The Construction of a King: Waste, Effeminacy and Queerness in Shakespeare’s Richard II

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Performance politics has been a part of the historical reception of Shakespeare’s Richard II since its probable composition in 1595. Notably, critics commonly connect this play to a request made in February 1601 by a group of the Earl of Essex’s supporters, asking the Lord Chamberlain’s Men, Shakespeare’s acting troupe, to present a drama at the Globe theatre about the deposing and killing of Richard II. This drama might have been Shakespeare’s history play. Essex’s supporters apparently thought that staging such a play would generate favour for their aim to have Elizabeth I replace key members of her royal government, given that it imagines a successful change in state authority. This request engages with an analogy between the historical depiction of Richard II’s reign and Elizabeth’s rule that regularly circulated at the very end of the sixteenth century and early seventeenth century, especially as the problem of Elizabeth’s succession loomed large. Later in 1601, for instance, while Elizabeth reviewed historical documents about the reign of Richard II, she supposedly voiced the observation “I am Richard II. Know ye not that?” to her archivist William Lambard, a well-known quotation that points to the ubiquity of the association between the medieval king and early modern queen. Such an association, at the very least, indicates the evocative cultural environment in which some of the first performances of the play would have occurred, although this type of political interpretation is, of course, not the only viable one.

My argument will tease out other readings of King Richard in order to demonstrate both the complexity of this tragic protagonist and to unpack the significance of gender and sexuality in Gregory Doran’s recent production of Richard II for the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) at Stratford-upon-Avon, which was also televised live, in late 2013. This article argues, in particular, that theatrical texts like Richard II continually recruit and revitalise conventional figures, or social types, when dramatising characters in order to reveal that notions of economic activity, manhood, and sexuality interacted differently in early modern English culture than they do now, and this difference uncovers the sexual politics of Doran’s staging. When Elizabeth Fowler theorises what she calls “social persons” in her book Literary Character, she argues that any given representation of a person consists of “phantom templates” that overlap with one another to give the illusion of depth. Specific words, images, or actions repeat, forming templates that then can coalesce in the depiction of literary persons, building a multidimensional character that readers or audiences can quickly recognise.

Adaptations of these social types can become the means by which texts and theatrical audiences culturally grasp historical processes like economic change or contradictions in gender ideology. Richard II’s portrayal of its eponymous king enlists three templates, specifically the

2. Elizabeth Fowler, Literary Character: The Human Figure in Early English Writing (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2003), 10.
template of the wasteful man, the effeminate man, and the queer man, that intersect to give the illusion of the king’s singularity. By exposing these different templates, I will show that Doran’s production of Richard II cannot manage the profound challenge to identity that Shakespeare’s play poses by depicting the undoing not only of a king but of a person, an embrace of ontological absence incompatible with the boundaries that identity requires. Doran’s Richard II, instead, calcifies identity, particularly sexual identity, creating all-too-modern links between effeminacy and sexuality that harden into stereotype, which then impede any dramatisation of a self without borders, of a dispossessed self, in a world, then and now, strongly defined by possessions.

A wasteful king

Linguistic evidence can help reveal the symbolic resources available for making visible the use of wealth in Shakespeare’s Richard II, resources that imagine the wasteful man as potentially dissolute and dangerous. Appearing around the middle of the fourteenth century, the verb “to waste” denotes an act of squandering wealth, often for amusement, or an act of despoiling of land. These meanings point to the pleasure and violence involved in wasting. By the fifteenth century, the verb “to consume” emerges in the English lexicon, and this word also evokes potent pleasure and violence when representing the expenditure of wealth. To “consume” means to reduce something to ashes, to kill an adversary, or to spend goods and money, echoing the intertwined destructive and economic overtones of the verb “to waste”. These two verbs can also imply the enervating of the body, whether from emaciation, wounds, or disease, a weakening that hints at the sense of diminishment linked to spending wealth. To put it simply, spending saps the spirit. The noun “consumption”, which first appears in Middle English in the late fourteenth century, chiefly indicates an act of destruction or an illness that destroys the body. As Jonathan Gil Harris reveals, only in the early seventeenth century does the noun “consumption” start to refer to the use of wealth, a new meaning still entwined with the negative implications of wasting.

When representing men as consumers of wealth, a play like Shakespeare’s Richard II harnesses and adapts the figure of the waster encrypted in the English language, using its intermingling of pleasure and violence to critique selfishness and its capacity to dislocate the social hierarchy. In this play, the selfishness appears in both the apparent ambitions of Richard’s favourites in court and in the king’s own excessive self-interest. That the template of the waster shapes King Richard’s representation also rationalises the callousness of his character, a heartlessness able to do acts of great violence, as well as his effeteness, since spending wealth for pleasure drains the king both economically and emotionally.

While the first act of Richard II depicts its titular king as cruel, especially at the end when he voices his wish that John of Gaunt, his long-time advisor, would die, the second act overtly constructs him a waster, as someone who lacks restraint when spending wealth. This second act opens with Gaunt railing against the king, and the Duke of York is his audience. Even as Gaunt demands that Richard visit him on his deathbed, he characterises the king as an “unstaid youth” (2.1.1). In reply, York diminishes Gaunt’s hope for a change in the king through an auditory metaphor that highlights what King Richard cannot restrain: his desires. York clarifies that Richard will be unable to hear Gaunt’s advice because his ears are stopped with “flattering sounds”, specifically the “lascivious meters” that the “open ear of youth” always heeds (17-20).

