

Deconstructing Identity in Shakespeare's Richard II

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Abstract

This paper examines the traditional and materialist conceptions of subjectivity, as portrayed in Shakespeare's *Richard II*. The traditional view theorizes a human subject with a unified, coherent, and unchanging core, independent of its historical and social contexts, and characterized by self-determination. In contrast, materialist thought, as articulated by thinkers like Dollimore, rejects the notion of a fixed, essential self and emphasizes the constructed and contingent nature of identity. This perspective views identity as shaped by social, political, and ideological forces, and as inherently fluid and other-determined. The paper applies this theoretical framework to the character of Richard, who embodies the traditional view of a divinely ordained, autonomous king. Richard's inability to recognize the constructed nature of his identity leads to his political downfall and personal disintegration. Conversely, Bolingbroke, who succeeds Richard, demonstrates a keen awareness of the contingent and relational aspects of identity and emphasizes the importance of social and political legitimation. The examination of *Richard II* highlights the shift from a medieval, essentialist understanding of identity to a Renaissance, materialist one, underscoring the political and ideological implications of these differing conceptions of the self.

Keywords: Greenblatt, Identity, *Richard II*, Shakespeare

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1. Introduction

The conventional perspective on subjectivity views a human subject as having a unified, coherent, and unchanging essence that exists independently of its historical circumstances. This essence, in other words, transcends and remains untouched by the particular social and political contexts and relational networks in which the subject exists. Indeed, the traditional perspective, by positioning the human essence above and beyond the specificities of time and place, grants the individual a stable and autonomous identity, primarily defined by self-determination. This conventional view of the self rests on, and promulgates, the concept of “bounded being,” which points to a mode of being that isolates individuals from each other, denying the need for relationship “as the hub of human life [and] action” (Sharma, 2023, p. 111). Gergen (2009) calls this view an “ideology” that encourages individuals to view themselves as “uncaused causes,” as the source of others’ conduct and actions, but not as influenced by others (p. 51). In other words, within the framework of traditionalist thought, the individual is both autonomous and self-determined. Wilson (1995) argues that in “traditional approaches,” the concept of a fixed, unchanging subject is essential because it is such a subject that can provide continuity in history, which is vital for these “traditional approaches.” Nevertheless, this concept of subjectivity, often termed liberal humanism or essentialist humanism with its “rigid confines of fixed categories of identity” (Burns, 2024, p.2), faces challenges from materialist thought and its interpretation of the self. In stark contrast to traditional theories that “understand selves as primarily independent and self-sufficient” (Parks & Howard, 2021, p. 590), materialist theory explicitly contests the notion of a fixed, unchanging core within humans, the idea of identity as natural and pure, and the autonomy and self-determination of the subject.

Dollimore (2011), viewing the traditional theory as “idealist,” presents his materialist system, which unequivocally rejects the notion that human identity is “essentially or ultimately coherent and unified” (p. 84). It emphatically rejects humanist assertions about the existence of an intrinsic human core, considering it a myth. Davies (1997) similarly presents a vehement challenge to the traditional idealist/humanist thought, arguing that what we might call “the myth of essential and universal Man” (p. 24) is fundamentally flawed. Davies’ critique ultimately reveals a profound truth: “the self is a vacancy” (p. 60). The myth Davies refers to

is easily exploited to further ideological agendas. In *Radical Tragedy*, Dollimore critiques the idealist concept of identity and individuality, examining the works of Shakespeare and his contemporaries through a materialist lens. He labels the idealist perspective on the individual as “essentialist humanism.” This is termed essentialist because it asserts an “essence” for man; that is, “an unalterable essence which is what makes ‘him’ human,” and “which is the source and essential determinant of ‘his’ culture” (p. 250). A key point to emphasize is that this view of humanity is promoted and upheld because it can be readily and effectively used for ideological purposes. In a similar vein, Belsey, in *The Subject of Tragedy*, critiques the emphasis on the concept of an underlying core within idealist theory, referring to it as “interiority,” which she defines as “the inalienable and unalterable property of the individual” (p. 34), and characterizes it as a product of “liberal humanism.” Both Dollimore and Belsey aim to illustrate that this core, along with the notions of “essence” or “interiority,” is merely a myth; they also seek to uncover how this myth is created and sustained within specific social systems and “in the interest of specific power-relations” (Belsey, 1985, p. 223).

