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This thesis examines a range of generic influences in William Shakespeare’s Richard II. By exploring the play’s references to conflicting interpretations of history from different generic perspectives, I hope to advance a more nuanced reading of the play’s dynamic staging of history. In Chapter One, I suggest that Richard II complicates medieval and early modern conceptions of history by referencing the de casibus tradition alongside competing interpretations of history. Ultimately, I argue that the play presents a multifaceted performance of history that evades stable meaning by drawing attention to the ways in which characters’ interpretations shift as they tell and retell historical events from contrasting generic perspectives. In Chapter Two, I examine the mingling of comic and tragic elements in Richard II. Because early modern audiences and playwrights emphasized transitions, or rapid changes of emotion, I suggest that Richard II’s mixed affect is not an aberration, but rather part of early modern attitudes toward passions and playgoing. Together, these chapters present a reading of Richard II that highlights how early modern notions of affect and playgoing can offer today’s readers and playgoers a version of history that dramatizes the challenge of interpreting historical events.
Genres at Play: History, Tragedy and Comedy in Shakespeare’s *Richard II*

by

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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

Marie Wiley, Author
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Genres at Play: History, Tragedy and Comedy in *Richard II*

**Introduction**

William Shakespeare’s *Richard II* can be a perplexing play for modern readers: its dense rhetoric offers intricate challenges; its early modern version of medieval history is unfamiliar; and its two central characters, Richard II and his cousin Bolingbroke, who deposes him and becomes Henry IV, can lead to polarizing readings which either envision the play as a tragedy (with Richard as its tragic hero) or as a comedic political satire (with Richard as a buffoonish king who allows the Machiavellian Bolingbroke to usurp him). As with many English history plays, *Richard II* is difficult to fit into a generic category because it includes both Richard’s death (a common signal of a tragic genre) and also the possibly comical beginning of Bolingbroke’s new reign. In this project, I will argue that precisely because of its intricate rhetoric and ambiguous emotionality, *Richard II* is especially suitable for studying how Shakespeare employed and adapted older genres to create a dynamic performance of history.

In Chapter One, I will examine how Shakespeare adapted the medieval *de casibus* tradition in the play. Critical introductions to *Richard II*, such as that of Charles Forker, often note the influence of the *de casibus* tradition in the play’s narrow focus on Richard’s downfall (“Introduction” 80-3), and Paul Vincent Budra has gone so far as to argue that *Richard II* is “Shakespeare’s meditation on the *de casibus* form” (*A Mirror* 85). I hope to contribute to this critical discussion by arguing that rather than passively reflecting the *de casibus* tradition, Shakespeare intersperses references to the *de casibus* tradition with other conflicting generic perspectives within the play. In this way, the play creates a version of history in which the meaning of events is refracted through contrasting generic interpretations, which leads to a more
dynamic sense of history. Moreover, Shakespeare’s numerous and contrasting generic references transform the de casibus tradition; rather than functioning as a controlling schematic view of history, the de casibus tradition becomes one of a series of possible generic lenses which individuals might use to interpret history.

In Chapter Two, I examine the mingling of comic and tragic elements in Richard II. In this chapter, I will argue that because early modern audiences and playwrights relished transitions, or rapid shifts in emotion, Richard II’s mixed affect is not an aberration, but rather is reflective of early modern attitudes toward the passions and playgoing. Moreover, I will suggest that while the lability and range of emotions within the play can be perplexing under the solitary reading conditions in which most critics perform their analyses, my analysis of a filmed performance of Richard II can help to demonstrate how the play’s abrupt transitions from comic moments to tragic ones can work synergistically. Indeed, I suggest that the embodied presence of actors onstage helps to highlight the desperation which drives them to such farcical extremes, and I further suggest that actors’ creatively enacted emotional transitions help to dramatize the challenge of interpreting history. In this chapter, I posit that the contested significance of history is often the driving tension which produces the play’s unsettlingly comic moments.

In bringing together both historicist and performance-based readings of Richard II, I hope to demonstrate a critical method which brings us a little closer to the reading and playgoing practices of the early modern period. Indeed, such a mixed methodology resonates with historical phenomenological approaches, because literate early modern audiences would have been able to reflect upon historical chronicles, printed plays, and memories of past performances to shape their interpretation of historical drama. In bringing these two methods together, I hope to present
A reading of Richard II which highlights how early modern notions of genre, affect and playgoing can offer today’s readers and playgoers a vivid experience of history wherein references to different genres show how history is reshaped in the retelling.

**A Brief Critical History of Richard II**

First written and performed around 1595, Richard II is a play from Shakespeare’s middle period. As such, critics often read Richard II in light of how it reflects Shakespeare’s development as a playwright, noting how the play’s overt and stylized rhetoric becomes subtler in works from Shakespeare’s late period. In particular, the introspective speeches and soliloquies of Richard tend to be read as foreshadowing the development of tragic heroes of later plays such as Hamlet and King Lear. For example, Charles Forker argues that the play “adumbrates Shakespeare’s mature tragedies and histories. Hamlet’s egotism, self-consciousness and verbal brilliance are all to be found more rudimentarily in Richard’s character, as is a pale simulacrum of Lear’s growth from arrogance to humility” (“Introduction” 3-4). Here, Forker is reading Richard II as anticipating future “mature” works of Shakespeare. However, I agree with Simon Palfrey and Tiffany Stern that plays from Shakespeare’s middle period, such as the 1595 Richard II, can provide insights into Shakespeare’s development of theatrical techniques (358). Where Palfrey and Stern focus on prosodic developments, I will be looking at the range of genres referenced in Richard II, but I agree with Palfrey and Stern that Shakespeare’s middle period can offer intriguing insights, because plays from this period show Shakespeare’s playwriting techniques evolving in relation to the literary context from which they emerged. In particular, I wish to discuss the complex generic standing of Shakespeare’s history plays. Because History

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1 Forker notes that although 1595 is the most likely date of Richard II’s composition, this date is not entirely certain (“Introduction” 111-115).
was the generic title in which *Richard II* was categorized in the 1623 First Folio, it is easy to forget that the English history play was an emerging genre during the Elizabethan period. As I will go on to discuss, Elizabethan playwrights of English history plays did draw upon historical chronicles to create their work, but they also employed the older theatrical and literary genres of tragedy and comedy to shape historical drama.

**What genre is a history play?**

Records suggest that the English history play reached its height of performance popularity during the 1590s and that Shakespeare’s English history plays were among the most popular (Syme 224-5). Yet while the popularity of these plays is uncontested, scholars continue to debate the generic standing of *Richard II* along with the rest of Shakespeare’s English history plays. In contrast to tragedy and comedy, theatrical genres which date to Classical times, the English history play was a type of play which emerged during the early modern period, and as Paulina Kewes suggests, is not necessarily “a ‘true’ genre if by that is meant a dramatic form clearly distinguishable from the Elizabethan tragedy and the Elizabethan Comedy” (188). Along the same lines, David Bevington is among the critics who argue that “the English history play is not really a genre at all,” but rather “a composite, an informal kind of dramatic entertainment made up from disparate historical and theatrical materials” (93). So while chronicle histories served as sources for Shakespeare’s English history plays, these chronicles were incorporated

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2 As noted by Richard Hillman, the 1623 First Folio also removed the generic label ‘tragedie’ which appeared in the titles of some early printed quartos of the play, retitling the play as *The life and death of King Richard the Second* (10, 16).

3 Indeed, Holger Schott Syme’s research indicates that Shakespeare’s English history plays were the most popular of his era, because “no other author had as many history plays printed, reprinted, and remain attractive in the long run as Shakespeare” (230-1). Moreover, Syme suggests that during his lifetime, Shakespeare may have been known primarily for his historical drama, as his English history plays were the most often reprinted of his works (230-2).
along with elements from the more familiar theatrical genres of tragedy and comedy.

Shakespeare and other Elizabethan playwrights had a range of popular genres upon which they could draw in shaping historical chronicles into historical drama, and so these theatrical genres influenced the ways that audiences experienced and interpreted performances of history. While in some cases it might be useful to consider the English history play as its own genre, I hope to show how Shakespeare’s references to a range of genres within *Richard II* work together to create a performance of history in which different generic perspectives offer competing interpretations of historical events.

Generic distinctions are readily comprehended by today’s critics, but how did Elizabethan audiences experience dramatic genres? Early modern genres certainly influenced audience expectations and experiences, but rather than being strict rules, genres were fluid and open to adaptation. Susan Snyder highlights the interplay between generic fixity and fluidity present in early modern drama: “Generic traditions in Shakespeare’s time, often blending and always evolving, nevertheless served as guides: to playwrights in developing their material, [and] to audiences and readers in understanding the plays they produced” (95). Genres were recognizable, and yet components of those genres might be reused, repurposed, or hinted at and then refused in order to tease, satisfy, and/or thwart audience expectations. This theatrical generic fluidity did not only appear in the Elizabethan era, but as Susan Cooper writes, seems to have begun to develop in medieval dramaturgy and festivals. For example, some medieval plays, such as the *Second Shepherd’s Play*, included comic subplots in the midst of sacred material which created a more dynamic affective potential in theatrical productions (Cooper 49-51; Snyder 88). While some early modern writers argued that English theater ought *not* to embrace
this generic fluidity and instead ought to follow strict rules of Classical decorum, Shakespeare and other early modern playwrights chose rather to embrace a range of generic influences and to reference and employ a range of genres in their plays. This was particularly the case with English history plays, where the familiar genres of tragedy and comedy provided models for structuring and interpreting performances of history.

The early modern period’s shifting terrain of theatrical genres is especially pertinent to Richard II. Richard Hillman describes Richard II as being on a “generic cusp,” because when first published in quarto format in 1597, the play was titled as The Tragedie of King Richard the second, and was only later labeled as a History play in the 1623 First Folio (10). Richard II is not the only play to have been so retitled (Richard III was as well), but as Hillman further notes, we might interpret Richard II’s multiple titles “as a cue to consider the shifting, if not competing, ideas of chronicle history and tragedy within Richard II” (16). While Hillman focuses on history and tragedy, I will argue in Chapter Two that the comic elements within Richard II also contribute significantly to its overall effect. Though Richard’s death at the end of the play might have encouraged early modern audiences (and modern critics) to read the play as a tragedy, Richard’s role includes many moments which can be interpreted as comical, and the possibly farcical beginning of Bolingbroke’s reign as Henry IV in scenes 5.2 and 5.3 also seems to indicate that comic potential is lurking in the play’s version of history. As I will discuss in Chapter Two, these comic elements can work particularly well with tragic elements in a live performance of the play, and so I suggest that critical confusion over the play’s strange blending of generic references might be partly due to the affective differences between reading a play and seeing it performed. Indeed, the appeal of such comic elements in live performance may have
been one motivation which Shakespeare had for adapting historical sources and genres in *Richard II* in the way that he did.