3. This account of the definitions of “to waste” and “to consume”, along with their conceptual link to the noun “consumption”, relies on the historical meanings found in the Middle English Dictionary and Oxford English Dictionary.


The intensely pleasurable, if not erotic, meters that Richard’s open ear devours consist of “reports of fashion”, specifically Italian fashions; King Richard deeply enjoys hearing about these luxury goods, as does the whole nation, which then “limps after in base imitation” of the Italians (21-23). As Howard and Rackin note, not only does York’s assessment of Richard activate the sixteenth-century figure of the Italianated Englishman, an object of economic and cultural satire, but it also echoes Raphael Holinshed’s depiction of Richard’s court in his Chronicles. Holinshed portrays the king as an excessive spender who had more and better dressed servants than any other court to date. As a result, throughout the kingdom and regardless of rank, people began to mimic the king’s spending, and this escalation of consumption decayed the commonwealth.6 In York’s mind, the pleasure that King Richard receives when hearing about and when purchasing luxurious goods inhibits his capacity to rule for two reasons: firstly, the king cannot attend to the good advice of an advisor like Gaunt and secondly, his subjects imitate his actions, even though these actions are economically debilitating.

Gaunt then develops this notion of Richard’s wastefulness by highlighting that the king is both greedy and wild, a vision that partially explains his violence in the first act. That is, King Richard’s cruelty and his selfishness are interlinked traits that contribute to his failure as a ruler. Imagining himself as a seer, Gaunt offers the following prophecy about the king:

His rash fierce blaze of riot cannot last,
For violent fires soon burn out themselves;
Small showers last long, but sudden storms are short;
He tires betimes that spurs too fast betimes;
With eager feeding doth food choke the feeder;
Light vanity, insatiati coromant,
Consuming means, soon prey’s upon itself.

(2.1.33-39)

Gaunt figures Richard’s extravagant spending as a “blaze of riot” that like a fire flames high initially but quickly subsides, with the expectation that Richard must soon “burn out”. This image captures both the wildness of Richard’s behaviour (since his excessive spending is likened to a “riot”) and its dangerousness (since the height of a blaze still destroys, even if it is likely to dwindle to nothing). Although York’s depiction of the king admits the influence of external flatterers on Richard’s actions, Gaunt, by contrast, imagines the responsibility as entirely the king’s. This animalistic greed – Richard appears an “insatiati coromant” in Gaunt’s prophecy – drives him to brutal deeds in pursuit of his own interests.

While Gaunt contends that Richard’s own desires propel his actions, the king himself partially ascribes his wildness to the influence of others, making it appear more complex than a case of straightforward individual acquisitiveness.7 After he exiles both Mowbray and Bolingbroke in the first act, he closes the final scene with an announcement of his new political agenda. He tells his men – Green, Bagot, and Lord Aumerle – that his attentions will now turn to an invasion of Ireland. However, he understands that the crown does not possess the finances to

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7. On this point, my argument differs with Mario DiGangi’s position because he emphatically stresses the role of the flatterers in Richard’s fall. My reading, by contrast, reveals that the play presents a complex interplay between the influence of Richard’s favorites and his own desires. In part, DiGangi slants his reading in this direction because his interpretation of Richard II focuses on the depiction of favorites in tragedy as a genre. See his The Homoerotics of Early Modern Drama (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 116-17.
underwrite such a military expedition. King Richard explains to his followers that “our coffers, with too great a court/And liberal largess, are grown somewhat light” (1.4.43-44). He will solve this financial dilemma not only by expropriating Gaunt’s wealth upon his death since his son, Bolingbroke, is in exile, but also by increasing taxation throughout the realm – actions that contribute to his downfall. More importantly, though, he observes that the reason he does not have the funds for this war is that he has “too great a court”. The word “great” proves powerfully ambiguous. It could, for example, allude to its size, indicating that there are just too many people in the court and sheer numbers diminish his financial resources. It also, though, could point to the ambitions of his courtiers, hinting that they seek to better themselves. In doing so, they must influence the king, and he accepts this influence presumably because of his own “largess”. Rather than feeding only himself, Richard actually feeds others, allowing them to grow too great. When Bolingbroke returns early from exile, he makes just this point to the Duke of York: he explains that he had to return and retake his father’s patrimony since the king confiscated it and then gave it away to “upstart unthrifs” (2.3.122), presumably the men at court who rapaciously seek wealth so they can satisfy their own ambitions.

This dynamic between Richard and his flatterers explains why nobles like Gaunt portray the king as a landlord that leases out his property to wasteful tenants. As Dennis Klineck posits, the play regularly reminds its audience that England is land; that is, it stresses England’s potent status as physical property with socio-economic significance, as much as the emphasis on this land as a place contributes to an emergent sense of nationhood. In theory, Richard should tend to the land, cultivating it so that it continues to be productive and protected in the future. Instead, as Gaunt insists in his discussion with the Duke of York, the king treats it like “a tenement or a pelting farm” since he has “leased [it] out” to others (2.1.59-60). He repeats this sentiment after Richard himself arrives, telling the king: “Landlord of England art thou now” (113). From one vantage point, Gaunt’s accusation implicates Richard in commercial activity, hinting once again at his potential greediness, which reinforces the earlier depiction of the king as voracious; after all, to treat the land like a landlord is to treat it like commercial property that can be put into the market with the aim of earning a profit. From another point of view, this accusation highlights that the king’s failure is not entirely his own since every landlord requires at least one tenant, and the tenants that rent the land, in the end, contribute to the debasement of the crown. Still, the final responsibility for damage to the realm is the king’s. Gaunt reprimands Richard by making this very point:

A thousand flatterers sit within thy crown,  
Whose compass is no bigger than thy head,  
And yet engaged in so small a verge,  
The waste is no whit lesser than thy land.  

