

Richard II *and the Perspectives of History*

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SHAKESPEARE, like his fellow poets of the earlier seventeenth century, associated the word *perspective* not with the painter's *perspectiva artificialis* alone—that is, with the Albertian rules for representing three-dimensional space to which we chiefly connect the word in its literal sense—but also with what I will call the “curious perspective.”¹ The Renaissance was fascinated by pictures and devices that created surprising, often paradoxical, effects by manipulating the conventions of linear perspective. The curious perspective is a miscellaneous category including

1. I borrow the term from the title of Jean François Nicéron's treatise on distorted perspectives, *La Perspective curieuse* (Paris, 1638), and from Hobbes, who reminds D'Avenant of a particularly ingenious “perspective”: “I believe (Sir) you have seen a curious kind of perspective, where, he that looks through a short hollow pipe, upon a picture containing diverse figures, sees none of those that are there painted, but some one person made up of their parts, conveyed to the eye by the artificiall cutting of a glass” (*The Answer of Mr. Hobbs to Sr. William D'Avenant's Preface before Gondibert*, in *Literary Criticism of Seventeenth-Century England*, ed. Edward W. Taylor [New York, 1967], p. 290). For a lavishly illustrated survey of anamorphic art, see Jurgis Baltrušaitis, *Anamorphoses* (Paris, 1969).

distorted, "anamorphic" images, sometimes hidden within regular images, that resolve themselves when seen from unusual points of view or in refracting lenses or mirrors of varying shapes (flat, cylindrical, conical); landscapes which, turned on their side, become faces; reversible portraits (Illustration 2); and, more broadly, the *trompe l'oeil* illusionism of *camerae obscurae*, and the other marvels made possible by the new optics. Thus Cleopatra has a reversible portrait in mind when she says of her two-faced Antony, "Though he be painted one way like a Gorgon, / The other way's a Mars" (II.v.116-117); Orsino thinks of optical trickery when, seeing Viola and Sebastian together at last, he marvels, "One face, one voice, one habit, and two persons! / A natural perspective, that is and is not" (V.i.208-209); and France's bantering with Henry V turns on a joke about hidden landscapes:

KING

. . . and you may, some of you, thank love for my blindness, who cannot see many a fair French city for one fair French maid that stands in my way.

FR. KING

Yes, my lord, you see them perspectively, the cities turned into a maid; for they are all girdled with maiden walls that war hath never ent'red.²

(V.ii.311-316)

Our own ability to see *Richard II* "perspectively" may be somewhat clouded unless we look more closely than students have thus far³ at Shakespeare's most elaborate use of the perspective image, for it proposes in effect that the play itself is to be regarded as a kind of perspective device.

2. All quotations from Shakespeare are taken from *The Complete Works*, ed. Peter Alexander (New York, 1952). For examples of other poets using "perspective" in this sense, see Jonson's *Alchemist*, III.ii.382 ff., and Herbert's "Sinne (II)." See also my "Marvell and Velázquez in Perspective," *JGE*, XXVI, no. 4 (Winter 1975), 269-279.

3. The fullest treatment of "perspectives" in *Richard II* that I have seen is in Claudio Guillén, "On the Concept and Metaphor of Perspective," *Comparatists at Work*, ed. Stephen G. Nichols, Jr. and Richard B. Vowles (New York, 1968), pp. 28-90. Guillén is mainly concerned with the theme of the visualization of grief.

I

At the end of Act II, scene i, we have just seen Richard leave for the Irish wars and Northumberland tell the other disaffected nobles that the exiled Bolingbroke is about to land at Ravenspurgh. In a moment Green will report the chilling news to the queen, but before he rushes in the queen confides in Bushy that she feels the weight of some unknown grief, nameless and yet heavier to bear than the mere sadness of Richard's absence:

Yet again methinks
Some unborn sorrow, ripe in fortunes womb,
Is coming towards me, and my inward soul
With nothing trembles. At something it grieves
More than with parting from my lord the King.

(II.ii.9-13)

Bushy's reply ingeniously plays on the scholastic distinction between substance and shadow, something and nothing, to invent a consolation for grief that he—if not the queen with her premonition, or the viewer with his experience of the previous scene—will find convincing:

Each substance of a grief hath twenty shadows,
Which shows like grief itself, but is not so;
For sorrow's eye, glazed with blinding tears,
Divides one thing entire to many objects,
Like perspectives which, rightly gaz'd upon,
Show nothing but confusion—ey'd awry,
Distinguish form. So your sweet Majesty,
Looking awry upon your lord's departure,
Find shapes of grief more than himself to wail;
Which, looked on as it is, is naught but shadows
Of what it is not. Then, thrice-gracious Queen,
More than your lord's departure weep not—more is not seen;
Or if it be, 'tis with false sorrow's eye,
Which for things true weeps things imaginary.

(II.ii.14-27)

Bushy would have the queen believe she has "nothing" to fear. In this he is precisely, if ironically, correct. The play will demonstrate that

having “nothing” to fear is hardly a consolation. This “heavy nothing,” this “nameless woe,” will soon become substantial enough when Green arrives:

QUEEN

So, Green, thou art the midwife to my woe,
 And Bolingbroke my sorrow's dismal heir.
 Now hath my soul brought forth its prodigy;
 And I, a gasping new-delivered mother,
 Have woe to woe, sorrow to sorrow join'd.

(II.ii.62-66)

For Richard the “shadows” of what is not—the foreshadows of the nothing ahead—are even more ominous. Like Lear (reduced, says the Fool, to “Lear’s shadow,” “an O without a figure”), Richard will have to endure the loss of his power, his crown, the very name of king, finally his life. “Are you contented to resign the crown?” asks Bolingbroke in the deposition scene (IV.i.200). Richard’s “Ay, no; no, ay; for I must nothing be” (l. 201) is the properly ambiguous response of a “great minor poet” always sensitive to a quibble.⁴ For if he is “contented”—willing—to resign, he is then certainly not contented in the other sense, substantially the king, full with the royal authority. Bolingbroke is now full, Richard empty, and in an equally empty ceremony the crown changes hands in token of the shifted weight of political power. And in the moments before his murder in the keep of Pomfret Castle, Richard struggles with his contradictory thoughts, none of them “contented”:

Sometimes am I king;
 Then treasons make me wish myself a beggar,
 And so I am. Then crushing penury
 Persuades me I was better when a king;
 Then am I king'd again; and by and by
 Think that I am unking'd by Bolingbroke,
 And straight am nothing. But whate'er I be,
 Nor I, nor any man that but man is,

4. In Mark Van Doren's phrase, *Shakespeare* (New York, 1953), p. 68. The Pelican editor glosses line 201: “‘yes, no; no, yes,’ but also ‘I, no; no, I’” (p. 659 n.); the line is also *heard* as, “I know no I.” For this and other insights I am indebted to Professor E. W. Taylor.

With nothing shall be pleas'd till he be eased
With being nothing.

(V.v.32-41)

These thoughts are “still-breeding” (l. 8), endlessly generating yet still-born, barren, and thus the last paradoxical echo of the queen as a “gasping new-delivered mother” of the “nothing” in fortune’s womb.

