

Through his history plays, Shakespeare brilliantly succeeded in bringing to life—and passing to future generations—the most profound moral lessons of statecraft and citizenship, as they arose in the universal history of Plantagenet England



William Shakespeare and Sir Thomas More:

The Conscience Of Kings

by Paul Gallagher



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When Henry VII finally ended the “war of each against all” of the English feudal barons, and created an English nation whose monarchy was based on middle-class allies and the common welfare, he did so by ending the dismal, 400-year dynastic rule of the Plantagenet kings.

Their dynasty named for a yellow flower of that Normandy which they had invaded from Scandinavia in the Eleventh century, these Norman (Norseman) kings and their barons could never decide whether they were kings of Normandy, dukes of Aquitaine, princes of Anjou and of Sicily, kings of England or of France, tyrants of Ireland, or crusading knights of Jerusalem. They were “crusader kings”: all their Plantagenet and Anjou branches were the playthings of the maritime empire of Venice, controller of the Crusades, and Venice’s “each against all,” divide-and-rule domination of Europe before the Renaissance. Ruling England was never as important to these kings as invading, crusading, and devastating elsewhere, and this was the only way they knew, momentarily, to unite the feuding and vengeful oligarchs around them.

In this unfitness to rule for the general good, the Plantagenets were as bad a scourge on the peoples subjected to them, as those earlier Merovingian kings whom Charle-

*William Shakespeare (right),
Sir Thomas More (left).*

magne overcame to create the Holy Roman Empire, and to launch the Carolingian Renaissance with the aid of Irish and English Classical scholars. But worse, under the Plantagenets, England lost this, its early-Middle-Ages fame as a flame of knowledge and learning for all Europe; it became, instead, a backwater almost untouched by the Golden Renaissance of the Fifteenth century.

The Plantagenets and ‘The Anchorians’

The Plantagenet kings were in the mind’s eye of Sir Thomas More when he wrote these words, spoken by the traveller Raphael in *Utopia*, More’s parable of statecraft:

... the Anchorians, a people that lie on the South-east of Utopia, who long ago engaged in war, in order to add to the dominions of their prince another kingdom, to which he had some pretensions by an ancient alliance. This they conquered, but found that the trouble of keeping it was equal to that by which it was gained; ... they were obliged to be incessantly at war, either for or against [the conquered kingdom], and consequently, could never disband their army; that in the meantime they were oppressed with taxes, their money went out of the kingdom, their blood was spilt for the glory of their king, without procuring the least advantage to the people ... and their laws fell into contempt. ... To this I would add, that after all those warlike attempts, the vast confusions, and the consumption both of treasure and of people that must follow them; perhaps on some misfortune, they might be forced to throw up all at last; therefore, it seemed much more eligible that the king should improve his ancient kingdom all he could, and make it flourish as much as possible; that he should love his people, and be beloved of them; that he should live among them, govern them gently, and let other kingdoms alone, since that which had fallen to his share was big enough, if not too big, for him.

This thrust at the Plantagenets is made, in *Utopia*, when the philosopher-traveller Raphael is speaking with the narrator More about “John Morton, Archbishop of Canterbury, Cardinal, and Chancellor of England: a man . . . that was not less venerable for his wisdom and virtues than for the high character he bore.” Morton was Chancellor and chief advisor to the same King Henry VII who ended the Plantagenet nightmare and made “his ancient kingdom” into a nation. Morton lived for Shakespeare through Thomas More, who had been brought up and educated as a ward in Morton’s household. More knew in detail from Morton the terrible lessons of the reign of the last Plantagenet king, Richard III, since Morton had been directly involved in 1484-5 in bringing that tyranny (and the Wars of the Roses) to an end. More wrote out the *History of King Richard III*,

which was “the meat that Shakespeare fed on” for his famous tragedy of 1592, *The Life and Death of King Richard III*, in which John Morton appears in his historical role as the Bishop of Ely.

This tragedy presented to Shakespeare’s audiences of Tudor England, with the most brutal force, the impossibility of going back to the Plantagenet ideal of warrior/invasor kings, whose only allegiance was to their families’ ancient wealth, powers, and privileges. It is a justly famous example of what Germany’s great dramatist Friedrich Schiller called “the theater as a moral institution”—not one for day-to-day moral instruction, but one for impressing the moral sense of the citizens with the fundamental principles of statecraft and the common good.