(2.1.100-103)

Here, Gaunt makes metonymic connections between the crown that Richard wears, his head, and the land of England: his flatterers “sit” in his head, provoking the desires that lead him to use the realm for his own interests. The power of Richard’s flatterers is extensive since they penetrate his mind, influencing his desires; they encourage Richard to “waste” the realm, squandering its wealth and thus its value. This moment dramatises the intricate interrelations between a king, his advisors, and the state that spur Richard’s actions, with an emphasis on the impact of the flatterers on the king’s inner life, an impact that shapes and exacerbates his desires in ways that make him wild, especially wild when spending wealth.

The role that the flatterers play in corrupting Richard gains clarification later in the famous garden scene when the queen overhears a gardener and his servant discussing royal politics. As the gardener instructs his servant in how to prune trees and bushes, he metaphorically speaks about the state of the realm, implying that had King Richard “cut off the heads of too-fast-growing sprays” (3.4.34), then he might have both fostered the kingdom and avoided his fall. Grasping that the weeds prove a danger to the realm, the servant asks why people like he and the gardener should bother to follow the rule of law at all. The gardener quickly dismisses his servant’s proposition, explaining that Bolingbroke’s rule will prove different from Richard’s:

The weeds which his broad-spreading leaves did shelter,
That seemed in eating him to hold him up,
Are plucked up, root and all, by Bolingbroke—
I mean the Earl of Wiltshire, Bushy, Green.

(3.4.50-53)

Madhavi Menon rightly contends that this moment is vital to the narrative since it frames Bolingbroke’s treasonous actions as just; his execution of these men is a necessary pretext to Richard’s deposition. Menon also lights our attention on how Richard appears. The weeds in his court “seem’d in eating him to hold him up”, which means that what should have been a “productive prop” – that is, the courtiers helping to administer the royal government – are, instead, “a damaging drain”.10 Wiltshire, Bushy and Green are among those who consume the king, eating him insofar as he represents the kingdom as the whole. From this angle, these favourites of the king instigate the dissolution of the kingdom, just as much as Richard’s own desires do, underlining the dynamics that stimulate Richard to become, as the gardener puts it a few lines later, “the wasteful king” (3.4.55).

An effeminate king

Richard’s wasting of wealth ultimately destabiliises his position as king, which in turn undermines his manhood, emasculating him. The play voices this interconnection between wasting and gender via a metonymic affinity it draws between Bolingbroke’s son, the new prince, and King Richard. After he takes the throne as King Henry IV, Bolingbroke asks his noblemen about his son’s whereabouts, and this announcement marks the new king as possessing the reproductive potency that Richard seems to lack, even though Henry appears to have no wife in the play. Apparently, the young Prince Hal has disappeared for at least three months, and his father suspects his “unthrifty” progeny to be haunting London’s taverns with “loose companions” who thief (5.3.1-7). King Henry’s critique of his son extends further than a worry that his son commits crime, since this passage implies that these young men break the law to obtain the wealth they need to fulfill their desires to consume. Unlike Richard, Prince Hal and his friends are not buying luxury goods; instead, they carouse in taverns. Nevertheless, this dissolute behaviour, which inspires the young men to spend beyond their means, resembles the depiction of King Richard earlier in the play; this resemblance can shape an audience’s understanding of both characters. Bolingbroke elaborates on the consequences of his son’s self-indulgent behaviour: he becomes a “young wanton and effeminate boy” (5.3.10), which recalls Gaunt’s earlier depiction of Richard as an “unstaid youth” (2.1.2). In other words, Bolingbroke’s son’s unrestrained behaviour, including his spending, makes him both undisciplined – one meaning of “wanton” – and unmanly. His investment in satisfying his own desires implies that he does not exercise the self-control proper to a man, and this lack of manhood rebounds onto the representation of Richard, illuminating his own unmanliness.

The play, though, articulates the difference between Bolingbroke and Richard much more starkly in terms of gender, imagining Bolingbroke as masculine and the king as feminine. After King Richard finalises Bolingbroke’s banishment, Bolingbroke characterises his native land when he bids it goodbye in the following terms: “My mother, and my nurse, that bears me yet! / Where’er I wander, boast of this I can, /Though banish’d, yet a true-born Englishman” (1.3.307-309). Although initially Bolingbroke depicts his relationship to England as one between a child and its mother or nurse, his insistence that he is a “true-born Englishman” confirms that the relationship is one between a female caregiver and a male child. Provocatively, Richard deploys a parallel metaphor when he portrays his relationship to the land, but his metaphor inverts the gendered bond. Upon his arrival on the English shore after his military expedition to Ireland, Richard falls to his knees and greets the earth:

As a long-parted mother with her child
Plays fondly with her tears and smiles in meeting,
So, weeping, smiling, greet I thee, my earth,
And do thee favours with my royal hands.

