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## An Unruly Member: Attacking the King's Two Bodies Through Speech in *Richard II*

Shannon Adams

In Shakespeare's *Richard II*, the physical uprising that Henry Bolingbroke advances against the king is just one of several rebellions in the play. The people of England join Bolingbroke in a linguistic battle against Richard in which language functions as an act of violence that openly challenges Richard's fitness to be king. Drawing from early beliefs surrounding the monarchy, *Richard II* records the destruction of the king's corporal body as well as the political body over which he has stewardship. This mystical union between body and people is more generally known as the king's two bodies. Passages in *Richard II* present the tongue as an "unruly member" that operates outside of the body politic, creating political tension and disorder. This paper will define the king's two bodies historically and as they are seen in the play, as well as provide an explanation of the danger of the tongue to the body politic. Although King Richard clings to the literal interpretation of the two bodies, as is seen in his frequent references to his body as well as his failure to recognize his own mortality, he demonstrates an inability to control the tongue through his agreement to listen to evil language, such as flattery and rumor, and his refusal to hear the complaints of his people. As the tongues of both the body natural and the body politic become increasingly unruly, spreading dissent and discontent throughout the kingdom, the instability of Richard's reign increases, eventually leading to the dismemberment and fragmentation of the king's body politic and body natural.

## Dual Bodies in Renaissance Political Thought

The English Renaissance carried a long-standing tradition that the monarch was endowed with two types of bodies: the body politic and the body natural. In his influential work, *The King's Two Bodies*, Ernst H. Kantorowicz describes the distinction: the body natural is the contained, physical body of the king, subject to the pains of mortality; the body politic is the artificial, transcendent ability for the king's person to represent his entire kingdom. Richard's use of the royal "we" throughout the play is a direct allusion to his twin bodies.

The use of the human body to metaphorically represent an entire kingdom, with the crown at the head, hearkens back to Christian scripture. This idea is referenced multiple times in both Corinthians and Romans in which Paul compares the members of the church to different parts of the body, with each of the parts functioning separately but in perfect unity (Hale 29). Since the king was regarded as the literal representative of Christ on earth, Paul's analogy translated into the political arena, more specifically as a reinforcement of the divine nature of the kingship. C. G. Thayer's statement that a king is not necessarily "a good man" but is "by definition infallible" (38) directly coincides with Richard's belief that "the breath of world men cannot depose / The deputy elected by the Lord" (3.2.52–3). In other words, the reality of the two bodies of the monarchy was supposed to create a kind of super-human protection for the king's person and his people. Discussion about the body politic can be confusing, as it may describe either the crown as a figurehead for the entire country, or the actual population that makes up the kingdom. For the purposes of this essay, I will use both definitions, with the royal family and courtiers functioning as particularly important members of the general body politic, or the physical population of the kingdom.

That the vast amount of body imagery Shakespeare uses in *Richard II* has connection to the political ideology of the monarch's two bodies is highly probable. Queen Elizabeth I and King James I both used references to the body natural and the body politic in defense of their position as monarchs (Kalnin 8), so this idea was still flourishing and even legally legitimate in Shakespeare's day. Kantorowicz's claim that *Richard II* is really "the tragedy of the King's Two Bodies" (26) suggests that we should turn our attention to the king's bodies in order to understand the psychological and political complexities Richard faces rather than for mere historical context. Richard is convinced that his body, unlike those of the men around him, is especially consecrated to represent an entire people; the tragedy of the play comes from watching as the power of the crown separates from and works independently of the king's body.

In 1599 James I wrote *Basilikon Doron*, a kind of pragmatic guide for future rulers. James argues that for a prince, “Neither can anything in his government succeed well with him ... if his person be unsanctified” (103). While *Richard II* does not make any direct allusions to this text, it does address and challenge the ideas presented by James. Richard is the king, and under old law the king is responsible for the care of the members that compose his political body. Metaphorically speaking, different parts of the body represent the different classes that comprised the kingdom. Each of the parts has a specific role to work for and ensure the safety of the rest of the body. A king who has control over the parts of his own body symbolically has control over his kingdom.