Shakespeare’s ‘Friendship’ with More

To compose this Classical portrait of the English oligarchy, Shakespeare chose More’s history, although there were other chronicles of the Wars of the Roses available, which were used by other playwrights dealing with Richard III—one of the signs that Shakespeare knew More’s mind as a leader of the Renaissance. In 1596, Shakespeare collaborated with other playwrights in a *Play of St. Thomas More*. Its dramatic and political force centered on how More, after calming and ending dangerous popular disturbances in London in 1525, entered a courageous confrontation with his king, Henry VIII, demanding justice and mercy for the prisoners charged with the rioting. Although less known than More’s later confrontation with Henry over his erecting the rule of a state Church in England, this scene of 1525 was an exemplar of the “crimes of truth” for which Henry VIII would ultimately execute More in 1534. The *Play of St. Thomas More* was banned from performance by the censors of Henry VIII’s daughter, Queen Elizabeth I; however, its idea of the ruling virtue of mercy soon reappeared in Shakespeare’s great dramatic comedy, *Measure for Measure*.

Shakespeare may also have known More’s *Utopia* itself. It had been written in 1516, when the 25-year-old Henry VIII faced the choice between ruling his “own ancient kingdom as well as he could,” or reverting to invading France again, like a Plantagenet; but it could not be published in England until shortly after Shakespeare’s birth.

William Shakespeare’s mind owed much to that of More. Shakespeare employed the Classical drama of which he was master, to finally “bury” the corpse of the Plantagenet dynasty a century after Henry VII had killed it, by showing the English the cruel folly which the Plantagenet nobility had been, so that the English might reject such folly in themselves and in Tudor

England's state and society.

Lyndon LaRouche has observed that Shakespeare's historical dramas, featuring his ten plays of the English kings, are to be viewed as a bloc expressing a unified idea of universal history. In the development of these Plantagenet tragedies, as Classical dramas, the threat of doom to society lies in the threat that these kings and other leading characters will fail to break free of the *force of custom and false axioms of popular belief*, which they must change in order that their people survive. LaRouche adds, that this spectacle of tragedy as the fear in the leaders of society of urgently needed *change in the dominant axioms of thought and custom*, is then the method Shakespeare carries through to the "legendary" historical tragedies as well, most famously to *Hamlet*. The Classical drama of a Shakespeare thus moves the spectators to see the threat of this grip of folly and custom at a great moment, as if it were threatening them—it is—and to experience their own powers to escape it.

Shakespeare began to compose these dramas of the English kings—there may be eleven of them, as an *Edward III* is now being attributed to the Bard—essentially as soon as he became the primary playwright for his first theater company (probably the Lord Strange's Men) in 1589. He took the Wars of the Roses as virtually his first subject, for a series of at least four dramas, all being performed by 1592, and sometimes performed as an ensemble of plays, both at the Tudor court and in the public theater. This unified group of plays included *Henry VI, Parts 1, 2, and 3*, and the celebrated *Richard III*.

The chronicles on which these plays were based, were used as well by other playwrights of the Elizabethan stage, Shakespeare's predecessors and contemporaries. Often, playwrights like Shakespeare were given already-extant plays, to rewrite for their companies. In other words, much of Shakespeare's audience, like that of the ancient Classical Greek tragedians Aeschylus and Sophocles, already "knew" the stories of history and of "myth" from which the playwright was composing. But, did they know the *turning points* of that history? That was the question: the points of crucial decision—to change, or to remain in the safe "sanctity of custom"—which had determined which path that history took.



Globe Theatre/John Trammer

Shakespeare's "Henry V," performed at the reconstructed Globe Theatre, London.

Shakespeare and Marlowe

William Shakespeare and his contemporary Christopher Marlowe stood out, immediately and completely, from all the other Elizabethan playwrights who used the same stories for their plays. First of all, they alone achieved a masterful beauty in the use of *blank verse*, the unrhymed, five-measure poetic line which had been first used in English—"invented"—only during the 1570's, in the writing of philosophical poetry. Brought to the stage, blank verse was a revolution in bringing *intelligibility and natural clarity* of the characters' thought-processes to the spectators. Undistracted by rhyming couplets or clever "doggerel" lines, the actors could speak so as to convey the flow of their characters' thoughts as if the characters were really thinking them. Yet, with blank verse, the greatest poetic beauty and concentrated expression was also possible—by which Shakespeare's dramatic verse transformed the English language.

