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Priest, Clerk, and Pitable King:
The Portrayal of Richard II in Recent Production History

On a stage in Stratford upon Avon, Richard II and Aumerle share a passionate yet private kiss. In London three years earlier, King Richard stands weakly next to his towering wife Isabel. On the silver screen, Richard lies dead in his coffin, arms spread wide like Jesus Christ. *The Tragedy of King Richard the Second* (also known in the First Folio as *The Life and Death of King Richard the Second*) is no exception to the multitude of William Shakespeare's works adapted for the stage or film. Still, the story lives on, even out of the context of Elizabethan England. In the past twenty years, some portrayals have been sympathetic to the doomed king, whereas others were more critical of his vanity, greed and self-destructive behavior. Productions such as *The Hollow Crown* (2012), the Royal Shakespeare Company's Production in Stratford upon Avon (2013), and Fiona Shaw as Richard in a 1997 film, are particularly striking as favoring Richard, acknowledging his flaws as a part of his tragic destiny.

The actor playing Richard is not the only one who makes or breaks the character; countless other voices have a say in what type of Richard would appear before audiences. Richard has been played by men, women, dressed to look like Queen Elizabeth, stood opposite awkward Bolingbrokes, supported by adult Isabels, and loved by loyal Aumerles. Costuming can emphasize Elizabethan iconography, speaking to Richard's failures as a king; it can also enhance the portrayal of an aware yet doomed Christ-like king. Similarly, the deposition scene is full of opportunities in which cinematography and character interaction can work to sway audiences either for or against Richard.

The text is convincing in portraying King Richard II as a tragic king, and although he has flaws, he realizes his fate too late. Richard then pitifully works his cleverness until the
very end, clinging to his former ideas of kingship. Signs of sympathy in various productions can be spotted, although each approaches this shade of Richard from different angles. Richard, as a king, failed his people. All productions can agree that, as a man, Richard was doomed from the start.

Being a history play, Richard II’s story was more culturally and politically relevant in Shakespeare’s time. The Queen of England was Elizabeth I, and there was a lot of controversy surrounding her reign, particularly with regards to her refusal to appoint an heir, since she bore none. Also called The Virgin Queen, Elizabeth was criticized by many for disregarding the future of England. “When the Earl of Essex rebelled against Elizabeth in 1601,” they did so inspired by Shakespeare’s play (Elsaman Maus 973). Even Elizabeth herself acknowledged the political relevance of the production claiming, “I am Richard II...Know you not that?” Still, all Elizabethan performances featured all male casts, and so the costuming often allowed the association between Richard II and Elizabeth I apparent. Often Richard would be seen with reddish hair, long hair, or even in women’s clothing. Some of these traditions are continued today. But the connections between Richard and Elizabeth go farther than their inability to produce heirs. Both monarchs experienced civil war, and conflict between those in power and the people.

Shakespeare’s language hints at the many conflicts experienced by the English in Elizabethan times, using Richard and the other kings of the history plays to comment on political unrest. The troubles of Richard II would revolve around very relevant Elizabethan political issues such as the Divine Right to Rule and succession, the 100 Years War, and usurpation. Act 4 Scene 1 provides language that references these issues, and therefore wasn’t performed in Elizabethan times. Bolingbroke says, “In God’s name I’ll ascend the
regal throne," which provokes the Bishop of Carlisle to express how wrongfully Henry could claim such a thing (4.1.104). The Bishop's failure to convince the other men represented reasoning against Elizabeth, and could not have been shown to the people.

