

Chapter Two

Handling Tradition: Testament as Trade in *Richard II* and *King John*

*Richard II*¹ and *King John* exemplify Shakespeare's method of engaging the materiality of the playhouse to assist playgoers to handle the questions and dramatic conflicts of a play. The vertical and lateral planes of the architecture, the movement and gesture of the actors, the performance of costume and hand props are all artfully suited to the logical and embodied sense that is produced by silences and words. Voice, movement and stage stuff combine to produce a totality of dramatic tension, and in these plays the tension is palpably that which arises from interactions between the vertical, hierarchical order of tradition and the lateral, horizontal potential of trade. In Chapter One, where I outlined the etymological and stage significance of 'tradition' and 'trade', I stressed that Shakespeare does not assert a strict distinction between these ideas, but seeks to explore their playful and dramatic interaction. In *Richard II* and *King John*, Shakespeare presents worlds of traditional order in decline or under threat and invites playgoers to witness will expressed in these worlds in the language

¹ In all five quarto editions of the play published before the first folio of 1623, the play is called *The Tragedie of King Richard the Second*, but in the first folio it appears with the Histories as *The Life and Death of King Richard the Second*. The compositors might have borrowed the type-set already prepared for the preceding play in the collection, *The Life and Death of King John* (Charles R. Forker, *Richard II*, The Arden Shakespeare, third series (London: Bloomsbury, 2002), 179 n). In this chapter, all references to *Richard II* are to Forker's edition unless otherwise stated. References to *King John* are to E. A. J. Honigmann, *King John*, The Arden Shakespeare, second series (London: Methuen, 1954).

and actions of testament and trade. The participation of the playgoers as third party witnesses gives the performance a testamentary quality, but their participation is not passive. They are encouraged to subject the performance, and the will expressed in it, to a process of trial or testing. In legal testamentary terms they are invited to subject the will to ‘probate’ or ‘probation’,² which means that they are asked to approve what they have seen. I should stress again that as we think in testamentary terms, our focus should not be upon legal technicalities for their own sake but upon the ways in which the rhetorical, material and communal practices and effects of law are broadly akin to those of theatre. It has been said that modern playgoers approaching *Richard II* (and the same is true of *King John*), ‘are a bit like anthropologists dropped into a village just as a ritual begins; our task is to make sense of what we see’.³ The sense we are looking for ‘lies in the gesture, the object, the act, the person’ and ‘not in any secondary explanations, or reasons, or justifications’.⁴ To assist us in this task of sensing the full make-up of the play, Shakespeare presents on-stage witnesses, including manipulators and manual workers. They help the playgoers to handle the great questions raised by great events. In *King John*, the chief witness is Philip the Bastard; in *Richard II* it is the gardener.

² West describes probate as ‘probation of the testament’ (William West, *Symbolæography etc.* (London: Totthill, 1590), s.684).

³ James Boyd White, ‘Shakespeare’s *Richard II*: Imagining The Modern World’, in *Acts of Hope: Creating Authority in Literature, Law and Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), ch.2, 51.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 57.

When the gardener observes that the crown has been ‘quite thrown down’ by Richard’s ‘waste of idle hours’ (3.4.66), he plants a question in the minds of the playgoers.⁵ The question is whether Richard’s ‘waste’ is of the active or the passive sort. The word ‘idle’ suggests the former. The word ‘thrown’ suggests the latter. This question presents choices for the scene in which the physical crown changes hands from Richard to Bolingbroke. Should Richard cast it aside, or willingly hand it over, or willingly let it fall, or should he involuntarily lose his grip? If the latter, is it because of his own weakness or because of Bolingbroke’s force? There is talk of Richard’s ‘willing soul’ adopting Bolingbroke as his heir (4.1.109-10), but at the crux of the dramatic action Richard equivocates: ‘What you will have, I’ll give, and willing too; / For do we must what force will have us do’ (3.3.206-207). To the great advantage of the play, the text does not close the question of free will and possession of the crown, but leaves it to the playgoers to test the issues and reach conclusions. They might conclude that Richard’s neglect of the crown justified Bolingbroke’s possession of it, but however that question is settled on the surface it will merely disturb this deeper question: ‘can the destination of the crown be determined by individual will?’ That question had been revived by Henry VIII’s attempt to devolve the crown by his last will and

⁵ On the play’s capacity to constitute the playgoers as self-aware witnesses of the spectacle, see Bridget Escolme, *Talking to the Audience: Shakespeare, Performance, Self* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005). Phyllis Rackin argues that *Richard II* casts the playgoers in ‘a carefully calculated role’ (‘The Role of the Audience in Shakespeare’s *Richard II*’, *Shakespeare Quarterly* 36(3) (1985), 262–81, 263). See, also, Jeffrey S. Doty, ‘Shakespeare’s *Richard II*, ‘Popularity,’ and the Early Modern Public Sphere’, *Shakespeare Quarterly* 61(2) (2010), 183-205, 185.

testament and ‘was never settled’.⁶ Shakespeare declines to resolve the debate and instead exploits its dramatic tension. The debate is a deep one. It calls for nothing less than to ask whether the right to govern can pass by human handling or must be allocated by the lottery of birth and blood. Deeper still is the challenge to divine on which side of these possibilities the will of God is at work. For early modern playgoers, informed by such schools of thought as Richard Hooker’s ‘latitudinarian’ Anglicanism (which regarded individual piety as more important to God than traditional ecclesiastical structures), such issues translated into nascent political questions of democracy and personal election.⁷ Adam the gardener, representative of the Biblical Adam,⁸ was inviting the playgoers to question the power of individual agency to control events and to speculate with him that the high affairs of State might be better handled by common folk.

Let us suppose, as Andrew Gurr supposes, that Bolingbroke ‘sees the crown as the title to a property which can be bequeathed by will like the property of an ordinary titleholder’;⁹ still we never learn if Bolingbroke is right. The openness of such questions maintains the on-going life of the drama on the stage, and even in the study. We know that Bolingbroke took the crown into his own hands, but we are never sure if he stole it, or

⁶ Andrew Gurr ed, *King Richard II* (Cambridge: CUP, 2003), 20. On Henry VIII’s will, see Chapter One.

⁷ On Hooker’s influence, see Paul Raffield, *Shakespeare’s Imaginary Constitution: Late-Elizabethan Politics and the Theatre of Law* (Oxford: Hart, 2010), 23-33; and, White, *Acts of Hope*, ch.3.

⁸ He is ‘old Adam’s likeness, / Set to dress this garden’ of England’s ‘other Eden’ (3.4.72-3; 2.1.42), echoing Genesis 2:15. (Compare ‘Adam was a gardener’, *2H6*, 4.2.124.)

⁹ Gurr, *Richard II*, 20.

bargained for it, or merely picked up what had been dropped or thrown down. In *Richard II*, Richard calls Bolingbroke a thief (3.2.47), but it is not clear that Bolingbroke accepts the charge. Later in the tetralogy Henry admits that he ‘stole all courtesy from heaven’ (*IH4*, 3.2.50) and confesses on his deathbed that he ‘purchas’d’ (*2H4*, 4.5.199) the crown. At worst the word ‘purchase’ indicates theft, for Shakespeare sometimes uses it as a synonym for ‘steal’ (*IH4*, 2.1.91; *H5*, 3.2.42) as he does ‘convey’ (*R2*, 4.1.317), and at best it makes Bolingbroke an enterprising businessman. His language is financially loaded even when he talks of friendship (*R2*, 2.3.60-62). ‘Enterprise’ means ‘to take in hand’, and from Bolingbroke’s own mouth we learn, when he is king, that his ‘hands are full of business’ (*IH4*, 3.2.179). According to the gardener, even Richard himself ‘is in the mighty hold / Of Bolingbroke’ (*R2*, 3.4.83-84). In *I Henry IV*, Worcester regards Henry as an opportunist and alleges to his face ‘You took occasion... / To grip the general sway into your hand’ (*IH4*, 5.1.56-57). Whether this was enterprise or theft remains unclear. The dying Henry acknowledges that the crown ‘seem’d in me / But as an honour snatch’d with boist’rous hand’ (*2H4*, 4.5.190-191), but to say it ‘seem’d’ so is not to say it was. The question remains open.

The passing of the crown is not just a question of having or taking laterally within the horizons of opportunity. It is also necessarily a question of traditional descent. The question of descent is central to the play’s grand theme of Richard’s fall and Bolingbroke’s rise and it is amplified through the physical structures of the Elizabethan playhouse and stage. We consider two key episodes later in this chapter: Richard’s descent from the castle walls (3.3.178-182), followed by the narrated account of the citizens’ ascent to the ‘windows’ tops of London (5.2.1-6). Considered as a connected pair of scenes, these episodes have the effect of staging a democratic displacement of the king from his elevated position. Spatial inversion on stage mirrors upheaval in the State. The vertical vectors of the play and the antithetical

association of high to low is rendered dynamic by movement, props and such gestural points as the courteous bending of knees and the throwing down and picking up of gages.¹⁰ In the very first scene, in the quarrel between Bolingbroke and The Duke of Norfolk (Thomas Mowbray), we have in quick succession John of Gaunt's 'Throw down, my son, the Duke of Norfolk's gage' (1.1.161) and King Richard's 'Norfolk, throw down his. / ... / Norfolk, throw down, we bid' (1.1.162, 164). A kinaesthetic effect induced by the continuous ups and downs of the stage action amplifies the conceptual contrast between the highs and lows of the characters' fortunes and status.¹¹ The gardener's reference to the high crown 'thrown down' is one of many dynamic instances of the vertical vector of the play. Indeed the word 'thrown', by punning on 'throne', concentrates the antithesis in itself. The fact that the throne (more properly 'the state')¹² is a major stage property, but one that the actors cannot wield physically, means that it must be handled in the mind; as much by the playgoers as by the players. In contrast, the gages (gauntlets) are the hand prop par excellence. We will pick them up again before the end of this chapter. For now it is important to stress that they move across the stage horizontally as well as moving up and down through the vertical axis. Gages are exchanged hand to hand by a kind of trade bargain that implies documentary performance

¹⁰ See, generally, P. A. Jorgensen, 'Vertical Patterns in *Richard II*', *The Shakespeare Association Bulletin* 23(3) (1948), 119-134.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 119.

¹² 'Chairs of state on the Elizabethan stage...were not just centrally positioned on the horizontal axis...they were also raised on a 'halpace' or low dias', thus '[t]he monarch physically climbed up the steps to take his or her seat on the state' (Janette Dillon, *Shakespeare and the Staging of English History*, Oxford Shakespeare Topics (Oxford: OUP, 2012), 40).

made ‘under hand’. That is, with the signature or handwriting of the parties, hence Aumerle refers to his gage as a ‘manual seal’ (4.1.26).¹³ The legal and trade sense of the gage is clear in Mowbray’s declaration: ‘I... /... interchangeably hurl down my gage’ (1.1.145-6). In Shakespearean usage, the word ‘interchangeably’ is inseparable from the legal performance of trade bonds and other deeds. It is used later in the play to describe the setting down of ‘hands’ in sealing a document (5.2.98), as it is elsewhere (*IH4*, 3.1.77; *TC*, 3.2.56-7).

There is, of course, another puzzle posed by the gardener’s reference to the crown ‘thrown down’, beyond the immediate question of royal succession, and that is to know whose will is at work in the world and whose hand performs it. Intriguing here is the gardener’s observation that Richard has insufficient weight on his side of the balance: ‘In your lord’s scale is nothing but himself / And some few vanities that make him light’ (3.4.85-6). This may be an allusion to the supernatural, disembodied hand that wrote on the wall to warn King Belshazzar of his imminent downfall in the biblical *Book of Daniel*. The writing recorded the judgment that the king had been ‘weighed in the scale and found wanting’ (Daniel 5:27).¹⁴ However that may be, it is clear that the gardener, the manual worker, is inviting the playgoers to join with him in holding matters in the hands of the mind: grasping, wrestling, reshaping them, and weighing them in judgment. Shakespeare sometimes makes this invitation express, as when the chorus to *Henry V* concludes the first prologue by urging

¹³ The word ‘gage’ continues to have commercial connotations to this day, notably in the form of real security that goes by the name of ‘mortgage’.

¹⁴ Psalm 62:9 contains the words ‘weights’ and ‘vanitie’ and might therefore be an even stronger analogy. See, generally, Naseeb Shaheen *Biblical References in Shakespeare’s Plays* (1989) (Newark: University of Delaware, 2011), 377. Biblical quotes are from the Geneva Bible unless otherwise stated.

the playgoers ‘Gently to hear, kindly to judge our play’ (1.prologue.34). The chorus animates the playgoers to imaginative engagement of a hands-on sort: ‘deck our kings’ (1.prologue.28); ‘Grapple your minds to sternage of this navy’ (3.prologue.18); and, finally, he invites them to be conveyers of the king – to ‘Heave him away upon your winged thoughts’ and ‘fetch’ him in (5.prologue.8, 28). The invitation is expressly to ‘behold / In the quick forge and working-house of thought’ (5. prologue.22-23). Shakespeare would have his playgoers grapple like sailors, work like smiths and graft like gardeners. They are constituted hands-on participants in the play.

