CHAPTER SIX

Richard II:
Looking into the Mirror of Grief

OF ALL SHAKESPEARE'S earlier tragedies and histories, Richard II has the most interesting and, for Shakespeare's dramatic progress, most significant patterns of self-knowledge. The themes of losing and finding and of the search for the self are focused on a hero who shows a most conspicuous lack of self-knowledge, but who also elicits our tragic sympathy as no other hero does whom Shakespeare created before him.

When, probably in 1594 or 1595, Shakespeare decided to write a play about the reign of Richard II, he may have been drawn to this subject because he wished to depict the source of the troubles he had dramatized in the Henry VI plays. He also may have thought the forced abdication of Richard II and the usurpation of the throne by Henry Bolingbroke topical because of the Elizabethans' interest in, and anxiety about, succession. But if Shakespeare was induced to write a play about the fall of Richard because of its political relevance, he underplayed this aspect when he actually came to write the play. Whether considerations of political prudence persuaded him to concentrate on the human side of the conflict rather than on the clash of forces or whether he was stimulated by the pathos of the tortured king in Marlowe's Edward II, he poured his poetic and dramatic powers into depicting the suffering of Richard. The weak king, who falls and suffers, is in the front of the stage; the strong man, who rises and conquers, is hardly more than a background figure, generally doing only what the occasion requires.

To acclaim this reticence in word and action as the master strategy of a Machiavellian schemer is to deny the requirements of the stage, particularly of the Elizabethan stage, according to which characters live by what they do, say about themselves, and what others say about them, not by what they fail to do and say, and what others fail
to say about them. The interest of *Richard II* certainly does not derive from seeing Bolingbroke outmaneuver Richard because, as has often been said, Richard really defeats himself. In a sense, Bolingbroke is not only Richard's conqueror but also his victim, as is England in general. Bolingbroke too suffers from the grief that Richard inflicts on his country and comes to feel, most of all, himself. Bolingbroke loses his legacy and is banished; he returns indeed to become king, but as such, he inherits fear of rebellion and, in the end, is left with sorrow and remorse.

The early quartos and Francis Meres called *Richard II* (as well as other history plays) a tragedy, and the play has a better claim to the title as we have come to apply it by abstraction from Shakespeare's later tragedies than any other of his early dramas. *Richard II* focuses on one passion, grief, and makes it the prime mover of tragic sympathy. Some characters, such as the Duchess of Gloucester, Gaunt, and Richard's queen, Isabel, have the primary function of showing the grief that comes to all, first to the victims of Richard's misrule, then to his family and adherents. Grief imagery penetrates the play, and the passion itself is constantly varied with fear and contrasted with joy and hope; no play of Shakespeare offers better illustration for his use of these four primary passions.2

Lack of self-knowledge and intemperance are the roots of Richard's tragedy just as they are of Tarquin's in *Lucrece*, and the subject matter of the history play would have lent itself to a treatment very similar to that which Shakespeare accorded to the passion and disgrace of Tarquin. Shakespeare's sources presented a king who did not know himself, or, as Holinshed had it, who "forgot himself and began to rule by will more than by reason, threatening death to each one that obeyed not his inordinate desires." 3 Shakespeare did not altogether deny this Richard; his guilt in the murder of his great-uncle, Woodstock, is alluded to in the second scene and throws a shadow over his seemingly impartial effort to make peace between Mowbray and Bolingbroke. We also learn in the protasis of the play that Richard is "not himself, but basely led / By flatterers" (II.i.241–42) ; yet the Richard we remember most is that of epitasis and catastrophe: the man intemperate in grief, who loses himself in paroxysms of lament; the extraordinary sufferer, who knows the hollowness of the crown but cannot live a mere man; the poet of pain, who in his deepest humiliation yet gains an inkling of the common condition of man, a glimmer of tragic self-knowledge. Richard is not merely an
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exemplum of a bad ruler; he is also a man who comes, even if too late, to seek himself.

