Shakespeare Performed

Fiona Shaw’s Richard II:
The Girl as Player-King as Comic

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... Richard, that sweet lovely rose,
... this thorn, this canker Bolingbroke.
(1 Henry IV, 1.3.175–74)1

Even before it opened at the National Theatre in June 1995, every major British newspaper had an opinion about Deborah Warner’s Richard II. “Gimmick casting,” said the Independent on Sunday: “The sort of thing you might expect to see at the end of term in a boarding school.”2 A “Kingdom under siege,” observed the Guardian.3 The Observer Review asked about “a career in crisis,” and three weeks later the Independent felt compelled to publish a “second opinion” to “defend... Richard II from the baying critics.”4 This silly season among reviewers did not end when the play opened. First-night notices found critics—such as Benedict Nightingale in the Times—writing as if addled, their imaginations filled “with panicky images: the Maggie Smith Falstaff, the Nicol Williamson Desdemona, the Raquel Welch Titus Andronicus.”5

What was all the fuss about? Deborah Warner’s Richard was being played by “a girl.”6 And not just any “girl.” Fiona Shaw is one of the most remarkable actors of her generation.7 Fiercely intelligent and endlessly articulate—interviewing Shaw is like having the top of your head taken off and your cranium scoured out with a brillo pad—she brings that intelligence to every part she plays. Whatever her role—Kate Minola, Hedda Gabler, Electra—her character is quite simply the smartest person on the stage. It was clear from the anxiety rattling around in those pre-publicity interviews—and nothing rattles critics quite as visibly as a smart woman onstage—that the “girl” was not going to play the Richard they knew from a dozen previous productions, the wastrel, the gormless poltroon outmaneuvered by his barons, the “girly” king.

It was also clear that this performance was not going to be reverential about the idea of the English sovereign. Shaw is Irish. Cork is in her blood and, despite Shaw’s professional training at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in London, Cork survives in her voice, in her accent, in her witty, ironizing intonation. Hers is a voice that triumphs in comedy but that also interrogates politics. Given the history of the English in Ireland in the 1590s and the 1990s, and given, in 1995, the shabby daily spectacle of the English monarchy savaging itself in newsprint and on television, raveling out its “mystery”

6 Fiona Shaw, interviewed by the author, London, 15 August 1995. All subsequent quotations of Shaw are, unless otherwise noted, drawn from this interview.
7 Shaw’s stage credits include The Rivals, The Way of the World, Machinal, and The Good Person of Setzuan at the National Theatre; As You Like It, Much Ado About Nothing, The Merchant of Venice, Philistines, Liaisons Dangereuses, Mephisto, The Taming of the Shrew, The New Inn, Hyde Park, and Electra with the Royal Shakespeare Company; and Hedda Gabler at the Abbey Theatre. Among Shaw’s film credits are My Left Foot, The Butcher Boy, Three Men and a Little Lady, Super Mario Brothers, and Undercover Blues.
before the wearied eyes of its subjects, an Irish voice speaking an English king was bound to register skepticism if not downright mockery.

So Shaw’s Richard was always going to be subversive but not in the clichéd ways the critics imagined. For what mattered wasn’t that a woman was playing the king. What mattered, as Shaw saw it, “was that a woman was playing the king and refusing to play by ‘boys’ rules.” Her Richard—and this is an issue I want to return to—“acted like being a king wasn’t serious.”

For Deborah Warner the cross-gender casting was always a nonissue: Fiona Shaw was “the most exciting and suitable Richard I could think of.” For Shaw the project was an “experiment,” although not the one attributed to her by the hysterical Independent journalist who saw Warner and Shaw conspiring in “a long-term . . . attempt over the coming years to ‘appropriate’ Shakespeare’s male characters on the grounds that he didn’t write enough decent parts for women.” “It was nothing to do with that,” Shaw replies. “Ten years ago I couldn’t have played Richard II without the political overtone of feminism attaching to it. But that moment is gone. It’s over. We’re beyond that now. So the antifeminist criticisms of the production were completely passé criticisms. We’re into another area which is much bigger than men playing women or women playing men, bigger because it’s not about the nature of gender, it’s about the nature of being.”

Why the need for experiment? Because, says Shaw, “the theater right now is pretty dull. Shakespeare, the roles in Shakespeare, the theater: they’re all at a place which is dull. The National Theatre has just revived as ‘new work’ a production they did fifteen years ago. The Royal Shakespeare Company has publicly declared that they don’t think it’s their role to be innovative. This is very worrying. Because the nature of theater is to be innovative; any repeated moment in the theater is a dead moment. The theater needs to try to aim into the area that’s unknown. We don’t need any more productions of Shakespeare as a rendering of the known, as a rendering of a ‘cultural text.’ In experimenting with Richard II, I wanted to take a pearl of some imaginative extraordinariness and drop it into the cultural pool to see what ripples might occur. It’s rather fantastical to free someone from their gender. So what happens, what is released, if a woman plays Richard II? That was the experiment.”

