

Monica Oancă

University of Bucharest

## RICHARD II. *FROM CHRONICLE TO DRAMA*

**Keywords:** *medieval chronicle, Richard II, drama, Froissart, Renaissance theatre, Shakespeare's historical plays, narrative approach*

**Abstract:** *In this paper I intend to discuss Richard II as a historical character presented by Froissart in his Chronicles and as a literary character presented by Shakespeare in his historical play. I will focus on the change in the narrative approach from medieval chronicles to Renaissance drama. Besides Froissart's Chronicles, I will refer to other contemporary sources, like Thomas Walsingham's Historia Anglicana, and visual representations.*

*The chroniclers during Richard II's reign were either secular clerks or monks and this fact was echoed by obvious differences in their texts. The secular clerks, like Froissart, needed a rich patron (or patroness), which implied a certain allegiance. The chroniclers who were monks, like Thomas Walsingham, were part of a tradition of writing history and had a religious approach. One of their purposes was to use historical material, or events, retold as anecdotes, to teach their readers moral lessons. From the medieval chroniclers' work, Richard II emerges as a rather contradictory character.*

*Shakespeare acknowledged these facts and tried to solve this puzzle by emphasising Richard's narcissistic personality as an explanation for his changing moods and sudden decisions, and also for his aggressive reactions and his generous unexpected gestures. The Renaissance playwright, following Tudor propaganda, regarded Richard's deposition as part of a larger set of events and his Richard II is only the first part of the tetralogy that ends with Henry V's victorious reign.*

*Shakespeare and Froissart wrote in totally different milieus and they addressed dissimilar audiences, both in time and in social class, yet they both wanted to entertain. However, I shall show that, as a representative of the dramatic genre, Shakespeare's Richard II is coherent in its rendering of events which, in a chronicle, do not have an explanatory frame.*

I intend to compare the differences between the medieval chronicle and the Renaissance drama. I will comment on the general characteristics of a Renaissance play using Aristotle's Poetics as a guiding principle and I will stress the dissimilarities between the medieval and Renaissance literary genres, despite the fact that they treat the same events. In order to exemplify this topic I have chosen the historical character Richard II, and I have analysed the way he was portrayed in Froissart's *Chronicles* in comparison with Shakespeare's history play by the same name.

I have used Froissart's *Chronicles* because they are representative of the medieval way of writing high-quality chronicles, which were a complex product that involved recording historical events in a chronological way on the one hand, and presenting them in a beautifully illustrated manuscript on the other. The visual aspect of the chronicles was as important for the aristocratic readers as its content. I have noticed that although Froissart gives a lot of details in his presentation of the king, his court and the events that took place in his last years, the king's personality is not clear and the image is not coherent. Unlike Froissart's discontinuous story, Shakespeare's play tries to endow the events that led to the king's deposition and death with a deeper meaning.

The interest of the medieval chronicler was different from that of the Renaissance playwright. The latter wanted the admiration and the acceptance of the general public, while the former was interested in pleasing an aristocratic audience as they were the ones to commission the books, being therefore the chronicler's patrons, and this was a reason for producing rich illustrations to accompany the text. Such beautifully adorned copies could have been made as presentation copies, which were meant to be given to kings or other rich patrons, in order to obtain their support. There were many manuscripts that were illuminated with this particular purpose. One such chronicle that was much appreciated in England was *Flores Historiarum*,<sup>1</sup> which, like Froissart's *Chronicles*, has survived in many beautifully illuminated copies (Collard).

Froissart's complete *Chronicles* are concerned only with the events that happened during his life time. He had many patrons, the first being Queen Philippa, Edward III's wife. It was for her that he wrote his first work, an account of Edward III's adventures from Poitiers in 1356 to 1360. When he finished it, he "presented the volume to my lady Philippa of Hainault, noble queen of England, who right amiably received it to my great profit and advancement", as it is written in the first chapter of his *Chronicles* (Froissart 2). What Froissart wrote was not only a work of history, but a work of art, like the book he gave to king Richard II, in chapter 96 of the 4<sup>th</sup> book, of his *Chronicles*: "And I had engrossed in a fair book well enlumined all the matters, that [happened] in four and twenty years before I had made and compiled [it]... this fair book well covered with velvet garnished with clasps of silver and gilt" (Froissart 424).

