

CHAPTER 2

TOUCHING THE DEPTH OF THE SURFACE: *RICHARD III*

‘Grim-visaged War hath smoothed his wrinkled front’

Richard, the Duke of Gloucester, enters the stage – ‘*alone*’ (R3 1.1.1 SD). With its ‘opening solo entry for a play’s title-character’, the first scene of *Richard III* is ‘unique in Shakespeare’s work’ (Holland 17–8). The famous soliloquy with which the play begins serves not only the function of the ‘prologue to a play’ (Day 149), it also situates the play in the historical situation depicted by the preceding three plays of the tetralogy. However, besides its informing the audience about the triumph of the York party in the Wars of the Roses, Richard’s soliloquy mainly elaborates on a theme that his entrance exposes in a performative way: the protagonist’s ‘essential solitude’, as I would like to call it, using a concept I have purloined from Maurice Blanchot’s *The Space of Literature* (cf. 19–33).

The historical situation in which Richard finds himself at the beginning of the play is expressed in one particularly evocative sentence of the soliloquy, a sentence which I would like to take as a point of departure for my reading: ‘Grim-visaged War hath smoothed his wrinkled front’ (R3 1.1.9).

The Wars of the Roses over, Richard's brother Edward has been crowned England's king. Richard describes the contrast between the time of war and the period of peace, which has just begun. A series of parallelisms spills into the highly metaphorical sentence quoted above:

RICHARD

Now are our brows bound with victorious wreaths,
 Our bruised arms hung up for monuments,
 Our stern alarums changed to merry meeting,
 Our dreadful marches to delightful measures.
 Grim-visaged War hath smoothed his wrinkled
 front; (*R3* 1.1.5–9)

Richard presents the change effected by his family's triumph in artful words. The two lines which embrace the three anaphorically constructed lines in the middle of the passage provide us with keys with which to understand the passage. The parallelism opposes war and peace and allocates each of them half of the verse. In other words, each of the three central lines re-performs the change which Richard is obviously bothered about. The lines' first syllables speak of the past war, the final syllables of the new peace. This antithetical organisation culminates in the rigid oppositions of lines 7 and 8, in which 'stern alarums' / 'merry meeting' and 'dreadful marches' / 'delightful measures' form binaries that expose the stark contrast between the two states of worldly affairs. The parallel antithetical construction of the lines finds support in additional structures of similarity that strengthen both central isotopies from within. The terms constituting the isotopy 'war' show a striking aural resemblance; they each include the sound /ar/: 'bruised *arms*', 'stern *alarums*', 'dreadful *marches*'. With regard to the isotopy 'peace', it is the bilabial consonant *m* which reoccurs in all the terms: '*monuments*' '*merry meeting*', '*delightful measures*'. The line

which concludes the passage merges and reconciles the two semantic and phonetic series: with ‘Grim-visaged War’, Richard not only introduces the personification of the notion around which one of the two isotopies is grouped; he also refers us to the aural centre that resonated in the linguistic material of the *war*-series. The bilabial /m/ is also prominent, right at the centre of the passage’s last verse: ‘Grim-visaged War hath *smoothed* his wrinkled front’.

The line does not, however, continue the juxtaposition of war and peace which the preceding lines appeared to erect. Peace does not emerge as War’s eternal antagonist – in the concluding line, the ‘monuments’, ‘merry meeting’ and ‘delightful measures’ of peace merely resound in a verb – to *smooth* –; a verb that expresses a temporary modulation rather than the triumph over the opposing force, a modulation whose subject remains the personalised ‘War’. It is no coincidence that the epithet ‘[g]rim-visaged’ also incorporates the bilabial stop. The line thus exhibits an important asymmetry: in contrast to the preceding antithetical parallelisms, it is not bifurcated but encloses the current, peaceful ‘expression’ of the world in the description of War’s actual, his ‘original’ face. ‘Grim-visaged War’ and his ‘wrinkled front’ not only build the frame, constitute the alpha and the omega of the verse, but are the material basis, the ontological foundation of which peace is but a particular state, a modulation without substantial reality on its own. War is not a state of exception; it is the foundation of the world that can disguise – that is, ‘smooth’ – itself, and take on a mild appearance in times of peace.

The line’s phonetic structure supports its semantic articulation: ‘Grim’ at the beginning and ‘wrinkled’ at the end of the line assonate, and are connected by the fricative /r/, whose frequency of occurrence is a striking characteristic of the whole passage. The verb ‘smooth’ contrasts with its surroundings, both in its vocal colour and its onomatopoeic

‘silkeness’. The careful aural elaboration of the metaphor – War’s smoothing his ‘wrinkled front’ – indicates that this image is not mere ornament. It refers us to thinking about ‘surface’ and its modulations, about how ‘semblance’ and ‘reality’ may be understood differently when read as effects of dynamic processes of surface-(de)formation.

Shakespeare’s *Richard III* exhibits these surface-processes and their power on different levels, and also makes them a subject of discussion. As we will see, these processes stand in close proximity to the practice of theatre. In a certain sense, theatre consists of a manifold manipulation of surfaces: ‘wrinkling’ phonetic surfaces, roughening them with roaring fricatives or ‘smoothing’ them with sonant stops; clothing the actors on stage in different fabrics; coordinating their movements and gestures – staging conflict or harmony. All this turns out to be a production of sense, constituting a (fictional) world of its own. In the theatrical constellation, substantiality (the question ‘What is real, substantial and what is just fake?’) is suspended. It is suspended in favour of touch: the audience comes to the theatre in order to expose themselves to the touch of theatre’s elaborate surfaces.¹ Nevertheless, this cultural practice does not have to be shallow – on the contrary. Shakespearean theatre cannot be reduced to the evocation of intense affects – which certainly exceed the emotional routine of everyday life – since, at the same time, it negotiates complex existential and philosophical questions, though certainly not in the way a philosophical treatise would do. It does not lecture and present answers but involves its audience in these questions, infects them with a fundamental uncertainty, abducts them into a realm of fascination.²

In the passage we began to analyse, the theme of surface-modulation takes on the depth and reach of an existential and philosophical question. It provides the key for the functioning of the asymmetry that also defines Richard’s position in the world. At first, the situation appears to be simple. In

contrast to all the others, Richard is not made for ‘this weak piping time of peace’ (*R*₃ 1.1.24):

RICHARD

But I, that am not shaped for sportive tricks,
Nor made to court an amorous looking-glass;
I, that am rudely stamped, and want love’s majesty
To strut before a wanton ambling nymph;
I, that am curtailed of this fair proportion,
Cheated of feature by dissembling Nature,
[. . .]

Have no delight to pass away the time. (*R*₃ 1.1.14–25)

This contrast is expressed by the prominent and emotionally charged ‘But I’ that appears to single Richard out, to distinguish him from the rest. However, the series of three parallel sentences anaphorically beginning with an ‘I’ does not distinguish Richard from the collective of a universal ‘they’. Being ‘rudely stamped’, Richard cannot smooth his ‘grim face’, his disproportionate outward appearance. He lacks the physiognomic means to dissemble in the way that War does. Obviously, the others can. They are able to smooth their wrinkled fronts.

The series of three parallel, anaphoric sentences beginning with an ‘I’ echoes the tripartite series which describes the changes coming along with peace analysed above. In their consonance, the two series tell their own story of change, and the repeated ‘Our’ of the time of war turns into Richard’s ‘I’: he becomes an outsider in ‘the weak piping time of peace’. Despite his deformed body, Richard is not born an exception. He had not been physically or socially handicapped for as long as war has reigned.³ He had been well integrated in a devoted collective – this is what his anaphorical insistence on the ‘Our’ (‘Our bruised arms’, ‘Our stern alarums’, ‘Our dreadful marches’) emphasises. In Richard’s soliloquy, there is no counterpart to this collective for the time of peace – the

collective 'Our' which opens the lines fades away in the striking impersonality of peace's 'victorious wreaths', its 'monuments', 'merry meeting' and its 'delightful measures'. The formal symmetry of the antithetical structure exposes the lack of social collective that, according to Richard, distinguishes war and peace. As we will analyse in greater detail, the first scene of the second act supports Richard's analysis: the peaceful unity which the dying king establishes at his court is based on dissembling. It is superficial, in a literal understanding of the adjective: it relies on simple, ritualised gestures of touch that modulate the deep rifts between the rivalling parties, so that they form the temporary appearance of smooth peacefulness.

The fact that Richard is denied this 'smoothing' *modus* makes him embody the foundational, 'substantial' nature of war. He is a consequent reminder of the luring superficiality of peace, because he embodies the forces that bring forth peace's smooth surface: the forces of war.

The passage analysed at the beginning exposes peace as only a fleeting moment, a temporary modulation that veils its origin in forces of war ('War hath smoothed his wrinkled front'). The emblems of the new, triumphant peace, the 'victorious wreaths', speak of this material origin in war. Although symbols for the fact that the bloody conflict has ended and that a glorious victor has been found, the signifier 'wreath' betrays its close connection to the signifiers to which it is supposed to establish a binary opposition. Phonetically, '*wreath*' and '*wrinkled front*' clearly form a group, sharing the conspicuous phonetic sequence of /w/ (or /f/) and /r/. Semantically, 'wreath' and 'wrinkle' can be synonyms ('A fold, crease, or wrinkle' (*OED*, 'wreath, *n.*'; 4.a.)). Now, in this new period of peace that has begun, the brows are no longer 'wrinkled' in the gesture of frowns, and it is no longer 'wounds' that have to be bound up (cf. *R3* 5.3.177). Victorious wreaths bind the winners' brows and mark the transition to a new order of

the world. However, these 'wreaths' are but a modulation of the ancient 'wrinkles'; like bandages that cover wounds, these wreaths veil War's 'grim-visaged' face, they dissemble his 'wrinkled front' – and, at the same time, these wreaths are nothing but a particular arrangement of wrinkles that produce the smooth surface of peace.

It is wrinkles that bind the loops of repetition, whirls and folds that make the surface (re)encounter itself and thereby produce structures of sense, of belonging and identity. As I have tried to show, the few lines I quoted from Richard's soliloquy expose this process on the level of the signifiers, of the entangling play in-between meaning and phonetics. There is a last phenomenon of this kind to which I would like to direct our attention before moving on to elaborate on the relevance of these observations for the play as a whole.

The first line of the passage establishes a striking assonance on the sound /ow/ that issues into the anaphora 'Our', shaping lines 2–4: 'Now are *our* brows bound [. . .]', '*Our* bruised arms', '*Our* stern alarums'. This phonetic group is characterised by a strong tension: whereas 'our' and 'brows' are clearly delegated to the semantic field of personalised War (the past period that Richard bemoans), the adverb of time 'now' demarcates the new era of peace that has just begun. In the theatrical setting, the temporal deixis of 'now', however, opens up an additional layer of meaning, a layer that criticism has discovered to be among Shakespeare's almost conventional sources of theatrical wit: the playwright frequently plays with the reference of the shifter 'now' to the theatrical situation as such, to the here and now of the performance that is established by the bodily co-presence of actors and audience.

The fifth line echoes the very beginning of the play, which employs the shifter 'now' to its maximum impact: '*Now* is the winter of our discontent / Made glorious summer by this son of York' (*R*₃ 1.1.1–2). With Richard standing alone on

the empty platform stage, the reference 'Now', the first word of the play, is as undetermined as can be. This effect is even heightened by the fact that the 'reality' that is established – 'Now is the winter of our discontent' – is crossed out again by the second line and apparently turned into its opposite: winter 'is made' summer by an agent to which another undetermined shifter, 'this', refers. The logic of the seasons that Richard uses as an image for the change from war to peace emphasises the temporality and the fragility of the situation: victory and peace cannot, once and for all, banish war. The following two lines continue the metaphor of season and weather: 'And all the clouds that loured upon our house / In the deep bosom of the ocean buried' (*R3* 1.1.4–5). It will be another son/sun of York that will re-raise these clouds, attract their watery substance from the bottom of the sea and thereby change the surface of the world once again. This sun/son is Richard. He embodies the force that connects depth and surface. He embodies, in Gilles Deleuze's words, the 'becoming subversive of the depths' ('Plato and the Simulacrum' 258) that all the others try 'to repress [. . .] as deeply as possible, to shut it up in a cavern at the bottom of the Ocean' ('Plato and the Simulacrum' 259). He exposes the processes of which the current moment, as stable as it might appear, are but a temporary modulation. There are no smooth objects, in contrast to others that are sharp or rough – there are but processes of smoothing and wrinkling which endlessly create the textures of the world.

It is no coincidence that Shakespeare opens his play with a 'Now' that is defined as a moment of change. At this critical point, the movement of 'smoothing' becomes perceivable or at least reconstructable, as Richard shows in his soliloquy. The transition from war to peace summarised by Richard is, however, not the only change to which he asks the audience to direct their attention. He prepares them for yet another, more important transition: as 'the troubler of

the poor world's peace' (*R3* 1.3.220), he will disrupt the current world's smoothness, he will reintroduce holes and wrinkles. These surface-manipulations which come from an agent of the repressed warring depths will shape the play that the audience are about to experience. The shifting 'Now' describes the moment in which these transitions are performed – in which the tension between what is and what could be is given room to unfold, to become productive. This moment is deeply theatrical – a moment to which the audience exposes themselves willingly, more than that, for the thrill of which we – the audience – have come to the theatre. In *Richard III*, Shakespeare exposes our involvedness as viewers in the temporary 'trouble' that we are confronted with in the plays we see. Richard's odd expository soliloquy makes us his accomplices, his partners in crime (cf. McNeir 172). No matter whether it is Richard's thirst for revenge and power or the viewer's thirst for stories – we both want something to happen, now, in the limited time of our co-presence. The theatrical 'Now' thus re-establishes, on a different level, a form of collective that we encountered in Richard's soliloquy: *our* brows are not supposed to be smoothened in theatre – we expect them to be either convulsed by comic laughter or distorted by tragic fear. Therefore, we are secretly looking forward to Richard's manipulations – and they will touch us as deeply as his fictional victims.

Touches of Peace and War

When the sick King Edward senses his end is near, he pursues a last wish: he wants to make '[his] friends at peace on earth' (*R3* 2.1.6). In other words, although the triumph of the House of York has been duly celebrated and peace proclaimed, 'the blessed period of this peace' (*R3* 2.1.44) is still to be realised. The king himself voices obstacles to this project: the members of the king's party 'have been factious one

against the other' (R3 2.1.20); it is their 'unity' (R3 2.1.31) that has to be ensured.