All this is beyond Bushy’s ken, for in Act II, scene ii, the irony of Bolingbroke’s return, of the empty shadow becoming the terrifying substance, is directed against his attempt to explain (away) the queen’s sorrow. By the time he loses his head and is “grav’d in the hollow ground” (III.ii.140), he will have learned the meaning of a “nothing” grief, but now he is made to speak more than he knows: while he argues that Richard’s leaving can be understood unambiguously if one only regards it from the right point of view, his analogy with the curious perspective suggests that there are several possible points of view, and further that it is not as simple as it seems to choose the “right” way of looking.

Bushy maintains that there is only a single “true” grief falsely multiplied into twenty “imaginary” shadows by the tears in sorrow’s eye, as if by a multifaceted refracting lens. These deceitful perceptions are “like perspectives,” anamorphic pictures, which “*rightly* gaz’d upon, / Show nothing but confusion—ey’d *awry*, Distinguish form” (italics mine).⁵ But how are they “like”? which is the deceitful point of view? The conceit in these lines turns on a punning reversal in the usual meanings of the words I have emphasized. “Rightly” here means, “at right angles,” “directly,” and hence the *wrong* way to look at an anamorphic image; the right way is to look “awry,” that is, obliquely. The queen finds too many “shapes of grief . . . to wail” because (in line 21) she looks “awry” upon her lord’s departure—but which way is that? If the second “awry” in line 21 carries on the metaphor of lines 18–20 and means “obliquely but technically correct for an anamorphic picture,” then Bushy is saying: It is a mistake to look obliquely and thereby to distinguish multiple shapes of grief. Look at it “as it is” (i.e., “rightly”)—straight on, and in this case

5. II.ii.19 is variously punctuated in different editions of the play—a detail that reflects the difficulty of the conceit. See Matthew Black, ed., *Richard II*, The Variorum Shakespeare, (Philadelphia, 1955), XXVII, 137.

correctly) and you will see that what you fear is just (needless) confusion and (empty) shadows. But if "awry" in line 21 means "wrongly" in the usual sense, then Bushy's advice becomes: You look wrongly to look rightly (i.e., straight on) at your lord's departure and find there delusive shapes of grief. See it instead "as it is" (i.e., obliquely) and realize that the terrifying confusion in the direct point of view is in fact naught but the harmless shadows of one limited grief.

In the best tradition of the Variorum editor and his predecessors, I have attempted to cut a logical path through the forest of puns in Bushy's speech.⁶ However, with this prose version to guide us, we run the risk of not seeing the forest for the footnotes: to untangle the knotted complexities of the text is to overlook its effect on the reader or the playgoer. In our actual experience of Bushy's speech the crisscrossing double meanings of "rightly" and "awry" make the passage itself like an anamorphic perspective that conflates two images into one and requires of the witness the kind of mental juggling act Tesauro would have approved as the touchstone of a witty conceit. This is the same experience Stanley Fish describes in his reading of the "shifting relationships" in the final couplet of Herbert's "The Crosse":

Reading these lines is like looking at a gestalt figure in which first one and then another pattern emerge from the same physical (here verbal) components . . . until finally there is only one pattern made up of two declarations which, if they were laid side by side, would be perceived as mutually contradictory, but here, occupying the same linguistic space, they constitute a triumph over discursive language.⁷

I have singled out Bushy's speech because both the notion of a double perspective and the experience of seeing double that Fish describes are central to the play. Shakespeare's use of the painter's "perspective" as a metaphor for the understanding is one of the earliest in English. The word was common in English before the seventeenth century, as Claudio Guillén points out, in a more literal sense that referred first to the rules

6. Black, pp. 137-138, note on l. 22.

7. *Self-consuming Artifacts* (Berkeley, Calif., 1972), p. 188. The lines from Herbert are: "And yet since these thy contradictions / Are properly a crosse felt by thy Sonne, / With but foure words, my words, *Thy will be done*" (Hutchinson ed., p. 165).

and devices of optics and later to the artificial perspective of the artist.⁸ Through the Christian association of optics with magic, pagan sooth-saying, and the vanity of appearances on the one hand, and the pictorial illusionism of the artist's perspective on the other, the perspective metaphor was often used to figure a deception of the eye and mind, as in Drummond of Hawthornden's "All we can set our eyes upon in these intricate mazes of Life is but Alchimie, vain Perspective, and deceiving Shadows."⁹ In the seventeenth century perspective provides a metaphor for cognition as well as illusion. It contributes a vocabulary for speaking of the mind's point of view as an observer of its own contents or the facts of experience; like the figures in a painting, the objects of knowledge are "seen" at various distances or in different aspects in a conceptual space, as in Bacon's metaphor: "We have endeavored in these our partitions [of the *Advancement*] to observe a kind of perspective, that one part may cast light upon another."¹⁰ Similarly the perspective conceit in Ben Jonson's sonnet "In Authorem" demonstrates that those who fail to appreciate Nicholas Breton's verse must be looking at it from the wrong point of view:

Looke here on *Bretons* worke, the master print:
Where, such perfections to the life doe rise.
If they seeme wry, to such as looke asquint,
The fault's not in the obiect, but their eyes.

8. Guillén, pp. 43–47. See Shakespeare's Sonnet 24: ". . . perspective it is best painter's art" (l. 4).

9. *Cypress Grove* (1623), cited in Guillén, p. 42. Cf. Bacon: "It hath been an opinion that the French are wiser than they seem, and the Spaniards seem wiser than they are. . . . It is a ridiculous thing . . . to see what shifts these formalists have, and what prospectives to make superficialities to seem body that hath depth and bulk," *Essays* (1625) quoted in Guillén, p. 43.

In Nashe's *The Unfortunate Traveller*, Jack Wilton witnesses Cornelius Agrippa conjuring in a "perspective glass," a magical device that appears on stage in Greene's play, *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*. On the deceptions of the painter's perspective illusions, Nicholas Hilliard's formulation is typical: "painting [uses] perspective . . . by falshood to expresse truth. . . . For perspective, to define it brefly, is an art . . . for a man to express anything in short'ned lines and shadowes, to deseave both the vnderstanding and the eye," "Nicholas Hilliard's Treatise Concerning 'The Arte of Sinning,'" *First Annual Volume of the Walpole Society* (Oxford, 1912), p. 20.

10. *The Advancement of Learning*, II.viii.1.

