

KING RICHARD II: THE KING BY BIRTH

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“The king is not himself.” Thus Northumberland, who has seen Richard confiscating Gaunt’s property at the moment Gaunt has just breathed his last, complains indignantly to Willoughby and Ross.

These words, in my opinion, neatly express the essence of the play. *Richard II* is a tragedy of a king who misunderstands the nature of kingship and neglects his duties to his people. In other words, it charts the downfall of a king who cannot perform the role expected of him. At the same time, it is, in a deeper sense, a tragedy of a man who has lost sight of what he really is.

When the anointed king loses his social role, is he nothing, or still anything? As soon as Richard becomes aware that his crown is “hollow”, and that he is merely a shadow of a king, he is forced to seek his real identity. In this sense, the play represents the process of a man’s quest for his true self.

I

From the political point of view, Richard’s crucial error is that he misunderstands the nature of kingship. As Thomas Elyot emphasises in *The Book Named the Governor*, the ultimate purpose of a commonwealth is not the protection of the king’s prerogatives and supremacy, but the well-being of the people. The people do not exist for the king, but the king exists for them as the keystone of social stability. If, therefore, the king exercises his prerogatives

only and neglects his duties to the commonwealth, he is no longer a king in reality, even though he remains king nominally.

On his deathbed old Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster, admonishes Richard for his misrule. Rebuking his nephew for leasing the royal realm, Gaunt says:

Why, cousin, wert thou regent of the world,
It were a shame to let this land by lease;
But for thy world enjoying but this land,
Is it not more than shame to shame it so?
Landlord of England art thou now, not king,
Thy state of law is bonds slave to the law.

II. i. 109-114.¹⁾

Richard ignores him: moreover, as soon as Gaunt is dead, Richard makes the mistake, fatal to his throne, of confiscating the Duke's property to finance his war, depriving the Duke's son, Bolingbroke, of his hereditary rights. This is nothing but a breakdown of order by the very person who is responsible for maintaining it. The Duke of York is shocked by this rash act, and says:

Take Herford's rights away, and take from time
His charters, and his customary rights;
Let not to-morrow then ensue to-day:
Be not thyself. For how art thou a king
But by fair sequence and succession?

II. i. 195-99.

If a king, who exists to protect public welfare, destroys it, and if he, who is God's deputy, violates God's law, his own sovereignty is undone. This fatal mistake gives Bolingbroke excuse to return to England, and awakens the other lords' apprehension that their rights may be violated as well. But Richard, who believes that his divine right is inviolable, turns deaf ear to York's admonition.

'Lions make leopards tame'; 'We are not born to sue, but to

command.' Richard uses magniloquent language in the ceremonial atmosphere of the opening scene, but, as Richard Altic points out, his words are superficial and have no reality.²⁾ Everybody, believes that Richard is to blame for the murder of the Duke of Gloucester, but everybody pretends to be ignorant of it, and to be loyal to the king. His government and kingship, like his speech, have no substance.

Even when he learns that Bolingbroke has risen in revolt, Richard still seems to be convinced of divine protection :

Not all the water in the rough rude sea
Can wash the balm off from an anointed king ;
The breath of worldly men cannot depose
The deputy elected by the Lord ;
For every man that Bolingbroke hath press'd
To lift shrewd steel against our golden crown,
God for his Richard hath in heavenly pay
A glorious angel : then, if angels fight,
Weak men must fall, for heaven still guards the right.

III. ii. 54-62.

But as soon as he hears that his subjects, including his uncle, the Duke of York, have forsaken him and joined Bolingbroke, his confidence instantly turns into despair. It is unlikely that he really believes that angels will actually intervene on his behalf ; but, at least, this flight of fancy rests on the conviction that his subjects will not violate his divine right. But they do abandon him. By this unforeseen situation Richard is forced to conclude that his divine kingship has been nothing but an illusion, and he desperately offers Bolingbroke the throne without further resistance. Yet with the knowledge that he is merely the shadow of a king, another movement begins—his quest for his real identity. Richard, who has lived in an unsubstantial world, is now forced to find his substance.

II

As for the character of Richard, it is often said that he is flattered by parasites, politically incompetent, or above all, too weak as a king. But if we read the play without pre-conceptions, we will find that such views are altogether too clear-cut. It may be truer to say that Shakespeare consciously makes use of the pre-conceptions to make the matter ambiguous. Next I would like to deploy a counter-argument against these views and offer a new account of Richard's alleged weakness.