King Edward attempts to ensure that his peers 'continue this united league' (R3 2.1.2) by summoning them to a sort of pacification ritual that establishes the longed-for peace. According to early modern custom, the contractual speech acts that King Edward demands from his subjects are supported by gestures of touch which enact the unity declared by the words spoken:

KING EDWARD

– Hastings and Rivers, take each other's hand;
Dissemble not your hatred. Swear your love.

RIVERS

By heaven. My soul is purged from grudging hate,
And with my hand I seal my true heart's love. (R3 2.1.7–10)

Further 'reconciliations' follow this pattern: the king asks his wife to let her arch-enemy, Hastings, kiss her hand (R3 2.1.21), Dorset to embrace Hastings, and Buckingham to embrace the Queen's 'allies' (R3 2.1.30). They all obey and perform what the king, acting like a stage manager, directs them to do – only Buckingham wittily evades a contractual, declarative speech act. However, he, like all the others, enacts his part of the king's charade of social touches. The whole measure appears desperate: the king is well aware that these social touches are in danger of remaining shallow. He repeatedly expresses his anxiety of 'hidden falsehood' (R3 2.1.14) that may continue to lure behind the smooth surface of public show. However, there is nothing he can do about these doubts.⁴ On the contrary, the imperatives he directs at the court members testify to their foundation. The king's imperatives are haunted by the paradoxical structure that Niklas Luhmann has discovered for the semantics of love (cf. Luhmann *Love as Passion* 70; 166): analogue to the

appeal 'Be authentic!' that Luhmann elaborates on, the king's 'Dissemble not your hatred' (*R*₃ 2.1.8) or 'do it unfeignedly' (*R*₃ 2.1.22) prompts what cannot be prompted. He knows that the different factions hate each other, and it is this situation that motivates his intervention. The members of court are called to act against their hearts and perform a romance of reconciliation. At the same time, this acting out of the king's wish is to be done without dissembling and 'unfeignedly': a typical double-bind situation that demands play-acting while calling for authenticity.

In fact, the king's helplessness exposes the impossibility of constituting a 'united league' of peace. It confirms the diagnosis Richard presented in his initial monologue, when the collective of war did not find a counterpart in times of peace – a Schmittian insight, one might say.⁵ It is only two closely related 'instances' that can fully meet the king's paradoxical demand: theatre and Richard, both rather belligerent and not at all embodiments of peaceful harmony.

The theatrical situation solves the king's paradox by introducing a conventional agreement: although the audience know that what they see is play-acted, 'feigned', they have accepted to take it as if it was authentic. Theatrical speech is not to be confused with lying or dissembling – even though, outside the theatrical situation and its silent contract, it would have to be regarded as exactly these two.

Richard, I would like to argue, is authentic: he exposes his essential being only when dissembling, when feigning. To me, Joel Elliot Slotkin is correct when speculating that Richard has 'no essential identity in himself apart from performance' (14). In a certain way, he embodies theatre.⁶ Whether his lack of stable identity singles him out, or whether 'his mode of being' (Siemon 247) 'reflects [the] common nature' of those surrounding him (Siemon 245), is hard to tell. The awareness he creates for the potential lack of a trustworthy, 'genuine' 'non-dissembling' (non-fictional) core certainly distinguishes

him from the rest, and contributes to the fascination he radiates.

His role in the king's ceremony of reconciliation speaks volumes. He is the only person in the feud who manages to evade both the contractual speech and the ceremonial touches the king enforces upon the quarrelling courtiers. He feeds the illusion of his involvement in an all-encompassing peace by plain lies. However, although it is highly uncertain that the others' oaths of harmony and peace are more honest than Richard's manipulative words, his 'feigning' and 'dissembling' follow a different mode. This is indicated by his not becoming part of the community of touch that the others have joined. Richard does not adapt and subject himself to the king's superficial, ceremonial mode of touch, a mode which only the authority of the king has at its disposal. Richard's lies 'touch deeper' than the courtiers' submissive gestures of ceremonial reconciliation. As he himself tells the audience right at the beginning, his 'lies' are 'well steeled with weighty arguments' (*R*₃ 1.1.148). As we will see, his touch is an existential one. It penetrates the surface of courtly conduct; it is violent, always potentially fatal. It has the depth of war, whose touches are not slyly submissive but negotiate the question of life and death.

Richard himself elaborates upon his being different, which excludes him from the courtly community and its particular 'touch'. His tirade precedes the scene of reconciliation:

RICHARD

By holy Paul, they love his grace but lightly
That fill his ears with such dissentious rumours.
Because I cannot flatter, and look fair,
Smile in men's faces, smooth, deceive and cog,
Duck with French nods and apish courtesy,
I must be held a rancorous enemy.
Cannot a plain man live and think no harm
But thus his simple truth must be abused
With silken, sly, insinuating jacks? (*R*₃ 1.3.45-53)

Although Richard's words can be pitted against his actual behaviour/performance two scenes later, true, trenchant analysis and plain lie can hardly be kept apart, with regard to his self-description. It proves to be correct that Richard, unlike the others, does not '[d]uck with French nods', he does not partake in the 'apish courtesy' of kissing hands and embracing his foes, as directed by his majesty the king. And yet Richard is far from being a 'plain man', whose social interaction would be characterised by 'simple truth'. He does (nothing but) 'deceive and cog'. He has divulged the secret of his evil machinations to the audience at the very beginning of the play, so that we can observe him lying without any embarrassment. However, there is 'truth' woven into his lies – this is what makes them 'well-steeled', gives them their violent, piercing strength.

A dimension of 'honest' self-revelation continues the discourse of surface quality – 'wrinkled' and 'smooth' – that Richard has established in his initial soliloquy. He now elaborates on the lack of a capacity for peaceful times, which can already be found in his first words. The phrase 'I cannot flatter' may serve as a case in point. On the surface, it looks like a plain lie. We have seen Richard 'beguile or persuade with artful blandishments' (*OED*, 'flatter, *v.1*'; 5.), he is a master in that. However, the verb 'to flatter' is connected to the field of surface quality via its complicated etymology: it probably derives from the old French *flater*, 'to flatten down, smooth', hence 'to stroke with the hand, caress' (cf. *OED*, 'flatter, *v.1*'; etym.). In early modern England, *flatter* could still be used in 'French sense', signifying 'to touch or stroke lightly and caressingly' (*OED*, 'flatter, *v.1*'; 1†b.). Richard himself adduces the synonym 'to smooth' in the triad 'smooth, deceive and cog', which explains what he understands by flattering. The notion of smiling also alludes to the constellation that Richard's early soliloquy sketched out: as

Richmond will explicate eventually, it is 'smooth-faced peace' (*R3* 5.5.33) that brings along 'smiling plenty' (*R3* 5.5.34) – and thus stands in binary opposition to 'Grim-visaged War' and its 'wrinkled front' (*R3* 1.1.19). Paying attention to the semantics of surface quality, we can discover a layer of parhesiastic truth (cf. Foucault *Fearless Speech*) in Richard's words: he is, indeed, not capable of 'flattering'; his touch is not 'silken'; he cannot operate in the 'light', the 'smooth' modus of peace's surfaces.

The reason for this incapacity is indeed 'plain': Richard cannot 'look fair'; he is a 'plain man', an overtly unattractive person (*OED*, 'plain, *adj.* 2'; 17.). As he has told us in his initial soliloquy, he is 'curtailed of this fair proportion', 'rudely stamped', 'not shaped for sportive tricks', 'cheated of feature by dissembling nature' (*R3* 1.1.14–19). Richard's outward appearance is the exact opposite of 'fair'; it is not at all 'free from roughness or irregularities; smooth, even' (*OED*, 'fair, *adj.*'). He embodies the cross-grained crookedness that makes others expect the 'rancorous enemy' that he is. In contrast to other Shakespearean villains like Iago or Edmund, from the beginning, (almost) everyone is well aware that Richard, as a person, poses a serious threat. '[I]t is a mistake to overemphasize Richard's success in fooling other characters,' writes James R. Siemon (245) with reference to Robert C. Jones (cf. 37). His 'interior hatred' is well known, and not only because it is exposed by Richard's 'outward action' against parts of the royal family, as Queen Elizabeth claims (*R3* 1.3.65–7). The early modern audience, who experienced their world as held together by resemblances and analogies (cf. Foucault *The Order of Things* 17–44), would have inferred this 'interior hatred', this interior deformity, from Richard's outward appearance: 'Richard epitomizes the union of outer appearances and inner truths' (Slotkin 7).

In his famous soliloquy at the end of *Henry VI, Part 3*, Richard himself explains his machinations with this analogy:

RICHARD

The midwife wondered and the women cried,
 'O, Jesus bless us, he is born with teeth!'
 And so I was, which plainly signified
 That I should snarl, and bite and play the dog.
 Then, since the heavens have shaped my body so,
 Let hell make crook'd my mind to answer it.
 I have no brother; I am like no brother.
 And this word 'love,' which greybeards call divine,
 Be resident in men like one another
 And not in me: I am myself alone. (3H6 5.6.74–83)

Richard 'shapes' his mind according to the body in which he has been born – so that they correspond in their being 'crook'd', that is, 'not straight', 'not fair', 'uneven'. The natal teeth play an important symbolic role in this process: they demarcate Richard's 'fate' from the very moment of his birth. They are responsible for his 'dissembling': they make him *dissimilar* (cf. lat. *dissimilis*) from the rest (cf. OED, 'dissemble, *v.2*'). He has 'no brother', because he is 'like no brother'; there is nobody who matches his odd, deformed appearance. At the same time, they make him *dissemble*, 'simulate by imitation' (OED, 'dissemble, *v.1*'; 5.d.): The natal teeth mean that he should '*play the dog*'. It is important to note that Richard is not born evil, he is not born a dog. A sentence from his initial soliloquy confirms this: 'since I cannot prove a lover', Richard says, 'I am determined to prove a villain' (R3 1.1.28–30). Richard is born with a restricted set of capacities. He admits to 'have neither pity, love nor fear' (3H6 5.6.68); he knows that he lacks the mode of smoothness: 'Why, Love forswore me in my mother's womb: / [. . .] for I should not deal in her *soft laws*' (3H6 3.2.153–4; my emph.). He has been born, nevertheless. As a result, with Richard, a sharp piece of war,

of death, a piece of brutal ‘chaos’, of ‘disproportion’ and ‘deformity’ (3*H6* 3.2.158–61; my emph.) protrudes into the apparently ‘smooth’, loving and peaceful world of the living. ‘[L]ike one lost in a thorny wood, / That rents the thorns and is rent with the thorns’ (3*H6* 3.2.174–5), Richard embodies an existential mode of touch that the prevalent ‘soft laws’ of humanist and/or Christian pedigree are not used to represent. However, as Richard’s simile spells out, there are thorns in the world that he, the epitome of thorns, encounters.

‘I am myself alone.’ Michael Thalheimer took this sentence as a motto for his 2017 production of *Richard III* at the Residenztheater Munich. The production does not focus so much on the protagonist’s psychic disposition as one might expect, but rather explores Richard’s theatricality, his capacities as actor and stage manager. By following traces that Richard has left in his soliloquies from *Henry VI* 3, Thalheimer suggests an understanding of the title hero’s exceptionality, which reaches deeper than a phenomenology of psychological pathology. It is a commonplace in criticism to recognise ‘Richard’s narcissism’ (Slotkin 22), and reconstruct how ‘the stage Machiavell’s self-love’ (Siemon 244) has slowly developed into ‘[s]chizophrenia’ (McNeir 184) by the fifth act. However, ‘the actor [...] exposed without his masks’ (McNeir 184), which Waldo F. McNeir discovers in Richard’s late ‘schizophrenic’ soliloquy, resembles what others have found to be present on stage from the beginning: theatricality somehow short-circuits the attempt at seeing in Shakespeare’s play a psychopathological case study. Thalheimer’s production therefore takes a different approach, focusing directly on theatricality. His strategy is similar in outline to Vance Adair’s Lacanian reading: it refrains from identifying Richard’s psychic illness – that is, categorising Richard as sick and explaining the reasons for his problems – and analyses the play as the elaboration of a greater, structural problem which concerns us all. According to Adair, the

deformed Richard embodies what Lacan has called the ‘an-morphic stain’ (cf. Adair 54). This stain is not a pathology of subjectivity, but its unconscious foundation. Richard refers us to a layer that is situated before or beyond the closing of the ‘symbolic order’, beyond the realm of commensurability, stable meaning and oneness. His ‘ineffectuality of one who has lost all cohesion as an individual’, his being ‘potentially anyone and at the same time no one’ (McNeir 184) refers us to the starting point of subject formation, where play-acting appears to hold a constitutive function.

Like Michael Thalheimer, I would suggest that Richard’s ‘I am myself alone’ can be understood against the theatricality located at the degree zero of subject formation. Richard’s ‘loneliness’ is not ‘the complacent isolation of individualism’, as Blanchot (20) calls it. The ‘standard’, the ‘measure’ for his ‘loneliness’, is not merely the others – it is also, and primarily, himself: ‘I am *myself* alone.’ He is alone to himself; he is not even alone with himself. His incapacity to love affects the very foundation of personhood and individuality. Richard is not only unable to form loving (or any kind of) bonds to others; he exposes a protopsychic layer – a layer preceding his apparent pathological narcissism – on which he is not even capable of developing a relation to himself. On this level, ‘he’ and ‘himself’ are ‘all one’ (*OED*, ‘alone, *adj.*’; etym.), a mere grey dot, without a stabilised interior distance (a differentiation into at least two instances) to itself. His state may perhaps be said to resemble what Freud calls primary narcissism, a state which precedes the formation of the ego and any libidinal object-cathexes (cf. Freud ‘Zur Einführung des Narzißmus’).

It is this proto-individual, pre-personal neutrality, this absence of any definitive binding and therefore stabilising structure, that makes Richard, in my opinion, embody Maurice Blanchot’s notion of ‘essential solitude’ (19–33). For Blanchot, ‘essential solitude’ does not signify a subject’s

social situation, it does not denote a feeling of loneliness; it does not belong to the subject at all. On the contrary, it demarcates the transcending of the very limits of subjectivity.

