statement by a member of the Court carries more weight and is bound to be deemed too dangerous for

performance or for print. Avoiding taboo or dangerous political subjects fulfils the necessity of protecting the figure of the King as well as authors and companies from accusations of treason. Compelled by external forces of motivated by self-preservation, artists had to navigate a narrow passage between political constraints and artistic freedom.

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