ONE WAY to describe the passage from Richard II to Henry V is to say that the first play is a picture of a sick state in which appearance and reality are at odds and that the last play is a picture of a healthy state in which political appearance and reality are unified in terms of the Elizabethan ideal of monarchy. This essay suggests that one sign of the political sickness in Richard II is the presence, explicit or implied, of the Renaissance comparison between the state and the theater. As the suggestion is developed, the reader will be asked to grant that political problems are also philosophical problems, and that plot and character may be controlled expressions of a general moral theme as well as dramatic accounts of typical personalities or recurrent historical situations. Examples of the state-theater comparison from More and Machiavelli will be reviewed, not to prove direct indebtedness by Shakespeare, but to show how the comparison was available in two pertinent contexts, Christian humanism and Renaissance Realpolitik.

In More’s The Four Last Things the image of “the lorel who playeth the lord in a stage play” serves the theme of contemptus mundi. The proud

1 The state-theater comparison is not noticed by Richard D. Altick in his “Symphonic Imagery in Richard II,” PMLA, lxxii (1947), 339–365. Altick does, however, follow Mark Van Doren, Shakespeare (New York, 1939), pp. 85–87, in remarking the insistent use of tongue, mouth, speech, word, and this leads him to the conclusion: “That words are mere conventional sounds moulded by the tongue, and reality is something else again, is constantly on the minds of all the characters” (p. 350). He also suggests that “the tragic sense of unsubstantiality in this play—the confusion of appearance and reality” is supported by the repeated use of hollow and face (pp. 350–351, 363).

2 The interpretation which emphasizes the contrasting personalities of Richard and Bolingbroke is widely known. According to it, the theatrical and narcissistic Richard, a poet manqué, goes down before the efficient Bolingbroke, who, in Oscar J. Campbell’s words, “never clogs his impulse to action with play-acting or sentimentalizing” (The Living Shakespeare, New York, 1949, p. 181). The possible implications of the play as a mirror of a recurrent historical pattern have been stressed by Lilly B. Campbell in Shakespeare’s “Histories” (San Marino, 1947), pp. 168–212: “Shakespeare thus offered the follies of Richard II only as a background for the presentation of the problem that was so often discussed during Elizabeth’s reign, the problem of the deposition of a king... He used Richard II as the accepted pattern of a deposed king, but he used his pattern to set forth the political ethics of the Tudors in regard to the rights and duties of a king. It might equally well have served as a warning to Elizabeth and to any who desired to usurp her throne” (pp. 211–212).

3 The English Works, ed. W. E. Campbell and A. W. Reed (London and New York, 1931), 1, 479; see pp. 462 and 482–483 for the stage image in conjunction with the un-weeded garden, sickness, deposition and execution.
lord is told not to be so naïve as to confuse a temporary role with lasting reality. Only a simple-minded person will be “earnestly proud” of the “gay golden gown” which has been assigned to him for the performance. Death, like the end of the play, will show him who he really is. The make-believe lord will soon “walk a knave in his old coat,” and the king likewise will “be borne out of his princely palace, laid in the ground and left there alone, where every lewd lad will be bold to tread on his head.” We recall that Richard asks, as he nears the deposition, “What must the King do now?” and that he answers that he must lose name, jewels, gay apparel, “And my large kingdom for a little grave; . . . Or I’ll be buried in the King’s highway, . . . where subjects’ feet / May hourly trample on their sovereign’s head”(iii.iii.143 ff.). More turns directly from “the example of plays and players, which be too merry for this matter,” to an image of the world as a prison—“all the while we live in this world we be but prisoners, and be within a sure prison, out of which there can be no escape.” Richard also studies “how I may compare / This prison where I live unto the world”; and Shakespeare combines the images as Richard mentally populates his prison: “Thus play I in one person many people” (v.v).

In his History of Richard III (which Shakespeare had read in Holinshed), More uses the image of the stage play with greater complexity and applies it directly to politics. It is part of his comment on Richard’s attempt to engineer a coronation.4 The puzzled “on-lookers” try to adjust themselves to the mock coronation by recalling the difference between a stage play and real life. Their instinctive honesty, they reason, must be suppressed just as is the naïve inclination to recognize their friend the “souter” under the robes of the “Sultan.” The comparison of the state to a theater, along with the sardonic pun on “scaffolds” and the dramatic scene of the spectators’ humble puzzlement, enables More to imply that the lesson from proper behavior at a stage play can be applied to a state ceremony only when it in turn is a truly expressive fiction rather than a hypocritical disguise. If the central ritual of society, the coronation, is false, an instrument of self-interest rather than of renewed civic vitality and order, then the argument from dramatic aesthetics to social action is rendered fallacious. The “on-lookers” are stuftified, not reborn with the new king; things are “done in good order” but only “for the manner sake.” It should be noticed that the “commonsers” are all the people who watch the histrionic actions of the “noble” performers. They are primarily a part of a metaphor rather than a representation of a particular political group. They are in effect all “poor men”

