Richard II and Carnival Politics

DAVID M. BERGERON

WHY DID CHARLES II THINK IT NECESSARY OR DESIRABLE TO SUPPRESS Richard II in the 1680s?1 Had Queen Elizabeth's government similarly suppressed a portion of the text nearly a hundred years earlier? What is there about this play that may seem threatening to governments? Why did the Essex rebels in 1601 choose to have this play performed on the eve of what turned out to be their abortive rebellion against the queen? Does such an event illustrate the power of drama and the place of the theater in Elizabethan culture? Are the new historicists correct when they agree with Stephen Greenblatt that "Shakespeare's plays are centrally, repeatedly concerned with the production and containment of subversion and disorder"?2 Was the central part of the deposition scene in Richard II omitted or censored; and if so, by whom?

As one way of understanding the presumably threatening, subversive quality of Richard II, I will focus on the carnival nature of this play, especially the deposition scene. I do not suggest that Shakespeare necessarily created a carnival in the play; instead, I argue that he uses language and ideas associated with carnival as a means of exploring the topsy-turvy world of this play. Rituals of parody, deposition, and desecration that Peter Burke has found in carnival appear in this play, reaching their culmination in the deposition scene.3 Therefore, I will argue that carnival is not marginal but preeminent in the play as metaphor and reality. Carnivalesque substitution and transitoriness—not order and hierarchy—become the norm.4

Assessing the social and political place of the theater, its displays of power, its possible threat to civic order, and its role in the production of culture, a number of new historicist critics have emphasized the issue of subversion in drama.5 Heather Dubrow and Richard Strier observe that "some students of the field see all rebellions as contained, even authorized, by those in power, while others emphasize instead the power and the achievements of the subversive."6 Recently, Leeds Barroll has explored the new historicists'...

fascination with Richard II, focusing precisely on the issue of subversion. Barroll finds that some of these critics fail to consider all the evidence about the performance of Richard II before the Essex revolt; and he offers an appropriate cautionary note in assessing the power of drama in state politics, concluding that "in Shakespeare's case, not the play but the persons involved in the production—both players and those who commissioned the performance—were deemed dangerous because they were doing something they thought to be seditious."7 In Barroll's view nothing inheres in Richard II that should be construed as dangerous to the state. After all, performances of the play were not suppressed under Elizabeth or James.

Other critics, analyzing the place of drama in Elizabethan culture, have examined popular cultural traditions, including carnival. Robert Weimann, looking at "Topsy-turvydom in Ceremony and Performance," examines folk rituals from the medieval period to the sixteenth century. He sees little evidence of subversion: "At best only a playful kind of resistance to the division of social classes can be found in the variously disguised inversions of rank and authority." Thus the "subversive dimension of the Lord of Misrule should not be exaggerated or its importance overrated."8 But Michael Bristol finds that popular culture does contain potentially threatening qualities. He writes: "The critical recognition of misrule and Carnival provides an alternative to a political theodicy of the nation-state."9 Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, in an analysis that moves beyond a simple concern with drama, view carnival as "one instance of a generalized economy of transgression and of the recoding of high/low relations across the whole social structure."10 And Peter Burke, surveying carnival festivals in Europe between 1500 and 1800, concludes that "rituals of revolt did coexist with serious questioning of the social, political and religious order"; such protest "was expressed in ritualised forms, but the ritual was not always sufficient to contain the protest."11

At least one monarch saw no particular danger in such festivals. King James, writing in his book of advice to his son Prince Henry, advocates a certain indulgence in carnival expression. James writes: "...certaine dayes in the yeare would be appointed, for delighting the people with publicke spectacles of all honest games, & exercise of armes: as also for conveening of neighbours, for entertaining friendship and hartlinesse, by honest feastinge and merrinesse." James sees no harm "in making plaies and lawfull games in Maie, and good cheere at Christmasse." Such practices, he says, "hath beene vsed in all well gouerned Republicks."12

