

Chivalry in Shakespeare:  
How the Great Playwright Reveals the Code of Conduct

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## Abstract

Today's society understands chivalry in a vastly different context than how chivalry was originally understood in the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries. For this reason, it is crucial to turn to literature concerning the time period and people that were expected to uphold the code of chivalry at all times. This thesis will research, in depth, William Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of King Richard the Second* (1597), the first of the four history plays in the second tetralogy. Studying this work will enable the reader to gain a more full understanding of how seriously the noblemen of those days took this code of conduct. Chivalry originally began as a code of conduct for knights and nobility and was not simply a set of actions and characteristics to be performed, but a lifestyle of honor, courage, and selflessness.

Rather than studying a work that exemplifies chivalry in action, *Richard II* reveals the severity of the consequences that will affect an entire nation if chivalry is abandoned. Through a close study of the play itself and concluding remarks on the personal character of both Richard and his nemesis, Bolingbroke, it becomes obvious that violating chivalry not only affects the individual violator, but can also cause the demise of an entire nation. By studying the negative aspects of Richard and Bolingbroke's joint disregard for chivalry, it is my hope that the reader will come to understand the importance of adhering to this code of conduct.

### Chivalry in Shakespeare:

#### How the Great Playwright Reveals the Code of Conduct

The English language has changed immensely since Old English first came into use around 450 AD. As culture and society change, language must be changed to adapt to the needs of the people using it. Unfortunately, as a result of this modification of language, words and concepts are lost. Such is the case with the concept of chivalry. While the literal word still remains a part of the English language, the original meaning has been disregarded. The origins of the code of chivalry are actually much more interesting and intricate than any vague definition that is used today. By researching and studying this centuries old concept, it soon becomes evident that this code of conduct was not merely a good act to practice but was literally a way of life that governed the upper and middleclass citizens of England.

#### **What is Chivalry?**

The first aspect of chivalry that must be understood is what this code of conduct actually implied for the nobles of the Medieval Ages. When the concept of chivalry developed during the time of the Crusades in the Middle Ages, it began as a code of conduct for the knights. For these men, their actions were not merely occasional, but rather a way of life. The key ideals behind chivalry were not simple acts that could be performed, but attitudes and virtues that should be possessed. The standard of chivalry, however, had much deeper roots. Theodor Meron, author of *Bloody Constraint: War and Chivalry in Shakespeare*, states that the “practitioners” of chivalry, the knights, were expected to be “cultivated gentlemen” (11). Not only were nobles, knights, and lords expected to cultivate and demonstrate the virtues of chivalry, but they were also expected

to truly *be* men of virtue. The most important ideals were honor, loyalty, courage, mercy, a commitment to the well being of the community and the avoidance of shame and dishonor (Meron 11). Chivalry was considered to be the standard, not the exception. Only the finest men of the upper class were held to this standard of behavior and they took their responsibility very seriously.

One key area of study that must be addressed in regards to chivalry is Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* (1387). Although Chaucer and his work are not directly related to Shakespeare or *Richard II*, Chaucer did write about knights and the qualities they were to possess. Additionally, *The Canterbury Tales* were written sometime in the late 14<sup>th</sup> century, around the same time of Richard's reign in England. In his book *The Canterbury Tales and the Good Society*, Paul A. Olson discusses the social framework under which Chaucer was operating. Olson asserts that Chaucer wrote from the perspective of the existence of three main estates in society and within *The Canterbury Tales*, there is a character that represents each estate (30). The three estates in the work are the Church, the Court, and the Country, and all of the characters fit into one of the three estates (19). For the purposes of this study, the estate of the Court and particularly the character of the Knight are of the most importance. Olson defines the characteristics of the exemplary Knight in great detail:

[T]he second-estate Knight is powerful, worthy – physically strong and brave – but he also possesses the wisdom later defined...as the pursuit of peace through knowledge of God's laws for nature and man. He displays the fidelity, honor, liberality, and constraint of speech conventionally

assigned his role while wearing the humble apparel of that “union of chivalry and monasticism” found in the chivalric orders. (31)

These very characteristics were expected of every knight and defined what it meant to be a chivalrous and virtuous man. Olson also notes that Chaucer describes the Knight as having “a reputation of humility and cleanness” and a commitment to a life of poverty (31). Chaucer’s discussion of the characteristics that a virtuous knight absolutely must possess and exhibit serves as one of the most fundamental bases for chivalry in literature. This example of how chivalry is displayed in literature laid the foundation for Shakespeare’s in-depth study of how chivalry was acted out amongst the nobility.

Finally, the main aspect that defined what chivalry truly encompassed in its original understanding is how the knights and nobility treated their king. In addition to possessing and living out the previously mentioned characteristics, the true test of chivalry was whether or not a man was loyal to his king. Because the code of chivalry applied specifically to the men of the court, the issue of loyalty was of utmost importance.

### **The Origins of Chivalry**

One of the first and most important questions that must be addressed concerns the origins of the chivalric code. Unfortunately, because the concept developed over time, there is no firm date that can answer, with certainty, when this code of conduct became the norm. According to *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, a group of knights in the early days of the Crusader kingdom of Jerusalem first introduced actions of honor and courage as a code of conduct. These knights took it upon themselves to guide and protect pilgrims in addition to caring for the wounded and sick (102). In the name of religion,

these men fought and protected those who could not take care of themselves. This concept spread rapidly and soon there were groups of knights being formed throughout many countries in Europe. The image of the cross soon came to represent these elite groups and it was extremely honorable to be permitted to join one of these societies (102). Shortly thereafter, feudal lords began to give their followers a mark that resembled that of the elite groups of knights and “from the 14<sup>th</sup> century onward there was a proliferation of secular orders of chivalry” (“Origins of Chivalry” 102).

