In his last great soliloquy before his murder in the castle of Pomfret Richard II debates with himself the tragic irony and pathos of his situation as a king and no king, one who has enjoyed the greatest power accorded to man on earth and yet now sees himself reduced to nothingness. ‘I wasted time,’ he reflects, ‘and now doth time waste me’ (V.5.49). The figure of speech is typically rhetorical. Its technical name is antimetabole, a ‘cross’ figure in which words are repeated in inverse order: abba—in this instance ‘waste’ and ‘time’, followed by ‘time’ and ‘waste’. There is also a third element of repetition in the form of the first-person singular which is a little less obvious because of the change from ‘I’ (subject) to ‘me’ (object); but this is, if anything, even more important since it highlights Richard’s change of role from active agent, ‘I’, to passive sufferer of action, ‘me’. The placing of ‘I’ at the beginning of the line and ‘me’ at the end further emphasises this change of role: the man who starts by being in command, ends by being commanded.

This line and its rhetorical patterning sum up the career of Richard as Shakespeare presents it in his play. In the first half he is a hereditary monarch who can trace his lineage through uninterrupted succession back to William the Conqueror, but who throws away the power and prestige which this confers upon him; in the second half he is stripped of his titles and becomes belatedly aware of the extent to which his own mismanagement has contributed to his downfall. He ‘wastes time’ in that he both fails to take advantage of his great opportunities and imports disorder into a situation which calls for orderly conduct and the rule of law; and ‘time wastes him’ by both punishing him for his offence against order in not conducting himself as a rightful monarch should, and exposing him to the opportunism of Bolingbroke who takes the chance, when it is offered him, to seize power and establish himself as king, if not by right, then at least by might. His very failure to act positively boomerangs on Richard and causes him to become the victim of his own inactive fecklessness; wasting leads to being wasted, and the King who should be the dominant ‘I’ becomes the subjugated ‘me’.

Behind all this lies a complex sense of what kingship is and what possession of the royal office entails. The traditional view, embodied—to use E. M. W. Tillyard’s convenient phrase—in ‘the Elizabethan world picture’, places the King at the head of an elaborate social hierarchy which reaches down through the aristocracy, the clergy, and the commercial classes to the ordinary, unlettered peasant. This view emphasises
the overriding duty of obedience to one’s superiors. Each rank must obey the one above it; disturbance of the carefully interlocking structure of society is a most heinous offence, since the pattern is not merely man-made, but ordained by God. It corresponds to the divine plan for a perfectly ordered universe (though this has been disrupted by the fall of Adam and Eve from paradise, which brought sin and corruption into the creation), and is reflected, and reinforced, by the corresponding hierarchies which exist in the physical world and the parallel structures of the animal kingdom. Thus the sun is the ‘king’ of the universe and the planets are hierarchically subordinate to it, and the lion is the ‘king’ of beasts, with gradations of animal beings beneath him which correspond to those beneath the human monarch. The classic exposition of this view is to be found in Ulysses’ speech to the Greek warriors in *Troilus and Cressida*, where he attributes their failure in the siege of Troy to the dissension within their own army. When rank and authority are not respected, he argues, crippling disorder follows, spreading until it involves the entire universe in catastrophic chaos:

Take but degree away, untune that string,
And hark what discord follows? Each thing melts
In mere oppugnancy: the bounded waters
Should lift their bosoms higher than the shores,
And make a sop of all this solid globe:
Strength should be lord of imbecility,
And the rude son should strike his father dead;
Force should be right; or, rather, right and wrong—
Between whose endless jar justice resides—
Should lose their names, and so should justice too.

(*Troilus and Cressida*, I.3.109–18)

In *Richard II* the chief exponent of this traditional view is the Bishop of Carlisle, and, appropriately, his most powerful expression of it comes at the point in Act IV when Bolingbroke, the usurper, declares that ‘in God’s name’ he will ‘ascend the regal throne’ (line 113). The Bishop’s deepest principles are outraged by Bolingbroke’s use of the divine formula; his shocked reaction is, ‘Marry, God forbid!’, and he goes on to outline the terrible consequences which will result if Richard’s deposition takes place:

The blood of English shall manure the ground,
And future ages groan for this foul act.
Peace shall go sleep with Turks and infidels,
And in this seat of peace tumultuous wars
Shall kin with kin, and kind with kind, confound.
Disorder, horror, fear, and mutiny
Shall here inhabit, and this land be called
The field of Golgotha and dead men’s skulls.