For, as one comming with a laterall view,
 Vnto a cunning piece wrought perspectiue,
 Wants facultie to make a censure true:
 So with this Authors Readers will it thriue:
 Which being eyed directly, I diuine,
 His prooffe their praise, will meete, as in this line.¹¹

In the later seventeenth century the perspective metaphor becomes important for Leibniz as a way of imagining the unity of the universe from a divine point of view beyond the multiplicity of our individual perceptions. In the *Monadologie* he compares the universe with a city whose aspect changes with the observer's point of view, "comme multipliée perspectivement," but which is nonetheless the same city.¹² The varieties of individual experience are thus seen as valid, though partial "perspectives" on a perfect whole, and a metaphor based on the anamorphic perspective serves him, in another place, as an assurance of universal harmony:

C'est comme dans les inventions de perspective, où certain beaux dessins ne paraissent que confusion, jusqu'à ce qu'on rapporte à leur vrai point de vue, ou qu'on les regarde par le moyen d'un certain verre our miroir. . . . Ainsi le déformités apparentes de nos petits mondes se réunissent en beautés dans le grand, et n'ont rien qui s'oppose à l'unité d'un principe universellement parfait.¹³

Shakespeare's metaphor has the same form as Leibniz's but none of the philosopher's rational delight in the certainty of our knowledge or his assurance that the world we seek to understand is perfect and harmonious. In *Richard II* the painter's anamorphic "perspectives" lend the playwright not just a local metaphor but, as I hope to show, a conceptual model for seeing the chronicle of English history. We must see the play, like the queen her "nothing" grief, both "rightly" (awry) and "awry" (rightly)—as a wedged contrariety that contains two opposed points of view, neither offering the consolation of complete certainty, but both nec-

11. Ben Jonson, *Works*, ed. C. H. Herford and Percy and Evelyn Simpson, 11 vols. (Oxford, 1952), VIII, 362. The poem was originally printed before Breton's *Melancholike Humours* (1600).

12. *Monadologie*, No. 57, in P. Janet, ed., *Oeuvres Philosophiques de Leibniz* (Paris, 1900), I, 716, cited in Guillén, p. 53.

13. Cited in Guillén, pp. 55-56.

essary for a fuller, if paradoxical, apprehension of a truth beyond our logical reach. This perspective is akin to the Shakespearean "mode of vision" which Norman Rabkin, borrowing a term from Einsteinian physics, calls "complementarity." The term, coined by Niels Bohr and popularized by Robert Oppenheimer, describes the theoretical necessity to regard light as both wavelike *and* corpuscular according to the experiment one is performing. For Rabkin this is analogous to the literary technique which is certainly not Shakespeare's alone, but his preeminently, of "presenting a pair of opposed ideals . . . or groups of ideals and putting a double valuation on each."¹⁴ But we need not ally Shakespeare with such distinguished if historically remote colleagues from the pure science faculties when the playwright offers us a comparison closer at hand in the curious perspective.

II

Before putting the play in that perspective, we might pause over an example of anamorphic painting, the finest one of the style done in England: Holbein's *The Ambassadors* (Illustration 1).¹⁵

The figures in Holbein's double portrait are French envoys to the court of Henry VIII, Jean de Dinteville and Georges de Selve. Between them

14. *Shakespeare and the Common Understanding* (New York, 1967), pp. 20 ff.

15. Chambers in 1891 suggested Holbein as a possible source of Shakespeare's lines (Black, p. 137 n.). William Heckscher also mentions Holbein in connection with the metaphor in *Richard II* on pp. 10, 21 of his "Shakespeare in his Relationship to the Visual Arts: A Study in Paradox," *RORD*, xiii-xv (1970-1971), 5-73. An anamorphic portrait of Edward VI (now in the National Gallery) is known to have been displayed in Whitehall in Shakespeare's time. It is possible that *The Ambassadors*, of which the Edward portrait is a kind of technical imitation, also hung there earlier in the sixteenth century. The "ambassador" Dinteville took his portrait back to France; it remained there until 1787, when Lebrun bought it and resold it in England to a dealer. The National Gallery acquired it in 1890.

Henry VIII employed Holbein in the reconstruction of Whitehall, which is known to have housed other works by the artist including the great fresco of Henry with his parents and Jane Seymour that was destroyed in the fire of 1698: see James B. Shaw, "The Perspective Picture: A Freak of German Sixteenth-century Art," *Apollo*, VI (1927), 213. My discussion of Holbein is indebted to Baltrušaitis and to G. H. Villiers, *Hans Holbein: The Ambassadors* (London, n.d.).



Illustration 1. Hans Holbein, *The Ambassadors* (1533). Reproduced by courtesy of the Trustees, The National Gallery, London

they represent the temporal and spiritual arm of the French legation—Dinteville, on the left, is Seigneur de Polisy and Selve the Bishop of Lavour—with the poise, solidity, and magnificence that characterize Henry in Holbein's famous portrait of 1540. Dinteville is the more imposing figure in his black velvet surcoat lined with ermine and set off with rose-red satin sleeves. The gold neck chain carrying the badge of the order of St. Michael and the ornate golden sheath of the dagger in his right hand emphasize the gorgeous variety of color and texture in Dinteville's costume. Although Selve's purple brocaded robe is more subdued and his pose less commanding, he makes almost as forceful an impression: the two share an authoritative but wary look that joins the studied poise of men who know their own importance in the public eye with the shrewd, critical detachment of practiced courtiers in a foreign land.

In Holbein's composition their authority rests symbolically, as their elbows do in fact, on a table displaying the tools of mastery over the liberal arts. The lower shelf contains, on the side near Selve, a lute and open hymnal, and on the other side, the more practical instruments of worldly managements suited to Dinteville—a terrestrial globe showing the papal line of demarcation between Spanish and Portuguese possessions in the New World, a T-square and compasses, and a partially opened book that can be identified as Peter Apian's "Well-grounded Instruction in all Merchant's Arithmetic." The objects on the "higher" shelf, including an astrolabe, a solar clock, and a celestial globe, complete the symbolization of the four arts of the quadrivium by adding astronomy to arithmetic, geometry, and music. Pictorially, the collection stresses the interrelationship of the arts by balancing the lute against the celestial globe, upon which all earthly harmony depends, and the celestial globe against the earthly to point the analogy between the "upper" and "lower" spheres of knowledge represented on the two shelves. There may also be an allusion to the *perspectiva artificialis*, that other liberal art which the Renaissance had added to the inherited list: Holbein's lute is shown in almost the exact position as the lute Dürer had chosen a few years earlier as the subject of his woodcut demonstrating a precise mechanical method of perspective drawing.¹⁶

16. *Unterweysung der Messung* (1525), reproduced in H. W. Janson, *History of Art* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1967), p. 392.

Such still-life objects are of course common in late Renaissance painting, either as the subjects of smaller works such as inlaid panels or as significant background for other figures.¹⁷ Here these objects, meticulously detailed, lighted, and foreshortened, are at once emblems of the worldly knowledge associated with the ambassadors and in themselves a center of attention nearly as prominent as the main figures. The heavy table and the men flanking it form a single rectangular grouping welded by the horizontals of the shelves and the verticals of the figures, fully defined in surface and volume, convincingly represented to the eye. These men and the world at their command are, we tell ourselves, palpable, undeniably, "there."

So far, if we are looking "rightly," we experience the painting as an affirmation of the solidity and power of human achievement—of the instruments of policy, measurement, and exploration displayed before us, of the men who use them, and of the artist's power to image both in his own medium. Still we must reconcile this view with several small but disturbing details. The lute has one broken string, which in the iconographical tradition changes it from an emblem of harmony to an emblem of discord.¹⁸ Richard has the emblematic significance of a broken string in mind during his prison soliloquy:

Music do I hear?
 Ha—ha—keep time! How sour sweet music is
 When time is broke and no proportion kept!
 So is it in the music of men's lives.
 And here have I the daintiness of ear
 To check time broke in a disordered string;
 But, for the concord of my state and time,
 Had not an ear to hear my true time broke.
 I wasted time, and now doth time waste me. . . .