From a literary perspective, it is much more difficult to pinpoint the origins of the concept of chivalry. The rise of chivalric and courtly literature in France, however, was initiated sometime in the 12<sup>th</sup> century according to scholar Charles Muscatine’s book *Chaucer and the French Tradition: A Study in Style and Meaning* (11). Muscatine attributes the introduction of Medieval courtly literature to the knights and ladies of the time who wanted a genre of literature that more accurately reflected their lifestyle and social status (11). Gradually, the epic form was transformed into the medieval romance, which introduced the opportunity for a knight to display his love for a lady by rescuing her from some great peril. According to Muscatine, the knight’s display of love was synonymous with virtue itself (13). Additionally, the setting of the romance stories was often something exotic and dangerous as a means to highlight the bravery and courage of the knight who was about to embark on a great quest (15). Frequently, the source that is attributed with the popularization of this manner of conduct for knights and nobles is King Arthur and his Round Table. However, chivalry almost certainly got its start even before King Arthur, but he is generally the one who is credited for establishing chivalry as a way of life. Ultimately, Chretien de Troyes popularized Arthurian legends sometime

around the 1200s, and Arthur and his knights were described as having formed the Round Table based on the example of the knights of the crusades. Although courtly literature began much earlier, one of the most commonly referenced works in regards to chivalry and the courtly tradition is “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.” One of the central focuses of this poem is Arthur himself, which consequently causes the issues of chivalry and ceremony within the court to be a key issue because of his involvement with the Round Table. While the origins of chivalry in literature are widespread, the initial introduction of this theme into literature can most certainly be attributed to the early French tradition of tales of courtly love.

In regards to the crusades, chivalry originated as a result of religious issues, which is a crucial note because of the transformation this term has undergone throughout the years. Today’s society certainly does not consider religion to be an essential aspect of chivalry. Scholar J.J. Anderson reveals that during the early 1100s, religion was still a predominant issue and the two concepts of religion and chivalry most certainly went hand in hand (337). According to the *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, this theme continued into the 14<sup>th</sup> century, during the time of Philippe de Mézières, a French knight who was a leading proponent of the crusades and later joined a monastery and wrote many works about religion and knighthood (n. pag.). Although courtly literature began as a means to please the upper class, it underwent many phases and gradually evolved so that by the time Shakespeare was writing, the literature was entirely different. The changes chivalry has undergone throughout the years are numerous, but the biggest change has certainly come in regards to religion. Not only has chivalry become an outdated concept, but it has also been completely removed from the realm of religion.

### Shakespeare's Thoughts on Chivalry

For the purposes of this thesis, it is essential to have a firm grasp on the foundations of chivalry as previously discussed; however, this understanding is most important when addressing how Shakespeare dealt with the issue of chivalry in his works. Clearly, the works of William Shakespeare are too vast to ever be dealt with in one sitting; therefore, this study will focus specifically on one of his best-known history plays. The four plays *Richard II*, *Henry IV Part I*, *Henry IV Part II*, and *Henry V* are known as Shakespeare's "Henriad" and cover the reigns of these three kings from roughly 1398-1422. Although the theme of chivalry and its manifestations dominate the body of all four of these plays, *The Tragedy of King Richard the Second* most clearly and specifically addresses what happens when chivalry is violated. This theme is representative of what was happening in England as the country transitioned out of the Middle Ages and into modern times. William Butler Yeats comments that specifically the values of the Middle Age were being quickly disregarded to make room for the values of the modern age: "The courtly and saintly ideals of the Middle Ages were fading, and the practical ideals of the modern age had begun to threaten the unuseful dome of the sky" (21). Shakespeare's depiction of Richard's deposition provides a practical example of how the chivalric ideals were quickly passing with the time. E.M.W. Tillyard continues this thought when he says that "[t]he world of medieval refinement is indeed the main object of presentation but it is threatened and in the end superseded by the more familiar world of the present" (259). Not only is the play dealing with the specific issue of chivalry and how it changed as a result of Richard's reign, but also the larger issue of a cultural shift out of one period and into a new one.

The beauty of literature is that even though the reader may not know with certainty where the author stands on a certain issue, the works of that author provide immense insight into such issues. We certainly do not have the luxury of having recorded interviews with the great playwright at our disposal, but we do have his vast body of works. Tillyard comments that of all of Shakespeare's plays, *Richard II* is stylistically the most formal and ceremonial (245). Thus, Shakespeare's mastery in crafting his plays is seen in his decision to incorporate the theme of courtliness and formality into the very structure of the play as well as the explicit content. The world of *Richard II* is a world of chivalry and ceremony – both of which are slowly fading away. Rather than trying to discover what Shakespeare personally had to say about the issue of chivalry, however, we can turn to these plays and examine the themes and examples of chivalry that lie within them.

### **Richard II**

The focus of this study of the first play in the Henriad is twofold: first and foremost the play deals with the decline of chivalry that occurs when the king is an inadequate ruler, and secondly, the play addresses the issue of loyalty to the king and when, if ever, it is appropriate to defy the king. These issues ultimately become the entire basis of the play and then carry on into the remaining plays. Loyalty is perhaps the most prominent aspect of chivalry that Shakespeare addresses as he tells the story of Richard's rule as king of England. As previously stated, it is difficult to determine Shakespeare's precise views concerning chivalry; however, as is typical of great writers, Shakespeare incorporated many of his beliefs into his plays. Interestingly, *Richard II* deals specifically with what happens when the code of conduct is broken and subjects

