The Edinburgh Student Literary Journal

In what ways, and to what ends, do Shakespeare's plays reflect upon their own theatricality?

Catrina Kean

A/W 2025-26

'A woeful pageant have we here beheld' (Shakespeare)

Throughout *Richard II*, theatricality—through acting and artifice—is central to the English monarchy, shaping how power is taken and legitimised. Beyond the actors performing onstage, characters like Richard, Northumberland, and Bolingbroke act *within* the play itself. To dramatise this, Shakespeare employs three key metatheatrical devices: staging that creates audiences out of the nobles, performatively misleading language, and the crown as a key prop. Together, these construct a performance of legitimacy; the rebels, fully aware of their treason, reframe Richard as a national threat to superficially moralise what is, in essence, Bolingbroke's calculated overthrow. By treating Bolingbroke's rebellion as legitimate, *Richard II* exposes the theatricality of politics, driven not by morals but by the most convincing facade of morality. This is traced first through Richard's self-undermining performance of divine right. As his authority erodes, the nobles rhetorically reshape treason into moral necessity, culminating in the deposition scene wherein the crown's theatrical transfer exposes power as contingent on performance rather than divine truth.

The play's opening is inherently theatrical, with its public trial-like setting, indicated by the stage directions ('[*open ground... with seating for spectators*]' *Richard II* 1.1) and the later tournament scene (*Richard II* 1.3), emphasising the inherent performance required of kingship. Relying on divine entitlement, Richard blinds himself to his political vulnerabilities. He oversees Mowbray and Bolingbroke's trial as they accuse each other of being 'traitor[s]' (1.1.102), citing his 'sacred blood' as the foundation of the 'unstooping firmness of [his] upright soul' (1.1.119-121). By invoking 'sacred blood', Richard constructs an image of royal infallibility hinging on divine right, which is morally resolute with his 'upright soul' and above mortal disputes. However, his actions contradict this facade. Ironically, he undermines his own 'unstooping firmness' by initiating and prematurely ending Mowbray and Bolingbroke's ceremonial fight for justice, then undercutting his own decree to exile Bolingbroke, reducing his banishment from 'twice five summers' (1.3.141) to 'six

frozen winters' (1.3.211). While Richard powerfully changes the trajectory of lives with mere words, his judicial wavering undercuts his self-presentation as authoritative and dependable. Richard's theatricality exposes a disconnect between divine right and effective rule, opening the way for Bolingbroke to rise as an alternative beyond medieval kingship norms.

By presenting these scenes as public spectacles, the audience witnesses, like the nobles, Richard's indecision contrasted with Bolingbroke's constancy. The importance of public perception is immediately cemented, reinforcing the need to successfully perform leadership to retain support. Richard undermines his authority as he relies on ornate and theatrical language, such as the simile 'deaf as the sea, hasty as fire' (1.1.19), which sustains his regal image and status. Meanwhile, Bolingbroke's speech is balanced: 'Mine honour is my life; both grow in one:/ Take honour from me, and my life is done' (1.1.182-183). While Richard's authority stems from 'sacred blood' (1.1.119), Bolingbroke's comes from the 'honour' he enacts through loyalty to 'England's [...] sweet soil' (1.3.306). Bolingbroke's self-depiction as the masculine ideal, through his inclination to die for integrity, is itself a performance, yet his plain rhetoric conveys more sincerity. Contrasting Richard's inconstancy and flowery language, Bolingbroke's directness—'Take honour from me, and my life is done'—is reinforced by the equal beats on each side of the caesura, creating a balanced rhythm that reinforces a public display of his unwavering commitment to honour. The nobles, assuming roles as audience members, compare these competing performances of kingship; Richard's self-undermining presentation of divine right leadership preconditions the nobles' support for Bolingbroke's rebellion as a pragmatic alternative. Though Bolingbroke's lack of divine right should prevent support, the nobles' rhetorical reshaping of the political landscape to justify treason highlights the inherent theatricality of English politics.