In making Richard into this kind of character, Shakespeare could build on some hints in his sources, which depicted Richard's tragedy as a de casibus story, a fall from a high place in the manner of the examples in the Mirror for Magistrates, and which showed some sympathy to him.4 Said Holinshed:

This surely is a very notable example and not unworthy of all princes to be well weighed and diligently marked that this Henry, Duke of Lancaster, should thus be called to a kingdom and have the help and assistance almost of all the whole realm, which perchance never thereof thought or yet dreamed, and that King Richard should thus be left desolate, void, and in despair of all hope and comfort, in whom, if there be any offence, it ought rather to be imputed to the frailty of wanton youth than to the malice of his heart.5

At first Richard sees himself exclusively in the light of a victim of fortune's wheel; only very slowly does he accept the moral of the specula principis that kings must be virtuous or they may be punished, even deposed, by the vengeance of God. Richard sees his fall almost to the very end as primarily a de casibus tragedy, but we understand it from the beginning as a tragedy of character.

For creating as sorrowful a king as he did, Shakespeare had little precedent. Holinshed recorded only that Richard, returning from Ireland and advised of Bolingbroke's progress, "became so greatly discomforted that, sorrowfully lamenting his miserable state, he utterly despaired of his own safety and, calling his army together, which was not small, licensed every man to depart to his home." 6 The passage must have struck Shakespeare's eye by the marginal gloss: "K. Richard in utter despair." Shakespeare made, at any rate, this incident into the apex of Richard's emotional curve: up to this point he is a carefree youth; after it, he is a care-worn sufferer.

This is not to say that there are two Richards as there are two Edwards in Marlowe's Edward II, from which Shakespeare appears to have learned both positively and negatively. Marlowe's Edward is at first a pitiful, lascivious, and cruel boy, willing to hand over his kingdom, lock, stock, and barrel, to the patently immoral Gaveston; later, Edward is a suffering, tortured victim of his wife's and Mortimer's cruelties. The earlier Richard never sinks as deeply as the earlier Edward, and the later Richard is still recognizably the same
man as the earlier one. Richard before his fall is insolent and insouci­
ant; he is callous to the exhortations of Gaunt and York; he is irre­
ponsible, to say the least, in confiscating Gaunt’s property. On the
whole, however, he is a somewhat better man than Holinshed’s
Richard; he threatens no death to others; he does not manifest his
addiction to pleasure or to lust so patently as to lose our sympathy.
He wears his crown with just enough dignity to make his later con­
sciousness of its halo believable and pitiable.6

Essentially, the predicaments of Marlowe’s and Shakespeare’s
kings are alike: they both suffer for their human inadequacies, and
they suffer from their inability to separate the injuries done to them
from the indignities inflicted on the crown. Like Edward, Richard
is ignorant of the meaning of the injunction “know thyself” as Sir
Thomas Elyot applied it to the man of authority:

If thou be a governor, or hast over other sovereignty, know thyself,
that is to say, know that thou art verily a man compact of soul and
body and that all other men be equal unto thee. Also that every man
taketh with thee equal benefit of the spirit of life, nor hast thou any
more of the dew of heaven or the brightness of the sun than any
other person. Thy dignity or authority wherein thou different from
other is, as it were, but a weighty or heavy cloak, freshly glittering
in the eyes of them that be purblind, where unto thee it is painful
if thou wear him in his right fashion and as it shall best become
thee.8

As a king, Richard wears the robe of authority too lightly even if
he does not wear it as unbecomingly as Edward; he never dreams
that it can be taken away, as Elyot warned, if used negligently. Gaunt
calls him “possess’d . . . to depose thyself” (II.i.108). And York
despairingly comments on his rash confiscation of Gaunt’s property:
“Be not thyself—for how art thou a king / But by fair sequence and
succession?” (II.i.198–99).

Although Richard is unaware of the heaviness of his robe, he is
dazzled by its glitter. He is obsessed with his “preeminence,” with
his privileged place in the hierarchy of being and with the symbolism
of his divine stewardship, but he neglects to balance this awareness
with a just understanding of his duties. In adversity, he intoxicates
himself with vain hopes and illusions, such as that the native stones
will prove soldiers on his side and that God will provide a glori­
ous angel to make up for each of Bolingbroke’s followers. There is
something extravagantly un-English about his imagination—possibly
Shakespeare thought of a remark of Holinshed's that Richard took pleasure in being addressed by one of his followers in the fashion of an oriental potentate. At any rate, his consciousness of his halo before and after the deposition transcends the conventional belief in the divinity of kings.