By briefly looking at how Shakespeare adapted historical sources in *Richard II*, we can see how crucial tragic and comedic genres were in shaping the play’s version of history. For example, many of the cuts which Shakespeare made to historical sources serve to emphasize Richard’s role as a protagonist who begins at the height of worldly power and then suffers a devastating fall in fortune, thus shaping history to a tragic form. Indeed, the number of historical characters which appear in historical chronicles were cut drastically by Shakespeare, thus leading to an emphasis on Richard, Bolingbroke, and a small cast of nobles. This reduction in the number of characters was probably necessary to make *Richard II* playable for an Elizabethan theatrical troupe, yet as Anthony B. Dawson and Paul Yachnin have noted, Shakespeare made other significant departures from Holinshed’s *Chronicles* in narrowing the political scope of the play. Rather than staging the complex ups and downs of Richard’s reign and the diverse political actions involved, Shakespeare instead focuses relentlessly on Richard’s fall from power, thus eliding “the history of cyclical violence from his tragic retelling in order to shape the play’s action as a fall” (Dawson and Yachnin 20-1). Furthermore, Shakespeare cut Holinshed’s discussion of the complex civilian political action involved in the power struggle between Richard, his uncles, and Bolingbroke, so that the play’s “picture of Ricardian England seems tilted toward the nobles and the king” (Dawson and Yachnin 26). Indeed, cutting civilian politics concentrates the play’s action on the lofty heights of nobility from which tragedy (and, as I will discuss later, the *de casibus* tradition) typically narrated its tragic downfalls.
But Shakespeare’s changes to historical sources were not limited to cutting material; he also added comic elements to *Richard II* which do not appear in historical sources. One significant comic addition appears in Act 5, where scenes two and three feature the Duchess of York debating how to respond to her son’s treachery against Bolingbroke with her husband; this dispute become something of a comic domestic squabble. Many critics (and some directors) have critiqued the potentially farcical nature of these scenes, which seems out of keeping with the many elegiac laments of the play. However, as I will suggest, the looming tragedy of scenes 5.2 and 5.3 is inextricably bound with the outrageous extremes to which the Yorks are provoked, and so the comic and tragic elements of these scenes can work synergistically. Another scene which includes uneasy comedy emerging from tragedy is scene 4.1, the deposition scene. This semi-public ritual of unkining which is dramatized in this scene does not appear in any historical source, and so it is apparently a creation of Shakespeare’s. As I will discuss in Chapter Two, this scene also combines pathos with uneasy humor. As he stages his own decoronation, Richard’s role is rife with many thought-provoking and contradictory interpretations of his downfall, some of which are peculiarly comical. By attending to how tragic and comic elements intermingle in Shakespeare’s embellishments of history, my project examines how Shakespeare’s dissonant generic references help to dramatize the challenge of interpreting history.

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4 As Sheldon P. Zitner notes, “The role of the Duchess and her presence at the discovery of Aumerle’s plot are wholly Shakespeare’s invention” (179).

5 Because the first three published quartos of *Richard II* do not contain Richard’s deposition, scholars are still debating as to whether the full text of scene 4.1 was part of the play as first written and performed (but censored or withheld from publication), or if the full deposition scene was created and added at a later date (Syme 236-7).
Chapter One: Echoes of the De Casibus Tradition in Richard II

In Chapter One, I will examine Shakespeare’s references to the *de casibus* tradition in *Richard II*. Rooted in medieval literature, the *de casibus* tradition, a genre which influenced English tragedy,\(^6\) takes its name from Boccaccio’s influential *De Casibus Vivorum Illustrium* (c. 1360), which was loosely translated as *The Fall of Princes* by John Lydgate in the 1430s (Cooper 142). The *de casibus* tradition emphasized the role of fortune in the lives of powerful protagonists, presenting tragic tales which followed their falls from fortune to misfortune. While most critical introductions to *Richard II* briefly mention that the play includes references to the *de casibus* tradition, most notably in Richard’s oft-quoted “For God’s sake let us sit upon the ground/ And tell sad stories of the death of kings” (3.2.155–156) (Forker “Introduction” 38–9), only a few critics have explored the ways that *Richard II* is complicating the *de casibus* tradition, rather than merely reflecting it. And, whereas Budra has argued that Shakespeare’s adaptation of the *de casibus* tradition within *Richard II* is centered on the role of Richard (A Mirror 86), I will draw attention to a range of characters’ conflicting interpretations of Richard’s downfall. By doing so, I hope to demonstrate how the play creates a multi-faceted dramatization of history in which the *de casibus* tradition, with its attempt to frame and explain Richard’s loss of power as a tragic downfall, does not become the definitive explanation of history, but rather becomes one of many competing interpretations. By presenting this reading of *Richard II*, I hope to demonstrate how the play shows Shakespeare creating a version of history which invites debate, rather than settling into a single interpretation of the significance of historical events.

\(^6\) Because Chaucer was the first English writer to adapt the *de casibus* tradition in English and describe it as “tragedie,” Henry Ansgar Kelly argues that “Chaucer’s wide-open idea of tragedy… which encompassed the downfall of both the innocent and the guilty… became the popular notion of tragedy… [which included] the events themselves as well as literary or dramatic presentations of the events” (102).
Chapter Two: ‘Mongrel tragi-comedy’ in *Richard II*

In Chapter Two, I will explore comic elements and emotional transitions in the play. *Richard II* is intriguing because its many woeful speeches and lack of prose might make the play initially appear to be a pure ‘tragedie,’ as suggested by its 1597 quarto title. Yet when critics read *Richard II* as only a tragedy, their readings tend to marginalize the comic elements in the play. On the other hand, a few critics have created readings which read *against* tragedy by envisioning the play as a comedic satire. For example, John Halverson has argued that *Richard II* is a play in a “predominantly comic mode” which foreshadows Shakespeare’s more overt satirical vein which appears in *1 and 2 Henry IV* (most notably in the character of Falstaff) (274), but such a reading tends to disregard the many elegiac lines of the play. Rather than reading the play’s comedy as an either/or proposition, I suggest that *Richard II* is in concerned with the nearness of tragedy and comedy. To examine this more fully, I attend to how characters’ dissonant interpretations of history and fear of looming tragedy can lead to moments of unsettling comedy, and also to how mercurial emotions figure within the play (particularly with the character of Richard). Richard is a challenging character to interpret, and many critics have created reductive readings of Richard—as an arrogant king, a jesting king, or a profound king. He certainly is all of these in turn, and his mercurial range of affect not only reflects early modern attitudes toward the passions, but also can help to develop a more nuanced interpretation of the generic influences in *Richard II*.

This chapter will explore how the early modern appetite for transitions, i.e., rapid emotional shifts, helps to explain that *Richard II*’s mixed affect is not an aberration, but rather reflective of early modern attitudes toward the passions and playgoing. Because the lability and
range of emotions within the play can be perplexing under the solitary reading conditions in which most critics perform their analyses, this chapter will also discuss the Royal Shakespeare Company’s 2013 filmed live performance of *Richard II*. I hope that my analysis of a filmed performance of *Richard II* will help to demonstrate how the play’s seemingly contradictory comic and tragic elements can work synergistically. In contrast to critical readings which tend to polarize *Richard II* as a tragedy or occasional contrary readings of the play as a satire, my reading will examine the transitions between sarcasm, despair, whimsy, and other emotions in the play. Tragedy is not enough, it would appear, to dramatize the downfall of a king, because the play also includes recurring references to satirical, whimsical, and other surprisingly comic perspectives of history. I argue that by including these mercurial affective shifts, Shakespeare creates a play which foregrounds the challenges of interpreting history.

The two chapters of my thesis have distinct critical methods, and by presenting literary historicist research along with a discussion of a filmed performance of *Richard II*, my work explores how these distinct modes of research and reception can support each other. Throughout my research, I have continued to be amazed at how moving between reading and viewing adaptations of *Richard II* has informed my understanding of Shakespeare’s work. When reading, the prosody and literary references of the play tend to leap to the fore, whereas viewing a filmed performance allows the interaction of actors and the humor of the play to become more noticeable. Upon reflection, I realized that drawing on a range of different versions of *Richard II* resonates strongly with historical phenomenological approaches, because literate early modern audiences would have been able to draw on both reading and playgoing by accessing historical chronicles, printed play quartos, and dramatic performances to shape their interpretation of
historical drama. In bringing these two methods together, I hope to present a reading of *Richard II* which highlights how early modern generic practices and notions of affect and playgoing can offer contemporary readers and playgoers a vivid experience of history wherein references to different genres show how history is reshaped in the retelling.
Chapter One: Echoes of the De Casibus Tradition in Richard II

In this chapter, I will examine how Shakespeare both echoes and adapts the *de casibus* tradition within *Richard II*. The *de casibus* tradition takes its name from Boccaccio’s influential *De Casibus Vivorum Illustrium* (c. 1360), which was loosely translated as *The Fall of Princes* by John Lydgate (c. 1438). Extremely popular with medieval and early modern readers, *de casibus* narratives emphasized the role of fortune in the lives of the mighty, presenting tales of downfall which were sometimes shaped to serve as moral warnings to the living (Cooper 142). Yet the *de casibus* tradition had a complex attitude toward morality and religion, as Boccaccio’s *De Casibus Vivorum Illustrium* referred both to an amoral perspective from Classical narratives via the goddess of Fortune, whose whimsical influence created changes in the fates of mortals, and also to the strictly moralistic Christian worldview, where a fall in fortune was a justified punishment for sin (Farnham 105, 114-5). As I will discuss later in this chapter, writers of the early modern period were adapting the *de casibus* tradition in different ways. In *Richard II*, Shakespeare presents both moral and amoral references to the *de casibus* tradition, so that Richard is portrayed alternately as being deservedly punished for poor kingship and also as being an innocent victim of fate. Shakespeare’s open-ended evocation of the *de casibus* tradition contrasts with other early modern writers who worked with the same tradition, such as the authors\(^7\) of *A Mirror for Magistrates* (1559). The *Mirror* adapted the *de casibus* tradition to create a didactically Christian interpretation of tragic downfalls which were intended to warn

\(^7\) As Paul Vincent Budra suggests, there are intriguing parallels between the group authorship of *The Mirror for Magistrates* and early modern theatrical practice, as both were collaborative enterprises. Moreover, the *Mirror* was written as a series of first-person narratives in which each ruler reflected upon his reign and downfall, so it is possible that Baldwin and his collaborators were influenced by the developing theatrical world in Tudor England (Budra *A Mirror* 74).
current rulers to amend their sinful behavior, ultimately producing “a vision of providentially
ordered history” (Budra “Shape of De Casibus” 306). As will be seen, the contradictions
between a Classical amoral perspective\(^8\) and a Christian moral perspective of history are both
present in Richard II, where characters alternately voice clashing perspectives on the
significance of Richard’s downfall and Bolingbroke’s rise to power; this makes the meaning of
the historical events presented in Richard II difficult to determine. Indeed, the very multiplicity
of narrative perspectives within the play creates a version of history where the telling and
retelling of the past is as significant as the events which took place.

However, Shakespeare was not the first to construct competing narrative perspectives
within the de casibus tradition. In The Canterbury Tales (c. 1400), Chaucer made wry use of the
de casibus tradition. In “The Monkes Tale,” the Monk recounts a lugubrious series of downfalls,
with protagonists ranging from Adam to Hercules. Although Chaucer drew more on Biblical and
Classical sources than on Boccaccio’s De Casibus Vivorum Illustrium, early manuscript versions
of The Canterbury Tales often subtitled “The Monkes Tale” with de Casibus Vivorum Illustrium,
indicating a general awareness of the de casibus tradition in medieval readers (Correale and
Hamel 615-6). \(^9\) Although many of the Monk’s tales contain Biblical characters, the Monk does
not settle into a moralistic Christian framework, but instead repeatedly bewails fickle Fortune for
betraying the protagonists of his narratives:

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\(^8\) Of course, Classical narratives also include many examples of downfalls which are caused by
caracter flaws (such as hubris), so this contrast between Classical amorality and Christian
morality is by no means absolute.

