

## **“On the Decay of the Nobility”**

by Richard Simpson

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The decay of the English nobility as seen through Shakespeare's history plays is addressed in the following chapter from a collection of articles by members of the New Shakspeare Society, a group of English scholars and enthusiasts brought together by F.J. Furnivall in 1874, in a combined attempt to resolve through Darwinian methods the order of the plays and, by association, Shakespeare's artistic and intellectual development (and perhaps, though it isn't mentioned, his true identity).

Members of this group, which lasted until 1894, included H.H. Furness, F.G. Fleay, G.B. Shaw, Thomas Huxley, John Ruskin, Edward Dowden and Robert Browning. It was termed “New” to distinguish it from the earlier Shakespeare Society which had collapsed following the J.P. Collier scandal. That after two decades of effort, this distinguished group was still unable to sort out the problems involved is a measure of the number and complexity of the issues involved.

Richard Simpson (1820-1876), was an English linguist educated at the Merchant Taylor's School and Oriel College Oxford. As an Anglican vicar who later converted to Catholicism, his viewpoint stands clear of “the region cloud” that continues to make it so hard for the British Academy and their American cohorts to see the politics involved in the creation of Shakespeare's history plays, and the intensely political nature of his company, the Lord Chamberlain/King's Men. As long as the Academy continues to cling to the notion that the London Stage was the sole creation of a handful of working class entrepreneurs, that Crown politics had nothing to do with the productions of its own theater company, and that it's absurd to think that there was any reason for its number one playwright to hide his identity, it will remain as confused as it has been for the past 400 years.

The following article by Simpson is his take on one aspect of the background story Shakespeare tells throughout his history plays, namely the destruction, much of it self-created, of the ancient nobility over the course of time through the reigns of Richard II through that of Henry VIII. That Simpson could not see that this assessment came through a leading member of that dying class adds poignancy to what would otherwise be a coldly rational assessment of an interesting social phenomenon. Did the man who called himself Shakespeare for publication understand this from the start, or did it become clear only gradually over the long process of writing these plays for performance, and revising them for publication? That the class he describes was an artefact of an earlier time, and that, even as he wrote, he himself was an artefact, one that would not be understood by the Calibans who succeeded him, is an irony that could not have escaped the greatest ironist of all. “We are dying, Egypt, dying.”

The Society published a great deal of important material during its 20 years of life, much of it now available online. This and other important articles by Simpson, Furnival and others can be found by googling *The New Shakspeare Society's Transactions*. The following text is unabridged; only the punctuation and paragraphing have been changed to conform to present norms. / Stephanie Hopkins Hughes

## VIII DECAY OF THE NOBLES

NOTHING shows the unity of this series of chronicle plays better than tracing through them one single thread of history, such as the position of the nobles. We have chronicle plays by different authors; one (*Edward III*) to which Shakspeare himself probably contributed an act. But neither this, nor Heywood's *Edward IV*, . . . nor any other except perhaps Marlowe's *Edward II*, where we may suspect the counsel and assistance of Shakspeare, could be inserted in the Shaksperian series.

That series stands alone, not so much in the merit of its individual pieces as in absolute philosophical unity. Other plays deal with other classes of facts, the love affairs and victories of kings, and the failures of traitors. These all deal with their various subject matter in such a way that we may extract out of them a Shaksperian philosophy of history.

With regard to the position of the nobles: In *King John* they rightly appear not as deriving their rights from the great Charter, which the poet ignores, but as possessing them by common law and immemorial custom. The barons are the king's peers, his judges when he breaks the laws of Church, and State, and the executors of their judgment, so far as they have the power. They are united by corporate feelings, and resent the intrusion of new men, among whom the King finds his Huberts and Falconbridges to be his partisans and ministers. The chivalrous old families are on one side, the unscrupulous and blustering upstarts on the other; but politically the upstarts are in the right, the old nobles in the wrong.

In *Richard II* the nobles still have this corporate union, but the part they play is less sublime. They revolt, not to preserve religion and justice, but partly to preserve their order and privileges, and partly to deliver their country from misgovernment. In *Henry IV* they no longer hold together with the same unanimity. When they act against the king, their motives become personal; there is no question of better or worse government; their regret for dethroning Richard and new-found zeal for Mortimer, his legitimate heir, arises from their finding that dethroning one king and setting up another may be serviceable to the state, but is dangerous to themselves as soon as the new king is independent of them. Safety requires them to go on dethroning kings.

There is a halt in this movement in *Henry V*, for the Southampton plot fails, and the nation is united in a foreign triumph. But this accidental delay soon ceases, is even fertile of fresh evils, for when it is over the next reign begins with the discord of clergy and laity, which has been smothered for a time by the policy of the Bishops who advised the French war.