The experiment, then, had as much to do with reanimating a stagnant theater as with discovering a “female” Richard. Instructed by “the latent prompting” of the text, Shaw found her “femaleness [to be] very near to the heart of the play, and the world of the play [to be] very near the heart of the theatre.” Theater, Shaw thinks, “is often released by its opposite: something is released when a man-king is played by a woman non-king.” Further, “the theatre’s role is to show things by reflection not by direct representation. . . . to create totalities that people can look at, accept, reject, be changed by.”

The lines that came to resonate most powerfully for the (female) actor inside the (male) role were ones like Richard’s meditation on the paradoxical end of human being:

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\text{. . . whate’er I be,} \\
\text{Nor I, nor any man that but man is,} \\
\text{With nothing shall be pleas’d, till he be eas’d} \\
\text{With being nothing.} \\
\text{(5.5.38–41)}
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“There is something marvelous,” says Shaw, “about a woman speaking these lines, about a woman saying something about the nature of manhood—because that something is also about the nature of personhood. And that is really what is at play in this play.”

For the record, then, and drawing on my interview with Fiona Shaw midway through

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8 Warner, quoted in Armitstead, p. 10.
9 Temple, p. 23.
10 Quotations of Shaw in this paragraph are drawn from an article by Georgina Brown, The Independent, 26 May 1995, p. 25.
the play’s run, I want to document several choices the Warner/Shaw Richard made as a way of accounting for some of what the production released. As it turned out, the cross-gender casting was the route to a paradoxical return: by estranging the title role, it allowed the audience to reinterrogate, to reimagine, what previous performances had made us feel was familiar in the role; what, indeed, those previous performances had made us feel the role was about: a “girly” king and a double act. Fiona Shaw’s innovation was not so much to re-gender the role as to put a new spin on what it means to be the “player” king.

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There should have been nothing disconcerting about a woman playing the part since Richard has traditionally been perceived as something of a girly role. In early criticism Richard II was the tragedy of the effeminate king: for Coleridge, Richard’s “inherent weakness” was “an intellectual feminineness, . . . feminine friendism”; for Dowden it was his “‘boynishness,’” his “want of true and manly patriotism.”’ What repelled Hazlitt—Richard’s failure of “manliness”—Swinburne cherished: the “inspired effeminacy” of this “unmanliest of [Shakespeare’s] creatures.” It was Walter Pater who invented Richard as the poet-king, a sort of eloquent but effeminate “lasy-lad,” and it was Pater’s Richard that became the standard reading of the role in the theater; indeed, the standard was so universal that alternative readings stood out. In 1964 the unidentified Times reviewer started from the position that Richard II was so “fixed in the mind as a lyric tragedy centred on the narcissistic poet-king” that David Warner’s RSC performance was remarkable for its “unexpected masculinity.”

Since the 1970s, however, starting with John Barton’s landmark RSC production in 1973, the theater has become more interested in Richard II as a play of doubles: internal doubles, intertextual doubles, theatrical doubling. Barton, famously, saw Richard and Bolingbroke as “fatal twins” (in reviewer Irving Wardle’s unforgettable phrase). He had Richard Pasco and Ian Richardson double the roles, playing the king and the usurper on alternate nights. The effect of this was to literalize the duplicities Barton found in the play’s text: not just in its plot and roles but in its system of verbal and visual exchange.

Syntactically, this is a play that constantly “set[s] the word against the word”: language switchbacks on itself in cumulatively grotesque puns (on gaunt, for instance), and the text grows thickets of curious riddles, some that involve identity swaps. Outrageously, Bolingbroke can legitimate his return from exile because he was Hereford when he left but Lancaster coming home.

11 These nineteenth-century assessments of Richard’s character are quoted here from Nicholas Brooke, ed., Richard II: A Casebook (London: Macmillan, 1973), 30, 31, 41, 37, 74, and 55. To Pater, Richard was (if “nothing else”) “an exquisite poet . . . , from first to last, in light and gloom alike, able to see all things poetically, to give a poetic turn to his conduct of them, and refreshing with his golden language the tritest aspects of that ironic contrast between the pretensions of a king and the actual necessities of his destiny” (quoted in Brooke, ed., 55). C. E. Montague, reviewing Frank Benson’s Richard in the Guardian (4 December 1899), wondered “whether anyone who hears Mr. Benson in this part with an open mind can doubt that Shakespere meant to draw in Richard not only a rake and muff on a throne and falling off it but, in the same person, an exquisite poet, to show with one hand how kingdoms are lost and with the other how the creative imagination goes about its work; to fill the same man with the attributes of a typical, a consummate artist!” (quoted in Brooke, ed., 64). In the 1950s John Gielgud continued the theatrical tradition of Richard as the poet-king: see his comments on the role, first published in Sir John Gielgud, Stage Directions (New York: Random House, 1964), and reprinted in Brooke, ed., 77–81.