Moving to theater itself, Graham Holderness has argued that the metaphor of drama, realized in the plays, "is the most natural symbol—both

11 p. 203.
signifier and embodiment—of the festive, carnival principle."13 The theater, a special place of liberty and license, seemed a holiday experience for many. Theatergoers could find both release from the dimness and dreariness of their lives and indulgence in a special world (a special Globe). Holderness adds, "The stubborn realities of existence become malleable in the solvent of theatrical fantasy: rigid hierarchical relations can be inverted, kings can become clowns and vice versa...."14 We can now turn to Richard II in order to assess its carnival nature.

Using Mikhail Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World* as a starting point,15 I want to examine a basic tension in carnival, that between political stability and subversion. Any society that indulges carnival takes some risk; that is, it lays itself open to a kind of mockery that if carried to extremes would be subversive: the clown would indeed become the king. Richard II's deposition, I argue, subverts political order as Bolingbroke takes his place without the dramatist so much as batting an eyelash in judgment. In what may seem a contradiction, we often refer to Richard II as a "serious play"; I suggest that it is indeed serious play, culminating in the deposition scene, where the problem of misrule becomes explicit, prominent, theatrical, and carnivalesque.

Critics have sensed a playful, sometimes farcical mood in the play without necessarily linking this atmosphere to carnival. Kantorowicz notes the tension between fool and king in the play: "... only in that new rôle of Fool—a fool playing king, and a king playing fool—is Richard capable of greeting his victorious cousin and of playing to the end [of 3.3] ... the comedy of his brittle and dubious kingship." Eileen Jorge Allman observes that both Richard and Bolingbroke will recollect the story of King Cophetua "because it contains an irony that resonates in their own history. The beggar has become king and the king a beggar. Who is the king? Who is the beggar?"16 And James Black has discussed this same theme of beggar and king, focusing on the farcical nature of the last act, particularly the York-Aumerle conflict.17

I want to consolidate these views and examine the deposition scene in light of its carnival expression as the play moves from misrule of the king to the King of Misrule. Two questions will focus our attention: why does Shakespeare abandon his historical source and make Richard's deposition such an important theatrical scene; and why is this deposition (that is, the crucial lines 4.1.155–318 of Richard's formal abdication) missing from the early Quarto texts?18 The very text of the play mocks our expectations, playfully upsetting notions of a stable text. Further, the play does not possess the typical carnival conflict of underclass versus ruling class, plebian versus aristocrat. Rather, the struggle occurs within the same ruling,
aristocratic class. In Richard II Shakespeare focuses on a conflict within the same class and endows this conflict with carnivalesque features. In that carnival world of the theater, the dramatist offers a king unusually perceptive about the carnival nature of kingship itself.

Doubts about the political stability of the play world occur in the opening scene where Bolingbroke and Mowbray raise the unpleasant issue of Gloucester’s death. Richard clearly sees this matter as a threat to himself. He skillfully channels this tension and momentarily contains it by establishing the tournament of 1.3. The Gloucester problem will not go away, however, as Bolingbroke discovers at the beginning of the deposition scene. In many ways this later scene recapitulates issues and activities of Act 1—only some of the actors have changed. As a bridge into a consideration of the deposition, I will examine these earlier scenes for their farcical, sometimes threatening, carnival experience: we will see, for example, that the tournament is serious play. Richard’s task throughout is to restrain the disorderly world of rebellion that bristles with frightening energy and eventually turns the world upside down. One wonders who is the king and who the usurper. Substitution and subversion define the carnival politics of play within the ruling class.