Materialist thought does not stop here and proceeds to propose and expand its alternative view. After criticizing and negating the idea of an unchanging “essence,” it argues that identity is not given or natural; rather, it is constructed; it is not a fixity that pre-exists and/or transcends man’s historical and social contingencies. It emphasizes the constructing and determining role of the contingencies of time and place, especially the ideological and interactional forces, in the formation of the individual’s identity. In other words, an individual’s identity is assumed to be a contingent and constructed entity rather than something natural and given. The individual gets his/her identity from his/her interactions in a specific society. Identity grows from within the very sociohistorical context; it is contingent not transcendental. In this regard, Dollimore states that indispensable to materialist theory is the view of identity as constructed, “as an effect of what pre-exists it ... identity is powerfully— one might say essentially— informed by what it is not” (2003, p. xxxi). Closely tied to such a notion of identity as constructed is the idea of the relationality of identity. From a repudiation of natural-ness or given-ness of identity and stressing its constructed nature, it follows that the individual cannot be self-determined. Rather, the individual is other-determined, and evolves in and from their interrelations with others and their context. After exploring the ideas of some of the thinkers

of the period, Dollimore states that in the works of Montaigne, Hobbes, and Machiavelli, “man and society are demystified,” and concludes that these writers, “decenter the subject and so provide the bases for a material understanding” how social structures, political systems, and personal experience intersect” (2003, p. 174). To summarize the above argument, it can be said that materialist thought stresses that identity is not fixed, nor is it natural and self-determined; rather, it is fluid, constructed, and other-determined.

Accordingly, this paper seeks to examine such contrasting conceptions of subjectivity in Shakespeare’s *Richard II*. In this regard, Schwartz-Leeper (2022) states that *Richard II*’s journey illustrates the precarious nature of power and its capacity to dissolve personal identities. Indeed, it “deals with issues of selfhood and power, politics and identity” (p. 85). This paper adds to Schwartz-Leeper’s argument by a detailed focus on Richard’s fatal error of judgment. Indeed, Shakespeare’s play indicates that the traditional view of identity as a stable, autonomous essence is fundamentally flawed, as evidenced by Richard’s tragic downfall. By juxtaposing Richard’s essentialist identity with Bolingbroke’s recognition of the fluid nature of selfhood, the analysis illustrates how an understanding of identity as socially and politically constructed provides profound insights into the dynamics of power and legitimacy in Renaissance society. Ultimately, this exploration not only critiques the limitations of essentialist views but also emphasizes the relevance of materialist perspectives in comprehending the complexities of identity formation and its implications for political authority.

2. Political Identity in *Richard II*

The dominant medieval intellectual theory tended “to frame subjectivity as an isolated project rather than a social process” (Johnson, 2021, p. 21). During this period, “the integrity of the individual” and his/her “unchangeable soul” were taken for granted (Dollimore, 2011, p. 85). The human was believed to have both a fixed place within the great chain of being and a fixed core. Dollimore states that the roots of such an idea lie within religious and providential thought, according to which the human is metaphysically constituted and derives its identity from its relation with God. However, during the Renaissance period, the modern human began to develop a modern, materialistic understanding of identity: “individuals in the early modern

period” shifted from medieval notions of “a fixed identity (based on class, gender” toward a new sociocultural perspective that embraced identity as “*a state of becoming*” (Riddell, 2023, p. 58; italics in the original).

