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"Þat 3et þe wynd & þe weder & þe worlde stynkes": The Sins of Richard II and the Corruption of the Crown

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Abstract: Many writings from late-fourteenth-century England reflect a popular conception that English society had deteriorated into serious dysfunction, which included the Hundred Years' War, recurrent outbreaks of the Black Death, and ongoing tensions between the King and Parliament, among other matters. Three literati who discussed this problem were John Gower, William Langland, and the Gawain Poet. All three agreed that somehow King Richard II bore responsibility for the kingdom's travails. He had engaged in a quest for a Crown which served the interests of one man, not of society. Moreover, he had tried to create a Crown in which all law flowed from the king alone and all ecclesiastical matters ultimately flowed from the king through the Crown. Richard's Crown allowed for no debate and no participation. Richard wanted the *status regni* and the *status coronæ* to merge; the king and the Crown would become one. This violated the symbol of the crown as it had already existed before Richard II's kingship. The crown symbol he had inherited was corporate, with the king and the people together negotiating the meaning of royal power and duties. In addition, the English crown was a minor with the reigning king as the crown's guardian. No king could unilaterally redefine the symbol of the crown, much less treat it as a personal possession. King Richard II's treatment of the crown destabilized the kingdom, and it would cost him his crown. Gower, Langland, and the Gawain Poet disagreed vis-à-vis which exact failures of the king had destabilized English society thus abusing the crown, and all three wrote about the different issues they had with the king, but all concurred that whatever the exact failures, King Richard II had damaged the construct of the Crown of England, and thereby the realm.

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"Öyle ki rüzgâr, hava ve yer kokuştu": II. Richard'ın Günahları ve Tahtın Yozlaşması

Öz: On dördüncü yüzyıl sonu İngiltere'sinden birçok metin, İngiliz toplumunun ciddi bir işlevsizliğe doğru giderek kötüleştiği yönündeki yaygın bir anlayışı yansıtır; buna Yüz Yıl Savaşları, tekrarlayan Kara Veba salgınları ve Kral ile Parlamento arasında devam eden gerginlikler de dahildir. Bu meseleyi tartışan üç aydın John Gower, William Langland ve Gawain Şairi olmuştur. Üçü de Kral II. Richard'ın bir şekilde krallığın sıkıntılarından sorumlu olduğu konusunda hemfikirdir. Kral, bir toplumun değil de tek bir adamın çıkarlarına hizmet eden bir Taht arayışına girmiştir. Ayrıca, tüm yasaların yalnızca kraldan geçtiği ve tüm kilise meselelerinin en nihayetinde Taht aracılığıyla kralın süzgecinden geçtiği bir Taht yaratmaya çalışmıştır. Richard'ın Taht'ı hiçbir tartışmaya ve

Anahtar Sözcükler:

Orta Çağ edebiyatı,
Richard nazımları,
II. Richard,
İngiliz Tahtı,
Kraliyet imgeleri

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katılıma izin vermemiştir. Richard, *status regni* (kraliyet mevki) ile *status coronæ* (taç/taht mevki) birleşimini istemiştir; kral ve Taht bir olacaktır. Böyle bir durum, II. Richard'ın hükümranlığından önce de var olan Taht sembolünü ihlal etmektedir. Kendisine miras kalan taht sembolü, kral ve halkın birlikte kraliyet gücü ve görevlerinin anlamını müzakere ettiği kurumsal bir semboldür. İlaveten, İngiliz tacı, tahttaki kralın tahtın koruyucusu olması nedeniyle gayrireşittir. Hiçbir kral tahtın sembolünü tek taraflı olarak yeniden tanımlayamaz, hele ki ona şahsi bir mülk olarak davranamaz. Kral II. Richard'ın tahta olan yaklaşımı krallığı istikrarsızlaştırmış olup, bu durum tahtına mal olacaktır. Gower, Langland ve Gawain Şairi, kralın tam olarak hangi başarısızlıklarının İngiliz toplumunu istikrarsızlaştırarak tahtı kötüye kullandığı konusunda aynı fikirde değildir ve üçü de kralla yaşadıkları farklı sorunlar hakkında yazmışlardır; ancak hepsi tam olarak hangi başarısızlıklar olursa olsun, Kral II. Richard'ın İngiltere Tahtı'nın yapısına ve dolayısıyla krallığa zarar verdiği konusunda hemfikirdir.

