

Shakespeare Sunday – The Scripts: Richard II

by Justin Alexander

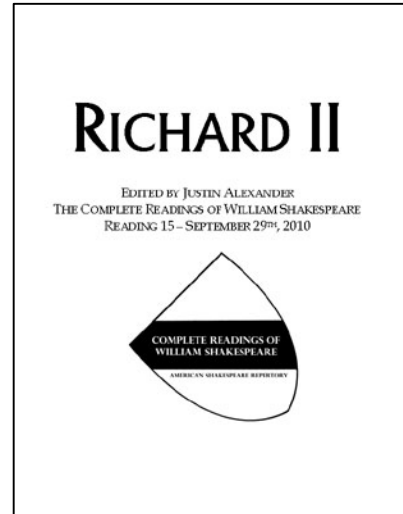
January 18th, 2015

ASR's script for [Richard II](#) is based primarily on the first Quarto of the play as it was published in 1597 (Q1). The decision to use Q1 as the source text of the play is based primarily on the relationship between the original texts as described by A.W. Pollard in 1916.

[RICHARD II – FULL SCRIPT](#)

[RICHARD II – CONFLATED SCRIPT](#)

Pollard was able to demonstrate (by tracing the inheritance of typographical errors from one edition to the next) that each quarto after the first was based entirely on the printed copy of the previous quarto: Thus Q2 was printed from Q1; Q3 from Q2; and so forth. (*Richard II* actually proved to be one of Shakespeare's most popular plays in quarto. Other than *Pericles*, it is the only play to receive two quarto printings in the same year.)



The exception to this rule is Q4 in 1608, which adds a version of the deposition scene to the play. The leading theory is that the deposition, despite its central importance to the structure of the play, was simply too controversial in the waning years of Queen Elizabeth's reign for it to be printed. (Another book regarding the usurpation of Richard II's throne by Henry Bullingbrooke had already become the center of a major political scandal.)

The other text to consider is the First Folio (F1). Textual evidence seems to indicate that the F1 text was based on one of the later quartos, but it also includes additional stage directions (suggesting access to the theater's prompt script) and a superior version of the deposition scene than the one found in Q4 (which reportedly shows signs of memorial reconstruction). But the exact nature of F1's source text is a matter of considerable debate which can basically be broken down into two separate issues:

- (1) Which quarto is the F1 text based on? (Some point to Q3. Others to Q5. Many to some combination of Q3 and Q5. But was it a single text assembled from a part of Q3 and a part of Q5, or did the typesetters have both a Q3 and Q5 laying around and simply consulted whichever was most convenient?)
- (2) Was the quarto text being used as a promptbook (with stage directions being added to the printed copy and, thus, added to the F1 text)? Or was the promptbook being consulted separately with its stage directions and perhaps other corrections being incorporated into a text being set from the printed quarto?

To these questions we can add:

- (3) What was the source of the Q4 deposition? (Memorial reconstruction is often one suggestion, but not a completely compelling one.)

- (4) From what source was F1's deposition scene (and possibly other corrections) taken from?

I have accepted the general scholastic conclusion that F1 is the superior source for the deposition scene, but since the F1 text is at least partly derived from a quarto text we know to be derivative of Q1, I have decided to employ the following textual standard:

Q1 is used as a source text. F1 is used as the source text for the deposition scene. F1 is also used to provide necessary corrections to the Q1 text, although if the correction originated in quarto editions between Q2 and Q5 (likely making it no more than a typesetter's best guess), I don't give it any more weight than other emendations.

STAGE DIRECTIONS FROM HOLINSHED

One final point of interest in the text are the stage directions for Act V, Scene 5 (in which Richard is murdered). In the original Q1 text, the scene appears like this:

KEEPER My lord I dare not; Sir Pierce of Exton,
Who lately came from the King commands the contrary.

RICHARD The devil take Henry of Lancaster, and thee,
Patience is stale, and I am weary of it.

KEEPER Help, help, help.

The murderers rush in.

RICHARD 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.

