

## **Richard II (Fall 2007)**

*Richard II* was written around the same time as *Romeo and Juliet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and the three plays together form, in the words of Harold Bloom, “a triad”—a “lyrical history” to complement Shakespeare’s most lyrical tragedy and comedy [249]. Lyric poetry is essentially about emotion—the expression of the poet’s, and the stimulation of a corresponding emotion in the reader; if lyric drama aims for a similar effect, Richard plays his part exquisitely—his luxuriant notes of self-pity nearly overwhelm the mere hypocrites and flatterers jostling for power alongside the inscrutable, “silent” Bolingbroke [IV.i.290].

In his *Lectures on Shakespeare*, W. H. Auden argues that “[l]anguage is the enemy of action” [68]. It’s easy to agree, as Richard yammers away his kingdom, yet Shakespeare (as always) resists oversimplification, and the play he wrote does more than chronicle the conjoined rise and fall of a soldier and a poet. In fact, these men—cousins, foils, deadly rivals—are two of Shakespeare’s most nuanced creations to date. Let us begin with the title figure and protagonist,

### **King Richard**

There is a marked difference between the Richard who leaves for Ireland, secure in his authority, and the Richard who returns, a few scenes later, to face Bolingbroke and his army of rebel lords. Like several of Shakespeare’s great speakers, notably Juliet and Rosalind, Richard requires an inciting incident, midway through his play, to activate his powers. For the women, it is the shock of falling in love; for Richard, it is armed rebellion, but the shock is the same—an unexpected assault on his naive sense of order. The fine speeches and sallies of wit that ensue are Richard’s attempts to re-order his

world, using the only tool he has remaining: his eloquence.

From the start Richard favors style over substance. Entering to arbitrate a dispute between two rivals, each accusing the other of treason, he sounds properly authoritative:

Old John of Gaunt, time-honored Lancaster,  
Hast thou, according to thy oath and band,  
Brought hither Henry Hereford, thy bold son,  
Here to make good the boist'rous late appeal,  
Which then our leisure would not let us hear,  
Against the Duke of Norfolk, Thomas Mowbray?

[I.i.1–6]

Yet already the royal façade has cracks. As Harry Berger, Jr. notes, “Richard’s explanation for ignoring Hereford’s ‘boist’rous late appeal’ is so bizarre that editors have in effect rewritten it: they have insisted that ‘our leisure’ in line 5 must mean want or lack of leisure.” Berger’s invaluable suggestion is that “Richard may well mean what he says—that is, ‘I chose not to let official business or unruly youngsters interrupt my leisure, my playtime’” [241]. Unfortunately, Berger proceeds to the more tenuous claim that Richard in fact *wants* to be deposed—that he casts a reluctant Bolingbroke in the role of usurper and goads him into doing the deed; that line about “our leisure,” then, is Richard’s way of announcing, from the very beginning, “Look how Bad we are. And what are you going to do about it?” [Berger, 242].

This seems to me a convoluted, unnecessary explanation. What I hear in Richard’s opening speech is simple vanity—not “how Bad we are” but how *important*, and how precious our time, matters of state be damned. Richard sums up his political philosophy in a single line: “We were not born to sue, but to command” [I.i.196]; much later, in a more cognizant line, he sums up his character: “I wasted time, and now doth time waste me” [V.v.49].

Richard's most egregious waste of time, at least in Act One, is to command that Bolingbroke and Mowbray settle their grievances by battling to the death in a trial by combat. When the day of trial arrives—replete with heralds, trumpets, and other chivalric formalities—Richard waits as both combatants bid their loved ones farewell, mount their steeds, and enter the lists; only then—some hundred lines into the scene—does he intervene, halting the spectacle with a flick of his baton. Still he delays judgment, withdrawing to solicit counsel from a circle of advisors that includes Bolingbroke's father, John of Gaunt, and probably also those “caterpillars of the commonwealth” [II.iii.166], the sycophants Bagot, Bushy, and Green (whom Bolingbroke later shall have executed for treason). This arbitrary alliance of biases produces an equally arbitrary sentence, a pair of banishments: Mowbray's for life; Bolingbroke's for ten years, reduced to six when Richard notes Gaunt's “grieved heart” and “sad aspect” [I.iii.209].

The obvious question that no one onstage dares ask is *why*? Why does Richard go to such lengths to build suspense, then abruptly flip the script? More precisely, why should he fear the prospect of two noblemen beating up on each other? He should be watching securely in his seat upon the dais . . . except, as we learn, the charge that Bolingbroke has leveled against Mowbray is the murder of Richard's (and Bolingbroke's) meddling uncle, the Duke of Gloucester, and most everyone seems to agree the order came from Richard. They cannot accuse him directly, of course—as Gaunt reasons,

God's is the quarrel; for God's substitute,  
His deputy anointed in his sight,  
Hath caused his death; the which if wrongfully,  
Let heaven revenge; for I may never lift  
An angry arm against his minister.

[I.ii.37–41]

The alternative, at least for now, is to lift that arm against *Richard's* deputy, Mowbray, who can offer in his defense only three cryptic lines: "For Gloucester's death, / I slew him not, but, to my own disgrace, / Neglected my sworn duty in that case" [I.i.132–4]. One can imagine the actor playing Mowbray delivering these and other lines—his suggestion that Richard's presence "curbs me / From giving reins and spurs to my free speech" [I.i.54–5], and his request that Richard "bid his ears a little while be deaf" [I.i.112]—through clenched teeth as he stares pointedly at his king.

For his part, Richard scarcely mentions Gloucester, let alone confesses to his murder—not even in his great soliloquy in Act Five, though he has long since been deposed and imprisoned and would seem to have little left to lose from admitting guilt. This may be more an indication of Richard's self-absorption than his innocence, for he also never denies giving the order; certainly his behavior in the first few scenes is consistent with a man who fears publically exhuming Gloucester—easier to put off acting till the last possible moment. When that moment arrives, rather than hazard the outcome of a fiercely partisan fight, he banishes the would-be combatants.

Richard cloaks this perversion of justice in the guise of pacifism:

For that our kingdom's earth should not be soiled  
 With that dear blood which it hath fostered;  
 And for our eyes do hate the dire aspect  
 Of civil wounds plowed up with neighbors' sword;  
 And for we think the eagle-winged pride  
 Of sky-aspiring and ambitious thoughts  
 With rival-hating envy set on you  
 To wake our peace, which in our country's cradle  
 Draws the sweet infant breath of gentle sleep;  
 Which so roused up with boist'rous untuned drums,  
 With harsh-resounding trumpets' dreadful bray  
 And grating shock of wrathful iron arms,  
 Might from our quiet confines fright fair peace  
 And make us wade even in our kindred's blood:

Therefore we banish you our territories.

[I.iii.125–39]

Yet, as before, the lofty rhetoric collapses under scrutiny. In a triumph of close reading, Harold Goddard strips away “the piled-up relative clauses” and “excess of hyphenated adjectives” to uncover the contradiction at the heart of Richard’s argument:

And for we think the eagle-winged pride  
Of sky-aspiring and ambitious thoughts  
With rival-hating envy set on you  
To wake our peace ...  
Which ...  
Might from our quiet confines fright fair peace ...

Or, as Goddard exclaims, “Subject and object the same!” [151–2]. So complacent has Richard become in the role of “God’s substitute,” the idea that anyone might actually parse his gilded phrases is inconceivable to him. Even he seems no longer to hear himself, if indeed he ever did, so that not only his pronouncement of banishment but countless other bits of nonsense leap carelessly from his tongue during these early scenes. As Mowbray and Bolingbroke prepare to leave England, Richard calls them back to swear an oath “never . . . / To plot, contrive, or complot any ill / ’Gainst us, our state, our subjects, or our land” [I.iii.188–90]. A reasonable demand, except that Richard has the enemies swear only “by the duty that [they] owe to God”; as for what they owe their king, he adds, almost whimsically, “Our part therein we banish with yourselves” [I.iii.180–1].