Richard II's tragic presentation on the page isn't only political. It philosophically speaks to Aristotle's paradoxical view of humanity both small (beyond control) and large (maintaining dignity). When Richard hears no one say Amen to his "God save the king," (163) he asks, "Am I both priest and clerk?" (164). But Richard is also simply a man, one trying to understand the meaning of all his titles and traditions. Richard experiences an extreme blow to his ego, earlier asking Aumerle, "We do debase ourself, cousin, do we not, / To look so poorly and to speak so fair?" (3.3.126-7). Even though Richard is acknowledging a decrease in status, he is at least recognizing the various statuses he can evoke and embody. Shakespeare, using this multifaceted portrayal of a king, can pay attention to actual events and persons while maintaining critical and artful. Richard can be a tragic hero, as long as he experiences a moment of catharsis, most likely found in the deposition scene or afterwards while he is locked away. Performing this play requires a company to make certain decisions about the type of king they want audiences to witness. Is he likeable? Forgivable? Weak? If and when does he acknowledge his fate?

Today, this transition from text to production requires a lot of thought, not only about the audience and current events, but also about the media through which Richard's tragic tale will be communicated. Michael Anderegg, professor and scholar of Shakespeare, comments on the downside of modern media saying, "cinema ... tends to reduce Shakespeare's text in a way that might be thought to encourage a simplified, unified point of view" (480). Many films are made for pure entertainment value, and must condense a
historically and philosophically involved piece of literature into an easily understood story. In the modern age, William Shakespeare has become a brand for consumers to digest and experience. It becomes problematic when moviegoers are "lacking experience of the original, [thusly falling] back on its similarity to other imitations—that is, to stereotypes" (Potter 453). One can't truly say they know the story of Richard II by watching one movie; the movie is a reflection of a text, which is a reflection of history. Still, movie directors, producers and actors have license to be artistically creative in telling their version of a text. Theater as well, has a "nature ... to be innovative" (Chillington Rutter 315). It is this freedom that has the power to take away from or add to an original text.

Many theater and film productions of Richard II make great use of the costuming to create metaphor through the iconography of Elizabeth I, referencing the past to modern audiences. In David Tennant's portrayal of the king with the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) in 2013, he dressed in flowing, feminine garb and donned long red hair (Tennant grew his own hair). Similarly in 2007, Jonathan Slinger played Richard II with the RSC and also evoked the image of Elizabeth I. Critic Alan C. Dessen noted how "in the first three acts Slinger's Richard had appeared in a distinctive reddish wig ... but in the deposition scene (4.1) he entered bare-headed and simply clothed" (144). This transition is an extreme take on the historical past of the play, likening Richard to Elizabeth only up to the point in which they were historically alike: she died remaining Queen, whereas Richard was deposed and then killed. On stage, Slinger's Richard needed to be stripped of his ties to Elizabeth (even though chronologically she ruled afterwards) and face his fate with his true, inartificial, and original presence.

1 Without knowledge of the historical context of his appearance, his costuming simply emphasizes his fragility, either as femininity or a likeness to the tragedy of Christ.
Much of Shakespeare's play involves artifice, vanity and how one chooses to present oneself. Many critics find Richard's obsession with appearance in performances make him appear unlikeable. Still, Richard's constant yearning to portray himself under a regal, merited and authoritative light is one of the reasons why he is so tragic: he so desperately clings to artifice and what he's familiar with, even when he knows he's past saving, as a way to understand his descent from power. Many productions use their own imagery with regards to set and cinematography to highlight certain pivotal moments in Richard's journey of realization. The Hollow Crown uses tight camera shots while Richard stands high in his castle dressed in golden armor, nervously sweating and trembling whilst hoping to prove himself formidable against his enemies. His insecurity is highlighted by the camera invasion of his presentation, overshadowing his artificiality.

In theater, audience members cannot zoom in, so producers chose to artistically enlarge certain moments. In the 2007 RSC production, Richard parted with Isabel standing "center stage clad in white while a shower of golden sand poured over his head" (Dessen 144). This visual embodied Isabel's encouraging presence and Richard's last experience of royalty. However, later the play becomes less sympathetic towards the king, having Bagot-Exton drag him "in a circle so as to leave a trail of blood around the still visible sand, a pool of red that stayed on the floor during the final scene" (Dessen 144). This imagistic scene is saturated with color and metaphor; Richard's death is a stain on the very sense of kingship he relished earlier in the scene. His tragic portrayal is emphasized with this dramatic graphic reminder of how quickly royalty and confidence can be destroyed.