Looking at the tournament scene, critics point out its ceremonial and formal structure, a point indisputably true. But beneath that orderly surface lies the genuine threat to Richard. If carnival exhibits ritualized violence, as Burke notes, then this tournament shares that quality. The tournament also becomes playful, at moments maybe farcical, because Richard does not allow the battle to proceed to its presumed and intended end. He cuts off the struggle by dropping his warder, an action and gesture that appear whimsical, as Shakespeare replicates the historical text in his fictional world. Richard’s gesture seems to say: “I’m not really serious; this is but play.” When the Marshal orders Bolingbroke to “Speak like a true knight” (1.3.34), one may hear a note of pretending: speak like a true knight, whatever you may be. Excited by the event, Mowbray characterizes his situation thus: “... my dancing soul doth celebrate / This feast of battle with mine adversary” (l. 91–92). This carnival language belies the imminence of death; the tournament seems festive, indulgent, and, for Richard, self-indulgent.

Richard’s punishment of the two knights by banishment confers on them a kind of anonymity, a characteristic of carnival as sketched by Bakhtin. Because carnival involves substitution and sometimes provides masks, actual identity is unimportant. The beggar could be king. Richard sends Bolingbroke to “tread the stranger paths of banishment” (l. 143)—unknown, anonymous. Mowbray becomes the scapegoat, the forever banished outcast, and he rightly complains of “A heavy sentence” (l. 154). Richard forces them to swear obedience by placing their “banish’d hands” on his royal sword (1. 179), a theatrical prop to be recalled by substitution in the deposition scene. But within a few lines Richard has reduced Bolingbroke’s sentence. Again, Richard sends out conflicting signs of whimsy: seriousness

19 Burke has taken note of aristocratic participation in carnival ([cited in n. 3, above] pp. 24–25); others, such as Bristol and Stallybrass, have emphasized lower classes.
20 p. 187.
and caprice alternate in this scene in ways that suggest misrule, even make-believe.

If Richard may be seen as the carnival king here, then Bolingbroke becomes the Lenten representative, sent away so that the festivity of rule may continue; but Lent will return at the appropriate moment. Bolingbroke’s spare language, in contrast to prodigal indulgence, hints of his austere position. John of Gaunt tries to interpret his son’s predicament: “Thy grief is but thy absence for a time” (1. 258). But Bolingbroke responds: “Joy absent, grief is present for that time” (l. 259). This curious exchange will be echoed by Richard and Bolingbroke in the deposition scene. If joy (carnival) is absent, then grief (Lent) is present. For the moment, but only for the moment, Richard has succeeded in thwarting the political threat to him. But history and the play’s carnival spirit will eventually displace him, subvert and substitute him. The tension in carnival between stability and challenge can readily be felt in the tournament scene.

With Mowbray put aside, the play concentrates on the conflict between the two aristocrats, Richard and Bolingbroke, building to that moment when they will exchange places, as is possible in carnival, that often salutary overthrowing of established order. Act 3 brings the antagonists together and effectively solves the problem of who will rule; the deposition scene only ratifies what has happened. Having himself had a kind of Lenten, chastening experience in Ireland, Richard returns to England ready for prodigal indulgence, as is manifested clearly in his language: he seems to have found a new voice, one that creates poetic fantasies as substitutes for reality.

Regularly invoking a supernatural world of God and angels readying themselves to rescue him, Richard risks becoming a parody of a king, a mock king.

Nothing signals the impending change better than the contrast that Richard makes between himself and Bolingbroke, “Who all this while hath revell’d in the night / Whilst we were wand’ring with the Antipodes ...” (3.2.48–49). A Bolingbroke revelling in the night evokes images of carnival indulgence. Richard restates the contrast in the final line of this scene: “From Richard’s night, to Bolingbroke’s fair day” (1. 218). Bolingbroke will now have his day in the sun, and Richard will become “a mockery king of snow” (4.1.260). Richard’s assessment underscores the transitory nature of this carnival life where one enjoys a little scene to “monarchize” and then no more.