12 This phrase comes from Tony Harrison, another poet who had problems squaring poetry with masculinity; see Carol Rutter, Tony Harrison: Permanently Bard (Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Bloodaxe Books, 1995), 15.

13 The Times, 16 April 1964, p. 6.


A language that formalizes duplicity is exactly right for this play of cross and double cross. (Who killed Woodstock? Whose side is Aumerle on? What does loyalty to “the king” mean, given the experience of, say, York?) But duplicity, an essential doubleness, is likewise mysteriously located at the heart of things in Richard II, so Bushy’s “perspectives,” his glass of tears that “Divides one thing entire to many objects” (2.2.18, 17), is precisely the right optical instrument to focus spectatorship in this play. “Double” is how Richard sees himself: composed of two bodies, the “gorgeous” king and the private man who “live[s] with bread” (3.2.175). He is double in another way, too, for he figures himself as a kind of androgyne: “My brain . . . the female” and “My soul the father” couple to “beget / A generation of still-breeding thoughts” (5.5.6–8) that are themselves “double” in that they are at once teeming and stillborn. It is the body’s failure to represent materially his psychic doubleness that maddens Richard in 4.1: gazing in the mirror, he is struck by the duplicity of his face, which refuses to register on its surface the grief his self feels. Then, as he requires his cousin to “seize the crown” (4.1.181), he figures the crown as “a deep well” and himself and Bolingbroke as twin “buckets”: all that distinguishes them is their emptiness or fullness. So Richard and Bolingbroke are doubles throughout, twins by antithesis (the “rose” versus the “canter,” or the “comet” that “could not stir” but it “was wond’red at” versus the “skipping King,” who “ambled up and down, / With shallow jesters” [1 Henry IV, 1.3. 175–76; 3.2.46–47, 60–61]). But they are also twins by synthesis, as we see when Bolingbroke replays in 4.1 the gage scene Richard presided over in 1.1.

By doubling and alternating the roles of Richard and Bolingbroke, John Barton made doubleness the production’s organizing metaphor but then went on to intensify its reference by using it to explore the metaphor of the player-king. What Richard knows and Bolingbroke learns is that to play the king is to play a part. Kingship is acting, acting is playing, and politics is theater. The players—mere histrions, hypocrites, antics—are interchangeable. The “O” that is their playing space is metonymized in the hollow circle of their crown, and it makes no difference who plays the king since “Antic” Death will outplay them all. So the golden ceremonial mask, which abstractly signified the king at the beginning of Barton’s production and that (in a sequence of three coronations enacted onstage) ritually transformed the face of the individual into the facelessness of the monarch, was replaced by its double at the end: a skull.

Other productions have seen doubles differently, as traffic between role and role, certainly, but also as dialogue between text and text. On tour in 1969, the Prospect Theatre Company played Richard II opposite Edward II with Ian McKellen in both title roles. At the RSC in 1990, Alex Jennings played Richard II in the main house opposite Simon Russell Beale’s Edward II in the Swan. Alan Howard alternated Richard II with Richard III at the RSC in 1980. Each of these Richards explored virility: McKellen held the orb with such a stiff military wrist that it looked as though rigor mortis had set in; Howard, tethered to the floor at Pomfret, used his chains like a thug’s garrote on his assassins.

But these Richards also toyed with aspects of effeminacy: McKellen was sometimes “given to hysterical anger”; Howard carried a blue satin handkerchief; Jennings stood limp-kneed. So while none of these Richards was a “lassy-lad,” there was enough in their performances that readmitted and recirculated Pater’s notion of the effeminate poet-king. More to the point, these Richards were being seen as half of a double act, companion plays in a repertoire that invited audiences to read Richard II intertextually
against either Edward II or Richard III. The paradoxical effect of this was to set up analogies that worked by association or disassociation: on the one hand, to somehow normalize Richard—each of the “shadow” kings was more extreme in his habits—and, on the other, to foreground Richard’s sexuality and make it a problem. Read intertextually, that monster of deformed and excessive masculinity, Richard Crookback, came to be seen as the ultimate product of Richard Plantagenet’s more delicately deformed deficient masculinity. And Edward (who is both his own poet-maker of excessive fantasies of homosexual pleasure and Gaveston’s abject muse of sodomitical enthrallment) projected a lurid sidelight onto Richard, fawned over by his less-demonstrative minions. Both sets of intertextual doubles made for strange traffic between text and text; both doubles sensationalized Richard. The effeminate king was deviant, abnormal. Given the performed intelligence of the companion play, this had to be so; for in these productions of Richard II, there was no position from which Plantagenet’s male and female selves could be seen as coherent, integrated. In these productions he had to remain “queer.”