\(^9\) As noted by Henry Ansgar Kelly, Chaucer’s concept of tragedy and the role of fortune was also
influenced by Boethius. Moreover, Kelly argues that Chaucer’s employment of tragedy was
highly influential in expanding the use of tragedy from Classical dramaturgy to also include
contemporary written English (194-7).
But for that Fortune alwey wole assaille
With unwar strook the regnës that been proude ;
For whan men trusteth hire, thane wol she faille,
And covere hire birghte facë with a clowde—
(3953-56)

Here, Fortune appears as an inconstant force which is aligned with the natural world, “cover[ing] hir brighte facë with a clowde” as might the sun or moon. The unreliable presence of Fortune plays much the same role in the Monk’s many tragic tales, first bestowing favorable circumstances and then withdrawing them. The Monk’s tales all follow the same basic form: mighty protagonists fall from their height of power. Finally, as if acknowledging that his audience might grow impatient with the Monk’s numerous sad tales, Chaucer has the Knight interrupt the Monk in protest:

‘Hoo!’ quod the Knight,’ ‘good sire, namoore of this!’
That ye han seyd is right ynough, y-wis,
And muchel moore ; for litel hevynesse
Is right ynough to muchè folk, I gesse.
(3957-3960)

The Host also chimes in, chiding the Monk for his excessively mournful tales which “annoyeth all this comapaignye” (3980). Chaucer’s inclusion of humor within the de casibus tradition in The Canterbury Tales indicates that even in the medieval period, writers and readers might have had a mixed attitude toward the unrelentingly pessimistic narratives of the de casibus tradition. The Monk’s tales of tragic downfalls threaten to go on until Doomsday, and so the Knight interrupts the Monk, urging him to be more considerate of his audience. As I will discuss in Chapter Two, Shakespeare’s Richard II also suggests that the excessive tragedy of the de casibus tradition can lead, somewhat surprisingly, to comedy, but at this point I wish to draw attention to the entangled Classical and Christian forces in Chaucer’s evocation of the de casibus tradition.
As Willard Farnham explains, the *de casibus* tradition drew on the Classical capricious goddess of Fortune, and medieval authors such as Boccaccio and Chaucer incorporated the mutability of Fortune into their Christian worldview (105, 114-5). This apparent contradiction between God’s divine plan and Fortune’s amorality was resolved by an understanding of Fortune as one of God’s creations, a form of “mundane mutability, which must remain to us irrational, though it is perfectly rational to God” (Farnham 114-5). And yet the tension between the Classical amorality of a capricious Fortune and the strict morality of a Christian framework would reappear in early modern adaptations of the *de casibus* tradition, with different authors adapting the *de casibus* tradition for different purposes.

Indeed, William Baldwin and his fellow authors of *A Mirror for Magistrates* (first published 1559) developed a version of the *de casibus* tradition which was more Christian than Classical, presenting tales of downfall with a pointed moral and political aim (Campbell 21; Budra “Shape of *De Casibus*” 306). Baldwin’s dedication of the *Mirror* places the work in line with Lydgate’s *The Fall of Princes*, stating that Lydgate’s moralistic vision of history would be continued by the authors of the *Mirror* (63). This didactic purpose is clearly stated in Baldwin’s introduction to *A Mirror for Magistrates*, where he explains that the title of the work indicated the authors’ intention of offering rulers a chance to reflect upon their conduct: “For here as in a looking glas, you shall see (if any vice be in you) howe the like hath bene punished in others heretofore, whereby admonished, I trust it will be a good occasion to move you to the soner amendment” (64-6). Thus, Baldwin and his fellow authors were directing their writing toward a specific audience with a political purpose: contemporary rulers were to read the *Mirror*, reflect upon examples of how God had punished sinful rulers of the past, and correct their own conduct
accordingly.\footnote{This moralistic vision of history seems to have been one which the authors of The Mirror for Magistrates intensified over time. In his study of the Mirror, Budra concludes that in revising and republishing the work, Baldwin and his fellow authors developed increasingly “retributive” tales, revising narratives in order to emphasize the hand of divine justice in history (“Shape of De Casibus” 308).} When they placed their work in line with Lydgate’s didactic version of the \textit{de casibus} tradition, the authors of \textit{A Mirror for Magistrates} were adapting the \textit{de casibus} tradition to emphasize the justice of a Christian universe.\footnote{While space does not permit me to discuss the complexities of \textit{A Mirror for Magistrates} at length, its broad readership suggests that the work also played a significant role in developing what Jessica Winston calls “a rhetorical space to speculate on the nature of power” in the early modern period (162).} This contrasts strongly with Chaucer’s livelier version of the \textit{de casibus} tradition, where the Monke’s gloomy and copious tales of downfalls test the patience of his audience. For Chaucer, it was not only \textit{de casibus} stories which were worthy of narration, but also audience responses to such sad tales. Because \textit{Richard II} also includes a range of clashing perspectives along with its evocations of the \textit{de casibus} tradition, it seems that Shakespeare (whether instinctively or intentionally) evaded the moralistic tendency of Lydgate and the authors of \textit{A Mirror for Magistrates} and placed \textit{Richard II} more in sympathy with Chaucer’s playfully dissonant version of the \textit{de casibus} tradition. Indeed, the Knight’s interruption of the Monke’s Tale is a form of character interaction which seems to delight in the very limitations of the \textit{de casibus} tradition: the Monke’s relentlessly tragic perspective is cut short by the Knight’s and Host’s insistence that the listening company has had more than enough sad tales for one sitting. And yet, because both \textit{A Mirror for Magistrates}\footnote{Drawing upon E.M.W. Tillyard’s observation that “that the various publication dates of the \textit{Mirror} coincided with periods of upheaval in England,” Budra posits that the ongoing appeal of the \textit{Mirror} may have been its placement of “the apparently malevolent whim of Fortune… in the context of a reassuring vision of history as a whole” (“Shape of De Casibus” 311-2).} and \textit{Richard II}\footnote{A Mirror for Magistrates and \textit{Richard II} were} were
popular with early modern readers, it would appear that both moralistic and more ambiguous versions of historical tragedy were of interest in the early modern period.

The influence of the *de casibus* tradition on *Richard II* is not only apparent in specific evocations from characters, but also in the broad shape of the play. In adapting sources for *Richard II*, Shakespeare limited the number of characters so that the focus remains on Richard and his downfall (Dawson and Yachnin 20-1). Moreover, in order to focus on Richard and his loss of power, Shakespeare cut Holinshed’s discussion of the complex civilian politics involved in Bolingbroke’s usurpation of Richard, making it appear as if the small cast of nobles which appear onstage were the only significant political forces involved (Dawson and Yachnin 25-6). This leads to a central focus on Bolingbroke’s rise in fortune and Richard’s corresponding fall. And yet, despite the narrowed historical scope of the play and its focus on Richard’s fall and Bolingbroke’s ascent to power, the play simultaneously presents a vision of a destabilized medieval world. Despite the steady progression of Richard’s downfall, its meaning is repeatedly contested with characters variously interpreting the significance of Richard’s loss of power. Indeed, Kirby Farrell reads *Richard II* as evoking a medieval world order which is “structured around polarized opposites—king, beggar; heaven, hell; life, death” in order to show this medieval stability breaking down in historical drama which highlights “multiplicity, strategy, and dynamic equilibrium” (11). In this way, Shakespeare’s play evokes the *de casibus* tradition both as a structural element and also as part of a crumbling medieval worldview. By presenting

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13 From 1595-1623, *Richard II* was among the most popular of Shakespeare’s reprinted works, as it was “reprinted five times in 17 years, its success rivaled only by *Richard III* (five editions in fourteen years) and 1 Henry IV (six editions in fourteen years)” (Syme 232).
multiple versions of history which are told for different purposes.\(^{14}\) *Richard II* transforms the *de casibus* tradition into one of many generic perspectives of history which attempt to explain history and assign it meaning.

**The Remorseful King Richard in *A Mirror for Magistrates***

Before I discuss the complexity of Shakespeare’s evocation of the *de casibus* tradition and his peculiarly conflicted portrayal of Richard’s downfall, I wish to examine how the authors of *A Mirror for Magistrates* represent the same king. As Budra has convincingly argued, William Baldwin and his fellow authors of the *Mirror* were interested in the “didactic potential” of tragic tales of rulers, and so they presented fallen rules that were intensely remorseful, revising history in a way that emphasized the role of God in punishing sinful rulers (“Shape of *De Casibus*” 306).

Although *A Mirror for Magistrates* appears to have been one of Shakespeare’s sources for *Richard II* (Bullough 279), the authors of the *Mirror* present a very different version of Richard II. This contrast comes out sharply when we compare Richard’s remorseful monologue in the *Mirror* with *Richard II*’s more complex king. In the *Mirror*, Baldwin et al. present a King Richard who perceives his downfall as fully justified, voicing a long list of his faults as a warning to other rulers:

```
My vicious story in no poynt see thou spare,
But paynt it out, that rulers may beware
Good counsayle, lawe, or virtue to despise…
I am a Kyng that ruled all by lust,
That forced not of vertue, ryght, or lawe,
But always put false Flatterers most in trust,
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\(^{14}\) As Michael Ullyot notes, Senecan drama also was a significant model which likely inspired Shakespeare’s dynamic shaping of historical drama. In addition to having a five act structure, Senecan drama was also deeply concerned with “situating known narratives in the unrecorded arguments, emotions, alternatives, doubts and regrets surrounding them as they unfold” (98-9). In Ullyot’s conception, English history plays were a “hybridization of the *de casibus* and the Senecan traditions” (102).
Ensuing such as could my vices clawe:
By faithful counsayle passing not a strawe.
(22-24; 31-35; Bullough 415)

Here we find a repentant king who is presumably saying precisely what loyal subjects would like
to hear. Speaking from beyond the grave, the *Mirror’s* Richard is a thoroughly Christian and
coherent entity: he bears witness to his faults so “that rulers may beware,” indicating that he now
recognizes the importance of contributing to a politically unified and Christian country. The
*Mirror’s* Richard has committed grievous crimes, but he at least knows enough about good
kingship to perceive and acknowledge his own failures: during his reign, he trusted “false
Flatterers,” put his own appetites before the needs of his subjects, and ignored “faithful
counsayle.”

In Shakespeare’s *Richard II*, the same monarch is indeed portrayed as ignoring the good
counsel of John of Gaunt and the Duke of York in scene 2.1. Yet, as we shall see, rather than
acknowledging and repenting his sins, Shakespeare’s Richard is instead self-contradictory. He
evokes the *de casibus* tradition to more ambiguous ends, not so much to strengthen England
politically as to meditate on the place of monarchs within history in order to come to grips with
his own loss of power. Crucially, Richard’s evocation of the *de casibus* tradition is peculiarly
absent of self-censure. In sharp contrast to the *Mirror’s* self-condemning king, Shakespeare’s
Richard does not blame himself for his fall from worldly power. Richard makes no direct
acknowledgement of his past mistakes and outright crimes, such as his involvement in the murder
of his uncle, Thomas of Gloucester (which John of Gaunt explains in 1.2.37-41),\(^\text{15}\) or his theft of

\(^{15}\) As noted by David Scott Kastan, Shakespeare chose not to present direct evidence as to who is
responsible for the Duke of Gloucester’s death, which leads to a “moral opacity” within the play
(48-9). Because Richard is not the only character who is accused of this crime (Bolingbroke
accuses Mowbray of the murder in 1.1 and three characters accuse Aumerle of the murder in
Bolingbroke’s legacy after John of Gaunt’s death in scene 2.1. Other characters observe these errors and try to warn Richard to correct his behavior, but the play clearly shows Richard ignoring what the *Mirror* terms “faithful counsayle,” so essential to good kingship. Certainly, some of this difference comes from *Richard II*’s focus on historical events as they unfold and characters struggle to interpret them, which is quite distinct from the *Mirror*’s first-person retrospective portrayal of Richard II. Also, Shakespeare presents characters who react in the heat of the moment, so that when John of Gaunt chastises Richard for high taxes: “Landlord of England art thou now, not king” (2.1.113), Richard angrily responds by calling him “A lunatic, lean-witted fool” (2.1.115). In this way, the play does show Richard alienating powerful allies, yet Richard’s ignorance of his political missteps is left for audiences to observe.

Throughout the play, Richard does not admit to grievous sins in the manner of the *Mirror*’s Richard, but focuses more on the crimes and betrayals visited upon him. Indeed, the closest that Shakespeare’s Richard comes to self-critique is in his final scene, 5.5, when from his prison cell Richard indirectly reflects upon his reign and loss of power. However, Richard does not express repentance for his poor kingship, but rather critiques himself for a failure of aesthetic judgment:

```
how sour sweet music is,
When time is broke and no proportion kept!
So is it in the music of men's lives.
And here have I the daintiness of ear
To cheque time broke in a disorder'd string;
But for the concord of my state and time
Had not an ear to hear my true time broke.
(5.5.42-48)
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4.1), audience members cannot know for certain who is responsible for Gloucester’s death, but can only choose amongst competing accusations.
Rather than directly discussing the pragmatic aspects of his reign (and any political misdeeds), Richard creates an analogy between broken time in the music that he hears in prison and the stately “concord” which he has lost. Richard describes himself as having “the daintiness of ear” to hear poorly played music, but admits that he lacked “an ear” to hear disorder in his “state and time.” While the play has indeed shown Richard refusing to listen to the counsel of John of Gaunt, the Duke of York, and others, in this scene Shakespeare nevertheless presents Richard as not perceiving his own failure in literal and practical terms. Instead, Richard seems to be expressing a poetical (and possibly deranged) response to his loss of kingship. In this way, *Richard II* departs from the more coherent historiographical perspective of the *Mirror*’s Richard, who lists the points of good kingship at which he has failed, thus placing his posthumous voice in agreement with what good subjects would deem to be good kingship. In contrast, Shakespeare seems to be interested in the range of interpretations which gather around Richard’s rule and loss of power.

Despite Richard’s obvious failings in *Richard II*, not all characters condemn him as an unfit ruler. While some characters criticize Richard (as when Northumberland calls Richard a “most degenerate king” after witnessing his theft of Bolingbroke’s inheritance [2.1.262]), others staunchly defend him (as when the Bishop of Carlisle refers to the law of Divine Right which defined Richard as “the figure of God” [4.1.125]). Indeed, Shakespeare’s inclusion of contrasting judgments of Richard within the play seems to have influenced critics to take one side or the other, either condemning Richard as an unfit ruler justly deposed or championing him as a misunderstood poet (Lopez 18). Yet because the play offers contradictory interpretations of Richard and his downfall, the play offers no final judgement. As Bolingbroke gains power, it
initially seems that he will be a more just ruler than Richard, and yet in scene 3.3, Bolingbroke executes some of Richard’s followers and then makes a cruel joke: “A while to work, and after holiday” (3.1.44). Moments such as this make it seem as if Bolingbroke will be a ruthless ruler who is more politically savvy than Richard, but perhaps no better. And so, a moral vacuum lies at the heart of the play. Indeed, Phyllis Rackin has argued that the formal construction of Richard II invites the audience to identify first with Bolingbroke and then with Richard, thus giving the audience an active though guided role in judging its central characters (362). But while Rackin’s analysis of how the play invites sympathies to shift from Bolingbroke to Richard has much to offer, I argue that the moral vacuum of the play might open up a broader range of audience responses. Shakespeare does not settle into a stable Christian worldview as do the authors of A Mirror for Magistrates, but instead offers historical events in all their ambiguity, creating a void of meaning which characters struggle to fill. And so, I suggest that the play offers audiences the freedom to respond to Richard’s downfall with condemnation, with sympathy, or transitions between these conflicting reactions. This allows audiences to experience a more fluid form of history which reverberates with competing interpretations. Although the historical events of the play have already occurred, the play emphasizes how differently characters interpret the meaning of those events, and thus presents a version of history in which historical meaning is shaped to diverse ends by different characters. Established literary genres, such as the de casibus tradition, thus play a significant role in the play, as they offer characters narrative tools from which they can attempt to interpret the significance of historical events.
Conflicting Perspectives on Richard’s Downfall

*Richard II* shows Shakespeare adapting the *de casibus* tradition, a tradition in which tragedy and history are tightly entwined. As previously discussed, the *de casibus* tradition’s tight focus on the downfalls of the mighty may have influenced the play’s dramatic focus on Richard’s downfall. And yet, by focusing on Richard’s loss of power, the play creates a central historical event which provokes clashing explanations from different characters (including Richard) as they struggle to interpret the meaning of this political shift. By interspersing references to the *de casibus* tradition along with many other perspectives on Richard’s downfall, Shakespeare allows the audience to perceive history being told from a range of perspectives, showing how characters use various genres in their attempts to interpret historical events. To put it another way, although the play as a whole does follow the basic pattern of a *de casibus* narrative by tightly focusing on Richard’s downfall, Shakespeare departs from the *de casibus* traditions in presenting many potential meanings of that downfall.

In order to follow the *de casibus* form of a fall from the heights of power, *Richard II* begins with Richard at the summit of his political strength. In Act 1 of *Richard II*, Richard’s position seems secure, despite his uneasy standing with political allies. As Richard’s behavior grows more egregious, it becomes increasingly clear that Richard is alienating powerful allies. Act 2 begins with John of Gaunt’s deathbed, where Gaunt mourns the indignities to which Richard has subjected the kingdom. Here may be an indirect evocation of the *de casibus* tradition, as Gaunt claims moral authority by foretelling Richard’s downfall, hoping to awaken

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16 For example, upon learning of his uncle John of Gaunt’s illness, Richard asks God to end Gaunt’s life so that Richard can use Gaunt’s wealth to make war in Ireland: “Now put it, God, in the physician’s mind/To help him to his grave immediately!/ The lining of his coffers shall make coats/To deck our soldiers for these Irish wars” (1.4.59-61).
Richard to kingly repentance: “My death’s sad tale may yet undeaf his ear” (2.1.16). Gaunt takes on the role of a prophet pronouncing the righteous judgment which will be visited on Richard:

Thy deathbed is no lesser than thy land,
Wherein thou liest in reputation sick;
And thou, too careless patient thou art,
Commit’st thy anointed body to the cure
Of those physicians that first wounded thee.
A thousand flatterers sit within they crown,
Whose compass is no bigger than they head.

(2.1.95-101)

Here, Gaunt attempts to establish a moral and Christian authority in order to scold Richard into ethical kingly behavior. Gaunt’s attempt fails and he dies, after which Richard does indeed unlawfully seize John of Gaunt’s property (2.1.155-162), which rightfully belongs to Gaunt’s son, Bolingbroke (who is also next in the kingly line of succession). Richard’s theft of Bolingbroke’s inheritance upsets the law of succession, and inspires many nobles to deflect their loyalties to Bolingbroke. This conspiracy allows Bolingbroke to usurp Richard and take his place as King of England. John of Gaunt’s rousing condemnation of Richard might make it tempting for audiences to interpret Richard’s downfall as entirely deserved, but Shakespeare also shows supporters of Richard describing his loss of power as a fall in fortune from the amoral perspective of some Classical narratives, in which a downfall was not the consequence of divine judgment, but rather was the result of enigmatic fortune. For example, in scene 2.4, upon being deserted by the Welsh warriors who were to have defended Richard, Salisbury addresses his absent king:

Ah, Richard! With the eyes of heavy mind
I see thy glory like a shooting star
Fall to the base earth from the firmament;
Thy sun sets weeping in the lowly west,
Witnessing storms to come, woe and unrest;
Thy friends are fled to wait upon thy foes,
And crossly to thy good all fortune goes.
(2.4.18-24)

Here, Salisbury incorporates a range of natural metaphors to account Richard’s fall. Rather than drawing attention to Richard’s political failures, Salisbury narrates political changes as reflecting a cosmic shift in power, with Richard falling “like a shooting star.” In this way, Salisbury seems to be drawing upon the figure of Classical amoral Fortune within the *de casibus* tradition, in which protagonists lose power simply because of the whimsical nature of fortune. Addressing the absent Richard, Salisbury names fortune as the cause of Richard’s political calamity: “crossly to thy good all fortune goes.” Moreover, Salisbury imagines events unfolding beyond Richard’s reign. The “storms to come” will indeed come, as Bolingbroke’s usurpation of Richard will lead to the Wars of the Roses, but Salisbury is more focused on Richard’s personal “fortune,” which is figured as the result of causes beyond human action. The beauty of Salisbury’s lines encourage the audience to pause here and shift toward a more complex interpretation of Richard, who certainly has exhibited poor kingship, but whose deposition nevertheless will wreak havoc which will extend throughout England.

It is understandable for representatives of the two rival factions (Richard’s supporters and Bolingbroke’s) to present polarized views of Richard’s downfall, but some characters shift in their interpretation of Richard after his loss of power. Foremost of these is the Duke of York, one of Richard’s uncles. In 2.1, York condemns Richard’s poor kingship along with John of Gaunt, saying that Richard will not listen to good counsel, because his ear “is stopped with other flattering sounds” (2.1.17). Yet as Richard loses power, York staunchly attempts to support
Richard and force Bolingbroke to “stoop/ Unto the sovereign mercy of the King” (2.3.155-6).

And after Richard has been deposed, York does not characterize Richard as having been justly punished for political misdeeds, but rather focuses the reversal of fortune between Bolingbroke and Richard, describing and sympathizing with Richard’s fallen state. After describing Bolingbroke as being welcomed by the populace on his ride through London (5.2.7-17), York describes Richard’s entry into London with compassion for Richard’s suffering:

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No joyful tongue gave him his welcome home,
But dust was thrown upon his sacred head;
Which with such gentle sorrow he shook off,
His face still combating with tears and smiles,
The badges of his grief and patience
That had not God for some strong purpose steeled
The hearts of men, they must perforce have melted,
And barbarism itself have pitied him.
But heaven hath a hand in these events,
To whose high will we bound our calm contents.
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(5.2. 29-38)

Here, York’s narrative is clearly attempting to create some significance from political upheaval. Rather than dwell upon Richard’s past failures, York describes Richard as more sinned against than sinning, noble in his “grief and patience.” Moreover, York places Richard’s fall within a Christian framework, narrating Richard’s loss of power as part of God’s “strong purpose,” i.e., as a mysterious part of God’s plan. Once Richard has lost power, York no longer critiques Richard, but instead is moved to sympathize with the fallen king. In this way, we see that Shakespeare has created characters that shift their worldview as they attempt to explain this political shift. Indeed, in Richard Meek’s reading of Richard II, he argues that the play “is self-consciously concerned with the questions of whether we should feel pity for Richard; or, to put it another way, whether subjects—or audience members—should feel sympathy for the monarch” (145). Such questions
are not fully answered, but York’s shift in sympathy suggests that a flawed king can indeed become a sympathetic figure after losing power. And so, by presenting a range of perspectives on Richard’s downfall, *Richard II* creates a dynamic evocation of the *de casibus* tradition in which different narrative perspectives of history are as significant as the events which actually occurred.