At Flint Castle, York reinforces the discrepancy between the image of a king and the King of Misrule. Spying Richard on the walls of the castle, York says: “Yet looks he like a king” (3.3.68)—again the word like. The sympathetic York says more than he intends, just as when he later refers to “so fair a show” (l. 71). Giving in to Bolingbroke’s demands, Richard nevertheless cries out: “O that I were as great / As is my grief, or lesser than my name!” (l. 136–37). Underscoring his lesser position, Richard proposes to exchange all his kingly vestments and emblems for those of a beggar hermit (ll. 147–54). Putting off kingly robes and taking on the garb of another implies the carnival king who now takes on a smaller part. Accu-

21 On the connection of carnival and Lent and the power of Lent to drive away carnival, see the example cited in C. L. Barber’s Shakespeare’s Festive Comedy: A Study of Dramatic Form and its Relation to Social Custom (Cleveland and New York: World, 1963), pp. 45–46.
rately, Richard records the response to him: "Well, well, I see / I talk but idly, and you laugh at me" (ll. 170–71). Down he comes "like glist'ring Phaeton" (l. 178): idle talk—mocking laughter—replacement.

The deposition scene becomes, to use Bristol's term, the "festive agon" of the play; it brings together elements of carnival already perceived and allows Richard his greatest histrionic moment. Of course, the scene simultaneously undercuts politics as a new king replaces the old king even as that new king will himself become subject to carnival ephemeral: briefly enjoying the position and status of king, knowing that he, too, will be removed. What carnival raises up, it puts down: order and stability remain momentary. As I have suggested, this scene in many ways recapitulates and completes the tournament of Act 1: the Gloucester problem opens the scene as it did the play's first scene, and we have the somewhat ludicrous piling up of gages on the floor of the stage—only now it is Bolingbroke who must confront this threat to order. In the deposition scene Bolingbroke and Richard enter the lists with an uneasy tension about who actually controls the scene. Richard's whimsy, evident before, appears again. As in the tournament, here the essential issue is power, symbolized now by the crown rather than the royal sword of 1.3. By the end Richard departs into a kind of banishment so that the festivity of the new court may proceed. The wholesale mockery of monarchy threatens always to overtake the deposition.

I begin examining the deposition scene with York's greeting to Bolingbroke. York reports:

I come to thee  
From plume-pluck'd Richard, who with willing soul  
Adopts thee heir, and his high sceptre yields  
To the possession of thy royal hand.  
(4.1.107–10)

The king, who has been "plume-pluck'd" and who now yields the scepter, resembles a mock king of carnival. Bolingbroke's response in this context has a note of whimsy: "In God's name, I'll ascend the regal throne" (l. 113). Of course, all of this is a deadly serious matter; but I am suggesting that the tone, a point of reference, invites us as readers/spectators to see the ephemeral and possibly subversive nature of the dramatization. Bolingbroke's response, formulaic and certainly expected, carries a note of playfulness as well, as he will now have his day to "monarchize.

The Bishop of Carlisle objects to what is happening, giving a rousing if sometimes embarrassing defense of Richard. In and out of context, this is an important speech; certainly Carlisle's prophecy about the blood of English "manuring" the ground comes true as rebellion will follow rebellion. But Northumberland's dismissal of the speech comes swiftly and forcefully: "Well have you argued, sir, and, for your pains, / Of capital treason we arrest you here" (ll. 150–51). The voice of moral and legal conscience that Carlisle embodies—a voice that is also the voice of the old stable order being forcibly replaced by a new political order—dims when in the presence of an ironic carnival spirit that dismisses, discards, and abuses such seriousness. Shakespeare shows in the subsequent plays of this tetralogy that such stability comes under regular attack: carnival pulls down, if only for a moment, established order, whether government or church.

Richard constitutes the fascinating center of this scene: at moments petulant, then ironic, then maudlin, then deluded, then perceptive, then
playful and witty. What are we to make of him, this man who becomes a "mockery king of snow"? The many changes in Richard's mood cause problems even in understanding his character. An unexpected playfulness runs through his personality, both the sense in which he is acting (playing) and in which he is whimsical. At moments this mock king mocks the king in a theatrically self-conscious manner, his irony taunting others as it also serves to justify himself. When he first appears, Richard observes: "I hardly yet have learn'd / To insinuate, flatter, bow, and bend my knee" (ll. 164–65)—he is not ready to surrender his role as king, having not yet learned to be a subject.