It is in light of such remarks—which if not hubristic are incredibly naive—that other unsettling subtexts appear. Richard’s attempt to impress upon Mowbray his impartiality in the quarrel with Bolingbroke (“Were he my brother, *nay, my kingdom’s heir, / ...* Such neighbor nearness to our sacred blood / Should nothing privilege him ...”

[I.i.116–20, *my italics*]) suddenly reads like an endorsement of treasonous thoughts; likewise, Bolingbroke’s earlier vow not to use his own royal blood to excuse inaction against the lesser-born Mowbray (“Pale trembling coward, there I throw my gage, / Disclaiming here the kindred of the king ...” [I.i.69-70]) sounds suspiciously like the preamble to treason itself. Richard may be voicing this very suspicion several lines later when he wonders aloud, “How high a pitch his resolution soars!” [I.i.109].

Ultimately, the extent to which Richard or Bolingbroke is conscious of the total range of meaning in his lines matters less than the atmosphere of instability they produce. As we shall see, overemphasizing this question of consciousness reduces Bolingbroke to a schemer better suited to the flat pageantry of the *Henry VI* plays, and sticks Richard with the inexplicable motive of trying to get himself deposed. What Shakespeare does suggest in these early scenes is a kingdom teetering on the brink of civil war, and a king too self-absorbed to notice. Richard repeatedly fails to connect his shortsighted policies—which include “farm[ing the] royal realm” (i.e., leasing his lands to upstarts such as Bagot and Green) as a quick source of revenue [I.iv.45–7]—with his increasing unpopularity, particularly in contrast to Bolingbroke. The exiled duke offers Richard a much-needed lesson in public relations; as Richard tells it,

Ourself and Bushy, Bagot here, and Green  
 Observed his courtship to the common people;  
 How he did seem to dive into their hearts  
 With humble and familiar courtesy;  
 What reverence he did throw away on slaves,  
 Wooing poor craftsmen with the craft of smiles  
 And patient underbearing of his fortune,  
 As ’twere to banish their affects with him.  
 Off goes his bonnet to an oyster wench;  
 A brace of draymen bid God speed him well  
 And had the tribute of his supple knee,  
 With “Thanks, my countrymen, my loving friends”;

As were our England in reversion his,  
And he our subjects' next degree in hope.

[I.iv.23–36]

As usual, the king is keenly attuned to the trappings of a good performance. He even seems to recognize the subversive quality of Bolingbroke's populist gestures, which if given sufficient scope could bring about the "reversion" Richard fears.<sup>1</sup> But "if" is precisely the point, at least for Richard—in banishing Bolingbroke, he believes he has circumvented the conditional. Never mind the sympathetic "slaves" left behind, though they are growing disenchanted with their royal master. In the words of the flatterer Green: "Well, [Bolingbroke] is gone, and with him go these thoughts!" [I.iv.37]. Or, as Richard himself succinctly puts it, in the following scene: "His time is spent, our pilgrimage must be. / So much for that" [II.i.154–5].

The occasion for this last statement, however, is not the departure of Bolingbroke but the death of his father, Gaunt. And here is where Richard's miscalculations finally prove disastrous. For the king has Irish wars to finance, only "[his] coffers, with too great a court / And liberal largess, are grown somewhat light" [I.iv.43–4]. This is Richard's own admission, though it is consistent with the picture drawn by his enemies of an "unstaïd youth" whose "rash fierce blaze of riot cannot last" [II.i.2 & 33]. Rather than lessen his largess, Richard opts to seize Gaunt's assets; this action not only disinherits Bolingbroke, whose exile denies him the opportunity to protest, it also signals to every other lord, regardless of his loyalty: *This could happen to you*. As the Duke of York (another uncle) exclaims, in a rare display of wisdom, "If you do wrongfully seize Hereford's rights, / ... You pluck a thousand dangers on your head, / You lose a thousand

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<sup>1</sup> "Reversion" suggests a *reversal*, obviously, but also the term signifies the legal right of succession, a meaning that cannot please the heirless Richard.

well-disposed hearts ...” [II.i.201–6]. To which Richard tersely replies, “Think what you will, we seize into our hands / His plate, his goods, his money, and his lands” [II.i.209–10].

Interestingly, this terseness is more rule than exception for the Richard of Acts One and Two. The poet-king who seizes the stage even as he loses his crown speaks barely fifteen percent of the lines in the first nine scenes<sup>2</sup>; his wit fails even to keep pace with the dying Gaunt’s:

*Gaunt:* Old Gaunt indeed, and gaunt in being old. . . .  
 The pleasure that some fathers feed upon  
 Is my strict fast—I mean my children’s looks—  
 And therein fasting hast thou made me gaunt.  
 Gaunt am I for the grave, gaunt as a grave,  
 Whose hollow womb inherits nought but bones.  
*Richard:* Can sick men play so nicely with their names?  
*Gaunt:* No, misery makes sport to mock itself.  
 Since thou dost seek to kill my name in me,  
 I mock my name, great king, to flatter thee.  
*Richard:* Should dying men flatter with those that live?  
*Gaunt:* No, no! men living flatter those that die.  
*Richard:* Thou, now a-dying, sayest thou flatterest me.  
*Gaunt:* O, no! thou diest, though I the sicker be.

[II.i.74–91]

Gaunt does not intend to waste his final breaths on flattery; in death he finds the nerve he lacked in life:

Now, he that made me knows I see thee ill;  
 Ill in myself to see, in thee seeing ill.  
 Thy deathbed is no lesser than thy land,  
 Wherein thou liest in reputation sick;  
 And thou, too careless patient as thou art,  
 Committ’st thy anointed body to the cure  
 Of those physicians that first wounded thee.  
 A thousand flatterers sit within thy crown,

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<sup>2</sup> By my count, 210 of 1340 total lines; during this same stretch, Bolingbroke speaks 230 lines. By contrast, in the ten scenes that follow his return from Ireland, Richard speaks 540 of 1414 total lines, or 38 percent; Bolingbroke drops to 177 lines.



Whose compass is no bigger than thy head;<sup>3</sup>  
 And yet, encaged in so small a verge,  
 The waste is no whit lesser than thy land. . . .  
 Landlord of England art thou now, not king.

[II.i.93–113]

In response to this masterpiece of rhetoric—compact and lucid as, image by image, it condemns him—Richard can only sputter empty threats:

A lunatic lean-witted fool,  
 Presuming on an ague's privilege,  
 Darest with thy frozen admonition  
 Make pale our cheek, chasing the royal blood  
 With fury from his native residence.  
 Now, by my seat's right royal majesty,  
 Wert thou not brother to great Edward's son,  
 This tongue that runs so roundly in thy head  
 Should run thy head from thy unreverent shoulders.

[II.i.115–23]

But Gaunt has saved his most devastating blows for last:

O, spare me not, my brother Edward's son,  
 For that I was his father Edward's son!  
 That blood already, like the pelican,  
 Hast thou tapped out and drunkenly caroused.  
 My brother Gloucester, plain well-meaning soul . . .  
 May be a precedent and witness good  
 That thou respect'st not spilling Edward's blood.

[II.i.124–31]

Gaunt thus leaves Richard to his fury—which undoubtedly sways the king's reckless decision to confiscate the dead man's property. This reassertion of royal power restores Richard's cheerfulness (“Be merry, for our time of stay is short” [II.i.223]); it also furnishes a trio of disaffected lords, including the powerful Northumberland, with an excuse to join Bolingbroke, who has returned to England to claim his inheritance.

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<sup>3</sup> Is Richard taking notes? In his next appearance he refers to “the hollow crown / That rounds the mortal temples of a king,” wherein “the antic sits” [III.ii.160-2]—death having replaced Gaunt's “thousand flatterers.”

It is only when Richard returns from rebellious Ireland, in Act Three, to find worse rebellion at home that his language truly begins to change. The transformation makes his demise inevitable (if it weren't already); it also makes him the most interesting person onstage. Richard's first instinct is to sentimentalize the realm he has for so long taken for granted:

I weep for joy  
 To stand upon my kingdom once again.  
 Dear earth, I do salute thee with my hand,  
 Though rebels wound thee with their horses' hoofs.  
 As a long-parted mother with her child  
 Plays fondly with her tears and smiles in meeting,  
 So weeping, smiling, greet I thee, my earth,  
 And do thee favors with my royal hands.