(V.v.41-49)

The open book next to Selve is a Lutheran hymnal whose pages hint at another harmony beyond the discord of the earthly lute: Luther's German translation of the "Veni Creator Spiritus," "Kom Heiligen Geyst," is

17. See Fabrizio Clerici, "The Grand Illusion: Some Considerations of Perspective, Illusionism, and *Trompe-l'oeil*," *Art News Annual*, XXIII (1954), 98-180, esp. pp. 135-141, 152-157.

18. See Alciatus, *Emblemata* (1531).

legible on the left, and on the right is the introduction to his shortened version of the Decalogue, in which Luther urges obedience to the divine law above all. We might also notice a tiny silver crucifix in the upper left corner (almost obscured by the folds of the curtain), an even smaller death's-head device in Dinteville's cap, and this: the decorative pattern of the floor places the scene unmistakably in the sanctuary of Westminster Abbey, though our view of the church is hidden behind the green drapery in the background.

It has been suggested that the discordant string alludes to the failure of the League of Cognac in 1533, which ended seven years of fragile alliance between England and France, or that Selve is shown with a copy of Luther's hymns because the French cleric was dedicated to healing the religious schism, itself the most strident discord of the age. Still there is the suggestion in these nearly submerged details of sacred imagery that the scene before us is somehow discordant and deceptive in its very solidity (the empty lute case can just be seen under the table). These men posed like acolytes on either side of the altar of human competence—in a kind of compositional parody of a religious scene—only conceal a truth that may be found on the altar behind the curtain.

That suggestion becomes part of the viewer's experience of the painting when he regards it "awry," in the perspective required by the anamorphic streak in the foreground. Seen from the right edge of the painting, the streak resolves itself into a skull. This bit of visual trickery, in part a clever signature ("holbein" means "hollow bone"), takes on a special significance in relation to the main theme of the work: it is a *memento mori* and an emblem of *vanitas* posed against a vital image of worldly prowess. Holbein had earlier used the death's-head device in the woodcut *Death's Coat of Arms* (1526), where, placed between two robust figures, it gapes out its somber reminder.¹⁹ *The Ambassadors* achieves the same effect more forcefully by creating the second point of view, for as the skull takes shape the rest of the painting becomes as blurry and indistinct as the streak was before. The "right" view goes "awry" as the wry view turns into a visual demonstration *de incertitudine et vanitate scientiarum et artium atque excellentia verba Dei*.²⁰ These wittily superimposed images

19. Reproduced in Baltrušaitis, p. 101.

20. From the title of Cornelius Agrippa's *Declamatio* (1530).

join the two sides of Holbein's career. The secular portraitist and official recorder of the glories of the Tudor court controls one perspective, but the other is in the charge of the painter of the Basel altarpieces, the designer of the *Dance of Death* woodcuts, and the illustrator of Luther's Bible and Erasmus's *Praise of Folly*.

As Holbein celebrates and negates the two ambassadors, so the same ambiguity extends to the painting itself, which asserts both the power of perspective to create an illusion of reality and the emptiness, the *vanitas*, of that illusion.²¹ That duplicity carries with it a similar process of loss and gain in the role of the viewer. The shifting perspectives undercut *his* authority as the ideal observer, but substitute a different kind of knowledge—an awareness of the reach and limitations of his own perceptions, and a disillusioned understanding that things are and are not what they seem.

III

That *Richard II* is capable of yielding the same understanding is a mark of its greater maturity over the first tetralogy and its kinship with the later tragedies. Compared with the limitations of the *Henry VI* plays—their episodic structure, their one-dimensional characters like Talbot, their vigorous heroics and unclouded patriotism—*Richard II* represents not only a considerable technical advance but a deepened insight into the problems of history and human motivation. Even *Richard III* seems crudely conceived beside it, despite the brilliance of the hunchback king's Machiavellianism, which sustains the play. As Richard III bustles from one hateful villainy to the next, and finally to a bloody dog's death in Bosworth field, the play moves toward its swift and untroubled resolution, reenacting a key chapter in the official Tudor explanation of English history. The Wars of the Roses, according to the chronicler Hall, showed "What mischief hath insurged in realmes by intestine devision . . . by domestical discord & unnatural controversy"; but this controversy

21. Agrippa had included perspective as one of the deceptions of the arts and sciences because it deals with false appearances.

by the union of Matrimony celebrate and comsummate betwene the high and mighty Prince King Henry the seventh and the lady Elizabeth his moste worthy Quene, the one beeyng indubitate heire of the hous of Lancastre, and the other of Yorke was suspended and appalled in the person of their most noble, puissant and mighty heire King Henry the eight; and by hym clerely buried and perpetually extinct.²²

The lesson of Henry’s victory was plain: “that all men (more clerer than the sonne) may apparently perceive, that as by discord greate thyngs decaie and fall to ruine, so the same by concord be revived and erected.” As the wars had issued from a breach of harmony, the union of Henry and Elizabeth “erected” fallen England to a state of sacramental integrity exemplified not only by “man & woman in marriage” but by the union of the “Godhed to the manhod,” for in Christ “manne was joyned to God whiche before by the temptacion of the subtile serpent was from hym segregate and divided.” The defeat of Richard III, the last and most vicious fomenter of discord, was nothing short of an act of redemption, a national resurrection.

So in Shakespeare’s play England awakes from Richard’s “dead midnight” to a new morning under Richmond, whose prayer at the end has the full moral weight of the play behind it:

. . . as we have ta’en the sacrament,
We will unite the white rose and the red.
Smile heaven upon this fair conjunction,
That long have frown’d upon their enmity!
What traitor hears me, and says not amen?
England hath long been mad and scarr’d herself;
.
All this divided York and Lancaster,
Divided in their dire division,
O, now let Richmond and Elizabeth,
The true succeders of each royal house,
By God’s fair ordinance conjoin together!
And let their heirs, God, if thy will be so,
Enrich the time to come with smooth-fac’d peace,
With smiling plenty, and fair prosperous days!

(V.v.18–23, 27–34)

22. Edward Hall, *Union of the two Noble and Illustrate Families of Lancastre & Yorke* (1548), quoted in Geoffrey Bullough, *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare* (London, 1960), III, 16–17.

Richard II returns to the origins of the division and also records the overthrow of a king and the installation of a new regime. But where *Richard III* has its moral poles clearly marked—on one side Richard, “determined to be a villain,” and on the other the pious Richmond, a captain of the Lord and a minister of chastisement—*Richard II*, without abandoning the framework of the Tudor myth, confronts the ambiguities inherent in the orthodox interpretation of English history.