As the gardener is a biblical type of everyman, so he is a political everyman who works at the level of the ground and of the groundlings. We might be tempted to call him a ‘levelling’ type, but although his policy of humbling the haughty (he cuts the heads off ‘too fast-growing sprays’ (3.4.34)) might sound to modern ears like a policy of social equality (‘All must be even in our government.’ (3.4.36)), we should not ascribe twentieth-century individualistic notions of equality to the Elizabethans. They would have been quite as likely to hear the cutting off of heads as a caution against social climbing and excessive ambition. The notion of ‘even’ government promoted by Shakespeare’s gardener was unlikely to have been our modern idea of uniformity across all strata of social status, but something more akin to a just and unbiased ordering of the social scheme: ‘Concord, not equality.’¹⁵ The sense of even ground is enhanced when the Queen, just prior to her encounter with the gardener, employs the metaphor of the sport of bowls (3.4.3-5). (Compare *King John*, discussed below, where the corrupting effect of ‘commodity’ on the ‘world’ is represented as a biased bowling ball.) The gardener’s policy is one of balancing the constituents of society as a conscientious

¹⁵ L. C. Knights, *Drama and Society in the Age of Jonson* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1968), 144.

cultivator balances the elements of his garden. His desire for harmonious balance between justice of a horizontal sort and order of a hierarchical sort is confirmed by his image of the scales, and that image is supported in the stage action through the balanced choreography of two parties: the queen and her two attendants on one side, the gardener and his two workers on the other. There is no modern sense of social equality here, at least not in the crude form ‘equality is uniformity’, but there is a sense of common human dignity regardless of social status. This is confirmed by the fact that the gardener speaks verse, as do the citizens of Angiers in *King John* (see below). It is true that *Richard II* contains no prose lines, which is true also of *King John*, *1 Henry VI* and *3 Henry VI*, but if Shakespeare had wanted to denigrate the gardener he could have given him prose despite the predominance of verse, as he did with Jack Cade and the rebels in *2 Henry VI*.

Shakespeare’s history plays can be regarded as extended rhetorical arguments designed to persuade the playgoing witness, not to a particular verdict or point of view, but to an appreciation of what it feels like to handle the evidence and to participate in political discourse. The weight and ‘feel’ of the dramatic dispute is handled as matter in the mind, and occasionally a conceptual question is enlivened by a sensory conundrum. For instance, what weight should we associate with a king who is lighter than Bolingbroke in the gardener’s image of the scales but heavier than Bolingbroke in Richard’s own image of the buckets in the well? (4.1.184-189).¹⁶ We are not compelled to resolve this apparent contradiction, but if the gardener’s scales are indeed the Biblical scales of the Divine assessor, we can perhaps understand Richard to be thrown down in the affairs of men, even to death, and at the same time to be taken up in the hands of God. This approximates to Richard’s own understanding. Addressing his wife en route to the Tower he tells her: ‘Our holy lives must win a new

¹⁶ Jorgensen, ‘Vertical Patterns’, 129.

world's crown, / Which our profane hours here have thrown down' (5.1.24-25). At a (perhaps unwise) distance from the stage we might see Richard's complete trajectory as down and then up, forming as it were the 'V' that makes the top half of a saltire. Bolingbroke's corresponding trajectory of rise and demise throughout the tetralogy would supply the lower half, with each half touching at the crossover point. Certainly there is a substantial crossing over of the characters' fortunes within *Richard II* and this is frequently emphasised through the rhetorical figure of *chiasmus*, which is a 'criss-cross' figure.¹⁷ A sub-species of *chiasmus* ('*antimetabole*', in which words are exactly repeated and reversed in the form A-B-B-A) is pithily employed at the moment of formal transfer of the crown when Richard equivocates his consent: 'Ay, no. No, ay' (4.1.201). At the moment of his death, Richard confirms a crossroad even in his own divided being: 'Mount, mount, my soul! Thy seat is up on high, / Whilst my gross flesh sinks downward here to die' (5.5.111-12). The same sentiment is expressed in Shakespeare's *The Rape of Lucrece* (1594) which was written closely contemporary with *Richard II*: 'This brief abridgment of my will I make: / My soul and body to the skies and ground' (1198-9).¹⁸ This antithetical treatment of soul and body is specifically the standard wording of an Elizabethan testament.¹⁹

Part of the appeal of Shakespeare's *Richard II* resides in references to the performative rituals of everyday life and death in early modern England, many of which

¹⁷ Forker, *Richard II*, 88.

¹⁸ Katherine Duncan-Jones and H. R. Woudhuysen, *Shakespeare's Poems*, The Arden Shakespeare (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), 333.

¹⁹ E.A.J. Honigmann and Susan Brock, *Playhouse Wills, 1558–1642* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1993), 19. For a template see West's 'verie perfect forme of a Will' (*Symbolæography*, s.689).

required the hands-on participation of ordinary folk. For example, when King Richard's laments that imprisonment divorces him from his wife 'hand from hand' (5.1.82) Shakespeare's playgoers would have recognised a reference to, and reversal of, the joining of hands in marriage and, more specifically, a reference to the ritual handfasting that sealed a betrothal.²⁰ Shakespeare himself might have been bound to Anne Hathaway by handfasting prior to marriage,²¹ and it is likely that he acted as witness to this rite in 1604 when he 'made sure' the betrothal of Stephen Bellott to Mary Mountjoy at the moment of their '*giving each other's hand to the hand*'.²² An effect of Richard's performative reversal of handfasting is to remind the playgoers of the preceding Act of the play in which they had seen the seriatim reversal of the elements of Richard's coronation rite. As the un-fasting of the matrimonial hands implies Richard's separation from his wife, it also implies his imminent separation from life, since marriage lasts only until death.

²⁰ David Cressy notes that '[t]he word 'handfasting', which called attention to the ritual action, was more commonly used in the north'. It involved 'holding and releasing of hands, the plighting of troths, kissing, drinking, and the ritual exchange of betrothal rings' (*Birth, Marriage, and Death: Ritual, Religion, and the Life Cycle in Tudor and Stuart England* (Oxford: OUP, 1997), 269, 273). The word 'gage' (with its associations to the hand) survives in the modern betrothal language of 'engagement'.

²¹ Germaine Greer, *Shakespeare's Wife*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), 87.

²² Daniel Nicholas, deposition of 19 June 1612 (*Bellott–Mountjoy*, Court of Requests). The italicized words are scored through in the original, which perhaps raises a doubt as to the veracity of this part. See, generally, Charles Nicholl, *The Lodger: Shakespeare on Silver Street* (London: Allen Lane, 2007), ch.27.

The testamentary sense is even stronger in those communal performances alluded to, or incorporated, in Shakespeare's *Richard II* that specifically relate to death and burial. Amongst these we must include the documentary performance of the last will and testament, which we will consider in more depth when we consider Richard's 'talk of wills' (3.2.148). At this point we will concentrate on a material correspondence between the documentary performance of a will and the physical performance of funeral rites. In Elizabethan times, both performances involved an express passing of the soul into the hands of God, and of the body to the earth.²³ (We shall shortly see that there is significance in the fact that earth itself was passed from human hands as part of the Elizabethan burial rite.) The preamble to Shakespeare's last will and testament was in a form standard for the time:²⁴

In the name of god Amen I William Shackspeare of Stratford vpon Avon in the countie of warr[*wick*] gent[*leman*] in p[*er*]fect health & memorie god be prayes doe make & Ordayne this my last will and testam[*en*]t in mann[*er*] and forme followeing That ys to saye ffirst I Comend my Soule into the hand[*es*] of god my Creator hoping & assuredlie beleeving through thonellie merit[*es*] of Iesus Christe my Saviour to be made p[*ar*]taker of lyfe everlastinge And my bodye to the Earth whereof yt ys made²⁵

This documentary form had a post-mortem counterpart in the dramatic performance of the funeral rite. The words spoken at Shakespeare's funeral (and at the funeral of his son, Hamnet, which was roughly contemporary with *Richard II* and *King John*) would have been

²³ See Cressy, *Birth, Marriage, and Death*, ch.18.

²⁴ Honigmann and Brock, *Playhouse Wills*, 19.

²⁵ Transcription based on Honigmann and Brock, *Playhouse Wills*, 105. Italic additions in square parentheses indicate characters not appear in the original will.

the words ordained to be spoken by the priest ‘At the Burial of the Dead’ according to the 1552 *Book of Common Prayer*. That ritual form of words, which was adopted without amendment by Queen Elizabeth in her edition of 1559, was as follows:

FORASMUCHE as it hathe pleased almightie God of his great mercy to take unto himselfe the soule of our dere brother here departed: we therefore commit his body to the ground, earth to earth, asshes to asshes, dust to dust, in sure and certayne hope of resurreccion to eternal lyfe, through our Lord Jesus Christ, who shal chaunge our vyle bodye, that it maye bee lyke to his glorious bodye, according to the mightie working wherby he is hable to subdue all thinges to himselfe.²⁶

This text had been significantly reformed from that of the 1549 first edition. The original wording had left the priest in his traditional position as mediator between God above and people below. The priest had uttered in the first person ‘*I* commende thy soule to God the father almighty, and thy body to the grounde’ (emphasis added). The second edition talks instead of ‘*our* dere brother here departed’ and uses the communal ‘*we* therefore commit his body to the ground’ (emphases added).

Ritual power was taken not only from the mouth of the priest but also from his hands. The words of committal in the first edition are preceded by the direction: ‘*Then the priest castyng earth upon the Corps, shall saye.*’ In the reformed (second) edition of 1552, that direction is altered in a small but important detail, for it is now the bystanders, not the priest, who perform the ritual act of casting dust upon the corpse: ‘*Then whyle the earth shal be cast upon the body by some standing by, / the priest shall saye.*’ This exemplifies that genre of participatory public performance that I call ‘testamentary’, for the third party bystander (the

²⁶ Compare Ecclesiastes 3:20.

‘tri-st’ or ‘testa’) is not a passive observer but a participant without whom the performance would be incomplete.²⁷

The ritual of the Roman Catholic priest casting dust down from a position somewhere between man and God, with the hierarchy that implies, was replaced by the horizontal ritual of brothers, members of a common priesthood of believers, casting dust upon one of their own.²⁸ The dust becomes a prop in a protestant drama with protestant script and protestant stage directions. The performative power of ordinary people taking matters into their own hands is an enduring one. Ben Whishaw, who played Richard II in *The Hollow Crown* production (BBC, 2012) and who based his portrayal partly upon the dictator Colonel Gaddafi, notes that in footage of Gaddafi’s capture ‘people are throwing things at him’.²⁹ The footage shows shoes being wielded by his captors, and presumably the deposed dictator was struck by these in accordance with the Arab notion that the shoe is ceremonially unclean and to be struck by it is symbolically to be trodden down in the dust. In a famous incident at a news conference in 2008, the same insult was quite literally hurled at President George Bush Jnr by an Arab journalist. Bush managed to dodge the flying shoe, but his father had been forced to take a similar insult lying down. In 1991, President George Bush Snr had suffered the discomfiture of having a huge mosaic portrait of his face set into the floor at the entrance to one of Baghdad’s major hotels. This cultural understanding of the shoe might be a reason

²⁷ See Chapter One.

²⁸ *For a Derridean appreciation of the dust in Richard II as a sign of the ‘crumbling of the principle of sovereignty’, see Geoffrey Bennington, ‘Dust’, Oxford Literary Review 34(1) (2012), 25-49, 42.*

²⁹ John Preston, ‘Ben Whishaw on his new role as Richard II’, *The Telegraph* (online), 30 Jun 2012.

why the celebrated Arab theatre designer Farrah (Abd'Elkader Farrah) employed a portrait of King Richard as a backdrop and lowered it to form a sloped stage for Bolingbroke to tread upon in Terry Hands' *Richard II* (RSC 1980).³⁰

The character of Northumberland, whom Richard labels 'thou ladder wherewithal / The mounting Bolingbroke ascends' (5.1.55-56), is a self-willing agent and an early modern protestant before his time. This is apparent from such lines as 'My guilt be on my head, and there an end' (5.1.69). He excises the priest from the proceedings. Again, when Richard is deposed, there is no bishop to preside over the reversal of the coronation rites. Richard asks, 'Am I both priest and clerk?' (4.1.174). He answers his own question when he washes away the balm of his anointing with his own tears and gives away his crown with his own hands, thereby reversing the sacramental actions of the priest in the coronation ceremony. Richard is reduced to acting as his own agent, but the play's exemplar of the modern, self-determining agent is Bolingbroke. The Victorian critic Frederick Boas conceived him in typically Victorian terms, to be an 'iron-willed man of affairs'.³¹ That may be overstating the efficacy of Bolingbroke's will, for there is truth in John Dover Wilson's suggestion that Bolingbroke is to some extent 'borne upward by a power beyond his volition',³² but even if fate placed the ladder of opportunity at Bolingbroke's feet it is clear that he scaled it voluntarily: 'In God's name I'll ascend the regal throne' (4.1.114). From the opening scene of the play, he declares his will to enact what he speaks: 'what I speak / My body shall make good upon this earth' (1.1.36-37). This is the very manifesto of modernity, even post-modernity. He is a self-

³⁰ Cited in Forker, *Richard II*, 106.

³¹ Frederick S. Boas, *Shakspeare and his Predecessors* (1896) (London: John Murray, 1940), 250.

³² John Dover Wilson ed, *Richard II* (Cambridge: CUP, 1939), xx.

willing actor setting out to perform his individual identity on the political and theatrical stage. The historical Richard II has been described as ‘the last king ruling by hereditary right, direct and undisputed, from the Conqueror’,³³ and therefore as ‘the last king of the old medieval order’.³⁴ The medieval nature of Shakespeare’s Richard and his faction can be emphasized through costume, for example by adopting Tillyard’s suggestion that Bushy, Green and Bagot were ‘very plainly Morality figures and were probably marked in some way by their dress as abstract vices’.³⁵ If Shakespeare’s Richard is mediaeval, he is nevertheless confronted with emerging modernity and ultimately his world is ‘superseded by the more familiar world of the present’.³⁶ Again, the mode of costume can be employed to represent tension between the old order and the new. For example, in Michael Bogdanov’s *Richard II* (English Shakespeare Company, 1989), epochal change was demonstrated by contrasting Richard’s ‘languid Regency dandy’ with Bolingbroke’s ‘sombre Edwardian civil servant’.³⁷

The bystanders in an Elizabethan burial service who threw dust upon the coffin had their counterparts in the commoners who cast dust on the head of Richard as he entered London trailing behind the triumphant Bolingbroke. The scene of Bolingbroke’s entry is reported by the eyewitness account of the Duke of York speaking privately to his wife. The Duke had broken off his tale, so the Duchess urges him to continue from ‘that sad stop, my lord, / Where rude misgoverned hands from windows’ tops / Threw dust and rubbish on King

³³ A. B. Steel, *Richard II* (Cambridge: CUP, 1941), 1.

