

# The Politics of Meaning in *King Richard II*

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Miki Nakamura

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The opening scene of the play tells us that the unity of the kingdom is already lost. Two nobles, Bolingbroke and Mowbray, accuse each other of treason. They argue about the murder of the Duke of Gloucester. Bolingbroke asserts Mowbray's responsibility for it, while Mowbray maintains that he did not kill Gloucester. They interpret the matter differently and contend each other over the meaning of it, that is, the murderer of Gloucester. Here we are shown the conflict between contradictory interpretations which pervades the play. In the play the attempts to settle meaning are made repeatedly, but they end in failure; the struggle between various interpretations for meaning never stops. Moreover, this struggle gives rise to the political dissension and makes the kingdom unstable.

The competition for meaning, which is introduced into the kingdom by the murder of Gloucester, becomes intensified as Richard breaches the law of primogeniture by appropriating Gaunt's estates for the Irish wars. For the interpretative certainty in the kingdom is guaranteed by the inheritance system. Catherine Belsey gives a good account of this point:

[T]he names of England and Lancaster are linked as elements in a system of differences where meanings are interdependent. All names are authorised by inheritance. . . . The inscription of authority in a name is

reciprocal and differential, not individual, and it is specified by blood.  
(34)

Both the name of the king and that of Lancaster are given their meanings by the inheritance system. Therefore, as Belsey states, Richard cannot deny meaning to the names of his subjects (35). It is not the king's will but the law of succession which governs meanings in the kingdom. Richard's violation of the law inevitably leads to the nullification of the system which governs meanings. In consequence there emerges "a world of political struggle for possession of meaning, property, and sovereignty" (Belsey 38), and incompatible interpretations ensue. In the conflict of interpretative acts, it becomes impossible to judge these interpretations: we are no longer able to distinguish correct interpretation from the wrong one. Richard's kingdom thus reveals itself as "a world of uncertainties" (Belsey 32) where the basis for understanding is lost.

The nullification of the system which governs meanings and the concomitant interpretative struggles affect the denizens of the kingdom. They take various attitudes toward the situation. We can divide them into three groups. First, there is Bolingbroke who takes advantage of the present condition of the kingdom. He extends his power by imposing his own interpretation on others and forcing them to regard it as correct. Secondly, there are Gaunt and the Gardener who try to find out the basis on which their interpretations of the world will be constructed. Thirdly, there are York and Richard who cannot adapt themselves to a variety of interpretations. This failure brings them into the oscillation between mutually contradictory interpretations. The recurrent interpretative acts of the characters mentioned above attest the fact that the kingdom has lost the interpretative certainty.

Robert Ornstein states that Shakespeare sees Bolingbroke as a "man of

destiny," or, rather, as a man who gives himself to his destiny by refusing to think about the consequences of his acts (114). His comment seems to imply that Bolingbroke aptly yields himself to the situation in which he stands. What is important is that situation in which it is impossible to distinguish correct interpretation from the wrong one. It is this circumstance that enables Bolingbroke to impose his own interpretation on others who have no basis for the judgement. In the world of uncertainty the one who can successfully maintain that his interpretation is correct can seize the political power. Moreover, the one who has power can judge others' interpretations arbitrarily. As Belsey points out, the conflicts for meaning are also the conflicts for power (37).

Bolingbroke, returning from the banishment, begins to extend his power by imposing his interpretation on others. First, in act 2, scene 3, he says to York who rebukes him for the unlawful return: "As I was banish'd, I was banish'd Herford; / But as I come, I come for Lancaster" (112-13). Bolingbroke names his former self Herford and his present self Lancaster: or, to borrow Joseph A. Porter's phrase, "[Bolingbroke would] have Richard's sentence [of the banishment] apply to the-holder-of-the-title-'Herford' and not to the-holder-of-the-title-'Lancaster'" (18). Bolingbroke thus interprets his present self as Lancaster to justify his return. York, being unable to deny Bolingbroke's interpretation, finally goes over to Bolingbroke's side. Secondly, in the same scene Bolingbroke rejects Berkeley's interpretation of him:

*Berkeley.* My Lord of Herford, my message is to you.

