

A BALANCE BETWEEN RICHARD'S "TONGUE" AND
BOLINGBROKE'S "TEETH": THE FEMININE AND
THE MASCULINE IN *RICHARD II*

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Feminist readings of *Richard II* continually try to redeem the feminine in this work and, accordingly, Richard himself, who is associated with the feminine. Critics often look to Isabel, Richard's queen, to re-legitimise her husband and, consequently, validate the importance of the feminine. For instance, Helen Ostrovich sees Isabel as a metaphorical reminder of Richard's divine right to rule: "a reading of the play that looks at Richard through Isabel establishes Richard as God's vicar on earth, the true king anointed in God's name" (24). And, similarly, Jean E. Howard and Phyllis Rackin interpret Isabel as "the mystical warrant for Richard's legitimacy" (157). However, these attempts to elevate the female must, to a degree, overlook the marginalisation and negation of the feminine in the play. There are only five female characters, two of whom are Isabel's ladies who collectively speak a total of six lines. Furthermore, Isabel herself only appears in three scenes and speaks a mere one hundred and twenty-eight lines. Thus, the female gender clearly occupies a marginal position in the play. Additionally, the value of the feminine, as a characteristic, is also negated within the text. Shakespeare's twinning of Richard II with the feminine directly parallels the king's fall from power. However, while certainly not valourising the feminine, the tone of the play shifts at the end, thus questioning the superiority of the male and the masculine. In this article, I will trace the trajectory of both the masculine and the feminine in *Richard II*. First, the text hints at Richard's femininity and foreshadows his downfall; then, it directly connects Richard with the feminine as he falls from power; and, lastly, it interrogates the apparent dominance of the masculine in order to enable, at least partially, the elevation of the female.

As the play opens, Richard is depicted as contrary to the typically male impulse to act, a characterisation which not only separates him from the male but also provides the catalyst for his fall. The scene is "an 'appeal for treason,' a kind of trial already archaic in Shakespeare's time, in which plaintiff and defendant present their cases in . . . person before the King, who instantly dispenses justice" (Maus 943). Bolingbroke accuses Mowbray of treasonous behaviour and, as Mowbray throws down his gage, challenging Bolingbroke to a duel, Richard intervenes to prompt reconciliation through discussion rather than through battle: "Let's purge this choler without letting blood. / This we

prescribe, though no physician: / Deep malice makes too deep incision; / Forget, forgive, conclude, and be agreed” (1.1.153-6). However, this preference for speech over action stands in direct opposition to the more masculine impulses of Bolingbroke:

O God defend my soul from such deep sin!
 Shall I seem crest-fallen in my father's sight?
 Or with pale beggar-fear impeach my height
 Before this out-dared dastard? Ere my tongue
 Shall wound my honour with such feeble wrong,
 Or sound so base a parle, 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. (1.1.187-95)

In this hyperbolic statement, Bolingbroke juxtaposes speech, which Richard both uses and urges, with action, while associating the former with feebleness and dishonor. Bolingbroke's metonymy creates a visual image of the inferiority of the tongue, speech, when matched with the violent and powerful efforts of the teeth, action. In fact, he depicts the teeth as actually conquering the dishonorable impulses of the tongue, an image which foreshadows Bolingbroke's own victory over Richard. During the battle between Bolingbroke and Mowbray, this symbolic use of teeth and tongue imagery becomes central when Richard prevents Bolingbroke's masculine drive for action by drawing upon the power of words to banish the two men (1.3), a decision which leads to Bolingbroke's eventual retaliation and consequent victory. Thus, from the start, Richard and Bolingbroke emerge as representing opposing impulses. While Richard is associated with the feminine and inferior speech, Bolingbroke represents masculine and dominant action.