³⁴ E. M. W. Tillyard, *Shakespeare’s History Plays* (1944) (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 259, citing Steel *ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 268.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 265.

³⁷ Jack Tinker, *Daily Mail*, 28 January 1989.

Richard's head' (5.2.1-6). The Duke continues:

As in a theatre the eyes of men,
After a well-graced 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 gentle Richard. No man cried God save him!
No joyful tongue gave him his welcome home,
But dust was thrown upon his sacred head.
Which with such gentle sorrow he shook off. (5.2.23–30)

The episode has a counterpart in the Old Testament. Not long after King David lost his throne to the rebellion of his son Absalom, we read that a Hebrew by the name of Shimei 'threw stones against him, and cast dust' (2 Samuel 16:13).³⁸ When Shakespeare's Richard 'shook off' (5.2.31) the dust, he was returning a Biblical curse upon the London citizens.³⁹ A stage director might choose to represent the casting of dust on Richard by means of a confetti shower, shadow show, video projection or some other such device, but it might be better to leave the falling dust to York's narrative account and to omit any peripheral physical representation of the actual matter. The power of the scene may be heightened if the playgoers are required to hold the dust in the hands of their minds, there to weigh it up and grasp its significance. Imagined stage properties can sometimes have a more powerful hold

³⁸ Shaheen, *Biblical References*, 386.

³⁹ Matthew 10:4-5.

upon playgoers' minds than physical props presented on stage. (The pound of flesh in *The Merchant of Venice* is a case in point.)⁴⁰ Held in the hand of the mind, the significance of the dust is something like the significance of the 'gage' considered earlier. Both things are taken up and thrown down in the vertical plane but they also have strong connotation of movement in the horizontal plane. We saw that the dust of the burial rite was taken up and thrown down in the horizontal plane of protestant brotherhood. The dust thrown down on Richard covers him in the shifting matter of the common highway and the *platea* (Greek 'street') that connects the low stage to the playgoers in the yard. 'Dust' would have a number of material implications for the Elizabethan playgoer. One playgoer would have thought of ashes scraped from the hearth, another of food scraps, and another of the contents of a chamber pot or 'jordan' (*2H4*, 2.4.32-33).⁴¹ Encouraged by the players' repeated contact (by means of hands, knees and words) with the imagined stage soil of England, some playgoers, perhaps the groundlings especially, would have thought of the dust of the ground. For some, the reference to dust might have brought to mind the dust of the burial rite or (less likely) the dust of the Biblical encounter between Shimei and King David. Whatever idea of 'dust' it brought to mind, York's description of commoners' wielding dust would have encouraged mental grappling with material such as the chorus urges in *Henry V*. Through mental engagement, the London playgoer was turned from witness to actor even as the actor playing the Duke of York played witness to the actions of commoners in the London streets. The dust of the

⁴⁰ Gary Watt, 'The Law of Dramatic Properties in *The Merchant of Venice*', in *Shakespeare and the Law*, P. Raffield and G. Watt eds (Oxford: Hart, 2008), 237-251.

⁴¹ The production of *Richard II* for the series *The Hollow Crown* (BBC, 2012) presents this scene in flashback and shows dung landing on Ben Whishaw's King Richard. The act of throwing this 'dust' is not shown.

burial rite, which moved from the priest to the people and endowed them with performative agency, here moves from the theatrical players to the playgoers and endows them with the power of participation in affairs of State.

The drama of commoners casting dust upon the captive King Richard seems to have had an uncommon hold on Shakespeare's imagination. He even refers back to it from 2 *Henry IV*, where the Archbishop of York condemns the commoners who 'threw'st dust upon [King Richard's] goodly head' and with 'loud applause' blessed Bolingbroke (1.3.103; 91). The word 'applause' here echoes the Duke of York's use of theatrical metaphor to describe the same event in *Richard II*.⁴² The hold that the scene had upon Shakespeare's imagination was specifically a theatrical hold.

On King Richard's return to England from Ireland, his first act had been to touch the ground. He blessed it, communed with it and pleaded with it to 'Throw death upon thy sovereign's enemies' (3.2.22). Yet in the event of Bolingbroke's triumphal entry into London, Richard's subjects become his enemies and they throw death upon him in the form of dust. In this expressly theatrical scene, the dramatic prop of the burial rite is thrown on Richard's head as if he were already dead. The kingship lives in Henry Bolingbroke and that which trails behind him in the form of Richard is the mere corpse of a king. It is perverse and paradoxical that the fleshy form of a king should outlive the sacred substance of his kingship, but here, as elsewhere (most profoundly in *King Lear*), Shakespeare exploits the drama inherent in the paradox. Richard presumes that 'The worst is death' (3.2.103.), but worse than death is living death and worse for a king is to be treated in life and death as if he were no more exalted than any corpse laid low in the earth. When Bolingbroke's fellow subjects – the

⁴² Hands clap in the parallel episode in one of Shakespeare's 'sources': Samuel Daniel, *The First Fowre Bookes of the Civile Wars* (registered 1594, printed 1595), stanzas 67-69.

common bystanders who witnessed and participated in his triumph – cast dust upon Richard, they effectively buried their king in the road of the merchant metropolis of London.

Shakespeare had earlier caused Richard to anticipate this fate:

Or I'll be buried in the King's highway,
Some way of common trade, where subjects' feet
May hourly trample on their sovereign's head;
For on my heart they tread now whilst I live,
And, buried once, why not upon my head? (3.3.155-159)

This passage begins with the antithetical pairing of 'buried' and 'the king's highway', but the antithesis is more nuanced than a commonplace contrast between high and low, for the way of the king in Shakespeare's play is not as high as it should be; it is imagined as a low road of 'common trade'.⁴³ The substantial contrast being made here is not between high and low along the vertical axis, but between the vertical order of tradition and the horizontal plane of trade.

Richard confesses that his 'coffers... / ...are grown somewhat light' and that he is 'enforced to farm our royal realm' (1.4.43-47) (Compare (*H5*, 5.2.124-7). This confirms that he has turned from tradition to trade. This word 'farm', which derives from the French *ferme* ('lease') and ultimately from the Latin *firma* ('fixed sum') indicates that Richard is landlord of a lease.⁴⁴ Gaunt establishes this with his complaint that England had been 'leased out... /

⁴³ On 'trade' and 'tread' see the discussion below, and Chapter One.

⁴⁴ See, further, William O. Scott, 'Landholding, Leasing, and Inheritance in *Richard II*', *Studies in English Literature*, 42 (2002), 275–92; Dennis R. Klinck, 'Shakespeare's *Richard II* as Landlord and Wasting Tenant', 25(1) *College Literature* Law, Literature, and

Like to a tenement or pelting farm’ and his indictment of Richard: ‘Landlord of England art thou now, not king’ (2.1.59-60; 113).⁴⁵ Shakespeare is here presenting landlord and king as incompatible offices. The well-known labels ‘landlord’ and ‘tenant’, which even today attach to the parties to a lease, might suggest that the arrangement was akin to the feudal relationship between lord and tenant. The basic scheme of the feudal system was that all land in the realm was owned by the Crown and every land holder (tenant) held his estate from his superior (his lord) and so on all the way up the chain to the monarch as supreme overlord. In fact, the farm lease ‘had...nothing...feudal in its nature, and was, consequently, exempt from the feudal rule of descent to the eldest son as heir at law’.⁴⁶ The lease was essentially contractual in its origins and the feudal terminology of tenant and lord was adopted out of familiarity or as a rhetorical pretence. England ‘leased out’ is for Gaunt an England in legal and commercial bondage (2.1.63-64, 114). Feudal land holding was understood in terms of

Interdisciplinarity (1998), 21-34. The Wilton Diptych represents Richard’s connection to the land in the form of his insignia, the White Hart, tethered to the land by a chain (see Raffield, ‘*Imaginary Constitution*’, ch.3. 51-73). At the end of Gregory Doran’s production of Richard II (RSC, 2012) the stage floor was raised to reveal David Tennant’s Richard chained to the dungeon floor. Thus Richard, who began at the top of the social ‘chain of being’ under God, is shown sunk to its lowest level.

⁴⁵ These lines have close counterparts in the anonymously authored play *Thomas of Woodstock* (c.1591-1595). See P. Corbin and D. Sedge ed, *Thomas of Woodstock* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 4.1.147-8; 5.3.106-7.

⁴⁶ Joshua Williams, *Principles of the Law of Real Property* (London: S. Sweet, 1845), 9-10. F. H. Lawson agrees that the landlord-tenant relationship was not feudal, but an ‘alien commercial element’ (*Introduction to the Law of Property* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958)).

‘tenure’, which described the terms on which a tenant held the land from his superior lord. The species of ‘tenure’ denoted the sort of duties that accompanied the holding. For example, tenants holding under the tenure of ‘Knight-service’ had the very onerous obligation of supplying military service to the Crown, or (as it evolved) a substantial cash equivalent. The relational nature of feudal land holding meant that it was a sort of ‘hand-holding’ between the tenant and his lord.⁴⁷ In *Richard II*, feudal tradition loses its grip and the realm itself is handled as an object of commercial trade. In Gregory Doran’s production (RSC, 2012), the throne of state took the form of a movable platform that reached its elevated position above the stage by descending from the fly loft. The ‘state’ should be stable and static. (Shakespeare consciously juxtaposes ‘state’ and ‘change’ (3.4.29-30)⁴⁸.) Its descent in this production signals that the political State itself was unstable and set on a tragic downwards trajectory. Richard abandons tradition for the low road of trade in other actions too, the most significant being the seizure of the inheritance that should have been handed down to Bolingbroke from John of Gaunt. This act, discussed further below, was the one by which Bolingbroke was, in his own words, ‘trod down’ (2.3.126).

In the context of land transfer, legal inheritance by ‘heirs’ under traditional default rules of descent can be displaced by lifetime sales and other legal ‘acts of trade’ but also by the legal ‘act of will’ we call the testament. It follows that testament and trade both effect lateral hand-to hand transfer in opposition to vertical hand-down by tradition. A lifetime purchaser of a fee simple was said to be an ‘assign’, and in early modern England the same

⁴⁷ Bradin Cormack, ‘Shakespeare Possessed: Legal Affect and the Time of Holding’, in *Shakespeare and the Law*, P. Raffield and G. Watt eds (Oxford: Hart, 2008), 83-100.

⁴⁸ On ‘stasis’, see Chapter Four.

label properly applied to the recipient of a fee simple under a testamentary will.⁴⁹ It is fitting, then, that David Tennant's Richard crawled along the ground – effectively representing the king as a downtrodden subject of trade, and one who treads or trades horizontally – as he spoke the play's most obviously testamentary line 'Let's choose executors and talk of wills' (3.2.148) (Gregory Doran, RSC, 2012). When Lepidus contrasts 'hereditary' to 'purchased' (1.4.13-14) in *Antony and Cleopatra*, Shakespeare is accurately alluding to the legal distinction between acquisition as an heir and acquisition as an assign by testament or trade. A testament produces succession but it does not produce 'inheritance' properly so called. When a testator writes his will he cannot name his heir because nobody can know who will be their heir at the future date of their death (for one thing, the present 'heir apparent' might predecease the testator). Hence the doctrine, recited by Sir Edward Coke, that heirs 'in the legall understanding of the Common Law, implyeth...he to whom lands, tenements, or hereditaments by the act of God, and right of blood doe descend of some estate of inheritance, for *Solus Deus haeredem facere potest non homo*' ('Only God has the power to make an heir, not man').⁵⁰

King Richard's reference to 'common trade' comes immediately after the 'list of exchanges'⁵¹ that Richard 'must' (a most unprincely word)⁵² perform as a result of his having

⁴⁹ J. H. Baker, *An Introduction to English Legal History* (London: Butterworths, 1990), 298.

⁵⁰ Coke, *Littleton*, 191a.

⁵¹ Ivor B. John ed, *The Tragedy of King Richard II*, The Arden Shakespeare (1912) 3rd rev. edn. (London: Methuen and Co, 1934), xxv.

⁵² It is said that shortly before her death Queen Elizabeth was told by Robert Cecil that she 'must' go to bed, to which her indignant response was '*Must!* Is *must* a *word* to be addressed to princes?'

traded places with Bolingbroke. The lengthy, itemised list is rendered in the form of rhetorical anaphora and reads like a trader's ledger of bargains. It starts 'I'll give my jewels for a set of beads' and concludes 'And my large kingdom for a little grave' (3.3.147-53). Charles Forker notes that the word 'tread' in Richard's 'Some way of common trade... / ... / ... on my heart they tread' (3.3.156, 158) is 'quibbling on *trade*'.⁵³ Both words share the same etymology and in some Elizabethan dialects were very likely pronounced the same.⁵⁴ Even modern ears can hear the sound of 'tread' amplified through the consonance of its elements in the adjacent words 'trade' and 'head', but why does Shakespeare emphasise the word 'tread' in connection with dust and a King's demise? It seems likely that Shakespeare is recalling the Psalms of King David, and in particular the lines: 'Then let the enemie persecute my soule and take it: yea, let him treade my life downe vpon the earth, and lay mine honour in the dust' (Psalm 7:5).