The First Folio provides us with the identities of the murderers ("*Enter Sexton and Servants*"), but still leaves us with a lot of unanswered questions: What prompts the Keeper to call for help? And should we interpret "Villain, thy own hand yields thy death's instrument" as a dramatic invocation (and perhaps foreshadowing) of the fate that awaits those who murder kings?

The description of the scene found in Holinshed's *Chronicles*, on the other hand, may help to shed some light on it:

King Henry, sitting on a day at his table, sore sighing, said, "Have I no faithful friend which will deliver me of him, whose life will be my death, and whose death will be the preservation of my life?" This saying was much noted of them which were present, and especially of one called Sir Piers of Exton. This knight incontinently departed from the court, with eight strong persons in his company, and came to Pomfret, commanding the esquire that was accustomed to sew and take the assay before King Richard to do so no more, saying: "Let him eat now, for he shall not long eat." King Richard sat down to dinner and was served with courtesy or assay, whereupon much marveling at the sudden change, he demanded of the esquire why he did not his duty, "Sir" (said he) "I am otherwise commanded by Sir Piers of Exton, which is newly come from King Henry." When King Richard heard that word, he took the carving knife in his hand, and struck the esquire on the head, saying, "The devil take Henry of Lancaster and thee together." And with that word, Sir Piers entered the chamber, well armed, with eight tall men likewise armed, every of them having a bill in his hand.

King Richard, perceiving this, put the table from him, and stepping to the foremost man, wrung the bill out of his hands, and so valiantly defended himself that he slew four of those that thus came to assail him. Sir Piers being half dismayed herewith, leapt into the chair where King Richard was wont to sit, while the other four persons fought him and chased him about the chamber. And in conclusion, as King Richard traversed his ground from one side of the chamber to the other, and coming by the chair where Sir Piers stood, he was felled with a stroke of a pole-axe which Sir Piers gave him upon the head, and therewith rid him out of life.

The fact that Shakespeare drew directly from this passage can be seen in its many similarities to the text of the play. In addition, it is relatively easy to see how the action described by Holinshed can be fitted to Shakespeare's verse:

KEEPER My lord I dare not; Sir Pierce of Exton,
Who lately came from the King commands the contrary.

[Richard takes the carving knife and strikes the Keeper on the head.]

RICHARD The devil take Henry of Lancaster, and thee,
Patience is stale, and I am weary of it.

KEEPER Help, help, help.

*<Enter Exton and Servants.>
The murderers rush in.*

RICHARD How now, what means Death in this rude assault?

[Richard takes a halberd from one of them, killing several of them.]

Villain, thy own hand yields thy death's instrument.
Go thou, and fill another room in hell.

Here Exton strikes him down.

While consistent, however, it should be noted that the exact timing of them and perhaps even their details are open for negotiation in actual production.

As an interesting note, the Moby Shakespeare on which virtually all online versions of Shakespeare are based includes a stage direction for Richard which reads: "Snatching an axe from a Servant and killing him." (This direction is from the 1864 Globe Shakespeare on which the Moby Shakespeare takes its text.) But there's no textual basis for Richard ending up with an axe, and Holinshed makes it clear the opposite is true: Richard employed a bill (or halberd). He was in fact *killed* by an axe, not wielding one.

TEXTUAL PRACTICES

Source Text: First Quarto (1597)

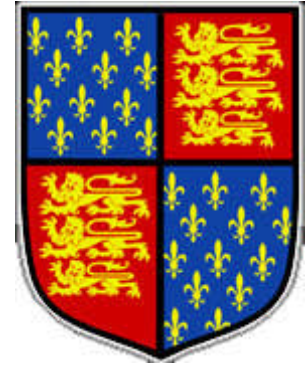
1. Original emendations in [square brackets]; emendations taken from F1 in <diamond brackets>; emendations taken from Q2 thru Q5 in {curly brackets}.
2. Speech headings silently regularized.
3. Names which appear in ALL CAPITALS in stage directions have also been regularized.
4. Spelling has been modernized.
5. Punctuations has been silently emended (in minimalist fashion).

Shakespeare Sunday – Bolingbroke vs. Richard II

[by Justin Alexander](#)

July 3rd, 2008

As I've [mentioned previously](#), I'll be appearing as Henry Bolingbroke in [Shakespeare & Company's](#) production of Richard II through August 3rd. In approaching this role I naturally bore with me the experience of having seen the play several times in the past – most notably on the stage of the Guthrie Theater in 1990 with Charles Janasz playing the lead.