Deborah Warner’s Richard II revisited these ideas—and remapped them. Cross-casting profoundly reconfigured the “queer,” stripping it of camp “effeminate glitter” and putting in place a “determinedly fresh optique.” Like Bushy’s “perspectives,” this optique positioned spectators to eye things “awry” to “distinguish form,” and so to make a new kind of sense of Richard II. That a woman was playing the king without impersonating a man or male behavior meant that the audience saw a Richard who was androgynous rather than effeminate, whose “womanishness” was not deviant but integral and resonant, inscribing within the role an alternative personal and political orientation. In this production, tears belonged to Richard as “naturally” as rage did.

Cross-casting likewise offered this production material to re-think and re-present the duality/duplicity of Richard and Bolingbroke. Irving Wardle, who twenty years earlier had called them “fatal twins” in John Barton’s production, observed of this production that the mirror Richard called for in the abdication scene was “superfluous”: “with victor and vanquished gazing into each other’s eyes.... Bolingbroke himself [was] Richard’s mirror.” Partly this depended on the uncanny physical resemblance between Shaw and her Bolingbroke, David Threlfall. (“We must be from the same family somewhere,” says Shaw. “But in fact we discovered the double in rehearsal. Deborah Warner didn’t cast for it.”) Even more uncanny was the sense that Richard and Bolingbroke were not just twins but male and female sides of what once had been a single self, now violently ruptured. Wardle saw them “magnetically circling each other like a platonically divided creature seeking to unite its two halves.”

Wardle saw, too, that the “theatrical fascination of this process [was] that it operate[d] simultaneously as a love journey and a power struggle.” The tragedy this Richard II heartrendingly divulged was not concerned with male (or even failed male) heroics. It was concerned with failed love. “Theirs is a love story,” says Shaw. “Its tragedy is that one of them gives his crown away to one who ultimately may not even want it.” This tragedy revolved around the kinship of two same-but-different cousins and around the kinship of two same-but-different genders. It was the story of a wrecked love affair.

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Shaw knew from the outset that it was this story of wrecked love that she wanted to explore. “I was not interested in the Richard who was king,” she says. “I was interested in the private love affair between Richard and Bolingbroke. I wanted to play a Richard who loves Bolingbroke. If he hates Bolingbroke, if his cousin is his archenemy, then the play is about one cousin who hates another cousin destroying him. That’s not interest-

18 Billington, 70; Wardle, The Times, 11 April 1973, p. 17.
What’s interesting is when the person you’re destroying is the person you love.”

Pitching this production on emotional rather than political ground was foremost among Deborah Warner’s directorial claims for Richard. Warner, says Shaw, “is wonderful at releasing the emotional heartbeat of a play. She feels that that’s where the essence lies. She’s apolitical. But of course if you hit the emotional heartbeat of the play, you also hit the chaotic area—the problematic area, the area you’re going to have to examine. If you hit that, the politics will follow.” Warner and her designer, Hildegard Bechtler, created a playing space in the 170-seat Cottesloe Theatre which felt both public and private and which managed to suggest itself as some sort of elegant but austere antechamber to the gorgeous state rooms seemingly just beyond, where the mystery and majesty of monarchy customarily performed. A narrow traverse stage in bare, honey-colored wood was flanked by steeply raked seats that rose behind barricades. The audience might have been sitting in choir stalls, on benches in the House of Commons, behind barriers at a joust, in grandstands at tennis. Their position on either side of the action configured the idea of “seeing double”: there could be no consensus viewpoint here, no single way of looking at things “from the front.” Every scene was played to a double audience, and spectators were aware of seeing across the playing space a mirror image of themselves.

In this way, spatially, Bechtler’s design located an attitude toward performativity. But it also evoked a world: a medieval world that was as spare yet gorgeous as monastic black letter illuminated in gold. Before the action began, the center of the playing space was set with a row of seven burnished stands, each of them displaying a miniature—a lion, a dagger, a crystal ball, a gold coin. A black-cowled figure tended (and eventually removed) them. He might have been a monk: a plainsong Kyrie Eleison hung faintly in the air. Or he might have been Death. We seemed to see, spaced out before us in those icons, the seven sons of Edward III, all but two of them wasted by death. Or maybe we saw a different kind of waste. That rich collection of gemlike miniatures perhaps represented Richard Plantagenet’s exquisite profligacy: Richard (the program notes told us) spent the medieval equivalent of a million pounds a year on ceremonial display. Did the tokens signify how little the wastrel had to show for his squandering of the kingdom?