*Bolingbroke.* My lord, my answer is—to Lancaster,

And I am come to seek that name in England,

And I must find that title in your tongue,

Before I make reply to aught you say.

*Berkeley.* Mistake me not, my lord, 'tis not my meaning  
 To race [sic] one title of your honour out.  
 To you, my lord, I come, what lord you will. . . .  
 (69-76)

Berkeley's interpretation, which names Bolingbroke Herford, is turned down by Bolingbroke who persists with the interpretation which names him Lancaster. Berkeley's final words, "what lord you will," indicate his forced willingness to submit to Bolingbroke's interpretative acts wholly.

The parallel between the interpretative struggle and the political struggle can be clarified by observing the scene of Bolingbroke's first encounter with Richard after his banishment. Richard, being deserted by his army, can nothing but speak ironically to Bolingbroke who has a substantial power :

*Bolingbroke.* My gracious lord, I come but for mine own.  
*Richard.* Your own is yours, and I am yours, and all.  
*Bolingbroke.* So far be mine, my most redoubted lord,  
 As my true service shall deserve your love.  
*Richard.* Well you deserve. They well deserve to have  
 That know the strong'st and surest way to get.  
 . . . . .  
 Set on towards London, cousin, is it so ?  
*Bolingbroke.* Yea, my good lord.  
*Richard.* Then I must not say no.  
 (3. 3. 196-209)

In his ironic answers Richard himself tries to expound Bolingbroke's interpretation which will be imposed on him. Bolingbroke's "mine own," according to Richard, means everything concerning Richard and his kingship. Moreover, Richard explains that Bolingbroke deserves what he wants since

he has the power Richard lacks. But, as the last two lines suggest, Richard cannot impose his own interpretation on Bolingbroke : he has to obey Bolingbroke's order. It is clear that Bolingbroke now holds the power that justifies his interpretation while Richard does not. Bolingbroke's superiority over Richard in the interpretative struggle corresponds to his superiority over Richard in the political struggle.

Bolingbroke, having ascended the throne, acquires the power that enables him to judge other interpretations arbitrarily. In his court it is dangerous to interpret the king's words. The case of Exton is a good example. In act 5, scene 4, Exton considers Bolingbroke's words with his servant :

*Exton.* Didst thou not mark the king, what words he spake ?  
 "Have I no friend will rid me of this living fear ?"  
 Was it not so ?

*Servant.* These were his very words.

*Exton.* "Have I no friend ?" quoth he. He spake it twice,  
 And urg'd it twice together, did he not ?

*Servant.* He did.

*Exton.* And, speaking it, he wistly look'd on me,  
 As who should say "I would thou wert the man  
 That would divorce this terror from my heart",  
 Meaning the king at Pomfret. (1-10)

Exton interprets the words "this living fear" in line 2 as Richard, and in consequence carries out the murder. His interpretation, however, is judged to be wrong by Bolingbroke ; the king gives him the order of exile instead of the reward. A question now arises : is Exton's interpretation really wrong ? Terence Hawkes and Kristian Smidt suggest that Bolingbroke's words have been misunderstood, that Exton interprets the King's words

wrongly, (Hawkes 100, Smidt 100), but rather their very acts of interpretation are wrong. For it is impossible for us to judge Exton's interpretation to be correct or wrong. If Exton did interpret the words differently and did not kill Richard, this interpretation also would be judged to be wrong by Bolingbroke. The king's judgement of interpretation remains arbitrary. The reticence of Exton's servant fully tells us the fact that it is perilous for the subjects to interpret the king's words.

Bolingbroke, though he can make use of the interpretative uncertainty, is simultaneously threatened by it. For the conflict of various interpretations makes his kingdom unstable like Richard's. This question will be discussed later.

