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## Richard II: *Folly, Degeneracy and Deformity*

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### *Folly and Degeneracy*

The paradoxical wisdom of folly is less manifestly apparent in *Richard II* than in plays such as *Twelfth Night* and *King Lear*, which contain fully-fledged wise fools who question the values of the sensible world. However, insofar as Shakespeare employs five voices—the Duchess of Gloucester, the dying Gaunt whose voice is like that of a “prophet new-inspired” (*R2*, II.i.31),<sup>1</sup> the two Gardeners and the Welsh Captain—that are estranged from the values of Richard’s court to comment upon two ideas of central importance to the play’s action, the “witless wisdom” (Ryan, p. 94) of folly is present in this play. It is these characters that make manifest the link between the king’s personal degeneracy and the degeneration of England.

In Shakespeare’s histories, the concept of degeneracy is frequently employed as a byword for a disregard for the values of the established order; in this connection, it has an affinity with the word “folly”, signifying a dangerous, even sinful, misapprehension.<sup>2</sup> According to Bolingbroke, Richard was “unhappied and dis-

1 All quotations from Shakespeare are from *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Greenblatt *et al.*

2 See *OED*, defs. 1a, c, 2a, b.

figured clean” by Bushy and Green because they “Made a divorce betwixt his queen and him” and “Broke the possession of the royal bed” (III.i.10, 12, 13). Ironically, of course, it is Bolingbroke who is responsible for Richard’s being “Doubly divorced”, breaking “A twofold marriage: ’twixt my crown and me, / And then betwixt me and my married wife” (V.i.71, 72-73). As the word “degenerate”’s etymological root implies—from the Latin *genus*, which signifies “birth, descent, origin; offspring; kind; race; family; nation or gender” (*Oxford Latin Dictionary*, s.v., 1)—the noun “degenerate”, which comes from the adjective, is “One who has lost, or has become deficient in, the qualities considered proper to the race or kind; a degenerate specimen; a person of debased physical or mental constitution” (*OED*, s.v., 1). In Richard’s case, this is bound up with property in general and primogeniture in particular. Because of his extortion of the commons and because he has “gelded” his cousin Hereford of his “patrimony”, Northumberland considers him a “Most degenerate king” (II.i.238, 263).<sup>3</sup>

The aberrant sexual behaviour of Holinshed’s Richard attracts the chronicler’s scorn because it threatens the legitimacy of the royal *genus* and because the king’s behaviour is supposed to be exemplary. Holinshed comments, in an observation absent in Polydore Vergil (his main source),<sup>4</sup> that Richard committed the “filthie sinne of lecherie and fornication, with abhominable adulterie, *speciallie in the king*” (Bullough, ed., p. 408 [my emphasis])—this particular vice is one of Richard’s “follies” (IV.i.275) in the now obsolete sense of folly as “lewdness” or “wantonness” (*OED*, def. 3a). To be degenerate is to violate the past by flouting the deep-rooted expectations or opinion of how you should behave in the present or how you will behave in the future. Thus it is to shatter the petrified historical constructs of form and precedence. When Hotspur reports to Henry IV the instrumental prodigal Hal’s mockery of chivalric conceits, the Prince’s contempt for the established order of things is palpable. Rather than holding court with his father, Hotspur reports that Hal has said that he intends to go to the “stews, / And from the common’st creature pluck a glove, / And wear it as a favour, and with that / He would unhorse the lustiest challenger” (V.iii.20-23).

Paving the way for *Henry IV*, Parts One and Two, in which it is of central importance, the concept of degeneracy is subjected to close (and critical) scru-

3 In a probable dramatic source for Shakespeare, the anonymous *Thomas of Woodstock*, Lancaster (John of Gaunt) also employs this word to describe Richard: “A heavy charge, good Woodstock, hast thou had / To be Protector to so wild a prince, / So far degenerate from his noble father” (I.i.27-29).