Richard plays with the crown, the great symbol of rule: to do this evokes a carnival spirit that treats lightly religious vestments and other signs of rule. We begin to wonder what these signs signify. Richard says: "Give me the crown. Here, cousin, seize the crown. / ... On this side my hand, and on that side thine" (ll. 181–83). The crown becomes a kind of toy, used to prompt Richard into his self-indulgent image of the two buckets, he being the bucket down and full of tears. The exaggerated image sounds ludicrous and undercuts the presumed seriousness of the moment. Richard is a mock king not only because he has been deposed but also because he himself mocks monarchy by his language and action in this scene.

Richard here becomes anonymous, gives away his name, clear evidence that he is but a carnivalesque king. When Bolingbroke asks, "Are you contented to resign the crown," Richard responds: "Ay, no; no, ay; for I must nothing be" (ll. 200–201). Richard complains some lines later: "I have no name, no title" (l. 255). We recall that in Act 3 he had ascribed extraordinary power to the name of king, at one point crying out in the face of the teeming army of Bolingbroke: "Is not the king's name twenty thousand names? / Arm, arm, my name!" (3.2.85–86). Dispossessed, deposed, set aside, Richard now wishes: "O that I were a mockery king of snow, / Standing before the sun of Bolingbroke . . . " (4.1.260–61)—precisely the situation. Kings of snow melt; the carnival ends.

But not before one last gesture from Richard: he calls for a mirror that he may see "what a face I have / Since it is bankrupt of his majesty" (ll. 266–67). Richard's puzzling string of rhetorical questions (ll. 281–86) leaves us uncertain about how much and how well he understands himself. When he dashes the mirror, another example of ritualized violence, he cries out to Bolingbroke: "Mark, silent king, the moral of this sport— / How soon my sorrow hath destroy'd my face" (ll. 290–91). Several things catch our attention. Bolingbroke as "silent king" counters the carnivalesque, busy, talkative Richard, who is playing out his last public scene. Richard refers to the mirror episode as "sport"—clear evidence that Shakespeare wants us to see the sport, the carnival, in this scene. Carnival exists, after all, as an alternative to presumably serious and stable institutions. When Bolingbroke breaks his silence and reinterprets the mirror's meaning, Richard is delighted:

Say that again.
. . . And I thank thee, king,
For thy great bounty, that not only giv'st
Me cause to wail, but teachest me the way
How to lament the cause.
(ll. 293, 299–302)

The mock king mocks the king—again.
Though Richard is clearly the Lord of Misrule now being set aside, one also hears uneasy, implied questions about Bolingbroke. The nature of carnival explores precisely that tension between stability and subversion. An especially narrow, humorless, non-festive spirit can say in reaction to the deposition what the Abbot of Westminster says: "A woeful pageant have we here beheld" (l. 321). In a sense, of course, the Abbot is right; but he has also missed the spirit of the experience. Interestingly, Carlisle and the Abbot frame the deposition; inside that histrionic frame resides a swirling process of carnival mockery.

Bakhtin notes the element of abuse that characterizes carnival. Nowhere is this more evident than in the report of York in 5.2, with its comparison of the crowd's response to Bolingbroke and then to Richard. Bolingbroke is the new king of carnival, and the crowds cheer him. Richard, in contrast, receives abuse. York reports: "... No man cried 'God save him!' / No joyful tongue gave him his welcome home, / But dust was thrown upon his sacred head ... " (ll. 28–30): Richard—scapegoat—mock king—pariah. As York observes: "To Bolingbroke are we sworn subjects now ..." (l. 39, my emphasis). "Now" sounds slightly ominous. As it leads into the whole Aumerle problem of rebellion against Bolingbroke, we see again the transitory nature of carnival: that which it establishes, it overthrow.