These ambiguities arise first of all from the chroniclers’ attempt to impose a providential design on the historical record. Richard II, though not malicious of heart, suffered from the “frailties of wanton youth,” ruled willfully rather than justly, and gave himself overmuch to his pleasures. To this extent, and because he had been unlawfully used at Richard’s hand, Bolingbroke’s revolt could be justified, and Holinshed could discern the “providence of God” at work in the deposition. Nevertheless, Bolingbroke was the “first author” of discord; as Henry IV he and his line were “scourged afterwards as a due punishment unto rebellious subjects.”²³ This paradox was sharpened by the elaboration, under Elizabeth I, of the doctrine of the king’s divinity. In the late fourteenth century the historical Richard had ruled as *primus inter pares*. At the deposition, as reported in Holinshed, the Bishop of Carlisle is concerned only with the injustice of passing judgment on a king in his absence. But Shakespeare’s Carlisle, influenced by the concept held by late Tudor political theology of the king’s divine right, argues Richard’s immunity from human judgment: “What subject can give sentence on his king? / And who sits here that is not Richard’s subject?” (IV.i.121–122).²⁴

The claims of divine right were elaborated in a series of homilies issued by the crown from 1547 on. Distributed to every parish in the kingdom, the homilies taught the duty of passive “obedience to Rulers and Magistrates” as the Lord’s deputies on earth, and the sinfulness of rebellion even against an evil king: “Shall the subjects both by their wickedness provoke God for their deserved punishment, to give them an undiscreet or evil prince, and also rebel against him, and withal against God, who

23. Hall, quoted in Bullough, p. 68; Raphael Holinshed, *The Chronicles of England* (1587), III, quoted in Bullough, pp. 402, 409.

24. Lily Cambell, *Shakespeare’s “Histories”* (San Marino, Calif., 1947), p. 206.

for the punishment of their sins did give them such a prince?"²⁵ This theological doctrine of the king's divinely ordained rule was reflected in English law, as Ernst Kantorowicz has shown, in the concept of the "king's two bodies."²⁶ Possessed of an immortal "body politic" (in effect the "body" of the state, with its citizenry the "members" and the king its "head") as well as a perishable "body natural," the king combined within himself the divine and the human—in a union analogous to the church's status in canon law as a *corpus mysticum*, and ultimately based on the dual nature of Christ.

The potential paradox of a king who both enjoys the special sanction of divinity and suffers the infirmities of the flesh did not trouble the Tudor jurists. In fact the ambiguity of this legal fiction was an asset in that it permitted the courts to argue with equal validity the divine or the human aspect of kingship according to the case before them. But applied retrospectively to an event like the deposition of Richard II, the doctrine of the king's divinity could only complicate the Tudor myth. If, despite his unfitness for rule, Richard stood above human judgment, then his deposition and murder by a subject could be nothing but the most impious treachery. Indeed, a "deposition" engineered by the sword could only be futile since the crown is an alienable possession that only separates itself from the king's person upon the death of his natural body, whereupon it invests itself in the proper successor. Nor can Richard the man effectively consent in his own deposition, even to preserve the nothing that is left him without the name of king, for the king cannot act against his own interest—"what the king does in his Body politic cannot be invalidated or frustrated by any Disability in his Natural Body." Yet that deposition must have fallen into God's larger plan, and the mantle of divinity must have passed to the usurper—especially if the usurper was to be the paternal ancestor of the Tudor line. From a providential point of view the glorious union of the white and red roses required the deposition of Richard II as prologue, just as Christ's salvation required the Fall of Adam. The Tudor lawyers had emphasized the seamless unity of

25. *Anglican Homily XXIII* (1573), in Bullough, p. 378. See Alfred Hart, *Shakespeare and the Homilies* (Melbourne, 1934).

26. Ernst Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology* (Princeton, N.J., 1957).

the king's dual nature, "a Body natural and a Body politic together indivisible . . . incorporated in one Person."²⁷ But the dramatist's concern lies with testing the fit between the physical and the metaphysical, between human action and providential design, in a case where the king's two bodies are violently separated.

When Richard is dethroned his royal identity is shattered like the mirror in the deposition scene, the glass that reflects, as Kantorowicz says, only the "banal face and insignificant *physis* of a miserable man, a *physis* now devoid of any *metaphysis* whatever."²⁸ He is left with a self defined only by deprivation and the fear of death; for Richard as for Holbein, the splendor of power dissolves into the imagery of the grave, of the "hollow crown" where death keeps his court. Deprived of the power of action and reduced to Bolingbroke's "Jack of the clock" (V.v.60)—an automaton ticking off another man's hours—Richard falls back on a desperate theatricality, on acting. Kingship becomes a role for Richard to play as he becomes the mere "shadow" of a substantial king. (In the Renaissance the word *shadow* included "actor" among its many meanings.)

It is the hopeless attempt to reconstruct the shattered fragments of his identity that turns Richard into a witty poet as well. Critics have regarded Richard's strained, punning language as a sign of the play's immaturity. The later Shakespeare, like Berowne in *Love's Labor's Lost*, would forswear "Three-pil'd hyperboles, spruce affectation, / Figures pedantical," the "summer-flies" of a style full of "maggot ostentation" (V.ii.407-409). *Richard II* has been soberly pronounced "a qualified achievement in the consciously artificial manner."²⁹ But this judgment fails to realize that artifice is Richard's only resource, that his language is excessive and conceited because it must stretch itself around the paradox of a king unkinged. Richard seizes obsessively on the words spoken to him and splits them in two. His language sets "the word itself / Against the word" (V.v.13-14), for only a double language, painfully aware of the opposite meanings lurking in words, is adequate to Richard's own double condition:

27. Edmund Plowden's *Reports*, in Kantorowicz, pp. 7 ff.

28. Kantorowicz, p. 40.

29. R. F. Hill, "Dramatic Techniques and Interpretation in 'Richard the Second,'" in J. R. Brown and B. Harris, ed., *Early Shakespeare*, Shakespeare Institute Studies (New York, 1966), p. 121.

BOLINGBROKE

Go, some of you convey him to the Tower.

KING RICHARD

O, good! Convey! Conveyers are you all,
That rise thus nimbly by a true king's fall.

(IV.i.316-318)

Richard's "conveyers" become both "royal escorts" and "thieves," as his "still-breeding thoughts" are both fertile and stillborn, and his anguished "Ay, no; no, ay" a knotted pun of conflicting impulses. Bolingbroke can afford to be, as Richard calls him, a "silent king" (IV.i.290), or, when he speaks, a skilled but conventional rhetorician concealing as much as he reveals: "Henry Bolingbroke / On both his knees doth kiss King Richard's hand . . ." (III.iii.35-36). His real meanings have no need for public utterance because they are attached to actions and backed with the weight of political power. Compared with Richard's frantic ostentation, Bolingbroke's reticence is powerful enough to topple a king without his once declaring his intentions. Bolingbroke not surprisingly has little patience with Richard's wordplay, but Richard persists in ruling the only realm where he still holds sway, persists in hammering his verbal subjects into linguistic models of his own paradoxical state.

But the effort is unavailing: Richard can never fashion his splintering words into a language that will reestablish connections. His final attempt to "compare / This prison where I live unto the world" (V.v.1-2)—to rejoin the shrunken kingdom of his own natural body to the greater world from which he has been severed—must fail. The only solution to his grief is the dissolution of the metaphysical and the physical in death: "Mount, mount, my soul! thy seat is up on high; / Whilst my gross flesh sinks downward, here to die" (V.v.111-112).