In *Henry VI* this opiate has lost its force. The bickerings of the Protector and the Bishop show that the bad leaven has been working under the show of union. The nobles are already combined in factions, churchman against layman, house against house. The feud of York and Lancaster begins, not on a question of their titles, but on some purely legal controversy in the Temple garden. There is no question of patriotism, or right, or religion among them. Any one of them will let his country perish for a mere personal matter of punctilio or interest. Instead of honour or conscience, they obey a blind impulse towards balance of power; and he that out-tops the rest, becomes the enemy of all. Meanwhile religion decays under prelates like Beaufort, and is honeycombed with superstition that can swallow, or craft that can counterfeit, the miraculous cure of Simcox at St Albans.

And now the populace first enters as a force in Shakspeare's dramatic world. Cade's country-people are falsely represented as having no determinate object but the disintegration of society and the abolition of law, as being soon weary of any course, strong only for

destruction, and swayed by the influences of the moment. The burghers of Bury, on the other hand, have a precise idea of what they want, and formulate their demands against Suffolk with equal reason and policy. And in *Richard III* the citizens of London discuss the death of Edward IV like political philosophers. A background of popular force and good sense begins gradually to appear, before which the nobles play out their losing game, swaying backwards and forwards, one faction strengthening itself by devouring another, for “snake must eat snake if it would grow a dragon.”

Throughout the struggle, one family gradually rises. York bases his fortunes partly on Warwick, partly on the mutinous people, and gains fresh strength by every blow which weakens anyone else. His three sons grow up in this hazard of fortune, like gamblers with no god but luck, or at the most a calculation of chances. Nature, however, is too strong for two of them. Edward and George are not sufficiently disengaged from passion and principles. Richard schools himself to stifle every feeling, sneer down every principle, and to guide himself by the interest, first of his house, then of himself. He uses his innate knowledge of good and evil, not to sway his own conscience, but to give insight and mastery over others. He is the antipodes of Henry VI.

Unscrupulous, firm, unhesitating, using his great capacity, not to unravel the tangle of right and wrong, but to find the next way to what he wants, he comes on the stage as the ideal Machiavellian prince, and also as the natural and necessary result of the gradual degradation of the nobles and the disintegration of their order. One destroyer, however wicked, is better than a nation of destroyers. Under him a change comes over the nobles. They have ceased to be kingmakers, peers, and censors of their sovereign, or petty princes warring for supremacy. They have found a master, against whom policy or violence is alike useless. They can only peep timidly through the chinks of their prison for a deliverer.

The king bases his power on the commons, and snaps his fingers at his peers. His fall comes, not from his political position, which is unassailable, and which his successor occupies and strengthens, but from the crimes by which he has climbed into his throne. He is the victim of his victims, whose curses consume him. He does not fall to pieces through his own imbecility, like Henry VI, but he is struck down by external force, and the envy of heaven against overpowerful wickedness.

After *Richard III*, Shakspeare skips one reign, and exhibits England under Henry VIII in a picture which serves for the times of all the Tudors. His portion of the play is in two parts, representing the Court and Nobles, first under Wolsey, and then under Cranmer. The picture suits the Court of Henry VII under Morton and Fox or that of Mary with Cardinal Pole, and that of Elizabeth under the very theological tuition of Burghley.

It exhibits a king succeeding to the autocratical position of the House of York, surrounded by nobles, not his peers but his servants, feeling in a blind way his dependence on the Commons, and no longer fortifying himself with the alliance of dukes and earls, as powerful in their counties as he in his realm, but surrounding himself with able ministers raised from the Sacristy, and enriched by him with the benefices or the spoils of the Church, in disparagement of the old nobility.

The difference between his reign and that of Richard III is, that dark deeds are now done, not by a tyrant's bare order, but through the subserviency of his judges, and by his superiority to the law. Buckingham, whose father had made Richard king, is now not much stronger than Will Summers. Henry amuses himself with his talk; but when he becomes a nuisance to Wolsey, he is delivered over to the judge, in spite of the queen's intercession.

Kingmakers have dwindled to courtiers. Their lives hitherto were a prey to violence and lawlessness; now they are the game for the labyrinthine subtlety of intriguing lawyers. The queen herself falls a victim to this new tyranny, and Cranmer rises by devising a new legal method of divorce when the old method proved too independent of the royal will.

