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Falling into Kingship:  
Bolingbroke's Slide into Power in *Richard II*

In act one, scene one of Shakespeare's *Richard II* Henry Bolingbroke assumes the role of crown prosecutor against King Richard. Thomas Mowbray is being accused of treason by Bolingbroke only because Bolingbroke cannot bring Richard to trial directly. So instead, Bolingbroke uses Mowbray as a play actor for Richard, causing two trials to be held simultaneously. It is said by Lorna Hutson that, "Everyone... quietly *knows* that the person on trial... will not be Mowbray, but the king himself" (137). However, Bolingbroke is also a play actor in this trial. As a baron of the realm Bolingbroke belongs to a group Ernst Kantorowicz calls the body politic, or the Crown. As a member of the Crown, Bolingbroke is a crown jurist, often making decisions of justice on the Crown's behalf. In this trial, Bolingbroke advances his role of crown jurist to crown prosecutor by holding Richard accountable for crimes against the Crown by the Crown.

Bolingbroke's role as crown jurist shows the beginning of his usurpation of the throne. Carl Schmitt argues that the sovereign – "stands outside the valid legal system... [but] belongs to it," meaning that somehow the power to be inside and outside of the law can be held by one body (7). If Schmitt's theory were possible Richard could never be put on trial by Bolingbroke. Ernst Kantorowicz uses *Richard II* as an "indirect critique of [Schmitt]" to propose a different theory: that the sovereign has two bodies, a body politic and a body natural (Halpern 67). The body natural is the king's physical body, or the manifestation of the body politic into a single body. The body politic includes all the peoples, lands, property, and powers accessible by the sovereign. By using Kantorowicz's theory, it can be seen that the body natural is being put on

trial by the body politic. The problem with using Kantorowicz's theory is that Richard would have to put himself on trial as the representative of the Crown, or multiple representatives of the Crown would need to be used. Instead, Bolingbroke is elevated to be the one person putting Richard on trial. This creates tension in the kingship because the body politic has manifested itself in a single, physical body other than the body natural. The tension in the kingship increases and eventually leads to Bolingbroke's rise to power.

Bolingbroke starts accumulating his authority as a representative of the crown when he gives his reason for initiating the trial to be to "please my sovereign" (1.1.48). According to Hutson, when administering the law "in early modern England... the [king] was imagined as always already absent, requiring hypothetical resurrection" (134). By invoking the king during his accusation, Bolingbroke begins a trial. This trial would seemingly be for Mowbray's betrayal of the Crown by killing the Duke of Gloucester, making Bolingbroke the crown jurist representing Gloucester. However, since Richard is the one who ordered Gloucester's death, Richard is the one now on trial with Bolingbroke acting as crown prosecutor (Hutson 137). Bolingbroke uses Mowbray to charge Richard for his – "... indiscretion[s]... to the commonwealth" (Hutson 136). The commonwealth is considered to be part of the body politic, this effectively places Richard on trial for crimes against the Crown.

Richard escalates the tension of the sovereignty of the body politic through his insufficient conclusion to the trial. Samuel Schoenbaum describes Richard's actions as trying to "rid himself of two embarrassments: ... Bolingbroke, who represents a direct threat, and Mowbray, to whom he owes too much and who has outlived his usefulness" (54). The manner in which Richard concludes the trial reveals his knowledge of the two trials taking place and the threats they pose to him.

"...our kingdom's earth should not be [soiled]  
 With that dear blood which it hath fostered;  
 ...for our eyes do hate the dire aspect  
 Of civil wounds [ploughed] up with [neighbors'] sword;  
 ...for we think the eagle-winged pride  
 Of sky-aspiring and ambitious thoughts,  
 With rival-hating envy, set on you  
 To wake our peace..." (1.3.422-29).

On the surface, Richard is saying that Bolingbroke's and Mowbray's pride has caused them to come to blows. However, England has fostered not only Bolingbroke and Mowbray, but Richard as well. Richard, who understands that there are two trials taking place, also gives a warning to Bolingbroke recognizable through the use of an enjambment on the word "you." Richard tells Bolingbroke not to start digging up the "civil wounds" he has made – "The commons hath he [pilled] with grievous taxes, / And... the nobles hath he fined / ...and quite lost their Hearts" – else he'll wake from his peace (2.1.937-39). The symbolism of "sky-aspiring" thoughts caused by "eagle-winged" pride creates a connection to Greek mythology where eagles are messengers of Zeus, the king of the gods who rules from the sky. This parallels Bolingbroke, who, as a baron, is a messenger of the king. Richard is suggesting that Bolingbroke is overreaching his own power as a messenger. Through his actions, Richard is trying to dissolve Bolingbroke's role as the crown prosecutor against him. The tension in the kingship is too heightened at this point for Richard to exile Bolingbroke as he did Mowbray and the shakiness of Richard's kingship is

further exposed when he revises Bolingbroke's banishment seemingly because of a baron: "Uncle... / thy sad aspect / hath from the number of his [banished] years / [plucked] four away" (1.3.506-09). That a baron's disapproval can so easily change Richard's decree does not speak well of his authority.