By setting Shakespeare's king next to Holbein's ambassadors, I have hoped to suggest that Richard's character and language must be seen from the two points of view of the curious perspective, generated, in Richard's case, by his double nature as king and man. In him the perspectives of imperishable authority and fragile mortality are joined in an unstable union, a discord, that requires us to see both the crown and the hollowness at its center. One analogue for Richard's character may be found in mortuary sculpture which presents two reposing figures of the



Illustration 2. Reversible Portraits. Esme de Boulonnois, *Il Faut Mourir* (17th century). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Elisha Whittelsey Fund, 1949

deceased, one fully fleshed and lifelike on the lid of a carved tomb and the second, a skeletal corpse, inside the tomb.³⁰ Another visual model that conflates the two aspects into a single figure is the reversible perspective portrait like the seventeenth-century French woodcut entitled *Il Faut Mourir* (Illustration 2). I would like to propose further that our need to see Richard rightly and awry extends to our experience of the play as a whole.

The “seeing” with which I have been concerned so far is a kind of

30. Reproduced in Kantorowicz, Figures 28, 30, 31.

intellectual balancing act in the presence of a double character speaking a double language. But of course we see a play in the literal sense as well: whether in performance or in the mind's eye, the drama depends upon our visual experience more directly than the lyric or the novel—which may or may not call up relevant imagery for the individual reader. The composition of figures on stage and the rhythm of their movement and gesture are crucial to what Michael Goldman terms the “energies of drama.”³¹ The play's sequence of visual imagery forms a pattern of understanding comparable to our experience of a painting, and it is worth special attention in *Richard II* because of the formal, posed quality of its court scenes.³²

IV

The first four scenes of the play alternate between public ceremony and private conversation. The public scenes, Bolingbroke's challenge (I.i) and the aborted combat (I.iii), are visually identical: two opponents take their place on either side of King Richard, who (with the viewer) must make a choice between them. The characters' movement on stage, like their language, is restricted to the few ritual acts prescribed by the solemn occasion. Standing “face to face / And frowning brow to brow” (I.i.15–16), Mowbray and Bolingbroke throw down the gage in turn and accept the other's challenge. In Act I, scene iii, the locale has shifted to the lists at Coventry, where there are perhaps more “Nobles” in attendance, the combatants are now armed, and a Marshall replaces Gaunt as an interlocutor between them and the king; otherwise this scene echoes the first in both its balanced composition and rigid formality. With Richard in the center (whether on a balcony above the “field” or on the platform stage), Bolingbroke and Mowbray enter from either side and “orderly proceed” to announce their name and cause, profess their loyalty to the king, and receive the lance. They are posed in a formal tableau that is all the more static because the action we suppose will issue from

31. *Shakespeare and the Energies of Drama* (Princeton, N.J., 1972).

32. For studies in this vein, with differing emphases, see Mark Rose, *Shakespearean Design* (Cambridge, Mass., 1972) and Ann Haaker, “*Non Sine Causa: The Use of Emblematic Method and Iconology in the Thematic Structure of Titus Andronicus*,” *RORD*, XIII–XV (1970–1971), 143–168.

all this ceremony is frustrated. Having refused to be reconciled, they will now not be permitted to fight:

LORD MARSHALL

Sound trumpets; and set forward combatants.

[*A charge sounded*]

Stay, The King hath thrown his warder down.

KING RICHARD

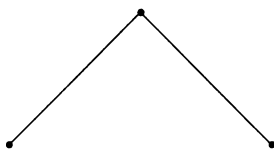
Let them lay by their helmets and their spears,
And both return back to their chairs again.

(I.iii.117-120)

The judicial forms of challenge and combat are intended to make conflicting claims manifest, a part of the public record, and to resolve them by the certain test of battle. Yet here nothing happens and no judgment is rendered except for Richard's apparently capricious decision to suspend the contest and banish both parties. It is left for the smaller scenes to reveal what lies hidden in the public spectacle. Richard explains his verdict publicly as a precaution against shedding kindred blood in civil strife, but in Act I, scene iv, he tells Aumerle that his private motive for the banishment lay in the fear of Bolingbroke's ambition and popularity. We know further from Gaunt in Act I, scene ii, that Richard is already spotted with kindred blood for his complicity in the murder of the Duke of Gloucester—that when Bolingbroke accuses Richard's agent Mowbray of spilling Gloucester's blood, "Which blood like sacrificing Abel's, cries / . . . To me for justice and rough chastisement" (I.i.104, 106), it is the king himself who stands guilty by proxy of committing the sin of Cain. The public scenes appear to be richly significant with all the trappings of history; but counterpointed against what is said out of public hearing, they become opaque. Their color and detail, their rhetoric, their very factuality, form an ornate surface concealing the truth beneath it. The high ceremony is there not merely to recreate a nostalgic picture of a lost medieval order, as Tillyard believed, but to suggest that history itself—for all its high-stomached language—is an inarticulate dumbshow.

I have emphasized the visual composition of Act I, scene i, and Act I, scene iii, because the same pattern recurs at three other points in the play, twice in the deposition scene, Act IV, scene i, and again in Act V, scene iii. Schematically, the three principal figures on stage—in Act I,

scene i, and Act I, scene iii, Bolingbroke, Richard, and Mowbray—form a kind of triptych with the central character in the judgment seat:



This is a scenic equivalent for the Gardener's judicial image of Bolingbroke and Richard "weighed" in the balance (which in production the Gardener will certainly make a living emblem by extending his arms like a pair of scales):

Their fortunes both are weigh'd.
In your lord's scale is nothing but himself,
And some few vanities that make him light;
But in the balance of great Bolingbroke,
Besides himself, are all the English peers,
And with that odds he weighs King Richard down.

(III.iv.84–89)

In each recurrence a dual judgment is to be made, that of the character at the fulcrum about the two contenders in the balances, and that of the viewer about the scene itself. These scenes together form a larger set of balances that weigh the crucial dilemma of the play.

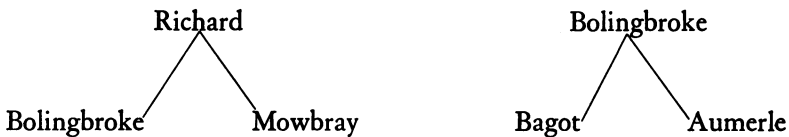
At the beginning of Act IV, scene i, when Bolingbroke has the power if not the crown, the "woeful pageant" of deposition opens with a formal challenge between Bagot and Aumerle over which the new king must preside. The captured Bagot is called to testify what he knows of "noble Gloucester's death; / Who wrought it with the King, and who perform'd / The bloody office of his timeless end" (ll. 3–5). He accuses Aumerle, who is brought forward and told to "look upon that man" (l. 7) as Bagot levels his charge:

In that dead time when Gloucester's death was plotted
I heard you say 'Is not my arm of length,
That reacheth from the restful English Court
As far as Calais, to mine uncle's head?'
Amongst much other talk that very time
I heard you say that you had rather refuse

The offer of an hundred thousand crowns
 Than Bolingbroke's return to England;
 Adding withal, how blest this land would be
 In this your cousin's death,

(ll. 10-19)

Visually and thematically, the scene reenacts the challenge in Act I, scene i, and Act I, scene iii, which also concerned responsibility for Gloucester's death, with different actors in the key positions:



Though Aumerle denies the charge, it seems at first that the balance has tipped decisively against him as three other witnesses line up on Bagot's side: Fitzwater supports Bagot's testimony from personal knowledge ("I heard thee say, and vauntingly thou spak'st it, / That thou wert cause of noble Gloucester's death"), Percy throws down the gage to defend Fitzwater's honor, and "Another Lord" adds his own gage to the pile as he declares Aumerle forsworn and treacherous (IV.i.36-37, 44-48, 52-56). At this moment, however, Surrey steps in as an eyewitness to the conversation between Aumerle and Fitzwater: "My Lord Fitzwater, I do remember well / The very time Aumerle and you did talk" (ll. 60-61). Fitzwater acknowledges that Surrey was there and looks to him for support, whereupon Surrey flatly contradicts Fitzwater's accusation and the two fall into a quarrel of their own:

FITZWATER

'Tis very true; You were in presence then,
 And you can witness with me this is true.

