Speaking Freely about Richard II

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And formally, according to our law,
Depose him in the justice of his cause.
King Richard II (II.i.29–30)

The deposition of Shakespeare’s Richard II has been controversial since the play’s original publication, and critics have generally concurred that the omission of “the Parliament Scene, and the deposing of King Richard” in Elizabethan editions of the play was a result of censorship. Whether or not the playwright himself was complicitous in the act is still uncertain. In this essay I will make the case that Shakespeare’s Richard II explores the practice of self-censorship, whether or not Shakespeare self-censored the notorious “scene of the crime”; that Shakespeare’s version of Richard’s story brings specific sixteenth-century notions of “free speech,” concerning the relationship of the king to his Parliaments, to bear on the problem of writing, and rewriting, the deposition of the king. The discourse on censorship that the play encodes, in fact, centers on other “depositions” which are subject to suppression in the text. Richard II exploits not one but two meanings of the word “deposition,” and the politically vexed matter of divesting the monarch’s power is bound, dramatically, to the depositions or formal testimony brought against him in trials throughout the play.1 Deposing both literary and historical

1. All quotations from Richard II refer to The Riverside Shakespeare, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974).

2. The publisher of the Fourth Quarto of 1608 advertised these additions on the title page.

3. Janet Clare, for example, has suggested that Shakespeare may have had a hand in suppressing the scene not only in published versions of the play but in Elizabethan performances as well. See “The Censorship of the Deposition Scene in Richard II,” The Review of English Studies, 41 (1990), 89–94. Leeds Barroll, on the other hand, has challenged the assumption that this scene was suppressed; he argues that it may have simply been added to the later quartos by the playwright. See “A New History for Shakespeare and his Time,” Shakespeare Quarterly, 39 (1988), 441–44, esp. 447–49.

4. Marjorie Garber has noted several meanings of “deposition” that are in play in Richard II, including “the lowering of Christ’s body from the cross—Richard’s view of the event” (Shakespeare’s Ghost Writers: Literature as Uncanny Causality [London: Methuen, 1987], p. 20). Jonathan Goldberg, pursuing Garber’s insight further, suggests that Richard, in refusing to read the document detailing his crimes in Act IV, scene i, marks written depositions—and by implication, all writing—as “rebel texts.” For Goldberg, Richard is logocentric, in the Derridean sense, in his suppression of writing in favor of the primacy of speech. See

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sources in the justice of Richard’s cause, Shakespeare ultimately incriminates writing itself—including his own account of Richard’s story—in the distortion and suppression of evidence.

That Richard II is centrally preoccupied with legal rhetoric and legal procedures has been noted before, but the reasons for this preoccupation have not been fully considered. Shakespeare transformed the deposition scene itself into a *cause célèbre*, a trial in which sentence is passed on the accused (in Holinshed, the commons called for such a trial only after Henry’s coronation). But the sense that the play as a whole will concern itself with judgment and judicial protocol is established from the very beginning. Richard II opens with a trial, as two lords, Thomas Mowbray and Henry Bolingbroke, accuse each other of high treason before the king. In the course of this proceeding, Bolingbroke charges Mowbray with, among other crimes, the murder of Thomas of Woodstock, Duke of Gloucester, the king’s uncle. Later, at the start of Act IV, scene i—the so-called deposition scene—Bolingbroke, now presiding as judge, hears further testimony in the Gloucester case. It is no coincidence that this hearing forms part of the same scene of judgment that culminates in Richard’s deposition: The Gloucester case is key to understanding Shakespeare’s cross-examination of the case of Richard, and the nature of the “testimony” preserved in the various records that transcribe his reign.

The scattered references to the Woodstock murder in Richard II have long been held to be vague and inconclusive. Mowbray’s response to Bolingbroke’s accusation, in particular, is difficult to follow: “For Gloucester’s death, / I slew him not, but to my own disgrace / Neglected my sworn duty in that case” (I.i.132–34). J. Dover Wilson called Mowbray’s words “embarrassed and ambiguous,” and dismissed the question of Gloucester’s death as “a minor strand in the texture of the play.”

“Rebel Letters: Postal Effects from Richard II to Henry IV,” Renaissance Drama, 19 (1988), 3–28, esp. 3–10. While I agree that Richard aims to suppress certain “depositions” in the play, these may be either spoken or written forms of testimony; moreover, I believe the play implicates Richard in the “rewriting” of his realm (that is, in the repression and revision of certain testimony) rather than in the repression of all “textuality.”


6. “On wednesdaie following, request was made by the commons, that sith king Richard had resigned, and was lawfullie deposed from his roiall dignitie, he might haue iudge ment decreed against him, so as the realme were not troubled by him, and that the caus es of his deposing might be published through the realme for satisfieng of the people: which demand was granted”; in Allardyce Nicoll and Josephine Nicoll, eds., Holinshed’s Chronicle: As Used in Shakespeare’s Plays (London: J. M. Dent, 1927), p. 43.

W. Tillyard also charged Mowbray with obscurity and concluded that Shakespeare “leaves uncertain the question of who murdered Woodstock.” It has also been suggested that Shakespeare glossed over the details of Gloucester’s death because he treated the material as “already read,” relying on his audience’s knowledge of one of his sources, the anonymous play Woodstock, to fill in the details he left out. I will argue that there was much more at stake than dramatic economizing here, that the very obscurity of the testimony brought forward in the Gloucester case is a clue that something has been censored. From the opening scene of the play, Richard II reveals the way that incriminating testimony is suppressed, testimony that bears, directly, on the “case” of the king. Indeed, the relegation of the Gloucester murder to a “subplot”—enacted both within the play and its critical reception—is one version of the censorship the play examines.