4 See Rosenstein, p. 143.

tiny at the close of *Richard II*. Moments after Hotspur and Henry IV have discussed Hal's aberrant behaviour, the theme is replayed in Aumerle's thwarted attempt to depose Henry (his uncle)—a degenerate king according to the rules of primogeniture. Aumerle's father, York, in what his wife argues is an action that violates the bonds of kinship, betrays his son to the king and is praised by the latter as a paradigm of constancy: "O loyal father of a treacherous son! / Thou sheer, immaculate, and silver fountain, / From whence this stream through muddy passages / Hath held his current and defiled himself" (V.iii.57-61). It is primarily through the idea of degeneracy—either from the head of the body politic or from one's family—that Shakespeare dramatises the dialectic between the individual and society in *Richard II*. We must not forget it is the actions of Bolingbroke, a character bound to the preservation of his *genus*, that cause the social and political upheaval, the deposition, which the play dramatises.

Despite Richard's protestations to the contrary, "the breath of worldly men" can and indeed does "depose / The deputy elected by the Lord" (III.ii.52-53). For, as Katharine Eisaman Maus notes, "If being a king and having a kingdom were completely inseparable—if the realm, were, so to speak, permanently soldered to the monarch—usurpation would be an impossibility" (p. 26). Moreover, it is hard to say who is more degenerate: Hal or Henry, York or Aumerle. The play dramatises the fall of a degenerate king's realm into the hands of one whose claim is degenerate because it breaks with the rules of inheritance. In terms of legitimacy—a concept which underpins the idea of degeneracy, since one must degenerate from a legitimate position in society, one's family or moral standing—the play's action lies somewhere between Scylla and Charybdis.

But a second, perhaps richer, vein of degeneracy is to be found in the way the concept of legitimacy—along with the intimately related concept of honour—is used by the play's nobility as a mask for a wholly instrumental set of relations, premised entirely on self-preservation and self-aggrandisement. The discord with which the play opens, in which the "ceremonious form of the appeal of treason" (Maus, p. 4) is used to cloak Hereford's knowledge of Richard's complicity in Woodstock's murder, is followed by the scene in which John of Gaunt is upbraided by his brother's widow. She accuses him of being degenerate because he—one of "Edward's seven sons", one of "seven vials of his sacred blood" (I.ii.11-12)—fails to avenge his brother's murder:

Thou dost consent  
In some large measure to thy father's death

In that thou seest thy wretched brother die,  
 Who was the model of thy father's life.  
 Call it not patience, Gaunt, it is despair.  
 In suff'ring thus thy brother to be slaughtered  
 Thou show'st the naked pathway to thy life,  
 Teaching stern murder how to butcher thee.  
 That which in mean men we entitle patience  
 Is pale cold cowardice in noble breasts. (25-34)

She attempts to motivate Gaunt's action in the present by recalling memories of an idealised past. For the second time in the play, we see the Christian value of turning the other cheek bow to ideals of honour—Mowbray and Hereford have already refused Richard's (admittedly feeble) demand that they "Forget, forgive, conclude and be agreed" (I.i.156). The chivalric honour (see I.i.182, 183, 184, 191) that both men invoke fractures their bond of obedience to the king. Not only the authority of a king, but also the virtue of patience—pejoratively linked in the Duchess's speech to "mean men" and "pale cold cowardice"—means less to these characters than appearing to be honourable.

The ironies of the Duchess of Gloucester's speech expose the self-serving core of the concept of legitimacy. She appeals to Gaunt's sense of pride and then his desire for self-preservation, rather than the desire to defend his *genus*, which one might have suspected to be, to a certain extent, innate. "Old John of Gaunt" may indeed be "time-honoured" (I.i.1)—as per Richard's formal epithet, with which this play opens—but, despite his defence of absolute regal authority, the assumption that Gaunt embodies the values of the good old days of chivalry is undermined early in the play by the Duchess's speech.

In *Thomas of Woodstock*, the tyrant Richard is impressed that Tresilian—a "Janus-like" (I.ii.65) fawning lawyer and parasite—has thought up the idea of "Blank charters, to fill up our treasury, / Opening the chests of hoarding cormorants / That laugh to see their kingly sovereign lack" (III.i.7-9). Shakespeare reverses the significance of the bestial image of the gluttonous cormorant to describe the voracious greed of Richard's inner circle.<sup>5</sup> In a desperate plea for the king to, in Northumberland's words, "make high majesty look like itself" (R2, II.i.297), Gaunt piles one commonplace about the perils of prodigality onto

5 Ralph Robinson's 1551 translation of More's *Utopia* renders the Latin "*helluo*", which signifies "glutton" (see More, ed. Miller, pp. 64-68), as "cormorant" (More, ed. Bruce, p. 22). This word is used in Hythloday's attack on the Tudor enclosures to describe the voracious sheep eating away the livelihoods of the poor, all in the name of the production of a profitable commodity, wool.