An actor's portrayal of Richard as kingly and authoritative also involves his level of masculinity. Textually, Richard II is considered to be a less masculine king than others in
Shakespeare's histories, although not all productions on stage and in film go so far as to portray and identify him as effeminate or even homosexual. Walter Pater, critic and writer of the nineteenth century, "invented Richard as the poet-king, a sort of eloquent but effeminate 'lasy-lad'" (Chillington Rutter 316). Richard's boyishness alongside his control of language meld together to form an endearing yet doomed king. Richard II is a negligent king who acts like bratty child, yet is also a manipulator of symbols and artist of exposition. None of these qualities, however, lend themselves to traditional masculinity, and many productions show this through imagery, costuming and actor interaction.

An entire casting will effect how masculine Richard is portrayed. Mark Rylance played Richard II at the Globe Theater in 2003 with an all-male cast, traditional to performance troupes in Elizabethan times. Scholar and professor Lois Potter commented on Rylance's stature saying, "Richard II's large doll-like queen (Michael Brown) looked embarrassed when standing beside the slightly-built Mark Rylance" (451). Brown, playing Isabel, wore heavy makeup, a dramatic red dress and headpiece. Still, he did not alter his voice to sound higher pitched, and could not help his height. Richard II is a play that questions the masculinity of the king, and putting him in an all-male cast further doubts that manliness if the actor appears less masculine than his queen. Still, this play manages to portray the pitiable and human nature of Richard evident in the text. At the Globe's performance, "the female identity, like the royal identity, was being presented as a constructed and alien thing" (Potter 452). Richard therefore, is left to be human, since his royalty (which he clings to) and his apparent femininity (which he subconsciously exudes) are both constructions. On stage for Act 4, Rylance wears white clothing, structured yet simple, against Bolingbroke's black wardrobe, symbolizing a pure Richard for the audience.
to judge. Rylance’s acting can only do so much to portray a certain level of sympathy towards Richard.

Deborah Warner’s 1995 film Richard II features Fiona Shaw as the title character, going against traditional Shakespearian standards for actors embodied by the Globe and challenging the idea of a feminine king with a human king. Potter notes, “Nicholas de Jongh, in his review for the Evening Standard, observed that ‘actresses play men far more convincingly than men do women,’” and Shaw is no exception (451). A distinguished Irish actor, Shaw was able to make the film about more than gender, claiming that the story is really “about the nature of being” (Chillington Rutter 315). Theater is all about taking on a persona, and her female identity was able to serve to the question of identity, both in terms of gender and Divine Right within the text. The nature of manhood and kingship become “the nature of personhood ... [which] is really ... at play in this play” (Chillington Rutter 315). Shaw’s portrayal of Richard doesn’t highlight her feminine qualities, but it sympathetically portrays a poetic king aware of his decline.

Shaw and other actors embody Richard’s wit and intelligence, but not all productions shed a forgivable light on the king, highlighting instead his weaknesses and flaws. Much of this depends on when, or if at all, the production shows signs of Richard’s emotional growth or realization of his wrongdoings. Still, there are always elements embedded in the text and speech of the actors that grant Richard some redemption. Author and professor Michael Shurgot acknowledges this tragic nature of the king in the text, saying, “even as Richard finally comes to know he is and why he has failed, he fights desperately to save his life. Richard gains self-knowledge only to lose the life that earlier
this knowledge might have saved." (133). It is up to each production to determine when Richard's moment of realization should be and how to portray that.