Dollimore even believes that the poststructuralist notion of identity is only a rediscovery of what “the Renaissance already knew” (2003, p. lxi). Such a shift in worldview can be explained mainly in terms of the secularization of thought. The medieval human’s notion of identity was basically a religious awareness. Their place within the universal scheme of things was determined in advance. The human was defined as God’s creature and as such derived identity from their relation to God. However, beginning from the Renaissance period, skeptical reflection on the idea of God and religion gathered new momentum. God, along with the whole religious and philosophical order of things associated with him, became the subject of critical and skeptical questioning. And, “if God was in trouble, so was ‘man’” (Dollimore, 2003, p. xxix). Eric Fromm (2001) writes about such an alteration in worldview during the Renaissance too. He grounds his investigation of the meaning of freedom for the modern human and its escape from the negative freedom on the interaction of individual and society, and argues that in the medieval period the individual was already placed and grew within an established order that limited them, giving them a sense of security instead. However, he continues, in the Renaissance, “the medieval social system was destroyed and with it the stability and relative security it had offered the individual. The individual was left alone; everything depended on his own effort, not on the security of his traditional status” (Fromm, p. 51). In other words, disconnected from God, the human was left to themselves to theorize their identity.

A crucial embodiment of this shift can be viewed in the political theory of the period where the teachings of the Florentine Machiavelli revealed that kings were not, as it was believed in the medieval period, independent entities connected with God. Rather, through the counsel he gave the prince, it became apparent how dependent a king was on the contingencies of his time and place. Kings were demystified, and it became apparent that they were not self-governing and independent of their subjects; rather, they were determined by them, and their success consisted in making their subjects consent to their rule. One of the most important

guidelines that Machiavelli stresses in *The Prince* is that the king needs to fashion his conducts and policies primarily and directly in accordance with the comportments of others: “most men judge more by their eyes than by their hands ... everyone is capable of seeing you, but few can touch you;” the prince, therefore, must manifest total mercy, faithfulness, integrity, humanity, and religion in his appearance (Machiavelli et al., 2019, p. 61). Apart from hypocrisy and deceit that such advice contains, it also suggests that a king is far from a self-sufficient, self-determined being. Machiavelli insists that not only should the prince have a well-trained army to act effectively against external threats, but he also needs to be conscious of the other-determined nature of his identity, specifically by avoiding being hated or despised and by keeping the people satisfied with him. The satisfaction the ruler should strive to maintain is not an end, but a means for obtaining the end of maintaining the power.

Greenblatt, who generally argues that individuals often experience “transformation of [their] identity” (Greenblatt & Philips, 2024, p. 92), seeks to analyze this question of autonomy or constructedness of identity too. In *Renaissance Self-fashioning*, he states that his “initial impulse” in writing the book was, “to understand the role of human autonomy in the construction of identity,” since he was concerned with “the power and freedom it implied” (2005, p. 256). Despite this initial expectation, in the process of writing the book he realizes that the “human subject itself began to seem remarkably unfree ... an ideological product ... a cultural artefact” (p. 256). In other words, the free, autonomous subject proves to be but a fiction, an illusion, and “identity is created in response to social and cultural pressure” (Haydon, 2017, p. 32). However, he insists that his “initial impulse” is, though in a more ironic way, confirmed nonetheless. The reason and proof of it are that those Renaissance writers he analyses in his book choose to stick to the notion (fiction) of the self-fashioning individual, because there was no substitute for this “illusion,” and because “to abandon self-fashioning is to abandon the craving for freedom” (2005, p. 257). In order to have the sense of freedom, the Renaissance human chose to stick to, embrace, and retain the fiction of self-sufficiency and independence of the subject. This latter point is where Dollimore disagrees with Greenblatt. Unlike Greenblatt, Dollimore believes that the freedom of the subject lies not in embracing but in abandoning such a fiction. He actually sees decentered subjectivity as a “vision of liberation,” and believes that “the materialist view ... far from eliminating individuality ...

realizes it” (Dollimore, 2003, p. 258). Therefore, for Dollimore, shattering the illusion of autonomy of the self is the necessary step for grasping a true understanding of one’s position in society. Such an understanding is what the King in *Richard II* fails to gain.