[III.ii.4–11]

Has the threat posed by the invader Bolingbroke awakened in Richard an appreciation for land beyond its pecuniary value? His emotion seems genuine, yet his actions—particularly the elaborate “salute” to the earth—are no less a performance than Bolingbroke's earlier “courtship to the common people.” Richard had scorned such affectation in a rival, yet his own display seems to fire his imagination; what follows is both irrational and inspired:

Feed not thy sovereign's foe, my gentle earth,  
 Nor with thy sweets comfort his ravenous sense;  
 But let thy spiders that suck up thy venom,  
 And heavy-gaited toads, lie in their way,  
 Doing annoyance to the treacherous feet  
 Which with usurping steps do trample thee.  
 Yield stinging nettles to mine enemies;  
 And when they from thy bosom pluck a flower,  
 Guard it, I pray thee, with a lurking adder  
 Whose double tongue may with a mortal touch  
 Throw death upon thy sovereign's enemies.

[III.ii.12–22]

Finally out of breath, he pauses long enough to catch his followers' bemused expressions:

Mock not my senseless conjuration, lords.  
 This earth shall have a feeling, and these stones  
 Prove armed soldiers ere her native king  
 Shall falter under foul rebellion's arms.

[III.ii.23–6]

The Bishop of Carlisle, who shall eventually prove one of Richard's most loyal subjects, tactfully suggests a different strategy; another loyal subject, the Duke of Aumerle (York's son and therefore Richard's cousin), is more direct: "He means, my lord, that we are too remiss, / Whilst Bolingbroke, through our security, / Grows strong and great in substance and in power" [III.ii.33–5].

Richard's reply is mere, magnificent fancy. The fundamental point—"The breath of worldly men cannot depose / The deputy elected by the Lord" [III.ii.56–7]—has previously been expressed by Gaunt [I.ii.37–41]; Richard's folly—and triumph—is to ornament this flimsy stance with such memorable poetry, one is *almost* tempted to join the king in his dreamscape:

Discomfortable cousin! know'st thou not  
 That when the searching eye of heaven is hid  
 Behind the globe, that lights the lower world,  
 Then thieves and robbers range abroad unseen  
 In murders and in outrage boldly here;  
 But when from under this terrestrial ball  
 He fires the proud tops of the eastern pines  
 And darts his light through every guilty hole,  
 Then murders, treasons, and detested sins,  
 The cloak of night being plucked from off their backs,  
 Stand bare and naked, trembling at themselves?  
 So when this thief, this traitor Bolingbroke,  
 Who all this while hath reveled in the night  
 Whilst we were wand'ring with the antipodes,  
 Shall see us rising in our throne, the east,  
 His treasons will sit blushing in his face,  
 Not able to endure the sight of day,  
 But self-affrighted tremble at his sin.

[III.ii.36–53]

Captivated by language, Richard crescendos to one of the most perfectly phrased untruths ever uttered: “Not all the water in the rough rude sea / Can wash the balm off from an anointed king” [III.ii.54–5]. Shakespeare repeatedly returns to the image of cleansing water, each time prompting us to consider whether any such “balm” remains on Richard . . . or perhaps is newly apparent through his suffering. For the moment, at least, the king’s strength proves as fleeting as his visions of spiders, toads, even “glorious angel[s]” [III.ii.61] fighting on his behalf. Messenger after messenger enters to report only death, desertion, and betrayal; following each loss Richard puffs himself back up, only so the next blow can further deflate him. At last he finds he much prefers “that sweet way . . . to despair” [III.ii.205]. This is a defining realization for Richard, whose charmed life till now has left him woefully unprepared for adversity. Instead, he retreats into language. Words are so much easier than people to manipulate.

Richard’s best speeches are absolutely drenched in sweet despair. Perhaps stoics make better kings, but sensualists make better tragic-kings:

Of comfort no man speak!  
 Let’s talk of graves, of worms, and epitaphs,  
 Make dust our paper, and with rainy eyes  
 Write sorrow on the bosom of the earth.  
 Let’s choose executors and talk of wills.  
 And yet not so—for what can we bequeath,  
 Save our deposed bodies to the ground?  
 Our lands, our lives, and all are Bolingbroke’s,  
 And nothing can we call our own but death  
 And that small model of the barren earth  
 Which serves as paste and cover to our bones.

[III.ii.144–154]

Has Richard really quit? He sounds the part. Yet as long as he has breath he shall insist on speaking:

For God’s sake let us sit upon the ground

And tell sad stories of the death of kings!  
 How some have been deposed, some slain in war,  
 Some haunted by the ghosts they have deposed,  
 Some poisoned by their wives, some sleeping killed—  
 All murdered ...

[III.ii.155–60]

And then it comes. Speak enough words, some are bound to be true. Some may even be profound:

[F]or within the hollow crown  
 That rounds the mortal temples of a king  
 Keeps death his court; and there the antic sits,  
 Scoffing his state and grinning at his pomp;  
 Allowing him a breath, a little scene,  
 To monarchize, be feared, and kill with looks;  
 Infusing him with self and vain conceit,  
 As if this flesh which walls about our life  
 Were brass impregnable; and humored thus,  
 Comes at the last, and with a little pin  
 Bores through his castle wall, and farewell king!

[III.ii.160–70]

Deserted by God as well as men, Richard, perhaps for the first time, peers inward. That he does not linger there—that he continues to orate for two more acts—is no surprise; even for disciplined thinkers, self-knowledge is elusive. For Richard, almost to the end, words remain pretty, witty things; his capacity for irony swells, but he uses it mainly to mock—friends, enemies, and himself alike:

Cover your heads, and mock not flesh and blood  
 With solemn reverence. Throw away respect,  
 Tradition, form, and ceremonious duty;  
 For you have but mistook me all this while.  
 I live with bread like you, feel want, taste grief,  
 Need friends. Subjected thus,  
 How can you say to me I am a king?

[III.ii.171–7]

Of course, within a dozen lines he proves he does not mean this. “My father has a power,” Aumerle offers. “Inquire of him, / And learn to make a body of a limb”

[III.ii.186–7]. Again Richard bounces up: “This ague fit of fear is overblown. / An easy task it is to win our own” [III.ii.190–1]. And again, just as quickly, death pulls him back:

*Scroop:* Your uncle York is joined with Bolingbroke,  
And all your northern castles yielded up,  
And all your southern gentlemen in arms  
Upon his party.

*Richard:* Thou hast said enough.  
Beshrew thee, cousin, which didst lead me forth  
Of that sweet way I was in to despair!  
. . . Let no man speak again  
To alter this, for counsel is but vain.

[III.ii.200–14]

No man should speak again, of course, except the king. But before we listen further, several others deserve attention, including a rare woman:

### **Richard’s Queen**

The historical Isabella (she is never named in the play) was only ten when Bolingbroke returned from exile; though Shakespeare has clearly aged her, so that she may better empathize with her husband, it does not seem to have been by more than a few years, and she has little to do with the play’s politics. Nowhere is this more evident than in the famous “garden” scene. As Bolingbroke rides in triumph toward London, the queen is left behind, with her ladies-in-waiting, to count the waning hours of her reign. Like Richard, she transforms every call to action to a symbol of wretchedness:

*Queen:* What sport shall we devise here in this garden  
To drive away the heavy thought of care?

*Lady:* Madam, we’ll play at bowls.

*Queen:* ’Twill make me think the world is full of rubs  
And that my fortune runs against the bias.

*Lady:* Madam, we’ll dance.

*Queen:* My legs can keep no measure in delight  
When my poor heart no measure keeps in grief.  
Therefore no dancing, girl; some other sport.

*Lady:* Madam, we’ll tell tales.

*Queen:* Of sorrow or of joy?

*Lady:* Of either, madam.  
*Queen:* Of neither, girl;  
 For if of joy, being altogether wanting,  
 It doth remember me the more of sorrow;  
 Or if of grief, being altogether had,  
 It adds more sorrow to my want of joy;  
 For what I have I need not to repeat,  
 And what I want it boots not to complain.