Although the earlier and the later Richard are recognizably the same man, Richard does change under the impact of suffering, and I believe that Shakespeare conceived this change as being accompanied by an alteration of humor. From reading Holinshed, he must have thought of the earlier Richard as of the sanguine complexion that turned into melancholy of the kind physicians thought to have come about by "adustion," that is, burning of the original humor. This melancholy was considered most serious, leading sometimes to madness and self-destruction. Holinshed's characterization of the young Richard contained features that the Elizabethans would have ascribed to the sanguine disposition, such as wantonness, extravagance in entertainment and clothes, general good nature, and seemliness in shape and favor. The Richard of the beginning of the play shares with Holinshed's some general characteristics of the sanguine temperament as in The Touchstone of Complexions (1581) Levinus Lemnius described them: men of this type, Lemnius said, are easily drawn to folly and pursue what is worst; given to sensual fantasies, they are unconcerned about the state of their country; as rulers, they are subject to the influence of evil advisers. The sanguine humor was thought to afflict particularly the young; Lemnius compared the sanguine youths to calves that in spring "skip and leap up and down," a phrase that recalls Bolingbroke's later speaking of Richard as "the skipping King, he ambled up and down" (I Henry IV, III.i.60). Lemnius's description of sanguine men as smooth-skinned, of ruddy or purple color, is paralleled in the Queen's characterization of Richard as a fair rose (V.i.8) and in Bolingbroke's as "a happy gentleman in blood and lineaments" until "unhappied and disfigured" by his followers (III.i.8 ff.). Shakespeare's Richard resembles the men of this humor who, as Lemnius said, although pleasant in company, know no measure in their affections. It is probably sentimentiality rather than political strategy that makes him remit four years of banishment from Bolingbroke's sentence. He claims to be affected by the tears in Gaunt's eyes (I.iii.208), and I see no reason why this explanation (invented by Shakespeare) should be taken as hypocritical. But sentimentiality is a different matter from goodness, and, among his
favorites, Richard can be quite callous about Gaunt's plight (I.iv.59–60). His almost clinical interest in watching the display of emotions shows itself also in the curiosity with which, on this occasion, he inquires “what store of parting tears were shed” at Bolingbroke's leave-taking (I.iv.5ff.). Richard remains an observer of the effect of grief on others even when it is his own grief that creates this effect: “thou weep'st, my tender-hearted cousin,” he says to Aumerle at Flint Castle (III.iii.160). Melancholy, as Lemnius said, retains some traits of the faculty and nature from which it came; the melancholic emoting of Richard evolves believably from that in his sanguine period.

The transition occurs at Richard's landing (III.ii) when he "weeps for joy" and "weeping-smiling" greets his native earth, and when, overwhelmed by messages of misfortune, he alternates violently between despair and hope. As Lemnius explained, such ups and downs are natural in the transition to melancholy, a humor that is not without heat: "And hereupon, in a manner all in one instant and without any time betwixt, do we see them suddenly changed from laughter and mirth into sorrow and pensiveness." Richard's outward and inward change is repeatedly emphasized. One such instance is when, with his characteristic interest in his own grief, he studies the "external manner of laments" in his face during the mirror scene (IV.i.296). Another instance is the parting scene, when the Queen finds him "both in shape and mind / Transform'd and weak'ned" (V.i.26–27). In the series of house-grave images, which precedes this observation, Isabel calls him "the model where all Troy did stand," a "map of honor," "King Richard's tomb," and a "beauteous inn" in which now grief is lodged. Interestingly, Lemnius illustrated his argument that one can still discern the former state of a body that has suffered alteration by grief by a very similar comparison to "great, huge, and sumptuous houses, being fallen down and decayed, [which] show evidently . . . of what hugeness and magnificence they erst were, how curious and busy the frame was, how skillful and industrious the architect and workman was."

