

Richard ii: the player- king



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Thus I play in one person many people, And none contented. Sometimes I am king, Then treasons make me wish myself a beggar, And so I am. V: v: 31-34, King Richard II

While entangled in the throes of dramatic suspense, the self-reflexive concept of metatheatrics reminds an audience of its present relationship with the actors. Shakespeare often implements metatheatrics; exemplified by the 'play within a play' concept that occurs in both *Hamlet* (Shakespeare, 1603) and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Shakespeare, 1596). In these and other examples, Shakespeare uses the stage as analogous to the world, and vice versa. In *As You Like It* (Shakespeare, 1600) Jaques succinctly demonstrates this analogy, saying "All the world's a stage,/ And all the men and women merely players" (II: vii: 139). Metatheatrics are especially prevalent in the *Henriad*, with Kings Richard II, Henry IV, Henry V, and Richard III, respectively, serving as performers in front of their court as well as literal performers on stage. Anne Richter in her study *Shakespeare and the Idea of the Play* describes this as the "Player-King image", in which Shakespeare illustrates the "contrast between the individual and the part which he assumed at the moment of coronation" (Richter 121). However, because Richard in *King Richard II* (Shakespeare, 1593) is the first King in the *Henriad*, he is never portrayed as an individual prior to the label of King. The crown is Richard II's sole source of self, and his identity is the reflection of his court's perception of his performance. Richard no longer has an identity when Bolingbroke usurps his crown. This essay's title quote indicates Richard's realization of his role as actor, with no real man behind the figurative mask. These lines take on dual meaning, as the actor reciting the lines literally does "play in one person many people" while the character of King Richard II also plays "in one

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person many people”; in essence, an actor portraying an actor (V: v: 31). This concept of metatheatrics is woven throughout the play on various threads and is especially evident in the identity, or lack thereof, of King Richard II. A display of court theatrics sets off the beginning of King Richard II, with a mutual indictment of treason between Thomas Mowbray and Henry Bolingbroke. The situation, however, is not as it appears; court formality masks the reality of the situation. Despite all of the flattery, professions of truth, and loyalty to the King, Bolingbroke’s indictment of Mowbray is really a sublimated implication of King Richard for the Duke of Gloucester’s death. It is a politically correct way in which Bolingbroke is able to threaten the King. Under the pretenses of defending himself, Mowbray is also defending King Richard. Every word in this scene is a misrepresentation, and while all three men are aware of it, they act out their roles accordingly. Richard’s talent as performer is showcased in his ability to play the unflinching monarch. His demeanor is completely professional with impeccable use of royal language. Speaking of Bolingbroke, Richard says, “ He is our subject, Mowbray, so art thou; / Free speech and fearless I do to thee allow” (I: i: 122-123). In this twist of irony Richard generously offers to be unbiased towards his kinsman Bolingbroke; indeed the King should be impartial towards Bolingbroke since Bolingbroke is condemning him! When considering the reality of this situation, the effusive flattery also becomes a farce. Bolingbroke’s words, In the devotion of a subject’s love, Tend’ring the precious safety of my prince, And free from other misbegotten hate, Come I appellant to this princely presence.(I: I: 31-34)are the exact opposite of his intentions. Bolingbroke is not concerned with the ‘ precious safety’ of his ‘ prince’ and is by no means ‘ free from other misbegotten hate’. It is precisely Bolingbroke’s ‘ misbegotten

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hate' that brings all three men into the present situation. The reality of the circumstance is quite the opposite of its appearance, and the function of members of court as actors is made apparent in this scene. Aware of the precarious situation he is in, Richard uses this opportunity to rid himself of the enemy Bolingbroke. Contrary to his intentions, his actions indicate that he favors Bolingbroke over Mowbray, sentencing Mowbray to lifetime banishment, but only six years to Bolingbroke. An act of political prudence, he does this to appear sympathetic towards his kinsman. Richard delivers these sentences in an passionate speech, stating that " our kingdom's earth should not be soil'd/ With that dear blood which it had fostered" (I: iii: 125-126). At the end of the act, however, Richard indicates to Aumerle that he intends to keep Bolingbroke out of England longer, stating, " but 'tis doubt,/ When time shall call him home from banishment" (V: iv: 20-21). The irony of this statement comes to fruition when Bolingbroke returns from banishment much earlier than Richard intended. Nonetheless, this moment displays King Richards' ability as an actor; indicating that all of his prior emotions and impassioned words were feigned. When this situation establishes Richard's keen ability to perform, all subsequent actions and speeches become blindingly melodramatic. The language with which he manifests his emotions is so ostentatious that he appears utterly fake. His royal speech pattern does not allow the basic function of communication; in *The Player King* James Winny describes this as " uttering declarations rather than conversing" (Winny 48). The trend in conversation comprises Richard orating in the royal ' we' and his subjects responding in effusive flattery. When Richard is engaged in dialogue it is hardly dialogue at all; the dynamic is that of performer and audience rather than mutual speaking parties. Conversation