In this play we can find no clear evidence that Richard's favorites, Bushy, Greene, and Bagot, are parasitical. Of course, they are believed to be so by those who complain of the king's misrule. Old Gaunt (II. i. 100-03.), and Northumberland (II. i. 241-45.) lament the abuses of the favorites and call them 'sycophants'. And Bolingbroke, who captures Bushy and Greene, condemns them as the origin of the misrule. His accusation is three-fold: first, the favorites have given the king bad advice; second, they have 'broken the possession of the royal bed'; and finally, they have slandered Bolingbroke and caused his banishment and the deprivation of his hereditary rights. But the play offers no clear support for any of these claims.³⁾ We cannot see the favorites misleading the king. On the contrary, it is always Richard who takes the initiative in making a decision. Whether to banish Bolingbroke and Mowbray, or to confiscate Gaunt's property, he decides without any consultation with the favorites. Compared with so-to-speak "weak" kings, like Henry VI, Marlowe's Mycetes in *Tamburlaine the Great: Part I*, or Edward II, Richard acts on his own authority rather than by leaning on someone else.⁴⁾ What Richard relies upon is not the favorites, but the prerogatives of the anointed king. Nor does this play provide evidence in favour of the second charge. We see the Queen's grief in two scenes—II. ii. and V. i.;

but in both cases her grief is not caused by the favorites. It is rather Bolingbroke that breaks 'the possession of the royal bed.' The final charge is also unfounded. The play is not clear about whether the favorites were at Coventry when Bolingbroke was sentenced to banishment. They are with Richard when he confiscates Gaunt's property, but Shakespeare does not make them slander Bolingbroke or suggest depriving him of his hereditary rights. As Paul Gaudet points out, 'Bushy and Greene are allowed no defence; their guilt has already been determined in advance of Bolingbroke's public charade.'⁵ Even when they are sentenced to death, they never behave in a cowardly manner, nor show any consciousness of guilt. And when they are executed, it is with the hope that heaven will 'plague injustice with the pain of hell.'

They are called parasites by Richard's enemy. Then, what does Richard himself think of them? It is noteworthy that he never attributes his misfortune to them, except for the scene in which he mistakenly thinks that they have made peace with the traitors. On the other hand, Richard shows a clear contempt for those who betrayed him. In the deposition scene he condemns those who used to be his subjects:

... Yet I well remember
The favours 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. 167-71.

And in V. i., when Richard takes leave of Isabel, he vents his anger against Bolingbroke and Northumberland for forcing him to divorce the Queen as well as the crown. Bolingbroke's condemnation of the favorites, it would seem, ironically applies to himself.

Contrary to the common view, Richard demonstrates considerable skill as a politician. Bolingbroke's accusation against Mowbray

in the opening scene can be summarised under three heads: he has embezzled eight thousand nobles; he plotted all the treason contrived in England 'in these eighteen years'; and finally, he has plotted the Duke of Gloucester's death. Of course, the crux of the accusation is the murder of Gloucester. As a grandson of King Edward III, Bolingbroke represents the royal blood:

Which blood, like sacrificing Abel's, cries
Even from the tongueless caverns of the earth
To me for justice and rough chastisement;
And, by the glorious worth of my descent,
This arm shall do it, or this life be spent.

I. i. 104-08.

This speech, although ostensibly intended against Mowbray, clearly implies a challenge to the king. As Stanley Maveety points out, 'by likening Gloucester's death to Abel's he equates Gloucester's murderer with Cain, but since Cain's sin was the shedding of his own family's blood, the allusion is not meaningful when directed to Mowbray.'⁶ 'How high a pitch his resolution soars': Richard clearly realises who Bolingbroke's true target is, and understands his accusation as a challenge to his throne.⁷ His task, therefore, is to get rid of the danger. First, he tries to calm Bolingbroke by bringing in the Duke of Lancaster, Bolingbroke's father.⁸ But Richard fails to pacify him, and both Bolingbroke and Mowbray insist on a trial by combat. But if it takes place, what the king will fear most is Mowbray's defeat. Should Bolingbroke win, Richard will have to admit his responsibility for the murder of Gloucester, and his status will be threatened. Since he has no guarantee that Mowbray will win, his only solution is to banish both of them. Having taken that decision, Richard does not omit to obtain Gaunt's consent for the banishment of his son. He knows that Gaunt, as an administrator, cannot support the assertion that England 'should not be soiled with that dear blood which it

hath fostered.' Thus Richard could be said to show considerable foresight and self-possession in removing the danger from his realm.