There seems to be no question that the Gloucester “subplot” of Richard II derives from an anonymous play, Woodstock, written sometime in the early 1590s. A. P. Rossiter, in his edition of this source, has marshalled the evidence: parallel phrases, adapted passages, analogous characterizations. Shakespeare’s John of Gaunt, who refers to “my brother Gloucester, plain well-meaning soul” (II.i.128), seems to have had this Woodstock in mind, rather than the man Holinshed described as “hastie, wilfull and given more to war than to peace.” Rossiter makes much of how far the author of Woodstock departed from the Tudor histories in his creation of “Plain Thomas”—as he is called throughout the work. This Thomas is “plain” both in style of dress (which sets him apart from the foppery of Richard’s court) and in a characteristic directness of speech. Yet for all his innovations, the author of Woodstock surely found grounds for such a portrayal in the chronicles. Holinshed notes how the dukes of Lancaster and York attempted to contain Richard’s displeasure with Gloucester: “to deliver the kings mind of suspicion, [they] made answer, that they were not ignorant, how their brother of Glocester, as a man sometime rash in woords, would speake oftentimes more than he could or would bring to effect, and the same proceeded of a faithfull hart, which he bare towards the king.” In Holinshed, Gloucester’s tendency

10. I am indebted to Annabel Patterson’s Censorship and Interpretation: The Conditions of Writing and Reading in Early Modern England (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1984) for her discussion of the ways in which “literature” in the early modern period was conceived in part as the way around censorship” (p. 63) and for detailing some of the self-censoring strategies employed by Renaissance writers.
to be “rash in woords” brings him into increasing conflict with the king: “Upon this multiplieng of words . . . in such presumptuous maner by the duke against the king, there kindeled such displeasure betwixt them, that it never ceased to increase into flames, till the duke was brought to his end.” The other dukes, apparently, warn him in vain of this: “the duke of Lancaster and Yorke . . . reprov[ed] the duke of Glocester for his too liberall talking, uttering unadvisedlie woords that became not his per- son.” It is clear that the author of Woodstock concurs at least this far with Holinshed—that Gloucester’s “too liberall talking” was a chief cause of his downfall.

The title character of the anonymous Woodstock, moreover, sees it as both his right and his obligation to speak “plainly” before the king. Woodstock characterizes Richard as a man “wounded with a wanton humour, / Lulled and secured by flattering sycophants” (I.i.144–45) and takes every opportunity to reprimand the king for his moral profligacy. At Richard’s wedding in Act I, Woodstock interrupts the festivities to warn the new queen of her husband’s flaws, and despite Richard’s protests, Woodstock insists: “Nay, nay, King Richard, fore God I’ll speak the truth!” (I.ii.23). As Richard’s abuses worsen, Woodstock returns with greater persistence to his self-appointed role: “I’m Plain Thomas, by th’ rood / I’ll speak the truth” (I.iii.34–35); “Scoff ye my plainness, I’ll talk no riddles, / Plain Thomas will speak plainly” (I.iii.115–16). Though he is confident in his claim that his “tongue hath liberty to show / The inly passions boiling in [his] breast” (I.iii.213–14), his “plainness” turns, for Richard, from provocation to a threat:

Wood. Ye have done ill . . .
King: Ha, dare ye say so?
Wood: Dare I? Afore my God I’ll speak King Richard
Were I assured this day my head should off:
I tell ye Sir, my allegiance stands excused
In justice of the cause. Ye have done ill.
The sun of mercy never shine on me
But I speak truth.

(I.iii.167–73)

When the king can no longer turn a deaf ear to Woodstock’s “plain speech” (“Plain Thomas, I’ll not hear ye” [I.ii.144]), he plots with his favorites to murder him. As he is captured and led offstage, Woodstock is determined to talk on: “Good heaven . . . forgive me, pray ye forbear a while / I’ll speak but one word more, indeed I will” (IV.ii.207–8). The King, however, has the last word, as he commands that his uncle be brought to silence: “Stop’s mouth I say: we’ll hear no more” (IV.ii.206).

14. All quotations from Woodstock are taken from A. P. Rossiter’s edition.
Woodstock dies in this play a martyr, the victim of the king’s efforts to conceal—from himself, in part—the truth of his crimes. Woodstock, however, is only the chief among many such martyrs in the work; in fact, the play follows the widespread efforts of the king and his favorites to apprehend any and all “privy whisperers against the state” (IV.iii.4). The court has unleashed a band of tax collectors who double as spies for the crown, among them one Simon Ignorance, the Bailey of Dunstable who, along with his brother Ignoramus, manages to gather a list of over seven hundred such “whisperers” over the course of the play. Those who speak out against the king’s blank charters are immediately accused of treason: “Why suffer ye their speech? To prison hie! / There let them perish: rot, consume, and die!” (IV.iii.47–48). A Serving-man and a Schoolmaster muse that “the country’s so full of intelligencers that two men can scarce walk together but they’re attached for whisperers” (III.iii.161–63). The Schoolmaster, however, believes he has found a way to write that will pass the censors; taken out of context, any single line of his verse seems innocent enough:

\[\text{Blank charters they are called} \\
\text{A vengeance on the villain,} \\
\text{I would he were both flayed and bald:} \\
\text{God bless my lord Tresilian.}\]

(III.iii.176–79)

But when Ignorance, overhearing the verses, apprehends him, the Schoolmaster tries in vain to defend his self-censored compositions. Ignorance goes on to condemn a man for whistling, as the Bailey explains to the culprit: “There’s a piece of treason that flies up and down the country in the likeness of a ballad, and this being the very tune of it, thou hast whistled treason” (III.iii.230–32).

Woodstock concerns, in large part, the risks of “too liberall talking”; it is a tragedy (and, at times, a dark comedy) whose central subject may well be the brutality of the Tudor laws against seditious libel. The fourteenth-century act that had defined treason as compassing or imagining the death of the monarch was reissued, in 1534, to encompass treasonous words against the king. (In fact, the older law had often been interpreted this way, but now the link between seditious words and treason-

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15. As in Shakespeare, this Richard “farms the realm” by issuing blank charters that license his favorites to collect funds, at will, from his subjects.

16. Tresilian, who does not appear in Shakespeare’s play, is a lawyer whom Richard advances to the status of Lord Chief Justice in Woodstock. Tresilian continually reinterprets the law to his own advantage.

ous intent was made official).

According to one historian of the period, the surveillance of “privy whispering” imagined in Woodstock was lived: “The Privy Council actively pursued its loose-mouthed subjects, and its register from 1540 to about 1570 is filled with reports about sedition, seditious libel, and rumour-mongering.” And the penalties for such crimes were harsh: in 1546 John Wyot, a carpenter, was set on a pillory with his ear nailed to it “the same to remain till he should himself either cut it off or pull it off” for uttering “lewd words” against the king. By Mary’s reign, the author of a seditious work could be punished by losing his right hand; by 1581, the same author would face capital punishment. In one famous case of 1605, it was determined that slander was not only an infraction of state law but also an offense against the law of God—and, moreover, that it constituted no defense to say that the offending words were true.