If Richard is fully aware of his doomed fate before the deposition scene, the production is demonstrating a king cleverly willing to make the most of his time to speak with his poetry. Shaw's Richard in that scene can be described as “quite simply the smartest person on the stage” (Chillington Rutter 314). Intelligence, however, is not always a positive quality. Richard II has also been called a “lyric tragedy centered on [a] narcissistic poet-king” (Chillington Rutter). His manipulative and dramatic behavior in the deposition scene is thusly presented by some productions as a continuation of “the king's foppery and dishonesty” that occurred off stage before the play even began (Potter 452). Still, a production that emphasizes Richard's flaws is testing the audience: How “unquestioningly [will] audiences believe that a king—or his modern equivalent, a star—can do no wrong?” (Potter 452) The likeability of Richard on stage or in film is key towards what the production wants to say as a whole, but that decision is not completely up to the lead actor.

The role of Aumerle enhances Richard's goodness, although it can suggest his homosexuality or vanity. At the Royal Shakespeare Company's production in Stratford, Aumerle and Richard kiss before the deposition. The moment was not in the text, and it made Aumerle's identity as Richard's murderer particularly shocking. Beforehand, “when Richard returned from Ireland (Tennent running barefoot on stage), Aumerle was loyally at his side along with a handful of courtiers” (Rogers 315-6). These sycophants are present in the text as 'marshals,' but appear more like youthful attendants in many recent productions. In the Hollow Crown, Aumerle himself also acted more as a flatterer, emphasizing Richard boyishness, immaturity, vanity and dependency. At Stratford,
"Aumerle became the one to deliver Richard's initial capitulation to Bolingbroke, speaking words dictated to him by Richard as the latter whispered them into Aumerle's ear: 'And all
the number of his fair demands / Shall be accomplished without contradiction' (3.3.122-3)"
(Rogers 316). Aumerle's presence is meant to comfort Richard, a man intelligent yet unable
to confront his enemies directly.

The portrayal of a king is nothing without the portrayal of his queen. In the text, the role of Isabel is so small that she is only called "The Queen, his wife" in the Persons of the
Play list. In reality, she was small, literally and figuratively, only having been a child throughout this series of events, and not a lot of agency. Her role in the play can add
dimension to the likeability of Richard; her portrayal is linked with his. "Iconographically, a budding virgin is a hortus conclusus," according to scholar and professor Helen Ostovich
(123). A prepubescent girl is symbolic of a garden because of her virginity; she is about to bloom. Isabel's symbolism as hortus conclusus connects her to the "Tudor rose and specifically the cult of Elizabeth" (Ostovich 124). Richard serves as a parallel to the queen, but ultimately it is Isabel who would get pregnant, not her husband. Isabel's inability to have a child, because she is still one herself, yet eager willingness to do so, relieves some fault off of Richard's shoulders. Productions, therefore, that cast Isabel as a child (or at least ethereal and childlike) are sympathetic towards Richard. Furthermore, "Isabel's implicit Marian associations challenge readings in which a harsh critique of Richard enables approval of Bolingbroke." (Ostovich 125). Isabel as the Virgin Mary, part of the Christian Mystery, can overturn a favorable portrayal of Bolingbroke. Richard's shortcomings related to succession are forgiven if Isabel is a child.
In the *Hollow Crown*, French actress and model Clémence Poésy plays Isabel. She is a woman, but has an ethereal and fragile appearance. Act 3 Scene 4 demonstrates Isabel's strength and willingness to save her husband, despite her inability to do so. Historically, Isabel's passivity in court is most likely due to her age and French nationality. The *Hollow Crown* uses the garden scene to showcase Isabel's headstrong attitude, but ultimately when Isabel and Richard must say their goodbyes, she is helpless again. Ostovich notes, from the text, "Isabel's shock after the deposition and claims that his abdication of responsibility thrusts her into a role-reversal ... The young Isabel is forced to become the sharply reproving mother, castigating the now childish schoolboy Richard" (Ostovich 127). Still, her nature as a loyal wife, not as a mother, stands in the forefront of the scene. Ben Whishaw's Richard is more intelligent than Ostovich sees the character, keeping his strength present to audiences. All Isabel can really say is, "Then wither he goes, thither let me go" (5.1.85). Like Tom Hughes' Aumerle, Poésy's Isabel is extremely loyal, shedding a positive light on Richard, but not motherly strength. Her "loving embraces during the last 30 lines of the scene... [echo] the love and loyalty of the Biblical Ruth" (Ostovich 128). It is not in Isabel's destiny to save Richard, only comfort him.