The words of King David begin with a personal prayer in the style of a rhetorical apostrophe to God in which he calls upon the Lord to be his defender against his enemies or else, *if* He judges David to be wicked, *then* to let his enemies triumph and tread him in the dust. According to the *The Book of Common Prayer*'s 'Order how the Psalter is appointed to be read' every Psalm was required to be recited every month in every parish in England. Shakespeare would have heard many of those readings and he would also have been familiar

⁵³ Forker, *Richard II*, 354 n. This would accord with the shared English etymology of 'trade' and 'tread'.

⁵⁴ In Elizabethan pronunciation, 'tread' rhymed with 'head' (*LLL*, 4.3.274-77) and 'red' (*MND*, 3.2.390-91) as it does today, but it is likely the Elizabethan 'trade' did too. See Fausto Cercignani, *Shakespeare's Works and Elizabethan Pronunciation* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1981), 78.

with Miles Coverdale's English translation of the Psalms from their appearance in the *Geneva Bible*.⁵⁵ On the evidence of Richard II, we can speculate that Shakespeare was impressed by the inherent drama of King David's high-stakes wager with God. Quite certain is the fact that the same biblical drama would make a significant impression a generation after Shakespeare's death on opposing sides in the debate surrounding the deposing of Charles I. King David's wager figured in polemics pleading the Royalist cause on the one side and the Parliamentary cause on the other. The Royalist polemic was the *Eikon basilike*, a tract attributed (somewhat dubiously) to Charles I during his time in prison awaiting trial. In the section entitled, 'Upon His Majesties going to the House of Commons',⁵⁶ Charles calls God to be his Witness: 'But thou, O Lord, art my witsnesse in heaven, and in my Heart: If I have purposed any violence or oppression against the Innocent: or if there were any such wickednesse in my thoughts', and, continuing, makes the wager that King David had made in Psalm 7:5: 'Then let the enemy persecute my soule, and tread my life to the ground, and lay mine Honour in the dust'. If the Psalm was at the front of Charles's mind, so Shakespeare's play might have been in the rear of it. Charles is known to have personally annotated his own copy of the 1632 second folio of Shakespeare's *Complete Works*.⁵⁷ (The evidence is even stronger to suggest that Shakespeare's play featured in high-stakes political drama in

⁵⁵ See, generally, Steven Marx, *Shakespeare and the Bible* (Oxford: OUP, 2000); John W. Velz, 'Shakespeare and the Geneva Bible: The Circumstances', in *Shakespeare, Marlowe, Jonson: New Directions in Biography*, T. Kozuka and J. R. Mulryne eds (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 113-118; and Shaheen, 'Biblical References'.

⁵⁶ *Eikon basilike, The pourtraicture of His Sacred Majestie in his solitudes and sufferings* (9 February 1649) sec. 3, 15-16

⁵⁷ Lukas Erne, *Shakespeare and the Book Trade* (Cambridge: CUP, 2013), 206.

February 1601. Supporters of the Earl of Essex had paid for a performance at the Globe of a play by the Lord Chamberlain's Men called the 'kyllyng of Kyng Richard the Second',⁵⁸ which was presumably Shakespeare's play.⁵⁹ It was performed on the 7th of February and the very next day the Earl led the so-called 'Essex rebellion' for which he was later executed.) In response to the *Eikon basilike*, Parliament commissioned John Milton's *Eikonoklastes*, which was published following the trial and execution of Charles I. Milton cleverly quotes Charles's own words as evidence of God's judgment against the king: 'What need then more disputing? He appeal'd to Gods Tribunal, and behold God hath judg'd, and don to him in the sight of all men according to the verdict of his own mouth.'⁶⁰ *Milton inevitably had the last word, but had Charles lived he might have cited another Psalm in which the downtrodden King David attributes his fallen state, not to Divine judgment, but to betrayal by the people. David is confident that in the eyes of God he 'shall stand fast for evermore as the moon, and as the faithful witness in heaven', but of the people he hears God complain: 'Thou hast broken the Covenant of thy servant, and profaned his crown, casting it on the ground...Thou hast caused his dignity to decay, and cast his throne to the ground' (Psalm 89:39, 44). This Psalm perhaps inspired Shakespeare's 'crown...quite thrown down' (3.4.66).*

⁵⁸ National Archives, SP 12/278, no. 78, fol. 130r.

⁵⁹ See Paul E. J. Hammer, 'Shakespeare's *Richard II*, the Play of 7 February 1601, and the Essex Rising', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 59(1) (2008), 1-35; and, Jonathan Bate, *Soul of the Age: the Life, Mind and World of William Shakespeare* (London: Penguin, 2008), 249-86; but see Blair Worden, 'Which play was performed at the Globe Theatre on 7 February 1601?', *London Review of Books*, 10 July 2003.

⁶⁰ *Eikonoklastes in answer to a book intitl'd Eikon basilike etc* (London: Matthew Simmons, 1649), 28.

When Shakespeare's King Richard utters those plaintive lines: 'For God's sake let us sit upon the ground / And tell sad stories of the death of kings' (3.2.155-6), it will have called to playgoers' minds *The Mirror for Magistrates*, which was popular in various editions from 1559 to 1610. Thomas Sackville, one of the co-authors of *Gorboduc* (see Chapter One), was a key contributor. Richard's lines might also have evoked John Lydgate's *Fall of Princes* (c. 1431-38) to which *The Mirror*, according to its Preface, was a sequel. Both works were collections of didactic tales, mostly metrical, on the *de casibus* theme of the fall of (or of that which befell) great historical figures. The earliest royal life reflected upon in *The Mirror* is that of Richard II and it is now trite to say that Richard's troubles as portrayed in Shakespeare's play were popularly considered to be a cautionary tale on the dangers of uncertain royal succession. It therefore held up a mirror to the aged and childless Elizabeth. There is even an oft-repeated legend that Elizabeth once remarked to the jurist William Lambarde, 'I am Richard II, know ye not that?'⁶¹

Scene 3.2, in which we find Richard on the ground talking of graves, is the first of the two central scenes of the play. Together the pair of central scenes form the fulcrum on which the fortunes of the characters turn. Referring to the play's dominant image of a set of scales, Andrew Gurr summarizes the structure of *Richard II* in the single word 'balance'.⁶² Mark Rose suggests that the 'play pivots' in Scene 3.3.⁶³ The deposition scene that follows (4.1) is not so much a substantial shift in the status of Richard and Bolingbroke as a formal

⁶¹ The story is historically doubtful, see Bate, *Soul*, ch.14.

⁶² Gurr, *Richard II*, 16.

⁶³ Mark Rose, *Shakespearean Design* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press, 1972), 142.

Doty favours the garden scene (3.4) where 'the commoners finally appear onstage to discuss the shifting fortunes of Richard and Bolingbroke' ('Popularity', 200).

confirmation of the substantial changes that have already occurred in Act 3. The deposition scene was nevertheless symbolically potent enough to prompt its tactful (or perhaps tactical or compulsory) omission from all printed forms of the play during Elizabeth's reign.⁶⁴ The first of the two central scenes of the play, Scene 3.2, places the action on the coast of Wales where King Richard has just returned from Ireland. His first action is to salute the earth with his 'hand', and (presumably) to stoop down to do it 'favours' with his 'royal hands' (3.2.6; 10-11). In the BBC's *Hollow Crown* production, Ben Whishaw paws at the sand, hollows out a handful and scoops it up. This was an inspired choice. Richard will shortly 'talk of graves' and specifically of a 'little grave' and here he grabs burial dust in his hand and engraves a little grave in the earth.⁶⁵ Richard's stoop to the ground represents his declining status. The supreme overlord of all land is reduced to manual holding of the earth's base matter.⁶⁶ In feudal terms he becomes the lowliest form of land-holder. A related image of decline appears near the end of the play where the queen likens Richard to the king of beasts and cautions him against passivity. She advises that 'The lion, dying, thrusteth forth his paw / And wounds the earth, if nothing else, with rage' (5.1.29-30).

On the coast, hand-on-ground, King Richard feels the threat of 'the treacherous feet / Which with usurping steps do trample' (3.2.16-17) on his land. This is the threat of those levelling subjects who would tread down tradition and the threat of Bolingbroke in particular

⁶⁴ The deposition scene did not appear in print until Q4 (1608). See, generally, Cyndia Susan Clegg, 'By the choise and inuitation of al the realme': *Richard II* and Elizabethan press censorship', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 48 (1997), 432–48.

⁶⁵ 'Grab' and 'grave' share the same etymology.

⁶⁶ The land is Richard's *demesne*, which indicates his possession 'in hand' (Cormack, 'Shakespeare Possessed', 86).

who would trade places with his king. A sense of trade is present again when the Bishop of Carlisle counsels Richard to have respect for the Divine power that made him King. Speaking in terms of Richard's 'will' to accept the divine 'offer' (3.2.29-31) is more appropriate to describe a contractual deal than a divine gift. Richard attempts to reassert his traditional hierarchical status when he urges his followers to raise their sights: 'Look not to the ground, / Ye favourites of a king. Are we not high? / High be our thoughts' (3.2.87-89). His fortunes and his mood fluctuate with each fresh piece of news and are finally downcast by Sir Stephen Scroop's report of general rebellion amongst the King's subjects: men and women, young and old. Without the prop of popular support, the King's mind now plummets to thoughts of death: 'Revolt our subjects? That we cannot mend. / They break their faith to God as well as us. / Cry woe, destruction, ruin and decay. / The worst is death, and death will have his day' (3.2.100-103). Richard's reference to 'subjects' and 'God' invokes the settled hierarchy in which the King is situated above his subjects and below his Divine Lord, but the words 'revolt' and 'decay' acknowledge that the traditional social settlement is being over-turned and is falling away. The play's grand motif of Bolingbroke's rise and Richard's fall is immediately reiterated by Sir Stephen Scroop's report that Richard's closest confidants, Bagot, Bushy and Green, have been executed by Bolingbroke and now 'lie full low, graved in the hollow ground' (3.2.140). It is these burial words that finally throw Richard down into the dust: 'For God's sake let us sit upon the ground' (3.2.155).⁶⁷ To emphasise their continuing hold on the King's mind, Shakespeare plots the words 'grave', 'hollow' and 'ground' throughout Richard's next speech. It is the famous speech in which Richard, confronted with the immediacy of death and his own mortal state, turns testamentary:

⁶⁷ If the 'let us sit' is played as an invitation, the king's attendants are bound to join him on the ground, but see Forker, *Richard II*, 329, for performative alternatives.

...Of comfort no man speak!

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.

Let's choose executors and talk of wills.

And yet not so, for what can we bequeath

Save our deposed bodies to the ground?

Our lands, our lives and all are Bolingbroke's,

And nothing can we call our own but death

...For 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... (3.2.144-152, 160-165)

The combination of performance and introspection in this scene is typical of many in which Richard appears to sit in witness to the execution of his own will. Palmer suggests that he may be 'the only appreciative witness of his tragedy',⁶⁸ echoing Chambers' suggestion that

⁶⁸ John Palmer, *Political Characters of Shakespeare* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1945), 159. Cited in Forker, *Richard II*, 32 n.

he ‘becomes an interested spectator of his own ruin’.⁶⁹ Richard is his own audience too.⁷⁰ He witnesses events, but he has so lost his grip on them that he cannot even think to hold a writing instrument in his hand. Dust is his paper and his writing rains down in tears.⁷¹ Richard’s hand grows weak as Bolingbroke’s hand is strengthened.

There is something shocking in King Richard’s overt ‘talk of wills’ and executors. It has long been standard practice for monarchs of England to write wills, but in the matter of succession of the Crown the individual monarch’s will can only be a hollow performance. Richard’s question ‘for what can we bequeath / Save our deposed bodies to the ground?’ was very much a live one for the monarchy when Shakespeare wrote the play, and the orthodoxy then, as now, is that the Crown passes by traditional rules of succession which cannot be altered by the testamentary will of the particular king or queen. (See the discussion in Chapter One.) The reason for this is that the incumbent ruler may die, but the monarch never will. The monarchy is a corporation perpetual.⁷² The doctrine of the ‘king’s two bodies’ provides that when a king dies his ‘body natural’ perishes but his ‘body public’ does not.⁷³

⁶⁹ E. K. Chambers, *Shakespeare: A Survey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1926), 91.

Cited in Forker, *ibid.*

⁷⁰ Harry Berger, ‘*Richard II* 3.2: An Exercise in Imaginary Audition’, *ELH* 55:4 (1988), 755-96, 756.

⁷¹ On the use of ‘dust’ in Elizabethan writing, see Chapter Six.

⁷² F. W. Maitland, ‘The Crown as Corporation’ in *Collected Papers*, H. A. L. Fisher ed (Cambridge: CUP, 1911), III.251.

⁷³ Ernst Kantorowicz based his famous reading of Richard II’s deposition (*The King’s Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957)) on *The Case of the Duchy of Lancaster*: ‘the King has in him two bodies, viz. a body

This means that when a monarch dies (the principle applies to a queen as well as to a king), the crown passes immediately to the new monarch and the deceased monarch's last will and testament, even if it purports to pass the crown, has no crown to give. It is a basic principle of logic and law that people cannot give what they do not have (*'nemo dat quod non habet'*). Richard perceives that he will not have to wait for death to take his crown, for it is already slipping from his grip. The concluding call of Richard's speech is inevitably a call to dispense with tradition. Shakespeare has just placed in Richard's mouth the theatrical image of his reign as a 'little scene' and now he has him speak a stage direction to his followers who, as etiquette demanded, are bareheaded in their sovereign's presence: 'Cover your heads, and mock not flesh and blood / With solemn reverence. Throw away respect, / Tradition, form and ceremonious duty' (3.2.171-3). With these words, the actor playing Richard might choose to throw away the crown.⁷⁴

The second of the pair of pivotal scenes at the centre of *Richard II* is Scene 3.3. It is the one in which Richard for the first time encounters Bolingbroke face-to-face since Bolingbroke's illegal return to England. The scene is loaded with the antithetical motif of rise and fall and therefore presents an image of the play in microcosm. It begins when

natural, and a body politic. His body natural (if it be considered in itself) is a body mortal...his body politic is a body that cannot be seen or handled' (Mich. Term. 4 Eliz (1561) 1 Plow. 212, 213; 75 English Reports 325, 326). This case confirmed that Henry IV had successfully separated his Lancastrian inheritance from the Crown estate. It remains part of the monarch's privy purse to this day; inheritable, but not alienable by sale. Shakespeare's Bolingbroke begins to draft the legal theory of the two bodies when he claims that he was banished as Hereford, but returns as Lancaster (*R2*, 2.3.113-4).

