

## Propping up the King's Two Bodies in *Richard II*

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**Abstract:** This essay argues that the king's body politic in *Richard II* depends not only on the king's physical body but also on the many human bodies and material possessions that comprise the kingdom. *Richard II* presents the legal fictions of sovereignty and state and the illocutionary force of speech acts as ultimately resting on material bodies and objects. These bodies and objects tend to fall to the ground and fail to meet their owners' intended purposes. While in the fiction of the play bodies and objects are mostly ineffectual, from a dramaturgical perspective it is precisely because bodies and objects do not align with their owners' intentions that they appear to draw level with them as agents of dramatic action. People thus become like props in the play, and props become like people. Power is shown to be diffused away from the figure of the king towards the bodies and objects around him and the king himself is revealed to be a kind of prop.



Here am I left to underprop his land,  
Who, weak with age, cannot support myself. (2.2.82-83)<sup>1</sup>

The Duke of York delivers these lines in Shakespeare's *Richard II* when he finds himself handed the unenviable task of governing an already unstable country whilst Richard is conducting his military campaign in Ireland. Echoing John of Gaunt's earlier quibbling on his own name, York plays on

the two meanings of "land" as both the metonymic equivalent of the state and the actual rocks, stones, and trees of Richard's kingdom. York imagines the two political and physical lands as if they were now directly bearing down on his aged frame. Richard's decision to have an ailing and elderly regent prop up his state in his absence is one of the many errors that will culminate in Henry Bullingbrook's return from exile, his triumphant progress through England, and his removal of Richard from the throne. Although much younger and physically fitter than York, Richard too eventually finds his body no longer able to "underprop" either his land or his own claim to rule it. Just as York's body proves incapable of propping up the state, Richard's physical body proves incapable of propping up the fiction of the king's two bodies. In Ernst Kantorowicz's influential reading of the play, *Richard II* becomes "the tragedy of the King's Two Bodies," in which the king's physical and intangible bodies are violently separated and the protagonist limns a downward movement "from divine kingship to kingship's 'Name,' and from the name to the naked misery of man."<sup>2</sup>

This essay revisits the well-trodden theme of the king's two bodies in *Richard II* by exploring the role of physical entities in the play. It suggests that Shakespeare's play is less about the king's body politic *per se* than about the dependence of his body politic not only upon the physical body of the monarch but also on the living bodies and physical possessions that make up the kingdom. *Richard II* relentlessly demonstrates that the power to rule and to give one's speech acts illocutionary force depends on material bodies and objects. Bodies thus tend to become like props and props tend to become like bodies: inherently creaky supports for the fictions of sovereignty and state. *Richard II* may not be so much a tragedy as a tale of metamorphosis: the story of Richard's transformation from king to prop.

Kantorowicz himself associated the idea of the two bodies with the stage property. He reaches for the metaphor of the prop early on in his magnum opus, in which he describes the king's two bodies as "stage

properties" passed down from century to century.<sup>3</sup> In Shakespeare's play, the power to rule and command others is anchored in props and in the body-as-prop. By calling himself an "underprop," York might seem to lend direct support to this interpretation. Unfortunately, however, this construction of his line would be anachronistic since *The Oxford English Dictionary* dates the first use of the word "prop" to denote objects that appear on stage during the performance of a play to 1841.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, this essay argues that the idea of the human body as a kind of prop—both as a stage property and something that supports a fiction—is fundamental to the play. In *Richard II* props displace bodies as agents of dramatic action. Conversely people become a species of stage property.

David Norbrook has argued that Kantorowicz's widespread influence on criticism of early modern literature through *The King's Two Bodies* "has encouraged critics to turn from the more discursive aspects of early modern political culture and to focus unrepresentatively on theories of reflexivity and on royal ritual."<sup>5</sup> Closer to the mark would be to say that Kantorowicz-inspired readings often do not insist on reflexivity or ritual enough, moving too quickly past them to the single intangible power that supposedly lies behind them. Despite the "corporeal turn" in Shakespeare studies, considerations of the king's two bodies in *Richard II* tend to give the weight of attention to the king's body politic rather than the human body on which the king's intangible body in part depends.<sup>6</sup> Lorna Hutson's recent reconsideration of both *The King's Two Bodies* and *Richard II*, for example, follows much of the criticism it criticizes in dealing primarily with the king's fictional body at the expense of his fleshly one.