Carla Mazzio’s article “Sins of the Tongue” notes that within the body the tongue was considered the “most powerful *and* the most vulnerable member” and easily the most dangerous to the state (53). Historically the tongue represented language, rhetoric, and logic—all necessary tools to wield significant power. Early modern texts express anxiety that the same organ that speaks of good could also be used to speak evil and spread discontent. Because a person cannot completely control the effects of words once they have exited the mouth, the tongue carries an independence and separation from the body, through speech, that frightened early modern thinkers. The Bible warns of the destructive power of the tongue in the third chapter of James: “the tongue is fyre, yea, a worlde of wickeness: so is the tongue set among our members, that it defileth the whole bodie, and setteth on fyre the course of nature, and it is set on fyre of hel” (Geneva Bible 107). James suggests that the tongue has the capability of poisoning the entire body and is thereby an evil member to be treated with extreme caution. In early descriptions of the tongue, the necessity to “bridle,” an imperative lifted from James 1:26 (among other places) is stressed, especially for those in power. James I wrote that there is no better way to rule than to “stop ... mouths from ... idle and unreverent speeches” (*Basilikon Doron* 127). A king was responsible to not only exhibit control of language through correct rhetoric he also needed to know how to keep his subjects’ speech contained, curbing any traces of dissent in his kingdom.

### **Resistance and Reticence: Rumor and the “Challenge to Law”**

In *Richard II* Shakespeare explores the destructive capabilities of the tongue, essentially determining the extent to which language impacts the success or failure of the monarchy. The play presents Richard as adhering to traditional beliefs regarding the two bodies, as when he says, “we know no hand of blood and bone / Can grip the sacred handle”

(3.3.79). Yet he consistently engages in behavior that undercuts his position. *Richard II* opens with the disclosure that Richard has secretly ordered the death of his uncle. Rumors circulating around the court finally culminate into an open verbal rivalry between Henry Bolingbroke and Mowbray. Perhaps most significant in this transaction is Bolingbroke's admission to the connection between the tongue and physical violence. He promises that "what I speak my body shall make good" and later "what my tongue speaks my right-drawn sword may prove" (1.1.37–8, 46). Once the tongue is let loose, Bolingbroke's entire body moves toward active rebellion. This speech marks the liberality of language and the tongue's inherent resistance to "containment" (Mazzio 54). Mowbray's response that "the fair reverence of your highness curbs me / From giving reins and spurs to my free speech" is essentially a speech of protection for Richard. Mowbray has access to information that could destroy his king's credibility if it were opened to the public through speech. By remaining silent, Mowbray safeguards the stability of the monarchy.

Richard's mistake is in silencing the wrong offender. Mowbray faces lifelong exile in foreign land, thereby forever cut off from his access to his native language. Bolingbroke is forbidden to enter the area for six years but remains in England and thus retains his ability to communicate. In the melee between Bolingbroke and Mowbray, Richard recognizes the danger of his situation and executes judgment that he thinks will permanently ensure the safety of his reputation. The sentence of "speechless death" via exile is appropriate to the sensitivity of the circumstance, but Richard roots out the wrong man's tongue. Mowbray has already proved that he will not speak of Richard's infamy on pain of death. He is absolutely loyal both to the mystical divinity of the crown and Richard as the mortal person who claims that right. Instead of cutting off Bolingbroke's power of speech, Richard merely relocates the problem. The results of this decision are disastrous and immediate. In the next act Bolingbroke returns in verbal defiance of the king's ruling. He insists on keeping his previous title, affirming "my answer is to Lancaster" (2.3.70) although Richard has technically stripped him of his royalties. The Duke of York immediately senses that Bolingbroke's tongue retains the same impurities that initially caused his banishment. He pronounces everything that exits his nephew's "ungracious mouth" as "profane" and treasonous to the crown (2.3.88). Bolingbroke returns with a tongue unrepentant and untamed, ready not to support, but to "challenge law" (3.1.134).