On this reading, Richard is not flattered by his favorites, nor politically incompetent. What undoes him is his fatal misunderstanding of the nature of kingship and his overestimation of the divine right. And it is this characteristic weakness that makes him surrender the crown so easily.

Richard succeeds the crown from his grandfather, Edward III, in his childhood. Because he is a king automatically without any effort, he does not understand that he must act the part of king, and discharge his duties to the public welfare. He is a king, not because he carries a heavy responsibility and fulfils his duties, but because he has the divine right. In other words, he is not a king by role, but by birth; therefore, the man and the role are indistinguishable in his consciousness. He has no conception of such a role. He can, therefore, find no "ego ideal"—no ideal image of self—in his social role. Now I want to examine this concept of an "ego ideal" in relation to the other characters of the play.

III

When Richard tries to reconcile Mowbray and Bolingbroke, Mowbray has the audacity to resist the royal order. It is unbearable for him to leave the matter unresolved, without proving his innocence, because his sense of honour, which is the most precious thing for him, requires him to clear his name. Replying to the king, he says:

... My dear dear lord,
The purest treasure mortal times afford
Is spotless reputation—that away,
Men are but gilded loam, or painted clay.
A jewel in a ten-times barr'd-up chest

Is a bold spirit in a loyal breast.
Mine honour is my life, both grow in one,
Take honour from me, and my life is done.

I. i. 176-83.

Mowbray has a clear image of what he should be, and in order to reach this image he sets up a high standard for himself. For Mowbray the "ego ideal" is the readiness to die for honour, and he finds his meaning in his social identity as a knight. In other words, he is acting the part of the knight with a spotless reputation, and he consciously assimilates himself to it. He becomes fully aware of the fact that he is nothing but 'gilded loam' or 'painted clay' if the role is taken away from him. He risks, therefore, his life for it. He consistently devotes himself to acting the part of an honourable knight; even after he has been banished from England, he fights for Christ against pagans and dies a martyr to his ideal.

As Mowbray adheres to reputation, so does old Gaunt to his duties as an administrator. He also finds his "ego ideal" in his social role. Deprived of this function, he cannot find the *raison d'être* for himself. At the end of his famous paean on England, he deplores the present state of the country:

England, bound in with the triumphant sea,
Whose rocky shore beats back the envious siege
Of wat'ry Neptune, is now bound in with shame,
With inky blots and rotten parchment bonds;
That England, that was wont to conquer others,
Hath made a shameful conquest of itself.
Ah, would the scandal vanish with my life,
How happy then were my ensuing death!

II. i. 61-68.

England is 'the other Eden and demi-paradise' for him, so he cannot

endure its disgrace. Gaunt is torn between his duty to England, whose honour he esteems more than his life, and his duty to the king who has brought this disgrace onto his country. But, just as Mowbray remains constant to his ideal, and resists the king's order, so Gaunt adhered resolutely to his "ego ideal" as an administrator, and admonishes Richard for his misrule.

The same principle can be seen with Carlisle. He also finds his "ego ideal" in his social identity as a priest. He knows he cannot be Carlisle without fulfilling his duties. In the presence of the traitors he resolutely upholds Richard's divine right. To Bolingbroke, who is about to grasp the throne, Carlisle insists that he has no right to it:

Marry, God forbid!
Worst in this royal presence may I speak,
Yet best beseeming me to speak the truth.
Would God that any in this noble presence
Were enough noble to be upright judge
Of noble Richard! then true noblesse would
Learn him forbearance from so foul a wrong.
What subject can give sentence on his king?
And who sits here that is not Richard's subject?
Thieves are not judg'd 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 judg'd by subject and inferior breath,
And he himself not present? O forfend it, God,
That in a Christian climate souls refin'd
Should show so heinous, black, obscene a deed!

IV. i. 114-31.

Carlisle has an image of the ideal priest, which obliges him to

defend the anointed king at the risk of his life. He, too, recognizes that if his ideal is taken away from him, he will lose his meaning.

These characters assimilate their "ego ideal" to their social identity; they are prepared to risk even their life to fulfil their duty, for they know that the social self guarantees the integrity of the individual self. But Richard, who is a king by nature—by descent and divine right—cannot find his "ego ideal" in the role of king, or anywhere else, for the distinction between self and role does not exist for him. He has, thus, nothing to cling to, nothing to defend to the last. He owns nothing more valuable than his life. This is Richard's essential weakness.