Even though Hutson takes a very different approach to the play than we do, her reading of Kantorowicz and of *Richard II* is ultimately consistent with our own. Hutson argues that Kantorowicz-inspired readings of Shakespeare tend to overestimate the absolutist implications of the concept of the king's two bodies in both Kantorowicz's book itself and in Shakespearean drama. She emphasizes how the Renaissance understanding of the king's two bodies is seen in Kantorowicz to emerge

from an understanding of the king as Christ's representative on earth (*vicarius Christi*) to an understanding of the king as the embodiment of the perpetual common wealth (*vicarius fisci*). Hutson stresses that the concept of the king's two bodies exists in the Renaissance as a legal fiction, not as a literal reality. Thus she suggests that Richard's mistake in *Richard II* is to regard himself "as *vicarius Dei* when he is in fact, in his subjects' eyes, *vicarius fisci*."<sup>7</sup> Like Victoria Kahn in her essay in the same issue of *Representations*, Hutson suggests that the idea of the two bodies was especially apt for dramatic representation because of the common fictionality of the legal concept and of the drama itself.<sup>8</sup> The audience is invited to enter the legal fiction through the dramatic fiction and to judge the former through the lens of the latter. Therefore in *Richard II* the idea of the king's two bodies leads in the direction not of absolutism but a process of collective judgment through which the audience takes the measure of the monarch's capacity to represent the public good.<sup>9</sup> The intention of the present essay is to draw attention to the necessary precondition for this act of collective judgment: the audience's continual awareness of the materiality on which the fictions of the play and of the king's two bodies depend.

*Richard II* may be the only Shakespeare play written entirely in verse, but in its language and its dramaturgy it emphasizes the prosy materiality of things. As Caroline Spurgeon pointed out long ago, the imagery of the play revolves around three related words: earth, land, and ground.<sup>10</sup> "Look not to the ground," Richard implores Aumerle and Carlisle, asking "are we not high?" (3.2.87-88). But the audience is forced repeatedly to "look to the ground" not only because of the play's language but also because of the many downward trajectories that characterize the play's implied staging.<sup>11</sup> The movement of the play is to bring the king from "on high" to "the ground," as he literally is forced to do in the next scene when he descends to meet Bullingbrook in the "base court" (3.3.180). While the play's language and implied staging are engrossed in an earthy materiality, the play gives a prominence to material props that is without parallel in

Shakespeare. *Othello* has its handkerchief, *The Merchant of Venice* has its three caskets, and *As You Like It* has its love poems attached to trees, but *Richard II* brings memorable props on stage throughout its plot. These props and the people who use them have an irresistible tendency to fall to the bare earth that the play's language so often insists upon. Props and bodies physically fall to the ground and figuratively fail to meet their owners' purposes. Again and again, their owners join their props by falling down to the earth.

Consider some of the many props and bodies in the play that fall to the ground and fail as they do so. Mowbray and Bullingbrook throw their gages in an unsuccessful attempt to initiate a duel. They take up each other's gages with words of contempt for each other, but the ceremony forces both to stoop physically to their adversary in order to accept the challenge (1.1.74). Mowbray soon follows his own gage to the ground when he throws his own body down in front of Richard in an ultimately unsuccessful attempt to petition the King to be allowed to meet Bullingbrook in a trial by combat. After Richard has reluctantly arranged the trial, he unexpectedly throws down his warder before the trial has a chance to begin in a similarly ultimately unsuccessful attempt to neutralize the threat Bullingbrook and his grievances represent to him. On returning from Ireland, Richard goes down on his knees to affirm his love for a land that he will be told, minutes later, is slipping out of his hands. The victorious Bullingbrook kneels in front of Richard, who wins a small victory over his rival by forcing him to end his charade by standing up again. Bullingbrook's and Mowbray's solemn exchange of gages is repeated as a farce in 4.1, in which the sheer number of challenges results in Aumerle running out of gages. As Richard locks hands over the crown with Bullingbrook, he imagines it as a bucket full of tears taking him downwards, presumably to drown. The newly deposed Richard dashes a mirror to the ground because it will not show him the image he wishes to see in it. In Pomfret Castle, two murderers fail to kill Richard and are slain by him, their bodies likely landing on the stage. Richard's body soon joins

them on the floor when he is killed in turn by a third. The murderer sets the coffin containing Richard's body down in front of Bullingbrook, now Henry IV, in an attempt to ease the new king's mind. Instead it will weigh on Henry's conscience in the two *Henry IV* plays and haunt that of his son in *Henry V*. Only Aumerle, York, and the Duchess break this pattern of falling and failure when they kneel in front of the newly crowned Henry to sue, successfully, for Aumerle's life. As they do so they signal a temporary restitution of the ability of the prostrate body or object to instantiate the intentions of its owner. But the overwhelming majority of the props and the people who use them in *Richard II* both fall and fail in ways that figure the collapse of the political order itself.

The pervasive attention devoted to props in *Richard II* is striking, especially considering the sparseness with which Elizabethan theater used props in general. The stages of large public theaters like The Globe used both scenery and props sparingly. Actors would have relied on a small set of reusable stage properties, alongside costumes, to aid in the representation of a play's characters, settings, and actions. Some stage properties are mentioned in the stage directions included in the early modern editions of the plays while others are clearly referred to in the lines. Alan Dessen has argued convincingly that use of additional stage properties is encoded in the language of the plays, subsequently often lost on later readers: for instance, according to Dessen, the original stage direction at the beginning of 2.1 of *Richard II*, calling for John of Gaunt to enter "sick," very likely indicated that the actor be brought on stage in a chair, especially since when he later wishes to leave he asks to be "conveyed" to his bed.<sup>12</sup> But even taking all three of these categories into account, the total sum of stage properties explicitly or implicitly called for in Shakespeare's plays, and in early modern plays in general, is still relatively low. Frances Teague's survey counts an average of 34 material objects other than costumes to appear during a performance of a Shakespeare play produced according to the presumed early modern

staging conventions; a figure adjusted for varying lengths of different play-texts yields an average of one stage property per 96 lines.<sup>13</sup>