violate and defy their loyalty to the king. Not only is chivalry concerned with how the people of the upper class act in relation to the king, but also with how the king carries out his duties as the leader of the nation. Essentially, there are three main views concerning the role of Richard and Bolingbroke in the play. Scholar G.G. Gervinus supports the view that Richard's deposition comes at his own hands because of his poor leadership. In his article, "Richard II," Gervinus "identifies the central conflict of *Richard II* as that of a weak but legitimate monarch opposed by a competent, statesmanlike usurper" (n. pag.). John Alvis, author of *Shakespeare's Understanding of Honor*, affirms Gervinus' claim when he says "Richard II...allows Bolingbroke to dethrone him and thereby disrupt the peace of the realm for generations while he dreams of relinquishing his power for the humble life of a hermit" (19). Tillyard approaches the issue from the opposite stance claiming, "Shakespeare knows that Richard's crimes never amounted to tyranny and hence that outright rebellion against him was a crime" (261). From Tillyard's perspective, Bolingbroke is completely at fault and his usurpation is entirely inappropriate. Finally, S. C. Sen Gupta addresses the joint fault of both men in his book *Shakespeare's Historical Plays* when he says, "That Richard II was guilty of serious misgovernment is undoubted, but did he deserve to lose his crown? And even if he so deserved, had Bolingbroke the right to depose him, or had his subjects any right to try him?" (116). Raphael Holinshed, Shakespeare's chief historical source, believes that Richard did deserve to lose the crown because he ordered Thomas Mowbray to secretly murder the Duke of Gloucester (65) – an act that cannot be overlooked. Essentially, the entire issue of how chivalry was maintained or rejected in the play can be summarized with Gupta's questions. Clearly, the issue of where to place the blame for the failure of Richard's reign is a popular yet

divisive issue amongst scholars. The purpose of this study is to reveal how Bolingbroke's actions were clearly in violation of the code of chivalry, but also how Richard's actions as a weak, less than honorable king are often overlooked despite their anti-chivalrous implications. Fault cannot be wholeheartedly placed on either man; rather, both men's actions join together to initiate the decline of chivalry. While the play provides a detailed picture of how chivalry was preserved in the Middle Ages, it shows, more importantly, how it was violated by king and noblemen alike.

Shakespeare opens Act I, scene i with an exchange between Henry Bolingbroke, Duke of Hereford and Thomas Mowbray, Duke of Norfolk and wastes no time introducing chivalry as a central theme in the play. Bolingbroke, cousin of the king, accuses Mowbray of committing several treacherous acts against the king, including assisting in the murder of one of the king's uncles. Holinshed depicts this scene on a much larger scale. Rather than occurring as a simple argument between the two men, Holinshed describes this occurrence much more like a courtroom with witnesses speaking to the King on behalf of both men. Holinshed notes that at one point, an unnamed knight gives his testimony on behalf of Bolingbroke accusing Mowbray of being "a false and disloyal traitor" and saying that Mowbray is the core of all of the treason that occurred in England over the last eighteen years (69). Immediately following these accusations, Richard turns to another unnamed knight who is called on to defend Bolingbroke's honor. Essentially, this knight denies everything that was previously said and reverses the claims saying that Mowbray is actually the one who has lied and been disloyal to the king and that as a result of his lies, Mowbray, not Bolingbroke is the true traitor (69). Naturally, both men deny their involvement in any of these schemes, and in doing so, the language

and actions of the court are introduced. In order to settle the dispute, Bolingbroke throws down his gage, indicating that he is challenging Mowbray to a duel to defend his honor. From the outset, therefore, the reader is introduced to the use of chivalrous language and terminology. This employment of chivalrous language is the most basic, yet consistent, manifestation of chivalry that is seen throughout the play. Scholar, William Henry Schofield draws attention to why this chivalric action was essential to men who were expected to abide by this code of honor. According to Schofield, "Once dubbed, the knight had above all to defend his honour. . . ." (191). This obligation is manifested in Mowbray's response to Bolingbroke throwing down his gage: "I'll answer thee in any fair degree / Or chivalrous design of knightly trial" (1.1.80-81). Although in today's society we would say Mowbray was merely acting like an arrogant man who was afraid to be disrespected, the issue actually goes much deeper. Because of the code of chivalry, Mowbray was expected to defend his honor and in this situation, the most respectable course of action was for him to do exactly as Shakespeare describes and respond to Bolingbroke's demand for a duel. On this level, Mowbray's display of honor seems respectable; however, Shakespeare actually uses it to indicate a looming power struggle.

The violations of chivalry in the opening of the play are actually two-fold: Richard's interference with a chivalric custom and the two nobles' decision to completely disregard the king's command in order to preserve their personal honor. First of all, Richard eventually interferes with the men's argument and orders them to let go of their dispute but they choose to disobey and place their personal honor over their obedience to the king. In his essay about the play, Allan Bloom says that by prohibiting the duel from taking place, "he [Richard] brings the era of chivalry, the era of Christian knights

inaugurated by the first Richard, the Lion-Hearted, to its end” (61). Additionally, this action destroys due process of law because, legally, the appropriate course of action was for the men to duel to the death. The act of dueling to the death was a traditional, chivalric custom and by refusing to allow it to take place, Richard violates the code of conduct. Bolingbroke and Mowbray, on the other hand, defy the code of chivalry by directly disobeying the order of their king. Mowbray claims his loyalty to the king but says he cannot risk the shame: “Myself, I throw, dread sovereign, at thy foot. / My life thou shalt command, but not my shame” (1.1.165-166). Both men’s actions were initially in line with chivalric customs, but as soon as they defied the king they violated a more important command. Gervinus claims this opening scene has the greatest dramatic prominence in the play and that it seals Richard’s fate. Alvis takes a similar position when he says “Bolingbroke and Mowbray’s confrontation...leads to the overthrow of a king who places too much trust in ceremony” (199). Richard’s key error is a result of his unwavering faith in the customs of his kingdom. Ultimately, Richard decides not to allow the duel to take place and banishes both men from England in order to settle the dispute. Derek Traversi comments in his book, *Shakespeare: From Richard II to Henry V*, “The king’s own position here is curiously wavering. Like Bolingbroke and Mowbray, in their response to the conventions of feudal chivalry, he is in part acting a set role” (17). Richard’s weak character prevented him from allowing the death of either man, but he originally set a time for the duel because of his obligations to the order of chivalry and his commitment to ceremony.