another, suggesting that the ruthless pursuit of self-interest is only ever self-destructive:

He tires betimes that spurs too fast betimes.  
With eager feeding food doth choke the feeder.  
Light vanity, insatiate cormorant,  
Consuming means, soon preys upon itself. (II.i.36-39)

Invoking the licence granted to fools and dying men, Gaunt inveighs against the madness into which society has degenerated. He concludes his famous praise of England, “This royal throne of kings, this sceptred isle” (II.i.40), by stating that England

Is now leased out—I die pronouncing it—  
Like to a tenement or pelting farm.  
England, bound in with the triumphant sea,  
Whose rocky shore beats back the envious siege  
Of wat’ry Neptune, is now bound in with shame,  
With inky blots and rotten parchment bonds.  
That England that was wont to conquer others  
Hath made a shameful conquest of itself. (59-66)

Evidently, Richard’s own “blank charters” (I.iv.48) turn out to be not so much writing that conquers as writing that deposes. However, his legal discourse, which seeks to order reality, illustrates the darker side of reason’s desire to categorise and put the world to use.

Once this desire is fulfilled, that which had been fixed becomes exchangeable—like Gaunt’s “coffers”, which are transformed to “make coats / To deck our soldiers for these Irish wars” (I.iv.60-61). The “shame” of which Gaunt speaks is connected to the king’s degeneracy in two interrelated ways. First, because he exults in the works of man, Richard is idolatrous. As David Hawkes explains:

The pursuit of fleshly pleasures or worldly goods indicates a misconstrual of the *telos* of the human being. To be carnal is to forget that the body is a means to a spiritual end. Such a fleshy consciousness will systematically reduce the spiritual to the material, the subjective to the objective. It is, in other words, a *fetishistic* consciousness. (p. 58)

As Gaunt makes clear, the “bonds” that enact this quantification are material: written script is ultimately perishable, liable to become “rotten”. To put one’s faith in such bonds, in humanly produced contracts rather than divine revela-

tion, is a misapprehension or folly that endangers the soul. Such a fetishistic consciousness is dangerously foolish, since it misapprehends the world, seeing it as possessing cornucopian plenitude, whereas, in and of itself, without the hope of salvation and resurrection, the world is barren, and human activity utterly bereft of significance.

Secondly, Richard's behaviour is utterly at odds with how a Christian prince should behave. As Erasmus argues at length in his *Institutio Principis Christiani* (1518), the earthly pomp and decadence that kings like Richard revel in can be measured only by the privations of their subjects.<sup>6</sup> Richard "wax[es] great" as a result of "others' waning" (2*H6*, IV.ix.18), in the manner that Shakespeare's Alexander Iden, ruminating in his country garden, considers to typify the modern world. Furthermore, by being captivated by the external signifiers of kingship, he actually negates it, for, as Erasmus explains in explicitly theatrical terms: "If all that makes a king is a chain, a sceptre, robes of royal purple, and a train of attendants, what after all is to prevent actors in a drama who come on stage decked with all the pomp of state from being regarded as real kings?" (p. 215). A consequence of such fetishism, then, is that it elides the distinction between a player king and a real one.

In desperation, Gaunt jokes about the similarities between his cadaverous appearance and his name. Without his property, his name is a free-floating signifier bereft of any material referent. The object of his erstwhile (idolatrous) pride becomes the object of his scorn. As Maus brilliantly shows (pp. 17ff.), the very names of the nobility attest to the way their identity—or *property* in the early modern sense of a distinguishing feature—is determined by what they own.

This piece of moribund humour is absent from Shakespeare's sources:

*King Richard.* Can sick men play so nicely with their names?

*John of Gaunt.* No, misery makes sport to mock itself.

Since thou doest seek to kill my name in me,

I mock my name, great King, to flatter thee.

*King Richard.* Should dying men flatter with those that live?

*John of Gaunt.* No, no, men living flatter those that die.

*King Richard.* Thou now a-dying sayst thou flatt'rest me.

*John of Gaunt.* O no: thou diest, though I the sicker be.

*King Richard.* I am in health; I breathe, and see thee ill.

