Dear CLHC workshop participants,

Thank you so much for the opportunity to present this work. This piece, which is forthcoming in a Routledge volume of essays on *Richard II*, will be a chapter in a book project I am undertaking on tyranny and sovereignty in Shakespeare. Specifically the project will trace how Shakespeare stages a range of responses to tyranny resonant with contemporary political debates on tyrannicide and forms of obedience. So far I have written chapters/articles on tyranny and exceptionalism in *Macbeth*, *Coriolanus*, and *Richard III*, as well as this essay on *Richard II*. But the book is very much a work in progress, and I will appreciate any feedback you might have to offer on this piece and, by extension, on the book project itself.

--Rebecca
Sovereignty, Tyranny, and Shakespeare’s *Richard II*

by

Rebecca Lemon

The censorship of Shakespeare’s *Richard II*, including the deposition scene, along with the commissioning of the play the night before the Essex rising and the comment of Elizabeth I, “I am Richard II, know ye not that?” (Nichols 552), have led to decades of analysis on how the play shadows the potential deposition of Elizabeth herself. Did the play spur the Essex rebels to action against the Queen? Did the Queen see herself in the play’s fallen monarch? Did her advisors recognize the parallel as well, thereby ordering the play’s censorship?

While readings of the play might have hinged on these direct relations of *Richard II* to Elizabethan state politics—the play’s censorship, the rebels’ commissioning, and Elizabeth’s comment—recent critics have challenged every one of these suppositions. Cyndia Susan Clegg carefully considers the alleged censorship of the play only to conclude that fourth quarto’s expanded deposition scene may not represent press censorship but merely expansion and revision (Clegg 1997). Paul E. J. Hammer has argued that, if Shakespeare’s play was indeed commissioned the night before the Essex rising, it was a mere coincidence; the rising was not a planned event, but instead an unexpected skirmish. Finally, the queen’s comment has been deemed questionable, being published years after it supposed delivery (Barroll 1988: 447; Bate 2009: 23-7; Clegg 1999: 119).¹ In short, there is no evidence that the performance of
Shakespeare’s play was used as a spur to immediate action against Elizabeth or her advisors; and there is little firm evidence the play provoked royal or state disapprobrium in the way scholars hypothesized.

*Richard II* does, however, address some of the most crucial political questions of the Elizabethan era. Succession, tyranny, divine-right monarchy, popularity, favoritism, state expenditure, and military involvement in Ireland are among the issues that both define late Elizabethan political conversation and appear in the play. Scholars have explored such connections: they have suggested how the play might shadow Elizabethan policy, be it in Ireland or at court with favorites such as Leicester or Essex; they have also studied how the play might challenge or bolster the Elizabethan state in its representation of the deposition of an English king. Most pointedly, connecting the play to Catholic resistance theory such as the Jesuit Robert Parsons’s *A Conference against the Next Succession to the Crown of England* (1594), scholars establish how the tyrannical, illegitimate rule of Richard II mirrors the government of Elizabeth, both trespassing law and custom, and therefore prompting allegedly legitimate deposition.

This essay contributes to discussions of *Richard II* in relation to Elizabethan politics from a different angle. Rather than viewing the play through the prism of Elizabeth, her advisors, and the English state, I examine the play through the lens of European political thought, and the forms of kingship which England might likely experience when a new and most likely foreign monarch (such as James VI or Philip II) comes to sit on its throne. In the period after the execution of Mary, Queen of Scots in 1587 and the resulting war with Philip II of Spain; in the period of wars in the Low Countries, with English troops defending the Protestant Dutch against
the Spanish; and in the period just after the conversion of the French king Henry IV to Catholicism in 1593, England stood in embattled relation to Catholic Europe and particularly to Spain. Yet Philip II—former king of England by his marriage to Mary I and, through his rule of Portugal, alleged descendant of John of Gaunt—had a claim to the throne asserted repeatedly by English Catholic recusants, including most vehemently Parsons whose pamphlet appeared the year before Shakespeare’s play.

Repositioning Shakespeare’s *Richard II* in relation to European debates on succession, tyrannicide, and sovereignty illuminates the play’s timely engagement with contemporary political issues, while at the same time avoiding the critical acrobatics necessary to read the play as a political allegory of the Elizabethan court itself. By the 1590s, Elizabeth made an unlikely Richard. In contrast to Shakespeare’s king, she was neither young, tyrannical, impulsive, lawless, nor easily led. This is not to say she was free from the charge of tyranny: the execution of Mary, Queen of Scots and the cutting of John Stubbes’ writing hand, to give two examples, earned her notoriety. Further, her more radical Catholic subjects deemed her recusancy policies a sign of her tyranny, while Stubbes, John Goodman, and John Knox wrote against female rule as inherently unlawful and tyrannical (see Walker 1998). But by 1595/6, the year of the play, Elizabeth’s imminent demise (she was 62 when the play was first performed) and the rule of her potential successor were more immediate concerns than her mode of governance over the last four decades (on the play's date see Forker 2002: 111-20).²

To argue that Shakespeare wrote a play in the 1590s counseling Elizabeth to rule more justly, or threatening her with deposition, seems unlikely; that Shakespeare wrote a play about succession
and the fear of a future ruler’s potential absolutism and tyranny is indisputable. By the 1590s succession, despite Elizabeth’s efforts to the contrary, had become the dominant political topic. The queen's advisors had pressed her to secure a future ruler for England. In the face of her resistance, and her injunction forbidding conversations on succession, her advisors nevertheless conducted clandestine negotiations. Further, her subjects aired their fears about succession, tyranny and their hopes for a legitimate ruler in print. The attacks on the tyranny of Philip II in The State of Christendom (1657; composed c.1594-5) and the praise for a Spanish successor in the Catholic resistance theory of Parsons's Conference and Cardinal William Allen's An Admonition (1588) and A Declaration (1588) are the most obvious examples of such writings on succession. These writings build, however, on a broader debate conducted over the course of the second half of the sixteenth century. The debate began in the work of Protestant exiles composing polemic against Mary and Philip in the 1550s, including Goodman and Ponet; it then moved through both the Huguenot philosophers Philippe Duplessis Mornay and Théodore de Bèze, and the Republican theorists George Buchanan and John Knox, writing in the 1570s; and finally reached a crescendo in the 1590s. 3

All of these writings on succession are deeply invested in particular rulers, and lobby for their favorite contenders. But regardless of the instrumentality of these tracts and their divergent views on succession, they all share a common concern: all condemn tyranny, and speculate on appropriate responses to it. The discussion of tyranny, and specifically on the legitimacy of tyrannicide, runs through these tracts, regardless of political or religious allegiance. The key political conversation in the second half of the sixteenth century, then, concerned succession specifically as it related to the dilemma of bad rule; furthermore, by the 1590s, this conversation
pointedly centered on potential successors to Elizabeth herself, with texts such as *The State of Christendom* and *A Conference* directly addressing the question of English succession.