Ultimately, however, his desire for both men to live outweighs his duty to chivalry and he changes his original decision to the banishment of both men. Gervinus

goes on to say, “[The scene] serves essentially to place in opposition to each other, in their first decisive collision, the two main characters, Richard and Bolingbroke, the declining king yet in his power and glory, and the rising one in his misfortune and banishment” (n. pag.). Although Richard is the rightful king and Bolingbroke the usurper, many scholars tend to emphasize Richard’s character flaws, rather than Bolingbroke’s traitorous actions. In his book, *Shakespeare’s Histories*, George J. Becker makes a general statement about the play saying, “The subject is simply the fall of one king and the rise of another” and that the play merely gives evidence of Richard’s weaknesses and Bolingbroke’s strengths (18). If Becker’s assertion is true, the greatest violations of chivalry are not only Bolingbroke’s usurpation, but also Richard’s unsuccessful kingship. While chivalry is characterized by defense of personal honor, it is also concerned with the how the king acts to uphold the order of chivalry within the state. As Richard’s weaknesses begin to reveal themselves, the dual violation of chivalry by the king and the nobles is also revealed.

Richard’s actions in banishing both Bolingbroke and Mowbray reveal a great flaw in his character and in his ability to lead. Mowbray suffered the greatest punishment as he was banished for life, while Bolingbroke was only banished for six years. Once again, Gervinus believes this situation to be the most critical in obtaining a glance into Richard’s inability to lead his people: “The weak Richard...ignobly banishes for a lifetime the man whom he loves, and who would have been his most faithful support, and for a few years the other whom he hates, whose ambitious thoughts he fears, and whose banishment he has in his heart faithlessly resolved as limitless” (par. 4). Based on this assertion, it appears from the very beginning that Richard’s character prevented him from

being capable of upholding the chivalrous standard. A weak king is clearly not the type of leader that can be expected to uphold the code of honor. Nothing is less honorable than permanently banishing a loved one while simultaneously sending away the threat for only a short while. Instead of pruning the kingdom and ridding it of potential threats while strengthening and encouraging the men who would help him succeed, “he did everything which could forfeit his crown” (par. 6). Richard’s fear caused him to act dishonorably and fail to uphold the standards of chivalry expected of the King of England.

After these introductory issues concerning chivalry in the play, Shakespeare turns his attention to how the king is expected to act in accordance to the code of conduct. Act I, scene iv, concerns itself with King Richard’s plans to take all of John of Gaunt’s (Bolingbroke’s father) money and land upon Gaunt’s death. Clearly, this act would not be keeping with honor and a commitment to the community; consequently, it becomes apparent that Shakespeare is once more raising the question of whether or not the king must also abide by the chivalric code. Schofield comments on the range of Shakespeare’s application of the virtues of chivalry by saying, “Shakespeare, with unique genius, widens their sphere [virtues], and makes them universal in application, meet for highest or lowest, for keenest or dullest, in this majestic world” (263). By taking Gaunt’s possessions, Richard violates the inheritance laws, which commanded that everything would pass to Bolingbroke and ultimately violates the very principle on which Richard himself stands. Becker asserts “Richard committed an unpardonable error by confiscating all of Gaunt’s property, denying Bolingbroke his rights to land and titles as the oldest son” (17). Clearly, Richard’s actions were not appropriate within the bounds

of chivalry, but they were especially despicable because of his position. A second predominant view of Richard's character is that he is merely a weak man and that his weakness is revealed through his actions in the play. "Richard II and the Character of the King" by Samuel Taylor Coleridge suggests that this final scene of Act I reveals the true essence of Richard's weak character. Later in the scene, Richard's fear is disclosed as he voices his concerns upon seeing how strongly the people of England seem to support Bolingbroke as he departs for Ireland. Coleridge asserts that it is in his reflection on this situation that the "beauty of royalty" wears off and Richard's "peculiar kind" of weakness is revealed (17). Richard's weakness is "not arising from want of personal courage, or any specific defect of faculty, but rather an intellectual feminineness which feels a necessity of ever leaning on the breast of others" (17). Richard's constant need for affirmation and support from his subordinates suggests he does not retain the mental strength to rule the kingdom appropriately. At this point, it becomes clear that while a main component of chivalry is how a king's subjects respect him, chivalry is also concerned with whether or not the king's actions make him honorable and worthy of respect. Physical strength is no longer enough to judge a man's character – it is invisible strength that makes him chivalrous.

Act II introduces Richard's uncle, the Duke of York, who plays a key role in introducing the main theme of loyalty to the king. York disagrees with how Richard has acted in regards to Gaunt's possessions and believes he has wronged the whole family. News begins to spread that Bolingbroke is returning to England to fight Richard because he believes the king is a horrible leader and is running England into the ground. Dain A. Trafton, however, suggests in his article "Shakespeare's Henry IV: A New Prince in a

New Principality,” that from his initial banishment, Bolingbroke began planning his return (97). Being banished from his homeland is as painful to Bolingbroke as any extreme physical pain, which he hints at in Act I, scene iii, and Bolingbroke never truly has any intentions of completing his banishment abroad, but plans to return as soon as it suits him. Undoubtedly, York knew his nephew well enough to know this about him which makes his decision that much more difficult. At this point, York must decide if he will take up arms with his nephew, Bolingbroke, or remain loyal to his king. York reflects on his dilemma while considering whom he should defend:

Both are my kinsman.