⁷⁴ As David Tennant did (Gregory Doran, RSC, 2012).

Northumberland reports the news that ‘Richard’, refuged in Flint Castle, has ‘hid his head’ (3.3.6). Northumberland’s omission of the title ‘King’ lowers Richard as surely as if his head had been physically removed from his shoulders. Richard is a master of ceremonial courtly display, as will soon be apparent from his celestial appearance high on the castle walls, but Bolingbroke knows better how to stage-manage political theatre for common consumption. One of his favourite performative points is the courteous kneel, sometimes accompanied by the courteous kissing of an offered hand. Bolingbroke was required, as a vassal lord, to kneel and kiss the hand of his liege lord during the feudal ceremony of homage and would have done likewise out of courtesy on other courtly occasions, but Shakespeare has him turn the obligation into a performative opportunity. It has been observed that ‘[e]ach time after his exile that Bolingbrook kneels...he rises with his powers enlarged’, whereas each time ‘Richard sinks to, kneels, or sits upon the ground after his return from Ireland, he rises weaker than before’.⁷⁵ Before the trial by combat that preceded his banishment, Bolingbroke had requested permission of the Lord Marshal to ‘kiss my sovereign’s hand / And bow my knee before his majesty’ (1.3.46-47). King Richard’s response – ‘We will descend and fold him in our arms’ (1.3.54) – anticipates his future descent from king to subject.

Bolingbroke did not reserve his courtesies for the king. On at least one occasion he doffed his hat to an oyster-wench, and we are told that a ‘brace of draymen... / ...had the tribute of his supple knee / With ‘Thanks, my countrymen, my loving friends’’ (1.4.32-4). Bolingbroke knew the trick of bending low to pick up the favour of the people, and the king is actor enough to know that he is being upstaged by him. Richard complains that

⁷⁵ Philip C. McGuire, ‘Choreography and language in *Richard II*’, in *Shakespeare the Theatrical Dimension*, P. C. McGuire and D. A. Samuelson eds (New York: AMS Press, 1979), 61-84, 75-6.

Bolingbroke is acting ‘As were our England in reversion his, / And he our subjects’ next degree in hope’ (1.4.35-6). In the scene of Bolingbroke’s illegal return to English soil, Shakespeare employs Bolingbroke’s uncle, The Duke of York, to alert the playgoers to the hypocrisy in Bolingbroke’s genuflection (2.3.83-4), but Bolingbroke is undeterred. He performs his gestural trick even as late as Scene 3.3 in which he offers to kiss Richard’s hand and bend *both* his knees in obsequence to the King (3.3.35-37; 48). In this scene, Shakespeare causes Bolingbroke to fall into a trap of metaphor and paronomasia (pun). Bolingbroke identifies himself with water and the King with fire: ‘Be he the fire, I’ll be the yielding water; / The rage be his, whilst on the earth I rain’ (3.3.58-9). At first sight these metaphors seem a wise choice if Bolingbroke wishes to communicate his humility (flames rise up ambitiously and water tends humbly downwards to the lowest level), but Bolingbroke is betrayed by the metre of a line that leaves him hanging on the damning consonance of ‘rain’ and ‘reign’. Hence the hasty enjambment: ‘My waters – on the earth and not on him’ (3.3.60). The actor has the choice to pause at the end of the verse line or continue to the end of the clause. The former will betray Bolingbroke’s subliminal treachery; the latter will suggest loyalty.

When Richard appears resplendent on the castle walls, his first words indicate his readiness still to believe the physical formalities of deference: ‘long have we stood / To watch the fearful bending of thy knee’ (3.3.72-73). He berates Northumberland for his failure to perform: ‘how dare thy joints forget / To pay their awful duty to our presence?’ (3.3.75-76). The king from the upper stage makes an optimistic apostrophe to the Divinely ordered hierarchy – the ‘chain of being’ – in which God is the lord over kings, kings the lords over men, and men mere ‘vassal’ subjects (3.3.85-90). Confirmation that the ‘chain of being’ is undone comes when Richard descends into the base court of the castle: ‘Down, down I come, like glist’ring Phaëthon, / ... / In the base court? Base court where kings grow base / ... / In

the base court? Come down? Down court, down king!’ (3.3.178-182).⁷⁶ When Richard reaches the level ground of the stage, he finally sees the insincerity of Bolingbroke’s genuflectory posturing: ‘Fair cousin, you debase your princely knee / To make the base earth proud with kissing it. / ... / Up cousin, up. Your heart is up, I know, / Thus high at least, ... although your knee be low’ (3.3.190-195). (The actor may choose to lower the register of their voice on the word ‘low’, which can serve to intensify both the king’s gravity and the sense of his downwards trajectory.)⁷⁷ Shakespeare places a scene late in the play (5.3) in which Bolingbroke is made to arbitrate a contest of supplicatory kneeling that verges on the comic. Bolingbroke urges throughout that all parties – the Duke of York on the one side and York’s wife and son on the other – should rise to their feet, but Shakespeare obliges him to witness a mockery of his own genuflectory excess. The points of his own performance are played against him, and the playgoers enjoy seeing him pricked by it. Played one way they will laugh with him; played another they will laugh at him.

Just before his descent from the castle walls, Richard remarks that Bolingbroke ‘is come to open / The purple testament of bleeding war’ (3.3.93-94). George Steevens made the common sense observation that ‘purple’ indicates the effusion of blood and that ‘testament’ is used in its legal sense: ‘Bolingbroke is come to open the testament of war so that he may peruse what is decreed there in his favour’.⁷⁸ Instead of submitting to succession by lineal

⁷⁶ Charles Moseley identifies impressive similarities between Richard’s fate and Ovid’s account of the Phaëthon myth (*Shakespeare’s History Plays* (London: Penguin, 1988), 122).

⁷⁷ David Tennant employed this technique (Gregory Doran, RSC 2012).

⁷⁸ *The Plays of William Shakespeare* (in eight volumes) Vol IV (London: Longman et al, 1797), 190n.

descent, Bolingbroke is content that the crown should descend by bloody acts of will.⁷⁹ Does this necessarily imply that Bolingbroke's will is opposed to the will of God? Shakespeare, ever keen to keep open the question of the rights and wrongs of Bolingbroke's actions, has Bolingbroke dispute any such suggestion. When the Duke of York urges Bolingbroke to have regard to the heavens above his head, Bolingbroke claims to 'oppose not myself / Against their will' (3.3.18-19). Bolingbroke can be understood to regard war as a traditional mode of direct appeal to Divine authority, which is how he regarded his personal trial by combat with Mowbray. On this view, Bolingbroke is prepared to act by rolling the dice and to leave it to God to decide the outcome, whereas his father had been content, in more passive mode, to leave the 'quarrel to the will of heaven' without taking up arms to test the point (1.2.6). For Bolingbroke, the outcome of a war witnesses to the divine will, so that war is a 'purple testament' in that sense too. To open a testament of this sort, by way of trade or bargain with God, supports our suspicion that Bolingbroke is ever the businessman. On his illegal return to England, Bolingbroke confirms with heart and hand his bond of friendship with his allies: 'My heart this covenant makes; my hand thus seals it' (2.3.50). The language here is the biblical language of the Divine covenant written directly on the heart,⁸⁰ but it is also the language of commercial trade (it is preceded by references to 'count', 'fortune' and 'recompense').

Shakespeare emphasizes Bolingbroke's self-conscious agency when, wrongly put out of his rightful inheritance, Bolingbroke takes matters into his own hands: 'I am a subject, / And I challenge law. Attorneys are denied me, / And therefore personally I lay my claim / To

⁷⁹ On seal and blood, see Chapter Six.

⁸⁰ Hebrews 10:16; quoting Jeremiah 31:33. In Hebrews 8:10, the same verse from Jeremiah is paraphrased with the word 'testament' substituted for 'covenant'.

my inheritance of free descent' (2.3.133-36).⁸¹ We know that Bolingbroke subsequently went further than this when he laid claim to Richard's royal inheritance. Bolingbroke was bound to claim that the usurpation was righteous and in accordance with God's will. On his deathbed he confides in Prince Hal that all his reign had 'been but as a scene / Acting that argument' (2H4, 4.5.197-8), adding that 'what in me was purchas'd / Falls upon thee in a more fairer sort; / So thou the garland wear'st successively' (4.5.199-201). Henry asserts that his death 'Changes the mood' (2H4, 4.5.199). Not the 'mood' only, but also the 'mode'. Bolingbroke acquired the crown by trade 'purchase' (1H4, 2.1.93), but his son will take it by traditional descent. Henry V's settled state of possession is what lawyers call 'quiescence of title', hence Henry IV's dying words to his son: 'To thee it shall descend with better quiet' (2H4, 4.5.187). At the last, Bolingbroke (King Henry) appeals to God to grant a gift by his Divine grace, signalling that his days of bargaining with God are over. Addressing Prince Hal he says 'How I came by the crown, O God forgive, / And grant it may with thee in true peace live!' (4.5.218-219). His prayer is that God will fill up the crown that he had hollowed out.

In *Richard II*, Henry Bolingbroke's hollow performance was not restricted to his knee. It extended to his hand, as when he threw down his gage in the opening scene and in doing so purported to discard his high status: 'I throw my gage, / Disclaiming here the kindred of the King, / And lay aside my high blood's royalty,' (1.1.69-71). Despite this disclaimer, he takes the chance at every turn to bring up his status again, as, for example, when he refers to 'the glorious worth of [his] descent' (1.1.107)). When King Richard invites Bolingbroke to pick up his gage, Bolingbroke replies 'Shall I seem crest-fallen in my father's

⁸¹ Contrast Thomas Cromwell's fatal submission to parliament under Henry VIII: 'I am a subject and born to obey laws' (J. D. Mackie, *The Earlier Tudors, 1485-1558*, Oxford History of England (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), 415).

sight? / Or with pale beggar-fear impeach my height' (1.1.188-189)). His refusal to pick up his gage is a deliberate assertion of his status. He only bows when it suits his own performance. No wonder Richard gives Bolingbroke the mock title 'high Hereford' (1.4.2). In Shakespeare's lifetime, and as far back as the reign of Richard II, the throwing down of a gauntlet in gage of combat was employed ceremonially in the celebrations following the coronation of English monarchs.⁸² Few people, if any, in Shakespeare's audience would have been aware of that obscure ceremony, but many would have witnessed the use of a glove or gauntlet in a ceremony known as 'livery of seisin' and many would have taken an active part in it. In the middle ages, the ceremony of livery of seisin was 'the most essential part' of the conveyance of inheritable estates and interests in land.⁸³ Even during Shakespeare's lifetime, this hands-on method remained the standard mode of acquiring land by purchase or gift.⁸⁴ The general rule requiring land transactions to be made in writing did not enter the law until the enactment of the Statute of Frauds in 1677 (29 Car 2 c 3). Holdsworth notes that, whereas the English relied on actual public performance of the ceremony of livery of seisin, on the European mainland 'under the influence of Roman law, there was a tendency to allow the delivery of a document, stating that seisin had been delivered, to operate as an actual livery of seisin'.⁸⁵ As part of the ceremony items of material stuff – normally a sod of earth, a twig or

⁸² Alice Hunt, *The Drama of Coronation: Medieval Ceremony in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: CUP, 2008), 36.

⁸³ W. S. Holdsworth, *An Historical Introduction to the Land Law* (London: Oxford University Press, 1927), 288.

⁸⁴ Coke, *Littleton*, 60-66. P. S. Clarkson and C. T. Warren, *The Law of Property in Shakespeare and the Elizabethan Drama* (1942) (New York: Gordian Press, 1968), 113.

⁸⁵ Holdsworth, *Historical Introduction*, 112-13.

such like, but occasionally something more exotic like ‘the door, the hasp, or the ring of the house’⁸⁶ – was held in hand to symbolise transfer of title to the land. Holdsworth records that ‘a sod from the churchyard will do, or a knife without any sod, or a glove, or indeed any small thing that lies handy’.⁸⁷ (Compare the use of earth from the churchyard in the ritual ‘passing’ of the dead in the Elizabethan burial rite, discussed earlier.) One might assume that the use of a glove was simply intended to symbolize the ‘handing over’ of the land. Perhaps it was, but it might also have been a vestige of something more violent. The legal historians Pollock and Maitland record that it was frequently required that the donee should *wear* a war glove or gauntlet transferred to him by the donor and that this glove was the ‘*vestita manus* that will fight in defence of this land against all comers’.⁸⁸ The hand vested in a glove or gauntlet therefore connects the gage thrown down in offer of combat with the land offered in lifetime purchase or gift. In both combat and contract, the gage of a glove is a material token of the fact that traditional matters of honour and landholding are being grasped into human hands by human will.

Bolingbroke is not the only self-willing trader in town. When Richard appropriates Bolingbroke’s Lancastrian inheritance (the estate which should have passed to Bolingbroke on the death of his father John of Gaunt), the wording of Richard’s ‘speech act’ betrays him: ‘Think what you will, we seize into our hands / His plate, his goods, his money and his lands’ (2.1.209-10). Here we glimpse the historical Richard whom Holinshed records ‘began to rule by will more than by reason’ and by whose parliamentary authority ‘diuerse rightfull heires

⁸⁶ Henry de Bracton, *De Legibus et Consuetudinibus Angliae*, 2.18.12; Coke, *Littleton*, 48a.