In conceiving Richard as a victim of melancholy, Shakespeare appears to have had two purposes in mind. First of all, the symptoms of the humor as the physicians described them—such as doubt, diffidence, distrust, morbid ruminations, indulgence in monstrous fictions, solitariness, weeping, sighing, and quick changes from indolence to mental activity—made Richard a dramatically interesting character.
But, more importantly, melancholy meant a concern with the earth, from which it was thought to arise, with dust, graves, worms, and death—in a word, with the contemptus mundi, and thus with the estate of man; "Melancholy," said Sir James Perrott, "is fittest for consideration." Shakespeare's use of the contemptus mundi convention gave him an opportunity to endow Richard with an overpowering rhetoric that displays his vanity but also brings with it an ingredient of self-knowledge.

Richard's first long lament strikes the characteristic note (III.ii.144 ff.). At the moment of danger, he loses his head; informed of the execution of Bushy, Green, and the Earl of Wiltshire, he rejects all comfort and wishes to talk only "of graves, of worms, and epitaphs." Nothing, he says,

*can we call our own but death*  
*And that small model of the barren earth*  
*Which serves as paste and cover to our bones.*

(III.ii.152-54)

Richard's subject is, in terms of the title of the second chapter of the Elizabethan translation of Pope Innocent's *De Humane Miseriae Conditione*, "The Vile and Base Matter Whereof Man is Made." It is a substance that determines his composition and his decay: "I am compared, saith holy Job, to clay and likened to embers and ashes. Clay is made of water and dust, both of them remaining, but ashes are made of wood and fire, both of them consuming and decaying." Innocent's reference to Job points to the biblical associations of Richard's speech: the ground to which Richard wishes to bequeath his deposed body is Job's "slimy valley" (xxi.33), the "water and dust" of Innocent, or as Richard has it, the "paste and cover to our bones." The Genevan side-note made the figure an appropriate reminder for royalty: "He shall be glad to lie in a slimy pit, which before could not be content with a royal palace." Richard's figure of the "model of the barren earth" recalls Job's elsewhere (iii.14) expressed desire to sleep and be "at rest with the kings and councilors of the earth, which have built themselves desolate places" ("barren places" in the variation of the Genevan side-note, which comes closer to Richard's words).

Richard sees himself as the epitome of "sad stories of the death of kings" that, *de castibus* fashion, he invites himself and others to tell,
sitting upon the ground; he comes to the conclusion that the crown of a king is a hollow crown, in which death keeps his court. The similarity of this idea to Holbein's woodcuts of death, particularly to the one depicting the dying Emperor Maximilian, has been noted often: a grinning Death, resembling Richard's "antic," his skeleton upreared behind Holbein's enthroned emperor, reaches for the crown. But Maximilian, unlike Richard, has not resigned himself to crying woe, death, destruction, and despair; although his sword is broken and his eyes are closing, he still metes out justice, turning severely toward the proud oppressor on the right and protecting the poor supplicant on the left: the Emperor, not Death, keeps his court. Richard's antic, who allows the king "a little scene, / To mon­archize, be fear'd, and kill with looks" (164-65) recalls the commonplace that the world is a stage, which fits into the contemptus mundi, but it is impossible not to associate the figure also with Richard's histrionics; his "self and vain conceit" (166) is infused into the image. And so it is when Richard takes up the equalitarian strains of contemptus mundi and of consideratio. Chelidonius wished princes to "consider the common beginning of all, the first matter whereof we are made and how we be all continued of like elements, bought with one blood, . . . nourished and fed all with like sacraments." But Richard, who says more vividly that "I live with bread like you, feel want, / Taste grief, need friends" (175 ff.), does not really believe with Chelidonius that the consideration of his mortal body shows that "there is no difference between the vilest creatures of the earth" and himself; when he asks his followers to "throw away respect, / Tradition, form, and ceremonious duty," it is in a plaintive tone that highlights his perplexity about what he and the world have come to.