Philip Henslowe's diaries are the most valuable source of information on stage properties in Elizabethan plays as they include detailed records of the stage properties and costumes used by Admiral's Men.<sup>14</sup> Unfortunately no comparably detailed source exists for Lord Chamberlain's Men and hence for the Elizabethan productions of many of Shakespeare's plays. But though the evidence for the original staging of the plays is scarce, it is generally accepted that the Elizabethan stage would have been quite bare by comparison to English stages of subsequent centuries. In the spare dramaturgical setting of the Elizabethan stage, those objects that did appear would have taken on a disproportionate significance. Jonathan Gill Harris and Natasha Korda point out that while literary scholarship has paid relatively little attention to non-costume stage props, witness accounts of theater performances in early modern England often focus on these objects, which suggests that to Elizabethan and Jacobean audiences, stage props constituted a prominent and memorable component of the plays. Gill Harris and Korda cite Samuel Rowlands' comments on the dagger used by Richard Burbage in the role of Richard III or Simon Forman's vivid memory of a chair he saw in *Macbeth* and a chest in *Cymbeline*.<sup>15</sup>

The position of props in *Richard II* is paradoxical. In the world represented within the play, props seem mostly ineffectual in the hands of those who use them. In the implied dramaturgy of the play, however, props encroach on the place usually occupied by actors as the agents of onstage action. A classic essay on the semiotics of the theater by the Czech structuralist Jiří Veltruský is very helpful here in accounting for the prominence of props in *Richard II*. Veltruský sets out from the premise that both everyday life and the theater are underlain by subjects' intentional acts in pursuit of some goal. In both the theater and in our daily existence we interpret the actions of others through signs. In the theater, however, Veltruský writes, "the action is an end in itself and it lacks an external practical purpose which might determine its properties." Thus the purpose

of action in the theater is “a semiological matter and not a matter of practical life.”<sup>16</sup> In performance, plays create a hierarchical system of action-signs that usually extends from the main actor down through the supporting cast and non-speaking parts and through to the props and the scenery:

The figure at the peak of this hierarchy, the so-called lead, attracts to itself the major attention of the audience and only at times allows room for attention to be given to the supporting cast. At the same time, by giving impulses for action, the lead affects the performance of the rest of the cast, and at times may even act as their outright regulator. The spectator may still perceive the other figures as acting subjects, but their subordination is evident. Usually, however, situations may arise in the course of the play when someone other than the lead becomes the main pillar of the action....All of the *dramatis personae*, however, from the lead to the smallest bit part, definitely form an absolutely coherent line according to their varying activeness, the cohesion of which is maintained precisely by the jointness of the action.<sup>17</sup>

This model of a hierarchical but dynamic system of actors' parts carrying different degrees of what Veltruský dubs “action force” seems readily applicable to *Richard II*. Richard's power to sit astride the throne and the play's semiotic system is displaced by Bullingbrook, who increasingly comes to control the symbolic making of intentional action: ordering Bushy and Green to be executed in 3.1 and presiding over parliament in 4.1. Excepting the scene in which he dethrones himself and the scene in which he fights and kills two of his would-be murderers, Richard increasingly comes to disavow the power to act. “Set on towards London, cousin, is it so?” (3.3.208), asks Richard Bullingbrook at Flint Castle. When Bullingbrook answers in the affirmative Richard replies, “Then I must not say no” (3.3.209).

So far Veltruský's model seems consistent with an absolutist reading of *Richard II* and of the concept of the king's two bodies. We can use this much of Veltruský's essay to read *Richard II* as a play that shows how one king replaces another as the head of the political-semiotic hierarchy. But Veltruský is especially interested in how material objects can displace people in their perceived action force and how actors can become akin to onstage objects when their action force is reduced nearly to zero. He points out that human beings can become effectively part of the set, as when soldiers standing outside a building signal that it is a barracks. Conversely, props participate in the action and take on an action force of their own, as when a dagger worn as part of a costume becomes the instrument of an onstage murder. Veltruský observes that in the theater the line between actors and props is often blurred:

The function of each component in the individual system (and in the drama as a whole) is the resultant of the constant tension between activity and passivity in terms of the action which manifests itself in a constant flow back and forth between the individual components, people and things. It is therefore impossible to draw a line between subject and object, since each component is potentially either. We have seen various examples of how thing and man can change places, how a man can become a thing and a thing a living being. We can thus not speak of two mutually delimited spheres; the relation of man to object in the theater can be characterized as a *dialectic antinomy*.<sup>18</sup>

The palpable "action force" that props possess in *Richard II* flows from their apparent ineffectuality as instruments of their users' intentions. The very refusal of the props to fulfill their users' aims leads them to appear to draw level with them as carriers of action force. Thus Bullingbrook's displacement of Richard masks a more fundamental displacement of people by props in the play. Far from being concentrated in a single figure, action force is dispersed in *Richard II* among the many bodies and stage

properties that move about the stage. The play continually reminds the audience of the resemblance of props to bodies and of bodies to props.