Shakespeare's play clearly participates in this contemporary political conversation. In his absolutist style of rule, Shakespeare’s Richard II encapsulates the fears about Elizabeth’s potential successor. The successor may be real—James or Philip—but for the play’s purposes the successor is, more powerfully, merely imagined. Rather than positing Richard II as one particular foreign ruler, he stands instead for the threat of the future, namely the threat of a successor emerging from an early modern political landscape marked by tyrannical rule. Richard threatens property rights, eliminates his opposition, and insists on his right to govern above the law. In depicting such errancy, Shakespeare not only stages the spectre of tyrannical leadership before his audience. He also locates the origin of this tyranny: it emerges from the king's faith in his own divine right. It is, as the play carefully reveals, this faith in his divine sovereignty that leads to Richard’s rigidity and lawlessness, leading him to undermine the English methods of governance through custom and consent.

**TYRANNY AND RESISTANCE**

The play opens on the king’s tyranny: Richard has commissioned the murder of one of his subjects, the duke of Gloucester, and now Bolingbroke directly confronts the man guilty of the crime, Mowbry. This confrontation poses a serious problem for Richard, which he solves by banishing both men. In doing so he exhibits the self-interest characteristic of the tyrant, systematically eliminating his own opponents. The king's next political decision is equally tyrannous: he illegally seizes Gaunt's estate. The king thus transgresses one of the most
fundamental rights of subjects, namely the right of _meum_ and _tuum_, of property ownership. This action prompts the king’s faithful advisor, York, to warn: "If you do wrongfully seize Herford’s rights . . . You pluck a thousand dangers on your head, / You lose a thousand well-disposed hearts" (2.1.189-206). York informs Richard, and the play’s audience, that by ignoring the legal parameters governing his office and by seizing private property, the king undermines his own rule. He does so not only because he challenges the very process of succession whereby he gained the throne ("how art thou king but / by fair sequence and succession?") (2.1.198-9); but also because he prompts Bolingbroke to revolt. Exiled and disinherited, Bolingbroke is punished as a traitor before he has even committed the act: the punishment for treason, unlike most other crimes, included disinheritance (Bellamy 1970: 80; Lemon 2006: 64, 182). As a result, Bolingbroke has little left to lose: his attempt at legal action in the trial by battle was denied, he now suffers the fate of a traitor in being disinherited, and his most obvious recourse to regain his estate lies in rebellion.

Richard’s suspension of law—commissioning the murder of Gloucester, banishing Bolingbroke and Mowbry, and seizing Bolingbroke’s estate—thus provokes a political crisis. He has veered into tyranny. Loyal subjects, Gaunt and York, inform the king of this fact and attempt to counsel him toward good rule. Gaunt famously warns Richard that his kingdom “is now leased out,” “bound in shame, / With inky blots and rotten Parchment bonds” (2.1.63-4). But the king's ears are stopped with “flatt’ring sounds,” “lascivious meters,” “eager feeding” and “light vanity” (17, 19, 36, 37). Like all tyrants, he refuses to listen to sound advice: “too late comes Counsel to be heard” (27). After Gaunt and York, then Ross, Willoughby and Northumberland also bewail damage to “Justice,” “patrimony,” and “our lives, our children, and our heirs” (2.1.245). They
catalogue Richard’s corruptions, his “flatterers,” “grievous taxes,” “new exactions,” “blanks,” “benevolences,” “burdensome taxations,” and “dissolution” (242-8). These men struggle to respond to ill rule and Richard ignores them as well. As a result, they face a dilemma, one familiar to Shakespeare’s contemporaries: how should loyal subjects respond to tyranny?

This question dominated European political debate in the late sixteenth century. Early modern writers—whether sovereignty or resistance theorists, Catholic or reformed, or lawyers or polemists—unite in condemning tyranny. And these writers all concur on its definition: a tyrant is a ruler who breaks his or her country’s laws. Thus Henry of Bracton in De legibus et consuetudinibus angliae (c.1235) writes “the name ‘tyrannus’ and not ‘rex’ belongs to the person set up as king ‘when his pleasure and not the law prevails’” (Bracton 1968: 33). This definition reappears in Sir John Fortescue’s On the Laws and Governance of England (c.1463; translated 1573), as well as in Sir Thomas Smith’s The Commonwealth of England (c.1565; published 1583), where he writes that a tyrant "breaketh lawes already made, at his pleasure" (Fortescue 1997: 53 and Smith 1594: 6). Sovereignty theorists, including the French Catholic Jean Bodin and the Scottish James VI, also link tyranny and pleasure: in Six livres de la république (1576) Bodin writes, “now the greatest difference betwixt a king and a tyrant is . . . the one measureth his manners according to his lawes; the other measureth his laws, according to his own disposition and pleasure,” while in Basilicon Doron (1599) James VI calls a tyrant one who “invert[s] all good Lawes to serve onely for his unrulie private affections” and one who, in Trew Law of Free Monarchies (1598) has the “spoil” of his subject’s “lands and goods to the princes own private use” (Bodin 1606: 212; Sommerville 1994: 20, 70). Resistance theorists concur. The author of Vindiciae contra tyrannos (1579), likely the Huguenot writer Philippe Duplessis
Mornay, deems tyrants those who "think that whatever they desire is permitted to them," who can "in no way endure the voice of reason and law," while Parsons’s *A Conference* begins with a standard definition of tyranny as the trespass of law: kings “shal governe according to law and equity . . . which end being taken away or perverted, the king becometh a tyrant” (Mornay 1994: 67; Parsons 1594: 61).