Without the reserves of an "ego ideal" to fall back on, Richard is helpless once he loses public support. Before Bolingbroke, he cannot even preserve his pride. At Flint Castle he asks Northumberland:

What must the king do now? Must he submit?

The king shall do it. Must he be depo'd?

The king shall be contented. Must he lose

The name of king? a God's name, let it go.

.....

Most mighty prince, my lord Northumberland,

What says King Bolingbroke? Will his Majesty

Give Richard leave to live till Richard die?

III. iii. 143-74.

Thus, what Richard can do to resist the traitors is to mock himself. Because, as an anointed king, he has felt no need for a social identity, and assumed that he would remain king by right, and not by effort, he abandons his "name" or "role" easily. Yet we must note a contradiction. The man who throws his 'name of king' at the feet of the traitor, Bolingbroke, is a man who continues to be king in himself. But what can this mean when he is no longer king in reality? When he abandons his social identity, he comes

to suffer an identity crisis.

IV

When Richard is betrayed by his subjects and deprived of his actual role—his public self—he falls into abject despair. This he expresses as a sense of unreality—a sense that the whole of his life has been mere play-acting:

... 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 fear'd, and kill with looks,
Infusing him with self and vain conceit,
As if this flesh which walls about our life
Were brass impregnable; and humour'd thus,
Comes at the last and with a little pin
Bores thorough his castle wall, and farewell king!

III. ii. 160-70.

Just as the fact of death makes the whole of life seem unreal, so Richard's loss of power makes him feel that his rule has been a sham. He feels he has not been a real king, but an actor-king, not in the sense we have understood this term—an ideal self which must be sought and defended—but in the sense of a pretence. The truth about himself, he now feels, is that he is merely an ordinary man. So he claims to be finding his identity in his ordinariness:

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. 171-77.

But it would be a mistake to think that he is adapting himself to his ordinariness. The tone of his outburst is self-pitying despair. Only a divine king could seriously believe that to be an ordinary man is a hopeless and helpless fate. Carlisle tries hard to awaken his reason and says:

My lord, wise men ne'er sit and wail their woes,
But presently prevent the ways to wail.
To fear the foe, since fear oppresseth strength,
Gives in your weakness strength unto your foe,
And so your follies fight against yourself.
Fear and be slain—no worse can come to fight;
And fight and die is death destroying death,
Where fearing dying pays death servile breath.

III. ii. 178-85.

But Richard cannot understand what Carlisle means until the last moment of his life. Persuading himself that life is an empty role-play, he abandons himself to his grief, in which he can feel reality without doubt. But this grief is a proof that what he has lost is not trivial—it is an inner condition that proclaims him a king in himself, if no longer in the kingdom.

Here, cousin, seize the crown.
Here, cousin,
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.

IV. i. 181-89.

Richard, who knows his grief is not unsubstantial, cynically reminds Bolingbroke of the fact that his triumph in the public gaze is hollow, for it lacks legitimacy, which is Richard's hidden property. He compares Bolingbroke to an empty bucket which everybody can see, and himself to a bucket full of tears, that is a hidden reality. But the point of this analogy is to tell Bolingbroke that he is not free of Richard, and that he is not a complete king. What he has done is to reverse the relationship of power between the two men described by the gardener in the earlier garden scene:

King Richard he is in the mighty hold
Of Bolingbroke. Their fortunes both are weigh'd;
In your lord's scale is nothing but himself,
And some few vanities that make him light.
But in the balance of great Bolingbroke,
Besides himself, are all the English peers,
And with that odds he weighs King Richard down.

III. iv. 83-89.

Richard's comparison makes the point that there is more to kingship than power. 'His tragedy is in part that of one who cannot recognize a mean between kingship and nothing,' says Peter Ure of Richard.⁹⁾ It is a tragedy because for a king by divine right to be deprived of his kingdom is to be nothing—not even an ordinary man, because he is king essentially and his role and himself are inseparable. To Bolingbroke, who says he thought Richard had been willing to resign, Richard replies:

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.

IV. i. 191-93.

This is a truth Bolingbroke can do nothing about. And Richard goes out of his way to demonstrate what it is that he continues to stand for, despite his impotence. His grief is the grief of a divinely ordained king, and as long as he asserts it, Bolingbroke is a show of half of his power. Thus it is that Richard continues to claim, even if he does so in a self-pitying way, that his betrayal by his subjects has a religious significance.

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 deliver'd me to my sour cross,
And water cannot wash away your sin.