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Introduction: Moral Turpitude in the Late Fourteenth Century

Upheaval gripped England in the late-fourteenth century. Beginning in 1348, the Black Death had repeatedly devastated the population. Since 1337, the Hundred Years' War had engaged England in a continual conflict that drained the kingdom's coffers leading, in part, to economic uncertainty. Many of the inhabitants saw their society as somehow dysfunctional; a view reflected in the writing of the period. Three of England's literati—John Gower, William Langland, and the Gawain Poet—agreed that in some way King Richard II (r. 1377–1399) bore responsibility for the dysfunction in society, such as the Black Death, the Hundred Years' War, and the Peasants' Revolt. The three reflected differing opinions regarding which failures they believed that Richard II had committed which negatively impacted society, but all agreed on the king's responsibility for the state of society.

Richard II had engaged in a quest for a Crown which served the interests of one man, not of society. He had tried to create a Crown in which all law flowed from the king alone. Richard's Crown brooked no dissent. Finally, and perhaps most importantly for Richard, he wanted the *status regni* and the *status coronæ* to merge; the king and the Crown would become one.

This article examines the works of the three Ricardian poets from the perspective of their implied criticism of King Richard II. William Langland envisioned a corporate Crown, but one in which the king worked in tandem with the Church to guarantee peace

and prosperity in society. When either the clergy or the king (or both) failed to keep to their duties, the Crown could not function, and society fell off kilter. When society fell out of joint, the Crown suffered betrayal, although later in his life, Langland censured the Church more brutally, viewing the Church as having sold itself to Mammon. John Gower discussed a corporate Crown in which the king consulted the opinions of, but not necessarily the advice of, his subjects. Gower saw a kingdom in order only when all dissident voices found expression and through that expression felt loyalty to the Crown. The Gawain Poet, the most vociferous critic of Richard II of the three writers, visualized the king as a false guardian of the Crown, one who had betrayed his ward, and God. To this poet, Richard had seized both estates and sancta not his by right and appropriated them to the Crown in defiance of all that the Crown symbol means. In this way, the king betrayed the Crown by betraying the people, the Church, and God. In addition, the Gawain Poet saw a king who potentially engaged in the deadly sin of *luxuria*, particularly sodomy, which also qualified as heresy.

The issues of King Richard II and his abuses of power have provided historians and literary scholars with ample material for books and articles over many decades. One recent entry in this discussion by Samantha J. Rayner, *Images of Kingship in Chaucer and His Ricardian Contemporaries*, examines the theme of kingship in the works of John Gower, the Gawain Poet, and William Langland, then compares those findings to discussions of kingship in Geoffrey Chaucer's works. Thus, Rayner identifies those concerns as being common to all four writers. In contrast, this article interprets the Crown as a Geertzian symbol, in and through which the people interpreted their relations with the king. It then examines this cultural symbol through the works of three of the aforementioned writers (John Gower, the Gawain Poet, and William Langland) to find specifically how each writer thought that King Richard II had failed the Crown and his kingdom. With the Gawain Poet, political failures are accompanied by sins against God and the Church. Geoffrey Chaucer is not included in this study because, in his work, he says little, relative to the other three, to criticize King Richard II. The construct of kingship *per se* in late fourteenth-century England is not the subject of investigation, but how one king failed to maintain the crown properly and thus brought disaster upon English society. Thus, this article examines how the three writers discuss the failures of King Richard II as custodian of the crown, and in so doing shed light upon what the literate upper classes may have thought of the king's reign.

Cultural Symbols of Late Fourteenth-Century England

The Crown existed as the preeminent cultural symbol during Richard II's reign for not just royal authority, but royal relations with the people. Clifford Geertz explained a cultural symbol as an extrinsic source of information for individuals and societies, which provides a template by which humans comprehend and interpret data from their world (Geertz 92). In Geertzian terms, the Crown existed as a cultural symbol through which the people interpreted their relations with the king and the king's relations with the realm. Because

of this, the Crown symbol became infused with certain meanings and expectations. The Crown symbol did not arise as the result of one king's creation of it, or even as the product of several kings', but through a dialectic between the kings and society. For one person, even a king, to unilaterally attempt to alter the content of a cultural symbol, like the Crown, could disorient that culture and call into question the content and stability of other cultural symbols. In the case of fourteenth-century England, altering unilaterally the content of the Crown symbol could only occur corporately.

To the medieval English, the Bible, particularly 1 Corinthians 12:12, provided the basic paradigm for the corporate functioning of the three estates in medieval English society: "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ." But even the highest estate, the nobility, possessed a corporate character. Unlike in France or the Byzantine Empire where the king or emperor respectively possessed all effective sovereignty within his person, England evolved a constitutionalism in which Parliament acted as representative of the entirety of the realm; the king did not constitute the sole legislative and executive power in the kingdom (Kantorowicz 225).