While these sovereignty theorists and resistance pamphleteers might concur on the *definition* of tyranny, they diverge sharply on the appropriate response. To begin with the sovereignty theorists, they vehemently argue for *no* response: subjects should remain absolutely obedient to their ruler, even when he/she proves a tyrant. Their theory of absolute obedience and non-resistance is part of the doctrine of the divine right of kings. This doctrine asserts the king’s appointment by God, and his rule above the law. A passage from 1 Samuel 8: 11-17 provides the biblical support for the divinity of rulers and the non-resistance of subjects, when Samuel tells the people of Israel that they will suffer at the hands of a king who will tyrannically seize both private property and citizens: “And he will take your fields, and your vineyards, and your best olive trees, and give them to his servants” (Geneva Bible 93). Calvin writes of these biblical verses that “certainly these things could not be done legally by kings” but the people are “bound to obey, and could not lawfully resist: as if Samuel had said, To such a degree will kings indulge in tyranny, which it will not be for you to restrain” (Calvin 672). Bodin and James VI also cite this passage as support for absolute obedience. Bodin writes that it is illegal for “any subject individually, or all of them in general, to make an attempt on the honor or the life of the monarch, either by way of force or by way of law, even if he has committed all the misdeeds, impieties, and cruelties that one could mention” (Bodin 1992: 115). James concurs, writing in
Trew Law (1598) that “the worst tyrant’s oppression should be willingly accepted since it was sent by God to test the Christian humility of the subject.” He elaborates:

a wicked king is sent by God for a curse to his people, and a plague for their sinnes: but that it is lawfull to them to shake off that curse at their owne hand, which God hath laid on them, that I deny and may do so justly.

(Sommerville 1994: 79)

The theory of the divine right of kings and the doctrine of absolute obedience, supported in 1 Samuel, gained its political teeth over the course of the sixteenth century as both Catholic and Reformed rulers claimed godly sovereignty in the wake of the Reformation. In Elizabethan England, the articulation of theories of divine right offered a mechanism for establishing obedience to the crown after the split from Rome and the subsequent excommunication of Henry VIII and Elizabeth I. The Elizabethan advocacy of divine right appears in such royal sources as the government-issued *An Homily against disobedience and wylful rebellion* (1570). This homily cites St. Paul’s epistle to the Romans, St. Peter’s first epistle and Christ’s parables as sources for the divinity of kings. In St. Paul’s epistle (Romans 13:1-2), for example, we learn that “there is no power but of God, and the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever therefore resists the power, resists the ordinance of God” (Geneva Bible 413; Wooton 1986: 96). Since this epistle refers to “powers that be” rather than specific powers (in the church or state), this passage is taken to support the authority of earthly rulers as divine representatives. Further, the homily associates resistance to such authorities with damnation: “it is most evident that kings, queens and other princes … are ordained of God, are to be obeyed and honored of their subjects; that
such subjects as are disobedient or rebellious against their princes disobey God, and procure their own damnation” (Wooton 1986: 96-7).

Resistance theorists respond precisely to these tenets of absolute obedience and the irreproachable divinity of earthly magistrates as outlined in the theory of the divine right of kings. They counter that biblical and state laws instead favor resistance against tyranny. Specifically, they claim that the power of the monarch is limited in two ways: first, the coronation oath represents a contract between the king and his people which, when broken, could result in his lawful deposition; and second, the authority of kings derives from popular consent, not God. In *Vindiciae contra tyrannos* for example, Mornay argues that kings and subjects enter into a contractual relationship. In failing to uphold this contract, the tyrant should be removed:

> There is ever, and in all places, a mutual and reciprocal obligation between the people and the prince; the one promises to be a good and wise prince, the other to obey faithfully, provided he govern justly. The people therefore are obliged to the prince under condition, the prince to the people simply and purely. Therefore, if the prince fail in his promise, the people are exempt from obedience, the contract is made void, the right of obligation of no force.8

(Mornay 1994: 158)

According to this theory of government by contract, tyranny absolves the subjects of allegiance. Indeed, to protect the law and the state, subjects *must* rebel against the tyrant to restore order: “It
is therefore permitted the officers of a kingdom . . . to suppress a tyrant; and it is not only lawful for them to do it, but their duty expressly requires it” (Mornay 1994: 158). 

Théodore de Bèze offers similar arguments against the encroaching power of Catholic “tyranny.” As a French Calvinist theologian, Beza vigorously defended the rights of those Reformed citizens living in France, welcoming them into Geneva after the St. Bartholomew’s Day massacre. In his tract Du droit des magistrats sur leurs subjects (Concerning the rights of rulers over their subjects, and the duty of rulers toward subjects) (1574) he, like Mornay, views the king as a servant of the commonwealth: “peoples . . . are not created for their rulers, but rulers rather for their peoples” (Franklin 1969: 104). Beza is, however, no rebel; he does not upend state hierarchy in his text. Instead, he quite carefully argues—in a manner which distinguishes him from Mornay—that it is up to magistrates, not individuals, to resist the tyrant. Furthermore, England itself has enjoyed good rule under Elizabeth’s government, with Beza praising the queen's moderate leadership in contrast to the rule of Philip II. “As for the kingdom of England, it is the happiest in the world today,” thanks to “the mild and beneficent government of their most gracious Queen Elizabeth, as compared with the wretched and miserable condition of so many other countries” (Franklin 1969: 118). Nevertheless, in Beza’s formulation, no earthly leader should be obeyed without question and “even a private individual must use all his strength to defend his country from attack” (Franklin 1969: 105).