6 See Erasmus, p. 225.



*John of Gaunt.* Now He that made me knows I see thee ill:  
Ill in myself to see, and in thee seeing ill.  
Thy deathbed is no lesser than thy land,  
Wherein thou liest in reputation sick. (II.i.84-96)

Gaunt's name has become as polysemous as a word in the mouth of a fool. Although Richard dismisses this critique as the words of a "lunatic lean-witted fool" (116), Gaunt, in the transvaluative manner of the wise fool, actually turns reality on its head by playing on the dual significance of the word "ill": the ill man is morally healthy; the healthy man is dangerously ill in moral terms. Gaunt ironically adopts the position of one of Richard's flatterers so as to warn him about the deceptive nature of their eloquent counsel, as opposed to his riddling wordplay, which is as erudite as Lear's Fool's castigations of his master, and far removed from the inarticulate language of lunacy. Because his son returns to England specifically to make good his name, Gaunt's self-deflation holds a residual significance: it creates a structural irony. Arguably, it tacitly makes a mockery of Henry's entire project of reclaiming his birthright.

As Jonathon Baldo contends, history consists as much of "erasure, rewriting and forgetting" (p. 67) as it does of remembrance, so to destroy the documentation of someone's existence is to write them out of history. This is precisely what Richard's flatterers attempt to do to Bolingbroke. His sense of vulnerability to historical erasure is palpable when, in a kangaroo court, he indicts them for *logocide*. They have

From my own windows torn my household coat,  
Razed out my imprese, leaving me no sign,  
Save men's opinions and my living blood,  
To show the world I am a gentleman. (III.i.24-27)

The proliferation of first-person pronouns in connection with his property certainly supports Maus's argument. Furthermore, Bolingbroke's return makes it clear that concerns about the duplicity and mutability of words in the face of the reality they purport to signify are not simply a problem of representation: for words shape history.

## Deformities

To examine the theme of history's form and deformity, it is necessary to consider the exchange between the Gardeners, absent from the sources, which puts the historical narrative of the nobles and gentry on hold. Far from offering comic relief—an idea commonly used to discount the significance of fools (wise and otherwise), plebeian characters and clowns alike—their exchange is rife with tensions, tensions that resonate throughout the play. As with the Clowns in *Hamlet*, the Porter in *Macbeth* and Falstaff's language of exuberant corporality in *Henry IV*, Parts One and Two, the language of these plebeian characters not only reflects upon the main action, but also betrays an uncanny grasp of significant patterns of imagery, tropes and metaphor that run throughout the "serious" action of the play. Furthermore, they "brush history against the grain" (Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History", p. 258), deforming the received account of history by their very presence. In particular, these men, who work up to their elbows in matter, but speak in elegant blank verse, display an intuitive grasp of a conflict at the heart of Shakespeare's representation of history: namely, the antinomical nature of historical narration. The problem with an unreflexive and objective narration of history is that its own form belies it. In one of the very first theorisations of historical practice, Lucian's "How to Write History", the satirist contends that the object of history is, in a certain sense, an aesthetic one, since it is to "superinduce upon events the charm of order" (Lucian, p. 132). To write history is to give the formal organisation intrinsic in representation—something, which in an objective sense, is *not*—to the formless multiplicity of what has been.

Perhaps this tension accounts for the striking contrast between form and chaos in the exchange between these two characters and, indeed, in the play as a whole:

*Gardener* [to First Man]. Go, bind thou up yon dangling apricots  
Which, like unruly children, make their sire  
Stoop with oppression of their prodigal weight.  
Give some supportance to the bending twigs.  
[To Second Man] Go thou, and, like an executioner,  
Cut off the heads of too fast-growing sprays  
That look too lofty in our commonwealth.  
All must be even in our government.

You thus employed, I will go root away  
 The noisome weeds which without profit suck  
 The soil's fertility from wholesome flowers.

*First Man.* Why should we, in the compass of a pale,  
 Keep law and form and due proportion,  
 Showing as in a model our firm estate,  
 When our sea-wallèd garden, the whole land,  
 Is full of weeds, her fairest flowers choked up,  
 Her fruit trees all unpruned, her hedges ruined,  
 Her knots disordered, and her wholesome herbs  
 Swarming with caterpillars?