Perhaps for this reason, the French cultural symbol of the Crown as separate from and above, if not divinized with respect to, its current holder never evolved successfully in England (Kantorowicz 364). The English constitution did recognize the separation betwixt the *status regni* and the *status coronæ* yet did not separate the two completely (368). This led to the English kings possessing, in Richard II's opinion apparently, a weaker crown with respect to the kings of France. Instead, the English Crown possessed the rights of a minor. Both Richard II and his great-grandfather Edward II (r. 1307–1327) had received allegations of "disherison [disinheriting] of the Crown" (372). The English king acted as the guardian of the Crown and could abuse it even to the point of depriving it of its rightful inheritance or due. Due to the Crown's status as a minor, kings or dynasties could not own Crowns but merely act as guardians (373). English law recognized the reigning king's relationship to his dynasty as essentially (anachronistically speaking) one of the current heads of transgenerational corporations that held temporary guardianship of the Crown (380–383). Such a state of affairs provided the English Crown with protections not afforded other crowns in Europe; for example, kings could not deprive the Crown of its property or estates (374–375).

By contrast, the Byzantine Crown symbol rested within one family by the fourteenth century. The Byzantine theory of kingship was based upon theorists like the sixth-century Agapetus the Deacon, who saw the Byzantine emperor as almost godlike in power, albeit still a mortal man in body (Tumarkin 6). God himself appointed the emperor (*basileus* in Greek) to rule as Heaven's vicegerent on Earth, and even the Church had to submit to the emperor's authority. As such, only God himself could dictate the content of the Crown-symbol. A *basileus* could not alter the Orthodox Crown; the Crown and the king seemed to exist in a hypostatic union in which the two were one but in different persons.

Even the king's sin could not taint the Crown. The French Crown symbol transcended its king. The king and the Crown did become one but in something like a union wherein each kept a separate identity. Richard II had corresponded with the courts of both Paris and Constantinople and met Byzantine Emperor Manuel II, so he knew the power of these Crowns.

Beginning in 1397, the king introduced new forms of address, vis-à-vis the crown, designed to elevate the person of the king above ordinary mortals. Richard appears to have borrowed these ideas from his father, Edward of Woodstock, whose court at Bordeaux reflected French courtly mores and addresses (Saul, "Richard II" 874–875). As a general rule, one addressed English kings in the language of lordship rather than in the language of majesty, as in France where one commonly employed titles such as *Rex Franciæ in regno suo princips est*, "The King of France is prince in his realm" (863–865). The French kings invoked their majesty as a way to claim the Byzantine imperium against the Holy Roman Emperor; Richard might have wanted to claim the imperium of the French kings and of the Byzantine *Basileis kai autokratōr ton rhōmaiōn*, "Emperor and Sole Ruler of the Romans." Richard changed convention and by the end of his reign, the king received obsequious addresses to *Exellentissimo ac Christianissimo Principi et domino nostro, Domino Ricardo Dei gratia regi Anglie*, "To the Most Excellent and Most Christian Prince and Our Lord, Lord Richard, By the grace of God King of England" (859). By contrast, earlier forms from the time of King Edward I (r. 1272–1307) employed the simpler *Excellentissimo principi*, "To the Most Excellent Prince" (863). Ever more elaborate titles of the king's majesty made Richard sound almost as if he were divinizing himself and making himself the source of all law (857).

Law fascinated Richard II. He consulted with judges in 1387 about who in England had the authority to make law, and about circumstances when law might or might not bind his subjects. Around 1390, he commissioned a book of statutes for his personal use; the manuscript survives as St. John's College, Cambridge, MS A.7 (Saul, "The Kingship" 47). Such an interest in law might have derived, in part, from the king's relations with Parliament. In 1381 and 1385, Parliament conducted investigations into Richard's household expenditures and charged another commission with finding ways to reduce those royal expenditures (Saul, "The Kingship" 48–49). Such parliamentary interference did not sit well with the young king, but what happened next sat even worse. In 1388, a cabal of the king's enemies gained ascendancy in Parliament. The Appellants, as they came to be called, temporarily contained the power of the king and manipulated Parliament to execute three of the king's favourites. Richard regained his power in May 1389, but his trust in corporate governance, whatever it may once have been, suffered permanent damage (Benson xxiii–xxiv).

The nature of the reign of Richard II changed publicly in the summer of 1397. He ordered the arrests of political opponents and ordered the sheriffs of the realm to swear new oaths to him. Around this time, Richard wrote a letter to Emperor Manuel II

Palaeologos in Constantinople in which he complained about the rebelliousness of the English lords (Saul, "Richard II" 867). In the missive, Richard rationalized his actions and demeanour vis-à-vis the lords as that of God to Lucifer and the rebellious angels. Furthermore, Richard suggested that peace within his realm equated to no internal dissent from the person of the king (Saul, *Richard II* 387). This idea had floated about the court of the young Angevin king since at least 1383 when Chancellor Michael de la Pole had informed Parliament that obedience to the king constituted "the sole foundation of all peace and quiet in the realm" (Saul, "The Kingship" 52).