The policy is that which Richelieu afterwards carried out in France, to rear the absolutism of the crown on the annihilation of its peers. The great families are ruined by forced residence at court, not to honour them, but to make them live beyond their means. Their youth “break their backs with laying manors on ’em.” Wolsey, “butcher's cur” though he be, is a beggar whose “book outworths a noble's blood,” and who is omnipotent, while in the king's favour, to make and mar, to unmake even a queen, though he fails to make another. He has not, like one of the old nobles, any power of his own; he is a mere conduit of the king's power. When he loses favour, he bursts like the bubble to which Fletcher compares him, and leaves no root behind. After his fall, another Ecclesiastic succeeds, equally raised from obscurity by the king, protected by him against the nobles, and hoisted up simply to do the work of the divorce.

This degradation of the nobles was felt to be one of the most serious facts of the time. Under the Cecils the peers had come to be mere parasites of the court, feeding upon the people by their monopolies, helpless to protect the Commons against the Crown, and only powerful as the instruments of its tyranny. Essex, involved in the net, vainly struggled against the toils. He half drew his sword when the queen boxed his ears and wrote to Egerton, “I keep my heart from baseness, though I cannot keep my fortunes from declining. When this scandal was done unto me . . . doth religion enforce me to serve? . . . Cannot princes err? Cannot subjects receive wrong? Is an earthly power or authority infinite? . . . I can never subscribe to these principles.” He lived a century too soon; he would have had a fairer field in 1688. In the 16th century the evil was too imperfectly criticised for a remedy to be devised.

In the literature of the time the blot is hit,<sup>1</sup> but no plan for its relief discussed. Verstegan<sup>2</sup> laments

the overthrow of the nobility, and the great and general oppression of the people. Touching the present state of the nobility, wherewith the stately courts of former princes were adorned, their armies in the field conducted, the commons of the country relieved, look whether they are not brought into that servility that, if they apply not themselves to Cecil's humour, they must not live in the country but be tied unto the court, or allotted their dwelling as if they were his perpetual wards, yea rather, as

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<sup>1</sup> A term from the game of Backgammon: *blots* are checkers, a single blot can be *hit*, that is, removed from action, prevented from moving forward.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Verstegen was a Catholic writer, and a fierce critic of the Burghley regime who published on the Continent during Elizabeth's reign. In 1564 he was known as Richard Rowlands while studying at Christ Church Oxford under Canon Thomas Bernard along with George Pettie, to whom the euphuistic novel *Pettie's Petite Pallace* was later attributed, and one “Richard Vere,” whose identity has never been established (Anthony á Wood). Simpson found him a valuable source for his alternative view of Crown politics during Elizabeth's reign.

pupils that are kept under with rods, not daring to speak what they think or know, but are set to be aim-givers, while others are set to hit the marks. Some of them he hath undeservedly brought into disfavour of the prince; sundry he hath drawn upon feigned favours of the court to consume themselves to beggary; others he hath sent forth to be pirates and sea-rovers; and the lives of some of the principal by guileful pretended crimes he hath taken away; and by one means or other he hath brought such as be yet living unto those terms as none may be permitted to carry any credit in the Commonwealth except it be some very few whose wisdom he can easily overrule. By which means there is no subject in England of such opulentness, none of more authority, and none of more power than himself.<sup>3</sup>

“New lords new laws” was the devise of the day. The Northern lords in their first proclamation declare that their rising was for the removal of those who had “abused the queen, disordered the realm, and now lastly seek to procure the destruction of the nobility.” In the second proclamation, the rising was “to make known to whom the true succession of the crown appertaineth,” hindered by common enemies about the queen’s person whose practices are “well known to us and to the rest of the nobility.” Pius V, in his bull of 1570, says, “She [the queen] hath dismissed the royal council of English nobles, and filled their places with obscure men and heretics.”

“Cecil and the Queen,” says Philopater (1592), “made nothing of the ancient nobility,” who repented too late of their subserviency in 1558. They rose and failed in 1569, and then “Cecil so oppressed them, bred such quarrels amongst them, so impoverished them, and loaded them with debt, that he was thenceforth free from all fear about them.” And Parsons, in his Memorial, promises the reformation of the injury and disestimation laid upon the nobility and gentry in these latter years by some base heretical persons in authority. It is not for me to say how this reform could have been carried without an unpatriotic appeal to the Pope or Philip. All I show is, that the grievance was felt and discussed, and that Shakspeare had laid it open in the light of living history.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> “Tracts such as Richard Verstegan’s *A declaration of the true causes of the great troubles* (1592) and Robert Parsons’ (or Persons’) *An advertisement written to a secretarie of my L. Treasurers of Inland* (1592) were smuggled into the realm and collectively created the defamatory notion of “Burghley’s commonwealth” or a *regnum Cecilianum*, in which Elizabeth and her realm were shamelessly manipulated for the benefit of the Cecil family and their supporters” (earlystuartlibels.net)

<sup>4</sup> What he did not “lay open” was his real name.