IV. i. 237-42.

In the presence of the traitors Richard compares himself to Christ and his subjects to Pilate. In comparison with Mowbray who dies a martyr for honour, Richard has nothing for which to sacrifice his life but himself; yet 'himself'—his identity—is what makes him the rightful king, so the 'nothing' he sacrifices himself for is, from the point of view of political power, everything. Realising that the only thing he can do is to die a martyr for his divine right, his mind vacillates. While he admits his 'title' has been unsubstantial, he cannot find his identity anywhere else. To Northumberland, who calls him, "My lord," Richard cries:

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 usurp'd. Alack the heavy day,
That I have worn so many winters out,
And know not now what name to call myself!

IV. i. 254-59.

Deprived of his 'title', what is he? In order to find an answer, he asks Bolingbroke for a mirror.

No deeper wrinkles yet? hath sorrow struck
So many blows upon this face of mine
And made no deeper wounds? O flatt'ring glass,
Like to my followers in prosperity,
Thou dost beguile me. Was this face the face
That every day under his household roof
Did keep ten thousand men? Was this the face
That like the sun did make beholders wink?
Is this the face which fac'd so many follies,
That was at last out-fac'd by Bolingbroke?
A brittle glory shineth in this face;
As brittle as the glory is the face,
For there it is, crack'd in an hundred shivers.

IV. i. 277-89.

But all he can see in the mirror is what everybody can see—his outer face. He cannot perceive his inner state, but only the gap between the outer and the inner. Recollecting his past, he smashes the mirror; the broken mirror is nothing but a symbol of his past self.¹⁰

The shadow of your sorrow hath destroy'd
The shadow of your face.

IV. i. 292-93.

Bolingbroke neatly interprets this gesture. Where there is the shadow, however, there is the substance. Answering him, Richard

says:

'Tis very true, my grief lies all within,
And these external manners of lament
Are merely shadows to the unseen grief
That swells with silence in the tortur'd soul.
There lies the substance.

IV. i. 295-59.

Thus he proclaims, once again, that his internal grief has the reality. But he cannot connect this reality with his public self as a ruler of the kingdom. The problem for him is whether the inner self, when cut off from the public, has any reality. If he is no longer king in actual fact, what is he then? Richard has to face this problem at Pomfret Castle.

V

In his confinement at Pomfret Castle Richard begins to meditate upon his existence. Imprisoned and isolated from the outer world, he now has no audience before which to show his grief but himself.

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.

V. v. 1-5.

What is a man who has lost his social role? Is he nothing or still anything? Richard tries hard to 'hammer out' the meaning of his existence, but however obstinately he tries he cannot succeed.

Thoughts tending to ambition, they do plot
Unlikely wonders; how these vain weak nails
May tear a passage thorough the flinty ribs

Of this hard world, my ragged prison walls.

V. v. 18-21.

The 'flinty ribs / of this hard world' which confine him are at one and the same time the walls surrounding his flesh and the walls which separate him from self-recognition, and possibly the body enclosing the soul. But he is forced to recognize that he cannot break the walls. Looking back on his past, Richard says:

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 Bolingbroke,
And straight am nothing.

V. v. 31-38.

Thus he again returns to the idea of 'nothing'. Politically, of course, he is 'nothing', because he has lost both the crown and the outer world. He declares that he cannot be satisfied with any role: but the problem is that he does not understand his role to play. He has destroyed himself, because he has not been able to fulfil his social duties. If there is something which fastens us to the external world and saves us from being nothing, it is our social role. For example, in *Henry VI: Part 1*, Talbot offers us a demonstration of this fact. In act II, scene ii, the Countess of Auvergne plays a mean trick on him, for he is a formidable threat to the French army. But when he has been captured by her he says, "I am but a shadow of myself." As soon as he winds a horn, his soldiers rush into the castle. The soldiers are Talbot's 'sinews, arms, and strength', and it is they that make Talbot the real Talbot. In other words, his substance exists in his role as a

mighty commander; if he loses his soldiers, he is but a shadow of himself. This he knows, and is therefore prepared to fight. Compared with Talbot who has a clear image of self, however, Richard has lost sight of what he really is. He knows he is 'nothing' in the external world; but he cannot relinquish the idea that he continues to be "something" in the internal world—although he cannot tell what it is.

... whate'er I be,
Nor I, nor any man that but man is,
With nothing shall be pleas'd, till he be eas'd
With being nothing.