As the action began, spectators were again invited to see double, this time in dumb-show, when, at the far end of the playing space, behind a gauze curtain flickeringly backlit by candles, actors-as-actors entered in ones and twos and began warming up. Eventually they lifted down the coronation robe that stood against the back wall and invested Richard. Themselves transformed by the act of this transformation, they genuflected deeply to the body-made-king. That all this took place behind the gauze mystified the action. Majesty was slightly unreal: a performance that exaggerated its own theatricality like the shadow-play on the back wall which loomed larger than the figures that cast it. This ambiguity was intensified moments later when Shaw, now robed as King Richard, turned as if to make the big ceremonial entrance. But she didn’t walk on. She walked off. Astonishingly, majesty ducked out by a side door! (When Richard reappeared moments later to start speaking the play, Shaw no longer wore any of those ostentatious trappings.)

Unlike the metatheatrical opening of John Barton’s production, then (an opening that consciously foregrounded the transformation of actor into “character,” and an opening that Warner seemed to be quoting in order to deconstruct it), this moment was designed quite deliberately to resist registering any such move between actor and role: instead it stubbornly, even insolently, insisted on their separateness. In this production the (female) actor would in no sense “become” the (male) king. Moreover, the iconoclasm of the jokey deferred entrance laid down a marker for the rest of the production: the player-king in this performance would do a lot of “playing around.”

This opening saw Warner and Shaw chancing things in a major way. That the gamble was worth taking began to be clear when Richard and Bolingbroke, king and cousin, faced each other in the opening scene. The two stood at opposite ends of the playing space: Bolingbroke, dark, brooding, ponderous under a costume as heavy as the chain mail it evoked; the king, skittish in a costume that put a free-moving white robe over a torso tightly wrapped in white bands, as if Richard’s body were already swaddled in a
winding sheet that was meant to suggest his conceit on the sacredness of the “flesh that walls about our lives.” Behind Richard lounged a gaggle of pretty youths dressed in Florentine taffetas: Aumerle’s flame-colored hair curled toward his green-satin shoulders. Behind Bolingbroke stood men in leather, rivets, coarse wool. A court of lightweight adolescents ranged itself against a caste of heavies, a king whose feet swung off the ground when she sat on her throne placed against a cousin planted foursquare. What could two such different creatures as Richard and Bolingbroke possibly have to say to each other?

But this was the stunning discovery. As the scene played, it emerged that, far from being strangers to each other, the cousins were symbiotically connected. They shared a secret language. It was a language of gesture, of game, of fooling around at the margins of the deeply serious. (Where did this language come from? In rehearsal Shaw invented a prehistory for Richard and Bolingbroke: “I made up all sorts of secret games in my head about their childhood, like the fact that Bolingbroke had always been Richard’s protector physically—in school fights—that he’d always taken care of his weak and inadequate little runt of a cousin. So when Northumberland starts to bully Richard about signing the articles of confession in the abdication scene, of course Richard hides behind Bolingbroke, of course Bolingbroke puts his arms around Richard. He’s shielding Richard. He’s the closest thing to a mother Richard has. That area of confusion was something our production could achieve because we were in a world where the king wasn’t masculine and so where Bolingbroke could play his ‘feminine’ weakness rather than his strength, his vulnerability to Richard and Richard’s vulnerability to him.”)

This exclusive language put them in an exclusive world, even surrounded by the court. “It was one of those languages,” says Shaw, “that exists underneath language. Not a subtext. A secret language that discloses secret histories.” Ultimately it was this secret language, expressed in child’s play and clowning, that told the love story between Richard and Bolingbroke. But it was also this secret language that, when love failed, Richard would redeploy to the business of critiquing politics. Then, unabashedly the player-king, Richard would use that language to instruct Bolingbroke—and the audience—in the same brand of savage political lesson the Fool teaches Lear.

Four instances made this language explicit to the audience. In the opening scene, Bolingbroke, upping the ante of accusation against Mowbray, as though goaded by the mocking raised eyebrow of his cousin-king into an adolescent game of “chicken,” finally blurted out the business about the murder of Woodstock. His strangled cry was an act of playground desperation, a bid by the abject for love, not power. There was a palpable sense in the scene that Bolingbroke had been estranged from the king, that this meeting was about “two lads” and a lost “boy eternal” that had been displaced by newer, more glamorous favorites. The scene was about yearning and nostalgia, about personal, not public, politics.