Not only the mighty politician like Bolingbroke but those who live on the margin of the kingdom are faced with the interpretative uncertainty. Both Gaunt who belongs to the old generation and the Gardener who is an ordinary people have to cope with the world which is flooded with incompatible interpretations. And their opinions show that they construct their interpretations of the world with definite frameworks.

In act 1, scene 2, Gaunt considers the murder of his brother Gloucester. The Duchess of Gloucester maintains that he should revenge on the king who is said to have plotted it: "to safeguard thine own life, / The best way is to vengeance my Gloucester's death" (35-36). Although Gaunt also believes that Richard is responsible for the murder, he decides not to take revenge:

God's is the quarrel—for God's substitute,  
His deputy anointed in His sight,  
Hath caus'd his death; the which if wrongfully,  
Let heaven revenge, for I may never lift  
An angry arm against His minister. (37-41)

What the passage makes clear is that Gaunt considers the matter in terms of the divine right of the king. In other words he makes decision within the framework of the doctrine of divine right.

On the other hand, the Gardener tries to understand the confused situation in the kingdom with another framework. In act 3, scene 4, while ordering his servants to trim the garden, he refers to Richard's misgovernment :

O, what pity is it  
That he had not so trimm'd and dress'd his land  
As we this garden ! We at time of year  
Do wound the bark, the skin of our fruit-trees,  
Lest, being over-proud in sap and blood,  
With too much riches it confound itself ;  
Had he done so to great and growing men,  
They might have liv'd to bear, and he to taste  
Their fruits of duty. Superfluous branches  
We lop away, that bearing boughs may live ;  
Had he done so, himself had borne the crown,  
Which waste of idle hours hath quite thrown down.  
(55-66)

Concerning the Gardener, there are several interpretations of him. Let us take two examples. E. M. W. Tillyard, on the one hand, regards the scene of the gardeners as an elaborate political allegory, and states: "he [the Gardener] is himself, in his microcosmic garden, what neither Richard nor Bolingbroke separately is, the authentic gardener-king, no usurper, and the just represser of vices" (250-51). Maynard Mack, Jr., on the other hand, points out the limit of the Gardener's power: "the weakness of the Gardener's position is, of course, that his power survives *only* within the garden.

. . . Though his skill is not subjected to the Queen's curse ["Pray God the plants thou graft'st may never grow" (3. 4. 101)], it has no power over the political events that elicited the curse in the first place" (32). It is obvious that in the above passage the Gardener compares the ruling of the kingdom with his treatment of the garden. Through this comparison he tries to imagine an ideal order of the kingdom. The king can maintain such an order, according to the Gardener, by suppressing the ambitious men as the Gardener himself does "[c]ut off the heads of too fast growing sprays" (34). Thus the Gardener makes the garden he is supervising the basis on which his interpretation of the world is constructed.

Both Gaunt and the Gardener secure their stances in the world of uncertainty by interpreting the present state with definite frameworks of their own. As Alexander Leggatt points out, "we hear different voices trying to understand the world in different ways" (58).

If Gaunt and the Gardener can take up some framework with which they interpret the world, York cannot do so. As Lord Governor, York has to meet Bolingbroke's army which rebels against the king and he is forced to choose between Bolingbroke and Richard, or "between personal and family honor and political allegiance" (Quinn 176) :

Both are my kinsmen :

Th'one is my sovereign, whom both my oath  
And duty bids defend ; th'other again  
Is my kinsman, whom the king hath wrong'd,  
Whom conscience and my kindred bids to right.

.....

All is uneven,

And everything is left at six and seven. (2. 2. 111-21)



York considers what he has to do both in terms of his duty as a subject and in terms of his familial affection. If he takes up the former framework, he must repel Bolingbroke's army as the king's deputy; if the latter one, he has to support Bolingbroke. York, however, cannot choose both of them. Consequently he oscillates between these two frameworks, or between two interpretations.