There is a similar mixture of true grief and "self and vain conceit" in Richard's confrontation with Bolingbroke at Flint Castle. Desolate and bereft of friends, Richard takes consolation in the extravagant hope that the wrath of God, which the contemptus mundi predicted for sinful mankind, will avenge the injustice done to Richard; God "is mustering in his clouds on our behalf / Armies of pestilence" (III.iii.85 ff.). And when Richard appears to turn inward by offering to exchange his position with that of a hermit, he spoils the appeal to our sympathy with the theatrical effect of the idea of exchanging England with "a little little grave, an obscure grave—" an effect increased by the suggestion that he be buried "in the king's
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highway" (154 ff.). One looks here in vain for a recognition of his own responsibility for his fall. There are, at most, occasional dim realizations of his insufficiency, as when, descending to the “base court”—the punning adds a histrionic accent to the symbolic moment—he compares himself with “glist’ring Phaeton, / Wanting the manage of unruly jades” (178–79); it was Phaeton’s presumption that made him want to drive his father’s chariot, and it was his incompetence, not any particular unruliness of the horses, that brought him too close to the sun. Like Richard, Phaeton was responsible for his own disaster.

The abdication scene, the summa epitasis of the play, brings not only a significant turn of events but also an important stage in Richard’s growth toward self-awareness. But if one may speak here of anagnorisis, it is in a sense different from Aristotle’s; Richard’s recognition is not really a “change from ignorance to knowledge.” Hardly more than some glimmers of self-knowledge shine through Richard’s display of vanity. Just before the symbolic transfer of the crown, Richard achieves a culmination in self-aggrandizement when he likens himself to Christ and degrades his enemies into Judases (IV.i.168 ff.). His public “undoing” of himself still betrays how deeply he “drinks” his griefs; it is a rhetorical showpiece with puns, antitheses, and anaphora, and even his announcement that he must “nothing be” is as much an appeal to the spectators’ emotions as resignation; his feeling for the nothingness of man is overshadowed by the feeling of his nothingness due to deprivation from kingship (216 ff.). When Northumberland tries to force him to read the accusations against him and to confess to their truth, his eyes fill with tears; he cannot see, and he looks inward to find himself a “traitor with the rest” (245 ff.). He feels a total loss of identity and knows “not now what name to call myself” (259).

This, the moment of Richard’s greatest self-loss, produces his first confrontation with the truth, which is given symbolic emphasis in the mirror scene. The idea is imaginatively prepared for earlier in the play by glass or mirror images symbolic of grief. Thus in his days of happy kingship, Richard read grief in the “glasses” of Gaunt’s eyes. And when Bushy attempted to console Queen Isabel, he compared the view of sorrow’s eyes to perspective glasses that “rightly gaz’d upon, / Show nothing but confusion—ey’d awry, / Distinguish form” (II.ii.14 ff.). In looking into the mirror during the abdication scene, Richard for the first time distinguishes form.
In this scene, Shakespeare availed himself of the multifaceted symbolism of the mirror. It was, first of all, the emblem of vanity and self-love, often associated in Shakespeare’s time, as now, with femininity. The moralists sought to combat the allurement of the mirror with ethical considerations. One of the sayings in *Disticha Catonis*, the collection Shakespeare had in grammar school, recommended that man contemplate himself in the mirror and, if he appeared handsome, act in a way that expressed this *forma*. If he appeared ugly (*deformus*), he was asked to compensate for the lack of facial beauty by good manners. The mirror was thus a medium for *vanitas* as well as *veritas*, as the Elizabethans often were reminded. In Diego de Estella’s *De Contemptu Mundi*, translated by Thomas Rogers (1586), the Christian was told, “if thou have a desire to know who thou art, take a glass and behold thyself in it. . . . And that thou mayst not be deceived, behold not thyself in a glass that is hollow, which maketh a show of the thing represented therein clean contrary to that which it is indeed, but take unto thee a glass that is plain, which setteth out man according as he is in truth.” The hollow glass, Estella said, is the glass of life; it makes men look lusty and strong; but it is a glass of vanity and lies; the true glass is the glass of death, which shows man his sinfulness and mortality. The mirror of self-knowledge thus became the mirror of death. As Sir John Davies said, “Then she [the soul] which hath been hoodwinked from her birth, / Doth first herself within Death’s mirror see.”