Earlier Richard himself hints at a possible carnival interpretation in 3.2, where he reminds his listeners, as he first urges them "to sit upon the ground / And tell sad stories of the death of kings" (ll. 155–56), that Death allows each king "a breath, a little scene, / To monarchize, be fear'd, and kill with looks . . . " (ll. 164–65). But Death breaks through with a little pin and then "farewell king!" (l. 170). Thus the monarch, no matter how seemingly powerful and stable, resembles in fact the carnival king who enjoys his position fleetingly. Changing the mood, Richard urges his audience: "... throw away respect, / Tradition, form, and ceremonious duty ... " (ll. 172–73). If his listeners actually did so, they would give way to carnival indulgence, turning the world upside down. Small wonder that Richard becomes such a remarkable carnival king in the deposition scene: he apparently, at least at moments, understands better than anyone the transitory and subversive nature of kingship, the hollow nature of the crown.

Bolingbroke, having emerged from his Lenten banishment to enjoy the removal of the King of Misrule, nevertheless has trouble himself fully appreciating the inherently carnival perspective on monarchy. We hear him cry out in the beginning of 5.3: "Can no man tell me of my unthrifty son?" (l. 1). This young, "wanton, and effeminate boy" (l. 10) mocks his father through unruly, carnival-like indulgence. When told of the triumphs to be held at Oxford, Prince Hal, so Percy reports, said that "he would unto the stews . . . " (l. 16). Twice Bolingbroke uses the adjective "dissolute" (ll. 12, 20) to refer to his son and to the prince's companions. Shakespeare plants this new seed of carnival and lets it ripen in 1 Henry IV, especially in 2.4 of that play, when Hal and Falstaff play the role of king only to be set aside: exactly the carnival process.

The last word on carnival in Richard II comes from Richard, imprisoned in 5.5. In his strange, tortuous soliloquy he reveals: "Thus play I in one person many people, / And none contented ... " (ll. 31–32). This suggests an understanding of his carnival predicament. He adds: "Sometimes am I king, / Then treasons make me wish myself a beggar, / And so I am . . . " (l.
Further thought makes him wish to be king again, and so he is until he is "unking'd" by Bolingbroke and becomes "nothing" again (ll. 34–38). No one in the play better summarizes the carnival plight of change and lack of stability. Whenever we think that we grasp the current order, we remember to ask: who is the beggar; who is the king? As the speaker of the Epilogue to All's Well says: "The king's a beggar, now the play is done" (5.3.331). Or as Hamlet sardonically phrases it: "... a king may go a progress through the guts of a beggar" (4.3.30–31).

My final argument about carnival in Richard II centers on the text of the play, a text that challenges assumptions of hierarchy and order, a text that politicizes textual commentary on it as its own "carnivalesque" nature subverts our attempt to distinguish the real from the mocking text. Having looked at Richard's performance in the deposition, we must nevertheless remind ourselves that Richard does not appear in this scene in the early Quarto texts of the play, not in fact until Q4 in 1608. One state of the 1608 title page calls attention to new material in the play: "The / Tragedie of King / Richard the Second: / With new additions of the Parlia- / ment Sceane, and / the deposing / of King Richard. . . . " Certainly one interpretation of this title page suggests that the deposition scene material, namely Richard's appearance, might indeed be new. At the least, the 1608 Quarto teases us with that possibility.

The usual explanation for this vexing textual problem of Richard's absence has been political censorship; but I noted several years ago that the censorship explanation is at best an ex post facto hypothesis. Leeds Barroll cogently observes: "The generalization that would follow from such a premise is that all new material in revised editions of Shakespeare's plays would represent the surfacing of previously censored sequences—a proposition that can be neither supported nor refuted." Simply put, no evidence exists for government suppression of the text. Curiously, those who make the argument insist that the play was nevertheless performed with the whole deposition scene intact. Without rehearsing all the arguments, including my own, suffice it to say that something unusual occurred in the early texts of Richard II.