Based on these productions, I had largely embraced the modern scholastic tradition, which (loosely speaking) holds the play to be about a philosophically-inclined god-king (Richard II) who is deposed by a usurping, forsworn bastard (Henry IV). Digging a bit deeper into the modern scholastic tradition reveals a common understanding in which Richard II, serving metaphorically as a symbol of traditional royalty in which the king rules by divine right, is replaced by Henry Bolingbroke, who serves as a symbol of modern royalty in which the king rules in the legacy of Machiavelli.

This is all well and good and, honestly, I was looking forward to playing Bolingbroke's bastardy right to the hilt.

But as I began to peel back the layers of the play and delve into the character, I actually found a very different Bolingbroke waiting for me in Shakespeare's words.

THE PLOT

A quick plot summary for those less familiar with the play: At the beginning of the play, Bolingbroke accuses Mowbray (another noble) of treason and provides a list of specific charges to that effect. Mowbray accuses Bolingbroke of the same (but, notably, has no similar list of charges). The issue is supposed to be resolved through a trial by combat, but Richard II cancels the duel and instead banishes both of them.

While Bolingbroke is gone, his father – the Duke of Lancaster – dies. Richard II takes the opportunity to seize the duchy for himself, parcels it out to a variety of political sycophants, and uses the profits to fund a war in Ireland. Bolingbroke, enraged, returns to England. Richard II is deposed and Bolingbroke is crowned king as Henry IV. Richard is locked up in Pomfret Castle and there he is killed by one of Bolingbroke's followers.

BOLINGBROKE'S POINT OF VIEW

My major revelation with Bolingbroke was simply this: He never says he wants the crown.

In fact, he says quite the opposite many, many times. When he first returns to England, for example (in Act II, Scene 3), he meets with his uncle, the Duke of York. York is loyal to Richard and accuses Bolingbroke of treason (because he has returned from his banishment before his appointed time). In response, Bolingbroke says this:

As I was banish'd, I was banish'd Hereford;
But as I come, I come for Lancaster.
And, noble uncle, I beseech your grace
Look on my wrongs with an indifferent eye:
You are my father, for methinks in you
I see old Gaunt alive; O, then, my father,
Will you permit that I shall stand condemn'd
A wandering vagabond; my rights and royalties
Pluck'd from my arms perforce and given away
To upstart unthrifths? Wherefore was I born?
If that my cousin king be King of England,
It must be granted I am Duke of Lancaster.
[...]
I am denied to sue my livery here,
And yet my letters-patents give me leave:
My father's goods are all distrained and sold,
And these and all are all amiss employ'd.
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.

To my ear, that's an impassioned and earnest plea. Bolingbroke acknowledges that he is wrong to return before the term of his banishment has ended... but he feels as if he has been forced to it. It's not just that Richard has stolen his family's fortune: With his father's death Bolingbroke has become the Duke of Lancaster, and as a duke he has a sworn responsibility to his subjects. In addition, his own rights as a subject of King Richard have been violated.

This pattern continues. In Act III, Scene 3 – when Bolingbroke reaches the castle where Richard waits for him – he declares:

On both his knees doth kiss King Richard's hand
And sends allegiance and true faith of heart
To his most royal person, hither come
Even at his feet to lay my arms and power,
Provided that my banishment repeal'd
And lands restored again be freely granted...

When he actually comes face-to-face with Richard, it's Richard who keeps insisting that Bolingbroke has come to depose him. Bolingbroke answers him repeatedly: "My gracious lord, I come but for mine own." and "So far be mine, my most redoubted lord, as my true service shall deserve your love."

Nor is Bolingbroke the only saying it. Northumberland, Bolingbroke's most powerful ally, tells York:

The noble duke hath sworn his coming is
But for his own; and for the right of that
We all have strongly sworn to give him aid...

Most notably there is York himself. The moment when Richard first resigns his crown is not actually seen on stage, but when Richard later asks, "To do what service am I sent for hither?" York is the one who says:

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.