⁸⁷ Frederick Pollock and Frederic William Maitland, *The History of English Law before the Time of Edward I*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: CUP, 1898), II.86.

⁸⁸ Pollock and Maitland, *History*, II.85.

were disherited of their lands and liuings'.⁸⁹ In *Troilus and Cressida*, Ulysses observes that 'when degree is shaken, / Which is the ladder to all high designs, / The enterprise is sick.' (1.3.101-3). Ulysses is talking here of such subversive acts as Richard's enterprise in pulling the ladder of inheritance away from Bolingbroke and Bolingbroke's enterprise in pulling the ladder of royal status away from Richard. Ulysses' point is that commercial ventures are no bad thing in themselves, but that trade is detrimental when it subverts the traditional order of things, for it is only 'by degree' that 'Peaceful commerce ... / The primogeneity and due of birth, / Prerogative of age, crowns, sceptres, laurels, /...stand in authentic place' (*TC*, 105-108). Under feudal law a traitor's estate was automatically forfeited into the hands of his lord,⁹⁰ but until he broke his banishment Bolingbroke was no proven traitor (as York points out at 2.1.192-4) so Richard's seizure of Bolingbroke's estate is illegitimate. Rejecting tradition, he has treated Bolingbroke's noble inheritance as if it were common stuff of trade to be grabbed and handled and passed from person to person regardless of due descent. It is surely no coincidence that the sound of 'seisin' is concealed in Richard's 'seize into'. The very next line betrays him further, for his inventory of the Lancastrian estate is in the itemised form that one associates with a bill of trade or a testament made by private will. Richard should take heed. Kings who favour trade over tradition might one day have to hand over their crown.

The Duke of York is incredulous that Richard intends to seize Bolingbroke's inheritance, he dares to challenge him directly: 'Seek you to seize and gripe into your hands / The royalties and rights of banished Hereford?' (2.1.189-190). This is surely the chief

⁸⁹ Holinshed, *Chronicles*, (London: J. Harison, 1587), VI.493 (An. Reg. 21. Richard II).

⁹⁰ William S. Holdsworth, *A History of English Law* (ten volumes) (London: Methuen, 1922-32), III.69 n.3.

offence to which York was alluding, a few lines earlier, when he referred to ‘England’s private wrongs’ (2.1.166). The word ‘private’ is apposite. By seizing into his own hands that which ought to have been handed down to Bolingbroke by inheritance, Richard effectively privatizes the public dignity of the nobility. Traditional inheritance becomes no better than the hollow subject matter of common trade, valued only as a commodity of bargain and exchange. York is in no doubt about the serious implications of Richard’s offence: ‘Take Hereford’s rights away, and take from Time / His charters and his customary rights; / Let not tomorrow then ensue today; / Be not thyself, for how art thou a king / But by fair sequence and succession?’ (2.1.195-9). York contrasts Richard’s privateering to the dignity of Richard’s royal predecessors whose hands had won glory by battle and blood; a mode traditionally approved as being dependent upon the providential hand of God (2.1.171-172, 179-181). Richard’s act of seizing Bolingbroke’s Lancastrian inheritance pre-empted and denied the providence of God. His hand had seized where God’s hand should have granted. Bolingbroke’s response, we might say his revenge, is to seize Richard’s royal inheritance.

The play’s final and climactic use of the word ‘seize’ comes in King Richard’s line ‘Here, cousin, seize the crown / Here cousin: / On this side my hand, and on that side thine’ (4.1.182-183). Director and actor have significant choices to make in the suiting of gesture to these words. Should Richard stretch towards Bolingbroke the hand that holds the crown? This would be to ‘tender’ the crown in the etymological sense of ex-tending it in offer. David Tennant’s Richard did something subtly but effectively different to this when he extended his arm, not towards Bolingbroke, but into neutral space, and without looking towards Bolingbroke beckoned him as a dog to a bone with a small, high-pitched ‘Here cousin’ (Gregory Doran, RSC 2013). Or should Richard merely hold the crown and require Bolingbroke to make all the moves? Fiona Shaw’s Richard set the crown on the ground and with a little gesture of her hands goaded Bolingbroke to pounce on it (Deborah Warner,

National Theatre, 1995). Ben Whishaw's Richard (BBC, 2012) remained rooted and Bolingbroke (Rory Kinnear) slowly walked towards him. When Bolingbroke took hold of the crown, Richard tightened his grip, and, contracting his arm, moved in to meet Bolingbroke at close quarters over the golden hollow. Eventually, Richard relinquished the crown by rolling it along the ground towards Bolingbroke, who wisely declines to stoop but stands in silence. Bolingbroke's agent, Northumberland, picks up the crown for him.

The physical passing of the crown is the moment of formal hand-over from Richard to Bolingbroke, from tradition to trade. Richard employs the language of commerce when he laments the trading of his name: 'I have no name, no title / ... / if my word be sterling yet in England, / Let it command a mirror hither straight, / That it may show me what a face I have, / Since it is bankrupt of his majesty' (4.1.255; 264-7). When he throws down the mirror it symbolizes the casting down of that aspect of himself that was king. The moment Richard performs the stage direction '*Shatters glass*' (4.1.288), his regal image turns to dust. The gesture echoes the moment that Richard threw his warder (ceremonial staff) down to halt the trial by combat between Bolingbroke and Mowbray (1.3.118). Jorgensen notes that '[t]his simple motion, halting the empty ceremony of the combat, has solid repercussions for Richard'. Jorgensen cites the observation made by Mowbray in *2 Henry IV* that 'when the king did throw his warder down, /... / Then threw he down himself' (4.1.125,127).⁹¹ It has been said that King Richard 'mistook his warder for an enchanter's wand',⁹² but in Shakespeare's hands the warder does have magical properties on stage (compare Richard's 'senseless conjuration' of the soil (3.2.12-23)). Sir James George Frazer divided the 'sympathetic magic' of material objects into two main branches – the 'imitative' (or

⁹¹ Jorgensen, 'Vertical Patterns', 123.

⁹² John, *Richard II*, xxiii.

‘homeopathic’), and the ‘contagious’.⁹³ The glove (or gauntlet or gage), which performed so powerfully in early modern ritual, is magically potent in both of Frazer’s senses. Its physical form imitates the hand, and because it has been in contact with the hand it carries the ‘contagious’ magic of continuing contact. The mimetic and contagious qualities that we see in the throwing down of a glove as gage are also present in the casting down of Richard’s warder. The contagious quality is present in the fact that the warder has been in contact with the King and the mimetic quality is present in the warder’s capacity to represent the rectitude of regal rule. The phallic implications of the metonymic object and the symbolic implications of its removal from the king are self-evident. Richard seems to assert his royal power when he throws down the warder, but by interrupting Divinely supervised combat it is arguable that the true effect is to curtail a traditional basis for determining royal right to rule. As such the throwing down of the warder can be seen as a symbolic and prophetic act of self-emasculatation.⁹⁴

Richard had said ‘show us the hand of God / That hath dismissed us from our stewardship; / For well we know no hand of blood and bone / Can gripe the sacred handle of our sceptre, / Unless he do profane, steal or usurp’ (3.3.77-81), but Richard’s own anointed hand acts as the ‘hand of God’ to dismiss him from the throne. Richard’s hand trades with Bolingbroke’s in the shared business of deposing the true king. York reports to Bolingbroke that Richard is willing to yield his sceptre ‘To the possession of thy royal hand’ (4.1.111). He

⁹³ J. G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough* (New York: Macmillan, 1922), ch.3.

⁹⁴ Compare Polonius’s line ‘Take this from this’ (*Ham*, 2.2.153). The context suggests that he means ‘take my head off my body’ and would gesture accordingly, but Edward Dowden opined that Polonius might be saying something like ‘take this staff of office from my hand’ (*Hamlet*, The Arden Shakespeare (London: Methuen, 1899)).

then proceeds immediately to the pretence that the trade has effected an orthodox succession when he invites Bolingbroke to ‘Ascend his throne, descending now from him’ (4.1.112).

The truth is that the crown did not descend by the traditional mode. It became a hollow commodity of trade the moment Richard took it off. A few lines later, at the point of transfer of the physical crown, Richard’s words emphasize the work of his own hand in the business of hand-over: ‘I give this heavy weight from off my head, / And this unwieldy sceptre from my hand, /... / With mine own hands I give away my crown’ (4.1.204-205, 208). The form of his words might seem to suggest that this is a unilateral and willing gift, but in substance it is a bilateral transaction. The reason we can never decide if Richard’s hand gave or if Bolingbroke’s hand took is because they were both complicit in transferring the Crown. In the moment of their trade, in the joining of their hands either side of the physical crown, they shake hands upon a bargain.

And yet not so, for there can be no true bargain with a hollow crown, and no true bargain without consent, and Shakespeare embeds the sense (as must be common sense) that Richard is not a free and fully willing party to the deal. One of Shakespeare’s most brilliant techniques for achieving this uncanny sense of unwilling volition is a method that I call ‘fractional inference’. What I mean by this is that Shakespeare omits a key word but amplifies our sense of its absence by scattering fractions of the word throughout the text. In the following passage, for example, he omits the word ‘will’, but the sound elements of ‘will’ are included in such words as ‘well’ and ‘fill’ and ‘whilst’ and through the repeated sound of ‘w’. This prompts a subconscious search for the word ‘will’ which makes us feel its absence all the more:

Now is this golden crown like a deep well

That owes two buckets, filling one another,

The emptier ever dancing in the air,
The other down, unseen and full of water.
That bucket down and full of tears am I,
Drinking my griefs, whilst you mount up on high. (4.1.184-189)

Bolingbroke's very next line – 'I thought you had been willing to resign' – by expressly using the word 'will', joins together the elements of 'will' that had been present in fractured parts in Richard's speech. We now sense more strongly than ever, if only subconsciously, that the word 'will' was absent from Richard's speech and we perhaps begin to feel deep down that Richard could not bring himself to say the word 'will' because his mind was fundamentally unwilling. Richard's response – 'My crown I am, but still my griefs are mine' (4.1.191) – purports to express his willingness to pass the crown, but through the assonance of 'still' it serves only to amplify again the absence of Richard's actual will. Like a stage silence, the absence of Richard's expressed 'will' demands our attention. Like a 'pregnant pause', it is a full absence. It fills up our attention. The placement of the static 'I am; but' between the 'w' of 'crown' and the 'ill' of 'still' adds another dimension. It produces the subconscious sense that Richard is poised in perfect stasis between will to resign and will to remain king.⁹⁵

⁹⁵ Darlene Farabee notes the contrast between the movement in the metaphor of the bucket 'dancing in the air' and the 'stage image' of the 'static crown'. ('Grounded Action and Making Space in *Richard II*', in *Shakespeare's Staged Spaces and Playgoers' Perceptions* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), ch.2, 49.)

‘Performance is a kind of will’, but Richard’s performance is a kind of unwilling will. It is true that, having handed over the crown, he calls himself a traitor to have given it with his ‘soul’s consent’ (4.1.249), but beforehand he had never once expressed his free consent to pass it. His ‘I will undo myself’ (4.1.203) is not so much a statement of his volition, as a prediction of his future action. His statement ‘I’ll give, and willing too; / For do we must what force will have us do’ (3.3.206-207) equivocates the voluntary nature of his actions. As far as we know, Elizabethan playgoers were never permitted to witness the politically incendiary deposition scene on stage. Certainly they never saw an authorized version in print. Despite this, the fact of the disposition was plain enough from the play, and it was plainly puzzling. Part of the puzzle was to know if human will had forced the transfer of the crown or whether everything had unfolded according to the will of God. The question was intensely relevant to the question of who should succeed to the English crown after Elizabeth, and the related question of the mode by which the next monarch should succeed. In breach of the traditional rule of primogeniture, Henry VIII’s will had sought to oust the Scottish line descended from his elder sister Margaret in favour of the descendants of his younger sister Mary Tudor. Elizabeth ignored her father’s testament and confirmed the traditional mode of descent by consanguinity and primogeniture. She designated James VI of Scotland to be her successor, and though he had ‘a hereditary claim no stronger than Bolingbroke’s’, it was at least a plausible hereditary claim. Elizabeth therefore ‘spared the land the spectacle of a Monarch being designated by purely human agency’.⁹⁶ When Shakespeare wrote *Richard II*, it was politically prudent to leave the question open as between succession by tradition and

⁹⁶ Jack Benoit Gohn, ‘*Richard II*: Shakespeare’s Legal Brief on the Royal Prerogative and the Succession to the Throne’, *Georgetown Law Journal* 70 (1981-1982), 943, 973.

succession by testament. The weighty question of will and descent was left in the playgoer's hands and in the balance of their minds – on this side one argument, and on that another.

This seems an appropriate point at which to pass from *Richard II* to *King John*. Tillyard downplays the correspondence between *Richard II* and *King John*, but this is because he was determined to demonstrate the unity of *Richard II* and *Henry IV*. He argued that between *Richard II* and *King John* 'the connexions are fitful and unimportant'.⁹⁷ I will argue, to the contrary, that the plays are in many substantial respects twinned; and not only because they are amongst a small group of Shakespeare's plays that are entirely in verse, or because they appear adjacent to each other (*King John* first) in the First Folio, or because they were both written around the same time.⁹⁸ The more important fact is that *King John* and *Richard II* resonate with each other and amplify each other through such shared thematic concerns as testamentary will, succession, inheritance, tradition and trade. The two plays also correspond in the ways these themes are realised through such performative attributes as staging, physical gesture and touch.