[III.iv.1–18]

Even for a woman in a Shakespearean history, Richard's queen is quite passive. She is absent from the entire first act, including the fateful trial by combat, and though she does accompany the king to Gaunt's deathbed, her single line ("How fares our noble uncle Lancaster?" [II.i.71]) goes unheard by the hot-tempered men. She will not see Richard again until Act Five. Theirs is a strange relationship, though I find no evidence for Bolingbroke's worst charge, leveled at the royal favorites Bushy and Green:

You have in manner with your sinful hours  
 Made a divorce betwixt his queen and him,  
 Broke the possession of a royal bed,  
 And stained the beauty of a fair queen's cheeks  
 With tears drawn from her eyes by your foul wrongs.

[III.i.11–15]

This makes for effective propaganda but suspect history. Only three scenes earlier we witnessed the queen confiding in these same men who are supposed to have seduced her husband. She is afflicted with a "life-harming heaviness" [II.ii.3] when Richard leaves for Ireland, and she professes to "know no cause / Why I should welcome such a guest as grief / Save bidding farewell to so sweet a guest / As my sweet Richard" [II.ii.6–9]. Hardly the picture of a "broken bed."

Bushy is eager to help, though his advice is so beautifully impractical we might suppose his advancement at court is due not to any homosexual leanings but to his facility with the king's English:

Each substance of a grief hath twenty shadows,  
 Which shows like grief itself, but is not so;  
 For sorrow's eye, glazed with blinding tears,  
 Divides one thing entire to many objects,  
 Like perspectives, which rightly gazed upon,  
 Show nothing but confusion—eyed awry,  
 Distinguish form.

[II.ii.14–20]

The queen then demonstrates her own facility, suggesting she is closer in spirit to Richard than Bolingbroke finds convenient to believe:

*Bushy*: 'Tis nothing but conceit, my gracious lady.  
*Queen*: 'Tis nothing less. Conceit is still derived  
 From some forefather grief. Mine is not so,  
 For nothing hath begot my something grief,  
 Or something hath the nothing that I grieve.  
 'Tis in reversion that I do possess;  
 But what it is, that is not yet known—what,  
 I cannot name. 'Tis nameless woe, I wot.

[II.ii.33–40]

There is that word again, “reversion,” which Richard hung on Bolingbroke’s wooing of the commons: “As were our England in reversion his.” Fortune’s wheel is turning—in their separate spheres Richard and his queen both sense this. Yet all they can do is wrap their losses in words, like gauze.

What then should we expect when king and queen finally—perhaps for the first time—compose together? The occasion is Richard’s slow march to prison, following his deposition; the queen sets the scene as high tragedy:

This way the king will come. This is the way  
 To Julius Caesar’s ill-erected tower,  
 In whose flint bosom my condemned lord  
 Is doomed a prisoner by proud Bolingbroke.  
 Here let us rest, if this rebellious earth  
 Have any resting for her true king’s queen.

[V.i.1–6]





o'erpowered" [V.i.29–31]. Either way the metaphor is apt; Richard signals his approval by assigning her what is for him the most crucial task of all, namely telling his story:

In winter's tedious nights sit by the fire  
 With good old folks, and let them tell thee tales  
 Of woeful ages long ago betid;  
 And ere thou bid good night, to quite their griefs  
 Tell thou the lamentable tale of me,  
 And send the hearers weeping to their beds.

[V.i.40–5]

The reunion is interrupted by Northumberland, whom Bolingbroke (now King Henry IV) has ordered to convey Richard to prison and, in a parallel injustice, banish the queen to France. The irony is not lost on Richard, who turns Bolingbroke's accusations against Bushy and Green back on the new king: "Doubly divorced! Bad men, you violate / A twofold marriage—'twixt my crown and me, / And then betwixt me and my married wife" [V.i.71–3]. The queen pleads with Northumberland to "[b]anish us both, and send the king with me." ("That were some love, but little policy," the brusque rebel, suddenly witty, replies [V.i.83–4].) Yet what exactly would these unhappy lovers do if they were free to live out their lives together. Their parting lines suggest two people who, having never previously thought deeply about their relationship, feel compelled now to memorialize it yet lack the vocabulary beyond vague "groans" and "moans" [V.i.89–90]:

*Richard:* Come, come, in wooing sorrow let's be brief,  
 Since, wedding it, there is such length in grief.  
 One kiss shall stop our mouths, and dumbly part.  
 Thus give I mine, and thus take I thy heart.  
*Queen:* Give me mine own again. 'Twere no good part  
 To take on me to keep and kill thy heart.  
 So, now I have mine own again, be gone,  
 That I may strive to kill it with a groan.  
*Richard:* We make woe wanton with this fond delay.  
 Once more adieu! The rest let sorrow say.

[V.i.93–102]

This “exchange” of hearts recalls (or anticipates) the first kiss between Romeo and Juliet, the occasion for a similarly worded contemplation of shared sin.<sup>4</sup> But unlike Juliet, the nameless queen rejects her lover’s offer as “no good part”; even were she to accept his heart, her graciousness would be mainly for show, a gesture *expected* of two lovers never to meet again. Richard, bereft of ideas, grows frustrated by the “fond delay” of their parting and dismisses her—a sadly fitting end to a marriage that never quite was.

### Bolingbroke

For all his political talents, in the end Bolingbroke wins because he is as receptive to good fortune as Richard is resigned to bad. Who can say exactly when he realizes the crown can be his, let alone when he determines to take it? Bolingbroke’s journey through the play is marked by caution, though initially it is his enemies who appear cautious. “Cousin of Hereford,” Richard begins, “what dost thou object / Against the Duke of Norfolk, Thomas Mowbray?” [I.i.28-9]; Bolingbroke, after the obligatory bit of royal flattery, gets right to the point:

Now, Thomas Mowbray, do I turn to thee,  
And mark my greeting well; for what I speak  
My body shall make good upon this earth  
Or my divine soul answer it in heaven.  
Thou art a traitor and a miscreant,  
Too good to be so, and too bad to live,  
Since the more fair and crystal is the sky,  
The uglier seem the clouds that in it fly.  
Once more, the more to aggravate the note,  
With a foul traitor’s name stuff I thy throat  
And wish, so please my sovereign, ere I move,  
What my tongue speaks my right-drawn sword may prove.

[I.i.35–46]

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<sup>4</sup> *Romeo*: Thus from my lips, by thine my sin is purged.

*Juliet*: Then have my lips the sin that they have took.

*Romeo*: Sin from my lips? O trespass sweetly urged!

Give me my sin again. [I.v.108–11]

The antitheses are conventional (fair sky: ugly clouds), even clumsy (“Too good to be so, and too bad to live” makes me groan, at least), but there is no mistaking the strong iambic beat, the monosyllables and masculine endings, the shift to rhyme as he repeats his charge (lest anyone miss it!). This is a speech that demands to be heard, and compared to which Mowbray’s reply—enjambéd, halting, and so very careful—flounders evasively:

Let not my cold words here accuse my zeal.  
 ’Tis not the trial of a woman’s war,  
 The bitter clamor of two eager tongues,  
 Can arbitrate this cause betwixt us twain;  
 The blood is hot that must be cooled for this.  
 Yet can I not of such tame patience boast  
 As to be hushed and nought at all to say.  
 First, the fair reverence of your highness curbs me  
 From giving reins and spurs to my free speech,  
 Which else would post until it had returned  
 These terms of treason doubled down his throat.  
 Setting aside his high blood’s royalty,  
 And let him be no kinsman to my liege,  
 I do defy him and I spit at him,  
 Call him a slanderous coward and a villain;  
 Which to maintain, I would allow him odds  
 And meet him, were I tied to run afoot  
 Even to the frozen ridges of the Alps,  
 Or any other ground inhabitable  
 Where ever Englishman durst set his foot.