Richard II's self-aggrandizement may have served, in part, to further his political ambitions. In the summer of 1397, the Dean of Köln led a mission to England. Electors from the Holy Roman Empire approached Richard about potentially replacing the King of Bohemia, Wenzel of Luxembourg, as King of the Romans, and thus becoming an accessory after the fact to a *coup d'état*. Presumably, Richard could then look forward to a papal coronation as Holy Roman Emperor at some later date. The king did express interest in supplanting his brother-in-law and spent time cultivating German allies (Bennett 197). The plot did not materialize while Richard sat on the throne, however. The electors did overthrow Wenzel in 1400, but by then Richard II had also lost his throne (Saul, "Richard II" 874).

In 1399, King Richard II lost the Crown to his cousin Henry of Bolingbroke. The king's 30 September 1399 deposition charged him with, among other things, having eight times violated his promise to keep peace toward the clergy and people. Part of this charge involved his taking of the crown jewels and seizing of church sancta when he left for his Second Irish Expedition in 1399 (Coffman 963). The new King Henry IV (r. 1399–1413), a former Appellant, found more success in his reign than had Richard II, who had not been able to rule as absolutely as he might have intended. Corporate rule had won out over sole rule, but three Ricardian writers could have told that to Richard II before he came to grief.

William Langland and Richard II's Kingship

William Langland conceived of the king and of the Crown as the lynchpins of English society, as did the other authors, but he possessed a more utopian view of the proper functioning of the Crown. Langland wrote three known versions of his poem *Piers Plowman*; the A Text dates to the 1360s, the B Text to 1376–77, and the C Text he had completed by 1387 (Pearsall 9). All Langland passages are quoted from the B-Text unless otherwise noted.

Perhaps the bedrock of Langland's concept of the king and the Crown symbol lies in his statement: "The Kyng hath mede of his men to make pees in londe" (*Piers Plowman* III.221). The king had a responsibility to ensure peace in England:

> Kynges court and commune court, consistorie and chapitle –
> Al shal be but oon court, and oon b[ur]n be justice:
> That worth Trewe-tonge, a tidy man that tened me nevere.

> Batailles shul none be, ne no man bere wepene,
> And what smyth that any smytheth be smyte therwith to dethe! (*Piers Plowman* III.320–324)

All elements in the court and in the land functioned in unity when the king upheld his duty and ensured peace. In this way, the king fulfilled an important duty to the Crown; Richard II should have created a corporate Crown that united within itself a class-segregated society. Unfortunately, King Richard did not oversee such a harmonious society. If nothing else, the Peasants' Revolt saw battles, vandalism, and the use of extreme violence such as many decapitations by the rebels (Barker 394), as well as a violent and possibly treasonous reaction by the knights in the murder of Wat Tyler at Smithfield before the king (271). Langland's "And what smyth that any smytheth be smyte therwith to dethe!" could then just as easily be applied to the knights as to the rebels of 1381.

The king could only achieve peace through his sacred duty to protect the Crown symbol, a symbol bound in a theological construct with the Church. Langland expounded the rule of orthodoxy in society:

> And se it by ensaumple in somer tyme on trowes:
> Ther some bowes ben leved and some bereth none,
> Ther is a mischief in the more of swiche manere bowes.
> Right so persons and preestes and prechours of Holi Chirche
> Is the roote of the right faith to rule the peple;
> Ac ther the roote is roten, reson woot the soothe,
> Shal nevere flour ne fruyt, ne fair leef be grene. (*Piers Plowman* XV.96–102)

Using the example of a tree with the priesthood as the roots, Langland wrote that corrupt hierarchs corrupted the entire hierarchy dependent upon them; this included corrupt kings and courtiers. Only together through the corporate Crown could the king, as head of society, and the clergy function properly. Faithful churchmen who undertook their duties properly laid the groundwork for the Crown to keep peace in society. Corruption within the Church did not remain within the Church, but like leaven expanded into the larger society until it compromised the Crown itself. Although John Ball, one of the leaders of the Peasants' Revolt and a priest who taught doctrines at variance with the Church, apparently knew of Langland's work (Barker 431–432), Langland might not have endorsed Ball's ministry. If society relied, as Langland thought, upon the king and Church standing united and bound by proper dogma, then John Ball and King Richard would both have been dangerous to society. To Langland, both King Richard and priests like John Ball would have contributed to a situation where: "the roote is roten."