Yet despite the crown’s efforts to coerce silence throughout the play, the “truth” about Woodstock’s Richard survives—not only the truth about the oppressiveness of his reign, but also, more urgently, his brutal murder of the play’s hero. The author of Woodstock lays the blame for many of Richard’s abuses on his favorites—Bushy, Bagot, and Greene among them—but the king himself is never absolved of his share of the guilt for the murder. Richard’s henchman recognizes the harm this truth could do to the monarch: “So we must give it out [that Woodstock died a natural death] or else King Richard / Through Europe’s kingdoms will be hardly censured” (V.1.281–82). Shakespeare’s Duke of Lancaster refuses to avenge his brother’s death:

\[
\text{God’s is the quarrel, for God’s substitute,} \\
\text{His deputy anointed in His sight,} \\
\text{Hath caus’d his death, the which if wrongfully,} \\
\text{Let heaven revenge, for I may never lift} \\
\text{An angry arm against His minister.} \\
\text{(I.ii.37–41)}
\]

Woodstock’s Lancaster, however, insists on it:

\[
\text{We will revenge our noble brother’s wrongs;} \\
\text{And force that wanton tyrant to reveal} \\
\text{The death of his dear uncle: harmless Woodstock,} \\
\text{So traitorously betrayed.} \\
\text{If he be dead, by good King Edward’s soul}
\]

18. Bellamy, p. 27; Williams, p. 376.
19. Williams, p. 391. Bellamy asserts that “traitorous words were really the centre-piece” of the legislation of 1534 (p. 31).
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We'll call King Richard to a strict account
For that and for his realm's misgovernment.

(V.iii.2-5:19-21)

Indeed, as Rossiter points out, Woodstock advances no Carlisle to defend the king at the end of the play, and the idea of the divine right is rarely invoked at all on Richard's behalf. Woodstock ends with the defeat of the favorites, and although Richard is left out of the final recriminations on the murderers of the duke, the king awaits heavenly revenge for his crime:

O my dear friends, the fearful wrath of heaven
Sits heavy on our heads for Woodstock's death.
Blood cries for blood; and that almighty hand
Permits not murder unavenged to stand.
Come, come, we yet may hide ourselves from worldly strength;
But Heaven will find us out, and strike at length.

(V.iv.47-52).

Rossiter suggests that the author of Woodstock made an effort to "avoid too open a conflict with orthodoxy," that is, with the Tudor doctrine of passive obedience. Yet Woodstock stands as testimony that Richard's efforts to avoid the world's "censure" ultimately fail, for his crime is openly avenged by the "liberal" text of the play itself.

The anonymous Woodstock is a far more important source for Shakespeare's Richard II than critics have acknowledged. Woodstock speaks both through what remains of it in Richard II, and through what Shakespeare left out or modified. Shakespeare's use of Woodstock reveals, in fact, a great deal by its half-silences—strategies of self-censorship which, by laying the procedures of self-censorship bare, manage to expose the "truth" about Richard as well as the dangers of representing that truth too openly. And Richard II ultimately goes much farther than Woodstock in its dramatization of the king's fear of what was said about him, holding Richard himself responsible not only for the erasure of evidence, but also for having a hand in the rewriting of the official record of his rule.

21. Rossiter, p. 31. In fact, only Woodstock himself invokes the Tudor doctrine of passive obedience in the play, just before he is apprehended by the king and his favorites: "But he's our king: and God's great deputy; / And if ye hunt to have me second ye / In any rash attempt against his state, / Afore my God, I'll ne'er consent unto it" (IV.ii.144-7). But the fact that he is subsequently murdered by Richard casts doubt on the legitimacy of the doctrine. Even Woodstock is sympathetic with the plight of those who rebel against the king: "Afore my God I cannot blame them for it: / He might as well have sent defiance to them. / O vulture England, wilt thou eat thine own? / Can they be rebels called, that now turn head?" (III.ii.82-85).

22. Rossiter, p. 28.

Like Woodstock, Shakespeare’s primary source, Holinshed’s Chronicles was clear enough about Richard’s responsibility for the murder of Gloucester. The historian states outright that Richard ordered Mowbray to have him killed. Mowbray, however, delayed the execution of that order “wherby the king conceiued no small displeasure, and sware that it should cost the earle his life if he quickly obeyed not his commandement.” Mowbray thus “in maner inforced” had the duke suffocated or strangled (Holinshed isn’t sure on this point). Holinshed also establishes the idea that Mowbray’s crime, as far as Richard was concerned, had to do with something he allegedly said, some seditious libel concerning the king. Before making his accusations before the king, Bolingbroke brings the matter to the parliament: “In this parlement holden at Shrewsburie, Henrie, duke of Hereford, accused Thomas Mowbraie duke of Norfolke of certeine words which he should utter in talke had betwixt them, as they rode togethre latelie before betwixt London and Brainford; sounding highlie to the kings dishonor. And for further proofe thereof, he presented a supplication to the king.” Before Richard, however, Bolingbroke does not mention the conversation he had with Mowbray on the way to Brainford, charging him only with the murder itself. Yet Richard finds Mowbray guilty of libel: “Thomas Mowbraie, duke of Norfolke, because he had sowen sedition in the realme by his words, [shall] likewise avoid the realme, . . . never to returne againe into England, nor approch the borders or confines thereof upon paine of death.” We never learn what Mowbray said that was “sounding highlie to the kings dishonor,” what sedition he had sown in words. It seems likely, however, that Holinshed’s Mowbray was convicted for revealing (or threatening to reveal) Richard’s part in the murder.