So even York, who has been established as Richard's most faithful supporter, believes that Richard resigned the crown of his own will and that it was Richard who offered and not Bolingbroke who demanded it.

Now, admittedly, in most productions these lines are played for irony. Bolingbroke, dressed in a Nazi uniform, says, "Show fair duty to his majesty." And the stormtroopers move in. "My gracious lord," he says with mocking sarcasm dripping from his lips, "I come but for mine own." Even York's proclamation comes as he warily eyes the Glock pistols of his personal "guard".

And that can certainly be a very effective way to play it. But it's surprising that Shakespeare never drops the facade: There is never a moment when Bolingbroke – like a Richard III or Claudius or Iago – takes the opportunity to confess his knavery.

RICHARD'S POINT OF VIEW

But the larger objection is this: If Bolingbroke doesn't want it, why does Richard give it?

Here we come to what I believe is the central dynamic of the play: The fundamental discontinuity between the world view of Bolingbroke and the world view of Richard.

Richard's entire sense of identity is tied to the divine right of kings. Richard believes that, by right of birth, he is the chosen of god. And because of that, as King of England, he possesses a pope-like infallibility. For example (from Act III, Scene 3):

...we thought ourself thy lawful king.
And if we be, how dare they joints forget
To pay their awful duty to our presence?
If we be not, show us the hand of God
That hath dismissed us from our stewardship;
For well we know, no hand of blood and bone
Can gripe the scared handle of our scepter...

Richard literally believes that not only does he hold the throne of England in stewardship for God himself, but that – as king – he is literally more than mortal.

So Bolingbroke comes back from banishment and he says, "Richard, you made a mistake. You shouldn't have banished me and you shouldn't have stolen my inheritance. All I'm asking is that you repeal the banishment and give me my lands back."

From Bolingbroke's point of view, this is perfectly reasonable. Unfortunately, there's a problem: Richard believes that he's divine and infallible. To Richard, that's what being king means: If you're a king, you're divine and infallible.

But if you're infallible, you can't be wrong. So when Bolingbroke says, "You made a mistake." What Richard hears is, "You're not king."

Which is why you get dialogue like this (Act III, Scene 3):

BOLINGBROKE: My gracious lord, I come but for mine own.

RICHARD: Your own is yours, and I am yours, and all.

BOLINGBROKE: So far by mine, my most redoubted lord,
As my true service shall deserve your love.

RICHARD: Well you deserve: they well deserve to have,
That know the strong'st and surest way to get.

That entire exchange is literally two people talking past each other. Bolingbroke keeps saying, "No, seriously, I'm just here to get my inheritance." But what Richard hears is, "You're not king!"

Bolingbroke, unwittingly, throws Richard's entire sense of self into doubt and confusion. Take, for example, the conclusion of the famous "let us sit upon the ground and tell sad stories of the death of kings" speech:

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?

Richard never surrenders the idea that a king is supposed to be something more than mortal. And so, when he is forced to face his own mortality, he usurps and (ultimately) destroys himself.

THE DESTRUCTION OF GREAT MEN

Viewed through this lens, Richard II becomes the story of how two great men end up destroying each other.

Richard's destruction is self-evident — he is deposed and killed.

Bolingbroke's destruction, on the other hand, is a slightly subtler affair. By the end of the play he has been crowned king and, to all appearances, proven completely triumphant. But that triumph is, ultimately, tainted: In the process of achieving it, Bolingbroke has been pushed inexorably into a state of self-immolating sin.

From Richard's point of view, Bolingbroke has usurped not only his crown but his very identity:

... I have no name, no title,
No, not that name was given me at the font,
But 'tis usurp'd. Alack the heavy day,
That I have worn so many winters out,
And know not now what name to call myself!

From Bolingbroke's point of view, Richard has forced him to become a forsworn usurper.

And it affects him deeply. In Act V, when his cousin Aumerle is caught in a traitorous plot, the Duchess of York pleads for her son's life. Bolingbroke responds, "I pardon him, as God shall pardon me."