Only Shakespeare and Marlowe achieved this. Their lines alone can be mistaken for one another's, but are distinguished from all others by their signature beauty and power. (Marlowe, in fact, wrote a lost play on King Richard III just before Shakespeare succeeded him as playwright of a certain company—and it is possible, that Richard's celebrated opening soliloquy, "Now is the Winter of our discontent/Made glorious Summer by this son of York," was taken from Marlowe.) The blank verse of Shakespeare was chosen 150 years later by Gotthold Lessing, Schiller, and Goethe, as the verse model for the Ger-

man national theater, which took Classical drama from the tragic, to the higher level of the “sublime.”¹

Thus, the plays of Shakespeare and Marlowe often drove other playwrights’ versions of the same plays off the Elizabethan stage, as if by the appearance of a new and superior species.

Secondly, their use of these histories as dramatic metaphors for the follies which the English citizens of Tudor times needed to relive to overcome, was also unique. In the hands of Shakespeare in particular, the stories from the chronicles were transformed, often by the unforgettable changes which he made to the “factual” histories—inventions by which those turning points of history were marked and remembered ever since, although they were Shakespeare’s own creations. Thus, for example, if his first grand dramatic subject was the Wars of the Roses—as scholars of the London theater-performance records believe—then the most celebrated scene, that in the Temple Garden where those wars were named, was, in fact, Shakespeare’s invention. What was the dramatist’s purpose?

Discovering ‘What Was Not There’

In the first play of the the *Henry VI* trilogy, after the opening Act, in which Plantagenet occupying armies in France begin to feel the resistance led against them by Joan of Arc, the scene suddenly shifts to London, to the Temple Garden of one of the Inns of Court. There, a feuding group of great lords of England pluck from the briar bushes the famous roses by which they choose sides and broach civil war: white roses for alliance with Richard Plantagenet, Duke of York; red roses for the Earl of Somerset, the “Lancastrian” side of this “quarrel that will drink blood.” King Henry VI himself was at this time (1430) but nine years old, his government directed by a council of barons led by his uncle the Duke of Gloucester. In the next scenes, faced by an intensifying French national uprising led by the Virgin of Orleans, the English barons sail young Henry over to Paris to be crowned king of France. They do this even as they are igniting civil rebellion to threaten his throne in England!

By this juxtaposition, Shakespeare created the most stinging irony—the same feudal barons who would place this young Plantagenet on France’s throne by war, will never consent to let him grow to rule them in peace in England. From the opening of the play—the funeral of the “hero king” Henry V, full of black foreboding for the future—Shakespeare stuck under the spectators’ skins the disaster of the centuries of Plantagenet rule, and moved them to shudder at the tragic ironies of it. And the key turn of his screw is the Temple Garden scene of

the roses, the metaphor of English oligarchical discord and vengeful hatred, the scene by which the ensuing civil war was to be remembered.

But this scene had no “factual” historical basis, however; it was Shakespeare’s sovereign invention, key to the method of his tragedy. By so placing it, Shakespeare launched the Wars of the Roses, dramatically, in 1430, in Henry VI’s boyhood, at the point the liberation struggle for the French nation had just begun. In historical “fact,” the battles of the Wars of the Roses began in the later 1450’s, when Henry had been on the throne for decades. Shakespeare created a dramatic shift, which made his audience see the great English barons as permanently in a war of each against all, and all against France, and never willing to let their king *govern* his own people.

Shakespeare makes another such dramatic transformation in the second part of this trilogy, in his use of “Jack Cade’s rebellion,” which occurred at the time when Henry VI’s overthrow by Richard, Duke of York, was approaching (although this Richard did not take the throne, which fell several years later to his son Edward). Stuart Rosenblatt has described² how Shakespeare, showing the most penetrating sense of *universal history*, makes the mighty Duke Richard the behind-the-scenes author of this rebellion of tradesmen and poor artisans. Richard, flashing the same intensity in evil scheming for power that makes his tyrannical son notorious in *Richard III*, employs Cade to lead a chaotic rebellion, using popular discontent among the poor and ignorant as a *means of irregular warfare* by his aristocratic faction, to weaken the throne of England. These were “Venetian methods” which few in Tudor England understood, methods of the sort used repeatedly to disorient Henry VIII or to destabilize Queen Elizabeth I. And Shakespeare, with genius, depicts Jack Cade and his lieutenants as illiterates who hate learning, ready to kill anyone for the crime of merely being educated—fierce emblems of the backwardness of Plantagenet England during the Fifteenth-century Golden Renaissance of continental Europe.