[I.i.47–66]

Mowbray may be constrained by codes of gentlemanly conduct, whereby a person of lesser birth would not be permitted to challenge his betters (consider Act Four, when Bolingbroke forbids Bagot to take up the Duke of Aumerle’s gage [IV.i.30]); perhaps this explains his bizarre conclusion in the Alps! The scene ends with John of Gaunt’s half-hearted attempt, at Richard’s urging, “[t]o be a make-peace” [I.i.160] between his son and his enemy. Needless to say, the son is not convinced:

Ere my tongue  
 Shall wound my honor with such feeble wrong  
 Or sound so base a parole, my teeth shall tear  
 The slavish motive of recanting fear  
 And spit it bleeding in his high disgrace,  
 Where shame doth harbor, even in Mowbray's face.

[I.i.190–5]

The play does not contain a more grotesque image, though its brutal force is blunted by the concluding line, with its needless gloss. Again Bolingbroke proves a poor poet—by his own admission he doubts the imagination's power to shape reality.

Confronted with six long years in exile, he is advised by his father to “[l]ook what thy soul holds dear, imagine it / To lie that way thou goest, not whence thou com'st”

[I.iii.286–7]. Bolingbroke's reply is both characteristic and illuminating:

O, who can hold a fire in his hand  
 By thinking on the frosty Caucasus?  
 Or cloy the hungry edge of appetite  
 By bare imagination of a feast?  
 Or wallow naked in December snow  
 By thinking on fantastic summer's heat?  
 O, no! The apprehension of the good  
 Gives but the greater feeling to the worse.

[I.iii.294–301]

The duke shall retreat to this philosophical safe harbor time and again. Whatever we may think of Bolingbroke, not once—neither publically nor in soliloquy—does he dare imagine, or “apprehend,” himself wearing the crown, not until Richard has all but deposed himself by surrendering outside Flint Castle.

Bolingbroke returns to England from exile with the stated intention of reclaiming his stolen inheritance. As he protests to his uncle York,

My father's goods are all distrained and sold;  
 And these, and all, are all amiss employed.  
 What would you have me do? I am a subject,  
 And I challenge law. Attorneys are denied me,

And therefore personally I lay my claim  
To my inheritance of free descent.

[II.iii.131–6]

For modern, democratic audiences, at least, it is difficult to deny the justness of Bolingbroke's cause; even York admits to "hav[ing] had feeling of my cousin's wrongs"

[II.iii.141]. Northumberland makes a similar argument, to York as well as Richard:

His coming hither hath no further scope  
Than for his lineal royalties, and to beg  
Enfranchisement immediate on his knees;  
Which on thy royal party granted once,  
His glittering arms he will commend to rust,  
His barbed steeds<sup>5</sup> to stables, and his heart  
To faithful service of your majesty.

[III.iii.112–18]

Of course, as Shakespeare continually reminds us, vows are but words, conveniently twisted—or forgotten—when circumstances change. Northumberland sang a very different tune in the previous act; having learned Bolingbroke is making for Ravenspurgh, in northern England, "[w]ith eight tall ships, three thousand men of war," he urges his fellow malcontents Ross and Willoughby:

If then we shall shake off our slavish yoke,  
Imp out our drooping country's broken wing,  
Redeem from broking pawn the blemished crown,  
Wipe off the dust that hides our scepter's gilt,  
And make high majesty look like itself,  
Away with me in post to Ravenspurgh ...

[II.i.286–96]

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<sup>5</sup> Is Shakespeare recalling a similar phrase from his first "Richard" play, *Richard III*, when the hunchbacked king-to-be contemptuously dismisses peacetime ("Grim-visaged war ... / ... instead of mounting barbed steeds / ... capers nimbly in a lady's chamber / To the lascivious pleasing of a lute" [I.i.9–13])? "Barbed steeds" do not belong in stables. Is the implication that Bolingbroke, like Richard of Gloucester, will never be content to be less than king?

Yet for all their apparent expectations, the rebellious lords are careful not to speak in such openly treasonous terms to Bolingbroke; likewise, he does not promise anything more specific than “[e]vermore thank[s] . . . / Which, till my infant fortune comes to years, / Stands for my bounty” [II.iii.65–7]. What exactly this “bounty” might be he leaves to their imaginations, an art he is still perfecting in the final scenes, when his calculated ambiguities (“Have I no friend will rid me of this living fear?” [V.iv.2]) tempt Exton to murder Richard in his prison cell.

There are other reasons to doubt Bolingbroke wants nothing more than his inheritance. Recall the events immediately following the death of John of Gaunt. Richard has just seized Gaunt’s (now Bolingbroke’s) property, and—his mood greatly improved—he prepares to depart for Ireland. A brief stage direction follows: “*Exeunt King and Queen. . . . Manet Northumberland*” [II.i.223]. The implication is that when Northumberland turns to Ross and Willoughby (who have remained onstage with him), the scene continues as before, so that Gaunt has not been dead an hour before Northumberland announces Bolingbroke’s impending arrival at Ravenspurgh.

Now surely, if Bolingbroke is just offshore (with “three thousand men of war”!), he must have left France *before* his father’s death, and Richard’s thievery, could provide so compelling an excuse. Suppose for a moment his father had not died and Richard had not so egregiously violated his rights—what on earth was Bolingbroke planning to say to his justifiably outraged king? I suspect the answer is *nothing*, for he knew Richard would be safely out of the country; Northumberland admits as much when he says, of

Bolingbroke and his army, “Perhaps they had [been here] ere this, but that they stay / The first departing of the king for Ireland” [II.i.289–90].<sup>6</sup>

*Aha!* we might conclude—proof that Bolingbroke had designs on the throne from the start, that he returned to England to spark an insurrection. Still I hesitate, for several reasons. To begin, so much of Bolingbroke’s “strategy” is contingent on twists of fate and lucky strokes he could not possibly have anticipated: the storms that delay Richard and scatter the Welshmen; the promotion of the sympathetic (and inept) York to regent; and most crucially, Richard’s apparent, irrational determination to make things as easy as possible for would-be usurpers. I repeat: Bolingbroke’s most powerful tool for rallying support—his loss of title and property, an injustice that revealed to every overtaxed aristocrat “the very wrack that [they] must suffer” [II.i.267] should Richard’s tyranny continue unchecked—was not even handed him until *after* he chose to rebel. No matter how unpopular Richard may have been, the displacing of a monarch is hardly something to undertake without first examining one’s chances. Yet Shakespeare does not give Bolingbroke a single speech, soliloquy, or even aside in which to grapple with his motives. Perhaps he does this offstage? Regardless, this proves he is no villain, for what Shakespearean villain can make it through a scene, let alone a whole play, without contemplating his villainy?

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<sup>6</sup> To those who might argue Shakespeare intended the aforementioned scene to be divided in two (that is, Northumberland, Ross, and Willoughby exit with Richard, then re-enter “several months” later): Aside from being an inefficient piece of staging, such an interpretation is contradicted by the following scene, when Green—having just received word that Bolingbroke “with uplifted arms is safe arrived / At Ravenspurgh”—races onstage to ask if “the king is not yet shipped for Ireland” [II.ii.50–1 & 42]. Green’s urgency makes clear that Gaunt’s death, Richard’s departure, and Bolingbroke’s return happen in rapid succession.



More likely is the possibility that Bolingbroke chooses not to think at all. As previously noted, in the play's first half Bolingbroke speaks a greater percentage of the lines than Richard. It is only after he finds himself within grasping distance of the crown that he begins to grow silent, unreflecting, as though he fears what too free speech might reveal. He senses the winds have changed, but he is content to let them blow him where they will, so long as they first blow him back to England. Where he goes from there is more safely left to fortune.