Richard's death itself becomes a microcosm of Bolingbroke's despair: The deposition scene in which Richard "undoes himself" is fairly horrifying for Bolingbroke. Richard cedes the throne to Bolingbroke, but Richard's own struggles with identity make it anything but clear to the assembled nobles... which means that rebellion could still be raised in Richard's name. Richard has become a "living fear" for Bolingbroke, who says as much: "Have I no friend who will rid me of this living fear?"

Exton, hearing this, convinces himself that Bolingbroke has given him a command to kill Richard. He does so and brings the body before Bolingbroke to receive his reward. Bolingbroke is horrified:

BOLINGBROKE: Exton, I thank thee not; for thou hast wrought
A deed of slander with thy fatal hand
Upon my head and all this famous land.

EXTON: From your own mouth, my lord, did I this deed.

BOLINGBROKE: They love not poison that do poison need,
Nor do I thee: though I did wish him dead,
I hate the murderer, love him murdered.
The guilt of conscience take thou for thy labour,
But neither my good word nor princely favour:
With Cain go wander through shades of night,
And never show thy head by day nor light.
Lords, I protest, my soul is full of woe,
That blood should sprinkle me to make me grow:
Come, mourn with me for that I do lament,
And put on sullen black incontinent:
I'll make a voyage to the Holy Land,
To wash this blood off from my guilty hand:
March sadly after; grace my mournings here;
In weeping after this untimely bier.

And, again, these are lines which can be spoken with irony and a two-faced tongue. "My goodness, Exton! I can believe you would have done such thing! I am shocked – shocked! – to discover that there is gambling going on in this establishment!"

But how much more powerful is it if Bolingbroke is speaking from his heart? If he does, in fact, feel the heavy weight of woe and guilt and sin? If he is trapped between relief because his living fear is dead and horror that it was done in his name? If this speech – which is the last speech of the play – is not just political posturing, but the sound of a man's soul being ripped to shreds?

I'll admit that I have something of a soft spot for pathos, but I find this twinned tragedy – the drama of polar opposites annihilating each other – far more interesting than the story of a good king and a usurping bad guy (particularly since Shakespeare supplies Richard with more than enough faults to call into serious question his status as a "good king"). Watching the play unfold with this dynamic is like watching the interaction of matter and anti-matter in slow motion.

Shakespeare Sunday – Richard II

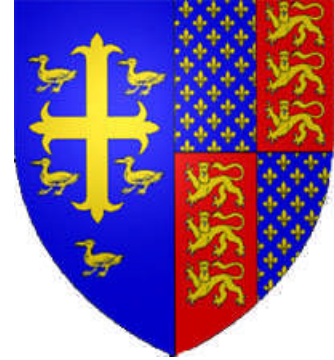
Richard and His Uncles: Discovering the Public Soliloquy

by [Justin Alexander](#)

January 25th, 2015

One of the more difficult passages to untangle in [Richard II](#) is found in Act II, Scene 1. Immediately following the death of the Duke of Lancaster, Richard announces that he's claiming all of Lancaster's property for himself in order to pay for the Irish wars:

RICHARD And for these great affairs do ask some charge,
Towards our assistance we do seize to us
The plate, coin, revenues, and moveables
Whereof our uncle Gaunt did stand possess'd.



The Duke of York's response is immediate:

YORK How long shall I be patient? Ah how long
Shall tender duty make me suffer wrong?
Not Gloucester's death, nor Herford's banishment
Not Gaunt's rebukes, nor England's private wrongs...

And he continues in this vein for 23 lines, laying out a point-by-point lamentation of Richard's tyrannies, before at last exclaiming:

"Oh Richard: York is too far gone with grief,
Or else he never would compare between."

And in response to this extraordinary tirade, Richard says:

RICHARD Why, uncle, what's the matter?

It doesn't seem to make much sense, and it causes York to deliver 22 lines in which he pleads with Richard to change his tune. Richard's still having none of it when he responds:

RICHARD Think what you will, we seize into our hands
His plate, his goods, his money, and his lands.

York responds by leaving the stage and Richard moves on to formally announcing the beginning of his Irish campaign, going on to specify:

RICHARD And we create in absence of ourself
Our uncle York lord governor of England;
For he is just and always loved us well.

... wait a minute. Did Richard just watch the same scene we did?