T’ one is my sovereign, whom both my oath

And duty bids defend; t’ other again

Is my kinsman, whom the king hath wronged,

Whom conscience and my kindred bids to right . . . (2.2.111-115)

Gervinus comments on York’s dilemma by saying, “He would like to serve the king and discharge his duty to his lord, but he thinks he has also a duty of kinship and conscience respecting Bolingbroke’s lawful claims to his inheritance” (par. 9). Although it seems obvious that York should defend Bolingbroke because he has been wronged, his obligation of loyalty to his king and the code of chivalry interferes. During this period, one of the most powerful tools a noble had available to him was his word and a noble’s word was his bond. York had professed loyalty to the king, which meant that the consequences of York’s decision would be no small issue if he chose to break his word and defend Bolingbroke. Ultimately, York declares himself “neuter” (2.3.159) so as to avoid choosing a side but eventually defaults to defending the wronged man. Bloom

suggests, “York’s neutrality symbolizes the exhaustion of the old order” (62). Rather than wholeheartedly taking up the cause of the king, York is torn between which man to defend which reflects the impending failure of the old regime. In addition to their initial support for of the young usurper, Meron notes another motive the nobles would have had for defending Bolingbroke: “...the confiscation of Bolingbroke’s property arouses the barons’ fear that they will suffer a similar fate. They thus decide to support Bolingbroke against the King” (170). Very quickly, the nobles are beginning to realize that if the king had no problem robbing Bolingbroke of his inheritance, he will very likely continue to manipulate his authority and do anything to benefit himself.

Bolingbroke’s most blatant violation of the chivalrous code comes in Act II, scene iii when he breaks his banishment and returns to England. While there is no question that Bolingbroke directly defied the king by returning home, Becker claims that Bolingbroke was justified in his actions because of Richard’s unpardonable actions in robbing him of his inheritance (17); however, this justification could not have come until after Bolingbroke was back in England because he would not have known about the injustice until after he returned. This development, however, also potentially had serious implications for York because of his recent struggle concerning where his loyalties truly lie. Upon learning that Bolingbroke has wrongly returned to the land, York addresses him as a “traitor” (88) and leaves no question that he believes Bolingbroke’s actions to be rebellious, treacherous, and in direct defiance to the king. Gupta notes the evolution of York’s character as he processes how to handle the issue of Bolingbroke’s return: “York acts very comically indeed. He at first uses violent language against Bolingbroke... and then in spite of being Richard’s deputy, professes neutrality. Later, when Bolingbroke,

violently disrupting 'degree', ascends the throne, he becomes a loyal subject of the usurper" (117). York understands and respects the old order but ultimately has no choice but to submit to the new order out of necessity. Not only does he support Bolingbroke's cause, but he also claims it is divinely appointed. Bolingbroke's decision to return, regardless of the violation of the king's decree, directly contradicts the chivalrous requirement to be loyal to the king and reveals that he places his personal desires above the ruling of King Richard. This exchange between uncle and nephew raises a much larger question concerning the current state of the chivalrous code of conduct.

Bolingbroke's decision to simply violate the king's decree and return whenever it suits him indicates how little reverence is given to the code of chivalry. If the king's commands mean nothing, there is no longer a universal code of how nobles and knights are to conduct themselves, but they can simply act in whatever way they please. Once again, this exchange raises the issue of loyalty to the king. Once York realizes Bolingbroke's failure to uphold the chivalrous standard, in particular, that of obedience to the king at all times, he makes it clear that he values obedience to the king above all else. York asserts, "But if I could, by him that gave me life, / I would attach you all and make you stoop / Unto the sovereign mercy of the king" (2.3.155-157). According to John R. Elliott, Jr., York realizes that Richard is partly at fault for the rebellion because of his poor management of the people and also that the situation with Bolingbroke is "past redress" which causes him to give in and take up arms with Bolingbroke (268). Sadly, York finds himself in a dilemma without a pleasant option and decides the best course of action is to relinquish control and go wherever the masses take him. Even though York

joins forces with Bolingbroke and his rebels, he is still clearly torn between how to uphold the two key aspects of chivalry – loyalty to the king and loyalty to the family.

Interestingly, Bloom suggests that the purpose of the first two acts of the play is to clearly depict Richard as the evil king who deserves to be deposed because of his actions (62). Bloom lists Richard's crimes which include thievery and murder and accuses him of being "a monarch without care or conscience" and states that "[b]y the end of Act II power and loyalty have slipped away from Richard as a rightful consequence of his crimes" (62). However, Bloom concludes this discussion by saying that all of this evidence against Richard still does not provide complete justification for Bolingbroke's decision to usurp the throne (62). At this point in the play, the distinction of Richard as protagonist and Bolingbroke as antagonist can no longer be drawn with one hundred percent certainty.

Act III serves to draw further distinction between the character of Bolingbroke and Richard as they are forced to choose how they will handle the issues they are now confronting. In his article "Bolingbroke's 'Decision'," Brents Stirling states, "In the first two scenes of Act III Shakespeare now presents Bolingbroke and Richard in characterization which emphasizes the utter difference in temperament between them" (29). Although Bolingbroke's return seems to be of serious consequence within itself, it merely serves as the catalyst that causes the downward spiral of his rebellion. Stirling references Act III, scene i as short and concentrated which parallels Bolingbroke's character. Summarizing the scene, Stirling asserts, "In a little over forty lines Bolingbroke has passed a death sentence, attended to the amenities of courtesy, and has set a campaign in motion" (29). As a leader, Bolingbroke is confident, unwavering, and

quick to act. His previous actions may not have been in line with the chivalrous standard, but Bolingbroke clearly makes for a great leader. Trafton asserts that Bolingbroke “is more thoroughly a rebel in thought than in action” (95). While Bolingbroke certainly entertained thoughts of rebellion, his greatest flaw is likely that he was an opportunist, which forced him to have to act quickly. Bolingbroke saw an opportunity to change the political order of things and he acted upon these opportunities because his mental rebellion was already underway.