(3.2.8-11)

Here, Richard figures himself as a mother holding his child, the earth, in his “royal hands”, expressing his tearful joy at returning, and this image effeminises him. He willingly adopts a feminine role, which stands in clear contrast to Bolingbroke, who performs a similar gesture upon his return, although he underscores his masculinity, his status as a “true-born Englishman”.

Moreover, the play links Richard’s effeminacy to the submissiveness of patience, which further emphasises this king’s exile from the masculinity proper to his rank. At its outset, the play affirms a link between masculine aggression and nobility when the Duchess of Gloucester upbraids John of Gaunt for his failure to avenge her husband after Richard allegedly murders him. She chides Gaunt, telling him that he cannot call his inaction “patience” but “despair” (1.2.29). Then, she elaborates on this despair:

In sifting thus thy brother to be slaughtered,
Thou showest the naked pathway to thy life,
Teaching stern murder how to butcher thee.
That which in mean men we entitle patience
Is pale, cold cowardice in noble breasts.

(1.2.30-34)

In her opinion, Gaunt suffers his brother’s murder too quietly, enduring this injustice without any active response, and she clarifies that rank shapes the meaning of his lack of aggression. She posits that only “mean men” should be patient, implying that such forbearance is a vital element to men lower down on the social ladder so as to guarantee order since impatience amongst “mean men” might appear like ambition, a rejection of their place in the social hierarchy. The Duchess contends that while patience is a virtue for those in socially subordinate roles, such endurance is only “cold cowardice” in noblemen, who need not always check their violence; they need not be submissive to everyone at all times since they are at the top of the social

11. Jean E. Howard and Phyllis Rackin rightly observe that the gender distinction between Bolingbroke and Richard, with Bolingbroke as more masculine and Richard as more feminine, in terms of early modern gender ideology, maps onto the common critical distinction between these two kings: they pose two different “models of royal authority” (Engendering a Nation, 142-43). The play imagines Bolingbroke as the exemplar of an authority grounded in self-representation and public opinion since he solicits not only the favour of noblemen but also of his soon-to-be subjects, whereas Richard appears as the paradigm of a ruler from the past with his authority established through hereditary descent and customary ritual. In part, the gender distinction between the two men can undermine the legitimacy of the mode of authority that Richard embodies.
hierarchy. From the start, the play delineates a manhood proper to noblemen and that manhood includes violence as revenge.

That Richard does not comply with this norm defined by the intersection of gender and rank emerges vividly at the play’s end when the queen reproaches Richard for failing to fight for the crown. As guards lead Richard to the Tower, the queen addresses him, emphasising his regality, yet his reply erases his royalty. The former king tells her that she should now retreat to France and a religious house where she should concentrate on attaining spiritual victory in the future, a reply that starbles and frustrates the queen. Using a series of questions, she berates Richard’s apparent surrender to Bolingbroke:

What, is my Richard both in shape and mind
Transformed and weakened? Hath Bolingbroke
Deposed thine intellect? Hath he been in thy heart?
The lion dying thrusteth forth his paw
And wounds the earth, if nothing else, with rage
To be o’er-powered; and wilt thou, pupil-like,
Take the correction, mildly kiss the rod,
And fawn on rage with base humility,
Which art a lion and the king of beasts?

(5.1.26-34)

Isabel challenges Richard’s transformation from a position of strength in intellect and heart to a weakened state. She avows that even a dying lion would use the last of its energy to fight, if only to wound the earth in “rage/To be o’er-powered”. Richard’s response to his deposition should thus be violence – even if that violence, like the lion’s, is futile – rather than his current acquiescence. It is not kingly to “mildly kiss the rod”. Richard’s meekness runs counter to his rank and gender, both of which dictate that he should fiercely take action in an attempt to regain his previous position.

Richard II, nevertheless, works hard to redeem Richard’s meekness by infusing his forbearance with spiritual significance. In particular, Richard repeatedly links his downfall to Christ’s suffering. When Scoop informs Richard that critique of his rule grows amongst the populace, he also reports that Bolingbroke executed Bushy, Green and Wiltshire. Before Richard grasps this news, he believes that his three followers betray him to join Bolingbroke’s faction. The king denounces these men, calling them villains, vipers and snakes, only to pronounce them, in a hyperbolic move, “Three Judases, each one thrice worse than Judas” (3.2.132). By depicting his men as Judases, he frames himself as Christ, and he seeks sympathy through this association with Christ’s betrayal, which leads to his brutal victimisation. During the first scene of act four, Richard also portrays Bolingbroke and his political supporters as Pontius Pilate, the Roman administrator who attested to Christ’s crucifixion. After Northumberland insistently demands that Richard read aloud the crimes he purportedly committed against the state, Richard wonders how Northumberland and the others can so easily break the sacred oath that secured his kingship, and he dejectedly states: “Showing an outward pity, yet you Pilates/Have here delivered me to my sour cross.” (4.1.240-241). Once again, Richard constructs an image of himself as similar to Christ because Bolingbroke and his men will put Richard on a “sour cross” when they remove him from the throne. By linking himself with this religious icon of a suffering man, Richard participates in re-signifying the submission that he enacts, lending his forbearance

12. My contention that the play dramatises conflict between the queen and Richard contradicts DiGangi’s assertion that this historical tragedy presents only “marital harmony” between the two (Homoeotropics, 118). DiGangi contends that this harmony is a distinctive treatment of the representation of Richard, especially since Holinshed’s Chronicles imagines Richard’s court as rife with lechery and that the king participated in unspecified lustful behaviour, although DiGangi’s position cannot account for the conflict between Richard and the queen in the final act.
a distinctive form of dignity. This dignity that Richard symbolically appropriates, moreover, attempts to rescue his masculinity because his fall in rank, a fall that verges on a complete eclipse of his identity, effeminates him.13