SURREY

As false, by heaven, as heaven itself is true.

FITZWATER

Surrey, thou liest.

SURREY

Dishonourable boy!

(ll. 62-65)

Since this is Surrey's first appearance in the play we have no voucher for his honesty or, indeed, for Fitzwater's, Bagot's, or Aumerle's. With one eyewitness for each side, the case reaches an impasse that can only be broken by calling yet another witness—for now Fitzwater remembers having "heard the banish'd [Mowbray, Duke of] Norfolk say / That thou, Aumerle, didst send two of thy men / To execute the noble Duke at Calais" (ll. 80–82). Bolingbroke is willing to have the conclusive witness repealed; but Norfolk, he is told, has died in exile, and he has no choice but to leave all these differences unresolved—"under gage" until some future "days of trial" which are never appointed in the course of the play (ll. 105–106).

This episode, inconclusive and apparently unrelated to the deposition that follows, is nevertheless reconstructed with some care out of a few details in Holinshed's chronicle. There Sir John Bagot is reported to have given a deposition containing "certeine evill practises of king Richard" and affirming Richard's "great affection" for the Duke of Aumerle. Bagot also testified to a private conversation with Mowbray in which the latter, having denied any part in Gloucester's death, named Aumerle as the one who carried out the king's murderous wishes. The next day, according to Holinshed, Fitzwater appealed Aumerle for treason and "twentie other lords also . . . threw downe their hoods, in pledge to prove the like matter against the duke of Aumerle." Bolingbroke then licensed the return of Mowbray to answer the charges against him and learned of Mowbray's death.³³ While Holinshed makes no mention of anyone speaking *for* Aumerle, who in his account stands condemned on all sides, Shakespeare deliberately adds the character of Surrey to balance the scales, and further makes Aumerle's case depend on the unobtainable testimony Mowbray carried with him to the grave. With these changes Shakespeare creates a scene where a matter of historical judgment becomes ambiguous: Surrey and Fitzwater see the past from conflicting points of view, and neither we nor Bolingbroke can decide which is "right" and which is "wry." That "dead time when Gloucester's death was plotted" is not just past but dead as Mowbray is dead—silent and beyond recall. Like one of Richard's double words, the past has split into opposites that cannot be reconciled.

33. In Bullough, pp. 409–410.

By its parallelism to the earlier judgment triptychs, this scene makes the question of Gloucester's murder all the more uncertain (given that Richard wanted it done, who carried it out? Mowbray? Aumerle?) and reminds us of the stasis and concealment, the inconclusiveness, of the history open to public view. The scene's importance as a prelude to the deposition becomes clear if we realize one obvious but vital aspect of our own relationship to this history play. Bolingbroke's vantage point on the history of Bagot and Aumerle is analogous to our vantage point on the history of Richard II and Henry IV: we are spectators at a reenactment, an attempted resuscitation, of a dead past, but the replica is necessarily a death mask and not the living flesh. Because we cannot see more than the preserved public face, we can never attain the certainty of knowing the private heart.

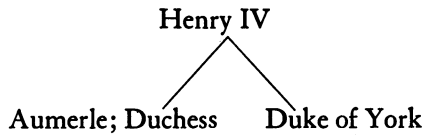
That limitation first of all gives special point to Carlisle's speech, which follows next. "What subject can give sentence on his king?" warns not merely against the offense of judging God's deputy but against the presumption of judging at all. If Bolingbroke cannot in conscience give sentence on two of Richard's underlings, how can he give sentence on Richard? The same caution must apply to the audience's judgment of the deposition. For Richard, acting as the stage manager of his own deposition, will maneuver Bolingbroke into the same position Bagot and Aumerle were in a moment before. Taking the crown (from York or one of the officers who has carried it into the room), Richard invites Bolingbroke to "seize" it, and the figures hold the pose, each with a hand on the crown between them, while Richard speaks:

Give me the crown. Here, cousin, seize the crown.
 Here, cousin,
 On this side my hand, and on that side thine.
 Now is this golden crown like a deep well
 That owes two buckets, filling one another;
 The emptier ever dancing in the air,
 The other down, unseen, and full of water.
 That bucket down and full of tears am I,
 Drinking my griefs whilst you mount up on high.
 (IV.i.181-189)

Richard's conceit of the crown as a "deep well/ That owes two buckets" echoes the Gardener's scales as a figure of the shifting fortunes

of the two men and the difficulty of the judgment we have to make between them. The banishment of Bolingbroke and Gaunt's prophetic denunciation of Richard in Act I had been followed by an announcement of Bolingbroke's return. Now the deposition of Richard and Carlisle's prophetic denunciation of Bolingbroke are followed (at IV.i.326-334) by the laying of a plot against the new king. As the beginning of the new regime reenacts the end of the old, our judgment is suspended in an equilibrium that carefully balances their competing claims.

The final triptych occurs in Act V, scene iii, where Henry must decide between two suppliants. On one side Aumerle (seconded by his mother) begs the king's forgiveness for his part in the conspiracy which has just come to light; on the other Aumerle's father, the Duke of York, urges the king to condemn Aumerle for treason:



An uncle to both Richard and Bolingbroke, York had been torn between them but finally bound his allegiance to the new king so securely that—even though Henry is inclined to be lenient—he now demands his own son's death. Henry, angry as he is with Aumerle, is also half amused at these proceedings, for the old duke and his persistent wife make a faintly ridiculous pair (ll. 79-82); and what is held up for ridicule in the warm light of Henry's generosity is York's vindictive code of "honor" and "dishonor" which places political loyalty over the natural affection of fathers for their children:

YORK

Mine honour lives when his dishonour dies,
Or my sham'd life in his dishonour lies.
Thou kill'st me in his life; giving him breath,
The traitor lives, the true man's put to death.

(ll. 70-73)

Henry chooses mercy over this harsh brand of justice, and his forgiveness is as complete as Aumerle's guilt. York urges him to say his pardon in

French—to “say ‘pardonne moy’” (l. 119)—but the king refuses to quibble. He will not “set the word itself against the word” (l. 122) but will rather speak it plainly, “I pardon him, as God shall pardon me” (l. 131); and to leave no doubt he grants the duchess’s plea that he speak it twice:

DUCHESS

Speak it again.
Twice saying ‘pardon’ doth not pardon twain,
But makes one pardon strong.