In Blanchot's understanding, 'essential solitude' is the condition of possibility for the writer's 'access' to what he calls 'œuvre'; the realm of writing – a realm that will always remain mysterious, and that knows neither domination nor domesticity. It is an a-personal realm, a realm of 'neutral, impersonal presence', of 'the indeterminate They [*On*], the immense, faceless Someone' (Blanchot 32), a realm which we as individualised persons cannot experience in everyday life, although it touches us essentially, as mortal beings that have 'come' from 'somewhere' and will 'go' 'somewhere', some day:

Here lies the most hidden moment of the experience. That the work must be the unique clarity of that which grows dim [*s'éteint*] and through which everything is extinguished [*s'éteint*] – that it can exist only where the ultimate affirmation is verified by the ultimate negation – this requirement we can still comprehend, despite its going counter to our need for peace, simplicity, and sleep. Indeed, we understand it intimately, as the intimacy of the decision which is ourselves and which gives us being only when, at our risk and peril, we reject – with fire and iron and with silent refusal – being's permanence and protection. (Blanchot 45)

With Richard, what Blanchot calls 'work' [*œuvre*] enters the stage. Shakespeare, in one of his typical metatheatrical strategies, constructs a *mise-en-abîme* structure: staging the (literary) 'work' within a 'work', exposing its literary effect and functioning. Luhmann would call this the staging of a re-entry: the re-entry of the literary form into the literary form (cf. Luhmann *Social Systems* 167).

As Thalheimer emphasised in his production, the 'form' that Richard embodies is overtly theatrical. He thus literally 'performs' the 'essence' of Blanchot's 'essential solitude': 'in

it dissimulation appears [*qu'en elle la dissimulation apparaît*]' (Blanchot 33; transl. altered). Richard's theatricality is a theatricality of (dis)simulation:

RICHARD

I can add colours to the chameleon,
Change shapes with Proteus for advantages,
And set the murderous Machiavel to school. (3H6 3.2.191-3)

But what is it that Richard's art of dissimulation, of camouflage and deceit, what is it that it dissembles? His hunger for the crown? The Machiavellian 'advantages' he speaks of indicate that his theatrical art merely serves the purpose of empowerment. However, is power really the root motive of Richard's project?

RICHARD

Then, since this earth affords no joy to me,
But to command, to cheque, to o'erbear such
As are of better person than myself. (3H6 3.2.165-7)

The motive of power drives his quest – it is, however, as Richard explicitly notes, a secondary effect: it takes the place of something else. Is it 'other joys'? The 'joy [. . .] to command, to cheque, to o'erbear' serves compensatory purposes. As a psychological structure which Richard has fabricated for his own stability as an individual, this hunger for power is an epitome of Nietzschean 'resentment' (cf. Nietzsche *Genealogy of Morals* 17-21). It is a reactive, negating, annihilating force that aims at the destruction of others, because they are 'of better person'. By shifting the focus from the 'self' to the others, this psychological structure masks, it 'dissembles', the actual problem: the problem of Richard's personhood. We are very quick in accepting Richard's compensatory, sadistic joy because it follows the libidinal economy that we ourselves identify with. However, if we are to take seriously what

Richard has told us, his own psychological explanation loses cogency. It may turn out to be a mere 'screen-explanation' (cf. Freud 'Über Deckerinnerungen'), since sadistic joy clearly belongs to Love's 'soft law'. If Love has really already 'fore-sworn' Richard in his 'mother's womb', the force driving his actions must lie beyond his subjective, libidinal economy.

In the beginning was Richard's body, its deformity, its disproportion – its teeth.⁷ This is what Richard cannot conceal – and he will not even try to dissemble his abnormality. On the contrary, as we have seen, it is his deformity that 'dissembles'. In the beginning were the teeth – and an appeal to play: 'Play the dog!' This dissimulation dissembles 'nothing', it dissembles the mystery of birth, the 'nothing' that we were and through which we pass before making our entrance on the stage of this world.

'Play the dog!' follows the same logic of double bind that we encountered in the king's imperative to 'play the role and do not dissemble'. However, it is located differently, on a different level. Here, the imperative initiates the primal scene of play-acting that happens to be, at the same time, the primal scene of a being's being. The equation: 'Be yourself! = Play yourself!' does not dissemble, does not conceal or cover up anything, except the abyss of being. All the other roles that Richard, as the dog, the villain, takes on to realise his project are secondary; they are part of his first role, in that they are located on the same level as the roles the king forces on the courtiers. However, Richard's secondary roles reach deeper. They do not merely function as a superficial costume that one throws on to meet external requirements, while one's 'true', inner essence/being secretly remains untouched. Richard's dissembling, his 'changing shapes with Proteus', is always in touch with his first, his existential role – it serves his original histrionic project of playing the dog.

In other words, Richard's 'flattering', his 'smiling', is a mode of 'biting' – it goes back to his natal teeth and their

appeal to play. Play-acting is thus associated with a particular mode of touch: a violent, an existential touch that reaches deep, that does not know the difference between surface and inner essence: a touch of war which touches at life and death.

It is this 'truth' about his deep dissembling that Richard, between the lines, tells his brother Clarence, shortly before commissioning his death. It is again 'lies well steeled' (R₃ 1.1.147) that speak of the connection of play-acting and touching deeply:

RICHARD

Were it to call King Edward's widow 'sister',
I will perform it to enfranchise you.

Meantime, this deep disgrace in brotherhood

Touches me deeper than you can imagine. (R₃ 1.1.110–13)

Richard will perform a 'reconciliation' with Queen Elizabeth. He will, however, make sure that Clarence is already dead when this scene of reconciliation takes place. As it turns out, Clarence would have been set free, if he were still alive. The 'deep disgrace in brotherhood' does not only 'touch' Richard; it will also touch Clarence 'deeper' than he had hoped for. The depth of this touch is the depth of play-acting; of a performance whose 'authentic', 'honest', non-performative 'foundation', its strategic motivation, can only be guessed at. And what if there was 'no such [non-play-acting] substratum'? If there was 'no "being" behind doing, working [*Wirken*], becoming'? If "the doer" [was] a mere appanage to the action' – and 'the action'/*acting* were everything (Nietzsche *Genealogy of Morals* 28; transl. altered)?

Richard – A 'deep dissembler'

Although its protagonist is a master of surface manipulation who claims to be able to 'add colours to the chameleon',

Shakespeare's *Richard III* is a play about depth. The bare figures speak for themselves: the adjective *deep* occurs eighteen times; by way of comparison, *Hamlet* has four, *King Lear* five. The entry in the *OED* gives quotations from *Richard III* for seven different meanings of the adjective 'deep'. The play apparently sounds the semantic 'depth' of this concept – and, as I would like to suggest, it links its reflections on depth to the question of theatrical manipulations of surfaces: it is about theatre's 'touching upon the deep'.

It is Richard who introduces the adjective 'deep'. We have quoted him speaking of a 'deep disgrace in brotherhood' that 'touches him deeper' than his interlocutor, Clarence, could imagine. For Clarence, 'deep' signifies a certain, enhanced intensity here – something that 'comes from or enters into one's inmost nature or feelings; that affects one profoundly' (*OED*, 'deep, *adj.*'; 9.). This is the way he himself, according to the *OED*, uses 'deep' three scenes later, when he, in 'dialogue with God', refers to his prayers as 'deep' (*R3* 1.4.69). As with Anne's 'deep exclaims' of mourning (*R3* 1.2.50), the intensity of their 'acts' testifies to their authenticity: it is not just a superficial stylisation, no costume, but their 'inmost nature' that exposes itself as touched. However, Richard undermines the authenticity connected with the adjective *deep* early in the play. In an instance of dramatic irony, the audience notices that Richard's comparative 'deeper' does not merely further intensify the intensifier 'deep', but introduces a false bottom. What here happens to the intensifying adjective 'deep' does not happen to it 'from without': Richard merely activates one of its central semantic dimensions. The fact that one has to touch *deeply* in order to reach 'one's inmost nature' means that this inmost nature is '[h]ard to fathom or "get to the bottom of"' (*OED*, 'deep, *adj.*'; 6.a.). Deep is what does not show on the surface – which is both the reason for its authenticity/truth and its secretiveness.

In other words, when Richard divulges his 'deep intent' (*R3* 1.1.149) to us, we cannot be sure to have reached a

bottom that is, once and for all, secure. This is not due to the fact that Richard is the sort of friend, '[d]eep, hollow, treacherous and full of guile' (*R3* 2.1.38), who only suits as a punishment and should never be trusted.⁸ Richard is, for once, certainly not lying when he shares his plans with us. However, it remains doubtful whether a person's 'intent' may resolve the 'secrets of the deep' (*R3* 1.4.35) with which Richard is 'playing', whether it may stop the ambiguous forces at play . . .

Richard and Buckingham consciously conjure up the depth of the deep – they trust in their having it at their disposal. Richard himself obviously believes in his 'deep intent'. Together with Buckingham he relies on the fact that the helping hands they are using are 'sworn as deeply to effect what we intend / As closely to conceal what we impart' (*R3* 3.1.158–9). Here again, the semantic doubleness/duality of 'deep' emerges: it combines 'trustworthy authenticity' and 'secretiveness'. At the same time, Richard and Buckingham use the effect of 'authenticity' produced by deepness for their manipulative stagings. It is Richard's 'meditating with two deep divines' (*R3* 3.7.74) that makes him (appear) an adequate personality for the 'deep designs' (*R3* 3.7.66) of appointing a new king – that is, for heaving Richard on the throne. Buckingham picks his words carefully and calculates with the persuasive force of 'deepness'. However, all these 'deeps' are instances of dramatic irony: the audience has been made aware of the false bottom of this deepness. Furthermore, the adjective 'deep' carries in itself the semantic tinge of sin, crime and guilt. The cardinal's 'so deep a sin' (*R3* 3.1.43), Clarence's being 'in sin as deep as I' (*R3* 1.4.213) and the Duchess of York's speaking of 'deep vice' (*R3* 2.2.28) actualise this semantic dimension of 'deep', its being used '[a]s an attribute of moral qualities or of actions in which sinking or abasement is present' (*OED*, 'deep, *adj.*'; 8.).

When Buckingham and Richard re-raise the warring 'clouds that loured' on the house of York, raise them from their

being ‘buried’ in ‘the deep bosom of the ocean’ (*R3* 1.1.4–5), they are not aware that they are actively accelerating their own abasement. Their own rise on the wheel of fortune is doubled by a simultaneous movement downward, their continual sinking on moral grounds. They unleash the power of the deep, they attempt to exploit it for their own project – and they even come to embody it. However, despite the almost godlike mastery they must feel while successfully pursuing their plans, they have no idea what it is that they are operating with. This is hardly surprising. According to Maurice Blanchot, ‘[t]he deep does not surrender itself directly [*en face*]; it only reveals itself by dissembling itself [*en se dissimulant*] in the work’ (170; transl. altered). Although it is Richard, as suggested above, who embodies what Blanchot calls work and who reveals the deep by dissembling, the deep also hides from/eludes him. The abyss of the deep inevitably breaks open and will swallow him, along with anybody else. Murdering his young nephews, the ‘[t]wo deep enemies’ (*R3* 4.2.71) as he calls them (he obviously believes in the intensity of their hostility), is a desperate attempt at impossible rescue. Margaret’s curse finally seizes him: in Buckingham and Stanley, he takes ‘deep traitors’ for ‘dearest friend[s]’ (*R3* 1.3.223) and dies all alone. Buckingham falls prey to the deep as well: his ‘reward’ for the ‘deep service’ he has provided for Richard (*R3* 4.2.117) is no less fatal.

It is others who gain insight ‘in the secrets of the deep’ (*R3* 1.4.35). Strikingly, they – Clarence and Hastings – are both doomed to die. While staring death in the face, they get a glimpse of – the deep!

Although the clouds that Richard sets out to raise are ‘buried’ in ‘the deep bosom of the ocean’, he does not fully realise that he is playing with death. The vivid hope for a worldly rise covers the existential backside of his ‘deep’ project. Death is certainly present in the notion of war that Richard affirms – it is, however, only the death of others that Richard

literally touches upon. As with anyone else, the reality of his own death remains repressed. Unlike Hastings, when on the brink of death, Richard is not aware that human existence and its megalomaniac thirst for power, especially in the war-like situation that he fosters, resembles the drunken sailor on the mast, 'Ready with every nod to tumble down / Into the fatal bowels of the deep' (*R3* 3.4.99–100). The deep of which Richard thinks himself to be the master, the deep, which he exploits for his ends, turns out to be 'fatal': the deep is the deep of death.

This is why both for Richard and for us (us living mortals), 'insight' into the deep is impossible.⁹ One would have to be 'in the time of death / To gaze upon these secrets of the deep' (*R3* 1.4.34–5), as the Keeper trenchantly remarks. In a certain way, Richard, as the one incapable of mourning, is the furthest away from the 'time of death'. It is this trait that distinguishes him from the play's female figures – the widows Anne, Margaret, Elizabeth and the Duchess of York. Lady Anne or Queen Elizabeth do not fall for him or his charms. They willingly accept him as what he is: death. They have come in touch with death – they have lost dear ones – and having nothing to lose except for their lives, they willingly comply with the inevitable.¹⁰ Refusing to fight their fate and '[a]ssuming their tragic roles as pitiable victims' (Howard and Rackin 106), Lady Anne or Elizabeth appear to be weak characters in a tragedy.¹¹ However, their refusal to resist testifies to a superior 'knowledge' of the essence of mortality. Paradoxically, what they do by preferring not to play the tragic heroine is affirm the (non)essence of existence. As women, they appear to have particular access to the mysterious limits of the human being: giving birth and losing (one's) life.¹²

The 'female knowledge' of mortality, however, does not provide direct insight into the secrets of the deep. The impossibility of mortals to form an idea of or even pre-experience their death subsists. Different, 'medialised' modes

of experience are necessary to circumvent this impossibility. The play exposes one such mode: the dream.¹³ It provides Clarence with a dreadful opportunity to live through 'the time of death' and 'gaze upon these secrets of the deep' shortly before his murderers enter his cell:

CLARENCE

[. . .]