These are the facts about identity that Richard is at first unable to comprehend and later unwilling to acknowledge; he, as Dollimore (2019) might say, inhabits “the culture of identity correctness [in which] people are hierarchically ranked” (p. 710). His initial inability to comprehend renders him a politically blind leader, and in the end powerless, and his later unwillingness results in his dissolution. He is oblivious where Bolingbroke is quite alert. Even John of Gaunt refers to the fluidity of self and identity: “you urged me to as a judge, but I had rather/ You would have bid me to argue like a father” (Shakespeare, 2011, 1.3, 237-238). However, Richard rather chooses to stick to a medieval notion of identity, and Shakespeare arranges the events in a way to expose the irrelevance of this spurious notion in a new age. Richard is unable to abandon the old, idealist notion of his own identity. He always sees himself as an autonomous and self-determined entity whose identity has been once and for all metaphysically bestowed on him; he thinks of himself as a divinely determined king who, as such, is protected against any earthly material threat. Richard never tires of insisting on the idea that his identity as a king is natural, because it is God-given, and thus immune to external adverse circumstances:

Not all the water in the rough rude sea
Can wash the balm off from an anointed king;
The breath of worldly men cannot depose
The deputy elected by the Lord. (Shakespeare, 2011, 3.2, 50).

At this stage, he maintains that he has a divinely protected identity and “is careful to wrap himself in the mantle of moral authority, appearing before the citizens with prayer book in hand” (Greenblatt, 2010, p.77). Richard, “primarily due to his excessive youthfulness,” relies merely on the supposedly divine origins of his power; knowledge-less, he becomes powerless (Glitz, 2020, p. 128). It is impossible for him to see his identity as dependent on and the product

of outside circumstances. And later on, unable to cope with the new opposing notion of identity thrust upon him, his disintegration becomes inevitable.

Richard has enjoyed a pre-power sense of autonomy that has directly and uninterruptedly been succeeded by a “metaphysical” sense of autonomy after sitting on the throne. He can only see himself as a self-anchored, fixed entity. Therefore, he is rather unfamiliar with and ignorant of any alternative to an autonomous self; in other words, “the recognition of the extent to which social institutions form human nature” (Dollimore, 2003, p. 170) is beyond him. Like some other Shakespearean characters, such as Antony, Coriolanus, and Lear, Richard acts under the illusion that he transcends the power he holds and his material situation. In other words, he perceives himself as the bearer of power, yet he is merely like a fly perched upon the axle of a chariot, looking back and exclaiming, “What dust do I raise!” (Patterson, 1991, p. 1)

Moreover, Richard is firmly within the circle of those who consciously nourish this illusion of autonomy and actively perpetuate it. Even when Richard has gone through enough inner turmoil and external humiliation to come to the bitter conclusion that he is much less than a king— “Subjected thus, / How can you say to me I am a king?”—the illusion-perpetuators immediately and insistently attempt to restore his former sense of identity. They refuse to let Richard confront the full depth of his fall from power, and instead, try to convince him that his kingship is intact, though the reality is starkly different. The Bishop of Carlisle, even in the time of chaos and political turmoil, does not let the illusion weaken: “Fear not, my lord. That power that made you king/ Hath power to keep you king in spite of all” (Shakespeare, 2011, 3.2, 27-28). His words encourage Richard to cling to a fabricated sense of identity. Similarly, Richard’s queen, even when Richard is a captive and has no realistic hope of regaining power, affirms that he is “a lion and the king of beasts” (Shakespeare, 2011, 5.1, 34), further making Richard uphold the illusion of his kingship.

However, after returning from Ireland and learning a torrent of disheartening news about the death of some of his faithful subjects and the treachery of others, Richard is shaken and is willing to reconsider his ideas about his identity. All this culminates in his famous contemplation on the vanity of life and earthly property in the face of death in Act 3, Scene 2.