*Gardener.* Hold thy peace.  
 He that hath suffered this disordered spring  
 Hath now himself met with the fall of leaf.  
 The weeds which his broad spreading leaves did shelter,  
 That seemed in eating him to hold him up,  
 Are plucked up, root and all, by Bolingbroke. (III.iv.30-53)

This exchange offers a précis of the play's themes and imagery. Prodigal offspring that threaten to destroy the achievements of their fathers must be "Cut off" to prevent lasting damage to the abundance of England. This "sea-wallèd garden" is infested with parasitical creatures and "weeds". In addition to echoing Bolingbroke's description of himself as a gardener and the king's flatterers as "caterpillars of the commonwealth, / Which I have sworn to weed and pluck away" (II.iii.165-66), as with the image of the "cormorants", Shakespeare inverts the significance that the image of the "caterpillars" accrues in the second half of the source.<sup>7</sup> In the latter part of *Woodstock*, Tresilian's trickster-servant, Nimble, insults a group of common people, from whom he is extorting money, by calling them "caterpillars" (III.iii.145), while here the word is re-employed by a worker to describe the venality of "the Earl of Wiltshire, Bushy, Green" (R2, III.iv.54).

This imagery of parasitical existence is significant not only because it attests to how the grotesque register lies at the heart of the play, but also because it is associated with the nature of dramatic representation in the period. For instance,

7 As Richard Hillman shows, this word was previously employed in *Woodstock* to describe Richard's flatterers (p. 178). Moreover, "According to *OED*, 'caterpillar' had been applied for roughly a century to social parasites; playwrights may have especially relished the term, given Stephen Gosson's 1579 polemic, *The Schoole of Abuse, Conteyning a plesent inuectiue against Poets, Pipers, Plaiers, Iesters, and such like Caterpillers of a Commonwealth*" (Hillman, p. 223n7); my thanks to Prof. Hillman for drawing my attention to this fact.

*A second and third blast of retrait from plaies and theaters* (1580), the second part of which is sometimes attributed to Anthony Munday,<sup>8</sup> like many of the contemporary anti-theatrical polemics, views theatre as a degenerate activity, which tempts its audiences, who “prodigally consume” (p. 21) this commodity, to replicate the atrocities they see on stage: real-life desires and emotions are dangerously easily infiltrated by represented ones. People’s “insatiable desire [for] filthy pleasure” (p. 21) of the theatre not only allures “scholars . . . from their studies” (pp. 76-77), but, far worse, is intrinsically idolatrous: “we despise the Lordes table, and honor Theaters; at a worde, we loue al things, reuerence al things, God alone seemeth vile to vs” (pp. 16-17). One need only think of the modern notion of the matinee idol to observe the continuing association between actors and idols.

The tract continues, observing that itinerant players debase their patrons both financially and morally:

since the reteining of these *Caterpillers*, the credite of Noble men hath decaied, & they are thought to be couetous by permitting their seruants, which cannot liue of themselues, and whome for neerenes they wil not maintaine, to liue at the deuotion or almes of other men, passing from countrie to countrie, from one Gentlemans house to another, offering their seruice, which is a kind of beggerie. (pp. 75-76)

Obviously, the actor’s art and the plays themselves are commodities. Thus they are objects of the implacable desire that characterises a fetishistic consciousness, which, never satisfied, restlessly and relentlessly shifts from desiring one thing to another. Shakespeare’s telling of history, however, makes it apparent that through theatre, a commodity, the dangers of an objectifying or fetishistic consciousness, which, as we have seen, reduces kingship to stage playing, can be diagnosed. Richard is captivated by the signifiers of authority; and in this he is like the idolatrous tyrant of the *Trauerspiel*, of whom Benjamin writes, “His unfaithfulness to man is matched by his loyalty to those things [the symbols of kingship] to the point of being absorbed into contemplative devotion to them” (*The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 156).

In contrast to the plebeian characters in the rest of the Second Tetralogy, the Gardeners speak with “law and form and due proportion”. This registers

8 The first blast, implicit in the title, is Gosson’s *The School of Abuse*; the “second blast” is a partial translation of the fifth-century treatise *De gubernatione Dei*, by Salvian of Marseilles; in the “third blast”, the author compares the observations of the “second blast” with the theatre of the late sixteenth century.

the play's obsession with form and formality in the face of material disorder, the way in which weeds tend to grow even in the most carefully maintained of gardens. Analogies between the state of the nation and the state of a garden—ill-maintained or otherwise—abound in both of the play's two main sources. In *Woodstock*, Lancaster reflects on the duties and achievements of himself and his brothers, making the comparison between statecraft and gardening:

Thus princely Edward's sons in tender care  
Of wanton Richard and their father's realm  
Have toiled to purge fair England's pleasant field  
Of all those rancorous weeds that choked the grounds  
And left her pleasant meads like barren hills. (V.vi.1-5)

Likewise, in Holinshed, horticultural degeneration acquires a providential significance. In the year of Richard's deposition, "old baie trees withered, and afterwards, contarie to all mens thinking, grew greene againe, a strange sight, and supposed to import some unknowne event" (ed. Bullough, p. 396).