Richard’s gaze into the mirror reveals all these symbolic facets. When he wishes to look into it rather than read the articles of abdication, he desires to study “the very book indeed / Where all my sins are writ, and that’s myself” (IV.i.274–75). It is the first mentioning of his sins—the mirror is to reflect Richard’s “true” image. But a narcissistic self-fascination interferes momentarily; he sees a “brittle glory” in the face and wonders why it has not become deformed. Yet Richard’s grief is too great to make him accept the image in the “flatt’ring glass”; the discrepancy between appearance and reality, between the outside of grief and its substance angers him, and he smashes the deceptive glass, quipping that his sorrow has destroyed his face—his face in the mirror, that is. Bolingbroke emends: “The shadow of your sorrow hath destroy’d / The shadow of your face” (292–93). Richard retorts that he is no longer interested in the outside look, in the “external manner of laments,” which are “merely shadows to the unseen grief / That swells with silence in
the tortur'd soul" (294–98). But even at this moment of inward turn, Richard cannot resist the temptation of displaying his vanity; he "thanks" Bolingbroke for not only giving him cause to wail but also for "teaching" him to lament his cause (300–302). Whether Richard here actually finds the refinement of his rhetoric by his adversary worthy of imitation or, more likely, is piqued by being upstaged even momentarily, Richard's interest in self-expression wins out over his desire for self-knowledge. The mirror of truth turns into a mirror of flattery.

Richard cannot help dramatizing himself even in that scene of intense pathos when he takes leave of his queen. One may read repentance into his exhortation to her and to himself that "Our holy lives must win a new world's crown" (V.i.24); but he is as much as ever intent on audience effect when he asks her to tell others after his death the lamentable tale of his misfortune "and send the hearers weeping to their beds" (45).

Only once before his death does Richard immerse himself in self-consideration without such side-interest in the effect of grief: in his long soliloquy that compares his prison at Pomfret Castle to the world (V.v.1 ff.). The speech begins as an exercise in self-delusion and ends in near-maddening grief, but in the process Richard penetrates to some understanding of his condition as a man and a king.

Richard's soliloquy hinges on concepts of body and soul and forms in this respect a climax to this nosce teipsum imagery prominent in the play. In the earlier acts, the images are associated primarily with grief and suffering, but also with the notion that in this experience lies a way to truth. As Bolingbroke accuses Mowbray of the treason that has its source in the king himself, he promises that "My body shall make good [the challenge] upon this earth, / Or my divine soul answer it in heaven" (I.i.37–38). When the king prevents the duel, Bolingbroke regrets that the issue cannot be settled; if it had been, either his or Mowbray's soul would have "wand'red in the air, / Banish'd this frail sepulchre of our flesh" (I.iii.195–96). The imagery becomes associated with Richard's party when the queen agonizes in his absence and finds her apprehensions confirmed; as her soul has "brought forth her prodigy," she feels like a new-delivered mother that has joined woe to woe and sorrow to sorrow (II.ii.64 ff.). From the time of the king's return, the body and soul images characterize his own attitudes and are either used by him or refer to him. "All souls that will be safe, fly from my side," he says at the first moment
of danger as he abandons all hope and begins to talk of graves and the decomposition of the body (III.ii.80). But this morbid preoccupation demonstrates also that he understands now that kings are made of the same clay as other men. He realizes the vanity of the belief that “this flesh which walls about our life / Were brass impregnable,” when a little pin can bore through this “castle wall” (166ff.). The house-grave imagery the queen applies to his grief-wasted body at their parting adds further pathos to his own ruminations on the fact of human impermanence.