Bolingbroke, the main source of trouble for Richard and general power aside from the title character in the play, is vital for the production. His portrayal can make or break Richard, and how the two actors relate on stage can increase or decrease Richard's case as a tragic king. Ben Miles portrayed Bolingbroke at the Old Vic Theatre in London opposite Kevin Spacey, and the two created a clear foil in personalities between the cousins. Spacey's Richard was pensive and deliberate, whereas "Ben Miles's Bolingbroke...stormed on stage in 2.3 and...spoke rapidly and impatiently" (Shurgot 102). This difference adds
favorability towards Richard on the stage as an intelligent and manipulative man, while portraying Bolingbroke as aggressive and impulsive. Professor Shurgot noted, "Spacey's deliberate pace and his occasional glance at Bolingbroke showed that he relished not only his own fervid imaginings, but also annoying his adversary" (Shurgot 103). Richard balanced his taunts and boyishness with their clever intent, giving him the advantage.

Bolingbroke was solely reactive in this scene, holding no control in the situation. With each attempt Bolingbroke tried to reassert himself and his agenda, he "unwittingly gave Richard another image with which to play" (Shurgot 103). Both men have an edge over the other: Richard is doomed, and in many productions he knows it, but Bolingbroke looses the intellectual battle in the court. Irving Wadle described the two as "fatal twins," both revealing flaws in each other (Chillington Rutter 316). Richard takes his intellectual arguments into the physical space using both the crown and the mirror as symbols. Critic Robert Shuler notes, "as a literal looking glass wielded ritualistically, it enables Richard to simulate Elizabethan mirror magic in a last effort to identify and indict Bolingbroke as a demonic thief" (Shuler 93). Richard, who by so many is considered a thief, wants to assert his divine right using a symbol created during Shakespeare's day. "Whether the Elizabethan stage's first Bolingbroke gave a guilty stare at Richard's request, we can only speculate," but many Bolingbrokes in modern productions do just that (Shuler 99). Ben Miles, Rory Kinnear, Liam Brennan and Richard Bremmer all exhibit awkward stares, glossy eyes and an extreme desire for Richard to accept his downfall more quickly.

The portrayal of Richard by Kevin Spacey at the Old Vic Theater as a deliberate, thoughtful man adds to his sympathy, and speaks to his strength as a king. Even the costuming presented a military man to the audience. The first impression of Richard in the
production features Spacey standing still, "as if absorbing the magnitude and majesty of his position [then walking slowly,] relishing every step" (Shurgot 101). Spacey exudes confidence in his gestures, combining with the authority of his black militaristic suit. The strength in this portrayal carries into Spacey's line delivery, using the text advantageously. Spacey spoke "conscious of the highly wrought poetic images, as if calmly gaining actual military power from his cleverly imagining the 'murders, treasons, and detested sins' exposed by the brightening sun" (Shurgot 102). In doing so, the production granted Richard a lot of power right at the beginning, and vested much weight on how he handled himself towards the end of the play. Spacey maintained control in his speech, adding sympathy; he was aware of his downfall, and handled himself no differently with his power in question than he did at the beginning, when he wasn't challenged.

