Shakespeare’s *Richard II*: a gender approach

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Presentation overview

I/ Summary of the essay thesis

II/ Our response to the thesis: how does gender perception affect power relations?

III/ Brief performance criticism about representation of gender in *Richard II*
The Construction of a King: Waste, Effeminacy and Queerness in Shakespeare’s Richard II by Derrick Higginbotham

Higginbotham’s essay examines and exemplifies the complexities of Richard II’s eponymous character, King Richard, looking at the various lenses through which he can be scrutinised. In this presentation we will explore each of the three “templates” that Higginbotham has selected, that of waste, effeminacy and queerness, and in doing so emphasise the multi-faceted nature of the character.
1/ A wasteful king

- evolution of the definition of “waste”
- King’s own excessive self-interest
- incapacity to restraint desires
- this implies the King’s failure as a ruler
- use of the realm for his own interests
- importance of the role of the flatterers in corrupting Richard
2/ An effeminate king

- wasting → destabilises his position as a king → undermines his manhood → emasculates him
- reproductive potency: Bolingbroke VS Richard
- incapacity to refrain his desires implies no self-control proper to a man
- Richard’s downfall is linked to Christ’s suffering: self-victimisation restores his dignity and thus his masculinity
3/ A Queer King

- Theme of hunger
- Richard’s favourites interfere with his sexuality
- Violation of linear time (both reproductive and historical time) queers him
- Disorganisation of family structure
Femininity and the female in Richard II

- Throughout the play, we see King Richard II taking on a more feminine role, both in his actions themselves and in the way that he thinks of himself:

Dear earth, I do salute thee with my hand,

Though rebels wound thee with their horses' hoofs.

As a long-parted mother with her child

Plays fondly with her tears and smiles in meeting,

So weeping, smiling, greet I thee, my earth,

And do thee favours with my royal hands. (3.2.2)

- Richard characterises himself with a mother figure: demonstrating more feminine side.

- The fact that Bollingbroke makes a similar analogy but the other way round shows the difference between the two characters. How does Richard’s femininity affect our perception of his character?
Significance of few female characters

- Only five female characters, two of whom Isabel’s ladies, who speak precious few lines. Isabel is granted one hundred and twenty eight lines and only appears in three scenes only. Why is this?
- Richard as the femininity to Henry’s masculinity: polar opposites.
- Gender dynamics in the play: women of Richard II tend to be associated with family, have no political agency. Not objects of sexual desire at all. Put bonds of kinship over everything else.
- What could be the significance of Deborah Warner’s decision to cast a woman in the role of king Richard in her production? (later part of presentation) the character is written as a somewhat feminine one. How does this change your viewing of the character?
- With regards to bodily physicality of the king, we will look now at Ernst Kantorowicz’s work ‘The King’s Two Bodies.’
Ernst Kantorowicz: The King’s Two Bodies

- Main idea: the body politic versus the body natural.
- The king is a mere mortal; cannot be anything other than or greater than a person, yet his impact transcends his body.
- Body politic supposedly more “ample and large” than the Body natural.
- Symbolism of “the king is dead, long live the king”: never a time without a king.
- Difficult to defend the perfect union of the king’s two bodies while at the same time recognising the very distinct capacities of each body alone.
- Not separate, but united as one Body.
Scenic interpretations of gender in Richard II: a brief performance criticism

Gregory Doran, 2013
Deborah Warner, 1995
Ariane Mnouchkine, 1982
Trevor Nunn, 2005
- effeminacy of David Tennant
- duality between Bolingbroke and Richard II (black VS white),
- Bolingbroke’s body language very masculine
Deborah Warner, 1995

Richard II trailer

- a woman casted to play Richard II
- however effeminacy is not the main feature of the interpretation
- thus a new vision about Richard/Henry homosexual tension
- Fiona Shaw being a woman already gives a part of feminity to the character; she does not need to add any feminine feature
Ariane Mnouchkine: Festival d’Avignon, 1982

- Richard II in Japan
- importance of body and movements
- homosexuality is not a major theme but perversion is very important
- Richard-Bolingbroke’s relationship is ambiguous and impossible because based on power and love
- no particular attention given to homosexuality and gender in this interpretation
- modern costumes make think about today politics
Critical questions

1. Throughout the play and particularly in the initial few acts, King Richard II displays numerous feminine qualities. Do you therefore consider the lack of prominent female characters to be notable or even ironic in such a play?

2. Based on Kantorowicz’s concept of the King’s two bodies, is Richard II prevented from being a truly good king due to his weakness, or are the two qualities not mutually exclusive?
Works cited

“The Construction of a King: Waste, Effeminacy and Queerness in Shakespeare’s Richard II” by Derrick Higginbotham

“The King’s two Bodies” by Ernst Kantorowicz

Shakespeare, William. King Richard II.