The historical Jack Cade was no illiterate, and modern histories of the Wars of the Roses period turn up no conspiracy or connection between Cade’s Rebellion and Richard of York, who, while the rebellion briefly raged, was about to return from Ireland with an army. But Shakespeare saw, and made his spectators see, “what was not there” in the chronicles, and what modern scholarly historians do not see.³

History of Ideas

The Life and Death of King Richard III was the fourth and last of the “Wars of the Roses plays” Shakespeare apparently composed to be performed as a series, beginning

1592—perhaps by two combined theater companies, and with unusual financial backing from some who wanted the truth of those Wars understood by Queen Elizabeth and her subjects. *Richard III* is the most famous exemplar of Shakespeare’s method of creating *true, universal history*—fundamentally, the history of ideas in dramatic form—from the bits and pieces of chronicled “fact” available to him.

This play became the definitive history of how the Wars were finally ended and England united as a nation, for centuries after it was composed and first performed. Shakespeare wrote it in “spiritual partnership” with his predecessor Thomas More. By taking More’s history as the basis for *Richard III*, Shakespeare gave an “eternal” authority to More’s devastating portrait of the revenge-killing cycles of the English oligarchical families of the Plantagenet era.

More also showed how such rule had to destroy itself, by insisting on noting the psychological disintegration of Richard III before the battle of Bosworth, which Shakespeare made into an unforgettable Fifth Act scene. In the final century of that Plantagenet era, the great families so exhausted themselves in these blood orgies, that by 1484, half the titled baronies of England were empty, because there was no surviving adult male in the family; the children had become wards of the king; the family holdings confiscated by the crown, or added to those of other, temporarily victor-families in this war of each against all. When Henry Tudor, Earl of Richmond, crossed from France with

a small force of French, Welsh, and English soldiers, Richard III could muster only 8,000 knights and soldiers from all of England to defend his usurped throne. Henry ended the Wars of the Roses, and as King Henry VII, united and began to rebuild an exhausted and prostrate nation.

Thomas More became a teacher, and also the conscience—finally the tragic conscience—to Henry’s famous son, Henry VIII; as Pope John Paul II has recently declared St. Thomas More to be the conscience and patron saint of all statesmen and political leaders [SEE Box]. As we have seen, his *Utopia* of 1515 was a piece of this work accomplished by More. It was also part of a great effort by the English Erasmians who were Henry VIII’s friends, to pull him back from the brink of that 1516 Hapsburg Empire-allied invasion of France (involving his fantastic delusion that he was Henry V Plantagenet reincarnated!), which began his long downfall from his father’s level of governance and statecraft.

More’s *History of King Richard III* would have shown his king everything that he must not be, and must not do, if he were to “govern well his own ancient kingdom,” although it was not to be published in its English version until after both Thomas More and Henry VIII were dead. From Shakespeare’s revelation of it in 1592 until today, *Richard III* has been perhaps the most-often performed of all of the plays of Shakespeare, certainly the most famous of all “history plays.” *Richard III* is the authoritative *idea* of that evil quality of the English oli-

Pope John Paul II on St. Thomas More

On Nov. 4, 2000, John Paul II declared Thomas More the Patron Saint of Statesmen and Politicians. The declaration constituted an extraordinary challenge to all political leaders in the world today. For, to declare Thomas More their Patron Saint, is to challenge them to become like the great humanist, to conceive and live politics as he did.

In his address, the Pope said: “Yours can well be deemed a true and genuine vocation to politics, which, in practice, means the governance of nations, the formulation of laws, and the administration of public affairs at every level.” The Pope proceeded to examine the nature and aims of politics, from a Christian standpoint. “Politics is the use of legitimate authority in order to attain the common good of society. . . . Political activity ought therefore to be carried out in a spirit of service.”

And the aim is to attain justice, “which is not content to apportion to each his own, but one which aims at creating conditions of equal opportunity among citizens, and therefore favouring those who, for reasons of social status or education or health, risk being left behind or relegated to the lowest places in society, without possibility of deliverance.”

“This is the scandal of the affluent society of today’s world, in which the rich grow ever richer, and the poor grow ever poorer, since poverty tends to additional poverty,” the Pope said. Especially through the process of globalization, he added, this polarization has become exacerbated. The problem with globalization, is that it has divorced economic policy from morality. What must be done, is to reassert this morality, “to conform the laws of the ‘unbridled’ market to the laws of justice and solidarity.”

garchy which had to be overcome at that turning point in history, around the year 1485, when the English nation-state was born with the aid of its Renaissance predecessor, the France of Louis XI.