The RSC’s recent production of Richard II, directed by Gregory Doran and starring David Tennant, visually evoked the different masculinities that both Richard and Bolingbroke inhabit. The deposition scene crystallised the ways that this production marked their different styles of manhood, especially at that moment in Act 4 Scene 1 when they stand, facing one another, each holding a different side of the crown – a moment that distils their conflict over the throne. Tennant, in the role of Richard, stood on one side dressed in a wide-sleeved white tunic that almost reached the ground, a cross around his neck, and in bare feet. This tunic not only suggested religious garb, thus reinforcing the image of Richard as a Christ-like figure in this scene, but it also indicated that he is no warrior, especially since Tennant was without shoes. He appeared more like a pilgrim than a soldier. Moreover, Tennant’s slight build, his long hair, and boyish face made him appear not only younger than Bolingbroke but also less robust and thus more delicate. This seeming fragility echoed the play’s portrayal of Richard as effeminate, as unable and/or unwilling to respond to Bolingbroke’s challenge with the bluster expected of a king and nobleman. On the other side of the crown was Bolingbroke, who appeared in black leather pants with a brown shirt and jacket over it; around his neck he wore armour, and he had boots on his feet, making him look ready to fight. The actor Nigel Lindsay is also physically different from Tennant; he is thicker in build and, since Lindsay had short hair and a goatee, he appeared tougher and stronger. Casting and costume design thus enhanced the differences between these men, demonstrating how Doran’s production adhered to Shakespeare’s text, with its stress on Richard’s soft masculinity, although the religiosity that this costume evoked partially offset the king’s delicacy.14

13. In his famous study, The King’s Two Bodies, Ernest H. Kantorowicz also identifies the “royal Christology” that appears in Richard II, as does Paul Strohm in his more recent book, Politique. While Kantorowicz utilises the play to dramatise his thesis about the king’s two bodies – the natural body and the mystical body – with Richard II showing how these two bodies are torn asunder, Strohm argues that Richard aims to redeem his natural body via martyrdom. Neither Kantorowicz nor Strohm, however, reveals the ways that Richard and the play recruit Christology in an effort to rescue the King’s manhood by valorising his patience. See Ernest H. Kantorowicz, The King’s Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 16 and 29-40 and Paul Strohm, Politique: Languages of Statecraft between Chaucer and Shakespeare (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), 222-23 and 233.

14. Rebecca Ann Bach makes an overly strong argument about masculinity and subjection in the history plays that overwrites the nuance of a drama like Richard II. Bach firmly argues that in a culture of service, manliness requires men of all ranks to be subjected to one another, and she uses the depiction of the Duke of York in Richard II to make this claim. In the final act, when the duke’s son, Aumerle, participates in an attempt on King Henry’s life, his wife pleads with the king to save her son’s life, but the duke does not. While the duke’s action seems cold, he affirms his status as a subject before his status as a father, and his ordering of hierarchical relations secures his manliness; to put his family before his king, in other words, would be unmanly. Bach’s reading of this scene is persuasive, but it cannot be neatly applied to Richard’s conditions. That is, his subjection to Bolingbroke over the course of the play, as the queen points out, demands a stronger response than acquiescence; because Richard does not fight, the former king as well as the play itself seeks other, spiritual resources to redeem his choice. Masculinity, particularly the manliness of kings, and subjection in early modern English culture appear more contradictory than Bach allows, especially since subjection cannot be divorced from the value that early modern English culture put on men’s willingness to fight for revenge or for a political purpose like the crown. See her “Manliness Before Individualism: Masculinity, Effeminacy, and Homoerotics in Shakespeare’s History Plays” in A Companion to Shakespeare’s Works, Volume II: The Histories, ed. Richard Dutton and Jean E. Howard (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 228-31.
A queer king

In Shakespeare’s play, the scene in which the gardener and his servant do their work while discussing Richard’s rule signifies the former king’s subordination to others, and this subordination links the king to a passivity at odds with early modern English culture’s norms of masculine sexuality. After all, the gardener paints a scene in which Wiltshire, Bagot and Green—among Richard’s favourites—metaphorically eat the king, a metaphor that also insists on a materialisation of the king’s body. As noted above, the gardener refers to “The weeds which his broad-spreading leaves did shelter, / That seem’d in eating him to hold him up” (3.4.50-51). During this moment, King Richard appears as the garden that the weeds consume, intimating that this garden, this land, is co-extensive with the king’s body yet this materialisation of the king’s body flirts with literalising the metaphor. In this reading, the courtiers actually eat the king, conjuring a queer sexual scene that gains traction within the play’s logic, even as this historical tragedy continually deflects any final statement on Richard’s (sexual) desires.