Shakespeare, as I have already noted, has been charged with ambiguity in the Gloucester case, despite the unqualified certainty of his sources. But although Richard makes no formal confession in the play, Shakespeare isn’t ambiguous at all on this point, though it is instructive that some critics have failed to observe all the corroborating evidence the playwright provides. It is true that the first scene of the play seems to transform the Gloucester case—historically, a closed book—into a mystery. Richard appears to be uninformed about the scene about to be played before him, asking Gaunt if he knows whether Bolingbroke “appeal[s] the Duke on ancient malice, / Or worthily, as a good subject should, / On some known ground of treachery in him” (I.i.9–11). He makes a grand show of his impartiality towards the litigants:

Then call them to our presence; face to face,
And frowning brow to brow, ourselves will hear
The accuser and the accused freely speak.
(I.i.14–16).

Later he asserts that impartiality again, along with another invitation to speak freely:

He is our subject, Mowbray: so art thou
Free speech and fearless I to thee allow.
(I.i.122–23)

The king’s proffer of “free speech”—recalling the issue of “liberall” speech in Shakespeare’s sources—is central to understanding the “mystery” of Gloucester’s murder, and the nature of Mowbray’s testimony in this scene.

The right to “free speech” is not a wholly anachronistic notion, as we might suppose; the phrase was already in use in the sixteenth century, in reference to a well-established and yet bitterly contested parliamentary privilege. Freedom of speech seems to have been first requested explicitly by the Commons during parliamentary debates in the reign of Henry VIII. But by the end of the 1540s, according to one recent historian, the Common’s insistence on freedom of speech had already become “proverbial.”

Early journals recording the parliaments of Queen Elizabeth relate the ritual request of the Speaker:

And lastly [Sir Thomas Gargrave] came, according to the usual form, first, to desire liberty of access for the House of Commons to the Queen’s Majesty’s presence upon all urgent and necessary occasions. Secondly, that if in anything himself should mistake or misreport or overslip that which should be committed unto him to declare, that it might without prejudice to the House be better declared, and that his unwilling miscarriage therein might be pardoned. Thirdly, that they might have liberty and freedom of speech in whatsoever they treated of or had occasion to propound and debate in the House.

As part of the “usual form,” the monarch “freely” granted these privileges to parliament. But throughout most of her reign, Queen Elizabeth sought to restrict the last of these, and nearly every session of Parliament touched on issues that the queen wished to bar from debate. In 1576 Peter Wentworth delivered his impassioned address on the matter: “Sweet is the name of liberty, but the thing itself a value beyond all inestimable treasure. . . . The inestimable treasure is the use of it in this House. . . . in this House, which is termed a place of free speech, there is nothing so

necessary for the preservation of the prince and state as free speech, and without, it is a scorn and mockery to call it a Parliament House, for in truth it is none, but a very school of flattery and dissimulation.” For all the Commons’ insistence, however, Elizabeth ultimately ruled that all “matters of state” (including her marriage, the royal succession, questions of religion and foreign policy) could not be raised in the House unless she had granted explicit license to do so, as was reported by the lord keeper to the Commons in 1593: “her Majesty granteth you liberal but not licentious speech, liberty therefore but with due limitation. . . . It shall be meet therefore that each man of you contain his speech within the bounds of loyalty and good discretion.” Shakespeare appears to slight the fact that the most serious political threats facing Richard also came from his parliaments (although Northumberland acknowledges the will of the Commons when, at Richard’s deposition, he begins by reminding the assembled courtiers that the trial was being held at their request: “May it please you, lords, to grant the commons’ suit?” [IV.i.154]). Shakespeare’s Richard, however, refers to the “usual” way Tudor monarchs addressed their parliaments when he grants his assembled subjects free speech, while still, like his Tudor successors, placing implicit limits on what they dared to say.

The privilege of speaking freely is also tied, in Richard II, to the charge of speaking truly before the king. At the lists, before their judicial duel, Mowbray and Bolingbroke follow the official procedure for giving testimony, as Richard indicates: “And formally, according to our law, / Depose him in the justice of his cause” (I.iii.29–30). In accordance with that law, the men are charged with speaking the truth before they do battle:

In God’s name and the King’s, say who thou art
Speak truly on thy knighthood and thy oath,
As so defend thee heaven and thy valor!

Although the appellants are not required to make a comparable oath at Richard’s court, it is important to note that they choose to speak “for the record” nonetheless. Bolingbroke asks that his words be entered in

29. Elton, p. 263.
31. See Bryce Lyon, A Constitutional and Legal History of Medieval England (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), pp. 491–95 for a summary of Richard’s struggles with Parliament; in Lyon’s account, the deposition was the final solution for a king who “conceived of himself as an absolute monarch unrestricted by law or by parliament” (p. 494).
the heavenly “plea roll”: “heaven be the record to my speech” (I.i.30). And he promises to inflict a fitting self-violence if he fails to speak truly:

Ere my tongue
    Shall wound my honor with such feeble wrong,
Or sound so base a parley, my teeth shall tear
The slavish motive of recanting fear,
And spit it bleeding in his high disgrace,
Where shame doth harbor, even in Mowbray’s face.
(I.i.190–95)

But despite these ritual oaths, it becomes clear they are merely paying lip service to what was, in its most generous interpretation, a mere formality. Mowbray, for one, deliberately hedges in responding to Bolingbroke’s accusations. For convenience, I cite his words again here:

    For Gloucester’s death,
    I slew him not, but to my own disgrace
    Neglected my sworn duty in that case.

According to Rossiter, Mowbray’s words only make sense in the context of Woodstock, where Gloucester had charged Richard’s murderer with informing him of any threats to his life. For Rossiter, in other words, Mowbray is claiming to have neglected his duty to protect Gloucester. Alternatively, Mowbray may be referring to his sworn duty to Richard, and the fact that he postponed the murder in direct contradiction to Richard’s command. Neither reading, however, acknowledges the likelihood that the earl means to be evasive on this point, that his words deliberately deflect interpretation. He had already hinted that he cannot do otherwise: as he turns to make his own accusations against Bolingbroke, he prefices his words this way:

    I [can] not of such tame patience boast
    As to be hush’d and nought at all to say,
    [But] the fair reverence of your Highness curbs me
    From giving reins and spurs to my free speech,
    Which else would post until it had return’d
    These terms of treason doubled down his throat.
(I.i.52–57).