Furthermore, as Shakespeare's male characters, specifically Bolingbroke, increasingly align themselves with fellow males, Richard, in contrast, moves closer to his own feminisation by separating himself from his masculine ties. In John of Gaunt's attack upon Richard, he specifically highlights Richard's division from the legitimising line of male succession: “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, / Depositing thee before thou wert possessed” (2.1.104-7). In contrast, after John of Gaunt's death, Bolingbroke fulfills this process of succession, becoming a double for his father in the process: “Well, lord the Duke of Lancaster is dead. / And living too, for now his son is Duke” (2.1.225-6). Thus, Richard moves further away from an association with the masculine, a shift which mirrors his decreasing right to the throne, while Bolingbroke's masculinity and legitimacy continue to rise. As Howard and Rackin elucidate, “the binary opposition personalised in the conflict between [Bolingbroke] and

Richard is implicated in an early-modern ideology of ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’” (142). Hence, the play stages not only a battle for dominance between two men, but also between the masculine and the feminine. Moreover, the decreasing power of the feminised king reveals the emerging superiority of masculine principles.

In the early stages of the play Richard is paired with a man, Bolingbroke. However, it is notably Isabel who makes this connection, and the pairing proves to be weakening rather than empowering to Richard. Jeanie Grant Moore writes about Isabel’s speech in Act 2 Scene 2:

if Isabel’s child of sorrow is Bolingbroke, it follows that Richard’s must be his father – a fitting image since Bolingbroke will become Richard’s “heir” when he replaces Richard as king. Richard as the progenitor of Bolingbroke also suggests that from the nothingness of his imagined fears, Richard has created his own destruction in the form of Bolingbroke. The queen’s childbirth metaphor, from nothingness to the sorrow of Bolingbroke, replicates the concept of Richard as the author of his own fall from power. (23)

Moore sees Isabel as a reflection of Richard, providing “a visual medium through which we gain a new view of Richard’s experience,” a view which legitimises Richard (19). This reading concurs with the assertions of Helen Ostrovich, and of Howard and Rackin. However, I would argue that the imagery which Isabel uses in fact undermines her husband’s legitimacy. To begin with, Isabel, as a woman, does not take part in legitimising the male realm of the play. Her role in the line of succession can only be as a mother to one of these male heirs, which she takes on in her speech: “I, a gasping new-delivered mother” (2.2.65). However, fitting her restrictive gender role, the comparison she makes does not legitimise Richard; Bolingbroke becomes her “sorrow’s dismal heir” (2.2.63). Thus, as Moore points out, Bolingbroke emerges as the victor over Richard, usurping his throne. Isabel’s metaphorical connection of Richard and Bolingbroke does not have an empowering effect on Richard, but rather further foreshadows his impending feminisation and downfall.

As Moore illuminates, Richard becomes increasingly like the Queen; however, instead of proving a means of legitimising Richard, this feminisation instead mirrors and, in part, explains his downfall. Act 3 Scene 2 marks Richard’s first appearance after the power within the play has significantly shifted in favour of Bolingbroke. And, notably, it is in this scene that Richard completes the association of himself with the feminine: “As a long-parted mother with her child / Plays fondly with her tears, and smiles in meeting, / So, weeping, smiling, greet I thee my earth” (3.2.8-10). Richard views himself in the distinctly feminine role of mother. Thus, he becomes more like the Queen, who is by nature afforded this role. However, both Isabel’s and Richard’s metaphors prove

disempowering for the King. It is clearly Richard's feminisation which provides the ultimate reason for his downfall. His complete personal association with the female in this scene marks the point at which he relinquishes his power as king.

The association between Richard and his Queen is furthered over the course of the play and, accordingly, mirrors his unfitness to rule. Richard's tears and weeping in his 'mother speech' reoccur as he verbally resigns his right to rule to Bolingbroke:

We'll make foul weather with despised tears.
 Our sighs and they shall lodge the summer corn,
 And make a dearth in this revolting land
 Or shall we play the wantons with our woes,
 And make some pretty match with shedding tears;
 As thus to drop them still upon one place
 Till they have fretted us a pair of graves
 Within the art, and therein laid? (3.3.160-8)

Richard still tries to imagine that he retains some form of power, personifying his tears and imbuing them with the ability to create famine, games, and graves. However, the latter proves the only function of these womanly tears. Lisa Jardine writes about the connection between heroism, tears, and gender: "What is disturbing about the recumbent, weeping woman as female hero is not her qualities as such, but the fact that precisely those qualities *negate* the possibility for heroism in the male . . . In the male hero, weeping and swooning are the signs of vulnerability, of being 'all too human' . . . The female hero, on the other hand, is defined by that weakness, by her being *other than* manly" (author's emphasis, 193). Thus, Richard's weeping prevents the possibility of his ever regaining the power which he imagines he might still retain. The only function his tears serve is to reflect his fall from power. Feminised, he becomes like his "weeping queen," powerless in the political world of the play.