One of the textual precedents for Richard II, The Mirror for Magistrates, also construes the king as rapacious in terms of consumption and lust, intertwining the two in ways that resonate when reading Shakespeare’s play. In the 1559 edition of The Mirror for Magistrates, King Richard voices the following explanation for his downfall:

    I am a Kyng that ruled all by lust,
    That forced not of vertue, right, or lawe,
    But always put false flatterers most in trust,
    Ensuing such as could my vices claue:
    By faithful counsyle passing not a strawe.
    What pleasure pryckt, that thought I to be lust.
    I set my minde, to feede, to spoyle, to lust.
    Three meals a day could scarce content my mawe.
    And all to augment my lecherous minde that must
    To Venus pleasures always be in awe. 15

He contends that as a king, he “ruled all by lust”, and this lust circumvented any notion of right, at the same time that it inspired an uncontrolled desire to “feede”. As he puts it, he could barely content his stomach by filling it with food three times a day. Moreover, his feeding frenzy is part and parcel of his dedication to Venus, an allusion that makes his hunger both culinary and sexual. Richard’s lecherousness, then, drives his disorderly desire to consume but also thwart the institutions that establish social order like the law. Interestingly, it is not just that Shakespeare’s play depicts Richard’s desire for both consumables and sex in a more indirect manner than this image of the king in The Mirror for Magistrates. It is also that Richard’s approach toward these desires differs: Shakespeare’s Richard enjoys receiving pleasures, which highlights his character as less assertive and more submissive, whereas The Mirror for Magistrates represents him as forcefully possessing his desires. If other characters can be believed, Richard does not relish eating so much as he relishes his men eating him.

Bolingbroke’s decision to execute two of Richard’s favourites also suggests that these men in some way interfere with the king’s sexuality. Act three opens with Bolingbroke outlining the charges against Bushy and Green, including how they misled the king, influencing him to enact

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decisions like the banishment of Bolingbroke. Amidst these charges, Bolingbroke makes the following provocative statement, one of the more concrete accusations that he issues:

You have in manner with your sinful hours
Made a divorce betwixt his Queen and him,
Broke the possession of a royal bed,
And stained the beauty of a fair Queen’s cheeks
With tears drawn from her eyes by your foul wrongs.

(3.1.11-15)

Bolingbroke asserts that Bushy and Green “broke” the “royal bed”, creating “a divorce” between the queen and Richard. These men did this during “sinful hours”, although Bolingbroke does not specify what acts these men did. Did they procure women for Richard? Were they in bed with Richard? All the audience knows is that whatever actions these men did were “foul wrongs” that alienated the queen from the royal bed. If, to follow Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s famous proposition, one way to define queer is as “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality are made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically”, then this moment decidedly queers Richard. The possible interpretations of this representation of what Bushy and Green do to the king’s marriage connotate a straying that is not consonant with the sexual expectations of a king.

Other moments in the play also signal the ways that Richard prefers the bonds of men to the one with his queen, and this preference only stresses his queerness. When Bolingbroke finds Richard at Flint castle, he sends Northumberland to request a meeting. After Northumberland tells Richard that Bolingbroke requests to kiss the king’s hand and to have his lands returned to him, the king, upon confirming these wishes, turns to Lord Aumerle and laments his predicament. He recognises that by complying with Bolingbroke’s demands, the king creates the conditions for his eventual deposition. He then conjures an image of himself having thrown off his rich clothing, his sceptre and his subjects for the life of a poor pilgrim, and during this speech, he addresses Aumerle directly:

Aumerle, thou weep’st, my tender-hearted cousin.
We’ll make foul weather with despised tears;
Our sighs and they shall lodge the summer corn
And make a dearth in this revolting land.
Or shall we play the wantons with our woe,
And make some pretty match with shedding tears?
As thus, to drop them still upon one place
Till they have fretted us a pair of graves
Within the earth; and therein laid—there lies
Two kinsmen digged their graves with weeping eyes.

(3.3.160-69)

Richard’s speech reduces Aumerle to tears, and Richard utilises this grief to dramatise their bond since, like rain, their tears will beat down the corn, creating a famine in the land. Then the king turns his subject matter, as signified by his use of “or”, pitching to Aumerle that they should make a “pretty match” in their sadness. Thus far, Richard’s speech shares in the homoeroticism that conventionally constitutes the rhetoric of male friendship in early modern England, but Richard’s words also intimate that his desire might exceed the boundaries of friendship. Within this image of Richard sharing woes with Aumerle, the king portrays them as unruly and unchaste since they “play the wantons” together, with “wanton” redolent of sexual disorder. Combined

with the suggestiveness of Bolingbroke’s accusations against Richard’s favourites, this moment in the text enables a reading of the signs of male friendship as possibly sodomitical, as queer.17

While King Richard’s bonds with other men can queer him since they indicate his possible sexual disorderliness, his violation of linear time imposed by lineal descent, which is both reproductive and historical time, queers him in a different way. Annamarie Jagose offers a succinct definition of queer temporality when she claims that it is “a mode of inhabiting time that is attentive to the recursive eddies and back-to-the-future loops that often pass undetected or uncherished beneath the official narrations of the linear sequence that is taken to structure normative life.”18 In different ways, Richard and other characters position him against the normative direction of time as he breaks or scrambles the “linear sequence” that delineates the social order, specifically the historical linearity that reproduction establishes, and this anti-normative position also signifies his queerness. This queerness then symbolically intermixes with the whiff of excessive homoeroticism in the play’s portrayal of Richard’s bonds with his followers.

Earlier in the play, for instance, the Duke of York accuses King Richard of temporal inversion in his effort to disinherit Bolingbroke by confiscating all of Gaunt’s land and wealth upon his death. In a heated exchange, the Duke Voices his criticism of this action:

Seek you to seize and gripe into your hands
The royalties and rights of banished Hereford?
Is not Gaunt dead? And doth not Hereford live?
Was not Gaunt just? And is not Harry true?
Did not the one deserve to have an heir?
Is not his heir a well-deserving son?