This seems to be an appeal to decorum, his fear of offending the king with the harshness of his charges against Bolingbroke. But in the con-

33. Bolton discusses several references in the play to the official legal record or “plea rolls” of the fourteenth century (in use through Shakespeare’s day), p. 53.
34. In Woodstock, a man named Lapoole corresponds with Shakespeare’s Mowbray.
text of the king’s granting the right to “free speech,” there is also a hint here that Mowbray cannot or will not speak openly before the king. Mowbray repeatedly expresses a wish that the king wouldn’t hear what he has to say:

O, let my sovereign turn away his face,  
And bid his ears a little while be deaf,  
Till I have told this slander of his blood  
How God and good men hate so foul a liar.

(111–14).

Larry Champion has suggested that Mowbray, for all his hedging, manages to implicate the king as ultimately responsible for the murder. When Richard urges him to give up the quarrel, Mowbray protests, “My life thou shalt command, but not my shame” (166), and hints that the king should assume responsibility for the crime: “Take but my shame, / And I resign my gage” (175–76).37

But if he had not done so already, Shakespeare surely makes plain the truth of Mowbray’s indictment of Richard by continuing Act I with a scene in which John of Gaunt explicitly names Richard as the perpetrator of the crime: “for God’s substitute, / His deputy anointed in His sight, / Hath caus’d his death” (I.ii.37–39). Later, in Act IV, we learn that Bolingbroke knows the truth as well: “Now Bagot, freely speak thy mind, / What thou dost know of noble Gloucester’s death, / Who wrought it with the King” (IV.i.2–4). We can only guess at Bolingbroke’s motives for leaving the king out of his accusations in the opening scene; whether he means to provoke the king, or protect him, is hard to determine from the text. But the indirectness of Bolingbroke’s charge is, like the ambiguity of Mowbray’s self-defense, surely a deliberate effort to put “reins” on the free speech neither man dares to deliver. Despite the rights formally granted to his petitioners, and the formal act of deposition that encourages—indeed requires—free speech, it is clear that neither one of Richard’s subjects speaks freely at all. Both Mowbray and Bolingbroke deliberately suppress what they know of Richard’s role in the plot against Gloucester. If Shakespeare makes the opening of his play seem mysterious, it is only to expose the process by which the truth is forced into hiding.

Richard, no doubt, fears Mowbray’s deposition in the opening scene. That much seems clear when, breaking off the duel, he determines to banish him from England forever: “The hopeless word of ‘never to return’ / Breathe I against thee, upon pain of life” (I.iii.152–53). It is easy to understand why Mowbray, considering what he has done on the king’s

behalf, is not prepared for the word that Richard breathes against him: “A heavy sentence, my most sovereign liege, / And all unlook’d for from your Highness’ mouth” (154–55). Mowbray aptly describes his exile as a kind of linguistic imprisonment, because that is precisely what Richard means it to be:

The language I have learnt these forty years,
My native English, now I must forgo,
And now my tongue’s use is to me no more
Than an unstringed viol or a harp,
Or like a cunning instrument cas’d up,
Or being open, put into his hands
That knows no touch to tune the harmony.
Within my mouth you have enjail’d my tongue,
Doubly portcullis’d with my teeth and lips,
And dull unfeeling barren ignorance
Is made my jailer to attend on me.

What is thy sentence then but speechless death,
Which robs my tongue from breathing native breath?
(Liii.159–69, 172–73).

Richard’s sentence is, indeed, a “speechless death” for the man who, should he speak more freely, threatens to expose a dangerous truth in open court. Mowbray’s “jailor”—“dull unfeeling barren ignorance”—is surely an intertextual play on the Ignorance who apprehended plain speakers in Woodstock, another self-censoring revision of Shakespeare’s source. Richard’s subjects learn, in this scene, that “the breath of kings” (Liii.215) is more powerful than their own, that the king’s words can will speech or silence. Gaunt bemoans his complicity in his son’s fate in exactly these terms: “[Y]ou gave leave to my unwilling tongue / Against my will to do myself this wrong” (Liii.245–46).

Shakespeare’s John of Gaunt seems to represent one of his most radical departures from Woodstock as well as from Holinshed, who portrayed him as a fierce and ambitious man. Shakespeare’s self-appointed prophet determines, with his dying breath, to “undeaf” Richard’s ear with the truth:

O but they say the tongues of dying men
Enforce attention like deep harmony.
Where words are scarce, they are seldom spent in vain,
For they breathe truth that breathe their words in pain.

But this Gaunt, in fact, is not wholly original in his conception, for he seems to have inherited the outspoken character of Thomas of Woodstock, as he appears in Shakespeare’s anonymous source. The idea that
Shakespeare drew Gaunt after the model of Woodstock has been argued elsewhere. But what must be emphasized here is the literary procedure by which one character who lives (that is, is represented) in a text resurrects one who is dead and buried (that is, unrepresented); how, both within the text of Shakespeare’s play and “between” the texts of Woodstock and Richard II, Gaunt’s transformation marks the return of his repressed brother. It is no coincidence that it is Gaunt who, alone in Shakespeare’s play, openly accuses Richard of the murder. Although he alludes to it indirectly at first (“O had thy grandsire with a prophet’s eye/Seen how his son’s son should destroy his sons” [II.i.104–5]) he comes out with it at last:

O, spare me not, my brother Edward’s son,
For that I was his father Edward’s son,
That blood already, like the pelican,
Hast thou tapp’d out and drunkenly carous’d.
My brother Gloucester, plain well-meaning soul,
Whom fair befall in heaven ’mongst happy souls,
May be a president and witness good
That thou respect’st not spilling Edward’s blood.

(II.i.124–31)

Through Gaunt, Gloucester is put forward as legal precedent and chief witness in the case against Richard, although he has no actual voice in the play.