Mornay and Beza, in insisting on the contractual nature of kingship and the right to resist tyranny (either individually or according to state hierarchies), offer arguments resonant with a host of other resistance writers, including on the one hand Ponet, Goodman, Knox, and Buchanan, all of
whom voice Protestant resistance theory against Catholic tyranny; and on the other Parsons, Allen, and other Catholic resisters writing against Elizabethan tyranny. These arguments, flourishing over the course of the sixteenth century, resonate with a manuscript which circulated in England in the mid 1590s just before the composition and performance of Shakespeare’s play. Like other resistance theorists, the author of _The State of Christendom_ (likely Anthony Bacon, as Alexandra Gajda has established, though the text is attributed to Sir Henry Wotton) argues that the tyrant is no longer a legitimate ruler, regardless of his divine appointment: “For although a King be called God’s Minister, and his judgements seem to proceed from God’s own mouth, yet when he doth wrong, and breaks God’s commandments, he is not then God’s minister, but the divel’s and then he is no Judge, no King, because he leaveth God, and fulfilleth not that charge which the Almighty hath laid upon him” (Gajda 2008: 437; Wotton 1657: 12). When the king strays into tyranny, subjects may revolt: “the subject against whom the King taketh such unlawful course, may defend himself against his violence and oppression” (12).

These arguments for resistance in _The State of Christendom_ are directed against Spain, and the text is filled with attacks on Philip, calling him one “whose nature is to Command Imperiously, to Rule Proudly, and to Govern Tyrannically, as it appeareth in all places where he beareth Sway or Government” (Wotton 1657: 17). The author works to a crescendo in the argument against Philip when he offers an extended meditation on the Spaniard’s potential rule in England. Marked by innovative laws and invasive policing, Spanish rule in England would undo custom and law:
It is hard to say what course he would take, and how he would govern if he should chance to prevail against England; but I think he would . . . make all things new, as he himself shall be new; He will appoint a new government and new Governors; He will establish new Laws, new Orders, new Customs; build up new Citadels, and pluck down old Castels; kill our Nobility and place Spaniards in their rooms; . . . take away all ancient Privileges . . . plant his religion, and banish ours; impose new tribute; and charge the Subjects with strange impositions; Briefly set spies in every City, in every village, in every town, in every Hamlett, and in every House, to mark what is done or said, what what is Counselled or practised, Behold this is all that he can do.

(Wotton 1657: 237)

The author articulates an extended nightmare—on the danger of tyranny due to a foreign ruler’s occupation, and on the resulting seizure of property and the forcible conversion of subjects—which helps illuminate the atmosphere of the mid 1590s. Precisely at this moment subjects feared a tyrant might succeed Elizabeth. And such tyranny would inevitably provoke resistance: “But our Country men . . . will rather die then endure all this; or if they endure it for a time, will undoubtedly both seek and finde means to free themselves from such servitude in shortime” (Wotton 1657: 237).

The defense of resistance does not mean, however, that the author celebrates tyrannicide. Instead, the specter of resistance and deposition haunts the text: revolution is tragic, not liberating. Rebellion brings political chaos, as the author notes of the Lancastrians who topple Richard II: “I see that their rebellion wrought their own confusion” (Wotton 1657: 169). Errant
rulers “should be modestly rebuked, but not utterly rejected” (Wotton 1657: 203). Like Beza, this author does not offer a straightforward endorsement of resistance. Instead, he/she counsels a more moderate course of action, carefully developing a form of resistance theory that supports the Elizabethan regime and urges subjects away from rebellion while also noting, with a degree of pride, the English resistance to tyrannical rule. As Alexandra Gajda writes of the tract, “the author’s ‘subversive’ theories are incorporated into a work that is emphatically loyal to the queen and written in defence of her policies” (Gajda 2008: 439).

The analysis of law, tyranny, and succession in The State of Christendom and other resistance tracts serves to challenge Spanish tyranny, supporting the peaceable government of Elizabeth against its foreign enemies. But of course, by the 1590s such arguments for resistance appear in a different, more challenging, context as well: their arguments are taken up by the Catholic writers Parsons and Allen, both of whom shift the accusation of tyranny from Spain to England (see Parsons 1594; Allen 1588; Clancy 1964; Milward 1977: 114-5; Salmon 1991: 219-253 and Holmes 1982: 150). Robert Parsons’s A Conference—published in England, dedicated to the earl of Essex, and precisely contemporaneous with The State of Christendom—is undoubtedly the most incendiary of these Catholic resistance tracts. As with Beza and Mornay, Parsons attacks the tyranny of lawless rule. And like Wotton or Bacon, Parsons justifies resistance against monarchs who trespass the law. Further, like The State of Christendom, the text addresses an English audience. But it does so to argue for Philip II and the Infanta, against Elizabeth’s alleged tyranny. These two tracts thus offer similar arguments to entirely different purposes, upholding entirely opposite claimants (Philip II/Infanta vs. James VI) and attacking opposite states (England vs. Spain).
Constructing an analogy between Elizabeth and Richard II, *A Conference* traces Richard’s tyranny, exposing how the king trespassed against law, and created innovative statutes to prop up his reign. He prosecuted his nobles with “fayned” treason, and he “had made many wicked statutes as well against the church and state Ecclesiastical, as also to intangle the realme and nobility with fayned crymes of treason against his regaltie, as then he termed them” (Parsons 1594: 59). Parsons then considers the contrasting rule of Henry IV. While Richard broke his contractual obligation to the commonwealth, Parsons argues, Henry upheld the law. Richard and Henry thus represent opposite models of government: the one tyrannical, illegal and therefore illegitimate, the other law-based, accountable, and therefore sanctioned by God and Parliament. The contrast between these kings, and indeed the central role of Richard and Henry to Parsons’ argument, has led critics (including myself) to read Shakespeare’s *Richard II* next to Parsons’ pamphlet, positioning both as forms of late Elizabethan resistance theory.