Methoughts I saw a thousand fearful wracks,
A thousand men that fishes gnawed upon,
Wedges of gold, great anchors, heaps of pearl,
Inestimable stones, unvalued jewels,
All scattered in the bottom of the sea.
Some lay in dead men's skulls, and in the holes
Where eyes did once inhabit, there were crept –
As 'twere in scorn of eyes – reflecting gems,
That wooed the slimy bottom of the deep
And mocked the dead bones that lay scattered

by. (R3 1.4.24–33)

What is it that characterises 'the deep'?¹⁴ Its 'secret' appears to reside in a verb: the deep *scatters*. It dissipates, dispels, disperses, so that disparate 'things' – corpses, anchors and jewels – come to lie next to each other. More than this, they intermingle and build grotesque formations.¹⁵ As an effect of this grotesqueness, the abject and the invaluable question each other in their very essence: skulls become parts of precious, almost artistic arrangements and the invaluable is tinged by the corpses' vanity. The 'fascination' that undoubtedly issues from the deep 'is fundamentally linked to neutral, impersonal presence' (Blanchot 32): 'a thousand' human bodies 'form' the 'indeterminate They, the immense, faceless Someone' of which Blanchot speaks (32). This fascinating neutrality is produced by a primordial natural force, by the deep's scattering.¹⁶ Sometimes this force appears to reach over into the world of living beings, drawing them

into its abyss, as the Messenger reports having happened to Buckingham:

MESSENGER

The news I have to tell your majesty
Is that by sudden floods and fall of waters
Buckingham's army is dispersed and scattered,
And he himself wandered away alone,
No man knows whither. (*R3* 4.4.509–13)

It is certainly no coincidence that it is the watery, the oceanic element, the abyssal 'fall of waters' that scatters Buckingham's army and conveys him into a state of essential solitude: 'wander[ing] away alone' with nobody knowing where, Buckingham dies a kind of first death that prefigures his second and final one, which will follow shortly, when he is taken by Richard's men and executed.

Buckingham's fall, his falling prey to the scattering of the deep, foreshadows Richard's own end – as did Clarence's dream. The editors of the Arden3 edition have made a striking observation: some of the 'proceedings' taking place at the bottom of the deep, the 'wooing' and 'mocking' in particular, are reminiscent of Richard's main activities. As we will see, scattering (dissolving fundamental boundaries) is, indeed, his business. However, the paradigms that Clarence's dream exposes as dissolved, as neutralised,¹⁷ are exactly those that lend stability to Richard's very person and project. He works on nothing but the separation of dead bodies from the crown jewels: he sends his opponents down into the deep of death in order to adorn his living head with the golden ring. "A crown, or else a glorious tomb, / A scepter, or an earthly sepulcher" (*3H6* 1.4.15–16), his father had heard him shout on the battlefield. What at first looks like Richard braving death turns out to be the opposite: his project aims at 'earthly' rewards – crown, sceptre, sepulchre – no matter whether Richard will survive the battle or not. The tomb he speaks of is not the abyss

of death, but the worldly monument representing Richard's glory to the living. Clarence's dream therefore collapses the very foundation of Richard's braveness and hope. The bottom of the deep is not the dead counter-world of the living. It is its basis, its bottom, the place where all ends and from which all emerges¹⁸ – there is no earthly escape. It is the place that does not distinguish, where all distinctions are extinguished, the place of the absolute dissembling. It neither cares for individual heroics nor knows of glory or representation. At the bottom of the deep, the particular ceases to exist. Any difference of own and other dissolves – a thousand faceless bodies are scattered and it is faceless skulls – not heroic brows – that are terribly adorned with jewels, for no reason at all.

All these neutralising operations happen in the grounds of the deep's 'slimy bottom'. This bottom does not provide the ultimate foundation, but causes slippage. It scatters and disintegrates. If it founds anything, it founds the deep and its abyssal force – on mucous.¹⁹ The deep thus turns out not to be an additional vertical dimension that would supplement the horizontal dimension of the everyday world, qualifying it as superficial. 'The deep' is itself a surface phenomenon. Its 'slimy bottom' is of an absolute smoothness: not the smoothness of 'smiling plenty' that promises eternal stability, but a smoothness that brings together fish gnawing on corpses and polished 'reflecting gems'. A smoothness that does not know an opposite, because it extinguishes, it neutralises all opposites. It is biting and polishing at the same time.²⁰ Richard embodies this absolute, this biting, de-forming smoothness of the deep. He not only brings the deep to the world (where it has always been, but repressed and hidden), but he exposes, exhibits it in the world – and on stage.

The idea of connecting Richard with the notion of the deep was not Shakespeare's. He found it in one of his principal sources, in Thomas More's *History of King Richard III*. 'Hee was close and secret, a deepe dissimuler' (37), writes

More about Richard, and it is this sentence, I would suggest, that Shakespeare's play sets out to explore.

As we have shown, Richard's project of pursuing the crown, his thirst for worldly power and glory, is driven by a desperate impulse to defeat death, to escape its depth, a human impulse he shares with all of his adversaries. At the same time, he embodies the very forces of the deep. We may learn from Maurice Blanchot that what looks like a problematic contradiction turns out to be the key to Richard being the theatrical character that he is:

This in itself indicates that if men in general do not think about death, if they avoid confronting it [*se dérober*], it is doubtless in order to flee death and hide from it [*se dissimuler à elle*], but that this escape [*dérobade*] is possible only because death itself is perpetual flight before death, and because it is the deep of dissimulation [*la profondeur de la dissimulation*]. Thus to hide from it [*se dissimuler à elle*] is in a certain way to hide in it [*se dissimuler en elle*]. (Blanchot 94)

Death is 'the deep of dissimulation', the 'slimy bottom' of all hiding and dissembling, its slippery, non-foundational ground. A hiding that does not preserve what it hides – a hiding that is 'the essence' of all hiding – making disappear, dis-figuring, de-forming, for ever. As the 'deep dissimuler', Richard embodies death. He embodies its extinguishing forces as well as the 'perpetual flight before death' – that is, death. His being a deep dissimuler or dissembler indicates that he does not merely dissemble something. His dissembling reaches deeper than King Edward fears when he, for example, tells Hastings and Rivers not to '[d]issemble' their hatred (*R*₃ 2.1.8). The deep that Richard dissembles is an 'empty deep [*profondeur vide*]' (Blanchot 43; transl. altered), 'an indistinct plenitude which is empty' (Blanchot 26). Dissembling becomes 'deep' when it reaches the point of intransitivity, when it ceases

to dissemble something and just dissembles. It is here that Shakespeare discovers the theatrical potential of the historical figure of Richard III: theatre practises pure, intransitive ‘dissembling’; it exposes it, puts it on stage. Its simulation is ‘deep dissimulation’: theatre dissembles; it play-acts, without a ‘true essence/core’ in the background, without anything to hide – except for its own dissembling.

It is therefore only consequent that More’s formulation makes an appearance in Shakespeare’s text with a crucial displacement. Buckingham, talking to Richard, voices what I would suggest to be the centre of the play:

BUCKINGHAM

Tut, I can counterfeit the deep tragedian,
 Speak, and look back, and pry on every side,
 Tremble and start at wagging of a straw,
 Intending deep suspicion. (*R3* 3.5.5–8)

More’s ‘deep dissimuler’ has become ‘deep tragedian’. Although it is Buckingham who claims this ‘epithet’, it is, at the same time, surreptitiously attributed to Richard. The latter has triggered Buckingham’s claims with a question: ‘Come, cousin, canst thou quake and change thy colour [. . .]?’ (*R3* 3.5.1)

When Buckingham, only seconds later, proves indeed capable of joining Richard in play-acting their being chased by imaginary enemies, he ‘counterfeit[s]’ one particular ‘deep tragedian’: his master Richard. He ‘changes colour’ like Richard, who, as quoted above, boasted of being capable of ‘add[ing] colours to the chameleon’ and ‘[c]hanging shapes with Proteus’ (*3H6* 3.2.191–2). At the same time, the explicitly theatrical vocabulary that Buckingham employs introduces a decisive shift. In contrast to More’s choice of words, ‘dissimuler’, which focuses on Richard’s veiling of his ‘secret project’, Buckingham’s ‘tragedian’ draws attention to Richard’s dissembling itself, to the play-acting, to the

histrionic productions Richard brings forth. The deep of the ‘tragedian’ does not conceal anything. The tragedian is all surface. Nevertheless, his art is an art of depth. As Buckingham’s voicing of ‘deep suspicion’ emphasises, the tragedian must be a master of creating intense affects. Hamlet will marvel at exactly this phenomenon when encountering the players in the second act: for creating its emotional power, theatre does not need any foundation on true, authentic grounds. Buckingham exposes the gaping of the (theatrical) abyss, the slimy bottom of theatre, so to speak, by applying theatre’s characteristic operation to itself. This is what happens when he claims to be able to ‘counterfeit the deep tragedian’. He claims more than and something different from being able to imitate someone who is pursued by an enemy and who fears for his life. The ‘tragedian’ embodies imitation having become intransitive. Buckingham therefore boasts of being able to (dis)simulate pure (dis)simulation, to ‘counterfeit the deep tragedian’.

The paradox that Shakespeare – with an ironic wit that surpasses that of his characters – puts into Buckingham’s mouth indicates the paradox that is inherent in the ‘deep tragedian’ as such: the paradox of the depth of a surface. By definition, the ‘tragedian’ does not have an ‘inmost nature or feelings’ – nevertheless, he is probably more than anyone else capable of affecting ‘profoundly’: he is deep without being deep (cf. ‘deep, *adj.*’; 9.). Does he reveal the deep as (mere) simulation? Yes and no. The frightening groundlessness of theatre, its kinship to the pre- or post-figural, the shapeless realm of ‘the deep bosom of the ocean’ reaches over to ‘our’ world. It contaminates the world as we imagine it. It shakes our belief in the stable grounds of authenticity and truth, in the unchanging and timeless foundations of being. Here, we encounter the issue that Stanley Cavell has identified as central to Shakespeare’s works: ‘how to live at all in a groundless world’ (3). Theatre’s intensity undermines the hierarchised

distinction of 'the real, the grounded, the "material" world' and 'mere appearance, simulation, shadows of imitation'. It testifies to the profound reality of the deep, the bottomless, the paradoxical, slimy abyss of (dis)simulation.

Theatre's ungroundedness is not only spoken about; it is also performed. When Richard and Buckingham enter the stage '*in rotten armour, marvellous ill-favoured*' (R3 3.5 SD), the audience is made to believe – for some seconds – in a turn of events. Although the stage characters' dialogue quickly restores the superior awareness of the spectators and reveals the 'rotten armour' to be a carefully considered costume, the scene unleashes an intense theatrical affect. This is not so much due to the fact that the audience, for a short moment only, is taken in by Richard's dissembling and comes to share his victims' position; the scene 'touches more deeply': it touches upon the slimy bottom of theatricality.

We should not forget that it is a 'tragedian' who speaks Buckingham's words; an actor, who lives and breathes in the same world as the audience. As a tragedian, the actor (also) – in a case of dramatic irony – talks about his own art, which, in the surrounding of flourishing theatre business and prominent, competing actors, certainly entails 'counterfeiting' histrionic role models, adapting to a certain style of play-acting. Hamlet's famous instructions to the players can be read as a commentary on this question of 'counterfeiting the tragedians'. However, the scene does not merely crack a theatrical joke. What makes it a typical instance of Shakespearean metatheatre is the fact that it operates on the very boundary of theatre and reality.

When Buckingham, the stage character, 'counterfeits the deep tragedian', something strange and complex happens: the role/part plays its actor. The relations of material basis (actor) and ephemeral effect (the stage character) are inverted, or rather perverted. As a result, the boundary of theatre and world collapses in a double movement. On the

one hand, theatre appropriates, it ‘eats up’ the world: the materiality of the actor on the stage, theatre’s material conditions of possibility, are drawn into theatre’s ephemeral realm; they become the objects, the effects of play-acting. On the other hand, theatre’s material conditions of possibility, the tragedian, the theatrical machinery, appropriates, ‘eats up’, the actual theatrical ‘production’: when the role/part plays its actor, there is just ‘actor’ left on stage – an actor who does not play anything, except for his playing the actor that he emerges to be.

In a fascinating parrhesiastic moment that transgresses the fictional framing, the actor is given the opportunity to speak truly about himself. For a very short moment, he bails out of the conventional ‘lies’ of the theatrical setting. He does not dissemble his being someone else while performing a role on stage. He is not a shallow ‘dissimuler’, who, on the surface, dissembles what he actually ‘is’ in his inner inmost. For a moment, he does not cloak his true intents. He becomes a ‘deep dissimuler’: he exposes his costume as a costume. More than this, he exposes himself to *be* nothing but a costume – a chameleon – the costume of costumes.

However, what is it that this actor acts, what is it that he stages – what has become of the theatrical communication whose project it has been to make a fictional world appear on stage? In publicly play-acting nothing but its material foundation, theatre shows literally nothing. It is exactly this gesture that deeply affects the viewers – an affect that Maurice Blanchot calls ‘fascination’ (cf. 31–2). In his metatheatrical moments, Shakespeare entangles his audience in a particular sort of communication, a sort of communication that Maurice Blanchot characterises as ‘literary’: ‘In this communication it is obscurity that must reveal itself [*se faire jour*] and night that must dawn. This is revelation where nothing appears, but where dissimulation becomes appearance’ (198; transl. altered). Although theatre, as its name indicates, consists of

‘putting something before our eyes’, it is acquainted with the obscure secrets of the deep. In fact, it might, especially in its Dionysian origins, be closer to these secrets of the deep than we might today imagine. This is what Friedrich Nietzsche aims at when speaking of the ‘great history’ of a ‘delight in dissimulation’ (*Nachlaß* 1880–1882 474; my transl.).

Literary criticism has certainly contributed to the fact that we probably do not (primarily) associate theatre with this delight in dissimulation. The original delight has been tamed, if not eradicated, by our interest in ‘political’ or aesthetic intentions, in the ‘actual’ message ‘behind’ – dissembled by – the play or its ‘mimetic’ connection to the ‘real’, the historical world. Both project a vision of theatre that is founded on non-theatrical, stable ‘entities’ of our world. Theatre represents intentions or events/state of affairs that we are familiar with, or that we can decode. However, as many thinkers have noted, equalling *mimesis* with imitation or representation is grievously mistaken. ‘Imitation presupposes the abandon of an inimitable, *mimesis* on the contrary expresses the desire for it,’ writes Jean-Luc Nancy (‘The Image’ 75). As Nancy again emphasises with reference to Blanchot, this desire longs for ‘the inimitable, the obscure ground [*fond*] of the thing in itself’ (‘The Image’ 75): ‘That which resounds and that which moves (us), is [. . .] the desire to get to the bottom [*aller au fond*] of things, or even, which is nothing but another way of saying it, the desire to let this ground rise to the surface’ (Nancy ‘The Image’ 80). This is exactly what happens when Richard, the ‘deep dissimuler’, enters the stage and plays theatre, ‘play[s] the devil’ or ‘counterfeit[s] the deep tragedian’. The ‘ground rise[s] to the surface’, because Shakespeare makes his audience encounter theatre’s paradoxical, its abyssal, structure:

This abyssal structure is a non-fundamental structure, at once superficial and bottomless, still and always ‘flat,’ in

which the proper-ty [*propre*] sends itself to the ground, sinks in the waters of its own desire, without ever encountering, rises and is swept away – of itself. It passes into the other. (Derrida *Spurs* 117; transl. altered)

Theatre, as an art of (dis)simulation embodies this ‘non-fundamental structure’. It is in the moments when theatre does not show anything, when its production of illusions is suspended for seconds only, that we get the opportunity ‘to gaze upon these secrets of the deep’. We do not have to gaze into the theatrical abyss for long to experience it gazing back into us:²¹ the abyss fascinates us, it touches upon us, it draws us into its depth. ‘[A]rt always makes us founder,’ Jean-Luc Nancy writes, ‘and the shipwreck is in this sense assured’ (‘The Image’ 80).