It must be noted that York's irresolution results not only from his nature but from the present condition of the kingdom in which conflicting interpretations prevail. The last two lines in the above quotation explicitly convey the fact that the interpretative certainty is lost, "All is uneven," and that it is impossible to know which interpretation is correct as we cannot tell whether the spots of a dice are six or seven, "everything is left at six and seven." If we take this fact into account, York's behaviour in act 5, scene 3, in which he insistently asks the new king to execute Aumerle who has plotted the rebellion, can be seen from a different standpoint. York's obsessive devotion to Bolingbroke in the scene is generally regarded as farcial, but his unusual allegiance in fact derives from his hope that Bolingbroke's regime will give him a framework with which he can understand the world. York's desire to achieve the firm interpretative framework leads him even to demand his own son's death.

The comical aspect of York seems to have been overemphasized by critics. Stanley Wells, for example, says, "York is the nearest approach to a comic character in *Richard II*. He is potentially amusing because of his vacillations, his inability in the early part of the play to reconcile his disapproval of Richard's conduct with his respect for the office of king, his feeling of the injustice done to Bolingbroke with condemnation of the wrong he has committed in usurping the throne" (Introduction 32). We must not forget that York is one of the victims of the interpretative uncertainty.

As York is unable to cope with a variety of interpretations, so Richard

fails to adapt himself to it. Because of this failure, Richard is finally caught in the oscillation between contradictory interpretations.

Richard's violation of the law of succession, which nullifies the system which governs meanings, is also self-destructive. For, as York points out, Richard's kingship itself is sustained by that law : "For how art thou a king / But by fair sequence and succession ?" (2. 1. 198-99). Thus Richard breaks the very foundation of his kingship, and the kingship of Richard is put into question. Moreover, with Bolingbroke's extension of power, the desertion of his party, and the death of his favourites, Richard faces an imminent fall from the kingship. The crisis of his kingship is simultaneously the crisis of his identity, for it is that status in the kingdom which gives him identity. As Belsey states, "if he [Richard] is not king he has no identity at all" (36). Richard's interpretative acts, therefore, concern himself : how to understand Richard that is not king, and how to understand the meaning of himself ?

Since the foundation of his identity, the position as a king, begins to totter, Richard has to find another framework within which he can interpret and define himself. First, he attempts to interpret himself within the framework of "narcissistic narratives" (Eagleton 10). In act 3, scene 2, hearing that Bushy, Greene, and the Earl of Wiltshire are executed by Bolingbroke, Richard says :

For God's sake let us sit upon the ground  
 And tell sad stories of the death of kings :  
 How some have been depos'd, some slain in war,  
 Some haunted by the ghosts they have deposed,  
 Some poisoned by their wives, some sleeping killed,  
 All murdered. . . . (155-60)

Here Richard tries to observe himself objectively within the story of the death of kings. Richard's interpretation of himself within the framework of narrative occurs again in the next scene. Richard asks Northumberland who comes from Bolingbroke as follows :

What must the king do now ? Must he submit ?  
 The king shall do it. Must he be depos'd ?  
 The king shall be contented. Must he lose  
 The name of king ? a God's name, let it go.  
 (3. 3. 143-46)

What has to be noticed here is that Richard, in referring to himself, uses "the king" and "he" instead of "I". This unusual use of words suggests that Richard sees his present self as if he were a character in a story of the unfortunate king.

Secondly, a looking-glass is employed by Richard with which he can look at and interpret himself. In a deposition scene, after commanding a mirror Richard says : "I'll read enough / When I do see the very book indeed / Where all my sins are writ, and that's myself" (4. 1. 273-75). By using the mirror Richard tries to read "the very book," his face in the mirror, and interpret the meaning of it, or the meaning of his present self.