Indeed, though it is tempting to compare the word-infatuated Richard to Hamlet, in one crucial aspect Bolingbroke comes closer to embodying Hamlet's spirit. Returning to Denmark from his own exile at sea, and questioned by Horatio as to how, in spite of every odd stacked against him, he has managed to survive, Hamlet remarks, "There's a divinity that shapes our ends, / Rough-hew them how we will"; he later elaborates, "If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all" [V.ii.10–11 & 198–200]. How uncannily this speaks for Bolingbroke, though he seems incapable of speaking it himself. In protesting to every ear that "I come but for mine own" [III.iii.196], he both states truth ("Your own is yours, and I am yours, and all" [III.iii.197], concedes Richard) and lies—but not for the reasons we might think, for Bolingbroke has not truly come *for anything*. Yet by the final curtain he has accepted everything—the model of readiness. "Take not, good cousin, further than you should, / Lest you mistake the heavens are over our heads," York warns his rising nephew, who in a moment of inspiration turns the warning on its head: "I know it, uncle, and oppose not myself / Against their will" [III.iii.16–19]. The fascinating thing is this line could just as well be assigned to Richard. How the spirit of submission guides one

man to triumph, and the other to an early grave, is the crux of their relationship, and the question we must now address.

### **Abdication and Deposition**

How can Bolingbroke be said to submit when his central action in the play is to rebel? Rebel against a king he does, but a man may submit to a greater power, that of “the heavens ... over our heads.” This is not to claim God wants Bolingbroke instead of Richard to rule England; on the contrary, “the heavens” have only one certain plan for each of us: death. Considered in this light, *Richard II* contrasts a man who accepts the inevitability of death with one who clings shamelessly to life. Each of Bolingbroke’s actions risks death: accusing Mowbray of treason, a charge he must prove in combat “or this life be spent” [I.i.108]; defying Richard, who banished him “upon pain of life” [I.iii.140]; arming himself against his king, and ultimately taking his place on the throne, though his example shall invite every ambitious Englishman to contemplate the same. Bolingbroke’s assessment of his character, though it comes early in the play, is worth remembering throughout: “Not sick, although I have to do with death, / But lusty, young, and cheerly drawing breath” [I.iii.65–6].

By contrast, Richard takes every opportunity to invoke a death wish he does not really have. Perched in a tower, overlooking Bolingbroke’s army, Richard would have us believe he is more saint than king:

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!  
 I’ll give my jewels for a set of beads,  
 My gorgeous palace for a hermitage,  
 My gay apparel for an almsman’s gown,  
 My figured goblets for a dish of wood,

My scepter for a palmer's walking staff,  
 My subjects for a pair of carved saints,  
 And my large kingdom for a little grave,  
 A little little grave, an obscure grave ...

[III.iii.143–54]

Still Richard gives himself away—he is not searching his soul, he is crafting a new poem, and he cannot resist lingering a moment to tinker, as “little grave” becomes “little little grave” becomes “obscure grave.” To his great delight, his cousin Aumerle begins to cry; immediately Richard transforms the emotion into a fantastic conceit, whereby the combined effect of their tears is “to drop ... still upon one place / Till they have fretted us a pair of graves / Within the earth” [III.iii.166–8]. Yet not ten lines pass before we catch Richard pleading for life: “What says King Bolingbroke? Will his majesty / Give Richard leave to live till Richard die?” [III.iii.173–4].

Crowned by his enemy before he can crown himself, Bolingbroke hastens with the broken king to London, where he calls on Parliament to reopen the case of Gloucester's death. This time, however, he unambiguously makes Richard a co-conspirator in murder. “Who wrought it with the king” [IV.i.4], he asks the captive Bagot, who points his own finger at Aumerle. From every corner fly accusations and counter-accusations, until Aumerle finds himself so outnumbered he must beg “[s]ome honest Christian trust me with a gage” [IV.i.83] to defend his honor. At last Bolingbroke repeals Mowbray's banishment (only to learn Mowbray has died) and vows to assign every man his own trial by combat. The play seems to have started anew, with Bolingbroke king in practice if not yet in name, when York enters with the news that “plume-plucked Richard ... with willing soul / Adopts thee heir and his high scepter yields / To the possession of thy royal hand” [IV.i.108–10]. Only now, with shouts of

“long live Henry, fourth of that name!” ringing in his ears, does Bolingbroke confirm what the rest have been assuming all along: “In God’s name,” he cries, “I’ll ascend the regal throne” [IV.i.112–13]. From this point there is no mistaking his desire for the crown.

But wait! The honorable Bishop of Carlisle, who met Richard upon his return from Ireland and stood by him at Flint Castle, steps forward to give one of the most searing speeches in the play:

What subject can give sentence on his king?  
 And who sits here that is not Richard’s subject?  
 Thieves are not judged but they are by to hear,  
 Although apparent guilt be seen in them;  
 And shall the figure of God’s majesty,  
 His captain, steward, deputy elect,  
 Anointed, crowned, planted many years,  
 Be judged by subject and inferior breath,  
 And he himself not present? O, forfend it God  
 That, in a Christian climate, souls refined  
 Should show so heinous, black, obscene a deed!  
 I speak to subjects, and a subject speaks,  
 Stirred up by God, thus boldly for his king.  
 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;  
 Peace shall go sleep with Turks and infidels,  
 And in this seat of peace tumultuous wars  
 Shall kin with kin and kind with kind confound ...  
 O, if you raise this house against this house,  
 It will the woofullest division prove  
 That ever fell upon this cursed earth.  
 Prevent it, resist it, let it not be so,  
 Lest child, child’s children cry against you woe.

[IV.i.121-49]

It is a speech that looks both forward and back: forward to the civil wars that shall raise the red House of Lancaster against the white House of York; back to John of Gaunt’s

deathbed prophesy (though Gaunt's "seat of Mars" becomes for Carlisle a "seat of peace"—indeed, the word "peace" does not appear once in those famous lines of Gaunt's) [II.i.31–68], and to Richard's earlier, contradictory image of sleeping peace "frighting" itself. Though Carlisle's efforts land him in prison for "capital treason" [IV.i.151], he does convince the ever-cautious Bolingbroke to send for Richard, "that in common view / He may surrender. So we shall proceed / Without suspicion" [IV.i.155–7].

And so we arrive at the climax, a scene of such disturbing power it was stricken from all editions of the play printed during the reign of Queen Elizabeth [Dolan, xxxiii]. ("I am Richard II, know ye not that?" she is supposed to have remarked, presumably not with pleasure.) Richard enters with an elaborate show of humility; no doubt he has been polishing his lines ever since his surrender, though the result is toothless—sarcasm posing as satire:

Alack, why am I sent for to a king  
 Before I have shook off the regal thoughts  
 Wherewith I reigned? I hardly yet have learned  
 To insinuate, flatter, bow, and bend my knee.  
 Give sorrow leave a while to tutor me  
 To this submission. Yet I well remember  
 The favors of these men. Were they not mine?  
 Did they not sometime cry "All hail!" to me?  
 So Judas did to Christ; but he, in twelve,  
 Found truth in all but one; I, in twelve thousand none.

[IV.i.162–71]

The comparison to Christ is particularly outrageous (though perhaps not unexpected from one who since birth has been proclaimed "the figure of God's majesty"), but Richard does not belabor it. Instead, grabbing at one last straw, he shouts, "God save the king! Will no man say amen?" [IV.i.172]. Unfortunately, by declining all previous invitations

to resist, Richard has made his downfall inevitable; as concerned with self-preservation as he is, can he really expect anyone to alienate himself from the new regime by cheering the old?

In any event, he is met with silence, and his spirit seems to bow to necessity—too weary now even for sarcasm, he utters several of his least affected lines:

*Richard:* To do what service am I sent for hither?

*York:* To do that office of thine own good will  
Which tired majesty did make thee offer—  
The resignation of thy state and crown  
To Henry Bolingbroke.

*Richard:* Give me the crown. Here, cousin, seize the crown.  
Here, cousin, . . .

[IV.i.176–82]

These last words are subtly barbed, and perhaps Bolingbroke hesitates, reluctant too blatantly to “seize” anything from his pitiful cousin. The half-line “Here, cousin” suggests a pause in the action, and this momentary tension seems to reenergize Richard—fresh images and ironies pour from his mouth, as Bolingbroke stands by, powerless to silence him:

*Richard:* On this side my hand, and on that side thine.  
Now is this golden crown like a deep well  
That owes two buckets, filling one another,  
The emptier ever dancing in the air,  
The other down, unseen, and full of water.  
That bucket down and full of tears am I,  
Drinking my griefs whilst you mount up on high.