Second, at Coventry. As the lists were set, Bolingbroke interrupted the ritual by asking to “kiss my sovereign’s hand” (1.3.46). There was no trace of triumphalism in his voice. And he was certainly not upstaging the king—or Mowbray—in personalizing the politics of the moment so as to force Richard to descend into the lists and take him on face to face. (Threlfall’s Bolingbroke was never so politically aware; he was never the machiavel understudying as player-king.) Instead he was simply a man who knew that one of the appellants in this contest was minutes away from death: “a ceremonious leave / And loving farewell of our several friends” (1.3.50–51) looked that death in the eye. His simplicity was breathtaking. Again, there was a language—a love language—underneath the lines. He needed to embrace his cousin one last time. So Richard descended. She brought with her a bowl of holy water and solemnly anointed Mowbray’s forehead with the sign of the cross. She turned to Bolingbroke, but instead of repeating the ceremony, she mockingly paddled her fingers in the water and flicked it in his face. Then, setting aside her crown—and her jokes—she put her arms around Bolingbroke, and she kissed him. All the unspoken past, all the unimaginable future, hung on that lingering kiss.
This kiss was repeated with the same perplexing crossovers between high seriousness and kid stuff in 3.3 at Flint Castle. Richard spoke the lines on civil war as a solemn prophecy of apocalypse—but then she cut the ground out from under the warning by giving Northumberland no chance to deliver Bolingbroke’s submission. In a childish fit of self-destructive, self-theatricalizing petulance (“What must the king do now?” [3.3.143]), she seemed about to throw herself off the parapet. Instead, outrageously, she gave the king spinning down a length of drapery into the court below like a child on a slide, while she made an anticlimactic joke entrance down the back stairs. Her exit from the scene (“Set on towards London, cousin . . . ?” [1. 208]) ludicrously mimed a game of horsey-horsey. Yet against such funny business, Bolingbroke’s gravity—“My gracious lord, I come but for mine own”—was answered with equal seriousness— “Your own is yours, and I am yours, and all” (ll. 196–97)—and with an embrace from behind that put Richard literally in Bolingbroke’s shadow. The kiss Richard gave now was one Bolingbroke was in no position to return: a kiss from behind, a kiss from the past.

Finally, the deposition scene. Richard entered carrying the crown in a wicker basket. She sat with her knees stiffly together and her hands flat upon them like a schoolchild before the class register is called. When she ostentatiously recognized “The favours of these men” and dared them with “God save the king!” she cocked her hand around her ear, mockingly waiting for “Amen.” The joke on Judas and “All hail!” was funny, disconcerting: plain bad behavior (4.1.168–73). A king who clownéd around caught everybody out. She made the grown-up antiritual of royal resignation that York and Northumberland were so seriously attempting to improvise nothing more than a parlor game, a farcical charade, child’s play. As if to underline this, “Here, cousin, seize the crown” (l. 181) was Richard’s cue for a game of paddy-whack where the crown—which she’d set on the ground between herself and Bolingbroke, an improbable “bacon” for filching—was the prize. The cousins had obviously invented this game, had choreographed its overelaborate routine of slapping hands and thighs, had played it a million times before when the stake they were grabbing for was the best piece of cake, the best tennis racket. Part of the game was that Richard always won. Now the game was grotesque. The stake made it so. The fact that Bolingbroke wouldn’t play did not mean he was salvaging prestige for the crown. He’d won without playing. Bolingbroke understood that by winning, he’d made the prize meaningless.

Shaw’s disconcerting moves between royal play and child’s play were central to her interpretation of Richard II. “The play is massively to do with childhood,” she thinks, and quotes “let us sit upon the ground / And tell sad stories of the death of kings” (3.2.155–56) to explain that “Richard II is about fear and childhood. About telling stories. Bolingbroke is Richard’s childhood. There was a real sense in our production that we were each other’s playfellows. And always had been.”

Shaw’s Richard “adored Bolingbroke. He’s the biggest, most heroic man in the world. But he is also the person who makes Richard feel the weakest, the most inadequate person in the world. He is the man Richard is most jealous of and the man Richard most loves; and Richard is the one he most admires, because he admires kingship, does Bolingbroke, and then he corrupts himself by stealing it. Because the moment he’s stolen it, he’s destroyed it. He can never be the kind of king that Richard is.”

Shaw’s Richard grasped this long before Bolingbroke did. “Richard is so much quicker than Bolingbroke. Bolingbroke can return from exile claiming ‘I’ve come only for my own, only for Lancaster.’ But he can’t have his lands back and Richard remain king, because Richard is king only because Bolingbroke agrees that he is so, because Bolingbroke acquires the concept of divine right. If that goes, if absolute authority goes—and it does go if Bolingbroke can repeal his own exile—so does the king as a role and as a person. So Richard snookeys Bolingbroke. He says, ‘You know you can’t take your little without taking my all, because in taking that little, you’ve undermined the fundamental contract that keeps me king.’” Achieving that awareness, Shaw’s Richard achieved politics. She understood the whole political process—which had eluded her at court, at Coventry, at Gaunt’s death bed, on the coast of Wales—in one stunning
revelation. And all of what Richard now understood was gathered up in the compressed obliquity of that line, “Set on towards London, cousin, is it so?” (3.3.208). Drily, Shaw observes what her Richard knew: “Bolingbroke wanted the crown. He wanted it more than anything in the world. But he didn’t even know it.”