This questioning of law and the crown takes place on a broader level through the rumors circulating about Richard in the court. The dialogue between the Duchess of Gloucester and John of Gaunt and even

Amerle's veiled opposition to Richard's ruling to banish Bolingbroke, "would the word farewell have . . . added years to short his banishment" (1.3.15-16), reveal that verbal dissention is taking place throughout the court. In his book, *Shakespeare's Noise*, Kenneth Gross remarks that rumor is a "violent or disorderly form of speaking" (1). Rumor, like poison, spreads quickly, as personified through Bolingbroke's accusations, bordering on treason, expanding further and further throughout the kingdom. Bolingbroke has legally lost his name and property and is only kept in power through "men's opinions" (3.1.26). Indeed Bolingbroke relies heavily upon the positive power of rumor to assist him in gathering supporters and followers to physically force the king's hand: "all tongues cried 'God save thee, Bolingbroke!'" (5.2.11). It is through the tongue that Bolingbroke wins the hearts and minds of the people and the king loses favor. Richard prays that "double tongue . . . may with a mortal touch throw death upon thy sovereign's enemies" (3.2.20) without realizing that the dual nature of rumor, to either promote or destroy a person, has actually turned against him and saved his enemy. Richard fails to realize that through speech, his subjects see him as incompetent. Bolingbroke springs upon the decline in public morale as the perfect opportunity for him to build up and spread his reputation.

### Flattery and Fragmentation

Richard is not aware of what is happening around him because he is lulled into security through the flattery of a few of his subjects. Flattery in this play is perhaps the most condemned form of speech, and Richard's decision to listen to it is in direct opposition to his sworn duty to protect his body from danger. York acerbically observes that Richard's ears are deafened by flattery which works like venom. Rather than attending to the pressing matters of state, Richard is persuaded to pursue idle fashions and engage in meaningless wars; in the interim his body politic is being conquered and divided. Gaunt warns Richard that "men living flatter those that die," prophesying the decay and the deposition of both Richard's body politic and his body natural. Instead of noting the verbal discontent of his people and taking action against it, Richard relies on the false sense of security his followers provide. Gaunt tells him that outside of his supporters, "thou liest in reputation sick; / And thou, too careless patient as thou art / Committ'st they anointed body to the cure / Of those physicians that first wounded thee" (2.1.96-9). Because he has listened to the lies of a few, Richard has exposed himself to the critical tongues of his entire kingdom. Richard realizes too late that his followers "wound me with the flatteries of [their] tongue[s]" (3.3.213). David

Norbrook says, “his ... position is vulnerable because he increasingly places his own and his favorites’ private interests against the common good” (41). Richard gives free reign to his counselor’s tongues, and by so doing unleashes a freedom of speech within the rest of his lands that he cannot control.

Richard not only gives too much leeway with the speech of his counselors and people, but he lets his own tongue run loose when he should exercise restraint. Although Richard is capable of formulating powerful, even profound, ideas, the strength of his rhetoric is lost in the excessive length and often dizzying logic of his speeches. At the end of a twenty-eight line speech Richard remarks, “Well, well, I see I talk but idly” (3.3.170). Northumberland says of the same speech that Richard talks “fondly, like a frantic man” (3.3.183). Because Richard expends words, speaking idly, rather than carefully, he is judged insane. He has lost his head, which, in terms of the body, represents the kingship. Northumberland’s comment suggests that a king without the power of speech is a king without a head; a king without a head is no king at all. As Richard tells “sad stories of the death of kings” (3.2.151), his tongue reveals the mortality of previous kings and betrays his own humanness. In this speech the mystical power of the body politic is broken down and Richard is left with only a physical body like other men.

### **Bolingbroke and Richard: “The Silent King” and Death**

Where Richard fails to bridle the tongue, Bolingbroke exercises its absolute control. When Bolingbroke parts with his father for the six years of his exile, Gaunt asks him why he is not more vocally emotional. Bolingbroke’s response marks his attitude toward the tongue throughout the rest of the play: “... the tongue’s office should be prodigal / To breathe the abundant dolour of the heart” (1.3.245–6). Bolingbroke displays a constant awareness of the power of the tongue. In fact, he states that he would rather bite off his own tongue and remain speechless than shame his honor by it (1.1.190–4). A position of authority is about control over language; it is better to be without a tongue than to use it improperly because of its destructive capabilities. Bolingbroke recognizes that some messages are not safe in the mouths of other people, as we see in his comment to Lord Berkley: “I shall not need to transport my words by you” (2.3.81). When a report could turn against his favor, Bolingbroke makes sure that the information stays in his mouth, a place that he can exercise control. His one-line speeches are deliberately calculated responses to keep language from running away from him. In so doing, he protects his position and maintains control over himself and his followers.