As a genre the chronicle tended to expand continuously, Froissart did not want to create a finite work that would be restricted to a limited time. He did not want to show his audience a coherent or autonomous set of events, but rather he wanted to gather as many details as possible and to create an exhaustive narrative, which would also flatter his patrons. This natural wish to increase the material he recorded can account for the fact that the first books have more illuminated copies than the last one; in other words there

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<sup>1</sup> *Flores Historiarum* (*Flowers of History*) is a Latin chronicle dealing with English history from the creation of the world to the 14<sup>th</sup> century. It was compiled by various persons and it seems to have been originally written at St Albans Abbey, by Roger Wendover but continued at Westminster Abbey. It quickly acquired contemporary popularity, and several manuscripts were compiled at cathedral abbeys in Norwich, Rochester, London (at St Paul's), Canterbury (at St Augustine's).

are many, more than a hundred, illuminated manuscripts which contain only the first two or three books of the Chronicles. According to Katariina Närä, one of the main researchers working on the Online Froissart Project:

Froissart did not write just any old history, but recorded the aristocratic way of life, and therefore the deeds of men of rank and title. His work was also instructional: it includes examples and stories concerning various rulers and heads of state able to advise a young lord as to how, or how not, to govern his subjects. ... It is no surprise, therefore, that Froissart's lively account of the history of the nobility of the turbulent fourteenth century, and his descriptions of battles, crusades and tournaments listing individuals and their merits, should be something of a bestseller, and found on the bookshelves of many fashionable, well-off noblemen. ("Some Burgundian manuscripts")

The Valois Dukes of Burgundy made use of artistic patronage to enhance their public image and to distinguish themselves from the lesser nobility and of course from ordinary people. It is in Flanders where some of the most splendid manuscripts of Froissart's Chronicles, and the only complete sets comprising all four Books, were produced in the latter part of the fifteenth century.

Richard II was a pious king who was influenced by the French rhetoric of royal address, used during Charles V's reign (1338 – 1380). The French king inherited a coherent theory of sacral kingship, which was visible in the "coronation ordo" elaborated in 1250, during Louis IX's reign (1226 –70), Saint Louis (Staley 76, 80). Richard II tried to highlight the sanctity of kingship by stressing the connection with his saintly ancestors, and he did this for instance by having himself depicted together with them in the Wilton Diptych (1395–99).<sup>2</sup> His more than life-size portrait from Westminster Abbey, where he is represented with the coronation regalia, dating from 1395, also proves his wish to be seen as a ruler chosen by God: "These powerful artistic images were complemented by the verbal elevation of the king. From 1391 a richer and more formal language of address to the king was introduced" (Saul 238). Surprisingly, these features, which have been analysed and discussed by historians over the centuries, are more clearly visible in Shakespeare's drama than in Froissart's Chronicle. What I mean to say is that an artistic text, like Shakespeare's play, can hint at much more (by giving a hidden meaning to a wording or by revealing a person's inner feelings through theatrical gestures) than a medieval narrative. Different interpretations of the Shakespearean text unveil different potential aspects of Richard II's personality and of his interactions with the other characters.

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<sup>2</sup> On the left hand panel King Richard II is presented by the Saints John the Baptist, Edward the Confessor and Edmund the Martyr. In the right hand panel the Virgin Mary with the Christ Child in her arms is surrounded by eleven angels, against a golden background and field of delicately coloured flowers.

Usually the chronicles expressed the writers' opinion, and unavoidably the chronicles written in Richard II's time express different opinions concerning his character.<sup>3</sup> Some of them present a rather positive picture of his personality, like Froissart's Chronicles or the Kirkstall Chronicle (written in a Cistercian Abbey between 1397 and 1399), while others, like Thomas Walsingham's, talk about the fact that since 1397 "the king began to tyrannise and burden his people". The historian must take into consideration the fact that Walsingham's Chronicle, which ends in 1420, was rewritten during the Lancastrian regime and is therefore indebted to Lancastrian propaganda. Froissart's sympathy for Richard II,<sup>4</sup> on the other hand, can be explained by his approval of the king's policy of insuring peace with France.<sup>5</sup>

According to Antonia Gransden, Froissart rewrote his chronicles three times and as a result "the chronicle survives in three main redactions, each written at a different stage in Froissart's career and displaying considerable variations from the others. Each expresses a different point of view, reflecting Froissart's current response to his current situation and calculated to please whomever was his patron at the time" (Gransden 90). Yet the chronicles can serve as a study of medieval mentality, and the chroniclers' mentality seems to be that they should be loyal to their liege lord, and present the events in a manner pleasant to their noble patrons. Detachment is not their ultimate aim, and they admit their partiality as an accepted, ordinary, natural fact.