It is therefore not only the dream that possesses the mysterious power to provide us with an experience of the unexperienceable, of the ‘slimy bottom of the deep’ – theatre does so as well.²² And as Shakespeare’s play exposes for the dream, the experiencing of the unexperienceable is no process of pure and distant recognition. The audience does not merely watch the ‘passing into the other’, the processes of Protean changes, being performed on the stage – the ‘passing into the other’ reaches over to the spectators, seizes them, contaminates them; ‘the line separating spectator from player is stretched so thin that the demarcation becomes precarious’, writes Waldo F. McNeir (174).²³ For Richard’s victims – and also for himself – this is a violent process. It is therefore no coincidence that Nietzsche, in his fragment that ends on the ‘delight in dissimulation’, associates the name ‘Shakespeare’ with someone ‘who wants to do violence to the reader with his fantasy’ (*Nachlaß* 1880–1882 474; my transl.)²⁴ Richard’s brutality transcends the limits of fiction. It is the brutality of the ‘deep dissimuler’ that touches upon us as theatre’s affective power:

[T]he delight in dissimulation erupting as a power that pushes aside, floods, and at times extinguishes the so-called 'character'; the inner longing for a role and mask, for an *appearance* (*Schein*); an excess of capacities for all kinds of adaptation that can no longer be satisfied in the service of the nearest and narrowest utility: all that perhaps does not pertain solely to the actor in himself? (Nietzsche *The Gay Science* 225–6; transl. altered)

Shakespeare, Blanchot and Derrida expose Nietzsche's question as rhetorical. Richard embodies the forces of theatre. He is a pure and therefore highly dangerous affirmation of the delight in dissimulation which drives theatre as a cultural and artistic practice. However, it is exactly this abyssal delight – the accomplice of the secrets of the deep – that links theatre with the world. Transgressing, 'overflowing' 'the nearest and narrowest utility' and everything else that is 'in the service' of the human, intentional being does not solely pertain to the 'deep tragedian' Richard. As the protagonist voices right at the beginning of the play, he is himself the result of an event of dissembling – 'performed' by nature herself: nature is 'dissembling Nature' (*R3* 1.1.19). Her unfathomable processes of forming and de-forming, of making emerge and drawing back into nothingness, of giving birth and bringing death are driven by the same, abyssal force of dissembling as Nietzsche's actor. Theatre provides an experience of this deep, existential surface by exposing its audience to its (violent) intensity.

*Spurning Touches: Richard – 'plain man' and
'shallow woman'*

Richard is an artist of surface-manipulations: a Protean chameleon, as well as an extraordinarily skilled knifeman. The two 'capacities' differ significantly. The one fashions surfaces

that generate effects as ‘*action at a distance*’ (Nietzsche *The Gay Science* 71); the other destroys surfaces in the absolute nearness of penetration. In this difference, a difference of gender emerges: Friedrich Nietzsche regards the power of dissimulation, its ‘*action at a distance*’, as ‘[t]he magic and the most powerful effect of women’ (*The Gay Science* 71). ‘Woman’ ‘plays at dissimulation, at ornamentation, deceit, artifice, at an artist’s philosophy. Hers is an affirmative power,’ writes Jacques Derrida in his reading of Nietzsche (*Spurs* 67). The knifeman’s penetrations, on the other hand, obviously follow a male phallic imaginary. How do these two ‘capacities’ go together? Do they go together? And which one is characteristic of Richard, which is the one responsible for his success (and downfall)?

They are both closely related to touch. In fact, they demarcate the two opposing poles that are necessary to define the notion of touch: touch takes place 1) when something ‘strikes’ or ‘hits’ something (Old Occitan *toccar*), when there is physical contact that has a certain effect (cf. *Le Petit Robert*, ‘toucher, *v.*’); and 2) when, at the same time, the two (or more) that touch remain separate, when they do not lump together and form a new entity, but hold a certain distance all the way through their touching. The latter is the reason why Nietzsche, in one of his earliest reflections on the topic, notes: ‘Pythagoreans: [. . .] Touch. Actio in distans’ (Nietzsche *Nachlaß* 1869–1874 572; my transl.).²⁵

The fact that these two defining poles of touch are split by the divide of sexual difference – one actualising and visualising a male, the other a female imaginary²⁶ – leads to the disturbing disintegration of Richard’s capacities. Thomas More’s labelling him ‘a deep dissimuler’ takes sides with the female pole of artifice and deceit – and, as we have shown above, it is this trait that renders Richard a fascinating metatheatrical character. However, although Shakespeare was certainly inspired by the theatricality associated with Richard, he did

not forget about the latter's male, his penetrative, capacities. On the contrary, Shakespeare takes up the natal teeth attributed to Richard and employs them to characterise Richard as a person. He is not only the 'yonder dog' of whom Queen Margaret warns: 'when he fawns, he bites: and when he bites, / His venom teeth will rankle to the death' (*R3* 1.3.288–90). He is also drawn as a 'hedgehog' (*R3* 1.2.104), to borrow a word from Lady Anne. Shakespeare associates him with all sorts of sharp spikes, pricks and quills against which one should be on guard.

I would, however, like to suggest that it is the complex interplay of Richard's two capacities – 'hedgehog' and 'dis-simuler' – a particular mode of touch, penetrative and distant – that is held responsible for Richard's remarkable power. This interplay may best be observed in a scene paradigmatic for Richard's histrionic capacities, in the 'spectacle of Gloucester's seduction of Lady Anne', as Stephen Greenblatt calls it (*Hamlet in Purgatory* 168).

The scene begins with a rather violent and obviously phallic encounter of two aggressive males. Richard stops the funeral procession of King Henry VI's corpse with a harsh command that one sole halberdier, protecting the cortege, is courageous enough to disobey:

RICHARD

[. . .]

Advance thy halberd higher than my breast,
Or by Saint Paul, I'll strike thee to my foot
And spurn upon thee, beggar, for thy boldness. (*R3* 1.2.40–2)

Richard's use of the unusual verb 'to spurn upon' attracts attention. The Arden³ editors paraphrase its meaning with 'trample contemptuously' (cf. 'spurn, *v.* 1'; 5.), which is certainly what Richard's words 'signify'. However, whereas 'trampling', that is, hitting with the sole and heel of one's

shoes, describes an impact of blunt force, the etymology of ‘spurn’ points in a different direction: the sharp, pointed spur is a paradigm of penetrating force. ‘Spurning’ is Richard’s, the hedgehog’s ‘style’: as Lady Anne tells us only seconds later, Richard has ‘[s]tabbed’ (*R*₃ 1.2.11) King Henry VI, her father-in-law, as well as her husband, Edward. His is the ‘selfsame hand’ (*R*₃ 1.2.11) that has fatally penetrated the two bodies, ‘that made these holes’ (*R*₃ 1.2.14).

Jacques Derrida has made the spur the key term around which his reading of Nietzsche revolves. As his text resonates strongly with Shakespeare’s *Richard III* – it is dedicated to the power of dissimulation – I will come back to Derrida’s writing repeatedly, in order to open up Shakespeare’s text from this perspective.

As Derrida’s title indicates – *Spurs. Nietzsche’s Styles* – it is not one spur, but at least two – it is spurs in the plural – that make styles and spurs mutually ‘define’ each other. Two spurs also characterise Richard’s encounter with the halberdier. Richard answers the threatening gesture of the halberd, a sharp weapon, with a second threat of ‘spurning/spurring’. The doubling of the ‘phallic agency’ might make the scene less phallic than one might think. Although it negotiates (male) authority and exposes the phallic insignia of power, the absence of the thorn’s smooth counterpart, the absence of the plain, unguarded (female!) flesh which might be penetrated undermines the simple logic of phallic power. Two pointing spurs attack each other – from a distance. The halberdier’s boldness in turning his weapon on a superior, who has the phallus via his social position, creates a situation that does not permit the distinction between an active and a passive part. As the situation is not one of rivalry – the halberdier is no peer – fighting it out is not an honourable option, and another solution has to be found. Richard simply mirrors the phallic threat. As the hedgehog that he ‘is’ (or, rather, that he plays), he does not even have to draw his

sword in order to counter the threat of penetration. He fends off the attack with mere words, which are figurative and rather unusual, but nonetheless prove to be 'penetrating'. His superior authority is indicated (or rather produced) by the fact that he can successfully play, or dissimulate, his penetrating forces even without using the 'prop' of a weapon.²⁷

The coincidence of attack and defence, of activity and passivity, of action and reaction, that characterises the scene follows the logic that Derrida associates with the way a spur advances: 'Like the prow, for example, of a sailing vessel, its *rostrum*, the projection of the ship which surges ahead to meet the sea's attack and cleave its hostile surface' (*Spurs* 39). In this image, the sea is not a passive victim – it is itself 'hostile' and on the 'attack'. It is not destroyed or eliminated either: what Derrida calls 'spurring operation (*opération-éperonnante*)' (*Spurs* 107; transl. altered) does not aim at oneness.²⁸ This is not only indicated by the fact that the two 'opponents', ship and sea, outlive their conflict; the actual, the interesting, result of the operation is the 'twoness' of the water, its being cleft into a difference to itself, creating a trace, what the Germans call a *Spur*. This trace draws the outline, the contours, the shape, the *eidos* of the ship, whose oneness turns out to be an effect of spurring operations. The cleaving of a surface is the moment of birth of another surface. In fact, oneness does not play a significant role in the whole process. The spurring operation is fuelled by a whole series of twonesses: the difference of ship and sea; of wind (and helm); the difference of air pressures . . . This series does not refer to a stable bottom; it is abyssal. It is not held together by the organising 'oneness' of origin or end. If one had to assign a sex to it, it would surely be female.

The encounter of Richard and the halberdier, marginal as it is, prefigures the spectacular encounter of Richard and Lady Anne that follows. In doing so, it indicates that this encounter will be fuelled by the encounter of penetrative,

‘phallic’ forces; forces, however, that cannot be located in predefined gender roles. On the contrary, these roles have to be played – in an overtly theatrical sense, as we will see. Furthermore, the cast even changes parts during the scene. The ‘phallic’ forces – or ‘castration’s effect’, as Derrida calls them (*Spurs* 61) – are generated in-between the roles, and cannot be fully appropriated. They always exceed an instrumental use. The overall effect of the phallic forces’ ‘touch’ escapes intentional control.

The ‘spectacle of Gloucester’s seduction of Lady Anne’ is organised around the penetrating touch of the sword. It is no coincidence that Richard enters the stage while Anne is bemoaning the deadly wounds of her father-in-law. Richard appears on the scene as the man of the sword, as the one who is renowned for stabbing. His short skirmish with the halberdier emphasises Gloucester’s aggressive inclination to penetrating violence. The threat this directs towards the simple soldier reverberates through the whole scene and surpasses its actual addressee. The halberdier’s provocative gesture has merely prompted Richard to express, in words, what his aura alone transports to anyone who knows about his past deeds.

It is these past deeds that dominate the first part of his conversation with Anne. The widow reads Richard’s character from the very beginning. She is not deceived at all – she ‘falls undeceived’, as Joel Elliot Slotkin notes (20): to her, Richard does not ‘seem a saint’ (*R*₃ 1.3.335), not for a second. Even before he has spoken a single word, Anne identifies him as the ‘fiend’ (*R*₃ 1.2.34), the ‘devil’ (*R*₃ 1.2.34; 1.2.50; 1.2.73) that he is – or, rather, that he ‘plays’, as Richard tells the audience a scene later (cf. *R*₃ 1.3.335–7).

According to his own, misogynistic standards, Richard ‘[p]lay[s] the maid’s part’ (*R*₃ 3.7.50) in the first sentences that he exchanges with Anne: he mimes the ‘shallow, changing woman’ (*R*₃ 4.4.431); he lies, changes strategies, contradicts himself. However, this all proves to be to no avail.

Anne masterfully sifts truth from lie: 'In thy foul throat thou liest' (*R3* 1.2.95), she exclaims, when Richard denies the murder of Anne's husband; 'O wonderful, when devils tell the truth!' (*R3* 1.2.73), when Richard admits his lack of pity. If we decide to conclude for Richard, as Jean E. Howard and Phyllis Rackin do, that 'the woman's part has been included in the master showman's repertory from the very beginning' (109), we would have to come to a similar conclusion about Lady Anne: she knows how to play the man's part of having truth's unambiguity at his command.

However, feminist readings like Howard and Rackin's, which reconstruct the scene as a competition of the sexes, face one decisive problem. They presuppose what the scene negotiates. Who says that Richard's 'original' part is 'the man's' part? Does he represent 'masculinity'? Shakespeare's play does not expose the simple, 'naturalistic' model of 'warlike masculinity' (Howard and Rackin 109) opposing 'womanly', 'virtuous' femininity (Rackin 79). The seduction scene shows that one cannot know which trait, 'masculine' or 'feminine', will prove powerful or even useful in a certain situation. Neither Richard's initial attempt at deceit and dissimulation nor Anne's clear-sighted command of truth bring about an effect. The abstract appropriation of (gendered) capacities that Howard and Rackin evaluate – the more capacities, the better – is obviously no suitable indicator of concrete power relations. On the contrary, it is not appropriation, but the ceding of a gendered role that changes the game. Richard, the man of the sword, hands his weapon over to Anne:

RICHARD

[. . .]

I never sued to friend, nor enemy;

My tongue could never learn sweet smoothing word.

But now thy beauty is proposed my fee,

My proud heart sues, and prompts my tongue to speak.

She looks scornfully at him.

[. . .]