In the interpretative acts mentioned above, however, Richard still relies on the former basis for the definition of himself : he cannot abandon a kingly framework. We see that Richard in these acts only repeats his past experiences as a king. First, in looking at himself in the mirror, Richard in fact reproduces a luxurious life in his court. As Gordon Kipling points out, Richard II was famous for "empty pomp and ceremonial posturing" (85). The act of staring at the mirror, it can be assumed, was one of Richard's ordinary activities. In addition, as Peter Ure suggests, one of the symbolical

connotations of the mirror is “vanity” (lxxxii). Richard is still full of vanity. Secondly, Richard’s interpretation of himself within a story of the unfortunate king begins to take on a different aspect as we read the passage which follows the lines quoted above :

I’ll give my jewels for a set of beads ;  
 My gorgeous palace for a hermitage ;  
 My gay apparel for an almsman’s gown ;  
 My figur’d goblets for a dish of wood ;  
 My sceptre for a palmer’s walking staff ; (3. 3. 147-151)

In relinquishing the several attributes of the king, Richard parodies the coronation ceremony. To put it another, the coronation ceremony is enacted again in an inverted way by Richard. Thus Richard in his interpretative acts only repeats his past experiences as a king.

Moreover, “sad stories of the death of kings” (3. 2. 156) within which Richard tries to interpret himself tell us that Richard will repeat the fates of former kings. That stories reveal the fact that the murder of the king has been repeated so far. Richard’s forthcoming death, therefore, is “the common lot of kings” (Folland 392). Richard’s death will also be incorporated into the sequence of the deaths of kings : it will be one element of the repetitive sequence. Richard, though trying to obtain another framework to understand himself, cannot get away from a kingly framework.

Richard’s pursuit of the meaning of himself finally reaches an impasse. He is caught in the oscillation between mutually exclusive interpretations. The decisive moment occurs in act 4, scene 1, where Richard is asked to abdicate :

.....*Bolingbroke.* Are you contented to resign the crown ? .....

*Richard.* Ay, no ; no, ay ; for I must nothing be.  
Therefore no “no”, for I resign to thee.  
(200-02)

Bolingbroke’s question can be paraphrased as follows : “Are you contented to be no king ?” This question impels Richard to confirm his sense of identity and to consider if he can understand the meaning of himself who is not king. As to Richard’s reply, “Ay, no ; no, ay,” critics’ opinions vary. Wells, for example, interprets the phrase as “[b]oth ‘Yes, no. No, yes’ and ‘I, no. No I’” (Commentary 243). On the other hand, Molly M. Mahood gives “I know no I” (87) as one of its meanings. The indeterminacy of the words indicates Richard’s failure to cope with a variety of interpretations. He is just hovering between conflicting interpretations, between “I am contented to be no king” and “I am not contented to be no king,” between “I am I” and “I am not I.” Richard is unable to choose between these contradictory interpretations. Thus Richard’s pursuit of the meaning of himself is frustrated.

Richard’s oscillation continues to the end. In the prison, playing “in one person many people” (5. 5. 31), he says :

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. But whate’er I be,  
Nor I, nor any man that but man is,  
With nothing shall be pleas’d, till he be eas’d  
With being nothing. (5. 5. 32-41)

Here Richard compares himself as a king with himself as a beggar. Richard, however, cannot settle himself down on either side : for neither the status as a king nor the status as a beggar gives him gratification. All Richard can do is to oscillate between them. It is only by “being nothing,” by losing his life, that Richard can extricate himself from the oscillation and be gratified.