17. As Alan Bray contends in *Homosexuality in Renaissance England* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995) homosexuality did not exist in the same way that it does in modern England. By contrast, what “sodomy and buggery represented – and homosexuality was only part of these – was rather the disorder in sexual relations that, in principle at least, could break out anywhere” (25). Because sodomy often signified political disorder, it emerges as a possibility in the representation of Richard II given his proclivity for prioritising his selfish desires. Such a proclivity generates the socio-political confusion that undermines both his role as ruler and the welfare of the kingdom, and the play alludes to the ways that his sexuality represents this upset. See also Bray’s *The Friend* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 183-93.

18. Annamarie Jagose, “Feminism’s Queer Theory” in *Feminism and Psychology* 19.2 (2009): 158. Jagose’s definition of queer time captures the gist of a growing strand of queer theory that in many ways develops an implicit claim against a future that is methodological and methodical within Lee Edelman’s influential polemic of No Future: *Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. His critique of reproductive futurism objects to a vision of time that is both sequential and invested in the future. In response, literary critics diverse in content and method, including Carolyn Dinshaw, Heather Love, and José Muñoz, contend that disregarding chronological periodisation by touching across time can be queer, turning backwards in time can be queer, and investing in embarrassing utopias can be queer. Valerie Traub’s recent article offers one of the few critiques of this strand of queer theory in which she takes queer theorists, especially early modernists like Jonathan Goldberg and Madhavi Menon, to task for rejecting historicism wholesale because it employs linear time, as they do in “Queering History.” I cannot do justice to this engaged and engaging debate on queer temporality and historiography in this footnote, but suffice to say, queer temporality in my argument represents Richard’s break with sequential chronology, including the way that this break undoes his identity, which evokes his failure/ inability to reproduce, to create a proper line of succession. See also Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 7-31; Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 12-21; Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 5-10 and 52; José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2009), 19-32; Valerie Traub, “The New Unhistoricism in Queer Studies” in *PMLA* 128.1 (2013): 21-39; and Jonathan Goldberg and Madhavi Menon, “Queering History” in *PMLA* 120.5 (2005): 1608-17.
Take Hereford's rights away, and take from time
His charters and his customary rights;
Let not tomorrow then ensue today;
Be not thyself, for how art thou a king
But by fair sequence and succession?

(2.1.189-99)

York's argument here centres on the importance of following lineage when transferring property because he avers that Gaunt has a son in Bolingbroke, and that Bolingbroke deserves to be Gaunt's heir. If Richard seizes Gaunt's land and wealth, then he robs not only Bolingbroke but also time in general. The Duke elaborates on this proposition, claiming that Richard's actions will destroy the temporal order since a consequence of his actions will be that tomorrow will not follow today. In order to be a king at all, the Duke claims, Richard must protect "sequence and succession". When Richard does take Gaunt's wealth, he knowingly violates this order, breaking a specific form of tradition that organises both history and politics. His actions dissolve the predominant structure of time, so that, as Judith Brown notes, he "floats free of history", and this condition results in his becoming undone as the play develops.19

Just as King Richard's actions appear to disorder his marriage and temporality, he also disorganises family structure, which can signify his queerness as well. Outside of Flint castle where he meets Bolingbroke for the first time since his return from banishment, Richard admits that Bolingbroke will soon possess the crown. Because Bolingbroke kneels before the king, Richard asks him to stand, and then tells him, "Cousin, I am too young to be your father; / Though you are old enough to be my heir." (3.3.204-205) Richard admits the impossibility of transferring the crown to Bolingbroke via hereditary lineage because he is too young to be Bolingbroke's father. However, he also posits Bolingbroke will be his heir, soldering him into his family line in a way that muddles direct descent. Even as Richard denies that he can be Bolingbroke's father, he finally acts like a father, although in the process, he upsets time – he is too young to be this man's parent – and reconfigures family structure. The play confirms that Richard adapts family structure innovatively when, right before the official deposition, the Duke of York informs Bolingbroke that Richard formally "adopts thee heir" (4.1.110). In Holinshed's representation of the transfer of power from Richard to Bolingbroke, no language of adoption appears; Richard exchanges a ring with Bolingbroke and declares that his cousin can be successor to the throne.20 By using the verb "adopts", the play draws attention to the new immediate family that Richard establishes, one that is not biologically based. His act, then, preserves legitimate succession even as it sheers succession away from direct bloodlines in an unprecedented fashion, reconfiguring descent and effectively creating queer family bonds.

Although Shakespeare's play interleaves three templates, specifically the wasteful king, the effeminate king and the queer king, when constructing Richard as its protagonist, Doran's RSC production only grappled with two, and it did so without attention to an historical understanding of their relationship. Both Doran through his direction and Tennant through his performance portrayed Richard as effete and pusillanimous, making him appear unmanly in comparison to Bolingbroke's physical and political strength. In this sense, they captured the effeminate king, likely because some continuity in gender ideology between the early modern and the present exists, so that Richard's unwillingness to fight and his frailty still can appear more feminine than masculine. In no way, however, did Doran and his actors activate the template of the wasteful king, especially since the costuming of Richard in relatively plain clothes, including the tunic later in the play, resisted an exploration of his court's opulence. Doran's production thus forwent an interpretation of the play that could use the portrayal of Richard to critique commerce and its reach into government, an interesting omission given that we live in the wake of an uneven

global recession spurred by the banking crisis of 2008. The opposition between Richard’s financial decadence and Bolingbroke’s impulse to reform that corruption could allegorise current political conditions in compelling ways, albeit obliquely, so as to avoid simplifying the intricate interrelations of economics and politics in both the past and present.