Richard shows his awareness of the closeness of the body to the prop when he addresses Northumberland as a “ladder” on which “The mounting Bullingbrook ascends my throne” (5.1.55-56). If the power to accomplish action depends on props and prop-like people in *Richard II*, then this is particularly the case for the subset of actions defined by speech acts.<sup>19</sup> To make a speech act in the play is often to secure one's words to a prop. Bodies and objects are used as material warrants for words: gages are thrown down to initiate a challenge and a warder is thrown down to end one. One's own body can substitute for a prop, as when Bullingbrook begins what will be a long sequence of physicalized speech acts by proclaiming that what he says about Mowbray “My body shall make good upon this earth” (1.1.36-37). In the deposition scene, Richard performs a series of self-abnegating speech acts with his own body.

With mine own tears I wash away my balm,  
 With mine own hands I give away my crown,  
 With mine own tongue deny my sacred state,  
 With mine own breath release all duteous oaths... (4.2.206-10)

Both Richard and Bullingbrook share the assumption that speech acts ultimately depend on material objects. This complicates the longstanding critical view that the central conflict between the two main protagonists is underlain by their two distinct approaches to language: Richard's ineffective eloquence versus Bullingbrook's effectual but more prosaic speech.<sup>20</sup> Although Richard and Bullingbrook are often understood as having diametrically opposed conceptions of language, they share a sense of words as ultimately relying on physical bodies and things for their illocutionary force.

The audience is not allowed to forget that the ability to utter words itself rests on an organ of the body. The tongue in the play is understood as a kind of prop on which speech depends.<sup>21</sup> In the climactic moment of the

opening scene, Bullingbrook declares that he would sooner bite off his own tongue and throw it like a gage in Mowbray's face before he would recant his resolution to meet him on the field of battle (1.191-95). Similarly Richard figures the tongue as a self-executing sword when he interrupts Gaunt's deathbed tirade by telling him:

Wert thou not brother to great Edward's son,  
This tongue that runs so roundly in thy head  
Should run thy head from thy unreverent shoulders. (2.1.121-23)

When characters lose their ability to utter meaningful words, their tongues are figured as broken musical instruments. The exiled Mowbray puns on the two senses of "tongue" as a language and as an organ of speech when he laments:

The language I have learnt these forty years,  
My native English, now I must forgo,  
And now my tongue's use is to me no more  
Than an unstringed viol or a harp,  
Or like a cunning instrument cas'd up,  
Or being open, put into his hands  
That knows no touch to tune the harmony. (1.3.159-65)

Northumberland picks up the same figure when he announces Gaunt's death by saying, "His tongue is now a stringless instrument" (2.1.149).

Characters in the play consistently place their trust in breakable objects and vulnerable bodies to make their words physically palpable. The gages that are thrown down in the opening scene, for example, are first and foremost tangible objects even as they work in lieu of words and even as the conventions of a duel challenge invest them with the symbolic promissory value. Once exchanged, the tokens become physical evidence of the pledge, especially since the standard items used for the purpose in the medieval and early modern periods (most often a glove, sometimes also a cap) would typically bear some emblem of their owner, such as

initials or a personal motto. Peter Stallybrass and Ann Rosalind Jones have written about the fetishization of the glove in early modern power relations, noting how “gloves were among the material forms in which the early modern monarchy stored its supposed virtues” but how, at the same time, “the materialization of social connection through gloves was always threatened by the contingency of things: the gloves might not fit; they were easily lost...they wore out and got stained.”<sup>22</sup> Another drawback of the gages as guarantees of words is the inconvenient bulkiness and finiteness that the philosophers of the Academy of Lagado discover in Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*, who attempt to do away with words by carrying heavy bundles of things around with them, taking objects out whenever they need to conduct a conversation.<sup>23</sup> In 4.1. Aumerle is forced to ask the other characters present on stage to loan him an additional gage after he has cast down both his gloves but still wishes to continue to challenge others.<sup>24</sup>

Speech acts in *Richard II* have to be accompanied by the intentional movement of objects on stage, including one’s own objectified body. When asked by Richard to resign Bullingbrook’s glove and so cancel the initial exchange of gages, for example, Mowbray proceeds to throw himself down instead:

Myself I throw, dread sovereign, at thy foot,  
My life thou shalt command, but not my shame... (1.1.165-66)

Mowbray’s substitution of his own body for his gage is the first in a series of substitutions of human bodies for objects, and objects for words. Speech yields to the material body-object, prostrate on the ground, since the content of Mowbray’s speech becomes secondary to his decision as to where to place his gage and where to place his body. Whereas throwing Bullingbrook’s gage back down would have communicated an assent to Richard’s demand, Mowbray’s act of casting down his body equals a refusal. In these lines, assent and refusal become physical gestures involving the spatial displacement of a material object and a living body

respectively. Mowbray's prostrate or kneeling (depending on the staging) body acts as an extension of the glove thrown earlier. He becomes very much like a stage prop, because by positioning himself this way Mowbray gives the impression that his body can only be moved from its awkward position through another actor's action, in this case King Richard's withdrawal of his request for him to pick his glove back up. Like most of the physicalized speech acts of the play, Mowbray's strategic positioning of his own body will not ultimately succeed.