Richard's failings prompt the nobles to performatively cast him as the source of England's disorder, making kingship morally contestable rather than a divine right. While

Leeds Barroll, as cited by David Bergeron, argues that 'nothing inheres in *Richard II* that should be construed as dangerous to the state' (34), the insidious political maneuvering behind Bolingbroke's rise is dangerous in its ability to frame Richard's deposition as a public service rather than an attack on divine rule, exposing how political morals can be manipulated. Under divine right, Richard should be respected as 'God's substitute' (1.2.37), a view held by Gaunt, who vows to 'never lift/ An angry arm against His minister' (1.2.40-41). Thus, Bolingbroke's rebellion should mean blasphemously opposing God's will; knowing this, the nobles strategically reframe treason, avoiding direct discussion of regicide, instead using metaphors to gloss the rebellion. Northumberland calls Richard a 'fearful tempest [...] Yet [the nobles] seek no shelter to avoid the storm' (2.1.263-264), seeing 'the wind sit sore upon our sails' and leaving them to 'perish' (2.1.264-266). His metaphor omits Richard, redirecting attention to impersonal storm imagery, distancing Richard from the nobles' vulnerability and suffering, conveyed by their lack of 'shelter' and soreness; figured this way, Northumberland poses the objective absurdity of remaining unprotected from storms, framing rebellion as an obvious solution like finding shelter from battering winds, rather than striking against God. *Richard II*, therefore, reflects upon its theatricality through Northumberland; the irreligiosity that Elizabethans would have feared in a 'strike' (2.1.267) against God's 'minister' does not change, but Northumberland garners rebellious support by performatively reshaping treason into a moral, rational necessity.

Northumberland extends this, saying the nobles must 'shake off our slavish yoke,/ Imp out our drooping country's broken wing' (2.1.291-292). Richard's rule is not only figured as an oppressive 'slavish yoke' that they must be liberated from but also pathologised as the cause of England's 'broken wing'. By depicting England as a weakened bird, Northumberland frames Bolingbroke's rebellion as a natural remedy: just as birds' wings are repaired by 'imp'-ing (adding a new feather), England can be restored by introducing a new

monarch. This inherently destabilising idea is normalised through natural imagery. As John Elliott notes, Shakespeare 'defines his characters by their attitudes towards [...] the nature of kingship and the right of rebellion' (271). The nobles suspend their belief in Richard's divine right, seizing the 'right of rebellion' by reframing it as restorative. The detachment of politics from the religious foundations of Early Modern English monarchy—enabled by theatrical metaphors and rhetoric that avoid directly addressing regicide—casts rebellion in a nationalistic light, creating troubling implications that English politics can be theatrically shaped and morals manipulated for self-interest, all while obscuring illegality by acting authoritatively.

Richard II further reflects on its theatricality by destabilising public images of the body politic, portraying Bolingbroke not as traitor but as England's rational saviour. Francis Bacon, cited by Sidney Warhaft, explains that 'the body politic of the Crown [...] indueth the natural person of the King with [...] perfections' (201). As King, Richard should embody this ideal, which he performs by invoking his 'master, God omnipotent' (3.3.85), suggesting divine endorsement. However, while Elizabethan belief in the body politic would identify Richard's body with England, the nobles disrupt this, separating him first from England, then from kingship itself. England is personified as having her own body, 'this nurse, this teeming womb of royal kings' (2.1.51). The nurturing, generative connotations of 'nurse' and 'womb' present England's body as motherly, capable of producing many 'kings', bodily separating her from Richard, who is merely a bird's broken wing and replaceable by the many potential rulers the womb is 'teeming' with. Northumberland furthers this detachment, saying they must 'Wipe off the dust that hides our sceptre's gilt' (2.1.294); Richard, performatively self-defining by his 'high blood's royalty' (1.1.58), is forcefully separated from kingly symbols, reduced to mere 'dust' that dulls the sceptre's lustre, which symbolises his degenerative rule. Richard's right to rule is negated through metaphors that detach politics

from Elizabethan moral doctrines, making rebellion more palatable. The body politic was central to Elizabethan monarchy, and Elizabeth's own claim that 'I am Richard II' (Scott-Warren, 209) underscores the play's subversive potential in exploring the theatricality of English politics; Richard loses public favour due to his weak rule, but his eventual loss of power is ultimately because the nobles successfully act as if their actions do not contradict foundational political and moral beliefs. *Richard II* critiques English politics by showing how these doctrines can be theatrically manipulated to justify treason. This manipulation is a staged, theatrical process: avoiding direct discussions of blasphemy, the nobles frame Richard as a threat to England to necessitate rebellion.