It's a challenge routinely faced by actors playing Richard II: How do you listen to York rant at you for 50+ lines and then act as if (a) you didn't hear him and (b) it didn't actually happen?

Many critics have judged Richard's trust in York as an act of folly and point to this moment as proof of its foolhardiness. But there's a rather large line between "making a mistake" and "being completely disconnected from reality to the point that it shatters the audience's suspension of disbelief", and Richard seems to be rather firmly crossing that line.

THE PUBLIC SOLILOQUY

When something doesn't make sense to me in Shakespeare I find it helpful to assume that I'm the one making a mistake. Shakespeare wasn't always perfect, of course, but I've often found it valuable to give him the benefit of the doubt and assume that I've either overlooked something or based my conclusions on a poor assumption.

Which brings us back to the root of the problem: How can Richard possibly hear everything York says and then respond the way he does?

Maybe he doesn't.

One of the truths in working with a Shakespearean text is that most of the stage directions are missing. Even basic entrances and exits are often omitted, and finding a description of the internal action of the scene is a little like discovering buried treasure. Without those stage directions, we're often left looking for clues in the text to guide our understanding of how a scene is supposed to be played.

So what if our common sense is misleading us here? What if York isn't talking to Richard (who just finished speaking), but to himself?

Saying, "Why, uncle, what's the matter?" is absurd if you've just listened to York deliver a 23-line speech describing exactly what the matter is. But it's completely different matter if you've suddenly become aware that your uncle is in some sort of distress on the opposite side of the stage.

First, is this staging possible? Yes. Richard has just issued a formal decree that Lancaster's possessions are to be seized. It proved remarkably easy for Richard and his nobles to immediately "huddle up" to discuss the details of the plan, move up stage, and leave York alone to speak with the audience.

Second, is the staging plausible? In the case of Richard's response, we can see that that this staging actually helps to make sense of his line. But is it consistent with what York is saying? This is a more complicated question. On the one hand, York begins by speaking of Richard in the third person ("... have ever made me sour my patient cheek or bend one wrinkle on my sovereign's face"), which would be consistent with a soliloquy. But then he begins to speak in the second-person as if addressing Richard directly: "I am the last of noble Edward's sons, of whom thy father Prince of Wales was first." This language certainly leads one into the more traditional interpretation of direct confrontation. On the other hand, it's not unusual for Shakespeare's characters to address others rhetorically even when they aren't available for a response. (For example, when Hamlet says, "Remember thee? Aye, thou poor ghost, while memory holds a seat in this distracted body." We don't need to assume that the Ghost didn't actually exit several lines earlier, as indicated in the text, in order for the line to make sense.)

(In the rehearsal room we also experimented with York talking to someone other than Richard in a private conversation, but when we did we found the rhetorical device of referring to Richard in the

second person without Richard being present stopped working. Not all experiments are destined to succeed.)

Third, are there any textual clues that strongly support our interpretation? Here we find nothing definitive, but in our exploration we spotted a few elements of the text which certainly proved very effective for our purposes.

For example, York closes his first speech by saying:

Oh Richard: York is too far gone with grief,
Or else he never would compare between.

Shakespeare's "O" (or "Oh") is generally a large moment. It's an open syllable that can be easily extended to any length while allowing an actor to pour an immense amount of emotional content into it. If York is speaking to himself, then we need a large and clearly delineated moment at the end of his speech which can draw Richard's attention from across the stage. And Shakespeare, in building York's anguish to this "Oh" , has given us such a moment and coupled it directly to Richard's name.

Richard's line, of course, is the driving force behind our concept. And it is followed by the beginning of York's next speech:

"Oh my liege, pardon me if you please; if not,
I please not to be pardon'd, am content with all:"

In general, one would expect to ask forgiveness for something already said or request pardon for something they about to say. It's possible that York is trying to do both here, but it's interesting how naturally this reads like a response to an honest question of concern from Richard. ("Since you've asked, I'll tell you. But please forgive me for what I'm about to say.") And perhaps some clue to its nature as preamble can be found in that colon which so neatly launches the actor into the speech to come.