His prostration does at least have the temporary success of prompting Richard to assign the time and place of combat:

At Coventry upon Saint Lambert's day.  
 There shall your swords and lances arbitrate  
 The swelling difference of your settled hate. (1.1.199-201)

The anticlimactic ending of the Coventry scene, however, sees the arbitration of swords and lances yielding to the arbitration of words. The "swords and lances" in the scene remain as props in the wings: they are brandished by the combatants but never actually used in battle. But these props yield to words only through the mediation of another prop: the warder Richard throws down to stop the two men from going ahead with the duel. The scene at Coventry thus comes to mirror the opening scene. Like Mowbray and Bullingbrook, Richard initiates his intervention through a physical stage prop: the warder. He himself then takes over the arbitrating role originally assigned to the duelists' swords and lances as he proceeds to sentence each of the men to exile. The king employs his words as the combatants would have otherwise physically applied their weapons to settle the feud and as the actors playing them would have used stage weapons. Richard resorts to the combined force of a material object, in the form of the umpire's baton, and words, in the form of the exiling sentences, to implement his will. But by throwing down the baton he has already entered into the chain of falling objects and bodies that ultimately fail in their projected purposes. Much as Mowbray proceeds from throwing down

his gage to throwing down his body in front of Richard, Richard will proceed from throwing down his warder to throwing down his body on England, just as he is about to lose his control of his kingdom.

The famous deposition scene in 4.1 revolves around three props – the crown, the list, the mirror – plus a fourth if we count Richard himself functioning as a prop. As in the earlier scenes, the deposition itself hinges on an exchange of props. Undoing a coronation, it seems, is not too different from undoing a duel. They both can be canceled simply by being re-enacted in reverse, by throwing back the opponent's gage and retrieving one's own, and by taking off the crown and abrogating the oaths of office.

Richard and Bullingbrook's struggle over the crown transposes what previously had been a vertical dynamic of objects falling to the ground onto the horizontal tug of war between Richard and Bullingbrook. Even here, Richard pictures in his mind the crown taking Bullingbrook upwards and himself downwards:

Here, cousin, seize the crown;  
 Here, cousin,  
 On this side my hand, [and] on that side thine,  
 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. (4.1.181-89)

Harry Berger has drawn attention to the strange logic of this scene, in which Bullingbrook's rise seems to depend on Richard's fall. As Berger asks, "according to the somewhat weird physics of the image isn't he – as the full bucket – responsible for sending Bolingbroke's bucket up?"<sup>25</sup> The contest over the crown is thus another reminder that the fictions of state depend on downward tending bodies and objects. Even though Richard imagines Bullingbrook as figuratively the "up" bucket and himself as the

“down” one, according to the dramaturgical logic of the play as a whole, in which objects and bodies have been presented as always falling down to the ground, when Bullingbroke pulls the crown away he registers dramatically as the “down” bucket and Richard the “up” one.

The action of the deposition scene continues to be structured around the exchange of objects. Bullingbrook and his supporters want to initiate the formal deposition proceeding by having Richard read out loud a list of grievances against him and his favorites. But instead of acceding to this demand to indict himself, Richard unexpectedly calls for a mirror:

And 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 bankrout of his majesty. (4.1.265-68)

Northumberland's repeated request that Richard “Read o'er this paper while the glass doth come” (4.1.269) suggests a failure on his part to understand why Richard calls for a mirror. Bullingbrook and his supporters grant Richard his request because they seem to regard it as a mere caprice of the notoriously vain Richard, hoping that the arrival of the glass will finally coax him into reading the accusations. Richard, however, intends to use the mirror less as a distraction and more as a substitute for the list, attempting to reground his sense of self in it:

I'll read enough  
When I do see the very book indeed  
Where all my sins are writ, and that's myself. (4.1.273-75)

What Richard wants to read from the glass is an image that will signify his own experience. What he finds, however, is a prop singularly unresponsive to his gaze:

Give me the glass, and therein will I read.  
No deeper wrinkles yet? (4.1. 276-77)

In the ensuing inventory of what, according to him, the glass should but does not reveal, the reflection fails to show either his present destitution or his past prosperity:

Hath sorrow struck  
So many blows upon this face of mine,  
And made no deeper wounds? O flatt'ring glass,  
Like to my followers in prosperity,  
Thou dost beguile me! Was this the face...  
That like the sun, did make beholders wink? (4.1.277-84)

The mirror appears to Richard as an unresponsive object because it can signify neither his past glory nor his present pain. Yet at the same time, the mirror centrally aids in Richard's transformation into a stage prop. Richard's functional and material connection with the prop lies in his unrelenting desire to be accurately reflected in it. And precisely because he is not and physically cannot be reflected in the mirror with all his past triumphs and present woes the way that he wants to be, he is in fact represented in the mirror accurately. The looking glass shows him just as the audience and the other characters on stage can see him at the moment – the same physical body, unchanged in any substantial way from how he looked in his happier days. While Richard expects the mirror to behave almost like a responsive living being, instead of an inanimate stage prop, the unchanged image in the mirror causes Richard to become aware not only of the mirror's unresponsive materiality but also the unresponsive materiality of his own body. Richard becomes in his own eyes a kind of prop.