4 English Works, i, 447–448.
who are forced into "not be a-nowned what they know." It should also
be noticed that the pressure to act a part is two-way: the "on-lookers"
can not call things by their right names, but neither can the king. The
most efficient ruler (a Bolingbroke, for example) is still obliged to be a
part of the play; he must try to satisfy the "on-lookers" even though he
scorns them. Fear of political revolt is not emphasized as the cause of
his play-acting; he is simply not allowed any being or existence outside
of the theater. The emphasis is not on personality or politics in the mod-
ern sense, but on the general moral predicament. Christian humanism
denies the possibility of release from play-acting through secular policy,
no matter how shrewd or skilful. The release can come only in absolute
or other-worldly terms. This may be illustrated from More's Utopia.

The main framework of the first book of the Utopia is a dialogue
between speakers named More and Hythloday about the possibility of
putting ideal values into practice. The book ends with More's admonition
that the idealist must remember that life is a comedy: "What parte soever
yowe have taken upon yowe, playe that as well as yowe canne, & make
the beste of yt; and doo not therefore disturb & brynge owt of ordre
the hole matter, beycause that an othere, whyche is meryere & bettere,
cummethe to yowre remembraunce. So the case stondeth in a common
wealthe; & so yt ys in the consultatyons of Kynges & prynces." The first
book criticizes Hythloday's unbending idealism; he would disrupt the
play, and play is all there is. In the second book Hythloyd is freed from
the actual world and from the image of the theater which represents it,
and is allowed to present a speculative account of a static and rationally
ideal society.

Although Machiavelli scorned the idealism of the utopists, his realism
was not a denial of the necessity for political play-acting, but a change in
point of view toward it. Machiavelli's prince, like More's Richard III,
is obliged to pretend to be virtuous in order to satisfy and manipulate
the "on-lookers." But whereas More implies that the best ruler in this
world is the one who consciously and reluctantly exercises as little duplic-
ity as possible, Machiavelli implies that it is the one whose duplicity is
complete. The "commoners" make the play-acting, the fox-like duplicity,
necessary; they also make its success almost impossible, and thus call
for the lion. The ideal Machiavellian state may be thought of as a theater
in which the spectators are hypnotized by a perfect royal performance.

In turning now to Richard II, the first important point for the present
discussion, and one that has not been emphasized, is that Shakespeare's

6 It is not discussed in the best and latest account of the play's sources: Matthew W.
Black, "The Sources of Shakespeare's Richard II," Joseph Quincy Adams Memorial Studies
practical decision to follow Halle in beginning Richard II and the Henriad with the ordeal by combat between Bolingbroke and Mowbray not only provided him with a spectacular opening scene but also immediately involved him in the theatricalism of politics, and this presumably opened the way for the use of such an established motif as the state-stage comparison. The ordeal by combat was a social institution, like the courtroom process which developed from it, that was deliberately designed to impose a stereotyped or unnatural character upon the participants. The real feelings of Richard, Bolingbroke, Mowbray, and even Gaunt are necessarily masked to a large extent by the calculated neutrality of the ceremony. We sense at once that the king and the nobles are reading lines, that their social behavior is play-acting. Our subsequent judgment that the ceremony is a hypocritical disguise, that it will not cure the disorder which it is momentarily suppressing, is the product both of the glib ritualistic style and of those few lines in which contrary emotions come to the surface and announce themselves through a complication of the normally neutral and ceremonial tone. Most readers have heard the sarcasm in Richard's comment on Bolingbroke's charges against Mowbray: "How high a pitch his resolution soars." They have heard the private irony and the general mockery of noble sentiments in the king's assertion: "impartial are our eyes and ears. / Were he my brother, nay, my kingdom's heir..."