In short, we found this approach extremely effective in the rehearsal room. In the process we began referring to it as a "public soliloquy" " a speech in which we find a character expressing their innermost thoughts using the same techniques as the soliloquy, despite the fact that they aren't truly alone onstage. In doing so, we inadvertently unlocked a deeper understanding of the play as a whole: These public soliloquys can be found throughout the entirety of Richard II, often emphasizing a character's frustration, impotence, or humiliation. Richard, in particular, engages in the act of public soliloquy frequently, but (as we can see here) he's not the only one. (They even arguably manage to find their way offstage, if one interprets Bullingbrooke's "Have I no friend will rid me of this living fear?" , reported by Sir Exton in Act V, Scene 5, as the public expression of a private thought.)

Thus, interpreting this passage as a public soliloquy not only helps to solve an immediate textual problem, but also proves to be consistent with both the theme and structure of the play as a whole.

Originally posted on September 28th, 2010.

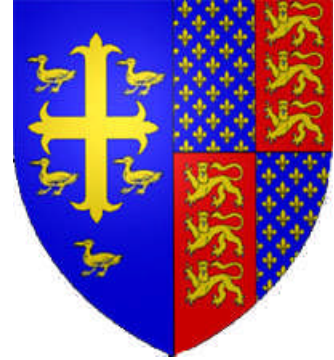
Shakespeare Sunday – Richard II

Aye, No; No, Aye: Mortal and Immortal Conflict

by [Justin Alexander](#)

February 1st, 2015

One of the interesting qualities of Elizabethan playwriting is the seamless connection between thought, word, and action. What makes the art of the soliloquy work, for example, is the lack of division between what the character is thinking and what the character is saying: They do not form their thoughts into words, but rather their thoughts leap directly to their tongues and into the ears of the audience. (Which is why Hamlet can advise his players, “Suit the action to the word, the word to the action.”) In a very real sense, the heightened reality of the verse essentially gifts the audience with telepathy: In watching Shakespeare, you are looking straight into the mind and soul of the character as it is stripped bare upon the stage.



In a related fashion, Elizabethan plays often rely upon choric speech: Sequences in which the description of an action becomes the action itself as the words of the actor are transformed through the imaginative powers of the audience. In fact, such sequences can often be even more powerful than the action would be in a direct presentation. In [Understanding Comics](#), Scott McCloud speaks of closure of as “the phenomenon of observing the parts and perceiving the whole”, and when a work of art demands of its audience that act of closure they become “silent accomplices”, “willing and conscious collaborators”. So, too, the Chorus of *Henry V* says:

Think when we talk of horses that you see them
Printing their proud hoofs in the receiving earth;
For 'tis your thoughts that now must deck our kings,
Carry them here and there, jumping o'er times,
Turning the accomplishment of many years
Into an hour-glass: For the which supply,
Admit me Chorus to this history.

It is a technique which turns a passive audience member into an active participant in the drama itself.

In the character of Richard II, Shakespeare weds the principles of the choric to the mold of the soliloquy in a series of transformative speeches which chart the fall of England's king. It begins in Act III, Scene 3 as Richard speaks to Northumberland:

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 sceptre 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;
Or I'll be buried in the King's highway,

Some way of common trade, where subjects' feet
May hourly trample on their sovereign's head;
For on my heart they tread now whilst I live:
And buried once, why not upon my head?

The sequence of exchanges described by Richard are intensely choric in their nature: His description of those physical acts force the audience to "deck the king" (or, rather, undeck the king) as they specifically create for themselves the specific reality of those actions.

Of course, the actions in question are not real: They are, at best, a future possibility which Richard conjures up for both Northumberland and the audience of the play. But more than that, they are a metaphor for Richard's shifting self-image. The change from Divine King to Holy Hermit is not merely a swap of costuming, but rather a fundamental change in Richard himself.

Which all sounds wonderfully abstract and soullessly intellectual, but here's what the speech boils down to in practical effect: Physical transformation becomes a metaphor for mental transformation, and in the process the telepathic power of the soliloquy is coupled to the audience participation of the choric.