Richard introduces the mirror into the scene in the hope that it will support or prop him up in this difficult moment when his words and actions have failed. The breaking of the mirror is, rather than merely an impulsive act of rage, also his final attempt to make the mirror responsive as an object. Richard seems to break the mirror in a desperate effort to extend his inner state of mind into the world. The effect of the breaking of

the mirror is to destroy his own image, divide one unresponsive prop into many, and to obstruct his vision. The theme of blocked vision has emerged earlier in the play when the Queen, bewailing Richard's departure for Ireland in 2.2, is reminded by Bushy that:

...sorrow's eyes, glazed with blinding tears,  
Divides one thing entire to many objects... (2.2.16-17)

Traditionally read as a reference to the ability of oblique mirrors to create distorted reflections of objects, the lines also anticipate how the pile of shards from the mirror Richard breaks will provide fragmentary distorted reflections of their surroundings.<sup>26</sup> The "shivers," as Richard calls them (4.1.289), are glassy counterparts of the tears he sheds earlier in the scene:

Mine eyes are full of tears, I cannot see;  
And yet salt water blinds them not so much  
But they can see a sort of traitors here. (4.1.244-46)

Richard begins the play thinking that bodies and objects are props under his control. By the scene in which he is deposed, however, both the tears of his eyes and the shards of the mirror have revealed themselves as a multitude of traitors that block his sight and his ability to act. The only prop left to Richard on his downward trajectory is his own body.<sup>27</sup>

The scene with the mirror reflects the play's insistence on materializing speech acts and interior states on stage with the aid of props. From the opening scenes of the play, consent and refusal have been established as the functional equivalents of physical gestures: throwing down an object invested with a symbolic meaning and throwing down one's body respectively. The breaking of the mirror thus stands at the end of a series of failures. This series of failures both culminates with and is embodied in Richard's request for the mirror. The bare request is still understood (Bullingbrook translates it into a command that yields the desired result), but its significance is perceived only dimly (nobody besides Richard seems to understand that the mirror is meant to replace the list).

We can read *Richard II* therefore with ineffectual gages and broken mirrors as chronicling the breakdown of a symbolic economy in which a single body—the body of the monarch—anchors the ritualized use of objects and bodies to prop up acts of speech and power. The dead Richard himself at the end of the play draws attention to the breakdown of a symbolic order, as can be seen in the difficulty characters have in referring to the body. The dead body is named “Richard” by Exton at the beginning but afterwards only referred to through paraphrasis as in “him murdered” (5.6.40) or through metonymy as in “this untimely bier” (5.6.52). With its dead and speechless Richard on stage surrounded by people left lost for words to describe him, the closing scene could be regarded as a final confirmation of the end of a world, if it ever existed, in which symbolic objects align symmetrically with the words and intentions of their users. In its place a new symbolic economy emerges in which power is diffused away from the figure of the king towards the living bodies of his subjects and the material things of his realm.

### **Epilogue: The King's Dead Body**

Records from the Court of the King's Bench from 1413 indicate that the historical Richard's body was “seen as dead by thousands upon thousands in the city of London and elsewhere in the realm.”<sup>28</sup> The policy of making a spectacle of the late king's body seems to have constituted a strategic move on Henry's part intended to prevent rumors of Richard's survival and rebellions seeking the restoration of potential pretenders to the throne.<sup>29</sup> The corpse thus becomes a weapon (object) for fighting rumors (words) and ultimately for dissuading potential rebels and impostors (bodies). Moreover, an anonymous London chronicler wrote that Henry was eager to display Richard's dead body and, in particular, his face: “And whanne that king Harri wiste verili that he was ded, he leet close and sere him in lynne clothe alle saue the visage, and that was left openne that men myghte se and knowe his persone from alle othir, and so

he was broughte to Londoun to Poulis, and there he had his Dirige and masse; and the same wise at Westmynstre, and thane he was buried at Langley."<sup>30</sup> Henry's concern to show Richard's face suggests a desire to at least partially disambiguate his own claim to rule, which was vulnerable not only because of the circumstances of his accession to the throne but also the fact that Henry was not first in the line of succession. Thus the historical Richard really did become a kind of stage property in Henry's theatrical procession of his body around the kingdom.<sup>31</sup> We might say that Henry's claim to rule at this juncture depended not so much on his own body as the dead body of his predecessor and on the living bodies of the spectators who witnessed it.