‘sad stories of the death of kings’: References to the *De Casibus* Tradition in *Richard II*

References to the *de casibus* tradition in *Richard II* are most overt in scene 3.2, when Richard returns from a military campaign in Ireland to find that his kingdom is slipping away. As Richard learns of one political betrayal after another, he cycles through a bewildering range of emotions, from faith that God and his angels will fight to protect his kingship (3.2.59-62), to rage at having been betrayed (3.2.129-134), to the depths of despair (3.2.205-210). I agree with Budra that scene 3.2’s emphasis on Richard’s alternation from the heights of hope to the depths of despair evokes “in miniature the form of the *de casibus* collections to which Richard alludes” (91). Yet what I see as being more significant in this scene is the range of interpretations which Richard voices on his own downfall. By focusing on Richard’s subjective experience in learning of a series of political betrayals, Shakespeare presents a character who uses contradictory perspectives in the attempt to interpret historical events. This is a significant departure from the *de casibus* tradition, because rather than presenting a character reflecting on a loss in fortune after it has occurred, Shakespeare is showing a character who is attempting to interpret his downfall before it actually happens. For example, upon learning that his Welsh troops “Are gone to Bolingbroke, dispersed and fled” (3.2.74), Richard immediately assumes the worst. In a rare moment of unselfishness, Richard insists that his own followers might also need to abandon him:
“All souls that will be safe fly from my side” (3.2.80-81). Yet upon Aumerle’s urging Richard to be comforted, Richard immediately resurrects hope and recalls that he still has the support of York. This sudden confidence is quickly overturned, as upon Scroop’s intimation that more bad news is on its way, Richard attempts to calmly accept the news of more devastating betrayals:

Mine ear is open, and my heart prepared;  
The worst is worldly loss thou canst unfold.  
Say, is my kingdom lost? Why, ‘twas my care,  
And what loss is it to be rid of care?  
(3.2. 93-96)

Here, despite the terror which he has voiced earlier, Richard seems to be making light of the impending loss of his kingdom. The range of contrasting interpretations with which Richard responds to his imminent loss of power does not present a stable meaning for his downfall, as does the Mirror’s Richard, but rather highlights the challenges of coping with the fear of his downfall. Such introspective attention to the subjective experience of a loss in fortune is quite new to the de casibus tradition.

Yet between soaring confidence that God will come to his aid and crushing disappointment at the news of mounting political betrayals, Richard seems to take on a detached perspective. Inviting his few remaining followers to sit and listen to de casibus narratives, Richard narrates political downfalls from a third-person perspective: “For God’s sake let us sit upon the ground/ And tell sad stories of the death of kings” (3.2.155-6). Indeed, this moment of detachment seems to have been Shakespeare’s invention, as scene 3.2 marks Shakespeare’s departure from historical sources. According to Holinshed, Richard lost power because he was betrayed and captured by Northumberland; but according to Shakespeare, Richard perceived that he had been politically outmaneuvered by Bolingbroke and chose to acquiesce to his loss of
power (Dawson and Yachnin 46-7). I wish to draw attention to how Richard speaks of “sad stories of the death of kings” with the detached omniscience of third-person perspective, rather than the first-person remorseful confession of the Richard II presented in _A Mirror for Magistrates_. To put it another way, Richard is speaking more as a narrator than as a character, a teller of sad tales rather than a prince on the verge of his downfall:

> For God’s sake let us sit upon the ground  
> And tell sad stories of the death of kings:  
> How some have been deposed, some slain in war,  
> Some haunted by the ghosts they have deposed,  
> Some poisoned by their wives, some sleeping killed,  
> All murdered.  
> (3.2.155-50)

This catalogue “of the death of kings” seems to belong more to the introduction to a book of _de casibus_ narratives than to a mighty king who is on the verge of his own downfall. Shakespeare seems to link this detachment to Richard’s (belated) development of insight, because shortly after this speech, he makes the decision to “discharge” his few remaining followers, “and let them go/ To ear the land that hath some hope to grow,/ For I have none” (3.2.211-213). In this way, Richard’s reflections on his imminent downfall seem to have shocked him into ethical behavior, placing the survival of his followers before his own. Indeed, this may be Shakespeare’s evolution of the “exemplary mode” of the _de casibus_ tradition, which required readers or viewers to “identify… with the protagonist of the exemplum” (Budra _A Mirror_ 75). Although readers or playgoers could not identify with a literal loss of kingship, they would all ultimately share in the death which Richard reflects upon. While Shakespeare’s Richard is not insistently didactic as is the _Mirror_’s Richard, scene 3.2 might more subtly suggest that reflections upon one’s downfall before it occurred could lead to less selfish behavior.
Some critics, such as Forker, interpret scene 3.2 as a low point in Richard’s emotional development, as the monarch “never appears weaker, more self-absorbed or more in love with defeat than in this scene, which ends in his renouncing politics altogether” (“Unstable Identity” 7). Yet, as Shakespeare has written it, Richard could not possibly have won; any attempt to combat Bolingbroke’s more powerful forces could only have caused pointless bloodshed. So while critics such as Forker stand at a contemptuous distance from Richard, a more thorough understanding of de casibus tradition helps to understand how Richard might be a character to identify with despite his flaws; while the spectacular height from which he falls is unique, his impending demise was a fate which all audience members would eventually experience themselves. Seen from this perspective, Richard’s attempt to come to grips with his downfall seems to have led to his surrender, which, as Shakespeare has written it, was the least disastrous course of action he could have chosen. This decision is one which seems to emerge from the wrenching perspectives which Richard has voiced regarding his imminent downfall. In scene 3.2, Shakespeare shows Richard transitioning from belief in a miraculous military victory to quite a different perspective, placing himself in a sequence of de casibus narratives of dead kings. This moment of suspension, when Richard speaks as from a great distance from his immediate and distressing personal circumstances, is clearly echoing the de casibus tradition, yet also departing from that tradition, because the central character is not speaking in a first-person retrospective and is not focusing on his own downfall. In this way, Richard’s evocation of the de

17 Indeed, Shakespeare also departed from historical sources in making Richard’s political situation more emphatically bleak. For example, Holinshed records that the Duke of York did assemble an army and attempt to defend Richard (Forker “Introduction 127”), but Shakespeare cuts this attempt at defense by having Scroop report that York has “joined with Bolingbroke” along with Richard’s northern and southern aristocracy (3.2.200-203).
*casibus* tradition appears as a moment of reflection which allows him to accept his place in history and choose an ethical course of action.

Furthermore, Shakespeare portrays Richard as incorporating a number of generic perspectives in addition to the *de casibus* tradition to interpret his downfall. Richard refers to many older narratives, Classical and Christian, in a seeming attempt to interpret the betrayal of his followers, his loss of political power, and his impending death. Early in scene 3.2, before Richard has learned of the loss of military support, Richard voices a cosmic analogy which compares himself to the sun, “rising in our throne, the east” who will shame Bolingbroke into surrender (3.2.50). At the close of 3.2, after having learned of the execution of some of his followers and the betrayal of others, Richard returns to this analogy but with the roles reversed, as he dismisses his remaining troops and vows to travel “From Richard’s night to Bolingbroke’s fair day” (3.2.218). In scene 3.3, upon descending to the court to meet with Bolingbroke and the nobles, Richard casts himself as Phaethon falling from the sky, having lost control of his chariot (3.3.177-8). In scene 4.1, Richard continues to veer between self-righteous rage and desolation, as he compares himself with Christ (4.1.169-171) and later mourns the identity he has lost with his kingship: “I have no name, no title… But ‘tis usurped” (4.1.254, 256). Having such a contradictory central character, the play seems interested in dramatizing the challenge of Richard’s attempt to interpret the significance of his downfall. At times, the central downfall of *Richard II* seems to be reflecting the *de casibus* tradition, yet its meaning does not settle into a stable perspective. Rather, the multiple retellings of this event shift its meaning with each retelling. Unlike *A Mirror for Magistrates*, *Richard II* seems to offer a version of history which embraces diverse and conflicting perspectives. In this way, Shakespeare’s evocation of the *de*
casibus tradition makes it one of a range of possible narrative structures which can shape our interpretation of historical events.

‘Debatable’ History

The bewildering array of perspectives voiced by Richard might actually be an innovation of the Elizabethan stage. Indeed, Ruth Lumney argues that, along with Christopher Marlowe’s Doctor Faustus (1594), Shakespeare created a new sort of protagonist in Richard II, one that provoked wonder and astonishment rather than clearly inviting a straightforward affective response (as would a hero or a villain). Lumney refers to these new types of characters as “debatable’ characters,” meaning characters whose motives cannot be readily ascertained, and she notes that such characters “can be enthralling, multifaceted, even unpredictable” (103). In Lumney’s conception, these ‘debatable’ characters more deeply engage audiences because they demand a keener intellectual attention and also encourage audiences to shift from judgement to debate: “The term points to a shift in the way spectators respond to a figure on stage, a change from asking, ‘Should, or should not this character behave in this way?’ (an ethical question) to asking ‘Why? Why is this character behaving like this?’” (101). Lumney draws attention to the unsettling effect of Richard’s extremes of emotion and how it relates to a the early modern period’s growing interest in subjective experience (101), but I wish to pose the question: how does such a ‘debatable’ central character shape an audience’s perception of history? If we read Richard as a ‘debatable’ character, this has significant repercussions for the form of history which Shakespeare was writing and his audiences were experiencing in the early modern period. Rather than perceiving history exclusively through the static de casibus form, in which the greatest uncertainty was whether capricious Fortune or divine Providence was responsible for the
fates of great men, Richard II presents history as dynamic and unstable because of the individual subjectivities involved. The de casibus tradition is clearly referenced in Richard II, but it does not function as a controlling scheme; rather, it is voiced by various characters according to their differing motives. And, as we have seen, particularly in the central character of Richard, uses of the de casibus tradition shift in response to characters’ changing circumstances. And so, it is significant that in Richard’s final scene (in prison), he reflects on the Wheel of Fortune, so evocative of the de casibus tradition. Yet rather than developing a definitive interpretation of his downfall, Richard describes his ongoing subjective experience of reliving his downfall after it has occurred:

Thus play I in one person many people,
And none contented: sometimes am I king;
Then treasons make me wish myself a beggar,
And so I am: then crushing penury
Persuades me I was better when a king;
Then am I king’d again: and by and by
Think that I am unking’d by Bolingbroke,
And straight am nothing
(5.5.23-41)

In this passage, Shakespeare presents history from a deeply personal and imaginative perspective. In describing his repeating fantasy of descending the social ladder to become a beggar and then rising to become a king, Richard is evoking the Wheel of Fortune, whose mutability and emphasis on the potential for loss of fortune so resonates with the de casibus tradition. Yet rather than drawing attention to Richard’s fate as a just punishment (as would the de casibus perspective of A Mirror for Magistrates), Shakespeare instead focuses on Richard’s ongoing retelling of history. Rather than presenting a version of history which settles upon a stable Christian worldview, where a monarch repents for the sins that have caused his downfall,
Shakespeare instead presents a Richard who is still reliving events in his imagination, “king’d again” and then “unking’d,” although his active role in history is at an end. By including Richard’s imaginative retellings of history, *Richard II* gives its readers and audiences a shifting and subjective perspective of history in which the significance of past events is fluid, shifting with the each retelling. By incorporating this radically subjective depiction of a historical figure who continues to struggle to interpret historical events, Shakespeare has placed the *de casibus* tradition within a series of possible generic lenses which individuals might use to interpret history.