The key question posed by *King John* is essentially the same as that posed by *Richard II*. As Robert Lane puts it, *King John* asks 'to what extent should the prince be able to dispose of the Crown as if it were his/her own property, thereby superseding the historically sanctioned rules of succession?'⁹⁹ Swinburne correctly summarizes the legal orthodoxy when he writes that 'It is unlawfull for a king to giue awaie his kingdome from his lawfull

⁹⁷ Tillyard, *History Plays*, 240.

⁹⁸ A broad, but by no means total, consensus dates them *Richard II* (1595) and *King John* (1596).

⁹⁹ Robert Lane, 'The Sequence of Posterity': Shakespeare's 'King John' and the Succession Controversy', *Studies in Philology* 92(4) (1995), 460-481, 467.

heires',¹⁰⁰ but the orthodoxy had certainly been by challenged by the pretensions of Henry VIII's testament (supported by statute, see Chapter One) and, as we observed in relation to *Richard II*, the position remained doubtful and dramatically potent throughout Elizabeth's reign.

The traditional rules of succession by blood supported Arthur's (John's nephew's) claim to the throne by virtue of his being the surviving legitimate son of John's elder brother Geoffrey, Duke of Brittany. John disputes Arthur's claim, and when he observes 'There is no sure foundation set on blood' (4.2.104) Shakespeare might be implying, beneath the more obvious sense of blood in battle, that an estate established on lineal descent of blood is less secure than one established by a strong political will. Arthur is a somewhat weak-willed creature, quite unlike his mother Constance but rather like Richard II. He even resembles Richard in talk of graves ('I would that I were low laid in my grave' (2.1.164)) and in his precipitous descent from a castle wall. In Arthur's case, his descent is an immediate fall to his death. The text tells us that 'th' inheritance of this poor child' is a 'little kingdom of a forced grave' (4.2.97-98). (Recall that Richard traded his 'kingdom for a little grave' (3.3.153).) If this is what becomes of Arthur's weak will and his claim based on inheritance by descent, perhaps John was right to suppose that a claim based on will is superior to one based on blood.

In terms of direct and prior lineage, John's title is not so well supported as Arthur's, but it has its props. One is John's 'strong possession' of the crown; another is the support of the people; a third is the testamentary will of his elder brother Richard I; and a fourth is the

¹⁰⁰ Henry Swinburne, *A Briefe Treatise of Testaments and Last Willes* (London: John Windet, 1590), 68.

fierce support of his mother Elinor (of Aquitaine). As for the first prop, Elinor confides in John that she suspects that he relies on ‘strong possession’ more than his ‘right’ (1.1.40). It may be that possession cannot confer moral ‘right’, but the position in law was, and remains, that possession confers a presumption of formal entitlement. This is why King John can challenge the citizens of Angiers with the question ‘Doth not the crown of England prove the king?’ (2.1.273). John’s argument was an old one, as William Camden confirmed in his *Annales of the reign of Queen Elizabeth*: ‘The Lawes of England many yeeres agoe determined ... That the Crowne once possessed, cleareth and purifies all manner of defaults or imperfections’.¹⁰¹ We noted earlier that Shakespeare’s King Henry IV was confident on his deathbed that his son’s possession of the crown would quietly settle the title that had hitherto been questionable. This was an important principle for the Tudor dynasty, for it relied upon the crown’s peaceful descent to Henry VIII to settle the title that his father Henry VII had acquired through war. Shakespeare includes essentially the same theme in *King John*. John had acquired the crown laterally by act of will, but when John dies Philip the Bastard expresses the hope that John’s son, Henry, will succeed by traditional vertical (lineal) descent:

PRINCE HENRY

At Worcester must his body be interr’d;

For so he will’d it.

BASTARD

Thither shall it then:

¹⁰¹ William Camden, *Annales Rerum Anglicanarum et Hibernicarum regnante Elizabetha* (London: William Stansby for Simon Waterson, 1615), I.14.

And happily may your sweet self put on
The lineal state and glory of the land!
To whom, with all submission, on my knee
I do bequeath my faithful services
And true subjection everlastingly. (5.7.99-105)

Regarding the second ‘prop’ in John’s support, which is the support of the commoners, John argues that if the crown does not prove him king then ‘I bring you witnesses, / Twice fifteen thousand hearts of England’s breed’ (2.1.274-5). John’s reliance upon commoners to bear witness echoes Bolingbroke in *Richard II*, who had issued the instruction ‘Fetch hither Richard, that in common view / He may surrender...’ (4.1.156-7). Bolingbroke, fortified by the commons, looked to God to bless his possession of the crown. Robert Parsons, an early modern commentator, saw something similar at work in the reign of the historical King John. He wrote that Arthur sought ‘to remedy the matter, by warr, yet it semed that god did more defend [the] election of the common wealth [in favour of John], then the right title of Arthur by succession’.¹⁰² The third prop supporting John was the will of Richard I. This was of prime importance to the historical King John (Holinshed records that the will had purported to assign to John ‘the crowne of England, and all other his lands and dominions’),¹⁰³ but Richard’s will is passed over only fleetingly and obliquely in Shakespeare’s play. No doubt ‘Richard I’s will gave the succession dispute in *King John* a direct relevance to the

¹⁰² Robert Parsons, *Conference About the Next Succession to the Crowne of England* (Antwerp: A. Coninx, 1594 [1595]), 194.

¹⁰³ Holinshed, *Chronicles*, VI.156. (An. Reg. 10. Richard I).

Elizabethan debate’,¹⁰⁴ but Shakespeare did not focus on historical detail to the detriment of drama. Regardless of what he knew about the testament of Henry VIII, the Acts of Succession and the Statute of Wills, Shakespeare’s instinct for dramatic tension led him to focus on battles between the wills of the living rather than upon the documented will of the dead. When Elinor opposes Constance and Arthur with the claim ‘I have a will’, Shakespeare elides the fact that she is referring to the will of her son King Richard I. Constance’s reply – ‘Ay, who doubts that? a will! a wicked will; / A woman’s will; a cank’red grandam’s will!’ (2.1.193-194) – puts the focus firmly on the living will of Elinor (and of her son John) as the main dramatic opposition to Arthur’s claim.

In *King John* and *Richard II*, Shakespeare invites us to question the capacity of individual will to determine the destination of the Crown and of other landed estates. To respond to that invitation involves nothing less than to question an individual’s capacity to depart from tradition. *King John* poses the question in the opening scene in which the king adjudicates upon the testamentary will of the deceased gentleman Sir Robert Faulconbridge. The primacy and prominence of this testamentary trial indicates Shakespeare’s intent to make contested will a central *agon* of the play. Lane points out that the testamentary episode ‘is wholly Shakespeare’s invention’, there being no reference to a testament in the earlier play *The Troublesome Reign of King John* which supplied Shakespeare play in other respects.¹⁰⁵ In the opening scene, Shakespeare’s King John performs the role of the participatory witness and judge. He is the testamentary ‘third party standing by’ who plays the part that is necessary to fulfil the dramatic action of the two protagonists (see Chapter One). The dispute between them concerns their entitlement to succeed to the Faulconbridge estate. On one side

¹⁰⁴ Lane, ‘Succession Controversy’, 466.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

is an elder son fathered by Richard I but born to the wife of Faulconbridge. On the other side is the younger son of the same mother, but this one fathered by Faulconbridge. The younger asserts the testamentary wishes of the deceased Faulconbridge. He claims to be entitled to 'My father's land, as was my father's will' (1.1.115). John rejects that claim and instead recognizes the rights of the elder son. He employs the then standard, and dehumanizing, proprietary reasoning that applied to a child born to a woman within wedlock, which was to recognize the husband's entitlement to the 'calf bred from his cow' (1.1.124).¹⁰⁶ The upshot was that the elder Faulconbridge, though acknowledged to be the bastard son of Richard I, was adjudged to be the legitimate son of Sir Robert. Thus Philip Faulconbridge, called the Bastard, was held to be heir to the Faulconbridge estate. John explains to the younger son that 'Your father's heir must have your father's land' (1.1.129). In dismissing the will of Faulconbridge and favouring the traditional mode of descent by inheritance, King John was obeying the law as it was prior to the 1540 Statute of Wills, but it was nevertheless somewhat hypocritical to do so when he had himself taken the crown by will despite Arthur's better legal claim by blood. The hypocrisy does not lie, as Lane suggests, in the fact that King John depended upon the will of Richard I.¹⁰⁷ The historical king did, but Shakespeare's king did not. In the play, John's decision to oppose individual will in the Faulconbridge dispute is hypocritical, not because John's title rests on the testamentary will of Richard I, but because John's title rests on the living will of John, supported by the living will of his mother Elinor.

In *Richard II*, the initial scene of the king on his high throne and the central scene of Richard 'on the Walls' (stage direction 3.3.62) is succeeded later in the play by the commoners on the high walls of London who look down on Richard and Bolingbroke (5.2).

¹⁰⁶ Swinburne, 'Testaments', 162.

¹⁰⁷ Lane, 'Succession Controversy', 467.

In *King John*, the opening scene of the king on his high throne arbitrating between the two sons of Faulconbridge is followed in the next Act by the scene of the citizens of Angiers installed high ‘upon the walls’ of their city (stage direction 2.1.200) arbitrating between King John and King Philip of France. At this point ‘the stage picture is divided significantly both horizontally and vertically, with the English and French either side of the stage, and the Citizens centrally and above’.¹⁰⁸ As in the opening scene, the conflict before the walls of Angiers is between traditional lineal succession and individual will, but the subject matter of the issue between King Philip and King John concerns nothing less than the proper descent of the English crown. The citizens who look down on the debating kings are not mere passive bystanders, but observers of an active and participatory sort. To express their role in testamentary language, we can say that they are not mere witnesses but judges who are called upon to observe the trial or probation of John’s will. In other words, to decide in testamentary mode if his will has ‘passed probate’. If not, the default rule of lineal descent should determine the outcome in favour of Arthur and the French king. The progress of the play from the first scene to this has the effect of passing judicial authority from monarch to commoner. That progress naturally culminates in the passage of judicial authority from the citizens on stage to the citizens in the audience. Thus ‘Shakespeare provokes precisely what the Crown’s policy precluded - the exercise of critical judgment on the part of his audience - casting them as participants in the process of determining the successor’.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸ Dillon, *Staging*, 49.

¹⁰⁹ Lane, ‘Succession Controversy’, 464.

Modern playgoers are also invited to participate as judges,¹¹⁰ although we may ‘feel that, like the citizens of Angiers, we cannot adjudicate between the claims’.¹¹¹ The question put to the Citizens of Angiers, and hence to the playgoers, is not a straightforward dispute between traditional inheritance and testamentary will. On the side of traditional inheritance is the default mode of lineal succession according to descent by blood; which order of descent was assumed to have been ordained by Divine providence of priority and gender at birth. Advocating this side of the argument on behalf of Arthur, King Philip appeals to ‘God and our right!’ (2.1.299) and asks John ‘How comes it then that thou art call’d a king, / When living blood doth in these temples beat, / Which owe the crown that thou o’ermasterest?’ (2.1.107-9).¹¹² In similar vein, Arthur’s mother Constance complains that Elinor is a ‘monstrous injurer of heaven and earth!’ (2.1.174) for denying ‘The dominations, royalties and rights / Of this oppressed boy: this is thy eld’st son’s son’ (2.1.184-5). The words ‘o’ermasterest’ and ‘oppressed’ both connote the revolutionary overthrow of God’s order and imply that John, in wrongfully assuming a height not ordained by God, has turned the true king into a ‘subject’ – literally someone thrown-under (*sub-jactus*). The language of over-mastering and over-pressing evokes the image of the king trodden underfoot, which was so powerfully employed in *Richard II*. Indeed, King Philip makes express the connection between ‘tread’ and the subjection of Arthur and the justice of his claim: ‘For this down-trodden equity, we tread / In warlike march these greens before your town’ (2.1.241-242).

¹¹⁰ See Julen Etxabe, *The Experience of Tragic Judgment* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013).

¹¹¹ Emma Smith, *The Cambridge Shakespeare Guide* (Cambridge: CUP, 2012), 78.

¹¹² Here ‘owe’ means ‘own’ and is intended to contrast Arthur’s ‘true’ title with John’s presumptive title based on possession.

‘Equity’ in the sense used here, means the Divinely ordained descent of the crown.¹¹³ The word imports a sense of substantial truth and justice that differs from formal appearance. John’s title is based on the legal formality of physical possession and (obliquely) upon the form of Richard I’s will. Philip claims that despite John’s formal or apparent title, Arthur’s title is the one supported by the Divinely ordained default rules of descent. When King Philip later turns traitor against Arthur, Constance turns Philip’s own use of ‘tread’ against him. She complains that fortune ‘with her golden hand hath pluck’d on France / To tread down fair respect of sovereignty,’ (2.2.57-8). In this we hear her complain that tradition has been downtrodden by the levelling tread of trade. It is a note that resonates with *Richard II*, but also with the passage in *King John* where the Bastard delivers his famous commentary on ‘commodity’. In that speech, he likens the distorting effect of commodity on the world to the distorting effect of a bias (weight) on a bowling ball (2.1.574-580). In his plays, Shakespeare usually employs the word ‘commodity’ in the economic sense of the word. (The phrase ‘proffitt and comodytye’ even appeared in his deposition in the dispute over the dowry to the marriage of Stephen Bellott to Mary Mountjoy.¹¹⁴ This followed his role as ‘an agent, a go-between, a broker’ in securing that marriage.)¹¹⁵ In *King John*, the Bastard’s usage emphasizes commodity as ‘exchange-value’.¹¹⁶ He should know, for he had exchanged his

¹¹³ Compare Stephen Hawes’s poem ‘Example of Virtue’ (c 1503–04). Dedicated to the Prince of Wales (the future King Henry VIII), it contains the line ‘Prince Henry is sprung, our King to be, / After his father, by right good equity’ (J. M. Berdan, *Early Tudor Poetry* (New York: Macmillan, 1931), 43).