As Richard II's reign reached its twentieth anniversary, the king had come to expect obedience from all quarters. He appointed Roger Walden to the archbishopric of Canterbury in 1397; not a bishop, Walden had served as the Lord High Treasurer (Davies 99). Others of the king's personal associates would find themselves in ecclesiastical careers as well: Robert Waldby would become archbishop of York in 1396, and John

Burghill would become bishop of Coventry and Lichfield in 1398 (Davies 103). Such actions by Richard II would prove him the opposite of Langland's exemplar of the virtuous king who knew how to care for the Crown and society: the Roman Emperor Trajan (r. 98–117). Langland, like many Christians, envisioned the non-Christian Trajan as a virtuous ruler whom God could not allow to sink into Hell. Langland expressed how even a pagan monarch could earn God's grace through proper treatment of the Crown and society: "Ac truthe that trespased nevere ne traversed ayeins his lawe, / But lyveth as his lawe techeth and leveth ther be no better" (*Piers Plowman* XII 285–286). Trajan, according to Langland, was not above the law of his land, and neither was Richard II.

John Gower and Richard II's Kingship

Around 1385, John Gower began writing the *Confessio Amantis* at King Richard's request (Eberle 236). He completed the work in 1390 and dedicated it to the king. Sometime in late 1390 to early 1391, he revised Book 8 to delete his dedication to Richard II, and finally by 1393, Gower rededicated his work to his liege lord, Henry of Bolingbroke. Gower appears to have harbored serious reservations about Richard beginning sometime during 1390–1393 (Staley 78–79). What concerned Gower about the king, however, must have first occurred in 1390–1391.

In the tale of Solomon, Gower warned against the sin of *luxuria*; one of the Seven Deadly Sins. Solomon delighted in women and married many from among the infidel nations (*Confessio Amantis* 7.4469–4573). His lust and his need to maintain that lust made him vulnerable to the influences of the pagan wives. In Heaven, God rendered judgment against Solomon for his lust and rent the Hebrew kingdom asunder in the days of his son Rehoboam (Grady 561–562). The young king approached his councillors to inquire about the way to best govern his patrimony. The elder councillors advised leniency; the younger, severity:

> The king hem herde and overpasseth,
> And with these othre his wit compasseth,
> That yonge were and nothing wise.
> And thei these olde men despise. (*Confessio Amantis* 7.4075–78)

Presented with a clear choice between the elders and the youth, Rehoboam chose to heed the advice of his peers and imposed a harsh reign upon his subjects. His decision proved fatal to the kingdom. Gower seemed to warn that as the excesses of youth have no place in government; older councillors, such as John of Gaunt, should receive more of a hearing from the king. If so, then Gower proved prophetic. As the ten northern tribes and Jeroboam I revolted against Rehoboam, so Cheshire and Henry of Bolingbroke revolted against Richard II. Ignoring the elder councillors had led not just to disaster for Rehoboam and Richard II, but in the case of Richard to the loss of the Crown to the elder councillor's son. From *luxuria* to civil strife, the Davidic Dynasty and the Angevin Dynasty presented Gower with a strong parallel between the sins of Solomon and those of Richard II.

To Gower, the king needed to demonstrate consistency, honesty, and a good reputation. The story of Darius and Zorobabel illustrated the need for Truth to undergird any king's reign:

> The gold betokneth excellence,
> That men schull don him reverence
> As to here liege soverein.
> The stones, as the bokes sein,
> Commended ben in treble wise:
> Ferst thei ben harde, and thilke assisse
> Betokneth in a king constance,
> So that ther schal no variance
> Be founde in his condicion;
> And also be descripcion
> The vertu which is in the stones
> A verrai signe is for the nones
> Of that a king schal ben honeste
> And holde trewly his behest
> Of thing which longeth to kinghede.
> The bryhte colour, as I rede,
> Which in the stones is schynende,
> Is in figure betoknende
> The cronique of this worldes fame,
> Which stant upon his goode name.
> The cercle which is round aboute
> Is tokne of al the lond withoute,
> Which stant under his gerarchie,
> That he it schal wel kepe and guye. (*Confessio Amantis* 7.1751–1774)

Using the crown itself as a metaphor for kingship, Gower explained that a good king was constant and possessed an excellence which men revered. This king also possessed virtue and honesty. Gower actually appeared to lay on this moral lesson with a trowel to the point that one wonders if the poet might not have thought King Richard II a bit thick. Gower might have seen early indications of the young King Richard's intolerance of opposing political opinions. The poet would definitely have known of the king's handling of the Peasants' Revolt and might not have considered the outcome worthy of a King of England.