If thy revengeful heart cannot forgive,
 Lo, here I lend thee this sharp-pointed sword,
 Which if thou please to hide in this true breast
 And let the soul forth that adareth thee,
 I lay it naked to the deadly stroke
 And humbly beg the death upon my knee. (*R*₃ 1.2.170–81)

Quite against his intentions, Richard speaks truly when he tries to seduce Lady Anne with a lie. As Anne's reaction indicates, Gloucester's 'tongue' is indeed not capable of 'sweet smoothing word'. Instead of 'smoothing' her face into a smile, he provokes a scornful frown.²⁹ It is this rhetorical defeat – some lines earlier, he had already attempted to persuade Anne '[t]o leave this keen encounter of our wits' (*R*₃ 1.2.118) – that makes Richard proceed to other means. He supplements his verbal skills with theatrical, bodily performance, with play-acting (cf. Slotkin 15; Olk 8). It is no longer the maid's verbosity that he plays – he now 'counterfeit[s] the deep tragedian'.

As a result, Anne suddenly finds herself involved in a melodramatic scene that is triggered by a rapid instance of gender trouble. In the blink of an eye, she touches upon 'the instrument of power'; she has the penetrating touch at her disposal. However, as soon as she has the sword – the phallus (cf. K. M. Smith 154) – her agency apparently shrinks to nothingness. She does not only appear to be incapable of using the sword and stabbing her enemy: even her sound judgement about Richard's person seems to have suddenly left her, even though Richard now frankly admits that he has 'stabbed young Edward' (*R*₃ 1.2.184):

ANNE

I would I knew thy heart.

RICHARD

'Tis figured in my tongue.

ANNE

I fear me both are false.

RICHARD

Then never man was true.

ANNE

Well, well, put up your sword. (*R3* 1.2.195–9)

With Anne's 'sparing' Richard, which the latter wittily connects to her consent to marriage, the battle is over – and there is little doubt who comes off the victor: 'Richard holds his own against Anne and eventually gains rhetorical mastery over her,' writes Dorothea Kehler (118). However, the way that Richard comes out the winner contradicts Kehler's very phrasing. Richard does not 'hold his own'; he rather mimes 'the other' and carries away the prize. His victory is a victory of Protean gender trouble. The 'power' that earned him the victory has been identified as 'female': Kristin M. Smith calls it 'Richard's feminine linguistic power' (154), while Howard and Rackin speak of 'the female power of erotic seduction' (109). With reference to Nietzsche, one could also add the 'female' 'theatrical power and agency', of which Howard and Rackin think 'the women' in Shakespeare's *Histories* to be 'deprived of' (108). However, as we will see, Richard has not 'appropriated' this power, as Howard and Rackin claim (108).

The power at work in the seduction scene is the power of spurring touch. It cannot be appropriated, because it is generated between at least two 'agents' and it takes its effect from a distance. It is not the possession of the sword that grants the power, however. The phallic sword is nevertheless the necessary (and necessarily dangerous) 'prop' that provides (part of) the theatrical impact that the scene distributes. It is also not the bloody, the fatal, use of the sword. Although it would have been possible for both, neither Richard nor Anne take the chance to stab their opponent. It is not brute violence but a different, a more sophisticated and more sustainable form of power that is at play here.

Both Richard and Anne play with what Jacques Derrida has called 'castration's effect'. In psychoanalysis, the castration

complex describes the dynamic that is generated when the phallus begins to circulate – when the positions of having and not not-having start to communicate (in both directions, as penis envy and castration anxiety) (cf. Freud ‘Drei Abhandlungen zur Sexualtheorie’; Lacan). This energetic dynamic is constitutively a phenomenon of distance: both envy and anxiety are only directed towards their ‘objects’. If their ‘objects’ were reached (the penis appropriated for ever or castration irreversibly and universally executed), the dynamic would abruptly come to a standstill.³⁰ The penis would cease to be of any value. This is what Richard’s handing over his sword to Anne simulates. Once the constitutive distance vanishes, once touch (as *actio in distans!*) is replaced by appropriation, all that remains is death: stabbing Richard and probably being executed for the deed. One could say that this would have been the ‘masculine’, the ‘heroic’ solution, that this would have shown the ‘warlike masculinity’ which Howard and Rackin so desperately miss in the play’s female characters. However, Richard and Anne prefer to defer their ends – and rather choose to play. They are theatrical; they are ‘woman’: ‘Unable to seduce or to give vent to desire without it, “woman” is in need of castration’s effect. But evidently she does not believe in it. She who, unbelieving, still plays with castration, she is “woman”’ (Derrida *Spurs* 61).

Strikingly enough, feminist critics appear to believe more readily in the truth of castration, that is, the stable basis of the distribution of gender roles and gender hierarchy, than Anne herself. ‘[I]t is the male protagonist who opposes the patriarchal project.’ write Howard and Rackin (106–7). But what about Anne? Which part does she play?

Seeing her in one of the ‘typically female’ ‘roles of helpless victims’ (Rackin 79) indicates that one may have fallen prey to the melodramatic spectacle which Richard has staged. The part he made Anne play is calculated to expose ‘her’ as weak, as incapable of using the phallic instrument of power. It is not

unreasonable to conclude, as Rackin does, that the ‘phallic incapacity’ that Richard attempts to attribute to Anne also affects her ‘female’ capacities of seduction and play-acting:

Would a woman be able to hold us (or ‘enthrall’ us, as they say) if we did not consider her able under certain circumstances to wield a dagger deftly (any kind of dagger) *against* us? Or against herself – which in certain cases would be the more severe revenge (Chinese revenge). (Nietzsche *The Gay Science* 74)

However, are the ‘circumstances’ that Richard has created in manipulative intent suitable for taking the scene as a litmus test which decides over Lady Anne’s capacities in general? And does she, indeed, prove incapable of wielding ‘any kind of dagger’? Lady Anne sees through Richard’s theatrical ruse and abruptly stops the melodramatic intermezzo:

RICHARD

[. . .]

Take up the sword again, or take up me.

ANNE:

Arise, dissembler; though I wish they death,
I will not be thy executioner. (R3 1.2.186–8)

It may have been Richard’s borrowing his phrasing from Thomas Kyd’s *The First Part of Ieronimo* that enables Anne (and probably also parts of Shakespeare’s audience) to unmask his histrionics. Strikingly, in Kyd’s play, the scene does not revolve around the sword, but a different ‘kind of dagger’: ‘Take vp thy pen, or ile take vp thee’ (2.3.28) Ieronimo tells his son Horatio. Richard’s rephrasing exposes the exchangeability of sword and the stylus, the instrument of word, which plays a decisive role in the scene.

By calling Richard a ‘dissembler’, Lady Anne shows that, in contrast to the mayor or most of the male characters,

she is not the naïve victim that Richard assumes her to be. Similarly to Richard, Lady Anne is ‘woman’: she embodies ‘scepticism and veiling dissimulation’ (Derrida *Spurs* 57). It is especially the latter that one tends to forget when evaluating the role she plays in the seduction scene. Why does no one seem to think her capable of playing a role, of dissembling her ‘true intents’?

Lady Anne is made a ‘pitiable victim[]’ by anyone thinking her unable to wield a woman’s dagger. In fact, she has been masterfully handling one all the while – but it is of a ‘kind’ that successfully dissembles its efficacy.

Anne not only puts an end to Richard’s melodramatic play, but also immediately starts her own. The ‘second act’ of their spectacle, which is now secretly directed by Lady Anne, is based on a ‘phallic weapon’ as well; a ‘phallic weapon’ that Lady Anne, symmetrically to Richard’s handing over of his swords, passes on to her enemy: language/the power of the word.

At the beginning of the seduction scene, Anne directs the audience’s attention to an incident between Queen Margaret and Richard:

ANNE

[. . .] Queen Margaret saw
Thy murderous falchion smoking in his blood,
The which thou once didst bend against her breast,
But that thy brothers beat aside the point.

RICHARD

I was provoked by her slanderous tongue (*R*₃ 1.2.95–9)

The scene exposes a central correspondence that plays a crucial role in the whole play: ‘murderous falchion’ matches ‘slanderous tongue’. Although the one seems to carry masculine, the other rather feminine associations, ‘the point’ is the *tertium comparationis* which connects the two: both have the (phallic) power to penetrate and hurt, to touch upon their opponent.

Shakespeare employs the character of Queen Margaret to establish this symmetry of sword and word. Margaret is 'a most worthy opponent to the chameleon king, Richard III', note Naomi C. Liebler and Lisa Scancella Shea (79). Margaret and Richard both hold aggressive outsider positions, which are exposed by their physiognomy. A 'wrinkled witch' (*R3* 1.3.163), as Richard calls her, she is, like the deformed protagonist, not a character of smooth peace; she shares sides with 'Grim-visaged War' and his 'wrinkled front' (*R3* 1.1.9).

The harsh label that Richard assigns to her indicates that she is to be feared. Her war is, however, not fought with weapons of steel – her 'power is entirely linguistic' (K. M. Smith 153). 'Can curses pierce the clouds and enter heaven?' (*R3* 1.3.194), she asks. The outcome of Shakespeare's play can be interpreted as a positive answer to this question.

Margaret even acts as an expert, informing others on how to achieve the penetrative verbal touch for which she appears to be famous:

QUEEN ELIZABETH

My words are dull. O quicken them with thine.

QUEEN MARGARET

Thy woes will make them sharp and pierce like mine.

(*R3* 4.4.123–4)

The expert of sharpening the metal blades corresponding to Margaret's linguistic ones is Richard: 'No doubt the murderous knife was dull and blunt', Queen Elizabeth tells him, 'Till it was whetted on thy stone-hard heart' (*R3* 4.4.227–8).

The two corresponding 'phallic' instruments, the sword and the tongue, do not come to touch very often on a thematic level in the play. However, when they do, we are provided with insights in the structure which shapes the play as a whole. Apart from the seduction scene, this happens in a marginal sequence often cut in productions, a scene which

turns out to be a comment on the seduction scene: Gloucester's conversation with the two little princes. Like the seduction scene, it centres on Richard's phallic weapon: 'I pray you, uncle,' York exclaims, 'give me this dagger' (R3 3.1.110). When Richard is reluctant to hand over the dagger (which he himself appears to value as a symbol of power) to his nephews, they entangle him in a rhetorical skirmish that exposes Richard's (verbal) vulnerability.³¹ The fact that the legitimate heir to the throne, still a child of nine years, can rhetorically challenge Richard worries the latter's right hand: 'With what a sharp-provided wit he reasons' (R3 3.1.132), Buckingham notes in an aside. Having the brute force of dagger and sword at one's command obviously does not render one untouchable. There are other kinds of pointed, penetrating 'daggers'. Power is a question of styles:

In the question of style there is always the weight or *examen* of some pointed object. At times this object might be only a quill or a stylus. But it could just as easily be a stiletto, or even a rapier. (Derrida *Spurs* 37)

In the seduction scene, Richard's 'sharp-pointed sword' encounters a pointed instrument of language, a stylus, or rather a quill, of a special kind: 'sweet smoothing word'. It is no coincidence that Shakespeare positions the two four-syllabled word combinations of similar morphological structure at corresponding positions, the end of their lines. Their juxtaposition exceeds the characters' use of these terms: they provide us with the two weapons with which the conflict of the scene is fought out, or rather the two instruments with which the protagonists play, in a symmetrical fashion. We have already analysed the first act's exchange of sword – the second act is dedicated to the power of 'sweet smoothing word'.

Critics agree that Richard plays the (female) part of the seducer and successfully wins Anne with the power of

his love-talk. However, Lady Anne does not naively fall for Richard: it is she who stages his surprising 'success' as a lover. Has not Richard himself admitted that he is 'not shaped for sportive tricks, / Nor made to court an amorous looking-glass' (*R3* 1.1.14–15)? Anne casts him in this surprising and odd role – as he had cast her in the role of the master over life and death only moments before. Like many feminist critics, Richard believes that he has appropriated the feminine power of erotic seduction – but, in fact, the first act of melodrama is followed by a romantic comedy into which Lady Anne has secretly entangled her adversary. It is she who 'play[s] the maid's part': she abandons her witty resistance and counterfeits the seduced victim. Hers is perhaps the sharpest, certainly the most perfidious of weapons: it is 'sweet smoothing word' that touches with the backside of the quill, with the smoothest of all surfaces. Lady Anne plays the mirror: 'a mirror all the purer in that it knows and is known to have no reflections. Except those which man has reflected there' (Irigaray *Speculum of the Other Woman* 134).

Has she fallen in love with Richard? We do not know, and we have no evidence for it. Her 'since you teach me how to flatter you' (*R3* 1.2.226) only indicates the ambiguity of the 'affection' that she shows towards Richard.

Has Richard fallen in love? Yes, he has. We do know because there is evidence for it. As soon as he is alone on stage, he confides his love to the audience:

RICHARD

Upon my life, she finds, although I cannot,
 Myself to be a marvellous proper man.
 I'll be at charges for a looking-glass
 And entertain a score or two of tailors
 To study fashions to adorn my body;
 Since I am crept in favour with myself,
 I will maintain it with some little cost. (*R3* 1.2.256–62)

Richard has 'crept in favour', he has fallen in love – with himself! As he concludes, it has been Lady Anne that has given him the feeling 'to be a marvellous proper man'. 'Maintaining' this feeling means buying 'a looking glass', which replaces the role that Lady Anne has played with a permanent object of the same function. Richard's narcissistic love does not testify to a new, healthier relation to himself – he has simply fallen prey to his own skills of seduction, which he admires all the more for the difficult starting situation that he thinks them to have overcome:

RICHARD

And I, no friends to back my suit withal

But the plain devil and dissembling looks?

And yet to win her? All the world to nothing? (*R3* 1.2.238–40)

Unlike Narcissus, Richard is not spectacularly carried off by his self-love. On the contrary, winning Anne is one of his great triumphs, and it is Anne who will pay for this triumph with her life: it is she who soon 'withers' away and dies a silent death offstage. However, she does not leave the stage without her own style of taking revenge: by playing the maid, by exchanging 'sweet smoothing words' with Richard, she contaminates him with the slow poison of human feelings. Certainly, Richard does not immediately perish from them. His ascent still continues and eventually leads him onto the English throne. However, Anne's mirroring intervention does not remain without consequences. Richard will not be touched by pity, but by a growing egomania that is accompanied by an almost paranoiac anxiety and need for control. These affects increasingly determine his actions and limit his former capacities.³² Although Shakespeare's play depicts the rise and fall of King Richard III, it tells a story of decline: the 'plain devil' that appears onstage in the first act gradually turns into the 'plain man' (*R3* 1.3.50) that he detested so much.