BOLINGBROKE

With all my heart
I pardon him.

(ll. 133–136)

Balanced against the play’s opening triptych, this scene completes one view of the historical process—let us call it the “right” view—that justifies the deposition morally and metaphysically, suggesting (as York had earlier put it) that “heaven hath a hand in these events” (V.ii.37). In the first act Richard had ruled in a case of treason and, to keep his own guilt hidden, had dispensed not justice but vengeance on both parties. By exiling and then dispossessing Bolingbroke of his inheritance, he had taken “from Time / His charters and his customary rights” and so broken the chain of “fair sequence and succession” by which he could claim his own authority. (II.i.195–196, 199). In this view Bolingbroke, as Henry IV, has rejuvenated the political order by putting time back into joint; he has created a “new world” (Fitzwater, IV.i.78) and a “new spring of time” (York, V.ii.50). Richard has the blood of Abel on his hands. Like the Gardener he is “old Adam’s likeness,” and his fall signified a “second fall of cursed man” (III.iv.73, 76). Although at the deposition Richard had played the role of a betrayed Christ—“Did they not sometime cry ‘All hail!’ to me? / So Judas did to Christ” (IV.i.169–170)—this was nothing but a shadowy performance, for the substance of divine kingship had passed to another man. Now when Henry pardons Aumerle the duchess correctly proclaims him a “god on earth,” and leads her son off stage with the words, “Come, my old son; I pray God make thee new” (V.iii.136, 146). The old Aumerle is forgiven under a new dispensation of mercy, and his pardon is the emblem of a regenerate kingdom. In short the

“right” view is that English history recapitulates spiritual history as a redemptive movement from sinfulness to grace.

If the play ended here it would be another version of Richard III, moving from “Richard’s night to Bolingbroke’s [= Richmond’s] fair day” (III.ii.218), but the concluding three scenes establish the second, “wry” point of view. First Exton and a servant remain on stage:

EXTON

Didst thou not mark the King, what words he spake?
“Have I no friend will rid me of this living fear?”
Was it not so?

SERVANT

These were his very words.

EXTON

“Have I no friend?” quoth he. He spake it twice,
And urg’d it twice together, did he not?

SERVANT

He did.

(V.iv.1-6)

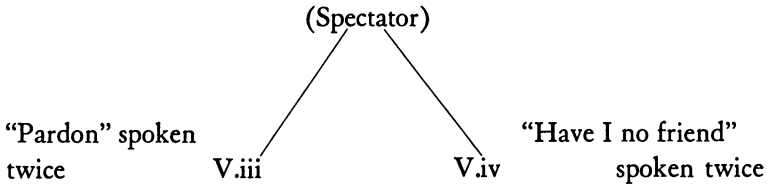
Having just twice spoken the words of pardon, Henry (evidently before the scene with Aumerle) had already twice spoken the words of treachery and murder. Having just refused to set the word itself against the word in a French pun, Henry now presents us with a far more disturbing contradiction—which is echoed a moment later in the language of Richard’s prison soliloquy. For among Richard’s discontented thoughts, the

thoughts of things divine, are intermix’d
With scruples, and do set the word itself
Against the word,
As thus: “Come little ones”; and then again,
“It is as hard to come as for a camel
To thread the postern of a small needle’s eye.”

(V.v.12-17)

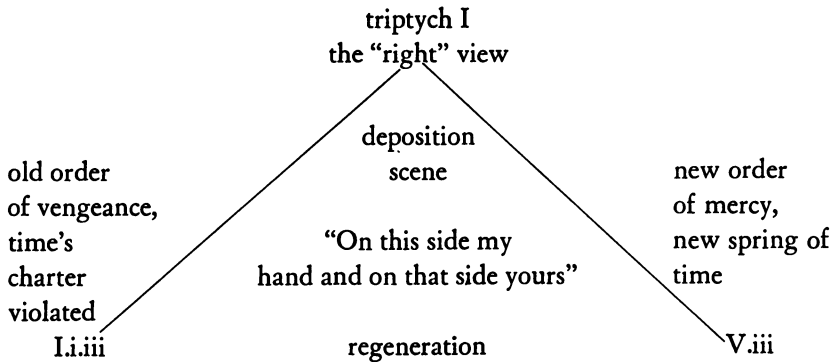
Weighing his own fate, Richard is caught on the dilemma of reconciling the scripture’s promise of mercy with its threat of retribution. The same

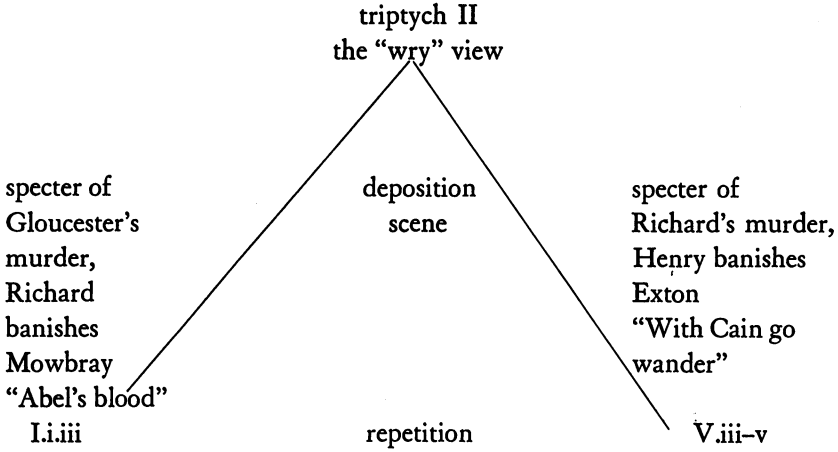
dilemma confronts the spectator in the juxtaposition of Act V, scene iii, and Act V, scene iv, which presents the equivalent (and equivocal) problem of interpreting King Henry:



Henry’s final action in the play, the banishing of Exton, completes the “wry” perspective by recalling the allusion to Abel in Act I, scene i: “They love not poison that do poison need, / Nor do I thee. . . . With Cain go wander thorough shades of night” (V.vi.38–39, 43). Exton is Henry’s man as Mowbray was Richard’s, and through these exiled surrogates both the deposed king and his successor bear the guilt of a kindred murder. In the “wry” view English history recapitulates the sin of Cain, recording a cycle of homicide rather than a spiritual progress.

These two perspectives together comprise the play’s two bodies, a spiritual and a physical nature paradoxically incorporated in one dramatic form. The play is bracketed by two opposing structural symmetries, corresponding to two opposed patterns of meaning, which may be represented schematically:





In our experience of the play, the "right" and "wry" points of view are superimposed in a way that forces us to hold both configurations in mind. As the model of a double character generates a witty double language, it also imbeds two modes of explanation in the same historical event, or rather discovers in one event two necessary, if logically incompatible, meanings. The play neither endorses nor denies the Tudor myth but builds on its premises to show that the providential theory of the king's double nature necessarily requires a complex kind of double-think for which the curious perspective is the visual model. Confronted with these shifting patterns of meaning, the witness can have no unequivocal point of view. Instead he is put in the difficult role of balancing conflicting but equally valid perceptions. He must see both the "controlling majesty" of kingship and the vanity of the "hollow crown."