Richard recoils against Bolingbroke's curt dialogue and labels him the "silent King" (4.1.200). Richard's subjects, acting as Bolingbroke's supporters, likewise hold their tongues when Richard is called to step down as the ruling monarch. Richard asks, "God save the King! Will no man say Amen? / Am I both priest and clerk? Well then, Amen" (4.1.162-163). In this critical moment, the people pledge their loyalty to a new ruler. Although their reticence is different from Bolingbroke's verbal discretion, Richard's subjects rescind his right to the throne by rebelliously withholding speech. The silence following Richard's plea is demonstrative of the complete control that Bolingbroke possesses over the tongue of the body politic. The people will not speak out against Bolingbroke, nor will they open their mouths to sustain Richard. Bolingbroke masters the verbal and nonverbal power of both his own and the people's tongues, breaking any remaining ties between Richard and the body of his subjects. Regardless of what Richard says at this point, his kingdom is lost and his body politic is publicly mobilized against him.

The violence enacted upon the body politic through the rebellion of the tongue culminates in Richard's self-condemnation in the deposition scene. Until this point, the body politic has slowly been separating, growing farther apart in purpose and loyalty to the crown. Richard's kingdom is essentially fragmented, but he must formally renounce the throne before Bolingbroke can replace him as king. In a sort of reverse coronation, Richard "undoes" (4.1.193) his consecration piece by piece. He describes how all of his body parts from his head to his hands literally "give away" the crown (4.1.194-200). At the end of this list the tongue receives the final condemnation: "With mine own tongue deny my sacred state" (4.1.199). In this scene, the body has turned itself traitor to the throne. Richard's physical members, acting as independent entities disconnected from the rest of the body, individually destroy specific privileges unique to the king. But it is the king's own tongue which denies the "divine right to be King" (Greenblatt 512). The tongue of the body politic has not only destroyed Richard's credibility and divided his kingdom, but has essentially mutinied against a fundamental belief regarding the monarchy: no longer does a king have to be divinely appointed. Richard condemns his tongue for issuing in a new reign that redefines what it means to be king.

The tongue is not only responsible for the death of Richard's reign, but also for that of his body natural. The overzealous courtier Exton kills Richard because of something that he overhears Bolingbroke say. In the scene just preceding Richard's death Exton tells a servant:



Didst thou not mark the king, what words he spake?  
 "Have I no friend to rid me of this living fear?" ...  
 And speaking it, he wistly look'd on me,  
 And who should say, "I would thou wert the man  
 That would divorce this terror from my heart"  
 Meaning the king at Pomfret [King Richard]. (5.4.1–2,  
 8–11)

When the new king asks how this "deed of slander" has been wrought, Exton replies "From your own mouth, my lord, did I this deed" (5.6.35, 37). The tongue is responsible for the death of Richard's two bodies, both as the divine representative of his kingdom as well as his mortal life.

## Conclusion

The destruction of Richard's two bodies at the end of the play suggests that the old ideas surrounding the monarchy themselves are both dying away and being challenged. Richard makes himself unfit to be king. In the play, his inability to listen to his subjects or to suppress negative speech throughout the country is devastating. Bolingbroke, on the other hand, is presented as understanding the power of the tongue and its significance to the monarchy. He fits James I's description of how a king should rule better than the natural heir. The unruly nature of the tongue in *Richard II* forces the question of what really defines a king. Is a king a king by divine appointment or by his ability to rule and effectively control a kingdom? Bolingbroke's ascension to power is not necessarily indicative of Shakespeare's feelings about the monarchy, but rather suggests that a new mindset about the right to rule has been set in force. In *Richard II*, the power of the tongue is more determinant and important to successfully handling positions of authority than the mystical consecration passed down from king to king.

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