In the poem "O Deus Immense," dated between 1398 and 1402, Gower addressed kingship more directly. To Gower, the people suffered for the sins of their kings; the people suffered because God punished all for the sins of one. If the king had an interest in preserving order in his realm, Gower had a suggestion: "Consilium dignum Regem facit esse benignum, / Est aliter signum quo spergitur omne malignum" ("Worthy counsel

makes a king bounteous, / In contrast to when every kind of spitefulness is spread about.") ("O Deus Immense" 11–12). With good councillors giving good advice, the king pleased God, and the Realm prospered. The scandal would not plague such a Realm, and sin would not endanger the king or the Crown. The key, however, was that the king was bound to listen to the advice of his counsellors, even if he did not necessarily follow it. A corporate Crown required it.

No democrat, a construct unknown in late fourteenth-century England, Gower nonetheless viewed the people, the commoners, as critical components of a corporate Crown. Gower warned: "Os ubi vulgare non audet verba sonare, / Stat magis obscura sub murmure mens loqutura. / Que stupet in villa cicius plebs murmurat illa" ("When the people's voice does not dare to speak out loud, / They speak their mind more darkly in murmurs. / Whatever is silenced in court, the commons murmur it sooner.") ("O Deus Immense" 23–25). King Richard needed to allow the people to air their grievances as a corporate Crown included the grievances of the people, even if the king was not required to act upon those grievances. Gower did not write out of a Jeffersonian faith in the *vox populi*, but as a supporter of the Crown. He wrote out of the knowledge that dissatisfaction with the king had the potential to endanger the Crown (Saul, "The Kingship" 54). Outside of Gower's literary world, Richard would alienate large amounts of land and wealth for the crown's benefit from July 1397 until his overthrow in Spring 1399. Henry of Bolingbroke's estates would number among those confiscated (Dunn 179). He would seize the enfeoffed land of the Appellants in 1397 and confiscate the Lancastrian and Norfolk inheritances in 1399 (Given-Wilson 122). Not only did Richard II not allow open dissent within even the nobility, but he forced them, particularly Henry Bolingbroke, into violence. The Crown construct required the cooperation of all within the Realm. Richard's failure to heed John Gower's advice cost him his kingship. Perhaps the young king's refusal to listen to the poet's proffered lessons contributed to the poet's breaking of faith with the king in 1390–91 (Saul, "The Kingship" 54).

The Gawain Poet and Richard II's Kingship

The Gawain Poet wrote against the reign of Richard II more vociferously than the other two literati. This may be due to the fact that the poet's home county of Cheshire ranked among the more socially and religiously conservative areas of England in the Ricardian age (Bowers 52). It could also reflect a political bias as Cheshire served as the power base for the Lancastrians, who remained loyal to John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster, Richard II's uncle and advisor, and to John's son Henry of Bolingbroke. The split between Richard II and John of Gaunt began in 1394 when John and the Earl of Arundel exploded at one another in the January parliament. Richard backed John, but their relationship became strained (Staley 95). When John died in February 1399, Richard confiscated the Lancastrian estates. Henry of Bolingbroke, exiled the year before, returned to England to claim his birthright and eventually seize the Crown from Richard. In the Gawain Poet's poem *Cleanness*, the poet overtly criticizes the person of the king in the figure of Baltazar

(the Babylonian King Belshazzar). That a Cheshire poet would so openly attack Richard in a poem could indicate a time late in the king's reign, possibly after the death of John of Gaunt and the exile of Henry of Bolingbroke.

In the episode of Belshazzar's feast, the Gawain Poet portrayed a royal court immersed in sin. The king threw a lavish party for his concubines and guests. As part of this party, Belshazzar ordered the sancta from the Temple of Solomon, which his father Nabigodenozar (the Babylonian King Nebuchadrezzar II, who was not related to Belshazzar) had seized, paraded about for the pleasure and use of his concubines. The poet specifically mentioned the use of the Temple Candlestick by the king's guests:

> As mony morteres of wax merkked withoute
> With mony a borlych best al of brende golde.
> Hit watz not wonte in þat wone to wast no serges,
> Bot in temple of þe trauþe trwly to stonde
> Bifore þe sancta sanctorum, soþefast Dry3tyn
> Expouned His speche spiritually to special prophetes.
> Leue þou wel þat þe Lorde þat þe lyfte 3emes
> Displesed much at þat play in þat plyt stronge (*Cleanness* 1487–94).[1]

This defilement of the Temple sancta, particularly of the candlestick which shone in the Holy of Holies with a divine light, was a major sacrilege which sent God over the edge, and he destroyed the Kingdom of Babylon for it. The poet might have written this portion as a thinly veiled criticism of Richard II's seizure of church sancta and crown jewels before his second Irish expedition in 1399. Although no precise dating of *Cleanness* could ever claim to rest upon irrefutable evidence, a composition during 1399 would fit the poem well to the times. If such a dating is accurate, then the Gawain Poet could have been concerned about God judging England for King Richard's violations of ecclesiastical property and the sacred regalia.