Richard's feminisation and the political redundancy in which it results are also reflected in his speech. The language which he employs both at his verbal surrender to Bolingbroke and at the official deposition feature heavily repetitive lists of renunciation, thus revealing his increasingly feminine role in the play. In his verbal surrender, he states:

I'll give my jewels for a set of beads,
 My gorgeous palace for a hermitage,
 My gay apparel for an almsman's gown,
 My figured goblets for a dish of wood,
 My scepter for a palmer's walking staff,
 My subjects for a pair of carved saints,
 And my large kingdom for a little grave. (3.3.146-52)

And, at his deposition, he tearfully admits defeat:

With mine own tears I wash away my balm,
 With mine own hands I give away my crown,
 With mine own tongue deny my sacred state,
 With mine own breath release all duteous oaths. (4.1.197-200)

Richard is always verbose; in fact, his control of language is his most admirable quality in the play. But, this characteristic also reflects his weakening inclination toward speech instead of action. And, as they do earlier in the play, his words here serve to further feminise and disempower him. While perhaps signifying an attempt to retain some agency, the unnecessary repetition of his resignation in these speeches highlights Richard's feminine qualities and his downfall. The repetition emphasises the fact that he is abdicating, again turning to speech instead of action, and giving up his crown instead of fighting Bolingbroke. Furthermore, these lists are redundant, detailing his resignation in far more words than necessary, thus mirroring Richard's own political redundancy. He no longer holds the fundamental political role of king. This sense of resignation is compounded by his continual use of the singular, "my" and "mine." The use of anaphora emphatically signals Richard's now 'singular' status. Richard is no longer king and, therefore, loses the plural, 'we' and 'our,' which signifies the king's two bodies. Thus, Richard's words and the structure of his speech reveal the same meaning: he has completely lost power; he is reduced to the singular.

At this point, Bolingbroke has officially become King Henry IV; however, this power shift also parallels a further change in the play's portrayal of the masculine and feminine. The ways in which characters are paired with their male and female counterparts proves integral to their positions of power and legitimacy within the world of the play. Richard continually turns away from masculine alliances, mirroring his fall from power and his feminisation. Thus, unsurprisingly, he concedes the only masculine pairing made for him in the text, that which Isabel made between himself and Bolingbroke, as he verbally renounces his kingship: "Cousin, I am too young to be your father, / Though you are old enough to be my heir" (3.4.202-3). However, whilst Bolingbroke characteristically aligns himself with masculine forces, in this instance, as heir to the throne, he is paired with Richard. York, Richard's uncle, fosters the alliance between the old and new king, "Richard, who with willing soul / Adopts thee heir, and his high sceptre yields / To the possession of thy royal hand. / Ascend his throne, descending now from him, / And long live Henry, of that name the fourth!" (4.1.99-103), a pairing which Bolingbroke unhesitatingly accepts, "In God's name I'll ascend the regal throne" (4.1.104). However, for the first time in the text, Bolingbroke is rebuked for the masculine impulses which both reflect his pursuit of the throne and this pairing

with Richard. Bishop Carlisle immediately chastises the new King Henry, painting his masculine impulses as divisive and delegitimising:

My lord of Hereford here, whom you call king,
Is a foul traitor to proud Hereford's king;
And, if you crown him let me prophesy
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. (4.1.125-34)

The masculine impulse to act which has been portrayed as both positive and legitimising over the course of the play here becomes as detrimental to male succession and power as Richard's feminine qualities have continually been shown to be. The repetition and alliteration of the parallel between Bishop's kin and kind emphasises the divisive effects of King Henry's masculine impulses. While Richard's feminisation weakens him, it also highlights his appreciation for family and community, through his association with the mother-figure, and his religious humility in both 3.3 and 4.1. King Henry's masculine impulses markedly contrast these characteristics. Thus, for the first time, the superiority of the male is called into question.