(IV.1.137–44)

The civil war implied in line 141 does, in fact, break out subsequently. Bolingbroke has scarcely become Henry IV before he finds himself faced with the conspiracy of Aumerle, the Abbot of Westminster, the Bishop of Carlisle, Salisbury, Spencer, Blunt,
Kent, Brocas and Seely, and some of his chief supporters, including Northumberland, Worcester and Percy, are in rebellion against him soon after the opening of the next play, Henry IV, Part 1. In Henry VI, Part 3 (which had already been written and produced prior to Richard II, though it deals with the reign of a king who comes at a later historical period than Richard) the words ‘kin with kin, and kind with kind, confound’ are given dramatic embodiment in a scene which contains the graphic stage direction: ‘Enter a Son that hath killed his Father, at one door; and a Father that hath killed his Son, at another door’ (II.5.54). Thus Carlisle’s prophecies not only have the support of orthodox Elizabethan doctrine, but are shown as coming true both within the bounds of this play and in Shakespeare’s other history plays as well.

Such reinforcement, it might be argued—and has, indeed, been argued by commentators who emphasise Shakespeare’s adherence to the ‘degree’ system—shows quite clearly where the sympathies of the dramatist lie. The King stands for legitimacy, and his deposition is an overthrow of divinely sanctioned order which has the direst consequences imaginable. Richard himself elaborates in the grandest manner on his kingly status, comparing himself, in the language of the order pattern, to the sun, and proclaiming his sacred imprint indelible:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Not all the water in the rough rude sea} \\
\text{Can wash the balm off from an anointed king.} \\
\text{The breath of worldly men cannot depose} \\
\text{The deputy elected by the Lord. (III.2.54–7)}
\end{align*}
\]

And in the following scene he insists on the appalling nature of the divine retribution which will be visited on his rebellious subjects:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{God omnipotent} \\
\text{Is mustering in his clouds on our behalf} \\
\text{Armies of pestilence; and they shall strike} \\
\text{Your children yet unborn and unbegot} \\
\text{That lift your vassal hands against my head} \\
\text{And threat the glory of my precious crown.} \\
\text{(III.3.85–90)}
\end{align*}
\]

However, like the Player-Queen in Hamlet, it seems Richard doth protest too much. Already in III.2 he has shown a capacity for exaggeration which makes his position suspect. His faith in God’s backing becomes overweening confidence when he declares egregiously that for every man conscripted by Bolingbroke, ‘God for his Richard hath in heavenly pay / A glorious angel’ (III.2.60–1); and he reaches the point of absurdity when he asks the rhetorical question, ‘Is not the King’s name twenty thousand names?’, capping it with the fatuous battle cry: ‘Arm, arm, my name! A puny subject strikes / At thy great glory’ (85–7).

Such extravagance betrays the extent to which doctrine has become an unrealistic obsession with Richard. Whatever truth there might be, to Elizabethan ears at any rate, in the claim that ‘divinity doth hedge a king’ (to use another famous phrase from
Hamlet), Richard's apparent willingness to ignore the crucial distinction between the symbolic significance of a 'name' and the facts of military strength reveals the inherent brittleness of his purely theoretical position. In this same scene the Bishop of Carlisle—eloquent spokesman for kingship though he is—presents a more sensible view which recognises the realities of 'power' as well as the prestige of kingly title, arguing, in effect, that God helps those who help themselves—or, at least, those who do not refuse 'The proffered means of succour and redress' (27-32); and Aumerle rubs in the lesson more bluntly when he interprets the Bishop as meaning 'that we are too remiss, / Whilst Bolingbroke through our security [=over-confidence] / Grows strong and great in substance and in power' (33-5).