Since the work of the English Enlightenment dilettantes Dr. Samuel Johnson and Horace Walpole in the mid-Eighteenth century, there have arisen entire schools of history aimed at debunking Shakespeare's and More's history as *an invention*. These historians have clamored that Richard III was no hunchback; may not have killed the young princes, sons of his dead brother King Edward, in the Tower; had sound reasons for those foul acts he did commit; and was no more or less a tyrant than other kings of the period. Recently, some in this school have even suggested that More really drew Richard III's sinister character as a disguised portrait of the man who overcame Richard's tyranny—Henry VII!

But here again, Shakespeare's view of the "factual accuracy" of the details of More's work is not the point. Shakespeare was seeking not factual details about Richard III, but historical truthfulness. No better picture will ever come to life, of the vicious, every-family-for-itself anarchy of a ruling oligarchy, than *Richard III's* Act I, Scene 3. In this scene—Shakespeare's own invention—Richard himself plays little role except as the object of prophecy by an old queen of the Plantagenet-Anjou dynasties. She prophesies that the evil Richard will be the vehicle of fate, by which all these mutually revenge-seeking oligarchs *destroy themselves*.

This is the great truthfulness of the play. Richard, the tyrant, does not destroy the great barons and ladies one by one, although he appears to do so; they destroy themselves, by tolerating and even welcoming his constant instigation of war and destruction. Their fantasies convince them that *their* families will become more powerful and wealthy thereby. The drama's tragic figure is the Earl of Buckingham, a great baron initially more powerful and wealthy than Richard, who has the potential means to enforce peace, but becomes instead Richard's chief conspirator in war and usurpation. Too late, Buckingham realizes what his fantasy has created, and attempts to raise powers in rebellion against Richard, but is defeated and executed. Thomas More was in a position to understand this underlying problem very well, because his own mentor, John Morton, had tried to move Buckingham and other nobles to join forces against Richard nearly a year before Buckingham finally raised his doomed revolt.

So, the failure of any of the leading nobles to break from the Plantagenet "axioms" of bad rule, doomed them finally to erect a deadly tyrant who would destroy

them all—which, ironically, gave way through the ascension of Henry Tudor to the creation of a nation based on citizens rather than barons, and on principles of general welfare rather than unending war. The words of Henry (about to be crowned Henry VII, and to make the defeated tyrant's niece, Elizabeth of York, his queen) close the drama:

England hath long been mad, and scarr'd herself;
The brother blindly shed the brother's blood,
The father rashly slaughtered his own son,
The son, compell'd, been butcher to the sire:
All this divided York and Lancaster,
Divided in their dire division—
O, now let Richmond and Elizabeth,
The true succeeders of each royal house,
By God's fair ordinance conjoin together!
And let their heirs,—God, if thy will be so,—
Enrich the time to come with smooth'd-fac'd peace,
With smiling plenty, and fair prosperous days!
Abate the edge of traitors, gracious Lord,
That would reduce these bloody days again,
And make poor England weep in streams of blood!
Let them not live to taste this land's increase
That would with treason wound this fair land's peace!
Now civil wounds are stopp'd, peace lives again;
That she may long live here, God say Amen!

This is the kind of historical truth bequeathed to Shakespeare by Thomas More, the patron saint of statesmen and political leaders, who gave his life for that truth. Lyndon LaRouche put it thus in a writing of Oct. 25, 2001, entitled "God Has Blessed Me":

The impact of More on Shakespeare's work, including Shakespeare's treatment of the lessons of the history of England, from Henry II through the overthrow of the terrible Richard III, typifies the genetic quality of the cultural transmission of truthfulness, even at all risk, from one generation to its successors.⁴

NOTES

1. For Lyndon LaRouche on the sublime and Classical theater, see Anita Gallagher, "Nathan the Wise: Timely Attack on the 'Clash of Civilizations,'" *Executive Intelligence Review*, Nov. 23, 2001 (Vol. 28, No. 45), p. 71.
2. Stuart Rosenblatt, "The 'History Plays': Using Shakespeare To Fight the Jacobin Mobs," *The New Federalist*, Oct. 1, 2001 (Vol. XV, No. 27), p. 9.
3. Shakespeare turned the same kind of spotlight upon a different period of history in his *Julius Caesar*, wherein he took Plutarch's and Suetonius's histories of oligarchical Rome, and created his own leading dramatic character, the Roman plebian mob—*vox populi*. He thereby placed the clue to the tragic "Sphinx's riddle": what drove the noble Brutus to cast away his better qualities and destroy the Roman Republic he wished to save?
4. Lyndon H. LaRouche, Jr., "God Has Blessed Me," *The New Federalist*, Nov. 5, 2001 (Vol. XV, No. 32).