The riskier discovery this production made was to represent Richard’s clowning as likewise achieving politics. Shaw wooed the audience’s laughter in the abdication scene, and she refused “for Richard to be sentimentally aware. That scene is certainly not sentimental. The pain in the scene is released by a man who won’t have other people take responsibility for his pain. And of course that goads and galls Bolingbroke.” So her Richard came into the scene fully aware of the irony of the situation: “So, here we are in Parliament and somebody’s king. I wonder who it could be? Because it used to be me. My cousin, whom I’ve agreed to make king (insofar as one can make him king), is here, too. So what would you like me to do? Give the crown away? Okay—there it is. In the basket. The absurdity of it all unmakes the moment, and Bolingbroke is left knowing that all his best things—such as ‘I will ascend the throne’—are completely meaningless. All the big heroic gestures are meaningless because he’s emptied out the meaning of what he’s achieved.”

Her clowning put Bolingbroke’s agenda into high relief. It infuriated him: by the end of the scene, he was so angry that he nearly threw the crown at Richard’s head. Laughter was provocative. But it was also interpretative: the audience saw Bolingbroke making the monarchy—the idea of the king—an absurdity. Mordantly, Shaw notes, “This scene was not the one Bolingbroke envisaged. If only Richard could say, ‘I, Richard of Bordeaux, give you …’ in a solemn, pompous voice, everything would be fine. Pomp is a fantastic disguise for feeling. Pomp would make people bow and scrape, and that would disguise the emotion. And then Bolingbroke would be covered. But the fact that Richard says, quite casually, ‘Right. Well. Have it,’ leaves a whole vacuum waiting to be interpreted. The moment Richard crowns Henry is the ultimate declaration that the crowning means nothing. ‘God save King Henry, unking’d Richard says’ (4.1.220). ‘Unkinged’—that’s a wonderful word. You can’t unking someone.”

As she played it, Shaw “unkinged” herself in a mime that turned the procedure into comic business. She sat primly on her throne, her crown at her feet, and, in exaggerated gestures, item by item divested herself of the illusory accoutrements of monarchy: “this heavy weight from off my head … this unwieldy sceptre from my hand” (ll. 204–5). There was nothing there, nothing in her hands: the emperor had no clothes. But as the clowning got serious, as the voice picked up power and momentum, as Shaw’s hands swept the crown up off the floor and rammed it painfully down on Bolingbroke’s head, the audience’s laughter died. What the audience might read from this mime was a radical political awareness: “Richard discovers that the whole thing has been a complete illusion. There isn’t anything real about being a king. The mimed anti-investiture is a way of pointing out that absurdity; of saying, ‘Here, Bolingbroke. Put this illusion (of power) onto your illusion (of power). Then you can have the illusion.’” Bolingbroke’s face contorted with pain as the crown was thrust down onto his temples. The pain was real enough, and where it would take him was signaled moments later when Richard, refusing to utter the articles of confession, took refuge behind Bolingbroke, spreading out their arms, back to back. Their double bodies were transformed into a cross—or perhaps into bodies hanging from it.

Ultimately it was Fiona Shaw’s irreverent child’s play, not her gender, that critics objected to in her performance: “When Shaw sits on the ground to tell sad stories of the death of kings, she sucks her thumb. It’s all a ghastly travesty”; “Her king is a man-child . . . unfitted to rule anything larger or older than Enid Blyton’s Famous Five”; “This playfulness not only makes Shaw unconvincing as an anointed king—she’d have to be more authoritative to make a believable queen of St. Trinians.”

Shaw is unrepentant. She had plenty of textual prompting to authorize her license.

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"There are piles of jokes in Richard II, and they’re real jokes, real wit. For example, ‘subjected thus, / How can you say to me, I am a king?’ (3.2.176–77). The brains of people who have the ability to fashion ironic jokes while saying something serious—that’s a very attractive quality to me. I was delighted by the jokes in our Richard. I was also delighted by the way we used bad taste. (For example, the way Richard bustled into Gaunt’s death scene already wearing a black armband and carrying a funeral wreath that had to be ditched because Gaunt wasn’t dead yet.) Bad taste was a tool. It highlighted something. I had great fun acting bad, and I wished the audience could have laughed more with Richard for being bad. People were so appalled at how bad he was that they kind of got protective on behalf of England. The death of Gaunt—that was very bad behavior, but the point was, the worse the behavior, the bigger the payoff when Richard comes to remorse of such size."

