

# “The Breath of Kings”

October 28, 2003

# A bit of royal dramatic criticism

- Elizabeth I to William Lambarde, guardian of the records of the Tower of London: “I am Richard II, know ye not that? He that will forget God will also forget his benefactors; this tragedy was played forty times in open streets and houses.”
- Treason Act of 1351 makes “compassing or imagining the death of the king, his queen, or his heir” a capital offense

# “I am Richard II”

- ... quoth Elizabeth I.
- -- As if, indeed, the Royal Person were immortal and had survived the years from 1400 to 1600 intact, and bearing the same grudges. Can every English ruler say “I am Richard II”?



# Two bodies

Blackstone: “the king never dies”

- The king’s natural body
- The king’s “body politic”



# The theory of persons

- Blackstone, 1778: “Persons are divided by the law into either natural persons, or artificial. Natural persons are such as the God of nature formed us: artificial are such as created and devised by human laws for the purposes of society and government; which are called corporations or bodies politic.”

# The king: an immortal person?

- Blackstone: “However the crown may be limited or transferred, it still retains its descendible quality, and becomes hereditary in the wearer of it: and hence in our laws the king is said never to die, in his political capacity; though, in common with other men, he is subject to mortality in his natural: because immediately upon the natural death of Henry, William, or Edward, the king survives in his successor.”
- -- In what does this second body consist? Where does the king keep his second body?

# “What is thy sentence then...

*Watch a king at work.*

- RICHARD. “Therefore we banish you”
- BULLINGBROOK. “Your will be done”
- RICHARD. “The hopeless word of never to return / Breathe I against thee”
- MOWBRAY. “A heavy sentence... And now my tongue’s use is to me no more...”

(I. 3. 139-162)

## ... but speechless death?”

- RICHARD. “Six frozen winters spent, / Return with welcome home from banishment.”
- BULLINGBROOK. “How long a time lies in one little word. / Four lagging winters and four wanton springs / End in a word, such is the breath of kings.”

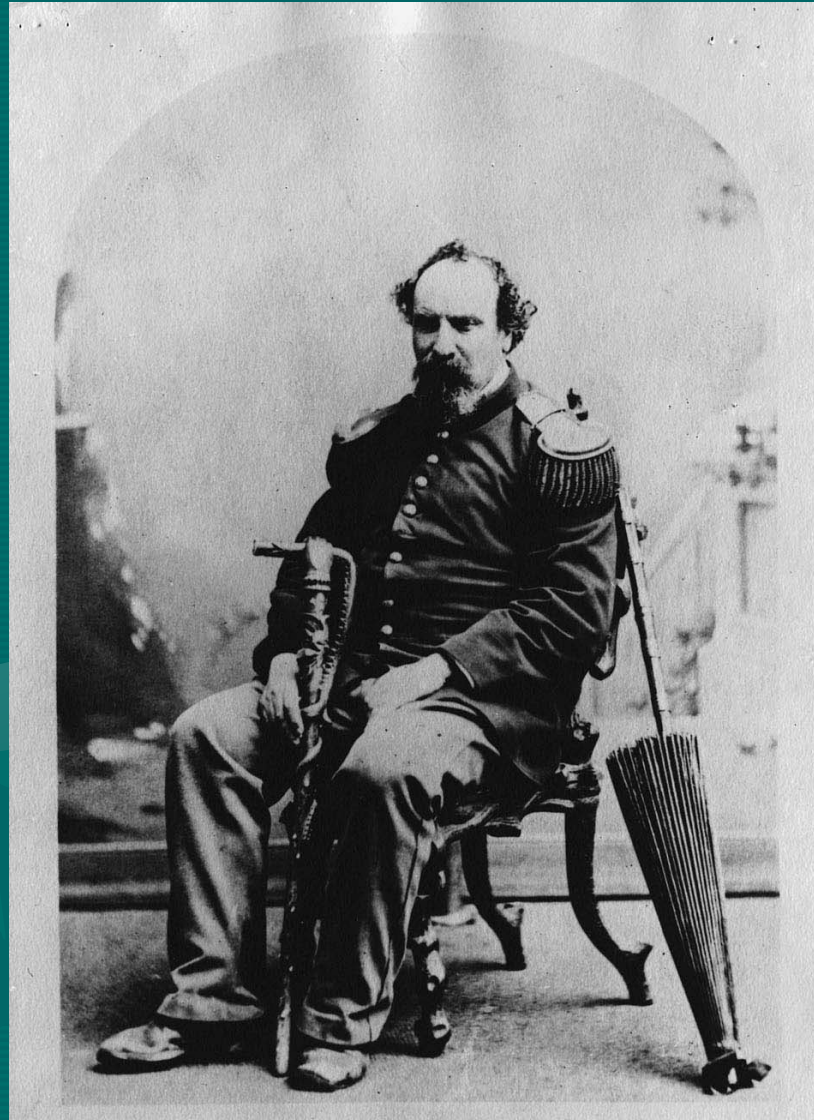
(I. 3. 210-214)



# Does thinking make it so?

- GAUNT. “Think not the king did banish thee, /  
But thou the king. ... Go, say I sent thee forth  
to purchase honor, / And not the king exiled  
thee... Suppose... thy steps no more / Than a  
delightful measure or a dance...”
- BULLINGBROOK. “Oh, who can hold a fire  
in his hand / By thinking on the frosty  
Caucasus? / Or cloy the hungry edge of appetite  
/ By bare imagination of a feast?” (I. 3. 277-94)

His Majesty Norton I, Emperor of America and Protector of Mexico.



# When words are utterly real

- John Austin, *How to Do Things With Words* (1962)
- “Speech acts” or “performative utterances”
- Not exactly true or false, but valid and invalid
- Conditions
- Chains of performatives



# Examples and limitations

- Promising, commanding, declaring (e.g., war), enfeoffing, sentencing, naming, crowning...
- Staged “performances” and imitations of speech acts
- Language and “power”: not either/or, but mutual entanglement and imbrication
- 2 languages, one “constative,” one “performative”? 2 bodies inherent in all of us?
- The Elizabethan sensitivity to words emerges from their sense of crisis in authoritative language

# Fair sequence and careless patients

- “Blank charters”
- “Inky blots and rotten parchment bonds”
- “Thy state of law is bondslave to the law”
- “Take Herford’s rights away and take from time / His charters and his customary rights. / Let not tomorrow then ensue today. / Be not thyself. For how art thou a king / But by fair sequence and succession?” (II. 1. 195-9)

# “The king is not himself”

- The king’s “body politic” is made up of speech acts
- Felicitous or infelicitous? Who decides?
- BULLINGBROOK.  
“All my treasury / Is yet but unfelt thanks” (II. 3. 60)



# What is a “body”?

- Criteria:
  - Agency
  - Autonomy
  - Relationships (to other bodies, to space, etc.)
  - Consequentialness
- *Richard II* anatomizes the king’s multiple body
- And according to Elizabeth I, it does something to it.



# Playing, acting, “compassing” -- doing

- *Richard II* anatomizes the king's multiple body
- And according to Elizabeth I, it threatens the coherence of that body's parts.