According to Peter Ainsworth, Froissart believes that the rôle of the second "order" or class, namely the oratores, was to record authentically and precisely the deeds of prowess performed by the valiant. Moreover Froissart aligns himself with "the heralds and the secretaries to the monarchical orders of chivalry" (Ainsworth 40). In the rendering of the tournaments in which his Chronicles abound, he is not simply an disinterested observer and narrator, but he enjoys the fighting and records it enthusiastically and like the heralds did on the battlefield, he presents the winners proudly and writes down details about their connections and discussions with their friend or

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<sup>3</sup> The medieval chronicles were written by lay persons (like Froissart) or monks (like Matthew Paris or Thomas Walsingham) and their books were either richly illuminated (like those of the writers mentioned above) meant for aristocratic audience, with many copies made after them (the *Polichronicon* written by Ranulf Higden is such an example too) or they were just used inside the monasteries and there was no need or request from anyone to make other copies. In this last case the chronicles were simple and unadorned, and their authors are unknown. If the matter was the history of England it was possible that even the place where they were written remained unknown, but if sometimes they followed the local matters, we can assume at least the place of their origin. Such an example is the Westminster Chronicle (which has no direct reference as to where it was composed), written during the reign of Richard II. The details that refer to events that took place at Westminster Abbey, for instance Richard II's coronation, lead the historians to believe that it was written at this abbey (Taylor 21).

<sup>4</sup> He presents the Duke of Gloucester as a rather devious character, with his own interests at heart (Froissart 429, 453, etc.)

<sup>5</sup> As a person that moved between the courts of France, Flanders and England, Froissart needed peace to be able to accomplish his journeys.

families prior to the tournament (Froissart 399, 404). He is aware that these are the events that are pleasant for his audience. Froissart proves his adherence to the aristocratic spirit, which admires courtesy and which places the violence of a duke or a count on a plane above criticism. It is perhaps because of this that Froissart's descriptions of battles and tournaments are the most colourful and inspiring parts of his *Chronicles*.

From this perspective Thomas Walshingham, writing at Saint Albans monastery, is different, since he "was brought up to see history as a branch of theology" (Saul 240). For instance he mentions the unscrupulous and cruel exploits of the Duke of Arundel and his comrades, which are not mentioned by Froissart, and as a religious person he also considers the misfortunes of the duke as being the result of this unchristian behaviour (*Historia Anglicana* introduction xviii).<sup>6</sup> Although the tournament was one of Henry VIII's pleasures, it became obsolete during Shakespeare's times. Nevertheless Shakespeare, also, places a "duel" at the beginning of his play and it is the king who takes the blame for both the failure of the joust (which, though planned, does not take place) and the failure to find a peaceful solution that would be acceptable for both parties. The tournament, a remainder of glorious medieval times, has no place in a Renaissance drama. It is to be noted that the illustrations of the illuminated manuscripts could have inspired Shakespeare in choosing some scenes in his plays. The important events were usually illustrated in chronicles, and therefore in some manuscripts of Froissart's *Chronicles* the banishment of both Mowbray and Bolingbroke or the deposition of Richard II are visually represented.

Shakespeare was aware that he was writing a play that should address a certain audience which would be socially different from the one addressed by chronicles, and the genre he used was totally different from that of the chronicles in which he found his inspiration. First of all his work was oral, not written. *Richard II*, in particular, addresses an elevated audience because it has rhymed verses for almost the whole play and there are no comic interludes that use blank verses and that were meant for a less educated audience that wanted to laugh and have fun. The effect of the words (their musicality, rhyme and rhythm can only be appreciated if they are read aloud or, even better, if they are performed on stage). Shakespeare did not even bother to have his plays printed during his life time, although they were completed. Secondly, even if they had been printed they would hardly have been a visual work of art, like the medieval chronicles (especially Froissart's) had been.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> *Historia Anglicana* has a more didactic and moral rôle, for instance it speaks about misfortunes being actually a punishment for irreligious behaviour and there are pages dedicated to consideration about several matters, like the short-comings of the Mendicant Orders (*Historia Anglicana* 13)

<sup>7</sup> Although Shakespeare's play does not use the medieval chronicles as his major source of information, they must have been known to him. His major source of information was perhaps the *Chronicle* written by Holinshed (probably the revised second edition published in 1587). Yet, since Froissart's *Chronicles* was an even more famous book than as it is now, some critics (Tillyard and Bullough) agree that it was known to him, and it could have been a source for his play (Forker 152-4). Charles R. Forker considers

The action in the play had to follow the accepted rules of the dramatic genre. Even if he could not change the outcome of events, Shakespeare presented them selectively because he needed to create a plot. Therefore there needed to be an exposition, presenting the characters and also the conflict between them, the narrative had to culminate in a climax, and there also had to be a dénouement, all in a quick succession, for the play had also a customary length. So he did not narrate the incidents indiscriminately, but rather selected certain events and created a plot so that the work could stand on its own. Such an action was consistent with Aristotle's *Poetics*, in which several principles of writing drama had been mentioned.