Much of the discussion surrounding the tragic nature of Richard's deposition revolves around the quality of his reign and how he treated his responsibilities as king. "[Shaw's] Richard," for example, "acted like being a king wasn't serious" (Chillington Rutter 315). Still, Shaw emphasized his intelligence, portraying a "player king" with incredible wit (Chillington Rutter 316). In Deborah Warner's film, Richard is aware of his ill fate. In this sympathetic take, "no one is more aware of the contrarious and oppositional ethos of this world than Richard, and his aim throughout the scene is to make others aware of it." The themes of kingship, and thusly the fight for power, are very relevant in the text, and so audiences are left to decide the extent the king himself acknowledges that. Shuler notes, "A major step toward this acknowledgement...is his calling for the looking glass" (94). The mirror allows him to prove to everyone that he is trying to look at his true self, past his artificial and somewhat delusional self-image as majestic and protected by God.
Some productions emphasize the role of religion in the play, and the portrayal of Richard II as Jesus Christ in costuming and gesture speak to the King's destined yet tragic story. In various performances from the past twenty years, Richard would step "back and spread his arms, Christ-like" (Shurgot 101). Richard has gestured this way whilst being robed by attendants, but also lying dead in a coffin, representing the many images and stages of Jesus's life and representation. At the Royal Shakespeare Theatre in Stratford upon Avon,

"The audience was confronted with the stage picture of a coffin, draped in black, in the center of a cathedral nave ... The hush that descended upon the auditorium the moment the music commenced was extraordinary ... instinctively [created] the church in which the first scene was to be set:" (Rogers 313).

The religious environment naturally created with the help of the audience could only be possible with the innovation of a theatrical performance. This allowed for the production to comfortably include gesture and costuming that reflected on imagery of Jesus, adding a layer of sympathy on the tragic king.

The *Hollow Crown* utilized the iconography of Christ in costuming, cinematography, gesture and symbolism. Jesus Christ is the prime inspiration for the appearance of Richard in the film, and not Queen Elizabeth, a mere mortal surrounded by politics. When summoned by Bolingbroke to the deposition, Richard is escorted while riding a donkey, and dressed in white, flowing and simple robes. He is barefoot yet wearing a crown, representing Jesus. Even the symbols Whishaw's Richard creates in his speeches are attributed to the goodness, yet tragic nature of Christ. The crown, his "focal emblem is
'moralized' as Richard transforms it into a 'deep well' and proceeds to explicate the tableau of theft in deliberately charged terms" (Shuler 94). The king is able to transform a simple item into so much more, mimicking the miracles created by Jesus. Because the crown becomes so saturated with meaning, it can no longer be handled by anyone besides the sole believer of that symbol in the room: Richard. Rory Kinnear's Bolingbroke "cannot place [the crown] on his own head; he must hold it awkwardly and then somehow, with as much grace as he can muster, return it" (Shuler 95). Bolingbroke's discomfort serves to highlight Richard's skill and likeability. Richard in the text even likens Bolingbroke to Pilates, a role the cousin surely feels uncomfortable bearing. In the film, even after the deposition, when Richard is locked up and alone, he still contemplates his fate. Similarly to Jesus Christ, who only after his crucifixion was he able to resurrect himself and acknowledge his true identity as savior. For Richard, this realization of redemption came to late for him to save himself.

In the past twenty years, the story of Richard II has been approached from various angles, with each production attempting to answer the question of the tragic king's redemptive qualities. Even with formidable Bolingbrookes, treacherous Aumerle's and passive yet post-pubescent Isabels, Richard's articulation and creation of saturated symbols in the deposition scene lend themselves to a fighting hero. Any physical interpretation, on stage or in film, ultimately speaks to the text; at the heart of Shakespeare's story, Richard is worthy of sympathy. From costuming to cinematography, various aspects of a production work together to highlight themes present in the text such as gender, kingship and usurpation. Ultimately, Richard II is a man who acknowledges his flawed idealistic view of the Divine Right to Rule and royal reign. He then makes an attempt to win a verbal battle in the war Bolingbroke started (with encouragement by
Northumberland and others). After his fall, Richard considers understanding his life of utmost importance and obsession. Besides his portrayal, his psychology, in the text and in productions, is the next step in deciding if Richard is truly a favorable character. Still, the golden crown will always remain "like a deep well," even though poor Richard realized too late.

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**Works Consulted**