Gaunt is also a vocal champion of the divine right of kings (so was Woodstock in Shakespeare’s source). As the play’s most reliable witness, Gaunt may seem to tip the play’s scales of justice in favor of upholding Richard’s rule, despite his abuses as king. But if Shakespeare’s Gaunt seems to maintain Richard’s divine right to rule, he nonetheless removes that right—at least rhetorically. Had Edward III, the great patriarch of the royal family, foreseen Gloucester’s murder, Gaunt suggests, “From forth thy reach he would have laid thy shame, / Deposing thee before thou wert possess’d, / Which art possess’d now to depose thyself” (II.i.106–8). Richard, Gaunt asserts, ought to have been deposed before he ever possessed the crown, a paradox that suggests that Richard’s deposition, in Gaunt’s view, is already a foregone conclusion. Gaunt’s son,
by implication, has nothing to do with Richard’s fall; in his retroactive prophecy, Richard’s successor is denied agency in the event. Gaunt’s famous elegy to a national paradise lost works to the same effect. His allusion to England as an “other Eden” and “demi-paradise” invokes the original Eden lost through disobedience. Yet, oddly, Gaunt does not pursue the analogy all the way. The obvious parallel he might have drawn—that once again, a paradise will fall through disobedience (that is, rebellion)—is averted. The fall of this Eden, according to Gaunt, is occasioned by Richard’s “farming” the nation, for his abuses against the state. Tellingly, Gaunt’s death is announced as speechlessness: “His tongue is now a stringless instrument, / Words, life and all, old Lancaster hath spent” (II.i.149–50). His death reminds Richard’s subjects of the need for secrecy, and the rebels who plot against Richard become privy whisperers:

Ross: My heart is great, but it must break with silence,  
Ere’t be disburdened with a liberal tongue.  
North: Nay, speak thy mind, and let him ne’er speak more  
That speaks thy words again to do thee harm!  

(228–31)

Gaunt’s story recapitulates, in part, the Woodstock story; under this cover, Shakespeare recalls the suppression of “liberal tongues” that dared to speak freely in his source.

But the truth about Richard, for all the apparent ambiguity, is evident enough in Shakespeare’s version of his story. Richard has broken the law, and, in doing so, undermines his own right to rule, at least according to a constitutionalist stand on the nature of the monarchy.41 York, as many have noted, makes an analogous case:

telling the death or deposition of the king were often interpreted as “imagining” or compassing the king’s death (p. 52).

41. See Lyon, p. 503, for a concise discussion of the historical legality of Richard’s deposition. Anthony Tuck reminds us that the historical Gloucester was closely associated with the constitutionalist challenge to the idea of divine right, that is, with a belief in the parliament’s right to depose a king:

Gloucester’s political attitudes were formed not only by considerations of prestige and self-interest, however, but also by a view of government and of the relationship between the king and the law which was common and traditional among men of his class. . . . [H]e and Bishop Arundel, presenting an address from the whole parliament, insisted upon the king’s obligation to rule in accordance with the laws of the kingdom and the advice of the magnates, contrasting this ideal with the king’s stubborn adherence to unwise council and to his own will in government. The final and most telling point of their speech was their assertion that the community had the right to depose a king if he refused to be governed and ruled by the laws of the kingdom and the advice of the lords. (p. 103)

See Tuck, Richard II and the English Nobility (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1974). I am suggesting, throughout this essay, that Shakespeare supported the constitutionalist position.
Take Hereford’s rights away, and take from Time
His charters and his customary rights; . . .
Be not thyself; for how art thou a king
But by fair sequence and succession?

(Il.i.195–96, 198–99)

Yet at the official arraignment of Richard in Act IV, scene i, the proceeding in which legal grounds for the deposition of the monarch are brought forward, Richard seems, for some readers, to emerge as the victim rather than the perpetrator of a crime. On close scrutiny, however, the scene upholds Richard’s conviction. Bolingbroke, having assumed Richard’s role as arbitrator, does not begin straightaway with the deposition, but rather, crucially, by reopening the Gloucester case. As I mentioned earlier, Richard’s guilt is taken as a matter of course here; what Bolingbroke seeks to discover is who actually served as Richard’s henchman, “[w]ho wrought it with the King, and who perform’d / The bloody office of his timeless end” (IV.i.4–5). Once again, free speech is granted: “Now, Bagot, freely speak thy mind” (1); “I know your daring tongue / Scorns to unsay what once it hath delivered” (8–9). Yet the circumstances of Gloucester’s death seem to become even more remote, more inaccessible as the scene plays on. Bagot accuses Aumerle, who denies it; Fitzwater rises to second the charge. Surrey charges Fitzwater with slander; Bolingbroke determines to recall Mowbray from exile to “enforce his trial” all over again. But Mowbray, Bolingbroke learns, is dead, and for lack of sufficient evidence, Bolingbroke leaves the matter under gage, and the issue is never (openly) raised again in the play. The scene seems designed to further the confusion over the Gloucester case, to suggest that the truth—given the death of a chief witness—will never be known. No doubt, the conflicting testimony given by the appellants in this scene has contributed to the illusion that Shakespeare never assigns blame in the case.

But the confusion the scene creates, the gesture it offers of deferring judgment, is a ruse, designed precisely to distract readers from the one truth that remains, however deeply it is buried in the record of the play: Richard’s guilt in the murder of his uncle. Act IV, scene i, is the scene of Richard’s trial—a trial which begins by reopening the case of Gloucester’s murder before it proceeds to the deposition. The so-called “deposition scene” begins, in other words, by rehearsing (though not freely) the testimony in the prosecution of Gloucester’s murderer. The truth about Richard is thus established long before the only official legal action taken against him in the play. Shakespeare insists that we judge Richard’s deposition in the context of all the “depositions”—albeit unofficial—given in the earlier part of the play.
To be sure, Richard’s dethronement is immediately preceded by Carlisle’s impassioned plea for Richard’s divine right to rule, condemning those who would seek to judge God’s anointed: “Would God that any in this noble presence / Were enough noble to be upright judge / Of noble Richard! / . . . What subject can give sentence on his king? / And who sits here that is not Richard’s subject?” (IV.i.117–19, 121–22). What might have passed as a legal deposition is, in Carlisle’s view, a usurpation, a crime against God and God’s deputy. But there is further evidence that Shakespeare aims to discredit the perspective that Carlisle shares, most of all, with Richard. Shakespeare’s departures from Holinshed in this scene, for example, are instructive. In his chronicle, Holinshed describes the formal accusations presented by Parliament “to the end the commons might be persuaded, that he was an unprofitable prince to the common-wealth, and worthie to be deposed.” Holinshed’s Richard actually insists on reading the thirty-three articles aloud before the assembled court: “for the more suretie of the matter, and for that the said resignation should have his full force and strength, himself therefore read the scroll of resignation.” Shakespeare’s Richard, however, refuses to read the list of his crimes, saying that he will read, instead “the very book indeed / Where all my sins are writ, and that’s myself” (IV.i.274–75). For some commentators, this is proof enough that “[n]either Richard nor Shakespeare is willing to comply” with the deposition, that the playwright, no less than the king himself, cannot condone the act. Janet Clare speculates that Shakespeare’s version of the scene may be evidence of self-censorship, in that he deliberately suppressed the fact that Richard publicly confessed to misgoverning the realm. But Richard’s refusal to read the paper before him is not necessarily evidence of the king’s innocence. Shakespeare shows us that Richard, after all, can hardly be taken as a reliable judge in his own case. Rather than reading the record of his crimes, Richard proposes to read himself, and what he sees—the “brittle glory” that shines in the “flatt’ring glass” (IV.i.287, 279)—bears little resemblance to the Richard seen in the earlier part of the play. Richard is a bad reader as well as a bad judge; or rather, Richard cannot adequately judge because he cannot accurately read the text of his own life. What is more disturbing, however, is the way that Richard’s tendency to misread himself becomes endemic to the play as a whole as it draws to its conclusion.