An action implies personal agents, who necessarily possess certain distinctive qualities both of character and thought; for it is by these that we qualify actions themselves, and these – thought and character – are the two natural causes from which actions spring, and on actions again all success or failure depends. ... Most important of all is the structure of the incidents ... Hence the incidents and the plot are the end of a tragedy; and the end is the chief thing of all. The plot is the first principle and the soul of a tragedy... (part VI).

Shakespeare's plot follows the usual pattern of an ancient tragedy. According to Nigel Saul "Richard's hubris" (his cruelty and his poor judgement, which prove the fact that he abuses his position) "is going to be followed by his nemesis" (his downfall and death), but the rightful king's usurpation turns into the usurper's hubris, and we witness the unfolding of his story in the next two plays of the tetralogy, and this hubris and "the terrible consequences for a land of usurpation" is the link between the four plays (Saul 1).

The personality of the king is pointed out through by the voices of important characters like the Duke of York, Edward III's last surviving son, and also through his own words. The King reveals his envy, when he refers to Bolingbroke's popularity, and his greed, when he thinks to use John of Gaunt's fortune for his own interests after the Duke's death. The picture in the first part of the play is bleak indeed, and Richard is presented as suspicious and disloyal of his own relatives. According to Bolingbroke, Mowbray is to be blamed for Thomas of Gloucester's death (Act I, scene 1, 100-108), but later on the words of Gloucester's widowed duchess hint that he was murdered "by envy's hand", while Gaunt more clearly states that

God's is the quarrel, for God's substitute,  
His deputy anointed in His sight,  
Hath caused his death: (Act I, scene 2, 37-39)

Gaunt clearly states his opinion that Richard was anointed and as the legitimate king he has "the divine rights of the king", and therefore he can only be punished by God:

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it probable that Shakespeare knew of Froissart's *Chronicles* in Lord Berners' translation, since there are hints at this translation in some of his history plays.

...the which if wrongfully,  
Let heaven revenge; for I may never lift  
An angry arm against His minister. (Act I, scene 2, 39-41)

Accordingly Gaunt chooses not to try to revenge his brother. The Bishop of Carlisle, also repeatedly states that the king, “the figure of God’s majesty, / His captain, steward, deputy-elect, / Anointed, crowned”, is divinely protected as the one chosen by God (Act Act IV, scene 1).

By denying Henry Bolingbroke’s right to succession, the king damaged the social order of the country. Bolingbroke’s right is as unquestionable as the natural order and the Duke of York points out that such an injustice puts in question the system of aristocratic values and thus the king’s own position. It is an instance when the two are not placed in opposition, but rather on the same side and depending on each other:

Take Hereford's rights away, and take from Time  
His charters and his customary rights;  
Let not to-morrow then ensue to-day;  
Be not thyself; for how art thou a king  
But by fair sequence and succession?  
Now, afore God--God forbid I say true! (Duke of York’s words in Act II, scene 1, 195-200)

Thus by refusing to allow Bolingbroke to succeed his father, the king might expose himself to criticism, as much as he increases the possibility of endangering his own right to the throne. The Duke of York’s words highlight the fact that such an act would mean his losing the sympathy of his subjects.

If you do wrongfully seize Hereford's rights,  
... and deny his offer'd homage,  
You pluck a thousand dangers on your head,  
You lose a thousand well-disposed hearts (Duke of York’s words in Act II, scene 1,  
201, 204-206)

This situation is contrasted with Bolingbroke’s growing popularity, his image as the “subjects’ hope”, of which the king was well aware (Act I, scene 4, 23-36).<sup>8</sup>

The play can be thus seen as Richard’s personal tragedy, and in his downfall he acquires a Christ-like aura. If the audience might have been against him at the beginning, in the second part, especially during the ritualised scene of the deposition, their heart must have gone with him. The play was understood from this perspective and it was entitled a tragedy in its first printed versions (the five 1597-1615 Quarto editions).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Yet the support of the nobles was lost almost as soon as he was crowned, proving thus that usurpation was a sin that could only be forgiven in the next generation, as Henry V’s succession to the throne was not contested. It is true though that it will haunt and eventually destroy his grandson, Henry VI.