Whereas the ‘plainness’ of the devil paradoxically signifies the maximum deepness of dissimulation, the infinite depth of the surface, the ‘plainness’ of man stands for the banality of the human existence that is characterised by following one’s all-too-human goals: above all, self-preservation. The deep dissembler, gradually, becomes one of us.

Richard’s decline can be observed as a decline of his capacity to touch. The more he thinks himself capable of controlling ‘the touches’, the less they work for him. It is paradigmatic that when he briefs Buckingham at the end of the third act on how to manipulate the London people with a public speech studded with lies, the result turns out disastrously. ‘Yet touch this sparingly, as ’twere far off’ (*R*₃ 3.5.93), he had instructed Buckingham, and comes back to this order when the latter returns to report on the people’s reaction:

RICHARD

Touched you the bastardy of Edward’s children?

[. . .]

BUCKINGHAM

Indeed, left nothing fitting for your purpose

Untouched or slightly handled in discourse. (*R*₃ 3.7.4–19)

Nevertheless, feeding the folk a plain lie and hoping for their enthusiastic support – crowning Richard their king – backfires terribly. Moreover, this trivial stratagem is not worthy of the ‘deep dissembler’ we encountered at the beginning of the play. Significantly, Buckingham has to intervene and advise Richard to ‘[p]lay the maid’s part’ (*R*₃ 3.7.50). He carefully stages a small scene in which Richard is seen praying ‘between two churchmen’ (*R*₃ 3.7.47), and pretends not to be easily won over to the request of the crown. Buckingham’s reminding the former chameleon Richard of the power of play-acting proves successful: it is theatricality that heaves him on the throne.

However, Richard has irretrievably lost his touch. His ‘delight in dissimulation’ that had been responsible for his exercising ‘theatrical power and agency’ – the capacity of touching at a distance – is gone. The demonic incalculability of Richard’s deep, abyssal surface is replaced by its very antidote: a compulsion to control, a compulsion to determine the ‘true nature’ of his surroundings. It is not a theatrical, not a playful kind of ‘touch’ that he ‘plays’ when testing Buckingham’s loyalty: ‘Ah, Buckingham, now do I play the touch / To try if thou be current gold indeed’ (*R3* 4.2.8–9). In contrast to the devil or the maid, the touchstone has not the power to seduce or tempt, its touch does not ‘magically’ transform its counterpart. It lacks the power of (dis)simulation; it is essentially anti-theatrical. It merely indicates the present material composition of a thing – and it does so by its ‘simple truth’ (*R3* 1.3.51) of staying the same itself. More and more, Richard shows this trait that the touchstone and the ‘plain man’ share. The deep dissembler has become a man of plain words: ‘Shall I be plain?’, he tells Buckingham, ‘I wish the bastards dead’ (*R3* 4.2.19).

The weakness of Richard’s new ‘plainness’ is showcased in the late counterpart to the seduction of Lady Anne. This time, it is Queen Elizabeth whom Richard attempts to win for his purposes. For dynastic reasons, he wants her to marry her daughter to him. Like the first seduction scene, Richard seems to have seduced his female conversation partner in order to meet with his wishes at the end of their talk:

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Shall I go win my daughter to thy will?

KING RICHARD

And be a happy mother by the deed.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

I go, write to me very shortly,

And you shall understand from me her mind. (*R3* 4.4.426–9)

As he is alone on stage, Richard celebrates his triumph. He does obviously not doubt his having, again, fooled 'the female sex':

KING RICHARD

Bear her my true love's kiss; and so farewell.

Exit Queen [Elizabeth]

Relenting fool, and shallow, changing woman.

(*R3* 4.4.430–1)

However, this time, Richard's assessment of the situation does not find unreserved approval among the audience and critics. 'The scene inverts the pattern of Act I, scene 2, by turning courtship to self-defence,' writes Gillian M. Day. 'Elizabeth leaves, equivocating her decision as did Anne, but fooling Richard with an ambiguity which, for the first time, he misreads' (Day 153). The assessment of the scene is rendered difficult by the fact that Richmond's successful rebellion prevents the realisation of the marriage plans. Stanley's message that 'the Queen hath heartily consented / He [i.e. Richmond!] should espouse Elizabeth her daughter' (*R3* 4.5.7–8) does not help to clarify the situation. It can either be read as a confirmation of Richard's statement – the queen is 'changing', in her decision she again follows the new male power hierarchy – or as evidence of her having fooled Richard all along.

The doubts that accompany Richard's 'triumph' are mainly caused by the course of the conversation itself. As Dorothea Kehler writes, 'in this second debate the preponderance of stichomythic responses are Elizabeth's, hers the sarcasm and greater dramatic force' (Kehler 118). Elizabeth emanates an astonishing 'delight in dissimulation' – she 'plays the fox' (Kehler 118). She wittily creates and balances on double meanings; 'it is she who now prosecutes the duplicity of words' (Day 153). While Richard tries hard to fix the plain meaning of what is said – 'What do you think?' (*R3* 4.4.258);

‘Be not so hasty to confound my meaning’ (*R*₃ 4.4.262) – Elizabeth’s artful eloquence seems to overcharge her opponent. Richard clearly becomes defensive:

KING RICHARD

Be eloquent in my behalf to her.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

An honest tale speed best being plainly told.

KING RICHARD

Then plainly to her tell my loving tale.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Plain and not honest is too harsh a style.

KING RICHARD

Your reasons are too shallow and too quick.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

O no, my reasons are too deep and dead,

Too deep and dead, poor infants, in their graves.

(*R*₃ 4.4.357–63)

Structurally, the situation resembles Clarence’s conversation with Richard. This time, however, Gloucester finds himself in the position of the petitioner, whose future depends on the goodwill and the verbal skills of others. ‘I will deliver you, or else lie for you’ (*R*₃ 1.1.115), Richard had promised Clarence. In contrast, Elizabeth refuses to use her eloquence for Richard’s request – and rather continues to deploy it against him. By introducing the opposing notion of ‘plainness’ to Richard’s attempt at appropriating her eloquence, Elizabeth builds Richard a verbal trap that exposes his project as dishonest at heart. More than this, with ‘eloquence’ and ‘plainness’, Elizabeth also exposes the binary pair of roles, the ‘styles’ of communication, which distinguish Richard’s and her part in their current conversation. Her witty words thus also provide us with a kind of metacommentary of rhetorical strategies and their limitations. The ‘style’ that Elizabeth appears to suggest to Richard is exactly the one that characterises Richard’s

weak, almost helpless performance in the scene. He is '[p]lain and not honest' – his words are of very limited effect; they do not seduce or fascinate at all. The 'plain man' Richard encounters a woman, meaning someone 'playing at dissimulation, at ornamentation, deceit, artifice' (Derrida *Spurs* 67).

Elizabeth's wordplay indicates that her rhetorical battle with Richard negotiates the question of the sexes. By playing with the homonymy of Richard's 'loving tale' / *tail* – 'Sexual member; penis' (*OED*, 'tail, *n.*1'; 5.c.) – Elizabeth connects the question of the power of words with the 'phallic' power of penetrating touches. However, things are more complicated than the conventional binary of 'warlike', 'powerful' masculinity and weak, 'virtuous' femininity that Phyllis Rackin attempts to apply to Shakespeare's *Histories* (cf. 79). Richard's is at the same time too plain and 'too harsh a style' – stylus, thorn, spur, pointed instrument – to perform effective touches. It is all a question of surfaces. In this scene, his 'style' does not seduce, because it is too obviously 'disagreeably hard and rough to the touch' (*OED*, 'harsh, *adj.*'; 1.), it is too 'smoothly', too honestly and too directly phallic. Richard speaks with the unambiguous and non-playful authority of the king – his non-dissimulating plainness is brutal but it does not touch; it does not 'act at a distance'. And this is exactly what his project of wooing the queen's daughter would have required!

As Richard himself taught us at the beginning of the play, the warlike is never 'plain', it is not 'free from roughness, wrinkles' (*OED*, 'plain, *adj.*2'; †3.a.). However, in order to be effective, it must not be exclusively 'harsh' either. The 'female power of erotic seduction', the 'theatrical power and agency' that Richard had embodied as the deep dissembler, paradoxically combines both: smooth surface and penetrating touch. In this late scene, it is not Richard's but Elizabeth's 'style', her rhetorical strategy of playing the fox, that exerts this kind of fascinating power. Richard says more than he is aware of by calling Elizabeth's witty statements

(*OED*, 'reason, *n.*1'; 1.a.) 'shallow' and 'quick'. They are, in a way, 'superficial' and 'hasty': in contrast to Richard's, they are improvised and do not communicate any plain, 'deeper' intent that would have preceded their utterance in any way. However, Richard does not realise the danger his words speak of. Elizabeth's reasons may be 'shallow', but they are 'quick'. The 'ground' she is standing on might not be well founded, but it is exactly this quickness, this being 'mobile, shifting, readily yielding to pressure' (*OED*, 'quick, *adj.*'; 18.), that poses a threat to her conversation partner. In contrast to Richard's allusive remarks to Clarence, Elizabeth explicitly elaborates on why Richard's request 'touches her more deeply' than he seems to imagine. Her children are 'dead', and she knows that Richard has 'whetted' 'the murderous knife' (*R*3 4.4.227–8) against them. More than this, it is her children's being dead that 'quicken' Elizabeth's words, that accounts for their piercing sharpness (cf. 'quick, *adj.*'; 17.). '[S]orrow' not only offers the women in Shakespeare's play 'a unique opportunity for speech in the hard, masculine world', as Joseph Campana claims (24), as we have already seen, 'woes' also 'quicken' the women's linguistic weapons – 'make them sharp and pierce' (*R*3 4.4.123–4).

Richard is right: Queen Elizabeth is, indeed, a 'shallow, changing woman', though this does not signify a weakness, but a powerful capacity: 'Women are considered deep – why? Because you never get to the bottom of them. Women aren't even shallow' (Nietzsche 'Twilight' 159). Richard is taken in by Elizabeth's abyssal, witty quickness, as he will be deceived by Stanley only shortly later. It is deep surfaces, keen, artistic play-acting – Richard's own weapon! – that save their (step)children's lives and thereby lay the foundation of a new dynasty of English royalty.

Richard's fall is not the result of a lack of wariness; it does not follow from a tragic flaw he commits as an act of individual weakness. It is significant that whenever the

word 'shallow' passes someone's lips in a disparaging way, a fatal 'mistake', a deadly error of judgement, looms in the air. Richard's is certainly the most prominent case. He does not only attribute the adjective to Elizabeth, but also to his future killer, whom he calls 'shallow Richmond' (*R*₃ 5.3.219). Richard's tragic misjudgement of 'shallowness' is prefigured by the fate of Hastings, who dismisses Stanley's prophetic dream about Richard's threatening brutality as 'shallow' fears:

HASTINGS

His honour and myself are at the one,
 And at the other is my good friend Catesby,
 Where nothing can proceed that toucheth us
 Whereof I shall not have intelligence.
 Tell him his fears are shallow, wanting instance: (*R*₃ 3.2.20–4)

Hasting's explanation of why he thinks Stanley's fears 'shallow' is indicative. He claims a superior position that renders him untouchable, that grants him control over 'the touches'. Being crowned England's king, Richard finds himself in such a position of authority that implies an attitude towards touch that differs from the one he had before. Instead of playing with the uncontrollable, wild power of touch (which is the privilege of the outsider position), the authoritative position demands shielding oneself against touch.³³ Paradoxically enough, the position most exposed to being touched upon, the position of honour and authority, is the one that holds the most defensive relation to it. It thereby constitutively loses contact to a considerable source of power and inevitably remains vulnerable on this flank. The intelligence, the prevision of touches that Hasting claims, is an illusion. The male eye of authority must be blind to the deepness of the 'shallow' – however, it will nonetheless feel its fatal intensity.

‘The question posed by the spurring-operation (*opération-éperonnante*) is more powerful than any content, thesis or meaning,’ writes Jacques Derrida (Derrida *Spurs* 107; transl. altered). It can, however, not be appropriated and employed for one’s own intents or personal projects:

The stylate spur (*éperon stylé*) traverses the veil. It rents it not merely in order to see or produce the thing itself, but in fact undoes the opposition itself, the opposition that has folded over on itself, bringing forth the veiled/unveiled (sailed/unsailed), the truth as production, the unveiling/dissimulation of that which is produced in the presence. (Derrida *Spurs* 107; transl. altered)

The stylate spur is no touchstone that informs us about the ‘true’ composition of the present world. On the contrary, it does not leave the opposition of ‘true’ and ‘fake’ untouched, of friend and foe, of you and me and the whole mechanics of hierarchy that organise the negotiations of power and influence. Its power is not political but anarchical, its reach incalculable and therefore inescapable: ‘It touches you, my lord, as much as me’ (R3 1.4.261), as Dorset says, ‘For emulation who shall now be nearest / Will touch us all too near’ (R3 2.3.23–6), a wise citizen adds.

Although the title might suggest otherwise, Shakespeare’s play is not dedicated to the spectacular story of an exceptional individual. As Jan Kott has convincingly shown, its object is history (3–46). It depicts and explores a pair of antagonistic forces, whose interplay shapes the course of history. Both are embodied by Richard at different stages of his life: the deep dissembler’s anarchical spurring-operations and the apotropaic authority of the status quo.

The spurring-operation, the deep dissembling, is operated from the margins, from the peripheries of the established power structure. It is, constitutively, ‘a womanly’ intervention.

Shakespeare's play does not expose this intervention as weak or powerless or ineffective, however. On the contrary, one does not do justice to the early modern play when projecting the 'modern dilemma' of 'womanly or warlike' onto it (Rackin 79). Shakespeare's *Richard III* suggests the exact opposite: the 'womanly', deep dissembling, the 'female' erotic seduction and theatrical agency – in short, all the 'touching at a distance' – are associated with the warlike and exposed to be powerful. Richard fascinates the audience and is successful when he plays the woman's role. He fails, one might say, because he 'is not feminine enough' ('Conceiving Tragedy' 99), using words that Tanya Pollard found to reference Hamlet. He fails when attempting to exercise the classical, male authority of the throne.³⁴ 'Richard is perhaps the only tragedy by Shakespeare in which women have, on their own behalf [*pour leur compte*], relations of war,' writes Gilles Deleuze ('Un manifest de moins' 90; my transl.), and he is right. One repeats Richard's mistakes of the second half of the play – the structural failings of patriarchal authority – when declaring the play's women to be 'powerless', 'helpless' (Rackin 79) or even 'pitiable victims' (Howard and Rackin 106). They might be 'shallow', but we should be warned!