V. v. 38-41.

Now Richard begins to realise the only possibility of breaking 'the flinty ribs / of this hard world'—he can slip out of 'being nothing' only by 'being nothing'; namely, by his own death. At this moment, when he is reaching this conclusion, a sound of music interprets his meditation.

Ha, ha! keep time-how sour sweet music is
When time is broke and no proportion kept!
So is it in the music of men's lives.

V. v. 42-44.

Getting an inspiration from the word 'time' (musical measure), he begins to analyse his past.

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. 45-49.

'I wasted time, and now doth time waste me.': clearly he realises

nothing remains for him but death ; but this he cannot yet face up to. Comparing himself to a clock, he reveals his grief and fear :

For 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.
Now sir, the sound that tells what hour it is
Are clamorous groans which strike upon my heart,
Which is the bell—so sighs, and tears, and groans,
Show minutes, times, and hours.

V. v. 50-58.

A beating sound of his heart sounds like tic-tok of a clock which announces the steady approach of death. He suddenly revolts against this pressure and exclaims, "This music mads me. Let it sound no more."

Thereupon, a visitor comes to him. He is a groom who has come to acknowledge his master. "Hail, royal prince!", says the groom. This unsophisticated salutation allays Richard's anxiety. He answers almost flippantly that he is not a king any longer. But this gesture of loyalty on the part of a faithful retainer reminds Richard of what he has lost, and his despair turns into anger against Bolingbroke. Then, three assassins suddenly rush into the room. To 'fight and die is death destroying death': what Carlisle has said symbolically is now enacted in reality. Richard, who has been lost in introspection, is now forced to fight hand to hand with the reality of life. Bringing an axe down on the head of one of his assailants, he finds himself in the sudden connection that he is not 'nothing' but the king. At the ultimate moment of his life, he finally realises what he is—a king who is not a king. Fatally wounded by Exton's axe, he cries out :

That hand shall burn in never-quickning fire
That staggers thus my person. Exton, thy fierce hand
Hath with the king's blood stain'd the king's own land.

V. v. 108-110.

Even if the crown is taken away, his divine right cannot be removed from him. With the completion of his career in the play, we discover that the divine kingship has been simultaneously both his destruction and his salvation. Richard can only resolve the insoluble paradox of his identity, of being at once king and not king, by departing this life.

Mount, mount, my soul! thy seat is up on high,
Whilst my gross flesh sinks downward, here to die.

V. v. 111-12.

Shakespeare, who has recurrently used 'downwards' imagery for Richard, for the first time uses 'upward' imagery here. The gross flesh sinking downward represents the fall of the king who could not sustain his royal role. But the soul ascending to heaven symbolises his acquisition of his ideal identity as an anointed king. His earthly role has been transformed into a heavenly role.

By his death—by 'being nothing'—Richard, paradoxically, proves his existence. That it assumes a post-human form does not mean that is nothing—as Henry IV, and even Henry V, will come to learn.

NOTES

- 1) Quotations are from *The New Arden Shakespeare*.
- 2) Richard D. Altik, "Symphonic Imagery in Richard II," *PMLA* 62 (1947), p. 349.
- 3) See Paul Gaudet, "The 'Parasitical' Counselors in Shakespeare's Richard II: A Problem in Dramatic Interpretation," *SQ* 33 (1982).
- 4) S. T. Coleridge mentions Richard's weakness and says, 'It is a weakness, however, of a peculiar kind, not arising from want of personal

courage, or any specific defect of faculty, but rather an intellectual feminineness which feels a necessity of leaning on the breast of others, and of reclining on those who are all the while known to be inferiors.' Quoted from *Richard II: A Cassbook*, ed. by Nicholas Brook (Methuen, 1973), p. 30.

- 5) Gaudet, p. 150.
- 6) Stanley Maveety, "A Second Fall of Cursed Man: The Bold Metaphor in Richard II," *JEGP*, 72 (1973), p. 179.
- 7) According to Holinshed, 'The King herewith waxe angrie, and asked the duke of Herford, if these were his words.' W. G. Boswell-Stone, *Shakespeare's Holinshed* (Lawrence and Bullen: London, 1896), p. 80.
- 8) According to Holinshed, Richard didn't ask Gaunt to calm his son, Bolingbroke.
- 9) Peter Ure, "The Looking-glass of Richard II," *PQ*, 34 (1956), p. 224.
- 10) Peter Ure, *King Richard II* (The New Arden Shakespeare), p. lxxxiii.