<sup>9</sup> There is a certain fluidity in the way the play was labelled, since at a certain moment the play was considered a “Lamentable comedy” (Bolam 145), as it was presented from Bolingbroke’s point of view,

Shakespeare acknowledges Richard's complex, contradictory personality. He mentions Richard's thoughtful behaviour towards his wife (Act V, scene 1), as well as his ungrateful and insensitive conduct towards his uncle (Gaunt), who had supported him and had been loyal to him until his death. Such shifting moods and unexpected changes of decision, as well as his aggressive reactions could be explained by "the narcissistic streak in his personality... Shakespeare, better than anyone, appreciated the dilemma because his reading of the character was so acute" (Saul 466). Perhaps the best proof that Shakespeare did, indeed, understand, that narcissism was at the core of Richard's belief that he was untouchable because of the divine rights that he had as the anointed king, chosen by God, and that narcissism was also the weakness that prevented him from correctly assessing the political and social situation, is that in the deposition scene (Act IV, scene 1), which is "the most politically subversive scene of the play" (Bolam143), Richard asks for a mirror and he scrutinises his face attentively. The mirror as the symbol of vanity and pride is also the sign that the king needs to redefine himself, having lost (or being on the point of losing) his identity as king. The mirror also creates the illusion of a double, and could be regarded as an element that hints at an exchange of identities or rôles. Thus Richard unwillingly giving up his crown becomes "nobody" (a shadow in the mirror), while Henry Bolingbroke, in receiving the crown, becomes the king. It is because of this powerful scene that they can be seen as two sides of the same coin.<sup>10</sup> Although it was not printed in the first editions,<sup>11</sup> this scene is nowadays considered the climax of the play, since it shows the psychological duel between Richard and Bolingbroke, which mirrors the political exchange of power.

Therefore the real subject of the play is not (as has erroneously been said) "the life and the death of Richard II", but rather his conflict with Henry Bolingbrooke and the exchange of power between them. Thus Shakespeare again follows Aristotle's precepts in not presenting the main character's whole life but only a selection of coherent events. According to Aristotle (in the 8<sup>th</sup> part of his Poetics), the plot is constructed of parts (scenes) that are organically joined, and the structural union is irremediably broken if one of them is displaced or removed. So unlike the medieval chronicles, not a certain character (like Richard II) and a succession of historical events concerning him represent the *raison d'être* of Shakespeare play, but an intelligent understanding and interpreting of the historical events in order to present a coherent and meaningful image of the past.

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and for him the play has a happy ending. The common name though was *The Life and Death of Richard II* (although there is very little about the king's life prior to Bolingbroke's banishment), and, in the 1623 First Folio, it was considered a history play.

<sup>10</sup> In 1974, at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, director John Barton stressed the tragic affinity between Bolingbroke and Richard by alternating Ian Richardson and Richard Pasco in the rôles of the king and his cousin.

<sup>11</sup> In the first and second Quartos, in 1597 and 1598, the deposition scene was removed, which proves not only that the government regarded English historical materials as subject to its own control, but also that historiography had a powerful popular appeal and because of this it was material for "the emergent national theatre" (Patterson 77-8).



Considering Aristotle's argument that "poetry is more philosophical and studiously serious" than history, since the latter only tells what happened while the former tells what could happen, we can place Shakespeare's history plays somewhere between these two extremes, since although he did use historical facts, he knew how to create his unique approach, distancing himself from the chroniclers' maze. Shakespeare was only interested in the dramatic potential of the chronicles, whether medieval or Renaissance. While the fact that the tradition of pageants (processions and other public spectacles) might have influenced Shakespeare's love for certain tableaux was mentioned by Bergeron (49), it has never been pointed out that the beauty of the decorated pages of the medieval manuscripts could also have had a role in Shakespeare's choice of certain scenes, a fact which I have tried to bring up. I have shown that although both the medieval chronicle and the Renaissance play were meant to entertain, they did it in different ways. There was obviously a difference in the task which they tried to accomplish, namely to impress and to flatter certain educated aristocrats, versus attracting and stimulating a large public, consisting of both educated and unlearned spectators. A crucial difference between the medieval and the Renaissance medium of conveying significance is the shift from a visual message, which medieval audiences were used to (stained glass and coloured walls in cathedrals being the norm), to an oral one, which was present for instance in sermons. This analysis could be continued to show that the difference between these two literary genres can actually reflect a difference between mentalities, medieval versus Renaissance.

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