Shakespeare puts this providential rendering of history into the mouth of the Welsh captain, so as to gesture towards the abuse of history, the way in which giving form to multiplicity, a process intrinsic to representation, can lead to manifestly erroneous conclusions:

'Tis thought the king is dead. We will not stay.  
The bay trees in our country are all withered,  
And meteors fright the fixèd stars of heaven.  
.....  
And lean-looking prophets whisper fearful change.  
Rich men look sad, and ruffians dance and leap;  
The one in fear to lose what they enjoy,  
The other to enjoy by rage and war.  
These signs forerun the death or fall of kings. (R2, II.iv.7-9, 11-15)

Of course, the irony is that, for all his dire imagery of the *mundus inversus*, it is the Welshman's decision to leave that is in no small part responsible for the earth-shattering event he foresees in the stars. When the Gardener, silencing the protests of the First Man, suggests that Richard's fall is a result of his tolerance of a "disordered spring", the tension between historical allegorisation, in which Richard indulges, and personal agency, which Bolingbroke employs to its full power, comes to the fore. The Gardener evokes images of autumnal, natural

decomposition when he uses the “fall of leaf” as a metaphor for Richard’s fall. But he also makes it clear that this fall is not part of an organic cycle. It is the consequence of an intervention, for Bolingbroke has “plucked up” these “weeds”, Richard’s parasitical flatterers, “root and all”.

Shakespeare uses the Gardeners to reflect upon the history in which the other characters are embroiled. England, the Gardeners make clear, is “full of weeds” not because the land or some higher power somehow intuitively senses Richard’s fall, but because the lethal combination of Richard’s prodigal kingship and Bolingbroke’s ambition has created chaos. Furthermore, this interlude illustrates an idea about history which becomes increasingly apparent in Shakespeare’s telling of it: what appears natural—be it the orderly and productive state or its microcosmic analogy, the garden—is a consequence of man’s efforts. As in the demonic Iago’s horticultural analogy, “Virtue, a fig! ’Tis in ourselves that we are thus or thus. Our bodies are our gardens, to which our wills are gardeners” (*Oth.*, I.iii.316-18), the garden here epitomises the way in which reason projects its own desires and demands onto what it calls nature.

The Gardener’s reflection, “All must be even in our government”, makes clear the link between statecraft and representation: the former must be even-handed and calm, while the latter lends an “even” form to reality’s multiplicity—the idea towards which I have been gesturing. The Gardener also echoes the under-garrisoned York’s abrupt reflection, after a series of self-interruptions, that “All is uneven” (II.ii.121), from shortly before; this discontinuous utterance lapses from mainly iambic pentameters into a fragmented line consisting of a dactyl followed by a trochee,<sup>9</sup> reflecting metrically what his panicked observation denotes.

On the one hand, if we read the Second Man’s observation fairly literally—“Why should we, in the compass of a pale, / Keep law and form and due proportion?”—then it poses a potentially incendiary question: why *should* the working man “Keep law and form and due proportion”—obey and be productive—when those assumed to be his moral superiors consume all he produces and fail to adhere to seemingly natural laws. On the other hand, this comment is re-played in the deposed king’s reflection on his fall:

9 This line is presented as a fragment in the Norton/Oxford edition.

How sour sweet music is  
 When time is broke and no proportion kept.  
 So is it in the music of men's lives.  
 And here have I the daintiness of ear  
 To check time broke in a disordered string;  
 But for the concord of my state and time  
 Had not an ear to hear my true time broke.  
 I wasted time, and now doth time waste me,  
 For now hath time made me his numb'ring clock. (V.v.42-50)

He can sense aesthetic discord, a lack of “proportion”, but could not govern his state harmoniously. Even as Richard approaches death he remains, as Zenón Luis-Martínez puts it, an “allegory monger” (p. 690), preferring to make himself a hapless, albeit self-dramatising, victim of “time” in the *de casibus* vein,<sup>10</sup> rather than admitting that he has been deposed because of human action.