In widening out the discussion of the tyrannicide debates to include Protestant as well as Catholic resistance theory, however, I have been arguing for a much more pressing and generalized fear of tyranny not as experienced in the present through Elizabeth, but as posited for the future in the form of an as-yet-unestablished, and potentially absolutist, ruler. To depict a tyrant in 1595 signals not Elizabeth but her successor; and to stage a tyrant in a public theatre, as Shakespeare does, is to ask a range of English men and women to consider how they might respond to such tyranny were it to confront them, in what they could only imagine would be the very near future.
RICHARD II AND THE DIVINE RIGHT OF KINGS

The portrait of Richard II as a tyrant appears in Shakespeare’s source texts. In Mirror for Magistrates (1559) for example, with his “evyll governaunce,” Richard “renteth ryght and law a sunder” (Campbell 111). “I am a Kyng that ruled all by lust,” he claims (Campbell 113). The “lust” here is not specifically sexual, but instead a general appetite for indulging his will through pleasure. He punishes the peers and nobles “with death, exile, or grievous fines” (Cambell 114) to support his spending. This phrasing—a king who rules “by lust” not law—precisely echoes the definitions of tyranny rehearsed in Bracton, Bodin, and others above. His rule, in Edward Hall’s Chronicle Containing the Histories of England (1548-50), caused “daily more and more the realm to fall into ruin and desolation (in a manner irrecoverable as long as king Richard either lived or reigned)” (Hall 6). “Neither law, justice nor equitie could take place, where the kings wilfull will was bent upon any wrongfull purpose,” Raphael Holinshed claims in his Chronicles of England (1587) (Holinshed 2:848). Each of these writers, while remaining sympathetic to Richard as England’s legitimate sovereign, depict the political chaos created by his abuse of the law.

Shakespeare’s play, like its source-texts, depicts Richard’s tyranny. Richard suspends legal proceedings, banishes his countrymen on dubious causes, and seizes the estates of nobles—all examples of tyrannical rule catalogued in 1 Samuel and stretching forward, through Calvin, Beza, Mornay, Bodin and James. But Shakespeare's play stands apart: it meditates deeply on the king’s errancy, probing not just the king’s tyrannical actions but also their origin. What causes his suspension of law? What prompts Richard to flaunt custom? Shakespeare answers these questions: the king’s tyranny emerges from his deep belief in his own divinity. More pointedly,
in Richard Shakespeare depicts a ruler with faith in the divine right of kings. Through his faith in his divine right, Richard trespasses law, he silences his subjects, and he refuses to protect the crown itself. And as we shall see, in asserting his own divine right, Richard becomes a tyrant; and in offering absolute obedience to the king, his subjects feed this tyranny. Thus more than his sources, and more than the political polemic on tyranny surrounding him, Shakespeare depicts not only how subjects might respond to tyranny, but also where such tyranny comes from in the first place.

Shakespeare introduces the political theory of the divine right of kings in the play’s second scene. Notably, this second scene has no precedent in Shakespeare’s source material. It also serves a limited dramatic purpose: the audience is informed of Gloucester’s death in the opening scene, discussed above, so this second scene provides no new information. Further, it features a minor character, the Duchess of Gloucester, who never appears again. What, then, is the function of this innovative scene? It precisely outlines the model of divine-right kingship, practiced by Richard and initially followed by his subjects who are forced, in their passivity, to consent to the king’s tyrannical rule. When the Duchess of Gloucester reproaches Gaunt for failing to revenge her husband Gloucester’s death, Gaunt replies,

    God’s is the quarrel—for God’s substitute,
    His deputy anointed in His sight,
    Hath caus’d his death; for which if wrongfully,
    Let heaven revenge, for I may never lift
    An angry arm against his minister.
This short speech effectively rehearses the three central tenets of divine right. First, Gaunt claims that the king has been divinely ordained: the king is “God’s substitute / His deputy anointed in His sight.” Second, the sovereignty of the king, Gaunt argues, is unrestrained by earthly law: Richard has caused Gloucester’s death, “for which if wrongfully / Let heaven revenge . . .” Richard transgresses earthly and divine law in commissioning the earl of Gloucester’s murder, but only heaven can remove the king from office or punish him for the crime. Gaunt refuses even to accuse the king, keeping his statement of the crime in the conditional: “if.” Third, Gaunt articulates a doctrine of non-resistance and passive obedience: he cannot resist the king, even in these extreme circumstances. He tells the Duchess, “I may never lift / An angry arm against his minister.” The king, at least to Gaunt, remains beyond the reproach of his subjects.

Gaunt might caution Richard that “thy death-bed is no lesser than thy land, / Wherein thou liest in reputation sick” (2.1. 95-6), but he refuses to act against Richard, the source of his country’s political chaos. The second scene with Gaunt thus serves an important function: it demonstrates a political belief in and consensus around the doctrine of divine right of kings in Richard’s England. This doctrine, familiar to Shakespeare’s audience, appears in political and religious texts such as An Homily, delivered to congregants from the pulpit by government order. Through Gaunt’s speech, Shakespeare sketches a familiar political credo: he establishes that Richard’s England concurs on its tenets of absolute obedience, the divinity of kings, and the subordination of law to sovereignty.
Critics have long recognized the role of sanctified kingship in Shakespeare’s play. But, in line with Kantorowicz, scholars have tended to analyze Richard’s model of sovereignty as part of a tragic, medieval narrative: with Richard’s fall comes the demise of sacred kingship, so pointedly chronicled by Gaunt: “This royal throne of kings, this sceptred isle, / This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars, / This other Eden, demi-paradise, / . . . Is now leased out” (2.1.40-59). These lines support Kantorowicz's reading. Richard is the last of the sanctified medieval kings, while Bolingbroke anticipates Tudor statecraft.  