He tells Aumerle, Scrope, and others that death allows a king: "To monarchize, be feared, and kill with looks,/ Infusing him with self and vain conceit" (161–162). He continues: "Cover your heads, and mock not flesh and blood/ with solemn reverence. Throw away respect,/ Tradition, form, and ceremonious duty,/ For you have but mistook me all this while./ I live with bread, like you; feel want,/ Taste grief, need friends ..." (Shakespeare, 2011, 3.2, 172-176). It has dawned on him that he is not the autonomous being that he always thought himself to be. This is no longer the Richard of the beginning of the play; he has gone through enough predicaments to feel and let others feel that kings are all but divinely protected and metaphysically constituted. Richard's latter talk is also an example of what Dollimore, in the introduction to *Political Shakespeare*, calls the "demystification of authority," making "greatness [of kings] very familiar if not ridiculous" (1994, p. 8), an idea which constituted grounds for opposing theatre in the Renaissance.

In spite of all the hostile events and the above-mentioned speech, Richard is still unable and unwilling to abandon his sense of being a king and strives to maintain even a shadow of it. This can be seen in the language he uses. He cannot abandon calling himself a king, even if he be the, "king of sorrows": "You may my glories and state depose/ But not my griefs; still am I king of those" (Shakespeare, 2011, 4.1, 192-193), or when he says, "I'm greater than a king!" (Shakespeare, 2011, 4.1, 35), because he believes that Bolingbroke, now the king, is flattering him, a subject. Belsey also argues that soliloquies are an indication of belief in an unchanging essence, or what she calls interiority. Accordingly, Richard's late soliloquies can be taken as his inability to accept the fact that he is not the self-sufficient entity he thinks he is.

However, Richard has no choice but to finally face and consider the new and alternative fact about his identity; that, far from being self-determined, he is a construction, a product of his interactions with his environment: "I have worn so many winters out/ And know not now what name to call myself" (Shakespeare, 2011, 4.1, 259). In fact, he is forced toward such a realization. Dollimore also points to such a sense of "identity as socially coerced" (1994, p. 176). This realization that a new identity has been thrust on him simply infuriates Richard. After being told that Richard has yielded and means to abdicate willingly, Bolingbroke, now King Henry, orders Richard to appear before him. Here, Richard faces many of those who were

his former “subjects.” The wound of this new “coerced” identity, which is in direct opposition to what Richard used to think of himself, provokes Richard to direct his bitter attack at them as traitors: “I well remember/ The favours of these men. Were they not mine?/ Did they not sometime cry ‘All hail!’ to me? ... God save the king! Will no one say ‘Amen’?/ Am I both priest and clerk?” (Shakespeare, 2011, 4.1, 168-174).

Greenblatt believes that abandoning the notion of identity is to die, while Dollimore says it is freedom. Richard seems to die. He has come to believe in the fluidity of self:

Thus play I in one person many people,
And none contented. Sometimes am I a king;
Then treason makes me wish myself a beggar,
And so I am. Then crushing penury
Persuades me I was better when a king.
Then am I kinged again, and by and by
Think that I am unkinged by Bolingbroke,
And straight am nothing. (Shakespeare, 2011, 5.5, 31-38).
Richard eventually comes to the bitter understanding that:
But whate’er I be ...
With nothing shall be pleased till he be eased
With being nothing. (Shakespeare, 2011, 5.5, 39-41)

3. Richard and Bolingbroke: Identity and Legitimation

Tennenhouse, in *Strategies of State and Political Plays*, emphasizes that in Shakespeare’s history plays, “authority goes to that contender who can seize hold of the symbols and signs legitimizing authority and wrest them from their rivals” (Dollimore, 1994, p. 121), and believes that “Bolingbroke’s public ceremony in which Richard is forced to hand over the crown” is an indication of this fact (p. 121). To put it differently, Bolingbroke’s “victory would signify publicly the loss of the divine mandate to rule” (Schwartz-Leeper, p. 78).