In the following chapter, I will continue to discuss how Shakespeare’s dramatization of multiple retellings of history and the introspective experiences of characters in *Richard II* creates a dynamic and ‘debatable’ version of history. Where Chapter One focuses on the intersection of tragedy and history in *Richard II*, Chapter Two explores the peculiar mingling of comic and tragic elements in the play. Where Chapter One has focused on how Shakespeare transformed the *de casibus* tradition by invoking it alongside other perspectives on Richard’s downfall, the next chapter will pay attention to how the very multiplicity of perspectives on Richard’s downfall can lead to subtle moments of humor. In pursuing this line of inquiry, I will discuss how the play’s multiple and dissonant interpretations of history can provoke unsettling affective responses both for characters within the play and for audiences or readers, inviting them to participate in an ongoing (re)interpretation of historical events.
Chapter Two: ‘Mongrel tragi-comedy’ in Richard II

In this chapter, I will explore how the excessive tragedy of Richard II is, somewhat surprisingly, interspersed with comic moments. Because the play was originally titled as The Tragedie of King Richard the second in its 1597 quarto (and also because of its many woeful speeches), the tragic elements of the play are more obvious than its comic elements. As a result, many critics have focused exclusively on the play as a tragedy. Furthermore, because Richard II is entirely in verse, some generations of critics have preferred reading the play to seeing it performed, the better to relish its exquisite poetry. One of the more vocal of these critics was William Hazlitt, who claimed that to see Richard II in performance filled him with “a degree of pain, disgust, and indignation,” so superior was his experience of reading the play in solitude (qtd. Coyle 76). Indeed, because Richard II does not shift from verse to prose to indicate a change from aristocratic tragedy to the lower social orders and a correspondingly comic register, as does Henry IV, its verse can lead critics to overlook the subtle humor of the play. However, rather than reading the play’s comedy as an either/or proposition, I shall explore Richard II’s preoccupation with the interplay between tragedy and comedy, suggesting that the play’s dramatization of the challenge of interpreting history is reflected in its mercurial shifts from tragic moments to comic ones. Indeed, as I will discuss later in this chapter, early modern audiences keenly observed and appreciated such abrupt affective shifts (Palfrey and Stern 315). Moreover, the synergy between comic and tragic elements can be highlighted in modern performances of Richard II. Because the play’s affective transitions are perhaps captured more

Moreover, some critics who are affronted by Richard’s political and personal inadequacies read Richard II as a failed tragedy. For example, Harold Bloom asserts that “It is better to think of Richard II as a chronicle rather than a tragedy, and of Richard himself neither as hero nor as villain but as victim, primarily of his own self-indulgence” (250).
aptly in performance than in reading, this chapter will incorporate a discussion the Royal Shakespeare Company’s 2013 filmed performance of *Richard II*. The lability and range of emotions within the play can be perplexing under the solitary reading conditions in which most critics perform their analyses, and so I hope that incorporating some discussion of a filmed performance of *Richard II* will help to demonstrate how the play’s seemingly contradictory comic and tragic elements can actually support one another.

This chapter suggests that *Richard II* is interested in the nearness of tragedy and comedy. As discussed in Chapter One, the play focuses on the downward trajectory of Richard’s downfall, yet at the same time offers a broad range of perspectives on the significance of that downfall. While many of these perspectives are elegiac, this chapter will draw attention to the disconcerting comic moments in the play which increase as Richard loses power. As I will discuss further on in this chapter, the play’s treacherous political shift sometimes provokes characters to farcical extremes and also leads Richard to voice a bewildering range of interpretations of his loss of power, some of which are humorous. Indeed, Shakespeare’s inclusion of comic references within the broad tragic shape of the play seems to have been part of his dramatic vision of history, as the scenes which feature moments of uneasy comedy emerging from tragedy were invented or fictionalized by Shakespeare.

For example, as I will discuss in this chapter, scenes 2 and 3 of Act Five show the domestic comedy which emerging from looming tragedy. In these scenes, Shakespeare made significant changes to the historical Duchess of York (who is only briefly mentioned in chronicles), creating instead a Duchess who is a much more colorful and humorous character. Upon discovering her son Aumerle’s treachery against Bolingbroke, the Duchess of York argues
against the Duke of York’s determination to have his son executed for treason; this dispute become something of a comic domestic squabble. Many critics have critiqued the potentially farcical nature of these scenes, which seems out of keeping with the many elegiac laments of the play. Other critics, such as John Halverson, have argued that scenes 5.2 and 5.3 indicate that \textit{Richard II} is truly satirical at heart and that its tragedy is essentially self-mocking. While I do think that scenes 5.2 and 5.3 include farcical elements, I argue that this does not necessarily eliminate the tragic potential of these scenes. Indeed, the very dangers of regime change and political insurgency that arise within these scenes are what provoke the Yorks to their outrageous behavior; and so, I suggest that the impending tragedy of these scenes is essential for driving their edgy comedy.

Another significant (and potentially comic) departure which Shakespeare made from historical sources is Richard’s deposition in scene 4.1. Historical sources only describe Richard’s deposition as having occurred “privately” from Richard’s imprisonment in the Tower, rather than in the peculiar and public ritual of unkinging which Shakespeare arranges for Richard (Forker “Introduction” 125). As I will discuss later in this chapter, this scene also combines pathos with unsettling humor. As I attend to the ways in which Shakespeare mingles tragic and comic elements in \textit{Richard II}, particularly in the transitions in Richard’s part, I will suggest that these clashing affective appeals play a significant role in contributing to the play’s deeply unsettling version of history, because they highlight how the significance of historical events is not stable, but rather is repeatedly contested, reinterpreted, and retold.
‘Mongrel tragi-comedy’

As evidenced in *Richard II* criticism, the emotional extremes of early modern drama can create a stumbling block to modern critics, who usually prefer to read the play as either tragic or comic/satirical. But plays which combined tragic with comic elements also troubled some early modern writers like Sir Philip Sidney, who preferred Classical decorum:

> But besides these gross absurdities, how all their plays be neither right tragedies, nor right comedies, mingling kings and clowns, not because the matter so carrieth it, but thrust in clowns by heads and shoulders, to play a part in majestical matters, with neither decency nor discretion, so as neither the admiration and commiseration, nor the right sportfulness, is by their mongrel tragi-comedy obtained (135).

Here, Sidney is voicing concerns about a lack of decorum in early modern plays, holding that generic purity is essential to “decency.” Indeed, the mixing of social levels, “kings and clowns,” appears to have been one theatrical technique to which Sidney objected—his understanding of genre dictating that comedy was appropriate for lower classes, while tragedy was better suited to the “majestical” aristocracy. This makes it seem likely that *Richard II* would have offended a sensibility like Sidney’s, since the play does not hold consistently to a “majestical” tone throughout; though it does not mix “kings and clowns,” it does contain a squabble in an aristocratic household and a king who sometimes behaves like a jester. As I will argue later in this chapter, the play’s abrupt shifts in generic references, from the satirical to the tragic, can

19 Indeed, in reading *Richard II* as either a tragedy or a satire, critics seem anxious to control the unsettling dissonance of the play’s commingled generic perspectives. In contrast, I am in agreement with Bridget Escolme when she asserts that in the early modern period, dramatic emotional expressions were not necessarily intended to reach clear resolutions, but rather might be “excessive rather than purgative… releas[ing] the passions from the boundaries of the body… and into the world, to be caught, enjoyed, and continued rather than purged” and resolved (179).
provoke uneasy laughter. These emotional extremes are not unique to *Richard II*; as Matthew Steggle argues, early modern dramatists in general and Shakespeare in particular were preoccupied with the boundary between laughter and weeping and how it might be blurred (125). However, in *Richard II*, I suggest that the presence of both tragic and comic elements leads to a version of history which explores the challenge of historical interpretation, as Shakespeare chose to not to limit the generic references of *Richard II* to that of tragedy, but to highlight both the comic and tragic potential in historical events.

In what follows, I attempt to develop a somewhat fluid approach toward genre. Rather than trying to fit *Richard II* into a purely comic or tragic genre, I will attend to how comic and tragic elements can work together synergistically. Indeed, Sidney’s desire for generic purity is all the more remarkable considering how often early modern playwrights and audiences diverged from it, finding instead that ‘mongrel tragi-comedy’ created fascinating drama. As Andy Kesson points out, “the didactic drive” of Sidney’s writing makes it clear that his goal was to refine the rough-and-ready experimental generic practices of early modern playwrights like Shakespeare (217). Kesson further advocates a critical loosening of generic expectations so that we might more carefully observe and engage with “the early commercial theatre's much more evasive attitude toward genre” (223). The early modern period’s “evasive attitude toward genre” seems to have built upon dramaturgical practices of the medieval era, as suggested by Susan Cooper (46). Indeed, medieval cycle plays differed significantly from Classical drama in their mixture of high drama with low comedy, with some sacred plays introducing comic subplots (Cooper 51; Snyder 88). Plays which presented such startling transitions from rustic comedy to solemnly sacred material became popular, and these rapid affective shifts were something which audiences
apparently acquired a taste for. In the early modern period, transitions in passions were prized: these quick shifts in emotion were anticipated by audiences, studied by actors, and structured by playwrights (Palfrey and Stern 315-6). As will be seen, some critics negatively assess Richard II in general and the character of Richard in particular for such abrupt affective shifts; when they do so, they are actually critiquing a central element of early modern theater.

Indeed, the many elegiac expressions of Richard II cause some critics assert that Richard II is utterly devoid of comedy, as does Geoffrey Bullough in his magisterial introduction to the sources of the play (381). However, when Bullough writes that Richard II “lacks comedy” (381), Bullough may be describing his own affective experience of reading the play. And I believe that in solitary reading, Bullough and many others do indeed read the play without amusement, though with a rich awareness of the literary allusions and prosodic elements of the play. Nonetheless, I suggest that comedic elements, especially those which surprise and/or evoke laughter, often work more effectively in the social setting of live performance. To explore this more fully, I turn to a filmed live performance of Richard II. While filmed performance certainly cannot capture the complex embodied and social experience of attending a play in person, I will argue that observations from a filmed live performance can allow us to return to reading the playtext with deeper insights into the synergistic relationship between comic elements and tragic elements Richard II. Of particular significance are scenes 5.2 and 5.3, some of the most controversial scenes of the play, in which a farcical domestic squabble seems to invade the play’s high tragedy.

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20 The term ‘transition’ emerged in the Restoration Period, but early modern documents preserve the accolades awarded to actors and playwrights who managed to portray a series of transitions, i.e. “snappy and seemingly spontaneous change[s] from one passion to another” (Palfrey and Stern 312).
Comedy emerging from Tragedy: domestic and political clashes in 5.2 and 5.3

As noted by Jeremy Lopez, Richard II is performed less often than other of Shakespeare’s works, as its relatively subdued action, intricate rhetoric, and historical subject matter pose challenges for modern audiences (6). Because I believe that the working of the play’s peculiarly mixed affect can become clearer in viewing a filmed live performance than it does in reading the play, I am going to offer a close reading of the Royal Shakespeare Company’s 2013 filmed live performance of Richard II, considering actors’ delivery of lines, actors’ body language and interaction, also the audience’s responses. This filmed performance also includes commentary from director Gregory Doran and producer John Wyver, who offer valuable insights into the startling humor of the play. To explain the many moments of audience laughter in the production, Doran explains that during rehearsals, he asks actors to watch for potentially humorous moments, positing that “Shakespeare knows that comedy is very close to tragedy, that one supports the other.” Doran and Wyver further note that tragedies translate to film better than comedies, suggesting that the immediate social aspects of humor may not translate as well in film as they do in live performance. They hint that the social and contagious nature of laughter is a significant factor here—it is rare to laugh aloud while watching a film or reading in solitude, but for playgoers, the elements of surprise from actors’ interpretations of lines and their onstage interactions make for a more social and embodied experience. Indeed, Doran and Wyver’s observations seem to support Allison P. Hobgood’s contention that the shared physical and social space of the theatre was an important aspect of the early modern playgoing; Hobgood describes this shared space as contributing to a collaborative dynamic between performers and audience members (2). To put it another way, the immediacy and
intimacy of early modern theater created a dramatic space in which audiences were eager to be startled, amazed, and entertained, and this expectation allowed performers to fulfill this desire and surprise their audiences, for example, by evoking an improvisational quality in their delivery which heightened moments of unexpected humor.