Instead Doran and Tennant concentrated on one aspect of the queer king, specifically the intimation that Richard might be a homosexual, so much so that Doran altered the play to match his reading. Doran and Tennant’s vision of Richard, to a degree, activated a stereotype of the gay male peacock, a figure that relies on his verbal prowess and intellectual bite, rather than his physical power, to exercise authority. In this approach, they also engaged with an element of the performance history of Richard II; Charles R. Forker remarks that Laurence Olivier, in an instance of homophobic invective, claimed that Michael Redgrave played King Richard as, in Olivier’s words, an “out-and-out pussy queer, with mincing gestures to match” in Anthony Quayle’s 1951 RSC production. Doran and Tennant did not aim to affirm a homophobic vision of King Richard, but they did depict him as an effeminate homosexual to generate a sympathetic portrait of this fallen royal.

Specifically, Doran tailored the script: in Shakespeare’s version, Sir Exton Pierce, a knight in King Henry’s court, imagines that the new king orders Richard’s execution, while in Doran’s version, Aumerle killed Richard, and this final betrayal gained greater tragic effect because earlier in the play when Richard and Aumerle were alone together, Richard kissed his favorite. At Flint castle, when the king imagines that he and Aumerle should “play the wantons” together, Tennant’s Richard passionately kissed Aumerle, which underscored the king’s desire for this favorite in his court. Doran consequently strengthened the sense of Richard as a sexually queer king, as overinvested in homoerotic bonds with other men, to generate pathos at the play’s end—a very modern pathos for an impossible love, especially when Aumerle surprisingly appeared as Richard’s murderer. Richard’s shock when he saw Aumerle might have echoed an audience’s shock, increasing the likelihood that spectators would identify with Richard, heightening the tragic element of the play’s end.

That this approach worked dramatically for some audiences does not legitimate the consequences of Doran’s changes, since these alterations assumed a transhistorical vision of gay identity that Richard II itself and its historical environment do not support. To put it differently, Shakespeare’s text blends together templates of the effeminate king and sexually queer king when fashioning Richard as a character, but that blending does not imply causal ties between these two templates; effeminacy does not necessarily translate into sexual unconventionality. A performance of the play that could create a distance between effeminacy and excessive homoeroticism, in fact, might be the more potent one in terms of sexual politics, for such a separation could jar audiences, given the everyday assumption that gender and sexuality are thoroughly intertwined. For instance, as Forker and Carol Chillington Rutter note, Ian McKellen’s 1969 performance of Richard at Prospect Theatre muted the king’s potential homosexuality by stressing Richard’s horror at the dissolution of the sacral status of kings. McKellen, for instance, studied and then mimicked the Dalai Lama’s bodily comportment to create a version of Richard that captured this king’s uniqueness and his investment in rituals, especially sacred rituals, of regal power. McKellen’s distinctive performance of Richard appears to have been a reaction to the ways other actors, like Michael Redgrave, portrayed the king. His chief means of transforming the character was to diminish, if not refuse, the link between sexuality and effeminacy that earlier interpretations of the play had assumed.

Deborah Warner’s 1995 production of Richard II at the Royal National Theatre also distinctively attempted to uncouple gender and sexuality through casting. Warner cast a woman, the Irish actor Fiona Shaw, as Richard specifically because she sought to counter the tradition

21. Forker, King Richard II, 100.
22. See Forker, King Richard II, 100-2 and Carol Chillington Rutter, “Fiona Shaw’s Richard II: The
that read the king as homosexual.\textsuperscript{23} Throughout this production, various hints about Shaw’s bodily status as female, such as the binding that she used to flatten her chest, visibly appeared, frustrating the possibility that the actor could consistently pass as male for audiences, and these hints underscored Shaw’s androgyny. In her interpretation, Warner stressed the love between Richard and Bolingbroke, using the disintegration of this bond and subsequent dissolution of Richard’s identity as the rationales for tragedy. Moreover, she had Shaw as Richard and David Threlfall as Bolingbroke appear physically similar: both had short dark hair cut in the same manner and they had comparable facial structures. By having Richard and Bolingbroke both love and physically mirror each other, Warner complicated the relationship between gender and sexuality, blurring distinctions to a degree that any coherent tie between effeminacy and sexual waywardness evaporated. Elizabeth Klett rightly proposes that this androgyny “problematized the very process of labeling sexuality, and thus presented a queer take on Shakespeare’s play.”\textsuperscript{24}

These earlier productions of the play – McKellen and Shaw’s interpretations of Richard – differently resisted causally linking effeminacy and queer sexuality, as Doran’s production so blithely did. Yet performances like these risk imagining Richard as more alien to audiences, whether Richard appears utterly absorbed by ritual (as in McKellen’s version) or entirely outside the gender system (as in Shaw’s portrait). Such an alien version of Richard ultimately fits better with the play’s distressing portrait of an individual’s fall out of history, out of any identity at all, upon his loss of the crown, which results in his embrace of negation, an absence that, unlike identity, knows no boundaries.

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