*Bolingbroke:* I thought you had been willing to resign.

*Richard:* My crown I am, but still my griefs are mine.  
You may my glories and my state depose,  
But not my griefs. Still am I king of those.

*Bolingbroke:* Part of your cares you give me with your crown.

*Richard:* Your cares set up do not pluck my cares down.  
My care is loss of care, by old care done;  
Your care is gain of care, by new care won.  
The cares I give I have, though given away;  
They tend the crown, yet still with me they stay.

*Bolingbroke*: Are you contented to resign the crown?

[IV.i.183–200]

One senses this is as close as Bolingbroke comes to losing his temper. However the question is delivered, Richard's reply contains so many layers neither actor nor audience can unpack them all. I do not refer to the entire speech that follows [IV.i.201–22]—yet another variation on Richard's favorite themes—but its first line only:

Ay, no; no, ay; for I must nothing be ...

The line's ambiguity is due partly to the fact that it may be spelled and punctuated a number of ways. Consider that "Ay" can mean both "Aye" ("yes") and "I" (and perhaps "eye" as well); this produces at least four relevant interpretations:

- 1) Yes, no; no, yes—that is, I no longer know whether I want the crown; because the crown has always defined me, I no longer know myself.
- 2) I, no; no I—that is, Do *I* resign the crown? No. Yet I shall lose it regardless, for I shall be nothing in death.
- 3) Yes. No, no I—that is, I *do* resign the crown, and in so doing have made myself nothing.
- 4) I, no; no eye—that is, I am nothing, for I closed my eyes when I most needed to see.

Wonderful! But which does Richard mean? The easiest to play is probably the first, for it is the least abstruse, the most grounded in action—each time Richard moves to give Bolingbroke the crown, he pulls it back, as though without it he'd be naked. The other meanings, as in all good poetry, flicker beneath the surface—as we perceive them, we are pulled ever more into the poem, so that Richard's achievement is to make himself the center of the play at the very moment he is, for all practical purposes, obliterated. But this moment too must pass, and Richard soon loses himself upon old ground, cataloguing in narcissistic detail the countless reasons we should pity him:

With mine own tears I wash away my balm,  
With mine own hands I give away my crown,

With mine own tongue deny my sacred state,  
 With mine own breath release all duteous oaths....  
 Long mayst thou live in Richard's seat to sit,  
 And soon lie Richard in an earthy pit!

[IV.i.207–19]

Yet worse remains than death. Northumberland hands Richard a different kind of catalogue, listing “[t]hese accusations and these grievous crimes / Committed by your person and your followers / Against the state and profit of this land.” The purpose? “That, by confessing them, the souls of men / May deem that you are worthily deposed” [IV.i.223–7]. Suddenly Richard blazes with authentic anger, as though the sheer audacity of treason cuts so quick and deep it bypasses the urge to perform. Whatever Richard’s sins, they do not justify the false pieties of hypocrites and thugs. “If thy offenses were upon record,” he tells Northumberland,

Would it not shame thee in so fair a troop  
 To read a lecture of them? If thou wouldst,  
 There shouldst thou find one heinous article,  
 Containing the deposing of a king  
 And cracking the strong warrant of an oath,  
 Marked with a blot, damned in the book of heaven.  
 Nay, all of you that stand and look upon me  
 Whilst that my wretchedness doth bait myself,  
 Though some of you, with Pilate, wash your hands,  
 Showing an outward pity, yet you Pilates  
 Have here delivered me to my sour cross,  
 And water cannot wash away your sin.

[IV.i.230–42]

Again the comparison to Christ threatens to waylay Richard as he gropes toward self-knowledge. The “wretchedness” is genuine, however, and by its light he sees the essential hollowness of “outward pity”—what does it matter if his fine words move latter-day Pilates to tears, or even shouts of “God save the king,” if in the end these tears serve only to blur the stain of betrayal? Tears join those two great symbols, water and



eyes (“aye,” “I”), and suddenly Richard’s own “eyes are full of tears; I cannot see” [IV.i.244]. But physical blindness can be a blessing if it forces one’s gaze inward (as *King Lear* shall remind us). “Nay, if I turn mine eyes upon myself,” Richard begins,

I find myself a traitor with the rest;  
For I have given here my soul’s consent  
T’ undeck the pompous body of a king;  
Made glory base, a sovereignty a slave,  
Proud majesty a subject, state a peasant.

[IV.i.247–52]

Ordinarily for Richard, such flashes of insight become self-indulgent reveries. Time and again we have seen him distance himself from an uncomfortable truth by “representing” it as some poetic object. This time, Northumberland’s unwelcome interjection staves off temptation, and a wave of fresh anger carries Richard deeper into his soul:

*Northumberland:* My lord—  
*Richard:* No lord of thine, thou haught, insulting man,  
Nor no man’s lord. I have no name, no title—  
No, not that name was given me at the font—  
But ’tis usurped. Alack the heavy day,  
That I have worn so many winters out  
And know not now what name to call myself!

[IV.i.253–9]

This is rare insight. It is also the concern of a poet, for what is poetry but the attempt to properly name each object and experience? With no interruptions to distract him, Richard seizes the chance to re-imagine himself: “O that I were a mockery king of snow, / Standing before the sun of Bolingbroke / To melt myself away in water drops!” [IV.i.260-2].

Again Richard would have us believe he desires death, and again his ensuing lines prove otherwise. What he wants, it turns out, is not death but a mirror—a representation

of life—“[t]hat it may show me what a face I have / Since it is bankrupt of his majesty” [IV.i.266–7]. It is difficult to imagine a less useful request, though it does make for effective theatre—gazing at himself in the mirror, Richard is transported so far from his present reality he ends up in another play! “Was this face the face / That every day under his household roof / Did keep ten thousand men?” [IV.i.281–3] he muses, Faustus and Helen at once, and Marlowe too, though none is a proper name for Richard. What a fall from “I know not now what name to call myself,” and several lines later he falls farther, smashing the mirror against the ground and pretending to find wisdom in its shards:

A brittle glory shineth in this face.  
As brittle as the glory is the face,  
For there it is, cracked in a hundred shivers.  
Mark, silent king, the moral of this sport—  
How soon my sorrow hath destroyed my face.

[IV.i.287–91]

I confess I do not understand Richard’s moral. As a warning to Bolingbroke (behave like me and you too shall be destroyed) it seems pointless—no one would accuse Bolingbroke of imitating Richard, whether in sorrow or otherwise. As a critique of his own behavior it works better, though again that word “sorrow” doesn’t quite fit—it is not sorrow that destroys Richard but vanity, complacency, arrogance. Essentially all Richard says here is that he has smashed a mirror, which returns us to the question of *why*.

Bolingbroke makes this very point, but Richard craves an audience, not an interlocutor:

*Bolingbroke:* The shadow of your sorrow hath destroyed  
The shadow of your face.

*Richard:* Say that again.  
The shadow of my sorrow? Ha! let’s see!  
'Tis very true; my grief lies all within;  
And these external manners of laments  
Are merely shadows to the unseen grief  
That swells with silence in the tortured soul.  
There lies the substance; and I thank thee, king,

For thy great bounty that not only giv'st  
 Me cause to wail, but teachest me the way  
 How to lament the cause.

[IV.i.292–302]

This is amusing, but what does it accomplish? Again Richard stumbles at the gate of truth—in distinguishing between external shadows and inner substance he seems to have realized something crucial about himself, yet the realization fizzles into one more attempt to goad Bolingbroke into losing his temper. And again Bolingbroke refuses the bait. If victory means letting Richard run his mouth longer than is comfortable, so be it. The new king even manages to sound cheerful as Richard limps to his conclusion:

*Richard:* I'll beg one boon,  
 And then be gone and trouble you no more.  
 Shall I obtain it?  
*Bolingbroke:* Name it, fair cousin.  
*Richard:* Fair cousin? I am greater than a king;  
 For when I was a king, my flatterers  
 Were then but subjects; being now a subject,  
 I have a king here to my flatterer.  
 Being so great, I have no need to beg.  
*Bolingbroke:* Yet ask.  
*Richard:* And shall I have?  
*Bolingbroke:* You shall.  
*Richard:* Then give me leave to go.  
*Bolingbroke:* Whither?  
*Richard:* Whither you will, so I were from your sights.  
*Bolingbroke:* Go some of you, convey him to the Tower.  
*Richard:* O, good! Convey? Conveyers are you all,  
 That rise thus nimbly by a true king's fall.  
*Bolingbroke:* On Wednesday next we solemnly proclaim  
 Our coronation. Lords, be ready all.