In this spirit, then, I will attend to interactions between performers and audience responses in the 2013 filmed performance of Richard II, to see how a live performance can help to create a deeper understanding of the play’s peculiarly mixed affect. Live performance is a complex phenomenon, but the following elements are particularly helpful in illuminating how the emotional extremes of the play can work synergistically: audience reactions (especially laughter); the reactions of characters onstage (which can show how diversely characters interpret and respond to lines, thus creating a more dissonant range of affective responses for audiences to observe and respond to); and actors’ delivery of transitions (which often have humorous or surprising interpretations that readers might not imagine from reading the text). But although it is necessary to focus on some of these key aspects, it is worth bearing in mind, as Brian Walsh reminds us, Shakespeare’s original audiences usually attended plays without having first the play, which meant that the overwhelming cognitive and emotional effects of live performance

21 Furthermore, Hobgood draws upon the contagion model of the passions in early modern culture, asserting that the early modern theater involved “a dangerously vibrant affective interplay between the theatergoers and the English Renaissance stage” (2). Such emotional contagion was understood to work both ways, so that rather than passively receiving actors’ emotions, the audience was engaged in “an emotional collaboration and reciprocity” with the actors (Hobgood 2).

22 Indeed, as Brian Walsh suggests, while introverted reading practices certainly aid the “teaching and producing of critical comment on dramatic texts,” much might be learned from considering Richard II’s complex impact on “audiences in ‘real time’” (197). Walsh further argues that Richard II is a ‘discomfortable’ play, and “that part of its peculiar power may derive from its ability to unsettle, on a very basic level, the minds and bodies of its audience” (197).
could be considered part of the pleasure of playgoing (184). Furthermore, I suggest that Richard II’s deluge of jarringly juxtaposed affective and cognitive perspectives make it difficult to sustain a pure generic interpretation of the play (both for early modern playgoers and today’s playgoers, many of whom might attend a play without reading it first), as the play’s central tragic trajectory is so often undermined by startling instances of humor. I suggest that the immediacy of performance is crucial to the synergistic relationship between tragedy and comedy in Richard II. In live performance, we do not simply read and interpret characters’ printed lines, but visually and sonically witness characters in their terror and guilt. The physical presence, interaction, and body language of actors make the wrenching effects of impending tragedy become more intimate and palpable even as such tragic moments contrast with humorous moments. In this way, I suggest, the embodied presences of actors create sympathetic appeals which are piercingly dissonant with the amusement we might feel at the farcical extremes provoked by these characters’ desperation.

To examine the synergistic relationship between comic elements and tragic elements in Richard II, I will now examine scenes 5.2 and 5.3 in performance. Certainly, the comic elements of 5.2 can be especially jarring, because the scene immediately follows the tragic parting of Richard and his Queen in scene 5.1. In scene 5.2, the play shifts away from the central characters (Richard and Bolingbroke) to focus on their cousin Aumerle, who has joined a conspiracy to assassinate Bolingbroke return Richard to the throne. Alongside the gravity of political intrigue, these scenes include elements of domestic comedy as the Duke and Duchess of York bicker over the fate of their son, Aumerle. As Margaret Shrewing has suggested, because of Richard II’s reputation as a tragic history, these scenes have often been cut from performances, both to create
a more sustained elegiac tone to the play and also to preserve the dignity of the Duke of York (117-20). Lopez also posits that these scenes might have so often been cut because of Richard II’s reputation as an essentially tragic play, a reputation which scenes 5.3 and 5.3 undermined “with their farcical sequence of entrances, ostentatious rhyming, and multiple kneeling supplicants” (30-1). Yet, as I am suggesting, these scenes can combine pathos with their absurdity. It is difficult to pinpoint what precisely is most significant in achieving this effect, but in live performance the physical presence of actors and their heartfelt delivery grounds their lines and actions in their earnest intentions, which encourages us to sympathize with their desperation even as we laugh at their outrageous behavior. Thus, in live performance, these scenes can establish heartbreaking pathos amidst the absurdity which undercuts the seeming quaintness of their lines on the page.

In the Royal Shakespeare Company’s production, scene 5.2 presents a fascinating emergence of domestic comedy from looming potential tragedy. Upon discovering Aumerle’s involvement in a plot to assassinate Bolingbroke, the Duke of York (played by Oliver Ford Davies) swears that he will “appeach the villain” (5.2.79) by reporting Aumerle to Bolingbroke. York’s roaring rage is not answered by Aumerle (played by Oliver Rix), whose speech and body language are restrained, as he is seemingly torn between fear for his life and a bitter indifference to his fate. However, the Duchess of York (played by Marty Cruikshank) adamantly insists that her husband’s first duty should be to protect their son (5.2.103). For readers like Halverson and directors who cut 5.2 in order to purify the elegiac lyricism of Richard II, this scene might seem merely farcical on the page. However, in the RSC’s performance, the intensity with which the
Duke and Duchess skirmish over their son’s fate highlights the desperate fervor which propels their bickering. For example, the following lines read simply enough:

Duchess: Hence, villain, never more come in my sight.
York: Give me my boots, I say. (5.2.86-7)

One gets the general idea of the Duchess’s rage at her husband and York’s dogged pursuit of justice, down to the homeliest detail, as he attempts to leave his home and ride to London in order to prove himself a loyal subject by reporting Aumerle’s treachery to Bolingbroke’s new regime. But in the Royal Shakespeare Company’s performance, the Duke of York is at once intimidating and comical as he chases his duchess around the stage: she refuses to give him his boots. While providing much-needed comic relief (and an entertaining look at the domestic life of a noble family), this domestic comedy in no way detracts from the pathos of this scene, where York roars threats against Aumerle while the Duchess pleads for York to “be more pitiful” (5.2.103). Indeed, by creating a vocal and mature Duchess of York, it seems that Shakespeare was interested in creating historical drama which stages the discordant clashes between familial and political loyalty, dramatizing the absurd extremes of speech and behavior which could spring from the midst of cutthroat politics.

Throughout the RSC’s filmed live performance, the onstage reactions of actors help to create comic moments that actually heighten the effect of the tragic moments of the play. Doran offers intriguing insights into audience engagement, commenting that alternating comic and

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23 As noted by Charles Forker, Shakespeare departed from historical sources by creating a Duchess who is Aumerle’s birthmother rather than his “much younger stepmother” (Richard II 441, note 109). Furthermore, while the Duchess is only briefly mentioned in historical chronicles, Shakespeare gives her an active role in resisting York’s determination to report Aumerle’s conspiracy against Bolingbroke (Forker Richard II 446, note 23-146; Zitner 179).
tragic elements work together to “emotionally engage” an audience. Doran focuses on emotions as a quality of movement rather than of stasis, somewhat analogous to the “transitions” of passions so relished by the early modern audiences, playwrights, and actors (Palfrey and Stern 315-6). While Doran describes the RSC’s production as intended to present Richard II “as a great lyric tragedy in its own right, rather than a prequel to Henry IV”, he does not perceive the humor of the play as being at odds with its tragedy: Doran’s concept of “emotional engagement” embraces movement from one emotional extreme to another. Indeed, Doran’s emphasis on how emotional shifts from amusement to compassion can support rather than erode one another resonates with historical phenomenological scholarship on early modern audiences. For example, Bridget Escolme argues that “the early modern theater is a place where audiences went to watch extremes of emotion and to consider when those extremes became excesses” (xvi). Not only were such emotional extremes an issue to judge appropriate expression of emotion, but also to savor such emotional excesses and to relish the transitions from one emotional extreme to another (Escolme xxv-xxvi; Palfrey and Stern 315-6; Hobgood 2). And so, in live performance, Richard II’s mingling of tragedy and comedy can offer playgoers a tumultuous journey through history in which meaning is not stable, but provocatively (and sometimes humorously) contested.

Indeed, the dissonant perceptions of characters can be a source of unsettling comic moments in Richard II. For example, in scene 5.3 of the Royal Shakespeare Company’s production, the Yorks arrive to argue their case before the newly crowned King Henry IV (previously Bolingbroke), who is played by Nigel Lindsay. The Duchess of York pleads for her son’s life to be spared, Aumerle begs to be spared the wrath of the new-made king, and York argues vehemently that his son should be executed. The Duchess of York is terrified of the
potential vengeance which Bolingbroke might wreak, yet also scathing toward her husband’s lack of compassion for their son. In piteously beseeching the new king for mercy, the Duchess makes a competition of her own and Aumerle’s request for pardon, pitting her and her son’s pleas against York’s demands for Aumerle’s execution; she insists that “Our prayers do outpray his” (5.3.108). Meanwhile, York’s vehement support of Bolingbroke seems to be charged with his guilt at having betrayed Richard, so that York’s growling insistence on Aumerle’s execution focuses on his personal suffering: “Thou kill’st me in his life” (5.3.71). The sharp contrast between impending tragedy of Aumerle’s potential execution (at his father’s insistence) occurs alongside the absurd scenario which unfolds as first the Duchess of York and then Aumerle kneel to beg the new king’s pardon. Finally, York himself kneels to Bolingbroke and argues against his wife and son’s pleas for mercy: “Against them both my true joints bended be” (5.3.97). In the RSC’s filmed performance, the kneeling trio of Yorks leads to uproarious audience laughter and a scattered round of applause. As he listens, Bolingbroke’s body language is stiff and reserved as he tries to maintain his fledgling kingly dignity in the face of this sincere yet outrageous scenario. When Bolingbroke finally relents, he makes with a veiled reference to his own sins in obtaining his crown: “I pardon him as God shall pardon me” (5.3.130). And so, absurd as scene 5.3 may be, it also foreshadows the dangerously entwined political and familial loyalties which will lead to the War of the Roses, when the descendants of York will battle against the descendants of Bolingbroke. As performed by the Royal Shakespeare Company, this scene resonates with absurd comedy which emerges from the perilous politics of the play.24

24 Indeed, Walsh reads 5.3 as furthering Richard II’s ‘discomfortable’ effect, because it gestures toward resolution via Bolingbroke’s pardon of Aumerle, and yet this pardon refers to Bolingbroke’s own guilt, which “creates more tension… articulat[ing] a new tension that must remain unrelieved” (193).
Rather than acknowledging the dissonant strains of tragedy and comedy which can be foregrounded in a live performance of scene 5.3, critics who read the scene as purely satirical tend to marginalize the impending tragedy of the scene. Halverson argues that scene 5.3 is “the climax of a series of scenes and speeches animated by the absurd and grotesque,” and that Richard II as a whole “lacks any pretensions to tragedy” (273, 268). Halverson thus seems to assume that tragic and comic elements must be at odds with one another. In reading the satirical moments of scene 5.3 as overriding any tragic appeal in Richard II as a whole, Halverson is perhaps describing his own experience of reading the play, in which he is only moved to scorn its characters. However, in viewing a performance of the play, such a polarized reading becomes more difficult to sustain, as the fervor and desperation which actors bring to their lines coincide with the farcical extremes of the scene. Indeed, I agree with Richard Meek when he argues that scenes 5.2 and 5.3 are part of Richard II’s “ambivalent concern with pity and compassion,” and that the play as a whole is structured to alternately create and repel sympathy with its characters (148). Moreover, I suggest that Richard II’s “ambivalent” sympathies are linked to 5.2 and 5.3’s mixed appeals to the scorn and sympathy of the audience, so that rather than settling into a purely satirical mode (which elicits our contempt) or a purely tragic mode (which moves us to compassion), the play encourages a movement between these clashing perspectives. In doing so, Richard II foregrounds the problem of choosing which historical figures to sympathize with, so that the play’s commingling of tragic moments with comic ones dramatizes the greater challenge of how to interpret history.
‘Radical Comedy’ in the Deposition