But Shakespeare’s portrait of kingship has a more precise political edge than this reading allows: his Richard is a thoroughly sixteenth-century monarch. He betrays a commitment not merely to mystical kingship, but to the political doctrine of the divine right of kings. The medieval theory of sanctified kingship had no political teeth. But the early modern doctrine of the divine right of kings does: developed in the wake of the Reformation, the doctrine of divine right positions the ruler above the law, commanding absolute obedience from his subjects. Richard, in the mode of a post-Reformation ruler, is confident of precisely such rights: he believes that the monarch is appointed by God, rules above the law, and commands absolute obedience from his/her subjects. The doctrine, as articulated by Richard and theorized by early modern political philosophers, might subsume notions of mystical, sanctified kingship; indeed, the feudal, medieval theory of the king's two bodies provides crucial historical and religious support for this early modern political doctrine. But sanctified kingship and the divine right of kings are historically and politically distinct. And in Richard, Shakespeare represents not simply a medieval king’s faith in his anointed status, but instead a sovereign's assertion of his own divine right.
Further, the play does not represent this political model of the divine right of kings neutrally. Shakespeare stages this doctrine as a prop for corrupt kingship, displaying a limit-case for divine right theory as subjects consent to rule by a murderous sovereign. He thus exposes a contradiction at the center of this political theory: divine right damages rather than protects subjects and kings. Most obviously, by the end of the second act Gaunt’s fidelity to this theory of divine right—evident in his absolute obedience and non resistance—has been strained to the breaking point. With his son banished and his estate seized immediately after his death, the figure of loyalist Gaunt exposes the dangers of absolute obedience for subjects. Such obedience only gives the tyrant a wider berth for lawless rule. The doctrine of divine right also offers little protection for monarchs themselves. This theory of sovereignty might assure Richard of his godly power, over and above those earthly subjects bound to obey him. But the exaggerated distance between king and subject, far from ennobling the office of monarch, instead endangers the kingdom because Richard cannot negotiate with his people without calling into question the ideological underpinnings of his office. Richard's attachment to the theory of the divine right of kings makes him inflexible to challenge or change.

The political danger of divine right for sovereigns appears most clearly in act three when Richard returns from Ireland to deal with the rebellion of Bolingbroke. Landing on the Welsh coast, Richard repeatedly voices the principles of the divine right of kings, but with increasing desperation and to little effect. Rather than marshalling soldiers to his aid, he conjures divine spirits: “This earth shall have a feeling, and these stones / Prove armed soldiers, ere her native king / Shall falter under foul rebellion’s arms” (3.2.24-6). Richard’s speech dangerously elicits among his loyal followers a kind of reckless repetition of the theory of divine right, which comes
to serve as a substitute for action: to Richard’s lines, the Bishop of Carlisle responds, “That power that made you king / Hath power to keep you king in spite of all” (27-8). Bolstered by Carlisle Richard further rehearses his divine connection. He is the “anointed king” who cannot be toppled by “shrewd steel:”

Not all the water in the rough rude sea
Can wash the balm off from an anointed king;
The breath of worldly men cannot depose
The deputy elected by the Lord.
For every man that Bolingbroke hath pressed
To lift shrewd steel against our golden crown,
God for His Richard hath in heavenly pay
A glorious angel.

(3.2.54-61)

No sooner does Richard articulate his own divinity, however, than he suffers the humiliating announcement of yet more defecting subjects. When the king defends his “balm[ed]” body, Salisbury reports the desertion of twenty thousand soldiers. When Richard rebounds, asking “Is not the King’s name twenty thousand names? / Arm, arm, my name!” (85-6), Scroop enters to confirm that Richard’s subjects “both young and old rebel, / And all goes worse than I have power to tell” (120-1). Beginning the scene as the metaphoric sun, the king ends by capitulating, talking only “of graves, of worms, and epitaphs” (145). In the scene on the Welsh coast Richard voices the fantasy of divine right monarchy—his mere landing in the country serves to marshal
the divine forces that will protect him and expose his enemies. But by the end of the scene, the inadequacy of this theory is evident, and Richard proves willing to surrender the throne to an enemy who has not even materialized.

Of Shakespeare’s sources, only Holinshed portrays Richard as a divinely anointed king. Mirror for Magistrates and Hall's Chronicle instead emphasize Richard’s tyranny. But if Shakespeare, like Holinshed, rehearses the divinity of kings he does so to starkly different effect, shaping his Richard both as a divinely anointed king and as a tyrant. Thus unlike Holinshed who condemns the king's deposition on the grounds of his divine appointment, Shakespeare depicts, again and again, the link between the king's faith in his divinity, his political tyranny, and his eventual fall. Disregarding the council or “breath” of his subjects, Shakespeare's Richard claims that law and authority lie within his breast alone. Furthermore, this theory of divine right appears as merely empty rhetoric since Richard invokes heavenly angels on the Welsh coast only to receive news of defecting subjects.

If faith in the rhetoric of divine right replaces prudent military action, such faith equally replaces skills of political negotiation. Shakespeare stages, for a mere moment in act three, a solution to Richard’s crisis: the king agrees to return Bolingbroke’s inheritance. This compromise does not exist in Shakespeare’s sources. But Shakespeare’s version dramatizes a peaceful ending when Richard claims Bolingbroke “is welcome hither, / And all the number of his fair demands / Shall be accomplish’d without contradiction” (3.3.122-4). These brief lines hint at a peaceful resolution. The fantasy of such a resolution is all the more powerful given Shakespeare’s first tetralogy: his audience is entirely familiar with the conflict following Richard’s deposition. In a
brief ten lines, Shakespeare gestures toward a solution, and away from the familiar, bloody history of war that follows.