[IV.i.302–20]

And that is that. Richard is dragged off to prison, and King Henry IV turns his attention to his “unthrifty son” [V.iii.1], and to the seriocomic interlude involving the Duke and Duchess of York and their son, Aumerle, an easily managed crisis that hints at

more difficult crises to come. But this is to leap ahead to the next play, Henry's play. As for Richard's, there is one last scene to consider:

### **Swan Song**

Imprisoned, deprived of an audience, Richard for once seems interested in subjects greater than himself. "I have been studying how I may compare / This prison where I live unto the world" [V.v.1–2], he soliloquizes. Listen again to these two lines, especially their fulcrum, "how I may compare. . . ." Another metaphor from the poet-king, only now to a different end. Richard's purpose is to "beget / A generation of still-breeding thoughts"; what's more, he finds, "these same thoughts people this little world, / In humors like the people of this world, / For no thought is contented" [V.v.7–11]. In the space of a few lines he has composed for himself a new audience.

An audience of one's thoughts, however, is still an audience of one, and whether at court or in prison (a distinction Hamlet shall reject), Richard remains the sole citizen of his "little world." As he catalogues his diverse "humors," he resumes his winding quest for identity. Does he belong to "[t]he better sort, / As thoughts of things divine" [V.v.11–12]? Is he "tending to ambition" or "tending to content"? Ambitious thoughts "do plot / Unlikely wonders—how these vain weak nails / May tear a passage through the flinty ribs / Of this hard world, my ragged prison walls"; contented thoughts "flatter themselves / That they are not the first of fortune's slaves, / Nor shall not be the last" [V.v.18–25]. Perhaps to guard against confusion—or perhaps simply out of habit—Richard continues to rely on the familiar language of performance:

Thus play I in one person many people,  
And none contented. Sometimes am I king:  
Then treasons make me wish myself a beggar,  
And so I am. Then crushing penury

Persuades me I was better when a king;  
 Then am I kinged again; and by and by  
 Think that I am unkinged by Bolingbroke,  
 And straight am nothing. But whate'er I be,  
 Nor I, nor any man that but man is,  
 With nothing shall be pleased till he be eased  
 With being nothing.

[V.v.31–41]

Before it concludes in one more death wish, this soliloquy brings together nearly every major theme and symbol in the play; we even revisit John of Gaunt's advice to his son—that imagination may transform reality—as Richard is “kinged” and “unkinged” as fast as he can think it. As for the water imagery, as Richard notes,

... now hath time made me his numb'ring clock:  
 My thoughts are minutes; and with sighs they jar  
 Their watches on unto mine eyes, the outward watch,  
 Whereto my finger, like a dial's point,  
 Is pointing still, in cleansing them from tears.

[V.v.50–54]

In essence, then, for all that Richard has suffered, he remains the same man with the same preoccupations. Midway through his speech an unseen figure begins to play music—presumably not well, if we are to believe Richard's critique: “Ha—ha—keep time! How sour sweet music is / When time is broke and no proportion kept!” To his credit he does not miss the damning moral:

So is it in the music of men's lives.  
 And here have I the daintiness of ear  
 To check time broke in a disordered string;  
 But, for the concord of my state and time,  
 Had not an ear to hear my true time broke.  
 I wasted time, and now doth time waste me ...

[V.v.42–9]

Yet Richard lacks the grace to yield to a new performer, instead talking himself nearly to the edge of reason. *Nearly*, for when he falls short he blames the music (though I doubt

he has heard very much): “though it have help madmen to their wits, / In me it seems it will make wise men mad” [V.v.62–3]. How Richard can presume, even now, to use the words “wise” and “me” in the same sentence is beyond me—the very next lines demonstrate his folly, as he begs the unknown musician to resume playing, “[f]or ’tis a sign of love, and love to Richard / Is a strange brooch in this all-hating world” [V.v.65–6]. There is no indication the musician hears.

Instead, Richard receives an even surer “sign of love.” With a “Hail, royal prince,” a poor man enters; he identifies himself as “a poor groom of thy stable, king, / ... who, traveling towards York, / With much ado, at length, have gotten leave / To look upon my sometimes royal master’s face” [V.v.67 & 72–5]. But the faithful servant brings unwanted news:

*Groom:* O, how it erved my heart when I beheld,  
 In London streets, that coronation day,  
 When Bolingbroke rode on roan Barbary,  
 That horse that thou so often hast bestrid,  
 That horse that I so carefully have dressed!

*Richard:* Rode he on Barbary? Tell me, gentle friend,  
 How went he under him?

*Groom:* So proudly as if he disdained the ground.

*Richard:* So proud that Bolingbroke was on his back!  
 That jade hath eat bread from my royal hand;  
 This hand hath made him proud with clapping him.  
 Would he not stumble? would he not fall down,  
 Since pride must have a fall, and break the neck  
 Of that proud man that did usurp his back?

[V.v.76–89]

As God failed to arm Richard with angels and the earth failed to offer spiders and toads, so Barbary fails as an improvised final defense. Richard is quicker to realize his folly where horses are concerned; he begs Barbary’s forgiveness, “[s]ince thou, created to be awed by man, / Wast born to bear,” yet again finds a way to transform a statement of

truth into an autobiographical poem. His talent for metaphor is deserting him, however; the best he can do is state the obvious: “I was not made a horse; / And yet I bear a burden like an ass, / Spurred, galled, and tired by jauncing Bolingbroke” [V.v.91-4].

Over the next few lines he beats his keeper and defies the trio of men come to murder him. Only now, when resistance truly is futile, does Richard rise in his own defense; snatching a sword, he slays two of the murderers, but death, when it finally comes, inspires little more in him than one last rant:

How now! What means death in this rude assault?  
Villain, thy own hand yields thy death's instrument.  
Go thou and fill another room in hell.

*Here Exton strikes him down.*

That hand shall burn in never-quenching fire  
That staggers thus my person. Exton, thy fierce hand  
Hath with the king's blood stained the king's own land.  
Mount, mount, my soul! thy seat is up on high;  
Whilst my gross flesh sinks downward, here to die.

[V.v.105–12]

As so often happens in Shakespeare, the dying man proves prophetic. Richard's spilt blood does indeed stain the (new) king's land; Henry IV shall waste the best years of his reign battling rebels who fight in Richard's name (chief among them the double-traitor Northumberland). The conclusion is unremarkable, but what should we expect? Richard spent his life running from death; when death finally catches up, Richard has no words for it save clichés about hellfire and souls. To the end, the poet-king has but one true subject: himself.

\* \* \* \* \*

Like that other Shakespearean Richard, Richard II is proof that a dramatic character need not grow to be compelling. Change is left to Bolingbroke, turning ever inward, secretive and silent, as he approaches a goal he dares not acknowledge. Richard's

poems may improve with his command of language, but their range does not—he speaks in the same tragedian’s voice whether surrounded by friends, foes, or his “little world” of “still-breeding thoughts,” and he dies no wiser than he lived. Yet he is not a reluctant hero in the mold of Henry VI or King John—he performs with gusto, and he earns his curtain call.

Or course, the fact that I would rather spend time with Richard is irrelevant to Bolingbroke, who readily cedes the stage in exchange for the kingdom. Whether the kingdom is better off is a question Shakespeare shall devote three more plays to answering (seven more when we consider the *Henry VI/Richard III* tetralogy). The search for a truly worthy king commences in earnest in the second scene of the first part of *Henry IV*, with the entrance of King Henry’s aforementioned “unthrifty son.” Three plays later, we find ourselves searching still. . . .

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