Another reason to criticize King Richard II was his personal morality, at least according to the rumour. In the poem *Cleanness*, the Gawain Poet attacked the sin of sodomy, which encompassed homosexual and lesbian relations, oral and anal sex, masturbation and bestiality, and even heterosexual acts considered *contra naturam* (Frantzen 451). Sodomy, in canon law, meant both sexual sin and heresy. The church made no distinction betwixt the two. Categorized as a form of the sin *luxuria*, sodomy became a sin with heavy theological implications (454). God condemns sodomy directly in *Cleanness*:

> I schal ly$_3$t into þat led & loke Myseluen

[1] For the primary texts and translations of the Gawain Poet, the following two works were consulted: (1) Andrew, Malcom and Ronald Waldron, editors. *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript:* Pearl, Patience, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. Liverpool University Press, 2007. (2) Finch, Casey, translator. *The Complete Works of the Pearl Poet.* Edited by Malcolm Andrew, Ronald Waldron, and Clifford Peterson, University of California Press, 1996.

> [If] þay haf don as þe dyne dryuez on lofte.
> Þay han lerned a lyst þat lykez me ille,
> Þat þay han founden in her flesch of fautez þe werst:
> Vch male matz his mach a man as hymseluen,
> & fylter folyly in fere on femmalez wyse.
> I compast hem a kynde crafte & kende hit hem derne,
> & amed hit in Myn ordenaunce oddely dere,
> & dy3t drwry þerinne, doole alþer-swettest,
> & þe play of paramorez I portrayed Myseluen,
> & made þerto a maner myriest of oþer: (*Cleanness* 691–701)

God had created heterosexual relations and taught it to humanity secretly, whatever that means, and found homosexuality particularly offensive to himself.

Sin caused natural disasters, be it the sins of a nation or the sins of a monarch. In the view of some of Richard's subjects, the threat of sin always followed the young king. The homosexual relationship between his great-grandfather King Edward II and Piers Gaveston remained in the national spiritual consciousnesses during the rest of the fourteenth century. Many in English society even saw Edward II's sexual sins as the *casus belli* for God to send the waves of the Black Death to afflict the land and feared that his sodomy did not follow him to the grave. Richard's reaction to opening the coffin of his favourite, Robert de Vere, Earl of Oxford, who had been three years dead, along with his attempts to persuade Pope Boniface IX to canonize Edward II, gave many in England pause (Hill and Stillwell 321–322). Some at the time, including apparently the Gawain Poet, suspected that Richard II had followed his great-grandfather into the sin of sodomy. In the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, the Gawain Poet placed particular emphasis upon the sexual slant of the story. He spoke of God's revulsion at sexual sins: "Þat 3et þe wynd & þe weder & þe worlde stynkes / Of þe brych þat vpbraydez þose broþelych wordez" (*Cleanness* 847–848). The Gawain Poet had a serious concern with ritual, and specifically sexual, purity. The poet may have encouraged submission to the Crown, but he may also have had serious problems with King Richard II, a monarch suspected in his own time of engaging in the very sexual impurities which *Cleanness* condemned (Bowers 55).

Any sins committed by the king not only impacted his minor ward, the Crown, but also God, who had given him the sacred power of healing. King Richard II inherited these functions from his predecessors. One of the king's functions was healing by touch, particularly healing scrofula, which King Edward the Confessor (r. 1042–1066) had introduced as a royal power from God. By the fourteenth century, King Edward I touched some 1000 subjects per year. English kings also healed through cramp rings, which the king hallowed at special ceremonies and then dispensed to his supplicants, who hoped for cures to rheumatism, epilepsy, convulsions, and muscle spasms. By the reign of King Edward II, blessing cramp rings had become a normal part of a king's duties (Thomas 227–228, 235). For King Richard II to be a hidden sodomite would not only potentially

compromise the healings but offend God. It would also defile the Crown entrusted to King Richard since a potential sodomite could redefine the symbol without reference to the laws of man or God.