¹¹⁴ 11 May 1612.

¹¹⁵ Nicholl, *Lodger*, 252.

¹¹⁶ Christian A. Smith, ‘“That smooth-faced gentleman ...Commodity”: Shakespeare’s

own feudal inheritance for ‘adventure capital on the international battlefield’.¹¹⁷ The Bastard helps the playgoers to see the mercantile reality of the peace brokered between King John and King Philip, which had been sealed by the marriage of John’s niece Blanche to the Dauphin together with ‘Full thirty thousand marks of English coin’ (2.1.530).¹¹⁸ The Bastard alerts us to the fact that ‘Angiers finally opens its gates, not to its rightful king but to a bargain’.¹¹⁹

King Philip had Arthur in hand when pleading his traditional right: ‘Lo, in this right hand, whose protection / Is most divinely vow’d upon the right / Of him it holds, stands young Plantagenet’ (2.1.236-8), but King John had tried to take Arthur in hand by force of will: ‘Arthur of Britain, yield thee to my hand; / And out of my dear love I’ll give thee more / Than e’er the coward hand of France can win: / Submit thee, boy’ (2.1.156-159). In the event, the two kings cut a deal that rendered Arthur irrelevant and they sealed it by the joining of their hands. The scene has been called ‘[p]erhaps the most graphic illustration of the symbolic power invested in the early modern handclasp’.¹²⁰ The business handled between the kings, mirrored in the handfasting of Lewis and Blanche (2.1.532-3), engages the playgoers to handle the matter in their minds. The papal legate will soon be persuaded to approve the kings’ bargain, but initially he cautions ‘Philip of France, on peril of a curse’ to ‘Let go the hand of that arch-heretic’ (3.1.191-192). The legate will later say that John,

critique of exchange-value in *King John*’, *Shakespeare* 4 (2013), 1-14.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., p.5.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., p.4.

¹¹⁹ Sigurd Burckhardt, ‘*King John*: The Ordering of this Present Time’, *ELH* 33(2) (1966), 133-153, 141.

¹²⁰ Michael Neill, *Putting History to the Question: Power, Politics, and Society in English Renaissance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 456 n.43.

having seized Arthur, holds a ‘sceptre snatch’d with an unruly hand’ (3.3.135) (compare Henry IV’s deathbed confession that the crown ‘seem’d in me / But as an honour snatch’d with boist’rous hand’ (2H4, 4.5.190-191). Philip initially resists the legate’s request to part hands that have been ‘newly knit...newly join’d in love’ (3.1.226, 240), and at first he refuses to ‘Unyoke this seizure and this kind regret?’ by snatching ‘palm from palm’ (3.1.241, 244), but he inevitably relents. Only when John makes his peace with the papal legate, is the pact between the kings confirmed. In *King John*, the matter of tradition, which should be handed down inviolate, is handled like the stuff of trade. As in *Richard II*, even the crown is physically handed over. For Shakespeare, the most significant event of the reign of King John was not the signing of Magna Carta, but the surrender of the crown to the papal legate and his receiving it back again ‘as a vassal of the Pope’.¹²¹ John’s ‘Thus have I yielded up into your hand / The circle of my glory.’ (5.1.1-2) receives the reply of the papal legate: ‘Take again / From this my hand, as holding of the pope’ (5.1.2-3). When John hands the crown to the Pope and receives it back, he claims that he does so in a manner that is ‘but voluntary’ (5.1.29). This confirms that the transfer is part of a free-will bargain, and yet it is the sort of foolish exercise of free will that merely serves to produce new subjection. (For discussion of this species of foolish will in Shakespeare’s comedies, see Chapter Three of [*Acts of Will*]).

The bargains in *King John*, and the many other evidences of John’s self-will, collectively demonstrate the same shift from handed-down tradition to hand-to-hand testamentary trade that we witnessed in *Richard II*. Queen Elinor employs testamentary language when she invites the Bastard Faulconbridge to pursue his will and abandon his inheritance to the younger Faulconbridge: ‘...wilt thou forsake thy fortune, / Bequeath thy

¹²¹ Frederick S. Boas, *Shakspeare and his Predecessors* (1896) (London: John Murray, 1940), 243.

land to him and follow me?’ (1.1.148-9). His response – ‘Brother, take you my land, I’ll take my chance’ (1.1.151) – leaves us unsure, as the broker Bolingbroke left us unsure, whether to choose chance is to choose the path of self-will, or to commit the lottery to the hand of God. The Bastard’s preference for ‘chance’ is in one respect the commercial preference of a merchant venturer, but it is also, etymologically-speaking, a preference for whatever may fall from on high. Elinor’s use of the word ‘fortune’ is similarly ambiguous in the way it confuses notions of traditional inheritance with merchant commodity. What we are really seeing when we see a shift from tradition to trade (and, by the same token, from tradition to testament) is not unlike the shift from status to contract that Sir Henry Maine observed in the ancient world;¹²² it is not a neat paradigm shift, but a dramatically significant change in emphasis. Elizabethan playgoers would have taken different sides in the drama and appreciated Shakespeare’s questions differently according to the perspectives of their own cultural, and specifically religious, traditions. It has been said, for example, that during Shakespeare’s lifetime ‘the Catholic sin of usury’ became ‘the Protestant virtue of banking’.¹²³ One person’s tradition is another person’s trade.

The key witness to the wills and deeds in *King John* is the Bastard Faulconbridge. He is ‘a surrogate for a particularly arch kind of spectator’.¹²⁴ This is perhaps especially clear in scene 2.1 in which he provides a running commentary on the contest conducted between the kings before the citizens of Angiers on their high walls. At the conclusion of that scene, the

¹²² Henry S. Maine, *Ancient Law* (London, John Murray, 1861).

¹²³ Ben Ross Schneider Jr., ‘*King Lear* in Its Own Time: The Difference that Death Makes’, *Early Modern Literary Studies* 1(1) (1995), 3.1-49, 31.

¹²⁴ Smith, *Cambridge Shakespeare Guide*, 79.

Bastard is left alone on stage to deliver his soliloquy on commodity. The scene can be appreciated as an extended metatheatrical exercise in the art of persuading the playgoers to identify themselves with the citizens of Angiers. Some of the metatheatrical references will seem obscure to us now, including King John's reference to 'the sky that hangs above our heads' (2.1.397) and Lewis's reference to 'the vaulty top of heaven / Figur'd quite o'er with burning meteors.' (5.2.52-53), but Elizabethan playgoers would have incorporated this into their appreciation of a theatre whose ceiling was both the natural sky and the ceiling of the stage 'heavens' (i.e. the underside of the 'hut' projecting over the inner stage, which was decorated with comets and other celestial forms). Other metatheatrical references are blatant, as for example where the Bastard observes: 'By heaven, these scroyles of Angiers flout you, kings, / And stand securely on their battlements, / As in a theatre, whence they gape and point / At your industrious scenes and acts of death' (2.1.373-76). The play's (politically dangerous) success in the endeavour of securing the playgoer's imaginative participation might explain the strange change mid-scene from 'Citizen' to 'Hubert' in the First Folio's designation of the spokesman for Angiers. The change might have signaled 'a sense of political decorum' and specifically a 'reluctance to grant a significant role to an unnamed, untitled figure who speaks for a body of the king's subjects'.¹²⁵

It is fitting that we should end with the practical business of the theatre. When Shakespeare referred to it as the 'two hours' traffic of our stage' (*RJ*, 1.prologue.12), we can be sure that one sense of the 'traffic' he had in mind was 'traffic' as the commercial offering that his company made to the paying playgoers. His use of the word in the other nine plays in which it appears is always in a merchant or monetary context. In *1 Henry VI*, reference is made to a royal marriage made 'in traffic of a king' (5.3.164). In *Macbeth*, he expressly pairs

¹²⁵ Lane, 'Succession Controversy', 478.

traffic with trade to emphasise their shared capacity to subvert traditional hierarchy. Hecate, Queen of the Witches, objects that her underlings (the ‘weird sisters’) have taken business into their own hands, and insists on her position at the top of the hierarchy (*Mac*, 3.5.4).

The traffic of the stage that Shakespeare had in mind was the commercial offering that his playing company made to the paying playgoers, but he seems always to have had more than one thing in mind. Another sense of traffic is the traffic that takes place on the stage between the players. The word ‘traffic’ probably derives from the Vulgar Latin **transfricare* (‘to rub across’), the original sense of the Italian verb being ‘to touch repeatedly, handle’.¹²⁶ The traffic of the stage is the trade business of handling and handing on. Occasionally, it is the handing on of props such as crowns and rings and parchments: ‘[m]uch like coins and other units of currency, hand props testify by their size and portability to an open potential. They can be variously possessed, traded, lost, found, concealed, and evaluated.’¹²⁷ Gesture also plays its part in this stage traffic or trade. Since ancient times, rhetoricians have appreciated the need to combine gesture and word in the process of conveying an argument. For the ancient orators, and their early modern counterparts, rhetoric was the ‘open palm’ to logic’s ‘closed fist’.¹²⁸ Even during every day speech, the gestural move from grasping to letting go, for example by relaxing and opening up a fist, frequently

¹²⁶ *Chambers Dictionary of Etymology*, R K Barnhart, ed (London: H Wilson and Company, 1988).

¹²⁷ Douglas Bruster, ‘The Dramatic Life of Objects in the Early Modern Theatre’ in *Staged Properties in Early Modern English Drama*, J. G. Harris and N. Korda eds (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 67-96, 70-71.

¹²⁸ Following Zeno’s metaphor.

signals a handing over of the power of speech.¹²⁹ The business of Shakespeare's stage was the urgent traffic of 'two hours' and lines were sometimes handed over so briskly that they rubbed up against each other. A single ten-syllable line of verse might be trafficked between parts as if the words were an object too hot to handle. A good example appears in *King John*, in the scene in which Hubert threatens to burn out Arthur's eyes with a hot brand:

HUBERT

Young boy, I must.

ARTHUR

And will you?

HUBERT

And I will. (4.1.40)

For all the talk of 'will' in that exchange, there is a clear sense that neither party is willing to hold the horrible thought for long. A scene such as this demonstrates one of the key demands made upon all theatrical performance: if the playgoers are to be moved, the drama must be full of moving energy and drive. When actors trade words and gestures and objects on stage it will be for nothing if there is no passing on of what I will term the performative 'Urge'. The word 'Urge', from the PIE root **werg-* ('to work', 'to do' or 'to perform') usefully combines the theatrical sense of practical production ('dramaturgy') with the theatrical sense of spiritual ceremony and dance (as in the Greek '*orgia*') with the sense of speed ('urgency') and thrust ('energy') and the sense that all parts ('organs') work together in the performance.

¹²⁹ S. Duncan, 'Some Signals and Rules for *Taking Speaking Turns in Conversations*', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 23 (1972), 283-292, 287.

Lag on stage is like ‘the law’s delay’ (*Ham*, 3.1.71); it does not feel ‘just’. Stage action feels fairer when it shows the humanity of swift and lively exchange between the players. The playgoers will be caught up in the current of the drama when the treading of the boards, trading of hands, and trafficking of words is done ‘trippingly’ (*Ham*, 3.2.2). To return to this chapter’s theme of ‘dust’, we can say that stage action should be like legal action in the popular ‘Court of Piepowders’. This ad hoc court was required to be present at medieval and early modern markets and fairs and was first named because merchants and market-goers would find justice done as ‘speedy’ there ‘for the advancement of trade and traffic, as the dust can fall from the foot’ (French: ‘pie poudre’).¹³⁰ Sir William Blackstone called it ‘the lowest, and at the same time the most expeditious, court of justice known to the law of England’.¹³¹

One of the rehearsal exercises employed by the Royal Shakespeare Company calls for a circle of actors to pass a pulse round the group with a clap of their hands – one actor clapping to give, and the next, facing, clapping to receive. Allocating the players a line from a passage of text, the exercise is repeated with each actor speaking their line before handing on to the next actor to speak theirs. The individual actor should not speak their line as if it stops with them. The breath must not be allowed to drop off at the end.¹³² Borrowing the

¹³⁰ Coke, *Institutes*, IV.60. See Bradin Cormack, *A Power to Do Justice: Jurisdiction, English Literature, and the Rise of Common Law, 1509-1625* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 93-4.

¹³¹ William Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England* (in four volumes) 1st edn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1765–69), II.4.

¹³² I am grateful to RSC Voice coach Emma Woodvine for letting me participate in a demonstration of the technique.

legal vernacular of *Richard II*, we might say that the actor should not neglect or ‘waste’ the energy of the speech, but that it must be kept up and passed along. Cicely Berry notes that there are many clichés for this: ‘keep the ball in the air’, ‘pass on the baton’, and so forth.¹³³ She advises that syllables should be differently weighted and that the ‘key’ is to ‘perceive the thought as movement’.¹³⁴ Thus the practical traffic of the stage is a sort of trade in metaphysical currency; a discharging from hand-to-hand, and mind-to-mind, of the precious cargo of a question, an idea and a will. This precious thought, expressed in word and movement and gesture and breath, should not be wasted or dropped or thrown down. It must be handed on. It then becomes something more than it could have been in a single mind or in one person’s hands. The creative trade of hands fills it up with values that economic grasping would hollow out. It becomes a communal and artistic artefact that can be passed from the stage to be handled by the playgoers. The playgoers will feel the frisson of its touch. They will encounter its weight, and it will move them. This sort of traffic is Shakespeare’s stock-in-trade, and it is part of the legacy he hands on to us.

¹³³ Cicely Berry, *The Actor and the Text* (1987) (London: Virgin Books, 2000), 82.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 83.