Another scene in which uneasy comedy mingles with tragedy in the Royal Shakespeare Company’s 2013 production of Richard II is 4.1, the deposition scene. Act Four opens with Bolingbroke holding court amongst the nobles, some of whom have supported his political coup, and some of whom were (and still are) loyal to Richard. After receiving permission from the Duke of York to become King, Bolingbroke is accused of treason by the Bishop of Carlisle (4.1.121-131). Northumberland counters this accusation by arresting the Bishop for treason (4.1.150-152), but Bolingbroke, conscious of the many eyes and ears attending to him, proposes that Richard (David Tennant) be sent for, so “that in common view/ He may surrender; so we shall proceed/ Without suspicion” (4.1.155-157). Once Richard appears, he voices a range of peculiar comic perspectives which arise from the scene’s political tension, linking it with what Rick Bowers terms “radical comedy,” a form of comedy which emerged in the early modern period. In Bowers’ conception, “radical comedy” created a space in which “acceptable behaviors” could be undermined and challenged with “alternative behaviors, zany improbabilities, linguistic excesses, and performative outrages” (9). While Richard seemingly extemporizes his own deposition, he does indeed make extravagant speeches which seem to subvert the transfer of power which he is enacting.

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25 In the first three published quartos of Richard II, scene 4.1 is much shorter and does not include Richard’s self-styled deposition. (In fact, Richard does not appear at all.) The full deposition scene was first printed in 1608, with scene 4.1 being expanded from 154 lines to 318 lines (Syme 236-7). As Holger Schott Syme writes, “No one knows why these lines are missing from the first three quartos, just as no one knows how and why they were inserted in 1608. They might have been cut from the text when it was first published in 1597; they might have been cancelled when the script was originally submitted to the Master of the Revels, probably sometime around 1595” (236-7). While the early modern performance history of 4.1 is unclear, the full deposition scene is often a highlight of modern performances.
In the Royal Shakespeare Company’s filmed performance, the dissonance between Richard’s extraverted theatricality and introverted exploration of his shifting political and personal identity are brought to the fore as onstage actors subtly react to Richard’s unpredictable speeches. The guarded hesitancy of the watching nobles and the stiff, awkward body language of Bolingbroke make it clear that they are deeply discomfited by Richard’s extravagant emotional responses to and cognitive reappraisals of his deposition. This sometimes leads to moments of disconcerting comedy, as when Richard (played by David Tennant) requests and receives the crown to give to Bolingbroke: “Here cousin, seize the crown. Here, cousin” (4.1.181). In performance, Richard waits for a long moment after inviting Bolingbroke to “seize the crown.” During this time, Bolingbroke starts to rise, then stubbornly sits back upon the throne, as if refusing to acknowledge Richard’s assertion of authority. At last, Richard breaks the silence by calling, “Here, cousin” in a light and playful tone, as if calling a dog. At this point, Bolingbroke finally does reluctantly rise and grasp the crown. This staging emphasizes the necessity of Bolingbroke’s obedient participation in Richard’s staging of his deposition, and also elicits a trickle of laughter from the audience at the absurdity of this momentary reversal of power. Yet the firm bearing of both Richard and Bolingbroke anchor this scene in its precariously improvised ritual of decoronation. This is not the only surprising gesture toward comedy in 4.1. Throughout the scene, the unpredictable intellectual and affective shifts (i.e., transitions) of Richard’s part play in counterpoint to the formality and restraint which all the other characters exhibit, and the tension of this contrast sometimes leads to startling moments of humor.
Indeed, the numerous and bewildering interpretations expressed in Richard’s transitions are crucial to the edgy comedy of this scene, transitions being “the particular moments when... emotions yielded to other emotions” (Palfrey and Stern 315). These transitions make Richard’s speeches challenging to interpret, as their rapid alterations in subject, cadence, and tone apparently depict a character that is undergoing tumultuous upheavals in emotion. Palfrey and Stern have created a purely textual transition-based reading of Richard II. However, in close reading a filmed live performance, I hope to demonstrate how performance can expand our sense of the possibilities which transitions offer not only for the actor interpreting the part, but also in the actors who react to these abrupt affective shifts. Another opportunity of viewing a filmed live performance is that of listening for diverse ways in which transitions can be enacted. Whereas reading a play makes a speech seem to be a seamless whole, live performance can feature expansive pauses between individual words or phrases which allow a listening audience to experience the gaps between words as a character experiences and struggles to articulate a tumultuous upheaval in emotion. In what follows, I offer a reading of one significant moment which to suggest how transitions might contribute to the synergistic effect of the deposition scene’s ‘mongrel tragi-comedy.’ To compare this reading with the previous section of this

26 Martha A. Kurtz argues that laughter in Richard II has a definite political function, being directed at Richard as he loses power and becomes a figure of mockery (589-90). However, in reading Richard’s behavior as “embarrassingly maudlin” (590), Kurtz seems to neglect the penetrating (if peculiar) intellectual engagement which appears in Richard’s part, which I argue is a significant part of the play’s comedy. In scene 4.1, humor is not always directed at Richard; he also uses humor to critique his political opponents.

27 Palfrey and Stern’s reading discusses how the development of Richard’s character is reflecting by the evolution of the transitions in his part over the course of the play. In Acts One and Two, Richard’s midline-shifts (a transition which occurs in the middle of a line, rather than between lines) are directed toward other characters in command or caprice, but as Richard loses power, his midline shifts become more introverted, conflicted, and contradictory (Palfrey and Stern 357-379).
chapter, scenes 5.2 and 5.3 offer dissonant perspectives which lead to unsettling shifts from tragedy to comedy, but these perspectives are distributed across different characters. By contrast, in scene 4.1, Richard voices a range of contradictory perspectives, and in these contradictions, he seems to oscillate in his interpretation of his loss of power, perceiving it from tragic and comic perspectives. In all of these scenes, however, the contested significance of history is the driving tension which produces such dissonant interpretations and opens the potential for moments of comedy.

In the Royal Shakespeare Company’s 2013 filmed live performance, transitions can emerge from powerful silences rather than lying smoothly on the page. Cast as Richard, Tennant makes vivid use of the transitions in Richard’s part, sometimes using dynamic pauses which heighten the tension of the scene and can make transitions all the more comic or surprising when they do emerge. For example, upon being asked whether he is “contented to resign the crown” (4.1.200), Richard seems to be publically debating this decision with himself: “Ay, no; no, ay; for I must nothing be” (4.1.201). This line can be quickly read, yet in performance, Richard delivers this line with agonizing pauses. The first “Ay” emerges as a resigned acquiescence after careful consideration, but Richard immediately and instinctively contradicts his acquiescence with “no.” Richard then backs away from Bolingbroke, seeming almost childish as he shakes his head and quietly repeats “no.” But then, seemingly on a despairing whim, Richard holds out the crown to Bolingbroke and sadly nods and says: “ay.” At this point, a scattering of audience

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28 Observing transitions as interpreted by an actor in live performance is quite different from reading the play. In reading, the precise emotions of a transition in a given speech are often not clearly indicated, and so readers can slow their reading of mercurial speeches to consider a range of possible interpretations. However, I think that a cyclical practice of viewing and reading the play can create a deeper awareness as to how transitions which move from a tragic to a comic register can work synergistically.
laughter indicates that a comic spark has emerged from the sharp transitions of Richard’s conflicted decision, which are at once weighty and whimsical. The charged silences which Tennant includes in his performance of Richard allow time for the audience to guess at what is going on in Richard’s mind, to observe the studious restraint of the crowd of nobles observing their former king, and perhaps to laugh at the extreme contradictions which Richard is articulating.

So in this way, observing mercurial emotions in live performance can help us to return to the printed speech with a sense of greater possibilities: for example, to invite longer pauses between individual words, and also to contemplate not only the figure of Richard who is speaking these lines, but also to the nobles who are listening to him. Both of these elements are significant to the strange blend of comic and tragic moments in this scene, as Richard transitions between bitter moments of sarcasm (a satirical impulse directed Bolingbroke and the watching nobles), to moments of plummeting despair (which sometimes seem to be purely meditative and other times seem to be calculated to shame those who observe his deposition), to moments of teasing whimsy (when it is not clear if Richard is intentionally mocking his political situation or discovering this comic potential for himself). Indeed, Rick Bowers makes a useful distinction between the social orientation of comedy and tragedy: “The tragic hero turns ever inward at the unfathomable differences of other people to grapple with the overwhelming question: ‘Who am I?’ More socially involved and messily uncertain, the comic hero looks outward at the unfathomable differences of other people and asks critically: ‘Who are you?’” (8). In the deposition scene, Richard paradoxically makes both of these turns by alternating introspective moments of confusion, anguish and eccentricity with extraverted moments of resentment, irony,
and accusation toward the nobles who witness his deposition. In live performance, the audience is included in this exchange, participating both in the unsettled and uncertain responses of the listening nobles onstage, and also in Richard’s wrenching transitions from pathos to sarcasm to whimsy as his perspective shifts in the attempt to discover and perform his deposed self.

**Conclusion**

As I hope I have demonstrated in this chapter, *Richard II* presents a version of history in which surprising moments of comedy can emerge from the play’s central tragic trajectory. By including these mercurial shifts in emotions, Shakespeare creates a play which foregrounds the challenges of interpreting history. Tragedy is not enough, it would appear, to dramatize the downfall of a king, because the play also includes recurring references to satirical, whimsical, and other surprisingly comic perspectives of history. Some of these comic moments appear in characters like the Yorks, who are driven to farcical extremes by the desperation of a looming tragedy, and other comic moments appear in the character of Richard, who is so devastated by his loss in fortune that he is driven to explore a range of interpretations of his circumstances; these appear in the are perplexing, contradictory, and sometimes humorous transitions in Richard’s part. By including these conflicting generic references, *Richard II* dramatizes not only historical events, but also the challenge of interpreting such events, suggesting that history holds both tragic and comic potential. Furthermore, the experience of listening to and interpreting the play’s emotional transitions can be heightened by live performance, and the filming of such live performances may help scholars to recover a glimpse of the surprise and dynamic engagement of

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29 The interactive model of theatrical casts and audiences which I am describing here is indebted to Allison P. Hobgood’s conception of the early modern theater as being shaped by dynamic “emotional collaboration[s] between the world and the stage” (2). Based on my own theatrical experiences (in the audience and onstage), I suggest that such reciprocity is not limited to early modern drama; this collaborative dynamic can also emerge in performances today.
playgoing which Shakespeare’s original audiences may have enjoyed. I hope I have presented a reading of Richard II which highlights how early modern notions of genre, affect and playgoing can offer contemporary readers and playgoers a vivid experience of history which emphasizes the many perspectives embedded within history, presenting a version of history whose meaning shifts as it is told and retold from different generic perspectives.
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