That there may have been alterations or revisions in the text of Richard II should not surprise us. Much recent textual criticism has urged precisely such activities by Shakespeare, and we now more readily accept the idea that Shakespeare's texts may represent some interim or changed version, that they may have undergone significant revision by Shakespeare. About King Lear, the play most widely discussed in recent textual scholarship, Stanley Wells writes: "the proper, conservative scholarly procedure is to suppose that the Quarto gives us Shakespeare's first thoughts and the Folio the text in its revised state." More than two decades ago E.A.J. Honigmann raised serious questions about the understanding of Shakespeare's texts; his rad-

---

23 p. 449 (cited in n. 7, above).
ical book underscored their unstable, changing nature. Stephen Orgel, examining Jonson’s function as a writer and preparer of texts, reminds us that Jonson suppressed the theatrical production of *Sejanus* in favor of a revised, printed text. Orgel emphasizes the collaborative nature of Renaissance art, leading to, among other things, changes in texts.

Kristian Smidt has specifically studied issues of revision in the history plays; and he offers an analysis of *Richard II*, though he pays no attention to the textual problems in the deposition scene. He thinks that Shakespeare may have originally intended to write a revenge tragedy centered on the Gloucester problem. Smidt comments: “There is evidence of different phases of composition in signs of disturbance which can hardly be accounted for otherwise.” The Bolingbroke who accepts his banishment and is friendly with Aumerle provides, Smidt argues, details that “are at variance with what we are told elsewhere and look like remnants of an original beginning or an early version or perhaps even an earlier play.” Therefore, Smidt believes that “*Richard II* underwent some major changes of design in the course of its shaping.” Smidt’s persuasive argument adds further to the possibility that Richard’s appearance in the deposition may indeed have been added later rather than suppressed earlier. What seems at first glance a stable text may upon investigation appear as a shifting text, more opaque than clear.

“Politics” would be a comfortable way to explain the alleged “removal” of Richard from the text of the deposition scene; we can understand how a wary government at times suppressed carnival. Did not Queen Elizabeth see a connection between Richard and herself? Did she not complain that the play had been performed “forty times” in the streets? Given the often uneasy relationship between government and theater—Elizabeth officially suppressed the Corpus Christi religious drama—we would not be surprised to find this another example of censorship. Furthermore, in all likelihood it was Shakespeare’s *Richard II* that was performed on the eve of the Essex Rebellion in 1601 as a means of stirring up the troops. Here a dramatic text apparently encouraged rebellion. But the explanation of political censorship for the deposition scene is too easy, quite apart from the lack of evidence. Such textual scholarship makes a political choice, suppressing the challenge of a volatile “carnival” text and attempting to stabilize a subversive text that mocks tidy assumptions.

Whatever explanation we posit—my own is that Shakespeare added Richard’s appearance sometime after 1603—we can at least make another link to the matter of carnival: namely, we have an unstable text, whether the government thwarted it or Shakespeare himself did. At moments, the early text of *Richard II* seems to mock itself with its incompleteness or uncertainty. Just as carnival helps us perceive the tension between stability and subversion in the character Richard and in the play itself, so carnival cautions us about assumptions of a stable text. The authority of the text of *Richard II*,

---

27 Unconformities in Shakespeare’s History Plays (London: Macmillan, 1982).
28 pp. 87–89.
or at least a part of it, remains in question, raising doubts about the hierarchical expectation that we may bring to the Shakespeare canon.

Carnival mocks the smugness of a Richard, or a Bolingbroke, or a reader unable or unwilling to welcome the challenge of a problematic text. As Bakhtin writes: “All the symbols of the carnival idiom are filled with this pathos of change and renewal, with the sense of the gay relativity of prevailing truths and authorities.” 29—an apt if unintended description of Richard II, the man and the text.

29 p. 11 (cited in n. 15, above).