involves a dramatic soliloquy from Richard and then a reaction from whomever happens to be his audience. The result is an awkward dynamic which leaves no room for natural impulsive emotion and creates a metatheatrical atmosphere for the duration of the play. Richard's soliloquies are so dramatic that it is impossible to discern his true emotions. In Act III scene ii, when he returns from Ireland, he experiences a violently rapid change of expression several times. As he reenters England, he expresses confidence in his rule, saying, This earth shall have a feeling, and these stones Prove armed soldiers ere her native king Shall falter under foul rebellious arms. (III: ii: 24) After learning of Bolingbroke's return to England, Richard's egotism inflates even more, proclaiming that Bolingbroke will "Not able to endure the sight of day, / But self-affrighted tremble at his sin" (III: ii: 52-53) because "The breath of worldly men cannot depose, / The deputy elected by the Lord" (III: ii: 56-57). When Richard then learns that his Welsh troops have dispersed, leaving him vulnerable, he panics, only to quickly regain his composure when reminded to by Aumerle. An instant later, however, he panics again in a blinding rage, cursing the Earls as "Three Judases, each one thrice worse than Judas!" (III: ii: 132). The Christ comparison is indicative his obnoxious egotism. Richard's speech then reaches the pillar of melodrama, wallowing in his melancholy: 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. (III: ii: 145-147) This range of emotions within two hundred lines approaches the point of ridiculous. It seems a farce; a comic jab at overacting. Regardless of whether that was Shakespeare's intention, the point is made that Richard is a performer. Richard's ability to perform stems from the unbalanced amount of power he

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has over others, derived from his title of King. As his subjects, others are obligated to listen to his grandiose orations and respond with affirmations of his greatness. Despite his occasional protest against flattery, Richard needs it more than anything. He is a performer and his identity and value lie in the reaction he receives from his audience, the court. In this situation there exists a dichotomy between real life and the play, because the actor who plays Richard derives his present value from the audience's reaction to his performance as Richard. This is true for any time period, as the value of an actor lies in his ability to evoke the right response from his audience. Richard becomes a more pitiable character as the plot develops, and as his subjects turn on him, so, too, would an audience begin to favor the dashing Bolingbroke. Although it was rarely shown during Shakespeare's time because of its anarchist plotline, a common Elizabethan audience would favor Bolingbroke despite his usurpation, because he is kind to the common man. Richard describes, Ourselves and Bushy Observ'd his courtship to the common people, How he did seem to dive into their hearts With humble and familiar courtesy. (I: iv: 23-26) As Richard loses his credibility with his audience, the English court, the actor playing Richard loses status with an audience. Richard's speeches take on dual meaning, not only representing Richard's losses, but the actor's losses as well. In the climactic scene in which Richard hands over the crown to Bolingbroke, the actor playing Richard is handing over the lead role to the actor playing the newly-named King Henry IV. Commanding a mirror, Richard looks into it and asks, "Is this the face that which fac'd so many follies, / That was at last out-faced by Bolingbroke?", again representing both Richard and the actor playing him (IV: i: 285-286). To be sure, the role of Richard is out-faced by Bolingbroke,

as the character of King Henry IV continues as the title role in two more of Shakespeare's plays. When Richard violently smashes the mirror he indicates a complete loss of identity, both for the character and the actor. The metatheatrical element present in Richard's role as king remains after the abdication scene. The Duke of York tells of Richard's plight; As in a theatre the eyes of men, After a well-grac'd actor leaves the stage, Are idly bent on him that enters next, Thinking his prattle to be tedious; Even so, or with much more contempt, men's eyes Did scowl on Richard. (V: ii: 23-27) and Bolingbroke later comments, " Our scene is now alt' red from a serious thing, / And now changed to the beggar and the king" (V: iii: 77-78). Because the idea of usurping a throne was so anarchist in the eyes of Shakespeare's contemporaries, he uses these metatheatrical elements not only as a literary technique but also as a means of constantly reminding the audience that this is only a play. Although based upon historical events, Shakespeare constantly infuses elements of metatheatrics to vindicate himself. Richard's value as a character derives completely from his response to others. Devoid of all other qualities, his crown was the only thing that created a positive reflection of himself. Even in Richard's most personal relationships, with his wife for example, he does not breach the realm of professionalism. He performs even with her; their final exchange mimics his impersonal oratory style that he used with his subjects. After his abdication Richard maintains his flamboyant use of language but it loses its impact when there are no sycophants to respond. This is illustrated when Richard says, " God save the King! Will no man say amen? / Am I both priest and clerk? Well then, amen" (IV: i: 172-73). Accordingly, Richard becomes his own audience. In his final monologue Richard sits alone in prison contemplating the world and his

place in it. He concedes to the fact that without an audience he cannot function, saying, And, for because the world is populous And here is not a creature but myself I cannot do it. (V: v: 3-5) Richard is an individual with no identity other than in his ability to perform, an ability that is null with no one to perform for. In losing his crown he lost his audience and is henceforth obsolete. When pondering the meaning of life he arrives at no conclusion other than that his time is nearing an end. Stating, “ For now hath time made me his numb’ring clock”, the actor indicates that both his time on stage and Richard’s time on earth are coming to a close (V: v: 50). Accordingly, the metatheatrics that pervade the plot of King Richard II apply to his final lines, as Richard the master actor bids farewell to his stage. Having played in one person many people, he never managed to find his sense of self.

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