The Gawain Poet did not merely pronounce doom upon the kingdom, however, but did suggest a simple way for kings to obey God and keep the Crown as it ought to be kept. Perhaps the poet saw the time as too late for Richard II, but another king could win God's grace by following the example of Nebuchadrezzar:

> Styfly stabled þe rengne bi þe stronge Dry3tyn,
> For of þe Hy3est he hade a hope in his hert,
> Þat vche pouer past out of þat Prynce euen.
> & whyle þat watz cle3t clos in his hert
> Þere watz no mon vpon molde of my3t as hymseluen; (*Cleanness* 1652–1656)

A true king remembered that his power came from the powerful Lord (stronge Dry3tyn), which apparently Richard II had forgotten. The Gawain Poet seemed to view Richard II as provoking God with his arrogance and possibly with sexual sin as well. Such a state of affairs could only lead England into disaster.

Conclusion: Sins of the King, Sins of the Realm

The three writers glossed all had different views of Richard II's failures, but all agreed upon his responsibility for the welfare of English society. William Langland envisioned a corporate Crown, but one in which the king worked in tandem with the Church to guarantee peace and prosperity in society. When either the clergy or the king (or both) failed to keep to their duties, the Crown could not function, and society fell off kilter. When society fell out of joint, the Crown suffered betrayal. Langland continued to ponder his society's problems throughout his life. By the time he constructed the C Text of *Piers Plowman*, he had grown disenchanted with a Church which would not function as God had intended, that is as faithful servants to the Crown to aid it in preserving society. In the Prologue of *Piers Plowman*, Langland included a version of a medieval exemplum of the belling of the cat, with the cat representing royal power. Only a properly functioning Parliament and Church could bell the cat to prevent it from running amok. The warning appeared in the B Text and remained in the C Text, but the C Text contained additions and emendations which betrayed Langland's real opinion about the breakdown of his society (Pearsall 10, 38). In the majority of alterations and amendments found in the C Text, the Church comes in for more brutal censure. Langland's point of view becomes clear: the cat had run amok and betrayed the Crown, but the Church had sold itself to Mammon and thus ensured that the cat would not receive any belling. Both the Church and King Richard II had betrayed the Crown.

John Gower also envisioned a corporate Crown in which the king consulted the opinions of, but not necessarily the advice of, his subjects. He saw a kingdom in order only

when all dissident voices found expression and through that expression felt loyalty to the Crown. To ignore the *vox populi* endangered the kingdom's stability, and through the king's neglect, the Crown. The lust of the king could also endanger the Crown, as Gower warned in the tale of Solomon because God punished entire kingdoms for the sins of their kings. One could imagine Gower warning that when kings broke their *trowthe* with their Crowns, sin waited to enter their realms. Ignoring his elder councillors constituted another way a king could break his *trowthe* with the Crown; the king ignored the experienced voices of his senior courtiers at his own peril. Gower lived long enough to see his warnings become realities, and he watched as Richard II's abuse of the Crown cost him, and his dynasty, the kingdom.

The Gawain Poet, the most vociferous critic of Richard II of the three writers, visualized the king as a false guardian of the Crown, one who had betrayed his ward. To the poet, Richard had seized both estates and sancta not his by right and appropriated them to the Crown in defiance of all that the Crown symbol meant. In this way, the king betrayed the Crown by betraying the people, the Church, and God. In addition, the Gawain Poet saw a king who potentially engaged in the deadly sin of *luxuria*. Since a sodomite king did not, by definition, only engage in sexual sin but also in heresy, then Richard's role as guardian of the Crown lapsed. A heretic king guarding a minor Crown offended God and disrupted the heaven-ordained hierarchy. One can only wonder what rumours the Gawain Poet might have heard in Cheshire. Did John of Gaunt speak to his Lancastrians about the practices and sins of the king back in London? Whatever the poet might or might not have heard, he saw King Richard II as having betrayed the Crown, and that betrayal placed him in company with Belshazzar.

King Richard II lost his crown in September 1399 and died sometime during 1400. One hopes that the deposed king did not suffer the fate of Belshazzar:

> Baltazar in his bed watz beten to deþe,
> Þat boþe his blod & his brayn blende on þe cloþes;
> The kyng in his cortyn watz ka$_3$t bi þe heles,
> Feryed out bi þe fete & fowle dispysed.
> Þat watz so do3y þat day & drank of þe vessayl
> Now is a dogge also dere þat in a dych lygges. (*Cleanness* 1787–1792)

Unfortunately, Richard II's death was very likely unpleasant, whether it was by violence like Belshazzar or by starvation while imprisoned. The new king, Henry IV, ended not only the reign of Richard II but also the concerns about Richard's failures and potential sodomy. The Crown now, at least officially, was corporate once again, under the protection of a righteous king, and served the interests of all in the Kingdom of England.

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