The last scene of the first act makes all of this explicit. The historical or social purpose of the ordeal by combat was well enough understood, and it had been stated by the king in his farewell to Bolingbroke: "Farewell, my blood; which if to-day thou shed, / Lament we may, but not revenge thee dead." By sublimating the issue and the participants, by purifying their motives, the ceremony was meant through its deliberate impersonality to end the call of blood for blood. But when the king and his followers are finally alone, they remove their masks, and we see that the ritual has left the actuality untouched. Their cynical scorn is

(Washington, 1948), pp. 199–216. The first act offers little or no evidence for the interpretation which stresses the contrast between the personalities of Richard and Bolingbroke. Miss Campbell is mainly interested at this point in the possible resemblance between Bolingbroke and "the Earl of Essex, famous for his courtesy and in love with the power which popularity brought" (p. 198). E. M. W. Tillyard in Shakespeare's History Plays (New York, 1946) does deal at length with Act 1, but he interprets the two tones or styles here and elsewhere in the play as representative of two eras, medieval and modern, that are at a moment of transition: "the 'poetry' of Richard is all a part of a world of gorgeous tournaments, conventionally mournful queens, and impossibly sententious gardeners, while Bolingbroke's common sense extends to his backers, in particular to that most important character, Northumberland. We have in fact the contrast not only of two characters but of two ways of life" (p. 258).
emphasized by the manner in which they mock the elaborately formal language of the ceremony: "How far brought you high Herford on his way? / I brought high Herford, if you call him so, / But to the next highway, and there I left him. / And say, what store of parting tears were shed . . ." Aumerle exclaims that he was so revolted by the part he was expected to play that he saved himself by a kind of double hypocrisy, pretending that he was too choked with emotion to say farewell. And on the other side, Bolingbroke is also described as busy play-acting, paying "courtship to the common people; . . . wooing poor craftsmen with the craft of smiles." Richard accepts such behavior as a matter of course; it is simply a fact that must be faced and answered with force or guile.

In this theatrical state of England, well-meaning "on-lookers" like Gaunt and York are stultified. It is useless or dangerous for them to call things by their right names. Gaunt is obliged to mock his name, the thing he stands for, and to accept from Richard the insinuation that his very dying words are merely unbecoming play-acting. Gaunt's comparison of Eden and England emphasizes the distance this society has fallen from the state in which man and his function or role are indivisible and naturally good. Even the "charters and customary rights" of Time (in York's words), the laws which are man's best instrument in building a contractual state that will at least help to repair his fall, are here perverted imitations of themselves, "inky blots and rotten parchment bonds." York attempts to withdraw ("I'll not be by the while"), but Richard assigns him a surrogate role, "lord governor of England." He does not "Know how or which way to order these affairs / Thus thrust disorderly into my hands," but "somewhat we must do."

In this dilemma York is confronted by Bolingbroke, who is presented in a series of tableaux which define him as a man of policy adjusting his appearance to changing audiences. To the opportunistic elder nobles his "discourse hath been as sugar"; to the honorable young Percy he offers a gentleman's "covenant" sealing "heart" and "hand"; to the lawful York he presents a humble knee and challenges law for his proper "rights and royalties"; to unnamed "on-lookers" he recites reasons for the execution of Bushy and Green, to wash their "blood / From off my hands here in the view of men . . ." Faced with this situation, in which illegalities are compounded and the distance from the ideal doubled, York is as stultified by the behavior of Bolingbroke as Gaunt was by that of Richard. His only recourse is to "remain as neuter."

At this point Shakespeare returns to Richard, and in the interest of theme gives him a character that has scarcely been prepared for in the first act. He now becomes the eloquent spokesman for the ideal. In
traditional imagery (garden, sun, time, Christ, etc.), he identifies himself with perfect majesty and that absolute value which has contempt for the world and its ceremonies. But since Richard has been discredited from the start as a Christian king and since he has now failed as a politician, we read this in terms of personality as sentimentalizing and in terms of theme as another way of emphasizing the emptiness of the name without the thing. It is this Richard of course who has been called histrionic, but there is no reason to think of him as being any more so than the politic Bolingbroke. Neither is allowed to exist outside of the theater of the state. Changes and developments which seem to be in the interest of characterization are more basically another view of the general moral sickness, in which “Each substance of a grief,” to borrow Bushy’s words, “hath twenty shadows . . .” The Bolingbroke “who never clogs his impulse to action with play-acting” must still do everything for “the manner sake.” Richard would welcome a forthright and quicker end: “they well deserve to have,” he urges, “That know the strong’est and surest way to get . . . For do we must what force will have us do.” But before he can obtain the release of unconsciousness, he must mount the “scaffold” and play out the scene which Bolingbroke is equally obliged to help enact. “What must the King do now?” asks Richard approaching the “stage,” and he wishes now for roles from contemptus mundi that he has not earned. Then with a self-consciousness that Bolingbroke cannot afford to show and that must be stultified in himself, Richard concludes: “Well, well, I see / I talk but idly, and you laugh at me.” But presumably Bolingbroke does not and can not laugh. He is in fact out of earshot, on the edge of the “stage.” He confers sharply about tactics with the stage manager Northumberland: “What says his Majesty?” The answer is crudely psychological and practical: “Sorrow and grief of heart / Makes him speak fondly, like a frantic man; / Yet he is come.” Then Richard enters and Bolingbroke advances, kneels, and begins to speak his lines in the mummery: “Stand all apart, / And show fair duty to his Majesty.”