Richard’s last long speech at Pomfret Castle gathers this imagery into a magnificent finale. His first sentence, “I have been studying how I may compare / This prison where I live unto the world” (V.v.1–2), strikes a characteristic contemptus mundi note. Pope Innocent’s tract devoted a chapter to “The Lamentation of the Soul Being in Prison,” which took its cue from the cry of the penitent sinner of Psalm 142, “bring my soul out of prison,” the latter being interpreted as the body. When Richard despairs of being able to compare his prison to the world because “the world is populous / And here is not a creature but myself,” he laments his loneliness much like the Psalmist: “I looked also upon my right hand and saw there was no man that would know me.” Richard’s fantastic remedy of populating his prison world by begetting “a generation of still-breeding thoughts” recalls the queen’s earlier conception of melancholy, the “unborn sorrow, ripe in fortune’s womb” she felt coming toward her trembling soul (II.ii.10). And as much as the queen brings forth a “prodigy,” Richard’s mental issue is unnatural. His plan for engendering thoughts analogous to the people of his kingdom is to make his brain “the female to my soul, / My soul the father” (6–7). But there is disharmony in the kingdom of man, said John Woolton, when “notices or seeds and, as it were, sparks of knowledge . . . are together engendered with the body and soul.” The conjunction of the soul with understanding, said Plutarch, makes reason, but with the body, passion. Richard’s thoughts thus become microcosmic correspondences of the melancholy world he knows; his thoughts “people this little world, / In humours like the people of this world, / For no thought is contented” (9–11). And Richard’s thoughts are at odds, like the people of his kingdom. Those thoughts “tending to ambition” plot “how these vain weak nails / May tear a passage through the flinty ribs / Of this hard world, my ragged prison walls”—the prison of Richard now becomes his body,
from which he would like to escape (18 ff.). The idea recalls Richard's earlier realization of the vulnerability of kings whose "castle wall" can be pierced by a little pin (III.ii.169). The prison image betrays Richard's desire to be freed from the world and from his body; his murder thus becomes a kind of deliverance.

Richard's speech is fancy in Coleridge's term, not imagination; it is chaotic as his mind is chaotic. But, in an erratic way, the speech does explore Richard's condition not only as a king but also as a man. For the first time, he realizes the value of "nothing," a word with which he had played when he resigned his kingship. But then he still thought of nothingness as the state of non-kingship; now he desires, like the just man in "the lamentation of the soul being in prison" of Innocent's tract, to be released from life: "Suffer me that I may be refreshed before I go from hence and before I shall become nothing." Richard knows now that, whether he is still king or not,

Nor I, nor any man that but man is,  
With nothing shall be pleas'd till he be eas'd  
With being nothing.  

(39-41)

As he hears music that does not keep time, he realizes fully the disharmony in himself that led to his downfall:

But, for the concord of my state and time,  
Had not an ear to hear my true time broke.  
I wasted time, and now doth time waste me.  

(47-49)

Thus, in the end, Richard gains an inkling of the cause and meaning of his tragedy.

But Richard's self-discovery is clearly limited. He does not, for instance, ever admit his guilt in Woodstock's murder. Neither does his new humility displace completely his old vanity, as is evidenced in the incident that follows the soliloquy. When he learns from the Groom of the Stable that Bolingbroke rode on coronation day on Richard's own roan, Barbary, he questions the servant about the behavior of the horse; and when he learns that it strode proudly, he rails against the ungrateful jade that "hath eat bread from my royal hand" (V.v.85). Even Richard's last words breathe as much an exaltation of royalty as of the hope of heaven: "Mount, mount, my
soul! thy seat is up on high; / Whilst my gross flesh sinks downward, here to die” (V.v.111-12).

Richard is all of a piece. He is portrayed as a man and a ruler who does not know himself and lacks a sense of moral decorum, but who gradually grows toward a limited self-awareness. Through his own misrule, he loses his crown and thus the only identity he knows, that of a divinely ordained king. From sanguine lightheartedness, he changes to melancholic dejection. Plunged into excessive and histrionic grief, he is the first of Shakespeare’s tragic heroes to be dominated by an overwhelming passion, which is his undoing, the major reason for his fascination, and a stimulus to gain self-knowledge. In tasting, relishing, and exploring his grief, Richard assumes a contemptus mundi attitude, which is, at first, more of a posture than a conviction; but the attitude becomes increasingly sincere, and, though it drives him near to madness, Richard gains on the way some of the self-knowledge he so sadly lacked, but he does not totally lose his latent vanity. The particular charm of Richard II, as John Middleton Murry has said, lies in the “nascent self-awareness” with which it is pervaded.30