The parading of Richard's body to the public is neither featured nor directly mentioned in the closing scene of *Richard II*. Some kind of procession is nevertheless projected outside the limits of the play when the coffin containing Richard's body is set down on stage and Bullingbrook's imagines himself walking behind it in his final lines:

March sadly after, grace my mournings here,  
In weeping after this untimely bier. (5.6.51-52)

The coffin with Richard's corpse functions as a composite prop crucially aiding Henry in his new regal role. It provides a physical marker of the definitive end of Richard's reign and so discredits rumors about Richard's survival and with them the possibility of his return to the English throne. But Henry is also put in a dependent relation to the coffin, following its lead. The introduction of the coffin with Richard's body into the final scene thus continues the logic that has run through the play, as though the ending of the play ran against a mirror. We get a distorted and inverted reflection of the beginning. This time Henry instead of Richard is the exiling arbitrator, ordering Exton, "with Cain go wander thorough shades of night" (5.6.43), and Richard's dead body instead of Mowbray's live one functions as the token in communication. The sense of *déjà vu* then returns in the final play of the second *Henriad*: in *Henry V*, on the eve of the

decisive Battle of Agincourt, we see Bullingbrook's son, now King Henry V, recalling the recent re-interment of Richard's body:

Not to-day, O Lord,  
O, not to-day, think not upon the fault  
My father made in compassing the crown!  
I Richard's body have interred new,  
And on it have bestowed more contrite tears,  
Than from it issued forced drops of blood. (*Henry V*, 4.1.292-97)

On the eve of his victory at Agincourt, Henry draws a parallel between his own crying body and Richard's bleeding one. The image of the two kings' bodies issuing streams of liquid serves to align Henry with Richard's dead body and obliquely anticipates the epilogue's reminder that Henry's enemies will make "his England bleed" (*Henry V*, Epi.12). Richard's afterlife is as a theatrical prop in the two Henrys' imaginations. He also serves to remind them that their power depends not so much on their own bodies as on the bodies and objects around them. Throughout the second tetralogy, Richard persists as a grotesque memento to his successors that the king may be only a prop in the hands of others.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997. All subsequent parenthetical citations from Shakespeare's plays will refer to this edition.

<sup>2</sup> Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1997), 29.

<sup>3</sup> Kantorowicz, 4.

<sup>4</sup> "There we subsisted by *spouting*, not Shakespeare, but our dresses and props." *OED Online*, s.v., "prop," n.6.

<sup>5</sup> See David Norbrook, "The Emperor's New Body: *Richard II*, Ernst Kantorowicz and the Politics of Shakespeare Criticism," *Textual Practice* 10 (1996), 329-57, 350.

<sup>6</sup> For an overview and critique of corporeal criticism of Shakespeare, see Keir Elam, "In What Chapter of his Bosom? Reading Shakespeare's Bodies," in *Alternative Shakespeares*, Vol. 2, ed. Terence Hawkes (London: Routledge, 1996), 140-63. For a reading of *Richard II* that considers the physicality of Richard's body, see Lisa Hopkins, "The King's Melting Body: *Richard II*," in *A Companion to Shakespeare's Works, Volume II: The Histories*, eds. Richard Dutton and Jean E Howard (Malden, M.A.: Blackwell, 2006), 395-411. For a reading of *Richard II* in conversation with Kantorowicz, Carl Schmitt, Giorgio Agamben and others, see Anselm Haverkamp, *Shakespearean Genealogies of Power: A Whispering of Nothing in Hamlet, Richard II, Julius Caesar, Macbeth, The Merchant of Venice and The Winter's Tale* (London: Routledge, 2011), 47-56. Haverkamp's is an exemplary evacuation of the critical issues connected with the king's two bodies, though the materiality of the king's body is almost entirely absent from his analysis.

<sup>7</sup> Lorna Hutson, "Imagining Justice: Kantorowicz and Shakespeare," *Representations* 106 (2009), 118-42, 135.

<sup>8</sup> See Victoria Kahn, "Political Theology and Fiction in *The King's Two Bodies*," *Representations* 106 (2009): 77-101.

<sup>9</sup> On this point, see also Jeffrey S. Doty, "Shakespeare's *Richard II*, 'Popularity,' and the Early Modern Public Sphere," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 61 (2010): 183-205.

<sup>10</sup> Caroline F. E. Spurgeon, *Shakespeare's Imagery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1936), 352-53.

<sup>11</sup> Majorie Garber discusses the downward movements of the play in *Shakespeare After All* (New York: Anchor Books, 2003), 238-69.

<sup>12</sup> Alan Dessen, *Recovering Shakespeare's Theatrical Vocabulary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 121.

<sup>13</sup> Frances Teague, *Shakespeare's Speaking Properties* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1991), 157-97. As of the time of writing, Teague's appendices constitute the most comprehensive listing of stage properties in Shakespeare and have been used by virtually all scholars who have since worked on the subject. Appendix A provides an overview of the main types of stage properties used in all the plays; Appendix B provides a detailed breakdown of the individual properties used in every play. The lists are broadly inclusive, counting any object mentioned in the original stage directions or dialogues/monologues/soliloquies in both the First Folio and Quarto versions. Teague notably excludes the kinds of "silent" stage properties that Alan Dessen identifies in his work. The author herself admits that any attempt to provide a quantitative account of this kind will be inevitably to some extent subjective.