The garden scene (III.iv), which follows, and which is set off by its allegorical mode from the rest of the play, re-asserts the ideal of the state as Eden and the possibility of its approximation by an Adam-like king through keeping “law and form and due proportion” in the “sea-walled garden”—a possibility perverted by both Richard and Bolingbroke. The next scene (IV.i), the appellants before Bolingbroke, parallels the opening action of the play and shows that the political mode has not been really altered despite the change in rulers. This is attested by Bolingbroke’s command: “Fetch hither Richard, that in common view / He may surrender; so we shall proceed / Without suspicion.” Once more the care for the “common view” may be read as an extension of the theatrical
Leonard F. Dean
trope rather than as simply fear of popular uprising. Much of the deposition scene, as many have observed, is an exchange of “stage directions”: “Here, cousin, seize the crown—Now mark me—Read o’er this paper—Urge it no more—Mark, silent king—Say that again.” Richard must go through the mockery of legal confession, but Bolingbroke too must suit his pace and words to Richard’s, or “The commons will not then be satisfied.” When Bolingbroke is “silent” it is not for lack of histrionic ability, as has often been suggested, but because his politic role will not let him speak his true thoughts. When Richard sees in the mirror that the “silence in the tortured soul” is the final “substance,” we may understand, as the blindly patronizing Bolingbroke and Northumberland cannot, that the discovery applies not exclusively to the personality of Richard but also to the moral situation, that extinction of consciousness is the only successful end to this play. Again the mode has not been changed, but merely the principals, as York observes: “As in a theatre, the eyes of men, / After a well-graced actor leaves the stage, / Are idly bent on him that enters next . . .” The Abbot of Westminster likewise describes the scene as a “woeful pageant”; his solution, however, serves only to continue the theatrical events: “a plot / to rid the realm of this pernicious blot . . . shall show us all a merry day.” That day is another scene stage-managed by Bolingbroke as he adjusts his policy to circumstances. He is, first, “smooth as oil” (to borrow his words from I Henry IV) with the deluded Duchess and her son: “Our scene is alter’d from a serious thing, / And now chang’d to ‘The Beggar and the King’”; then he is “Mighty and to be fear’d” as he orders “for our trusty brother-in-law and the abbot . . . Destruction straight . . .” The politic actor is exposed by the Duchess’ unwitting irony: “A god on earth thou art,” and by the murderous Exton’s closing quotation from this “god”: “Have I no friend will rid me of this living fear?” And the exposure is completed at the end of the play when Bolingbroke is faced with Exton and his own doubleness: “The guilt of conscience take thou for thy labour, / But neither my good work nor princely favour.”

Richard’s famous prison speech in the next to the last scene is often read as the climax of his ineffectual attitudinizing; it is also (as has been suggested in connection with More’s The Four Last Things) a dramatic analysis of the moral dilemma in the theater-like state. Richard’s thoughts are “like the people of this world. For no thought is contented.” His acting “in one person many persons” leads to the same judgment: “And none contented.” The source of the discontent is the dualism at the basis of the stage play. “Things divine” (urged by More) are hard; “Thoughts tending to ambition . . . do plot unlikely wonders”; and as a result all “Thoughts tending to content flatter themselves.” Time
therefore cannot be redeemed, concludes Richard, and "any man that but man is / With nothing shall be pleased, till he be eas'd / With being nothing." But of course one who will succeed in "Redeeming time when men think least [he] will" has already been introduced. Bolingbroke's "unthrifty son" will miraculously resolve the dualism of the theatrical state. It is not surprising that the dying father is made to describe the coming change in terms of the state-stage comparison:

God knows, my son,
By what by-paths and indirect crook'd ways
I met this crown; and I myself know well
How troublesome it sat upon my head . . .
For all my reign hath been but as a scene
Acting that argument; and now my death
Changes the mode. . .

(II Henry IV iv.v.184–200)