Richard's deposition scene exposes the theatricality underpinning Early Modern English monarchy. Richard's divine right, an unprovable claim to power, relies on performance to sustain authority, so fittingly, his loss of power is equally performative. Richard's deposition scene is self-consciously a 'woeful pageant' (4.1.321), diverging from Holinshed's *Chronicles,* which state that Richard remained imprisoned while his abdication was merely read aloud, rather than performed with an audience like in the play (Watts, 17). By making the power transfer a spectacle, the play reinforces anxieties that political power is not intrinsic, but rather constructed and dependent on public perception. Despite reframing Bolingbroke's rebellion as morally justified, the nobles' need for Richard to publicly depose himself reveals this as a conscious gloss over their political misdeeds. Evidently, their morality is fluid, reshaping political doctrines to suit their ambitions; after negating the Divine Right of Kings by rebelling, they force Richard to publicly 'Adopt' Bolingbroke as 'heir' (4.1.109). Heavy with irony, 'adopt' suggests falsely that Richard has a choice while also implicitly acknowledging the illegality of their rebellion in superseding the Divine Right of Kings only to then leverage it in authorising Bolingbroke. By forcing this adoption, the rebels manipulate political doctrines while maintaining a superficial front of legitimacy.

Richard II ultimately asserts that power is gained through acting and hollow performances, contingent on appearance rather than reality.

This focus on appearance is evident in the visual transfer of Richard's crown—a key example of theatricality's role in politics—as the crown becomes a prop embodying the materiality of power, its transfer dramatised as visual spectacle. Its transfer onstage embodies political tension in its prolonged awkwardness, moving erratically from officers' hands to Richard's: 'Give me the crown. – Here, cousin, seize the crown' (4.1.181). The deposition, loaded with a sense of acting, culminates the play's theatricality; Bolingbroke, well-aware of his illegitimate rebellion, claims he 'thought [Richard] had been willing to resign' (4.1.190), with 'thought' falsely conveying plausible deniability and 'resign' suggesting Richard's, and by extension God's, choice. Despite full awareness of his treason, Bolingbroke acts as reluctant heir, not forcefully 'seiz[ing]' the crown, but waiting for Richard to 'give [it] away' (4.1.208). The transfer is turbulent, with Richard claiming readiness ('I am' 4.1.191) before reversing this, saying 'Ay, no; no, ay: for I must nothing be' (4.1.201). The pun on 'ay' and 'I' reflects Richard's self-annihilation; in losing his crown, his sense of self disintegrates, which is further reflected in the disjointed syntax. This depletion of identity, performed in front of an audience, reinforces the performative nature of kingship; his theatrical resignation in handing over the crown contrasts his actual unwillingness to surrender, are conveyed by his self-destruction and self-contradiction ('Ay, no; no, ay').

In conclusion, the inherent theatricality evidences a chilling disconnect between political reality versus its appearance, revealing the ability of politicians to act in ways that can moralise misdeeds, like performing the overthrow as an 'adopt'-ive, morally resolute inheritance rather than treason. The crown leaving Richard's hands signals an end to genuine belief in divine succession, with authority instead hinging on public perception. The implication that the English monarchy is led by 'actor[s]' (5.2.24) conveys a reliance on

public performance to theatrically manipulate morals. Such performance superficially recasts the appearance of a problematic political landscape so as to render usurpation indistinguishable from rightful rule. Thus, *Richard II* reflects the political turmoil of the late Elizabethan period, exposing the monarchy itself as a theatre in which power is not divinely inherited but performed, destabilising the very foundation of monarchic legitimacy.

Works Cited

Bergeron, David M. "'Richard II' and Carnival Politics." *Shakespeare Quarterly*, vol. 42, no. 1, 1991, p. 33, https://doi.org/10.2307/2870651.

Elliott, John R. "History and Tragedy in Richard II." *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, vol. 8, no. 2, 1968, p. 253, https://doi.org/10.2307/449658.

"Elizabeth I: Marriage and Succession." *Royal Museums Greenwich*, 2022, www.rmg.co.uk/stories/royal-history/elizabeth-i-marriage-succession. Accessed 26 Feb. 2025.

Scott-Warren, Jason. "Was Elizabeth I Richard II?: The Authenticity of Lambarde's 'Conversation.'" *The Review of English Studies*, vol. 64, no. 264, Oxford University Press, Apr. 2013, pp. 208–30, https://doi.org/10.1093/res/hgs062. Accessed 23 Apr. 2023.

Shakespeare, William. *Richard II*. Edited by Cedric Thomas Watts, Wordsworth, 2013.

Warhaft, Sidney. "The Mystery of Hamlet." *ELH*, vol. 30, no. 3, Sept. 1963, p. 193, https://doi.org/10.2307/2872035.

Watts, Cedric. "Introduction." *Richard II*, William Shakespeare, Wordsworth, 2013, pp. 9–24.