There has long been critical admiration for the “poet-king so much

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42. Nicoll and Nicoll, p. 44.
44. Clare, p. 93.
enchantment by the resources, limitations, and ambiguities of language [that he] . . . never stoop[s] to prose.”45 It seems somehow fitting that this “born poet” easily reimagines himself as text, as the subject of narrative. No sooner does he foresee imminent defeat at the rebels’ hands, in Act III, than Richard begins to write his own story, and to include it along with stories like his own:

Let’s talk of graves, of worms, and epitaphs,
Make dust our paper, and with rainy eyes
Write sorrow on the bosom of the earth.

For God’s sake let us sit upon the ground
And tell sad stories of the death of kings:
How some have been depos’d, some slain in war,
Some haunted by the ghosts they have deposed,
Some poisoned by their wives, some sleeping kill’d,
All murthered—

(III.ii.145-47, 155-60)

He refers to his own “sad story” again as he bids his queen farewell, entreating her to tell it to others:

In winter’s tedious nights sit by the fire
With good old folks and let them tell thee tales
Of woeful ages long ago betid;
And ere thou bid good night, to quite their griefs,
Tell thou the lamentable tale of me,
And send the hearers weeping to their beds.

And some will mourn in ashes, some coal-black,
For the deposing of a rightful king.

(V.i.40-45, 49-50)

For all Richard’s undeniable gifts with language, he is in one sense no better at writing than at reading, for the “lamentable tale” he sketches here, again, has little to do with his story as represented in the text of Shakespeare’s play. The fact that Richard is a gifted poet is surely not grounds for his moral (or legal) acquittal. Richard III is a brilliant actor, but no less a villain, however entertaining or attractive; Richard II may be a “born poet,” but he is still, in the judgment of the play, a king who is justifiably deposed. There is no reason to assume that Shakespeare identified rhetorical might with right. Indeed, Shakespeare suggests that Richard’s linguistic abilities make him (like Richard III) all the more dangerous, in the long-run of history. It is surely no coincidence that Richard becomes “poetic” after he is deposed: Readers who remember Richard as the flawed

but sensitive “poet king” fall prey to the trap that Richard himself, in Shakespeare’s account, sets for posterity. The king who begins the play by censoring his subjects’ testimony aptly ends by attempting to censor the larger “testimony” in the prosecution of his reign.

The story Shakespeare tells in Richard II is as self-reflective as its protagonist, for the play is preoccupied with the way stories are written and rewritten, and the fate of “truth” in the transaction. Shakespeare’s own relationship to competing versions of Richard’s story may well have, in part, inspired these concerns; but the conditions of writing in early modern England no doubt made these issues even more urgent. The play continually alludes to the instability of texts, of stories that can be rewritten and revised. One such “story,” the scriptural account of the Fall, is retold several times over the course of Richard II. In Gaunt’s original version, the “second Fall” is occasioned by Richard’s mismanagement of England. The gardeners stress horticulture over scripture, but ultimately concur in Gaunt’s judgment that Richard is ultimately responsible for the “garden” going to seed:

O, what pity is it
That he had not so trimm’d and dress’d his land
As we this garden!

. . . . . . . . .
Superfluous branches
We lop away, that bearing boughs may live;
Had he done so, himself had borne the crown,
Which waste of idle hours hath quite thrown down.
(III.iv.55–57, 63–66)

Yet the Queen, overhearing them (“O, I am press’d to death through want of speaking!” [III.iv.72]) retells the story so that Richard is no longer to blame, but rather the victim of others’ wrongdoing:

What Eve, what serpent, hath suggested thee
To make a second fall of cursed man?
Why dost thou say King Richard is depos’d?
Dar’st thou, thou little better thing than earth,
Divine his downfall?
(III.iv.75–79)

46. As Henry Ansgar Kelly has demonstrated (Divine Providence in the England of Shakespeare’s Histories [Cambridge, Mass: Harvard Univ. Press, 1970]), Shakespeare’s sources (including Holinshed and, perhaps, Daniel’s Civil Wars and The Mirror for Magistrates) were hardly in agreement about Richard or the reasons for his fall from power.

47. The Queen is probably referring to the “customary penalty in England for refusing to plead guilty or not guilty before a court; i.e. for remaining silent” (Riverside, p. 826 n.) If so, it is interesting to note that the Queen, too, participates in the play’s preoccupation with legal questions of “free” and enforced speech.
Generations of readers after Richard’s Queen would reread the “Fall” represented in the play with the same nostalgic revisionism. But perhaps the most important narrative that is translated over the course of the play is the story of Cain’s murder of his brother Abel. At the start of Richard II, Bolingbroke sets the mark of Cain on the man who

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\text{[L]ike a traitor coward,} \\
\text{Shuic’d out [Gloucester’s] innocent soul through streams of blood,} \\
\text{Which blood, like sacrificing Abel’s, cries,} \\
\text{Even from the tongueless caverns of the earth,} \\
\text{To me for justice and rough chastisement.} \\
\text{(I.i.102–6)}
\]

At the end of the play, as many have noted, Bolingbroke transfers that mark to the man who has murdered Richard: “With Cain go wander thorough shades of night, / And never show thy head by day nor light” (V.i.43–44). There is no reason to doubt that Bolingbroke, who openly assumes the guilt for Richard’s murder, rightly assumes the identification that once belonged, exclusively, to Richard. But the danger in this translation is that the new version of the story—with King Henry as Cain and Richard as Abel—threatens to expunge the earlier version altogether. The murdered Gloucester, though “tongueless,” still cries out for retribution; Richard is still Cain, even if he is legitimately transcribed as Abel in the newest account of his story. It is easy enough to forget the earlier version, but it is precisely this kind of erasure that the play, on a closer reading, recovers.