In sharp contrast to Richard, Bolingbroke is fully aware of the constructed nature of identity. He knows very well that his identity is only an effect of his interactions and his conditions. That is why, early in the play, when he is in conflict with Thomas Mowbray, Duke of Norfolk, he seems ready to renounce his identity on the demands of the occasion:

there I throw my gage,

Disclaiming here the kindred of the King,

And lay aside my high blood's royalty (Shakespeare, 2011, 1.1, 69-71).

Bolingbroke never forgets the fact that the position he is going to take, the identity he is about to acquire, is but a construction and needs legitimation. He knows that this is not something that would be divinely bestowed on him; he is fully aware that he is not self-determined. This legitimation comes from others; it is Richard's determination; Bolingbroke knows very well that he has to be Richard-determined. Bolingbroke, well aware of the fact that he has to be recognized by others as the king, is conscious to first have Richard give him the crown, then to legitimize his rule by delegitimizing Richard as an inefficient king: "The souls of men/ May deem that you are worthily deposed" (Shakespeare, 2011, 4.1, 226-227). Therefore, Bolingbroke believes not in his own independence and self-determination but in the fact that he is other-determined, while Richard stubbornly insists that he himself is the author of his identity.

Richard's confidence in his self-entitlement and self-sufficiency leads him to the spurious belief that he needs no legitimation, neither for his authority, nor for his actions and permanence of kingship (Greenblatt, 1999, p. 948). This complacently fallacious belief in the naturalness and fixity of his identity has dire consequences. He sees himself above the law (his violation of property rights for example) and quite independent of his subjects because, as Katharine Eisaman Maus in the introduction to the play argues, he believes that his right and authority flow down from above. While his rival, Bolingbroke, with a practical mind, looks down to the subjects, Richard shows resentment at this good treatment of commoners. Richard says he has observed Bolingbroke's "courtship to common people,/ How he did seem to dive into their hearts/ With humble and familiar courtesy, What reverence he did throw away on slaves,/ Wooing poor craftsmen with the craft of smiles" (Shakespeare, 2011, 1.4, 24-28).

Moreover, Richard acts under the illusion of being autonomous. As a divinely anointed king, he believes that he is the origin of the power and authority that he holds. In other words, he refuses to see himself as “an agent whose identity is dictated by the necessities of political intervention and the pressures of the contingent historical moment” (Dollimore, 1994, p. 179). Discussing Antony and Cleopatra and Coriolanus, Dollimore argues that both Antony and Coriolanus act under the illusion that the authority and power they hold originate from their identity while they are nothing more than the effect of their positions within the systems of power. Richard appears to be suffering from the same illusion.

However, after Bolingbroke’s invasion and when he sees himself abandoned by almost everyone, Richard is forced to face a new notion of identity. He comes to the bitter realization that his identity as a king is a constructed notion, and that he is in effect only an effect of power, not its source. He realizes that his identity as a king is not transcendental, rather he can easily be “unkinged by Bolingbroke,” and bless a new king: “God save King Henry, unking'd Richard says/ And send him many years of sunshine days!” (Shakespeare, 2011, 4.1, 220-221); he is now “powerless and finally self-less” (Smith, 2022, p. 94). This unkinged King now faces some bitter realizations: that he is always other- not self-determined, and that he is king only when others call him so, not because he is naturally a king. At times, he even desperately wishes “that I could forget what I have been/ Or not remember what I must be now” (Shakespeare, 2011, 3.3, 137-138). Shakespeare, then, through Richard’s story dramatizes the radical instability of identity.

This new grasp of identity is simply too much for Richard to take in. Its unbearable weight crushes him, and he starts to disintegrate. He is forced to reconsider his identity under new, materialistic lights, and desert his idealist notion of identity. In other words, his attempts to disengage himself from the hostile circumstances simply fail; he internalizes the confusions and contradictions of his world, becoming confused and contradictory in the end. Richard’s story, then, illustrates the point that Shakespeare’s work “represents the birth of a certain kind of human” (Han, 2023, p. 59), that Shakespearean plays “represent forms of modern subjectivity” (Perry, 2021, p. 113).