As an audience, we are not only gifted with an incredibly intimate vision of Richard's thoughts, but we are also invited to participate in Richard's process of transformation. Just as Richard himself is both the agent of his destruction and the victim of his destruction, we as witnesses are simultaneously both the agents and the victims of that destructive process.

THE CHORUS OF THE MOMENT

Shakespeare uses a similar and yet subtle variation of this technique in the next of Richard's transformative speeches, which can be found during his deposition in Act IV, Scene 1:

Now, mark me how I will undo myself.
I give this heavy weight from off my head,
And this unwieldy sceptre from my hand,
The pride of Kingly sway from out my heart.
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;
All pomp and majesty I do forswear:
My manors, rents, revenues I forego;
My acts, decrees, and statutes I deny:
God pardon all oaths that are broke to me,
God keep all vows unbroke that swear to thee.
Make me, that nothing have, with nothing griev'd,
And thou with all pleas'd, that hast all achiev'd.
Long may'st thou live in Richard's seat to sit,
And soon lie Richard in an earthly pit.

Here the elements of the soliloquy become muted, but they are not completely discarded: The physical actions of Richard undoing himself are still serving as metaphors for mental revelation, and thus the passage, like a soliloquy, is still a baring of Richard's innermost thoughts.

What's particularly fascinating here, however, is that the choric elements of the speech are amplified by their immediacy: Richard is performing the action in the very moment he's describing it as the Chorus. And make no mistake, it is a Chorus: Because they're metaphors, Richard is not literally performing any of the actions he's describing. Which means that the audience is forced to create those actions in their mind's eye.

Richard creates a ritual in which the rites and duties of his office are systematically stripped away. The process is both a transformation of identity and the loss of identity. But by invoking that intensely personal ritual in the form of physical metaphor, Richard forces his audience (both the audience of the play and the audience of nobles within the play) to become his partners in the act.

THE FINAL TRANSFORMATION

Which brings us to the last of Richard's transformative speeches in Act V, Scene 5. (A speech which is also Richard's only true soliloquy in the play.) The speech is long enough that I won't quote it in full here, but its major framework looks like this:

I have been studying how I may compare
This prison where I live unto the world:
And for because the world is populous
And here is not a creature but myself,
I cannot do it: Yet I'll hammer it out;
My brain I'll prove the female to my soul,
My soul the father, and these two beget
A generation of still-breeding thoughts:
And these same thoughts people this little world,
In humors like the people of this world:
[...]
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 king'd again, and by and by
Think that I am unking'd by Bullingbrooke,
And straight am nothing.

The same basic structure of self-transformation is pursued, but in an almost transcendent fashion: Richard transforms himself into the world, the world into himself, and ends himself in nothing. It culminates a sequence in which Shakespeare's language literally transforms Richard before our eyes from one state of being to another. (And in a play with multiple references to caterpillars, no less.)

POWER AND IMPOTENCE

There is more to be found in this theme of transformation, however. The ability for power to enforce transformation is suggested heavily from the very beginning of the play (Act I, Scene 1):

RICHARD Rage must be withstood,
Give me his gage; Lions make Leopards tame.

MOWBRAY Yea but not change his spots: Take but my shame
And I resign my gage...

Mowbray may resist this change, but he is nevertheless forced to it.

There is a degree to which the play can be seen as an abstraction of the old query: Can God create a rock so large he cannot move it? Can the king's power to force transformation be used to transform the king into something other than the king?

Viewed through this lens, Richard's struggle to give up the crown is not merely the mortal struggle of a man who doesn't want to give up his power; it is a literal struggle between potence and impotence. Richard says:

We thought ourself thy lawful King: (...)
If we be not, show us the Hand of God
That hath dismiss'd us from our stewardship.

Only the Hand of God can remove divinity from the King and thus remove the King from his right. But while the king himself can be said to act as the hand of God, if he tries to take that power from himself does he not take the very power which would let him take it?

BULLINGBROKE Are you contented to resign the crown?

RICHARD Aye, no; no, aye.

Shakespeare presents us with an immovable object and an unstoppable force; he forces Richard to face a crisis both human and divine. And then he gives to the actor both "aye, no" and "no, aye": The opportunity to express both the mortal and immortal dimensions of the problem (or vice versa) in four simple syllables.

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