Shakespeare has often been credited with impartiality in his judgment of his characters, and his apparent even-handedness in identifying both Richard and King Henry with Cain may seem to corroborate this idea. But the notion that Shakespeare refused to pass judgment on either Richard or Bolingbroke, or that he made them accomplices in the same crime, seriously misrepresents the way the testimony of the play itself is brought forward and then self-consciously revoked. The early part of the play, when Richard is still king, bears witness to his numerous crimes; Richard is implicated, repeatedly, in his own deposition. Shakespeare also radically limits the role of the favorites—even the author of Woodstock, no great partisan of Richard’s, foregrounded their evil influence on the young king—and isolates Richard as his own worst enemy.48 The king reads his deposition as a violent crime: We hear him continually speak of himself as a murdered king when only his dethronement is in question. But, once again, this is

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48. Despite several comments about the evil influence of the favorites in Shakespeare’s play (the gardeners, for example, charge them with corruption), Bushy, Bagot, and Greene are portrayed in a surprisingly agreeable light here. They are kind to the queen in II.i. and almost noble in defeat in III.i.
Richard’s (mis)reading of the event, and not Shakespeare’s. The reason it is so easy to accept Richard’s version of his deposition is because Richard is ultimately murdered so that, with hindsight, his rendition of the event passes for prophecy, for a truth yet to be revealed. But the fact that Richard is the victim of a violent crime at the end of the play does not, retroactively, make his deposition a crime as well, and reading this way, again, only underscores the dangers of revision.

Bolingbroke, too, undergoes a “revision” over the course of the play. His motives at the start are only vaguely represented, and it is far easier to assign his guilt with the benefit of hindsight, that is, when we know him not just as the man who deposed Richard but as Richard’s murderer. King Henry, after all, expresses remorse only for the murder of Richard; only then does he fear recriminations:

Exton, I thank thee not, for thou hast wrought
A deed of slander with thy fatal hand
Upon my head and all this famous land.

(V.i.34–36)

And Henry, as Shakespeare knows, has reason to fear the deed as a “slanderous” one, an act that future generations will use—rightly or wrongly—to rescript the story of Henry’s rise to power. By the end of the play, moreover, it seems that this process has already begun. Richard’s own version of his story, the “sad tale” he entreats his former subjects to tell over and over, already threatens to rewrite everything that has come before, to pass over an original account in favor of his own rendition of the past. York rehearses the “story” of the procession of the two cousins through London, a retelling of a scene Shakespeare does not let us witness firsthand. York explicitly describes the scene as a “dramatized” one; the two men are viewed by their countrymen “[a]s in a theatre” (V.ii.23). In his account, Richard already appears as a martyr, a second Christ on his march to Golgotha:

[D]ust was thrown upon his sacred head,
Which with such gentle sorrow he shook off,
His face still combating with tears and smiles,
The badges of his grief and patience,
That had not God, for some strong purpose, steel’d
The hearts of men, they must perforce have melted.

(V.ii.30–35)

Richard, of course, favored this identification as well, but his reign—as represented in this play—hardly sustains such an analogy. By 1 Henry IV, Richard will be remembered as a “sweet lovely rose” (Liii.175) supplanted by a cankerous usurper, but the sources of this “memory,” too, can already be traced here.
The greatest threat that Richard II potentially posed to Shakespeare’s own queen was not the deposition (or dethronement) of the monarch represented there, but rather the “depositions” or testimonial offers against him throughout the play. This threat survives even the excision of the “deposition scene” itself; this single act of censorship (or self-censorship) cannot contain it. Nor is Richard’s “trial” contained by the bounds of Act IV, scene i. The legal framework of Richard II—initiated by the opening “courtroom” drama—is never abandoned as the play progresses; rather, the play as a whole forms the site where depositions are given, and judgment is passed. Despite the weight of the evidence against its protagonist, Richard II recapitulates the way that testimony—the truth about Richard—is ultimately suppressed in favor of a lie that Richard himself is instrumental in promulgating. The Gloucester case, especially, speaks powerfully against reading Richard’s dethronement as a “lamentable tale,” whatever follows later in the play. The near-suppression of the Gloucester case, so crucial in the larger case of Richard, is just one example of the way that the play manages to leave traces of evidence even as it practices self-censorship. In the sixteenth century, it may well have been inevitable that a writer, like the Schoolmaster in Woodstock, would develop strategies to forestall censure. But Richard II goes further, revealing the way that “telling tales” is, inevitably, bound up in procedures of censorship, in acts of judgment that, by their very nature, sentence something or someone to silence. Shakespeare’s Richard II is, after all, one more revision, one more “record” of depositions taken two hundred years before the playwright’s time. Yet by exposing the complicity of writing in the practice, the play offers hope that the truth will out, however suspect the record. Edward, the young Prince in Richard III, held out exactly the same hope, almost as if he foresaw his fate—to be smothered on command of the king:

But say, my lord, it were not regist’red,
Methinks the truth should live from age to age,
As ’twere retail’d to all posterity,
Even to the general all-ending day.50

49. I do not, by this, mean to privilege any particular version of Richard’s deposition as the “true” one, in some absolute sense. I do believe, however, that Shakespeare marks “rewriting” in Richard II as a distortion of evidence (i.e., a distortion of what was originally “evident”), whether or not the “truth” itself is ever recoverable.

50. III.i.75–78. In this scene, Prince Edward is asking his uncle to verify the story that Julius Caesar built the tower. But his concern for the survival of the truth, with or without written corroboration, pertains just as well to Richard III and his “plots.”