But Richard is incapable of achieving a balanced view; he swings from one extreme to the other. His instantaneous resort to doctrinal fantasy masks a self-doubt which just as quickly, and immoderately, reveals itself in a disturbing switchback of alternating attitudes, from excessive assurance to premature despair. One piece of bad news from Salisbury and he is ready to capitulate:

All souls that will be safe fly from my side,  
For time hath set a blot upon my pride. (80–1)

Aumerle's attempt to correct this, 'Remember who you are', causes him to veer the other way, but then Scroop's account of the deaths of Bushy, Green and Wiltshire plunges him back again into self-indulgent brooding on the mortuary themes 'of graves, of worms, and epitaphs' (145ff). His friends remind him of the need for action, and his 'ague-fit' is 'overblown'; difficulties are minimised: 'An easy task it is to win our own' (190–1). But news of York's desertion punctures him yet again, and he then resentfully rejects comfort of any kind whatever:

By heaven, I'll hate him everlastingly  
That bids me be of comfort any more.  
(207–8)

The whole scene is thus one of vacillation revealing Richard's temperamental volatility and his total inability to make an effective connection between the symbolic world of kingship doctrine and the political realities of the world in which he must exercise kingly power.

Nevertheless, this scene is marked by a developing seriousness and gravity of tone which contrasts with the different kind of irresponsibility, and even frivolity, of the scenes prior to Bolingbroke's return from banishment. At the beginning of the play Richard is faced with the confrontation between Mowbray and Bolingbroke. Because of its sinister political overtones this is a problem which needs to be handled both firmly and circumspectly, especially in view of his own obscure involvement in the subject of the quarrel—the death of his uncle, Gloucester. Richard, however, treats the occasion as one for theatrical display. When he calls the two men into his presence it is with evident relish for the histrionic opposition to be expected:
Face to face,
And frowning brow to brow, ourselves will hear
The accuser and the accused freely speak.
High-stomached are they both, and full of ire;
In rage, deaf as the sea, hasty as fire.

(I.1.15-19)

Conscious as he is that one of the contestants, Bolingbroke, is his own cousin, son of his principal counsellor, his uncle, John of Gaunt, he nonetheless makes a deliberate parade of impartiality; and though giving each man full scope to work himself up to a pitch of angry defiance, culminating in the challenge to trial by combat, he poses as a peace-maker, urging them to ‘Forget, forgive, conclude and be agreed’—only to undercut the solemnity of his chosen role with an ill-judged witticism: ‘Our doctors say this is no month to bleed’ (156-7). Then, persuasion having failed, he resorts to command, telling Gaunt to order Bolingbroke to throw down Mowbray’s gage, and himself ordering Mowbray to throw down Bolingbroke’s. ‘Lions make leopards tame’ (174), asserts Richard; but neither obeys, whereupon he makes a show of turning the conflict into a characteristically medieval contest of ‘chivalry’ (203). In I.3 this is staged magnificently, with much sounding of trumpets, elaborate costumes (each man enters ‘knightly-clad in arms’—11) and a profusion of rhetorical devices as formal announcement is made of the contestants’ titles. Their grounds of complaint are then rehearsed, and with much ceremony each makes a highly sentimental farewell. On the very brink of actual combat, however, Richard suspends the lists by melodramatically throwing down his warder. He consults with his advisers, and decides that, after all, peace-making must be his role—which represents true kingly motivation, expressed in terms that show proper consideration for his realm (‘for our eyes do hate the dire aspect / Of civil wounds ploughed up with neighbours’ sword’—127-8), but devalued here by Richard’s vacillation. Bloodshed is therefore replaced by sentences of banishment; but, finally, despite his earlier boast of impartiality, he banishes Mowbray for life and Bolingbroke for ten years, and compounds this impression of arbitrariness still further by reducing his cousin’s exile to six.

In I.4 the King’s frivolity is made still more apparent as he allows himself, and his circle of favourites, to scoff at Bolingbroke’s banishment (as well as revealing his jealousy of Bolingbroke’s popularity) and makes light of the exploitation of his kingdom in order to pay for a punitive expedition to Ireland. News that John of Gaunt is sick merely prompts him to flippancy:

Now put it God in the physician’s mind
To help him to his grave immediately!

(59-60)

and this is carried over into II.1, where he visits his uncle and treats the latter’s rebuke for his mismanagement of England as the ravings of ‘a lunatic lean-witted fool, / Presuming on an ague’s privilege’ (116). Still worse, the death of Gaunt elicits no more than two lines of peremptory platitude, followed by the dismissive, ‘So much for that’, and the seizure of his property as a further source of revenue for Richard’s Irish wars.
He is thus exposed as shallow in feeling, indifferent to the legality of his actions, and concerned only with himself and his immediate group of friends rather than his responsibilities as King of England.