This nascent self-awareness, one might say, is not only Richard’s but was also that of Shakespeare as a great tragic artist. In Richard II, Shakespeare found a way of integrating into a tragedy the themes of self-search, self-loss, and self-finding he had depicted in his early comedies. As in Love’s Labor’s Lost, the self-search of the hero is a confused and ill-planned quest that does not lead to one particular crowning insight.31 If one can speak of self-discovery at all, it is in quite a different sense from Aristotle’s anagnorisis. What Richard finds out about himself does not constitute a straight-line movement culminating in a peripeteia—Aristotle thought the connection between anagnorisis and peripeteia was the best solution—and Richard does not achieve a particular culminating discovery comparable to the full and devastating disclosure Oedipus receives of his true situation. Richard’s self-discoveries are dispersed and even precede the first unmistakably tragic development, since they begin in the flashes of contemptus mundi that ignite when there is yet much hope of rescue; the discoveries continue intermittently until his death, punctuating both epitasis and catastrophe. Moreover, and most important, Richard’s recognitions are much less intellectual than is Oedipus’s anagnorisis. They include a confession of sins and are more often emotional than intellectual approaches to the truth, as in that mem-
Richard II: Looking into the Mirror of Grief

Orable scene when Richard sees his own features and those of humanity more clearly by looking into the mirror of grief. Richard's slow, painful groping toward a sense of his character and situation reveals his potential worth as a human being while not denying his lack of suitability as a king. Richard's self-search and partial self-finding have moral and religious dimensions that Aristotle's anagnorisis does not have and could not have had.

Not for a long time did Shakespeare go beyond Richard II in the treatment of tragic self-loss and self-finding. The guilt-ridden Henry IV also lacks self-knowledge, but he never falls as deep or soars as high as Richard. Henry V, it is true, comes closer to achieving complete self-knowledge than any of Shakespeare's previous heroes, but he also never loses himself, not even as a prince, in the abyss of the soul, as does Richard. Only the great tragedies—in particular, Lear—provide parallels. And indeed, then Shakespeare gave a greater, richer meaning to the "all" that man has at stake in the struggle for self-knowledge, and of which Richard gains only an inkling; but he also made it a more elusive goal.

Like Shakespeare's earlier plays in general, Richard II delineates a road to self-knowledge and points up its potential rewards. Self-loss and self-finding take place in a cosmic frame the purposes of which are fairly evident. The play suggests not only a definable ideal of humanity but also of kingship—the ruler who is legitimate, moral, and strong. And though the play deals with disharmony, it shows harmony as attainable and indeed destined for England at a future time.

In hinting at such attainable ideals lies, I think, the main significance of two episodes that precede the catastrophe of Richard's death: the conspiracy of Aumerle, ending in pardon, and the new king's reference to his wayward but promising son. The small drama-within-the-drama of the Aumerle episode finds its happy resolution in the same scene in which Bolingbroke is induced to inquire about the dissolute prince who, as Shakespeare's audience knew, became the healer and harmonizer of England. York's betrayal of his son (or should we speak about York's loyalty to the only ruler who can rule?) points up the troubles of England in the frame of one family; but Bolingbroke's pardon of Aumerle turns a mother's grief to joy and moves, as do Shakespeare's early comedies, from confusion to its resolution, from disruption to unity. One small link of the broken chain is restored. And in Bolingbroke's words about Hal, we hear not
merely a father’s distress but see also the son’s “sparks of better hope, which elder years / May happily bring forth” (V.iii.21–22). In evoking this future development and the concomitant rise of England surely lies the main interest of this speech and not in any reference to a play or plays about the life of the prince and king Shakespeare intended to write—of this intention Shakespeare’s audience knew nothing. Thus the movement of grief is temporarily relieved by some, if muted, notes of joy and hope. Appropriately, even if one of these notes does come from Bolingbroke, it is struck before those of grief and fear associated with him in the end, notes that are the finale of the tragedy of Richard.