What prevents such reconciliation? Richard does. Or rather, Richard’s faith in the divinity of kings does. He cannot reconcile his own notion of royalty with capitulation to Bolingbroke’s demands. Instead, he no sooner considers this solution than he cries out to God as he begins the first of a series of speeches that question the status of kingship: “O that I were as great / As is my grief, or lesser than my name! / Or that I could forget what I have been!” (3.3.136-8). It is this inability to “forget” his own divine right which makes any kind of compromise impossible—he is aligned with “God omnipotent” (85), and he should be subject to “no hand of blood and bone” (79). Either he holds the singular force of the sun in his divine scepter, or he grasps “a palmer’s walking staff” (151). Having momentarily considered a compromise, Richard then recoils: to compromise is, as Richard says, to “debase ourselves” (127), to lose what he has been and to shape a new, abject political identity: “Subjected thus, / How can you say to me I am king?” (176-7). It is this exaggerated sense of his own exceptionalism that prohibits Richard from engaging in the play’s political world at all. He recalls his divinity and chooses, over compromise, a dramatic, Christological exit. He forsakes the symbols of his office for “a hermitage” (148), preferring at least the vestige of godly favor to an earthly solution to the political crisis. He embraces a kind of royal martyrdom, being a grave, a hermit, a palmer, or a monk (3.3.148-57). Realizing that Bolingbroke’s resistance is too strong and that he must forgo his claims to divinely sanctioned, absolute authority, Richard cedes the throne with maximum pathos: “What shall the king do now? Must he submit? / The king shall do it” (143-4).
Although the events of Richard’s deposition are well known to the audience, his sudden fall in act three proves shocking: confident of his own divinity only fifty lines earlier, the king relinquishes his power without warning. Indeed, when Shakespeare represents the transfer of power in 4.1, Richard not only participates in, but stage-manages, his own deposition. The deposition unfolds as a monologue, in which Richard talks himself into relinquishing the crown before Bolingbroke even demands it. The scene centers on Richard at the expense of every other figure on-stage. Challenged in office and deprived of the crown, Richard adopts the role of a latter-day man of sorrows. He characterizes himself as the son of God: he is Apollo’s Phaeton or, more potently, Jesus. His former followers are “Judas” to his “Christ” (4.1.171); they are “Pilates” delivering him to his “sour cross” (240-1). This scene thus represents the culmination of the play’s sustained exposure of the divine right of kings as a failed political philosophy: what happens to a king whose own theory of sovereignty fails?

If Richard initially views the sovereign as alone, inviolate, and even unearthly, after his deposition he is forced to participate in a new political economy. He cannot retreat to a hermitage. He tries desperately, for the first time, to examine himself in relation to his subjects. While formerly Richard saw himself as singular, now he tries to connect himself to his subjects through a series of fanciful equations based in an oppositional mathematics. He is one of two buckets on either side of the crown, each moving in opposition to the other. Or, as he puts it in prison, he is the clock that marks time for the new king Henry, counting down hours. The mechanistic simplicity of these equations belies their ideological innovation. Richard has never thought like this. Most spectacularly, he deems himself to be one of a group of traitors threatening the crown: “I find myself a traitor with the rest” (248).
No sooner has he grouped himself with his subjects, however, than Richard swings wildly back to memories of his singularity: “was this the face / That like the sun did make beholders wink?” (283-4). Here, Richard returns to the image of himself as the sun, as Phaeton, which characterizes his mode of sovereign rule. Even as Richard struggles to come to terms with his fall, then, his lyrical speeches recapitulate precisely the reasons for his failed kingship. His sense of isolation in prison only parallels his former exceptionalism. As king, Richard refuses to negotiate with his subjects, ignoring the counsel of Gaunt and York, and overturning law. So too in the final scenes: Richard’s elaborate conceits in prison represent the residue of his earlier exercise of sovereignty as he uses his own brain to produce a kingdom “of still-breeding thoughts; / And these same thoughts people this little world” (5.5.8-9). But all of these thoughts are merely extensions of his own fancy. Similarly, he breaks the mirror and thus creates a kingdom of many faces, all reflections of his own. Richard’s mind still turns over the remnants of his former philosophy, examining how he might retain divinity in this new political environment where he has become subject not only to Bolingbroke but, more generally, to mortality.

THE CRISIS OF SUCCESSION

Having witnessed the play’s sustained argument against Richard’s political philosophy and practice, an audience might fairly expect to hear a counterargument on the merits of Bolingbroke. Certainly Bolingbroke receives popular support, and in the brief representation of his rule he appears to govern through consultation with advisors, he follows legal process, and he pardons his critics, such as the bishop of Carlisle. In many respects, then, Bolingbroke appears to
exercise the law-based, customary rule of the king in parliament, a mode of rule that had been threatened by Richard's tyranny. Yet one of the more surprising features of the play is the difficulty Bolingbroke faces from the moment he ascends the throne. Indeed, Shakespeare spends the last two acts depicting Bolingbroke’s struggle to maintain authority. Infectious conflict erupts among his nobles (no fewer than six noblemen throw down their gages in 4.1, in a dizzying set of challenges), his son Henry is truant, and Aumerle enters into open rebellion. In the play’s final scene we learn that rebels burn the town of Cirencester, while the new king executes Salisbury, Spenser, Blunt, Kent, Brocas, Sir Bennet Seely, and the Abbot of Westminster, all traitors to the throne.

One might reasonably ask why Shakespeare chooses to represent Bolingbroke's difficulties in such condensed detail. And the answer to this question lies in the succession crisis. The problem with a succession crisis, as the final act of Shakespeare's play reveals, is that it never ends. Initiated by the tyrannical rule of Richard II, this crisis continues to haunt the state even when law-based, customary rule has been restored. If the process of "fair sequence and succession" (2.1.199) has been interrupted -- by Richard himself in his tyranny, or by Henry IV in his treason -- then political chaos ensues, no matter how skillful the subsequent monarch might be. Shakespeare reinforces the problems with succession by drawing attention to Henry's trouble with his own son. This "unthrifty" heir seems to presage a multi-generational succession crisis, as the country moves from tyrant to traitor to truant. Carlisle prophesizes precisely such chaos: “kin with kin and kind with kind” will “confound” (4.1.141). War is inevitable: “Disorder, horror, fear and mutiny / Shall here inhabit, and this land be call’d / The field of Golgotha and dead men’s skulls” (142-4). Carlisle's prophecy specifically concerns usurpation, threatening war
and bloodshed with Richard's deposition. Against deposition, he speaks in favor of the doctrine of absolute obedience and non-resistance. But as the audience well knows by this point in the play, Richard's tyranny already causes conflicts of "kin with kin," and he already produces "fear and mutiny" in his subjects. Even as Carlisle attempts to argue against deposition, then, his speech serves instead to illuminate the political trauma endured by Richard's subjects: if Richard's deposition might create chaos and mutiny, so did his rule; and so too will the rule of his successors.