This impression is increased by the slightly mechanical curtness of Richard’s language in I.4 and II.1. Later he is to be distinguished by a flood of eloquence, but in the first two Acts of the play the most vigorous and evocative language comes from his critics, and especially from John of Gaunt in his celebrated death-bed speech. The patriotic sentiments of II.1.40–58 are too often quoted out of context; the purpose of this idealised eulogy is to throw into relief the condition of England under Richard’s misrule, and the sequence of apostrophes (‘This royal throne … this sceptred isle, / This earth … this seat …’, etc.) forms an extended subject building up to the verb in line 59, ‘Is now leased out’, which turns splendour into corruption. Richard’s own casual reference to ‘farming’ (i.e. leasing out) his ‘royal realm’, at I.4.45, is echoed and intensified in the simile, ‘Like to a tenement or pelting farm’ (II.1.60), and, together with the scathing imagery of legal chicanery in ‘inky blots and rotten parchment bonds’ (64), powerfully conveys Gaunt’s despairing contempt for the degradation brought about by Richard. The dying man’s subsequent speech at lines 94–113 is, if anything, still more blazingly eloquent in its criticism. Richard callously asserts, ‘I am in health. I breathe, and see thee ill’ (92), but Gaunt turns the tables on him by presenting Richard as the spiritually sick man, whose ‘death-bed’ is the country he so misgoverns that ‘The waste is no whit lesser than thy land’.

Structurally, Gaunt’s speech anticipates that of the Bishop of Carlisle in IV.1. Both are focused on disorder; but where Carlisle foretells chaos as the consequence of Richard’s deposition by Bolingbroke, Gaunt, referring to the deterioration from the reign of Richard’s grandfather, Edward III, to that of Richard himself, sees a chaotic process which is tantamount to self-deposition:

O, had thy grandsire with a prophet’s eye
Seen how his son’s son should destroy his sons,
From forth thy reach he would have laid thy shame,
Deposing thee before thou wert possessed,
Which art possessed now to depose thyself.

(104–8)

Richard is like a tragic protagonist whose conduct contributes to his own downfall, though at this point he is unaware of his culpability, and the function of Gaunt (endowed with the inspiration traditionally attributed to a dying man, II.1.31) is to let him, and the audience, know his true condition. That his words do not immediately take effect is in no way a belittlement of their status. Their very eloquence powerfully foregrounds them and makes them a major influence on the perspective in which the audience views Richard.

It is often said that Richard attracts hostility before his deposition, but sympathy after. The structural comparison already noted between John of Gaunt’s and the Bishop of Carlisle’s speeches lends ready support to this suggestion. However, the change can be seen in process of development even prior to IV.1. The elements of
foolish overconfidence and instability in Richard’s behaviour in III.2 have already been analysed, and since this is a scene prior to the act of deposition it may simply be counted as further evidence of the unfitness which brings that deposition about. But what that analysis ignored was the deeper dimension which the scene also adds to Richard’s character—something which, significantly, it is impossible to ignore in performance in the theatre. Paradoxically, Richard in adversity becomes a far more dominant figure, in dramatic terms, than ever before. He holds the stage as the unquestioned centre of attention, and he does so by means of speeches which reveal a fascinating imagination at work.

His typical linguistic device is the ‘conceit’—a simile or metaphor so extended and elaborated that it seems at times almost to smother itself with its own ingenuity. For example, when Richard hears of the execution of Bushy, Bagot and Green he falls into a reverie on human mortality which leads him to the curious idea of the crown as a place where Death keeps its court, and having once seized on this theme he teases out its possibilities in a series of fantastic images:

within the hollow crown
That rounds the mortal temples of a king
Keeps death his court; and there the antic sits,
Scoffing his state and grinning at his pomp,
Allowing him a breath, a little scene,
To monarchize, be feared, and kill with looks,
Infusing him with self and vain conceit,
As if this flesh which walls about our life
Were brass impregnable; and humoured thus,
Comes at the last, and with a little pin
Bores through his castle wall, and—farewell king!