Furthermore, as King Henry is first rebuked for his masculine impulses and denied legitimacy through masculine pairings, Richard receives his first positive, legitimising male connection, albeit distinct from previous pairings between males of the English royalty which have occurred in the play. Richard, instead, becomes a double for Christ: "So Judas did to Christ. But He in twelve / Found truth in all but one; I, in twelve thousand, none" (4.1.161-2). The Bishop Carlisle's reminder of Richard's divine right to rule destabilises the superiority of King Henry's masculine impulses which use action to assert dominance. Richard readily takes up this stance, drawing a parallel between himself and Christ which finally legitimises his right to the throne.

This parallel between Richard and Christ also serves to remove the stigma associated with his feminine impulses, which constitute the main barrier between himself and the Crown. Richard again draws a connection between himself and Jesus, asserting his right to rule and reproaching his disloyal subjects, "Though some of you, with Pilate, wash your hands, / Showing outward pity, yet you Pilates / Have here delivered me to my sour cross, / And water cannot wash away your sin" (4.1.229-32). He continues this reprimand and insists upon his legitimacy whilst simultaneously displaying the very feminine impulses which led to his fall, "Mine eyes are full of tears; I cannot see. / And

yet salt water blinds them not so much / But they can see a sort of traitors here” (4.1.234-6). His feminine crying no longer seems to inhibit Richard’s right to rule. Instead, the Christ parallel allows for this to happen. For, as Richard wept over his deposition, so, in great sorrow for Lazarus’s death, “Jesus wept” (John 11:35). Thus, ironically, King Henry’s masculine overthrow of Richard is what finally legitimates Richard as king, making his feminine impulses acceptable.

Richard’s downfall completes the process of his feminisation, the two being intricately linked. However, in the end, instead of his feminine impulses validating his overthrow, his feminisation and deposition work together to render his story a tragedy. In his final meeting with Isabel, the parallels between Richard and his Queen come to completion: “So two together weeping make one woe” (5.1.86). In the feminine action of weeping, Richard and Isabel essentially become one person. Notably then, Isabel represents the person through whom Richard will be remembered as a legitimate king:

Tell thou the lamentable fall of me,
And send the hearers weeping to their beds;
For why the senseless brands will sympathize
The heavy accent of thy moving tongue,
And in compassion weep the fire out;
And some will mourn in ashes, some coal black,
For the deposing of a rightful king. (5.1.44-50)

His deposition cements Richard in the feminine position, “I must nothing be” (4.1.191). His tears and full identification with Isabel lament the tragedy of a king unrightfully deposed. Weeping becomes an integral part in the remembrance of Richard’s story. Richard weeps, Isabel weeps, and the hearers of his story too will be sent “weeping to their beds” (5.1.45). Thus, while the feminine and royal legitimacy prove opposing forces during his rule, in his downfall, the feminine emerges as his saving quality, rescuing his reputation.

In the end, it is not so much the feminine which is valourised, but the superiority of the masculine which is questioned, thus implying the vital need to balance the two. Richard’s predominately feminine rule proves unsatisfactory, as his impulses both instigate and signify his downfall. Yet, though his feminisation is paired with his fall from power, his feminine qualities, to an extent, redeem him in the end. The abuse of power associated with the masculine impulses of Henry IV triggers this partial redemption. Though incapable of successfully ruling because of the predominance of his feminine qualities, Richard is portrayed as a Christ-like tragic figure because of the active masculine world’s disregard for both feminine characteristics and religious concerns. Thus, Henry IV’s predominately masculine approach to kingship ultimately

proves to be a flaw. From this questioning of Henry IV's masculine rule and the partial redemption of Richard's feminine impulses, a third option emerges. Henry IV calls his son a "young wanton and effeminate boy" (5.3.10). The key word in this description is "effeminate." For Henry V, who becomes a great king whose reign is marked by his military prowess and masculine drive to action, the irony of being termed "effeminate" implies that the ideal leader should possess both masculine and feminine qualities.