Shakespeare does not attempt to offer a solution either to the succession crisis, or to the related tyrannicide debate. He simply stages the dead end of tyrannical rule: on the one hand, the violence of the war speaks against deposition; on the other, the tyranny of Richard requires intervention. Whatever the response to tyranny -- whether it is the rebellion of resistance theory on the one hand, or the obedience of sovereignty theory on the other -- a succession crisis looms. Even, then, as the play might resonate with the crucial European political debates on tyrannicide in staging a range of responses to bad rule, and even as it weighs in on questions about a foreign, innovative, or tyrannical ruler, the play refuses to adopt an instrumentalist position. Shakespeare’s play is at once intensely politically engaged, weighing in on the most crucial topics of the day, and yet philosophical, refusing to occupy one pragmatic position.

Shakespeare does not have to stand as one of the range of Catholics, from loyalist to resistant, or as one of the range of Protestants, from godly to reformed, in order for him to consider the issue of tyranny and succession. If polemicists from Parsons to Beza write instrumentally, arguing in favor of one successor or another, Shakespeare by contrast writes imaginatively. If we examine
the play through a strictly Elizabethan political lens—that is, seeing Richard as Elizabeth, and Bolingbroke as one of the successors—then the play’s perspective shrinks, and Shakespeare is merely asking us to take a side. The mere supposition that Elizabeth figures Richard seems to tip the playwright’s hand, exposing the play as resistance theory. But to argue instead that the play imaginatively engages questions of rule precisely at the moment when subjects face the specter of a new ruler is to take more seriously the play’s dramatic form, to recognize its dialogic mode, and to acknowledge its refusal of political utility.

This is not to suggest that the play has no political edge. For if the play offers no solution to tyranny, it does, as I have argued, speculate on its causes. And it is here we find the play's sharpest political point. The play undoubtedly locates the cause of Richard's tyranny in his mistaken faith in his own divine right: out of this faith comes his lawless and inadequate rulership. Shakespeare is thus highly critical of an absolutist political theory—the divine right of kings. He links this political theory with tyranny, probing not just the effects of tyranny but its causes. But as hard-hitting as Shakespeare’s critique of divine right theory might be, he does not glibly embrace resistance, which he shows to have a high political cost. The play's political insights on the relation of divine right theory, tyranny, rebellion, and political chaos put pressure on the instrumentalism of resistance and sovereignty theory by demonstrating the dead end of the succession crisis: there is no good solution. Of course, only a few years later, by 1603, the English succession crisis had been (at least apparently) solved. But this future resolution should not obscure our awareness of the fear that Shakespeare's audience must have had, in 1595, watching his play. The succession crisis in Richard II rehearses for Shakespeare's audience precisely the dramatic elements—from tyranny to absolute obedience to resistance—of their own
political crisis, one which had already put the English state on center stage in the European political theatre.
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Notes

1 Elizabeth spoke this line several months after Essex’s death, in a conversation with her advisor William Lambarde on August 4, 1601, a fact that undermines direct association of the quote with the performance of Richard II the year before.

2 Forker 111-20 suggests the first performance of Richard II probably occurred in the autumn of 1595. The first quarto of the play appeared in 1597, after its initial run by the Chamberlain’s Men.

3 Elizabeth’s relationship to such resistance literature was complex. These tracts often supported her political position against Spain, with its imperial designs on England and other Protestant nations. While the most incendiary texts, such as Parsons’s Conference, attack Elizabeth’s government and propose a foreign monarch, other publications including Beza and the anonymous The State of Christendom instead support Elizabeth against Philip II. But as a sovereign, Elizabeth condemned theories of king-killing as rebellious.

4 Bracton’s theory of sovereignty would be familiar to Shakespeare’s audience and, as Mendle notes, “Bracton’s judgement that the king had no peer among men but was ‘under the law, because the law makes the king,’ became a seventeenth-century commonplace” (102, note 12).

5 It thus follows the Justianiac model of sovereignty, inherited through continental civil law and rehearsed by numerous continental theorists. The intersection of notions of sanctified kingship with Roman legal theory helped shape the doctrine of the divine right of kings.

6 On the divine right of kings as a political doctrine emerging in the Tudor period, see Figgis, who claims the theory served as the necessary “transition stage between medieval and
modern politics” (256). I follow Figgis and Sommerville in associating the theory of the divine right of kings, as it emerges in Tudor and Stuart England, with absolutism. See Sommerville 1986: 9-56; Sommerville 1999: 11-14; 224-65; Sommerville 1991: 55-70; Wooton 22-86. For an alternate viewpoint, arguing for the distinction between divine right and absolutism, see Burgess 91-123 and Russell 101-20.

7 On the issue of election and succession, see Kewes and Doran, forthcoming; and Kewes 2006.

8 The Vindiciae appeared in partial English translation in 1588, and a full translation in 1648. See also Buchanan, whose text is dedicated to young King James VI. For earlier Protestant resistance theory, see Goodman and Ponet; and the excellent essay by Kingdon.

9 This contract theory reappears in the writings of Catholic resistance theorists, who defended rebellion against England’s monarchs on the grounds of their civil and religious tyranny.

10 See also Huntington Mss. This appendix rehearses the views of Antonio Peres, formerly of Philip II’s court who then, during his period of exile, wrote against Philip as a tyrant. While this text had been published in 1657, a manuscript copy suggests a composition and circulation date of 1595. On the text’s authorship by Anthony Bacon, see Gajda 437.

11 One might note the irony that subjects did not, in fact, revolt when faced with precisely such changes in the form of Henry VIII’s Reformation.

12 For a critique of Kantorowicz see Norbrook.

13 For the source of Carlisle’s speech in Bodin see Benjamin.

14 In Holinshed’s Chronicles and Jean Creton’s Histoire du Roy d’Angleterre Richard, for example, Northumberland and Bolingbroke demand a parliament to address the murder of the
earl of Gloucester, thereby returning to the contentious issue that provoked Bolingbroke and Mowbry’s battle. In Shakespeare’s version, these men request only the duke’s inheritance (3.3.113-4). In revising his historical sources, Shakespeare depicts the possibility of a peaceful conclusion to the conflict.