Indeed, “When Richard asks the Queen to tell his ‘lamentable tale’”, writes Lukas Lammers, “he explicitly asks for a particular version of his suffering to be passed on. Significantly, however, this tale does not simply coincide with that the play has shown” (p. 153). Richard’s “lamentable fall” does not “send the hearers weeping to their beds”, nor do they, as he supposes, when—with characteristic modesty—he compares himself to Christ, “mourn in ashes, some coal black, / For the deposing of a rightful king” (V.i.44, 45, 49-50). The particularities of the present historical moment are tacitly devalued through the suggestion that Richard’s story is just another example of a general theme, one of many “sad stories of the death of kings” (III.ii.152).

It is primarily through estranged voices—the widow, the rustic clowns, the dispossessed Gaunt and the superstitious Welshman—that *Richard II* critiques its diverse (and, at times, contradictory) historical sources, rather than simply replicating their assumptions. It comes as little surprise in a text so vitally concerned with how to write history that Shakespeare provides a clue for the play’s interpretation, one which engages the pervasive imagery of visual and cerebral reflection in the play. This clue is furnished by a historically irrelevant—but dramatically essential—interpolation, the dialogue between the young queen and Bushy about her objectless “unborn sorrow” (II.ii.10). Bushy’s attempt to cheer her up is drawn from the seriocomic world of anamorphic paintings, suggesting that her sorrow at losing the king is what generates her uncanny premonitions:

10 See Budra, pp. 85-95.

For sorrow's eye, glazèd with blinding tears,  
Divides one thing entire to many objects —  
Like perspectives, which, rightly gazed upon,  
Show nothing but confusion; eyed awry,  
Distinguish form. (II.ii.16-20)

Through a form that does not make positive truth claims in the manner that chronicles must necessarily do, Shakespeare enables the audience to view history “awry” through these five marginal voices, silent in his sources. This telling of history shows how such estranged voices can point out the folly—in the sense of misapprehension—of history’s victors, those who usually authorise the past.

In this respect, Shakespeare sketches out a kind of history, developed in the rest of the Tetralogy, that corresponds with Adorno’s injunction in *Minima Moralia* that

Perspektiven müßten hergestellt werden, in denen die Welt ähnlich sich versetzt, verfremdet, ihre Risse und Schründe offenbart, wie sie einmal als bedürftig und entstellt im Messianischen Lichte daliegen wird.<sup>11</sup> (p. 283)

The dominant values and ideals of the Ricardian age, the historical narratives from which the play draws, and the anti-theatrical polemics of Shakespeare’s time are viewed askance, through fiction, so as to shed light on the contradictions and irrationalities inherent within them. While Luis-Martínez is not entirely wrong to suggest that Shakespeare’s play views history as “a mournful experience” (p. 676) of perpetual catastrophe—the deposition that the play dramatises catalyses the “civil butchery” (*iH4*, I.i.13) that the two parts of *Henry IV* stage so vividly—it is necessary to add that the perspective from which these catastrophes are viewed is that of a future in which any narrative of history’s progression takes into account the persons and ideas that have been destroyed or muted in the name of progress.

Like the anamorphic painting to which it alludes, this play—with its insistently self-dramatising tyrant, its suspiciously eloquent rustics and its dialectical assault on what passes for the values of honour and legitimacy—foregrounds its own artifice, its removal from the world, so as to illuminate the intellectual paucity and moral bankruptcy of the serious “real” world, foolishly hoodwinked by appearances.

11 “Perspectives must be produced that move and estrange the world, reveal it to be, with its cracks and crevices, as abject and disfigured as it will one day appear in the messianic light”; my translation.



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- A second and third blast of retrait from plaies and theaters the one whereof was sounded by a reuerend byshop dead long since; the other by a worshipful and zealous gentleman now aliue: one showing the filthines of plaies in times past; the other the abhominacion of theaters in the time present: both expresly prouing that that common-weale is nigh vnto the curse of God, wherein either plaiers be made of, or theaters maintained. Set forth by Anglo-phile Eutheo*. London: Henrie Denham, 1580. STC 21677.
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