This implication assumes further significance given the play's historical situation in the reign of Elizabeth I. Both positive and negative associations can be made between Shakespeare's own monarch and her predecessor, Richard. In exploring the possible link between Shakespeare's *Richard II* and the Essex Conspiracy, which undoubtedly staged a version of the play on the eve of its plot, Evelyn May Albright emphasises the link between Elizabeth and Richard: "was the general analogy between Richard II and Elizabeth sufficiently obvious to justify its use in a play? Apparently it was. Elizabeth recognised herself in Richard II, and so did several of her counselors and statesmen" (690). And, clearly, because of the use of *Richard II* in the Essex Conspiracy, the comparison was not seen as beneficial for Elizabeth:

the schematic oppositions between an idealized masculine past and a degraded effeminate present give way to expose the cultural contradictions that lay at the heart of Elizabethan nostalgia for the medieval past. In Richard's characterization – as in the case of Elizabeth herself – the polluting forces of effeminate modernity are embodied in the same person who represents the patrilineal royal authority they threaten to subvert. (Howard and Rackin, 147)

However, I would argue that Shakespeare's telling of the story does prove beneficial for the Queen. Jardine argues that Elizabethan portrayals of women were detrimental to feminist purposes:

It led to their reaching back into the literary past in search of representation which could redeem and enhance the majesty of the sovereign, *in spite of* her femaleness. And when I refer to 'the Elizabethans', I include Elizabeth herself amongst them. In playing extremely adeptly the game of statecraft she did so according to the patriarchal rules. And that meant contriving, and conniving in the 'double bind' evaluations of her own actions. (169)

Yet, it is this combination of the feminine and the masculine, the undeniable presence of femaleness in a person who successfully functions within these patriarchal rules, that presents a positive feminist message.

In a way, Richard and Elizabeth can be seen as the final pairing in the play. Juliet Dusinberre posits that "Shakespeare's plays, all of them and not just the comedies, reveal to audiences multiple instances of power structures under pressure, which can be

paralleled in Elizabethan and Jacobean society, politics and culture” (xlv). This suggestion particularly resonates with *Richard II*, as Howard and Rackin highlight:

the gendered opposition between Richard and [Bolingbroke] takes much of its force from the predicament of the English aristocracy at the time the play was produced . . . The anxiety was heightened during Elizabeth’s reign by the presence of the female monarch and by the queen’s transformation of the medieval culture of aristocratic honor from martial service to courtly display. (143)

Thus, the changing status of women and particularly Elizabeth’s presence on the throne effects the representation of the masculine and the feminine in Shakespeare’s plays:

revision of traditional thinking about women, together with the actual activities of women in society, not least those of Elizabeth herself in the manipulation of gender roles, created a ferment of new questions which animated the drama of Shakespeare and his contemporaries, and deserves the name feminist. (Dusinberre, xlv)

Ultimately, both a completely feminine reign, presented by Richard, and a completely masculine reign, presented by Henry IV, prove unsatisfactory in *Richard II*. The text thus suggests a combination of the masculine and the feminine as a solution, a pattern which Marilyn French finds throughout Shakespeare’s canon: “his work represents a lifelong effort to harmonize moral qualities he did associate with the two genders, and to synthesize opposing or seemingly opposed states and qualities” (16-17). And, which can perhaps best be embodied by the queen herself: “[Elizabeth’s] strength as an icon comes from an extraordinary marriage of her sense of special appointment – of being married to England and anointed by God – with her equal awareness of her relation to ordinary womanhood: her smock, her pastoral imagery, her weak body with the mind and heart of a man” (Dusinberre, xxiv). Jardine notes how portrayals of Elizabeth reflected this combination of the male and the female in one figure:

In the later years of Queen Elizabeth’s reign the phoenix became her emblem. It allowed England to celebrate her perpetual virginity, and thus her refusal to reproduce, whilst affirming in compliment to the old queen a confidence that at her death a suitable heir would miraculously emerge from the flames of her funeral pyre . . . Sex and gender attributes have been transposed. Because the phoenix, with all its affirmative connotations, has become female, by Royal Command, the turtle, with all its disturbing passive dependency has become male. (195)

Thus, Elizabeth represents the type of ruler propounded within *Richard II*, one which combines the gentleness of femininity, embodied by a kind of motherhood and religious humility, and the active impulses of masculinity.

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