The nullification of the system which governs meanings and the concomitant interpretative struggles, as we have seen, affect the denizens of the kingdom. As there emerge conflicting interpretations, it becomes impossible for them to judge which interpretation is correct. The impossibility of judgement is indicated by Bushy’s speech in act 2, scene 2, which refers to the perspective trick in painting. In order to console the Queen, Bushy says :

Each substance of a grief hath twenty shadows,  
Which shows like grief itself, but is not so.  
For sorrow’s eye, glazed with blinding tears,  
Divide one thing entire to many objects,  
Like perspectives, which, rightly gaz’d upon,  
Show nothing but confusion ; ey’d awry,  
Distinguish form. (14-20)

Both Ernest B. Gilman and Murray Roston analyse this passage by referring to Holbein’s *The Ambassadors*. Gilman’s whole argument is based on his conviction that the play must be regarded as a kind of perspective device. The painter’s perspective, he suggests, is used by Shakespeare as “a metaphor for the understanding” (90). Roston, on the other hand, treats the matter in terms of the history of art. He states: “Such plays [*King Richard II* and other dramas of this time] do not rely upon a mannerist dematerialization of this world, an assertion of the exclusive authenticity of the eternal

or spiritual vision, but rather on an essentially High Renaissance conception of the mutual interdependence of the celestial and the mundane, and of the equilibrium which must be preserved between the two" (256). The first thing to stress here is that Bushy evaluates two points of view in looking at the picture. For "rightly" in line 18 means "correctly" as well as "directly," and "awry" in line 19 means "wrongly" as well as "obliquely": to put it plainly, Bushy asserts that it is correct to look directly at the picture and that it is wrong to look obliquely at it. He maintains that to look directly is to interpret correctly and that to look obliquely is to interpret wrongly. However, as Gilman points out, if we are to look at an anamorphic image, it is wrong to look directly: the correct way is to look "awry" (89). In other words, if we are to see an anamorphic image, to look directly is to interpret wrongly and to look obliquely is to interpret correctly. Consequently a correct interpretation becomes a wrong interpretation and a wrong interpretation becomes a correct interpretation; the evaluations of two interpretations are reversed. Thus it is clear that it is impossible to decide which interpretation is absolutely correct. What follows then is "the ceaseless oscillation of irreconcilable perspectives" (Greenblatt 25) and, moreover, the conflict between incompatible interpretations.

We must now return to the main problem with which we started: the murder of the Duke of Gloucester. The problem, as the initial origin of the competition for meaning, haunts the play and in fact motivates it. In the play the attempts to solve the problem and to grasp its meaning, that is, the murderer of Gloucester, are made recurrently, but the acquisition of that meaning is to be deferred: only conflicting interpretations of the problem are left. Recurring interpretative acts concerning the murder of Gloucester representatively indicate the interpretative uncertainty in the kingdom.

Since Gloucester is dead and cannot speak for himself, he needs one who speaks on behalf of him. It is Bolingbroke who performs that part in the

first scene of the play :

Further I say, and further will maintain  
 Upon his bad life to make all this good,  
 That he did plot the Duke of Gloucester's death,  
 Suggest his soon-believing adversaries,  
 And consequently, like a traitor coward,  
 Sluic'd out his innocent soul through streams of blood,  
 Which blood, like sacrificing Abel's, cries  
 Even from the tongueless caverns of the earth  
 To me for justice and rough chastisement. (98-106)

Against this accusation, Mowbray in his turn maintains that he did not kill Gloucester. Richard, being unable to judge which interpretation, Bolingbroke's or Mowbray's, is correct, finally permits them to fight so that each opponent can prove that his interpretation is correct. If Bolingbroke wins, it is confirmed that his interpretation which regards Mowbray as the meaning, as the murderer of Gloucester, is correct ; on the contrary, if Mowbray wins, it is affirmed that Mowbray is really innocent. Their battle would determine which interpretation is correct and stop the oscillation between contradictory interpretations. In act 1, scene 3, however, Richard orders a cessation of combat by throwing his warder down. Accordingly, the conflict between their interpretations is left intact, and the settlement of the problem is postponed.

Richard's failure to judge two nobles' interpretations comes from the fact that he is said to have a share in plotting the murder of Gloucester. It is likely that no one but the king is the meaning of the problem. However, the play provides us with vague information about Richard's complicity in the murder except in Gaunt's conversation with the Duchess of Gloucester in act 1, scene 2. A. P. Rossiter supposes that Shakespeare carelessly



expects the audience's knowledge of the matter so that he gives an insufficient information (36).