All through the play, then, Richard consistently refers to others as his subjects, perceiving them as dependent on him; he sees himself as the central figure upon whom the identities of others rely parasitically. He considers himself the source and distributor of others' identities. This mindset is evident in the self-satisfied language he employs. He repeatedly labels others as 'our subject,' which emphasizes the significance and independence of 'our' while highlighting the dependence and subservience of his 'subjects.' However, once he is dethroned, it shatters his self-sufficient identity, causing him to unravel. At this point, Richard experiences a linguistic destabilization. Initially, he consistently uses the royal 'we,' reflecting his sense of autonomy. This 'we,' imbued with independence, helps to sustain the illusion that "we were not born to sue, but to command." Yet, as he is "socially coerced" into adopting a new identity, the royal 'we' disappears and is supplanted by the modest 'I.' He is compelled to say 'I'; he can no longer utilize the royal 'we' and its accompanying 'our': "with mine own hands I give away my crown" (Shakespeare, 2011, 4.1, 208). Even at this juncture, Richard resists relinquishing his sense of autonomy by stressing that it is 'I' who is giving away his identity—no one is taking it from him. This perspective is rooted in the medieval notion of the "permanence of kingship." Despite the practical challenges to this belief, Richard desperately clings to remnants of this illusion to preserve himself. However, this 'I' is never equivalent to the royal 'we'; it is merely a faint echo of the former 'we,' now laden with remnants of others. The term 'subject' largely disappears from his speech, and when it is mentioned, it pertains to himself. He must now utilize the term "king" in a different context—he must refer to it as a subject. He will no longer hear himself called king; instead, he must address the King. The term 'king' was once a noun for Richard, but he now also employs the verb 'unking' as a transitive verb, signifying his unconscious acceptance that his identity, the object of "unking," is now defined by the subject of that verb: "I am unking'd by Bolingbroke" (Shakespeare, 2011, 5.5, 31-38). Ultimately, he is compelled to acknowledge, "I will undo myself" and "I must nothing be," and to relinquish his crown (Shakespeare, 2011, 4.1, 201-203).

4. Conclusion

Richard's tragic trajectory in *Richard II* offers a powerful dramatization of the disintegration of the idealist conception of identity. Initially clinging to the belief in his divine right and

metaphysically guaranteed kingship, Richard resists the possibility that his authority and identity might be historically contingent and socially constructed. His self-image rests entirely on an outdated framework of essentialist humanism, where autonomy and permanence are assumed. Yet, Shakespeare steadily unravels this illusion. Through political upheaval and personal loss, Richard is gradually stripped of his symbolic markers of identity—language, titles, authority—until he is forced to confront the reality of his dependence on others for his sense of self. The speech shifts from the royal “we” to the vulnerable “I,” marking the linguistic erosion of his autonomy. Unlike Bolingbroke, who demonstrates an acute awareness of identity as performative and other-determined, Richard cannot adapt to the new political order because he insists on a notion of identity that no longer holds relevance. In this sense, *Richard II* dramatizes the shift from a premodern to a modern conception of the self: from transcendental essence to constructed identity. Shakespeare, echoing materialist and proto-modernist thinkers, reveals how identity is never simply possessed, but rather bestowed, negotiated, and, ultimately, fragile. Richard’s downfall underscores the high cost of failing to recognize this truth. The play thus anticipates and powerfully affirms the materialist view that the self is not fixed, but forged in relation to others, to structures of power, and to the historical moment. In tracing Richard’s collapse, Shakespeare not only critiques essentialist ideologies but also stages the painful birth of a decentered, modern subjectivity.

Conflict of interest

The author(s) certify/certifies that they have no affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial interest (such as honoraria; educational grants; participation in speakers’ bureaus; membership, employment, consultancies, stock ownership, or other equity interest; and expert testimony or patent-licensing arrangements), or non-financial interest (such as personal or professional relationships, affiliations, knowledge or beliefs) in the subject matter or materials discussed in the present research paper.

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