

# ‘Tender-Hearted Cousin’: Queerness as Strength in *Richard II*

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## Abstract.

Gregory Doran’s 2013 adaption of *Richard II*, performed by the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC), was notable for its emphasis of a romantic subplot between King Richard and his cousin, the Duke of Aumerle. Their intimate relationship was emphasised again when Doran revived the production in 2016, thereby demonstrating that for Doran, Richard’s queerness is a fundamental aspect of the play. This research will investigate how the presentation of Richard’s sexuality, and his relationship with Aumerle in particular, has an impact on the way in which characters and situations within the play are perceived by the audience. This exploration will be underpinned by an analysis of the RSC’s 2013 performance. Use will also be made of commentary and interviews about the production, as well as critical reviews. Comparisons will be made between Doran’s production of the play and versions produced by other directors. These contrasts will be made to demonstrate the difference that Richard’s overt queerness- or lack thereof- has on the audience’s perception of the story. Examining this topic will demonstrate the nuances that the queer relationship in Doran’s production adds to *Richard II*. In particular, Doran’s version of the play uses Richard II’s sexuality as a source of strength, rather than as a catalyst for his downfall, and his intimate relationship with Aumerle humanises an otherwise selfish and narcissistic King.

## Shakespeare’s *Richard II*.

*Richard II* is one of eight Shakespeare plays which dramatize the rises and falls of the Plantagenet Kings. The play deals with the final three years of King Richard’s life as his abuse of power causes him to lose it and he is forced to cede the crown to his cousin and rival, Henry Bolingbroke (later King Henry IV) before being imprisoned and subsequently killed in the dungeons at Pontefract Castle.

## Richard’s Sexuality in Shakespeare’s Text.

- The text of Shakespeare’s play does not explicitly show Richard as queer: the only scripted kisses are between Richard and his wife (5.1.97-100), as is the only outright discussion of love. (Act 5, Scene 1).
- It is implied that Richard sleeps with men: his favourites are accused of ‘breaking possession of a royal bed’ (3.1.13.) Historically speaking, Richard II probably took at least one male lover during his life time (Warner, 2017).

## Gregory Doran’s production of *Richard II* for the Royal Shakespeare Company 2013, revived 2016 (Opus Arte, 2014).

- Richard’s effeminate appearance:
  - David Tennant boasted “great gingery extensions [trailing] girlishly downward” (Cavendish, 2013), as well as long robes and nail varnish- a contrast to everyone else around him.
  - He is “surrounded by big, gruff blokes in armour but actually chooses to have rather flighty hair and to paint his nails gold, and that says something about his character” (Tennant, 2013): Richard is not interested in conforming to the masculine ideals as portrayed by his cousin Bolingbroke.
- Taking control:
  - In Act 1, Scene 3, declaring his intention to “descend and fold [Bolingbroke] in our arms” (1.3.53) Richard instead forces a kiss on his cousin and rival’s mouth in a gesture of dominance.
  - Later, in Act 1, Scene 4, Richard pushes a sweet in to Aumerle’s mouth in a gesture that- although sensual- shows little regard for whether Aumerle actually wants the sweet or not.
  - As mentioned above, Richard’s three favourites- Bushy, Bagot, and Green- are implied by the text to be the King’s lovers. Doran’s production runs with this idea: Bushy, Green and Bagot often stand physically close to him, hanging on to his every word. The impression this gives is that Richard is surrounded by friends, and therefore has support. (in contrast to David Giles’ production in 1978)
- A humanising effect:
  - Learning of Bushy and Green’s execution is the first time the audience gets to glimpse Richard showing true feeling about someone other than himself.
  - Act 3 Scene 3, “The Flint Castle Scene”, is the point at which Richard has to face up to the fact that he is about to lose power. In Doran’s production, the only other person with him at this point is the Duke of Aumerle.
  - Aumerle’s own grief forces Richard to look outside himself and attempt to comfort his cousin.
  - This leads to a kiss between the two men, which “[is] about two human beings reaching out to each other in a moment of deep crisis” (Doran, 2014)
- Richard’s Deposition
  - The hair extensions also give Richard a sort of “Christ-like” appearance, particularly during the abdication scene (Billington, 2013)- he appears as something as a martyr before Bolingbroke
  - At the same time, he uses feminine behaviour to put himself at the centre of attention and mocks his cousin.
  - In a call back to the kiss he pressed on to Bolingbroke near the start of the play, Richard ensures the crown’s transference is highly uncomfortable for Bolingbroke by colouring it with sexual aggression
- Richard dies at Aumerle’s hand in 5.6, caressing Aumerle’s cheek in a mirror of his actions at Flint Castle, sealing the late King’s tragedy and humanity.



David Tennant as King Richard II, Sarah Yardy, 2017

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