Shaw did not see the collapse into comedy that some reviewers complained of in her performance. Rather, comedy intensified and complicated the focus. It was a “demonstration that so many of the games we’re deadly serious about show themselves to be absurd if you slant them, if you skew them just a little obliquely. If a man had been doing what I was doing in the part, reviewers would have been thrilled. But a woman playing that sort of thing was more than a little sacrilegious. You can’t have a girl playing a king and then acting like being a king isn’t serious. Because it’s very serious—as we men know!"

Did Deborah Warner’s cross-gender casting finally matter? Sometimes, yes. There were certain areas of the production where the effeminization of Richard worked to stunning effect, as in the trial by combat at Coventry (1.3). Shaw played the scene with “feminine” irresolution, which meant that Richard actually listened to Bolingbroke and took on the imminence of death. In full royal regalia, elevated on the backs of her courtiers, Richard watched as the barriers slammed down, the heralds bellowed out the appeals, the trumpets brayed, the spectators began drumming and chanting, the lists became a bearbaiting pit. Richard looked on, appalled, in an agony of watching that worsened as the noise rose deafeningly, the beating accelerated, the blood lust surged. When “womanish” Richard threw down the warder, it was because she couldn’t stand any more. The incredulous look on her face made this male ritual of combat an act of mass lunacy. Could men genuinely intend to settle their affairs this way? Her gesture read as a wholesale indictment of male “order,” male protocol.

Mostly, though, gender did not seem to matter, for it was not the nature of gender that Shaw’s performance was deconstructing so much as the nature of politics—the politics of politics—the nature of kingship. “Kingship: It’s such a protected English word! The mystification of words such as kingship is incredibly conservative and fundamental in the British imagination. The British would rather protect the word than investigate it or play with it.” So perhaps gender did matter after all. Perhaps only a woman playing the king could estrange the role sufficiently for this demystification to happen and to permit a British audience to consider what a very odd idea a “king” is.

Perhaps her finest achievement in the role turned out to be the way that, by putting a new comic spin on the player-king, Fiona Shaw poignantly and tragically opened up the joke plot, the comic paradox that lies at the heart of Richard II. Richard wins everything by losing, and Bolingbroke loses everything by winning. “The double bind that is the play,” says Shaw, “is that you have an England that has the wrong king, but you cannot cure England of the wrong king. The only thing you can do is to appeal to the king to be a better king. But the only way you can make him be a better king is to make him go through the process of the play that is going to kill him. The tragedy of the play—and of all our lives—is that we have to give up the thing that we feel is our essence, the thing we are most proud of, in order to gain ourselves. I think it’s fascinating that somebody gives his crown away to somebody who, by the time he gets it, may not even want it. That taps into our emotional lives, where we give our hearts away to people who don’t want them. And then we’re sad that we’ve given them away. Richard’s grief is ‘all within’ (4.1.295): his grief is that his love for Bolingbroke cannot be spoken."
When he says ‘I thank thee, king’ to Bolingbroke in the abdication scene (1. 299), it’s wholly without irony. He’s saying ‘Thank you. You’ve taught me the biggest lesson in my life. You’ve taught me betrayal.’ It’s a sad thing to thank him for. He could do without the burden of it. But poor old Bolingbroke. If God really is sitting on top of the cosmic structure, then God’s cruelty is that he makes Bolingbroke, who is Richard’s biggest champion, also Richard’s killer.’

The Shaw/Warner Richard II was the National Theatre’s most talked-about production in a decade, but after playing the role for over a year in London, Paris, and Salzburg, Fiona Shaw’s verdict on her performance was characteristically laconic: “It came. It went. It was a little gift, I hope, to the cultural world.”

Positing Pillars at the Globe

PAUL NELSEN

In 1599, in the early weeks of the first Globe’s nascent season on the South Bank, Thomas Platter, that enthusiastic Swiss visitor to London, chronicled this earliest surviving record of performance in Shakespeare’s famed playhouse:

On September 21st after lunch, about two o’clock, I and my party crossed the water, and there in the house with the thatched roof witnessed an excellent performance of the tragedy of the first Emperor Julius Caesar with a cast of some fifteen people; when the play was over, they danced very marvellously and gracefully together as is their wont, two dressed as men and two as women.

On 10 September 1995 an audience assembled along the Thames within the partially completed wooden O of the new Globe, with its thatched roof and timber-framed galleries, to witness the final event of the Workshop Season, a series of forty-five events organized by the International Shakespeare Globe Centre and featuring volunteer actors, directors, musicians, and other presenters. Workshop participants were invited to experiment with dynamics of staging, acoustics, and theatrical environment by presenting readings, performing music, choreographing sword fights, or grafting scenes or productions onto the full-scale mock-up of the stage appended to the still-under-

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