(III.2.160–70)

Richard creates a little verbal play-within-the-play, based on the medieval *danse macabre* in which personified death leads men and women a dance around, and finally into, their own graves. Death has already been shown at work in this play with the death of John of Gaunt, but Richard then seemed insensitive to its reality. Now he is keenly conscious of its power to undermine human vanity and with a puny ‘pin’ reduce a monarch’s self-esteem to nothingness. The splendour of his ‘name’, on which elsewhere he expends so much verbal energy, is thus provided with a very different context, and he, at least momentarily, pierces through the facade of kingship to the common condition of mortality which lies beneath it. Indeed, Richard invites his hearers to ‘throw away respect, / Tradition, form, and ceremonious duty’, and speaks of himself as a commoner sharing the same vulnerable humanity as themselves:

I live with bread, like you; feel want,
Taste grief, need friends. (175–6)

It is as if in the process of exploring his imaginative idea he anticipates the tragic lessons learnt by Lear and Gloucester in *King Lear*. It is obvious, of course, that he doesn’t actually do so. For Richard this is merely word-spinning; he has not yet learnt
what it really is to be reduced by bitter experience to the knowledge of his own participation in the universal human condition. But his words nonetheless open up vistas of tragic possibility and their effect, though ambiguous, is to make Richard seem a more complex and compelling figure.

The conflicting comments made by other characters in the play likewise add to this more complicated view of Richard. For example, the Duke of York, whose divided loyalties (Bolingbroke’s demand to have his father’s inheritance restored seems a reasonable one to him) and realistic appreciation of the political situation lead him to change sides, can still insist, in III.3, that Richard looks ‘like a king’ (68). Likewise, in the somewhat allegorical scene which follows, the gardener’s description of Richard as ‘the wasteful king’ who has brought disaster on his realm and himself by failing to cultivate and prune the garden of England harks back to earlier adverse comments; but the compassion and indignation aroused in Queen Isabel has the effect of enlisting sympathy for Richard, while her religious language (‘What Eve, what serpent hath suggested thee / To make a second Fall of cursed man?’—III.4.75–6) paves the way for Richard’s self-imaging as a Christ figure whose deposition is an act of the gravest sacrilege.

The combined effect of these various views of Richard is to make the audience increasingly aware of a situation which cannot be interpreted on one level only. The ground is prepared for his deposition so that when it does happen it is recognised as to a large extent inevitable; and Bolingbroke’s opportunistic seizure of power is seen to represent precisely that capacity for shrewd appraisal of actual circumstance which Richard signally lacks. On the other hand, Richard’s preoccupation with the theme of kingship makes it impossible to ignore the illicit nature of his usurpation, and tacitly reminds us that Bolingbroke is, after all, merely a clever manipulator of men and public opinion. Likewise, if Bolingbroke’s laconic use of words combined with forcefulness in action contrasts favourably with Richard’s verbosity, such prosaic virtues also suggest lack of imagination; and if the corollary for Richard is overabundance of imagination, running to verbal ingenuity and histrionic self-indulgence, these are qualities which also seem inseparable from the exploratory, and at least potentially tragic, power of his language. Richard in adversity thus becomes a tantalising figure. He seems to be at once deepening his awareness of his essential humanity and at the same time continuing his old frivolity of mind (though, as already indicated, with far greater linguistic inventiveness). This is never more apparent than in the climactic scene of the deposition itself (IV.1). There he makes a highly theatrical game of his own uncrowning, bringing together both verbal conceit and stage performance as he invites Bolingbroke to hold one side of the crown, while he himself holds the other, and proceeds to elaborate his image of the two buckets ‘filling one another’ (180ff). The ritualistic language of parallelism and repetition in which he formally ‘undoes himself’ (200–20) is a superb example of rhetorical exhibitionism, and his image of himself as ‘a mockery king of snow’ melting ‘before the sun of Bolingbroke’ (259–61) is a consummately executed figure of pathos. But more serious depths are touched as well. The intricate punning of his reply to Bolingbroke’s question whether he is willing to abdicate: ‘Ay, no. No, ay; for I must nothing be’ (200), is a mixture of paradoxical play and shrewd insight. At one
level it expresses that antithematology of vacillation—conceding, denying; denying, conceding again—which has been such a striking feature of his previous conduct, while at another it suggests his dawning awareness of the essentially contradictory nature of his situation. To answer ‘yes’ would be to negate that ‘I’ which has hitherto been inextricably involved with its own royal status—that is, to dissolve his being into nothingness. A single word would bring about its own opposite. And yet Richard is simultaneously aware that it is not within his power to withhold the word of assent. ‘Therefore’, he continues, his reply must be ‘no no, for I resign to thee’—a double negative which conveys both horrified rejection (No! No!) and recognition that Bolingbroke will not take ‘no’ for an answer. Later he offers a further variation on such self-contradiction in his reluctance to read the articles listing the misdemeanours which have brought this disgrace upon him; his eyes are ‘full of tears’, he says, so that he cannot see, and yet he is not so blind but that he ‘can see a sort of traitors here’ (243–5). His accusation is directed outward against his foes, but he also perceives his own treachery against himself in that he has paradoxically consented to ‘undeck the pompous body of a king’ and has ‘Made glory base, and sovereignty a slave; / Proud majesty, a subject; state, a peasant’ (246–51). The element of verbal play still obscures the extent to which this is true tragic recognition; but with the further histrionic business of the smashing of the looking-glass (275ff) Richard makes a deliberate analysis of his own image, or ‘face’, as it is presented to the outside world, which culminates in his enunciation of the more significant truth that all these examples of play-acting and verbal elaboration are ‘merely shadows to the unseen grief / That swells with silence in the tortured soul’ (296–7).