As the play continues, the king learns of Bolingbroke’s return and begins to express his feelings that Bolingbroke will overtake the kingdom. This scene provides a stark contrast to the previous example of how Bolingbroke reacts under pressure. Although Richard surely knew the importance of maintaining the appearance of control, in Act III, scene ii, the king reveals just how concerned he is: “Our lands, our lives, and all are Bolingbroke’s, / And nothing can we call our own but death” (151-152). At this point, Richard reveals his second great failure to uphold the code of chivalry – fear. One author comments that Richard is “an unsynthesized portrait almost always inadequate to the demands that the play potentially makes upon him” (Bogard 193). Richard’s inadequacy is apparent through his failure to control the rebellion within the country and the quickness with which he gives in to the idea that Bolingbroke is sure to overtake the monarchy. Certainly, it is crucial to note the extent to which Richard was outnumbered, however, his complete lack of fortitude and almost immediate retreat reveal the flaw in his character. Any king who would react in fear by running away to hide from a potential coup is clearly anything but a chivalrous man. There is no place for honor, integrity or bravery in the same company as fear.

At this point in the play, Shakespeare does an excellent job of demonstrating exactly how quickly and drastically the order of an entire nation will unravel once chivalry has been abandoned. Not only has Bolingbroke directly defied his king and planned how he will overthrow the monarchy, but Richard has also fallen prey to the destructive nature of fear. From this point on, anti-chivalrous attitudes and actions dominate the nation as Bolingbroke's support continues to spread throughout the court and he is well aware of that fact. Although only mentioned in passing, one of the most blatant indications that the nobles no longer support Richard and are willing to help Bolingbroke secure control of the kingdom comes in Act III, scene iii. When referring to the king, Northumberland purposefully leaves out Richard's title and refers to him only by his first name. When questioned by York, Northumberland has no shame in admitting that it was no accident. Northumberland proclaims, "Left I his title out" (3.3.11). Only moments later, Bolingbroke instructs a messenger to deliver his words to King Richard. Although at first it appears that Bolingbroke is asserting his loyalty to Richard, it soon becomes apparent that he was just flattering the king before making his demands. Bolingbroke states that he will bow to the king only if his banishment is reversed:

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 . . . (3.3.38-42)

Bolingbroke shamelessly approaches the king of England and demands that the king do as he says. Brents Stirling notes that if Richard does not restore Bolingbroke's land and

repeal the banishment “war is the alternative” (31). The order of chivalry has been completely uprooted and turned on its head. Bolingbroke’s actions are more than enough to have him beheaded on the spot; however, because of Richard’s inability to uphold the code of conduct within his own nation, Bolingbroke is permitted to act however he likes.

Shockingly, Richard’s reaction to Bolingbroke’s audacious claim is anything but expected. Without question, any logically thinking person would expect Richard to have Bolingbroke immediately imprisoned before he could even think about making his claims a reality. Only a weak king would hesitate, even for a second, when a potential usurper is directly threatening him. Richard’s decision, however, exemplifies once more how chivalry came to an end during his reign. Because Richard’s actions have proven him unworthy of being king, he has lost the power and respect to have Bolingbroke punished for his actions. Instead, Richard reflects on his personal, current position and, in a roundabout way, reveals that he will not only restore Bolingbroke’s possessions and repeal his banishment, but he will also willingly turn his crown over to the traitor. In the moment of his greatest weakness, the king violates the code of chivalry and fails to defend the honor of the position of the king. Richard reflects: “What must the king do now? Must he submit? / The king shall do it. Must he be deposed? / The king shall be contented. Must he lose / The name of king? A God’s name, let it go!” (3.3.143-146). Clearly, Richard has lost all of his will to defend his rightful position as King of England, and as a result of fear gives in to the traitorous rebel. Elliott attributes the king’s failure to his weak rule: “Richard takes Bolingbroke’s return from exile as symbol of his own inability to wield authority and anticipates the outcome” (265). Only moments later, Richard himself refers to Bolingbroke as “King” and “his majesty” (173) which indicates

that he has already mentally turned the kingdom over to Bolingbroke even though the kingdom is not yet his. Richard recognizes that the likely outcome of Bolingbroke's actions is his own deposition, but rather than fight to protect his crown, the weak king turns over his monarchy before Bolingbroke even attempts to take the crown. However, it is interesting to note Richard's language throughout this interaction because he is clearly still speaking as if he is king. When Bolingbroke dutifully bows the knee to his king, Richard chooses to acknowledge the truth of the situation – while Bolingbroke is outwardly showing his submission to the king, inwardly he is waiting to take over and will not submit (3.3.194-196). Finally, after much debate with himself and even a question to Aumerle about whether or not he should resist and fight, Richard relinquishes his title and addresses Bolingbroke concerning the crown, “What you will have, I'll give, and willing too; / For do we must what force will have us do.” (206-207). Upon Richard's admission that he will turn over the crown, Bolingbroke confirms that he had planned to take the throne away from the king. Richard's duty as king was to rule honorably and with integrity and to defend and protect the interests of his people. A chivalrous king is brave and loyal to his position until death. Sadly, Richard was too weak to faithfully defend the honor of his people and his throne.