<sup>14</sup> Henslowe's diary is available in the following modern editions: Philip Henslowe, *Henslowe's Diary*, ed. R. A. Foakes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) and Philip Henslowe, *Henslowe's Diary*, eds. R. A. Foakes and R. T. Rickert (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961).

<sup>15</sup> Jonathan Gill Harris and Natasha Korda, eds., *Stage Properties and Early Modern English Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 3.

<sup>16</sup> Jiří Veltruský, "Man and Object in the Theatre," in *A Prague School Reader on Esthetics, Literary Structure, and Style*, ed. and trans. Paul L. Garvin (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1964), 83-91, 83. Veltruský's ideas are developed further in Keir Elam, *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* (1980; London: Routledge, 2002) and in Andrew Sofer, *The Stage Life of Props* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2003).

<sup>17</sup> Veltruský, "Man and Object in the Theatre," 85.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>19</sup> On speech acts in *Richard II* see Joseph A. Porter, *The Drama of Speech Acts: Shakespeare's Lancastrian Tetralogy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 11-51.

<sup>20</sup> For the earliest example of this type of reading, see Walter Pater, "Shakespeare's English Kings," *Nine Appreciations with an Essays on Style* (London: Macmillan, 1910), 189. For a comprehensive account of this critical tendency, see Anne Barton, "Shakespeare and the Limits of Language," in *Essays Mainly Shakespearean* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 51-69. Madhavi Menon recasts the opposition

between Richard and Bullingbrook, arguing that Richard is associated with the trope of metonymy and Bullingbrook with metaphor. The opposition of metonymy to metaphor corresponds to Richard's "unnatural" attachment to male favorites as opposed to Bullingbrook's heteronormativity. See her "*Richard II* and the Taint of Metonymy," *ELH* 70 (2003): 653-675. This essay joins with Menon's emphasis on metonymy in *Richard II* by following the metonymic chains of props and bodies through the play.

<sup>21</sup> David Norbrook notes the materiality of the tongue *Richard II* in "'A Liberal Tongue': Language and Rebellion in *Richard II*" in *Shakespeare's Universe: Renaissance Ideas and Conventions*, ed. John M. Mucciolo (Hants: Scolar Press, 1996), 37-51.

<sup>22</sup> Anne Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass, "Fetishizing the Glove in Renaissance Europe," *Critical Inquiry*, 28 (2001), 114-32, 116 and 119. The humorous episode with the gages in 4.7. and 4.8 of Shakespeare's *Henry V* demonstrates how gages could be traced back to their owner. For a comprehensive history of the practice of dueling see Robert Baldick, *The Duel: A History of Dueling* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1965) and Markku Peltonen, *The Duel in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

<sup>23</sup> See Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, ed. Robert DeMaria, Jr. (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 172-173.

<sup>24</sup> Aumerle: "Some honest Christian trust me with a gage! | That Norfolk lies, here do I throw down this, | If he may be repeal'd to try his honor" (4.1. 83-85).

<sup>25</sup> Harry Berger, Jr., *Imaginary Audition: Shakespeare on Stage and Page* (Berkeley: Berkeley University Press, 1990), 47-73. For another reading of the crown, see Richard Halpern, "The King's Two Buckets: Kantorowicz, *Richard II*, and Fiscal *Trauerspiel*," *Representations* 106 (2009), 67-76.

<sup>26</sup> For a detailed discussion of the oblique mirror symbolism in the play and the presence of oblique mirrors in early modern England, see Allan Shickman, "The Perspective Glass in Shakespeare's *Richard II*," *Studies in English Literature* 18 (1978): 217-228.

<sup>27</sup> It is not clear whether an actual mirror would have been broken on stage in the early modern productions. Because mirrors were relatively costly then, it seems more likely that the acting company would have used a prop that could somehow simulate the breaking of a mirror, for instance a prop mirror that could be assembled back together. Even modern productions of the play often shy away from physically breaking the mirror on stage, although this is presumably to avoid having to deal with the clean-up rather than the cost. The acclaimed RSC production directed by Steven Pimlott with

Samuel West as Richard (2000), for instance, had Richard topple over a full-length mirror embedded inside a large wooden box, which was subsequently left on stage and later served as his coffin.

<sup>28</sup> *Select Cases in the Court of King's Bench under Richard II, Henry IV, and Henry V*, vol. 7, ed. G. O. Sayles (London: Selden Society, 1971), 212.

<sup>29</sup> Nigel Saul, *Richard II* (New Haven: Yale University, 1997), 427.

<sup>30</sup> *An English Chronicle of the Reigns of Richard II, Henry IV, Henry V, and Henry VI*, ed. J. S. Davies (London: Camden Society, 1856), 21.

<sup>31</sup> Elizabeth herself used the theater as a metaphor for the monarchy. In an oft-cited letter from the summer of 1594 Elizabeth cautions James VI of Scotland that "We princes are set on stage, where looks of all beholders verdict our works." Elizabeth I, *Collected Works*, eds. Leah S. Marcus, Janel Mueller and Mary Beth Rose (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 383.