Richard loses power through the barons' support of Bolingbroke. The roles of the barons are important first because they are part of the body politic and second because they are the resources upon which the kingship depends. Richard realizes that the barons are a major source of his power and attempts to control them by seizing their property. Examples of this are seen in his actions towards Gloucester's and Bolingbroke's properties. When Richard seizes Gloucester's property upon his death and refuses to find fault with the murderer, Mowbray, Richard not only gains Gloucester's wealth he is stealing away the barons' power by denying the right of recompense. This inability to ensure justice is seen in the Duchess of Gloucester when she asks, "Where then, alas, may I complain myself?" (1.2.255). She has lost the right to see justice because Richard's actions have stopped the normal procedure for retribution afforded the nobility. She then seeks her vengeance through Bolingbroke, "O, sit my husband's wrongs on Hereford's spear" (1.2.260). Richard's attempt to gain power backfires because he loses the support of the nobles by his actions, at the end of the trial he loses Bolingbroke, Mowbray, and the Duchess of Gloucester and partially loses York and Gaunt. Upon Gaunt's death and Bolingbroke's return he loses the Lords Willoughby and Ross and the Earl of Northumberland and eventually the Duke of York, who was his staunchest ally.

Bolingbroke's political standing grows when he returns to England early. When Bolingbroke returned, he shed a cloak of pretense that was protecting him from being accused of treason by indirectly challenging Richard through Mowbray. Mowbray realizes this and says –

“... what thou art, God, thou, and I do know; /And all too soon, I fear, the king shall rue” (1.3.501-02). Here it is that Bolingbroke has the potential to become more than a crown prosecutor, dismissible to the king. But in order to continue to avoid being accused of treason Bolingbroke could still not accuse the king directly. Instead, he claims, “I come but for mine own” (3.3.1844). At this point, Richard is still on trial by the Crown but Bolingbroke’s credibility as the Crown’s representative has become muddled. Does Bolingbroke want to be king or is it forced upon him through his intolerance of Richard’s injustices? Christopher Pye introduces the story of a spy who is carrying a message in his looking glass; when this spy escapes from capture he leaves behind his looking glass, betraying himself (82-83). In the same way, Bolingbroke betrays himself when he abandons his message to right the wrongs done to Gloucester and instead sets out to right the wrongs against himself.

It is in this muddle of motivation that Bolingbroke becomes the pseudo body, this false body commands a real power that is not officially recognized and therefore is not completely present. The pseudo body is temporary and ends once it has become the body natural. Bolingbroke starts changing from the crown prosecutor to the pseudo body when the reasons for his defiance change from representing someone else, Gloucester and the people, to representing himself. According to Schoenbaum – “*Richard II* ... was used in Shakespeare’s own day as a ... power struggle” (49). What was once a trial of power between the body natural’s abuse of the body politic has focused to become a trial on Richard’s abuse of power specifically to Bolingbroke. Bolingbroke gives up the pretense of covering his treason and firmly becomes the pseudo body in act three, scene three when Richard says, “For do we must what force will have us do. / Set on towards London, cousin, is it so?” (1855-56). If Bolingbroke had responded “nay” to this question he could have reverted from the crown prosecutor to his original position as a

member of the Crown. But because he replied “yea” he cemented his place as the pseudo body. This false body acts with the power of the body natural but without the acknowledged authority the body natural commands. Edward Plowden states that “the Body politic includes the body natural, but the Body natural is the lesser... and these two Bodies are incorporated in one Person... So that the Body natural... is magnified... by the said Consolidation” (Kantorowicz 9). The body natural only gains its power by the acknowledgement that it is the mouthpiece of the body politic. By becoming the pseudo body, Bolingbroke is forcing an eventual reversal of roles, wherein Richard will become something less than a member of the body politic and Bolingbroke will become the body natural.

Bolingbroke becomes the body natural when he inherits monarchical sorrow. According to Kantorowicz, it is the body natural, not the body politic that is subject to passions, and sorrow is a passion (13). Richard tells Bolingbroke – “You may my glories and my state depose, / but not my grief; still am I king of those” (4.1.2180-81). So, Bolingbroke is seemingly denied the kingly sorrow and the rights to the body natural. But the Queen declares, “... Bolingbroke my sorrow’s dismal heir” (2.2.1058). Bolingbroke becomes – “... the progeny brought forth by grief itself” (Pye 93). Bolingbroke inherits the body natural’s capacity for monarchical sorrow not through Richard but through the queen.

The presence of the pseudo body is essential to understand the stress of the relationship between the body natural and the body politic in Bolingbroke’s coup. There are shadows of the pseudo body present before it actually appears. As these shadows increase the pseudo body becomes more and more apparent. The emergence of the pseudo body coincides with the rising tension in the kingship. Bolingbroke is seizing upon Richard’s mistakes to fuel his own cause. By taking the opportunities presented by Richard’s follies to bolster his credence, Bolingbroke

becomes a strong figurehead for the will of the body politic while providing a specific face the body natural can oppose. The pseudo body provides a way for the body politic to depose the body natural.

Shakespeare uses Bolingbroke's slide into kingship to comment that monarchial power is only possible through support. Support garnered through the protection of the rights of the body politic. This democratic thought is expressed when the body politic creates a new body natural through the use of a pseudo body. Bolingbroke becomes the body natural because the body politic used him to champion its grievances. But this action is only necessary because the body natural has betrayed the support invested in it. By this portrayal of the monarchial power dynamic, Shakespeare shows that though the body natural may appear to be sovereign, the body politic is ultimately where the power lies.

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