Many scholars believe Bolingbroke had no option at this point but to step in and take over the throne. In his discussion of the history plays, R. J. Dorius suggests that “[b]y showing us the power and frailty of seven kings” the history plays “imply a standard of good kingship which no one of his [Shakespeare's] kings, except possibly Henry V, fully attains” (24). Dorius is also of the conviction that Richard's flaws were the undoing of his kingship and that he was never capable of being a chivalrous man or a

good leader. Dorius goes on to state that it was Richard's negligence in governing the people that created a "vacuum of power which must be filled, and invites disaster" (25), which introduces the opportunity for Bolingbroke to enter the scene. Assuming this evaluation is accurate, one may conclude that Bolingbroke was not necessarily the sole factor in Richard's dethronement. Finally, Dorius concludes by saying that the two men "are locked in a grim dance in which Richard's weakness opens the way to power for Bolingbroke, and Bolingbroke's silent strength matches Richard's expectations of annihilation" (35). Richard's weakness and horrible leadership necessitated that someone else take over the monarchy, which makes exceptions for Bolingbroke's actions. However, those actions were still in direct violation of his oath to the king, and Bolingbroke could have maintained his personal integrity and upheld the code of chivalry by waiting to take the appropriate actions in conjunction with the other government officials.

The issue of Bolingbroke's personal character throughout the play is ironic and unusual. Despite the fact that he directly defies the king and usurps the throne, most scholars, like Dorius, view him in a positive light as compared to Richard's faults and weaknesses as king. One author, however, comments, "Shakespeare has emphasized Richard's faults and minimized Bolingbroke's" (Boris 187). It could also be argued, however, that the roles are reversed by the end of the play and that Richard has grown in strength of character, while Bolingbroke has grown weaker as a leader. Nevertheless, the plain facts are that Bolingbroke defied the king, which directly violated the main stipulation of chivalry, and he committed treason by usurping the throne of the rightful king. Paul M. Cubeta remarks that Richard's deposition was not just a political and

chivalrous wrong but a moral wrong that violated God's ordained system of rule (2). As a result of this action against God, Cubeta states, "Because England countenanced this usurpation, she had to suffer as penance almost one hundred years of civil war following Richard's murder in 1399" (2). Regardless of the issue that Richard needed to be replaced because he was a weak and poor leader, Bolingbroke's actions in following through with the deposition wreaked havoc on the nation of England and caused them to suffer through war and poor leadership for many years after he took the throne.

According to Cubeta, Gaunt's final claim before his death that England has brought shame upon herself can be dually contributed to Richard's disorder and poor leadership and Bolingbroke's disobedience (4). Cubeta provides one of the most powerful statements concerning England's moral state after Bolingbroke takes the throne. Cubeta claims that by taking the throne in God's name, Bolingbroke has "ascended the royal throne by usurpation and the murder of God's anointed. England, saved from economic bankruptcy, has fallen into moral bankruptcy" (5). After this discussion of the play itself, and Richard's and Bolingbroke's character and actions, the most important and critical question concerning chivalry in this play deals with this issue of moral bankruptcy. The issue remains of whether or not it could truly be better for chivalry to be totally abandoned in order to have a king on the throne who is strong politically and economically but disrespects the traditional order of conduct and morality through his actions. Although Bolingbroke was clearly better suited for the kingship than Richard, his total disregard for the order of chivalry simply cannot be overlooked.

Ironically, now that Bolingbroke is in the process of taking over the monarchy, Shakespeare chooses to draw an almost identical parallel to the opening scene of the play.

Act IV opens with a group of nobles gathered with Bolingbroke to discuss the specifics surrounding Gloucester's death, but rather than a peaceful discussion, Bolingbroke finds himself in a very familiar position. Very quickly the nobles are at each other's throats and slandering each other, which triggers a chain reaction of the men throwing down their gages. Although the play has not yet reached its full conclusion, it is no coincidence that Shakespeare brings the play full circle in this scene and depicts Bolingbroke in his first position since Richard admits he will turn over the crown, having to face the issue that began it all – chivalry. The poetic justice shown here reveals Shakespeare's literary mastery. Bolingbroke defied the king when he threw down his own gage at the beginning of the play, and now that he is about to take over the kingship, he finds himself having to deal with the exact same situation. Just as Bolingbroke and Mowbray were engaged in a dispute in the opening scene, now Richard and Northumberland are engaged in a similar situation. In Act 1, scene i, Richard was the king being defied and now Bolingbroke and Richard have completely switched roles. Regardless of the irony in this scene, there is still a shred of value to be gleaned from it. Despite everything that has occurred throughout the course of the play, Shakespeare reveals that there remains a semblance of chivalry within England – if not in the men's character, then in their holding to the tradition of settling a dispute.

Only moments later, York enters the scene after having been with Richard to reveal to all that “Richard, who with willing soul / Adopts thee [Bolingbroke] heir and his high scepter yields / To the possession of they royal hand. “ (4.1.108-110). Immediately after Bolingbroke is named King Henry IV, Richard's loyal follower, the Bishop of

Carlisle, delivers a bold speech proclaiming the sin of this action. In defense of Richard's kingship, Carlisle states:

My Lord of Hereford here, whom you call king,  
Is a foul traitor to proud Hereford's king;  
And if you crown him, let me prophesy,  
The blood of English shall manure the ground  
And future ages groan for this foul act . . . (4.1.134-138)

Without hesitation, Carlisle clings to chivalry and defends his wronged king. He will not stand by and allow a traitor to wrongfully claim the throne. The one thing Carlisle understands that Bolingbroke has overlooked throughout the entire play is that once chivalry is defiled and the code of conduct is broken, discord and treason will rule the nation until chivalry is restored. Bloom certainly sees the logic of Carlisle's position when he says, "The overturning of one monarch provides argument for the overturning of another. There must be established authority and agreed-upon legitimacy" (65).

Interestingly, Carlisle's prediction proves to be correct and the War of the Roses follows along with many years of discord in the nation. For the first time in the entire play, we see a chivalrous man bravely defend the honor of his king. Sadly, in the greatest example of irony, Carlisle is immediately arrested for treason against the new king. Although Carlisle is later offered mercy by the new king, the question must still be raised of where this commitment to chivalry was when Richard was still on the throne? Perhaps this action most fully encompasses the dual fault of Richard and Bolingbroke to uphold the code of chivalry. Richard failed to defend the throne, while Bolingbroke failed to submit to it.