In these words the king who has hitherto seemed to be primarily a king of verbal gestures points to a language of silence which is beyond words. He does not, it is true, thereupon cease to be a player with words, but he does seem to touch the verge of a recognition that kingship, even in its most refined sense, is a matter of highly sophisticated posturing. By the very process of playing his regal role up to the hilt he comes to realise that it is indeed nothing but a role—a brittle human device, bolstered by doctrinal authority, but not substantial in itself. While the paraphernalia of ‘degree’ can be maintained its psychological effect may be relatively potent, but once that mystique is penetrated it is seen to have no absolute reality. The only true absolute is the ‘nothing’ which is revealed when the king is stripped of his titles and finds himself reduced to his inherent weakness as a fallible, mortal human being.

This is perhaps what Richard finally grasps in the soliloquy which precedes his death in V.5. And with this realisation comes the guilty acceptance that as a kingly play-actor and verbal embellisher he has been culpably negligent in allowing himself to be deluded by the trappings of his office into behaving as if the office, irrespective of the behaviour of the office-bearer, were enough to secure his power. It is significant in this connection that his final gesture in killing two of his murderers before being struck down by Exton is his first real action, and that for the first time action now becomes associated with language which is plain and curt, without the cynical flippancy of his earlier days. For once Richard responds to a situation with complete commitment. He is here neither the exploiter of his ‘name’, nor the passive witness to his own regal dismemberment. His
resistance is, of course, futile in that it cannot prevent his murder, but the fact that he neither resigns himself to his end fatalistically, nor allows his death to become a scene of introspectively adorned pathos, does hint at some closing of the gap in his previously divided personality.

As we have seen, it is also just prior to this moment that Richard pronounces the self-criticism quoted at the beginning of this essay: ‘I wasted time, and now doth time waste me’, and in so doing he succeeds at last in seeing his career for what it has truly been. The killing of his attackers may not represent the achievement of a real ability to combine action and words in effectively kingly fashion (and if it did, his achievement would still have to be reckoned as too late to alter his fortunes), but it suggests that he has perhaps learnt something of the lesson of experience. Although his fate remains on balance pathetic rather than tragic, it is this deepening of introspection to the point where it emerges in a new and firmer quality of action that entitles him to be regarded as at least a potentially tragic figure. His final dying words pronounce a curse on Exton for staining the king’s land with the king’s blood and express a somewhat conventional idea of death as the separation of ‘soul’ and ‘flesh’ (109–12), but his moment of greatest insight is contained in his recognition of the way he has made a ‘waste’ of his temporal status and opportunities—followed by that tantalising glimpse of how things might have become different.