The problem is argued again at Bolingbroke's court. In act 4, scene 1, several nobles offer contradictory interpretations of the murder of Gloucester as Bolingbroke and Mowbray did previously. As Stephen Booth points out, the first scene of the play is replayed here (89). On the one hand, Bagot, Fitzwater, Percy, and the nameless lord maintain that Aumerle is responsible for the murder. On the other hand, Aumerle and Surrey refute their argument. Thus, as we have mentioned before, Bolingbroke's regime suffers the interpretative uncertainty from its beginning. Moreover, the fact that there is a king's opponent, namely, Aumerle, and that there are opposed nobles, tell us that Bolingbroke's regime is very similar to Richard's; both regimes are unstable. To put it another way, Bolingbroke's regime repeats the instability of Richard's one. Bolingbroke, unable to judge which interpretation of the problem is correct, decides to repeal Mowbray in order to reconcile "these differences" (4. 1. 86), or the interpretative difference. However, Mowbray's death frustrates the king's attempt. The acquisition of the meaning of the problem is deferred again. The murderer of Gloucester remains unrevealed.

The play ends with the emergence of another problem: Richard's death as an origin of the Wars of the Roses. In act 5, scene 6, Exton brings Richard's coffin into the court:

Great king, within this coffin I present  
Thy buried fear. Herein all breathless lies  
The mightiest of thy greatest enemies,  
Richard of Burdeaux, by me hither brought. (30-33)

The word "breathless" in line 31 is important. According to Andrew Gurr,

“breath” means both words and air (77). Richard, being dead, loses his words and cannot speak any more. Therefore he needs one who speaks on behalf of him as Gloucester does. Those who perform that part will appear as traitors, as the two parts of *King Henry IV* indicate. Moreover, Richard’s death as an ambiguous problem will give rise to various interpretations and the political antagonism. The pursuit of the meaning of this problem will be repeated. As David Scott Kastan suggests, though Exton conceives of his own deed as an act of closure, though he buried Bolingbroke’s fear, the death of Richard II does not end much more than Richard’s life (49).

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## Synopsis

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By Miki Nakamura

This paper investigates *King Richard II* by considering the politics of meaning. In *King Richard II* the attempts to settle meaning are made repeatedly, but they end in failure ; the struggle between various interpretations for meaning never stops. Moreover, this struggle gives rise to the political dissension and makes the kingdom unstable.

The competition for meaning is introduced into the kingdom by the murder of the Duke of Gloucester. It becomes intensified as Richard breaches the law of primogeniture by appropriating Gaunt's estates, for it is that system which governs meanings in the kingdom. In consequence, as Catherine Belsey says, there emerges a world of political struggle for possession of meaning, property, and sovereignty, and incompatible interpretations ensue. In the conflict of interpretative acts, it becomes impossible to judge these interpretations : we are no longer able to distinguish correct interpretation from the wrong one.

The nullification of the system which governs meanings and the concomitant interpretative struggles affect the denizens of the kingdom. They take various attitudes toward the situation. We can divide them into three groups. First, there is Bolingbroke who takes advantage of the present condition of the kingdom. He extends his power by imposing his own interpretation on others and forcing them to regard it as correct. Secondly, there are Gaunt and the Gardener who try to find out the basis on which their interpretations of the world will be constructed. Thirdly, there are York and Richard who cannot adapt themselves to a variety of interpretations. This failure brings them into the oscillation between mutually contradictory interpretations.

In *King Richard II* the struggle between various interpretations for meaning, the struggle which is simultaneously political, never stops. The meaning of the

initial origin of the competition for meaning, that is, the murderer of Gloucester, remains unrevealed. Furthermore, as Richard's coffin is brought into the court in the last scene, it becomes clear that the pursuit of the meaning of the problem, the murder of Richard, will be repeated and that the interpretative, political, struggle for that meaning will continue.