The final act of the play holds still more examples of what happens when chivalry is abandoned. Act V, scene ii begins with a conversation between the Duke of York and his wife about what took place when Bolingbroke rode into London with Richard so that he could be named the new king. Sadly, York reports that the people of England “[t]hrew dust and rubbish on King Richard’s head” (6) while simultaneously shouting “God save thee, Bolingbroke!” (11). York is clearly distraught over what has occurred and yet this scene serves to further indicate just how quickly chaos ensues once chivalric codes have been abandoned.

During this discussion with his wife, York’s son Aumerle enters and York discovers that Aumerle is in possession of a letter that reveals (not too surprisingly) that there is now a group of rebels plotting to kill King Henry IV. In his article “History and Tragedy in Richard II,” Elliott notes that Shakespeare spends two lengthy scenes discussing the impending rebellion Bolingbroke now unknowingly faces (269). Because of his own rebellious actions, Bolingbroke has initiated a cycle of rebellion within the nation that will haunt him for the rest of his life. In the introduction to his book, Traversi comments, “Usurpation breeds rebellion in those who, after all, have only backed his claim for ends of their own, so that the new reign resolves itself into the king’s inconclusive struggle against the selfish interests which he has himself fostered to gain access to the throne” (3). The rebellion Bolingbroke encouraged in order to gain the throne, has not simply died off, but rather has caused the rebellion to be redirected at himself now that he is king.

More importantly, this issue of rebellion involving York’s son causes him to be thrown right back into the middle of his previous dilemma of whether to be loyal to his

family or to the crown. Elliott goes on to address what he calls “[t]he conflict between theoretical legal obligation and natural family loyalty” in which York finds himself (269). Perhaps unknowingly, the legal obligation Elliott is referring to in this statement is York’s obligation to chivalry. Unfortunately, for York, the obligation goes even further. He is placed in a situation where he must choose between loyalty to his family and loyalty to his king – both of which are essential aspects of chivalry. The chivalrous man always defends and protects his family, but he also always subjects himself to the king’s authority. York’s dilemma in this scene reveals just how serious of an issue chivalry was. Interestingly, the Duke wastes no time going to the king to warn him of the potential threat even though he has full knowledge that in turning his son over to the king, Aumerle will almost certainly be put to death. Shakespeare masterfully composed this scene to epitomize just how seriously the noblemen handled this issue of chivalry. As a chivalrous man, York was expected to look out for the best interests of his son, but those concerns came second to what was best for the king. Elliott asserts that York determined to turn Aumerle in because he found his confirmation in his allegiance to Henry by his conviction that it was God’s will that caused Bolingbroke to be crowned the new king (269). Once again, York demonstrates his unwavering allegiance and faithfulness to King Henry as he once did for Richard. After numerous examples of anti-chivalric sentiments and actions (some so extreme as to cause Bolingbroke to stage a coup and overthrow his own king), Shakespeare finally describes a powerful example of the life-changing decisions noblemen could face and what would happen when a chivalric man determined to uphold the code of conduct. York’s actions seem disagreeable because of

his rejection of his own son; nevertheless, strictly from a chivalric perspective, The Duke of York's actions are one of very few bright spots throughout the course of the play.

One of his first acts as king, Bolingbroke grants mercy to his traitorous cousin as an act of penance. As King Henry so eloquently puts it, "I pardon him as God shall pardon me" (5.4.131). Clearly, Henry recognizes the potential danger he faces because of his own treason and hopes that by pardoning Aumerle, he will earn some favor with God and avoid potential punishment. However, almost within the same breath, Henry proclaims that the other traitors will not receive similar mercy. In another grand display of irony, Henry commands his men to go "To Oxford, or where'er these traitors are. / They shall not live within this world, I swear, / But I will have them, if I once know where." (5.4.141-143). The double standard the young king exhibits is shocking in light of how he obtained the crown. Additionally, as soon as Bolingbroke learns that Richard has been killed, he vows to go on a pilgrimage to Israel. Bloom explains this action when he says, "He [Bolingbroke] salves his conscience by trying to return to the chivalric tradition which he has just uprooted" (68). In a moment of panic, Bolingbroke sees Richard's murder as a grave sin and, as penance, plans to visit the Holy Land. How ironic that only after initiating and securing Richard's deposition, Bolingbroke finally feels one small pang of remorse; however, even this remorse is more accurately attributed to fear of marring his new kingship with the murder of his predecessor.

### **Conclusion**

Chivalry was not just a minor detail in the lives of England's nobility in the Middle Ages, but a way of life. This code of conduct affected everything they did and determined how they lived their lives. Most importantly, the chivalric order dictated how

the people of a nation were expected to act in relation to the position of the king. Under no circumstances was it acceptable to defy the king, and as seen in this analysis of *Richard II*, it is clear that there was legitimate reason for this standard.

Without question, Richard's poor, ineffective leadership was a dominant contribution to the decline of chivalry in England; however, it was the combination of his actions with Bolingbroke's that caused the ultimate failure of the chivalric order. A close analysis of Shakespeare's history play, *Richard II*, reveals, first of all, how important the code of chivalry was during the fourteenth century, but more importantly, what happens when chivalry is abandoned. As several scholars noted, Richard's poor leadership created a power vacuum that necessitated a new leader. Once Bolingbroke realized this need, he ultimately decided that breaking the line of succession and being the strong leader England needed was more important than adhering to the code of chivalry. Both men failed in their respective roles in the nation, and as a result, their actions combined to form the catalyst that caused the death of chivalry in England.

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