The play's women are not victims. They are outsiders – and Richard, at least in the beginning, is one of them. The 'lamenting widows in *Richard III*' (Rackin 79) hold a particular status. They are remainders of a past world. Unlike their husbands, fathers and sons, they have survived a change of regime. It is, however, only their bare lives that subsist – as 'widows', they do not find a place in the new world. They are socially outlawed but, in a certain sense, also untouchable (cf. Agamben): Richard's brothers stop him when he bends his murderous falchion against Margaret's breast (cf. *R3* 1.2.95–9).³⁵ Their place out of touch with the system of worldly power renders any direct political intervention impossible. They exist apart, and all that remains to them is

the authority over their tongues – ‘their speech acts of complaint’ (Shortslef 120).

In fact, it is their isolation and their being cut off from any means of political power that grants them a licence to speak freely. This is what they do in Shakespeare’s *Richard III*: they act as parrhesiastes (cf. Foucault *Fearless Speech*) who call the cruel things by their name; they prophesy and curse. Their roles may be traditionally ‘womanly’, but this does not mean that they are powerless. On the contrary, their curses can ‘pierce the clouds and enter heaven’ (*R3* 1.3.194) and may prove as effective as Richard’s ‘deep dissimulating’. It is the insubstantial, shallow, apparently only superficial and empty sources of power that Shakespeare explores with his play. It is these deep, anarchical, spurring-operations, not backed by any agency of worldly power, feeding only of the deepness of words, that he exposes onstage. He shows that they form a constitutive part of ‘the poetic or tragic structure of history’, of the ‘secret structure’, which, according to Stephen Greenblatt, ‘fascinated Shakespeare’ (*Hamlet in Purgatory* 173).

With the play, he also argues on his own account. Shakespeare is all too familiar with the position of the lamenting widows, at society’s margin, far away from worldly power, free only to use their tongues and at the same time completely dependent on them: it is theatre’s position that the play’s women embody. As so often, Shakespeare makes his plays argue theatre’s case themselves. Theatre has the power to affect by touching at a distance, in a ‘female’, seductive way. Its insubstantial touches may even touch ‘more deeply’, more intensely, than what we are used to accepting as real and effective – this is what Richard tells us when waking from a dream:

KING RICHARD

By the Apostle Paul, shadows tonight
Have struck more terror to the soul of Richard
Than can the substance of ten thousand soldiers
(*R3* 5.3.216–18).

Richmond's triumph not only brings the anarchic spurring-operations of Richard, Margaret, Anne and Elizabeth to an end – it also terminates the 'deep dissimulating' of Shakespeare's play. I would therefore suggest reading it as a disguised epilogue, which mediates between the fictional world and its extra-fictional frame. The play had started with Richard's plan to prolong War's frowns, and resist the smooth smiles of the 'weak piping time of peace' (*R3* 1.1.24). It ends with Richmond's bidding God for 'smooth-faced peace, / With smiling plenty and fair prosperous days' (*R3* 5.5.33–4). There can be little doubt that the early modern playgoers, living in turbulent times still haunted by England's having 'scarred herself' (*R3* 5.5.23), shared Richmond's wish for the world into which these words dismissed them. However, the 'civil wounds are stopped' for a short time only, because many of the viewers would probably be looking forward to coming into contact with theatre's deep surfaces soon. Then, when the actors enter the stage, 'the new-healed wound of malice' will 'break out' (*R3* 2.2.125) again: although always remaining at a distance, their warlike spurring touches will certainly not fail to have their deep effect.

Notes

1. In his article 'Honeyed Toads: Sinister Aesthetics in Shakespeare's *Richard III*', Joel Elliot Slotkin refers his readers to a passage in Philip Sidney's *Defence of Poetry*, which chimes with theatre's particular relation to surfaces (cf. Slotkin 9): 'And truly even *Plato* who so ever well considereth, shall finde that in the body of his worke though the inside & strength were Philosophie, the skin as it were and beautie, depended most of Poetrie. For all stands upon Dialogues, wherein he faines many honest Burgesses of *Athens* speak of such matters [. . .]' (Sidney B2v). A few pages later, Sidney emphasises that it is the surface perfected by poetry that is responsible for the affective power of a text or the rendering of a thought: 'the Philosopher bestoweth

but a wordish description, which doth neither strike, pearce, nor possesse, the sight of the soule so much, as [the Poet] doth' (D1V). The haptic quality of *striking* or *piercing* words or images distinguishes poetry – poetry proves, according to Sidney, capable of touching from a distance, also in a material, physiological sense.

2. At least since Sigmund Freud's 'Einige Charaktertypen aus der psychoanalytischen Arbeit' (1916) Richard has been associated with an ambivalence of repulsion and attraction, which is often referred to by the term 'fascination'. This is not limited to the psychoanalytical tradition of reading *Richard III* ('[Richard is] endowed with a deadly power of fascination' (49), writes Vance Adair inspired by Lacan); Linda Charnes notes his 'fascination that always underlies revulsion' (*Notorious Identity* 38), Joel Elliot Slotkin speaks of 'demonic power and fascination' (25), Majorie Garber links the 'very fascination exerted by Richard' (81) to his deformity. My use of the term 'fascination' is indebted to Maurice Blanchot, who relates this term to solitude, an existential state of uncertainty which touches on notions of life and death, and which brings them into contact with the incommensurable (32).
3. Kristin M. Smith's claim that 'Richard is not "shaped" for the purely masculine world of the battlefield' (156) and therefore doomed to be defeated by Richmond does not do justice to Richard's past and the beginning of the play, which explicitly refers to his martial merits. Smith appears to be guided by an intuitive division of gendered spheres, which opposes war and femininity. As we will see, *Richard III* undermines those (very modern) segregations.
4. As William C. Carroll has shown (1992), *Richard III* diagnoses a desecralisation of the ritual order which transcends the king's desperate attempt of reconciliation and characterises the early modern historical setting.
5. For an extensive reading which links *Richard III* to the ideas of Carl Schmitt, especially his political theorem of the state of exception, see Rebecca Lemon (1992). Carl Schmitt plays a major role in the closing chapter of this book dedicated to *Troilus and Cressida*.

6. Richard's 'self-conscious theatricality' (Slotkin 14) has become a commonplace in criticism. 'The hero's play-acting forms the only real subject of at least the first three acts,' writes Thomas F. Van Laan (72), while Claudia Olk notes that 'Richard emphatically adopts theatricality to create himself and to direct others' (8), to give only two examples.
7. For Richard's deformity and its role in the play's reflections on history, see Garber.
8. Hastings curses himself with this punishment in *R3* 2.1.32-40.
9. '[E]vents or phenomena, such as one's birth or death, never show themselves,' writes Ken Jackson (473), referring to the philosophy of Jean-Luc Marion. As a consequence, sight does not seem to be the proper mode with which to approach such 'events or phenomena'. Touch might prove to be a more promising candidate, as a paradoxical mode that oscillates between the impossibility of reaching what it touches and the nearness which it nonetheless establishes.
10. In *Mothers in Mourning*, Nicole Loraux assigns the mother a 'preeminent position alongside the dead', which she owes 'to the unconditional privilege given once and for all by the bond of childbirth' (38).
11. Unlike Jean E. Howard and Phyllis Rackin, Tanya Pollard suggests moving away from male heroics as the standard for tragic action. Referring to *Hamlet*, she writes: 'The ideal protagonist, then, should be a woman, and one who has been pregnant' ('Conceiving Tragedy' 93). From this perspective, many of the female characters in *Richard III* cannot be called weak at all.
12. In 'Women's Time', Julia Kristeva contrasts different concepts of time, which she aligns with male and female subjectivity. She identifies 'two types of temporality (cyclical and monumental) [which] are traditionally linked to female subjectivity' (17). Both are associated with maternity (one via 'repetition', the other via 'eternity'). However, Kristeva emphasises that these two principles 'are found to be the fundamental, if not the sole, conceptions of time in numerous civilizations and experiences, particularly mystical ones' (17). These two female concepts of temporality clash with the prevailing male concept of time, which Kristeva characterises as 'time as project,

teleology, linear and prospective unfolding; time as departure, progression, and arrival – in other words, the time of history’ (17). Against this background, Jean E. Howard and Phyllis Rackin’s interpretation of the women’s role in *Richard III* can be understood. Their feminist strategy pursues the goal which Kristeva ascribes to the first feminist generation, the women’s movement, which ‘aspired to gain a place in linear time as the time of project and history’ (Kristeva 18). In other words, it is in terms of (male) history that the women in *Richard III* may be called ‘pitiable victims’. However, instead of bemoaning their failure of securing a successful place in (male) history, I would suggest following Kristeva’s feminist strategy and affirm the peculiarly female concepts of temporality which the women in Shakespeare’s play embody and read their resistance to heroic (male) roles as a critical intervention.

13. Maurice Blanchot exposes another mode: ‘the [literary] work itself is by implication an experience of death’ (92).
14. Steve Mentz’s *At the Bottom of Shakespeare’s Ocean* is an important reference for this question. His emphasis on change and instability resonates with my reading of the depths in *Richard III*.
15. For a historical setting of the notion of the grotesque, see Neil Rhodes, *Elizabethan Grotesque*.
16. The Shakespearean notion of ‘scattering’ is reminiscent of Jacques Derrida’s concept of ‘dissemination’ (cf. Derrida *La Dissémination*).
17. Starting from a reading of Maurice Blanchot, Roland Barthes has elaborated on the concept of neutrality, which is, for him, defined by the suspension or even dissolution of (semantic . . .) paradigms: ‘I define the Neutral as that which outplays [*déjoue*] the paradigm, or rather I call Neutral everything that baffles the paradigm’ (Barthes *The Neutral* 6).
18. When describing a force that ‘*distinguishes the ground of things* [*fait distinguer le fond des choses*]', Jean-Luc Nancy (with Maurice Blanchot as his reference) characterises the ‘ground’ involved in this operation in the following way: ‘this ground presents itself at the same time, moreover, as the

ground of forms held outside of it in their *status nascendi* as well as vibrating at the same time in the correlative imminence of a *status moriendi* by which they slide back anew to ground' (Nancy 'The Image' 78). To me, Shakespeare's reflections on theatre's power of dissembling appear to be dedicated to the same (de)formative ontological force.

19. Luce Irigaray associates the notion of mucous with the feminine 'ground', or matrix, out of which the notion of stable sameness and the masculine subject rise – and whose existence is disavowed by a belief in the originality of stable sameness: 'Eternal mediators for the incarnation of the body and the world of man, women seem never to have produced the singularity of their own body and world. The originality of a sameness that would relate to incarnation. Before and after the advent into the light of day. Before and after the movement outward into the brightness of the outside of the body, of the inside of a world. This *sameness*, quite apart from everything that can be said about it from the outside, has a way of relating to its appearance which cannot be equated with that of the masculine world, as a result of the way it lives in *mucous*. [. . .] [T]he mucous has no permanence, even though it is the 'tissue' for the development of duration. The condition of possibility for the extension of time? But only insofar as it is made available to and for a masculine subject that erects itself out of the mucous. And which believes it is based on substances, on something solid. All of which requires the mucous to blur in its potency and its act (in its potentially autonomous *hypokeimenon*?) and to serve merely as a means for the elaboration of the substantial, the essential' (Irigaray *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* 93).
20. Viewed more closely, the difference between biting and polishing is a difference only in scale – a difference in intensity, not in quality.
21. Cf. 'And if you gaze for long into an abyss, the abyss gazes back into you' (Nietzsche *Beyond Good and Evil* 68).
22. For the kinship of dream, ghosts and theatre, see Greenblatt (esp. *Hamlet in Purgatory* 164–80).

23. Lady Anne may testify to this contamination of Richard's deep dissembling when she claims, at the end of the seduction scene, that Richard 'teach[es] me how to flatter you' (R3 1.2.226) and performs this very flattering by accepting his ring and returning his farewell wishes.
24. Nietzsche's passage reads: 'Or, as with Heinrich Kleist, who wants to do violence to the reader with his fantasy; Shakespeare, too' (*Nachlaß 1880-1882* 474; my transl.).
25. 'Pythogareer: [. . .] Berührung. Actio in distans' (Nietzsche *Nachlaß 1869-1874* 572).
26. Luce Irigaray is certainly the thinker of these two imaginaries and their relation to touch. In her famous 'This Sex Which is Not One', the 'touch' of male penetration interrupts the female touch of the labia, which embody and perform the actual, paradigmatic notion of touch.
27. The scene's phallic encounter could be described with recourse to what Bruce R. Smith has called the topical 'analogy between tongue and penis' (*Phenomenal Shakespeare* 167). However, whenever activated, the analogy undermines the phallic regime by contaminating it with the tongue's 'slipperiness', with potential falsehood, dissimulation – all associated with 'the female' in Shakespeare's plays.
28. For Luce Irigaray, this aiming at oneness is actually the phallic characteristic. When she asks, 'Perhaps it becomes phallic through this relationship to the one?' (*Speculum of the Other Woman* 229), the question is rhetorical.
29. The pair of facial expressions, or rather sur-facial qualities – smooth smile and grim frown – form a key metaphor that frames the play. We had already analysed it in Richard's initial soliloquy, and it re-emerges in Richmond's monologue at the end of the play: 'Smile heaven upon this fair conjunction, / That long have frown'd upon their enmity! / [. . .] And let their heirs, God, if Thy will be so, / Enrich the time to come with smooth-faced peace, / With smiling plenty and fair prosperous days' (R3 5.5.20-34).
30. For the dynamic of circulation which is connected to having and not having, see Jacques Lacan, 'Seminar on the "Purloined Letter"'.

31. On Richard's being 'vulnerable to the "pricking" accusations of others' (125) and the early modern physiological background for this vulnerability, see Shortslef.
32. This is in part compensated for by Buckingham's assistance, who continues the devilish capacities that Richard shows in the beginning and who is, in a large part, responsible for Richard's gaining the crown.
33. To put it gendered terms, Richard joins the hegemonic, patriarchal project of 'undermining female tactility' (Karim-Cooper *The Hand* 167) in the authoritative position of the king – and thereby deprives himself of his major capacity.
34. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari associate Richard with what they call the 'war machine', that is, nomadic, anarchical forces opposing the stability of the 'state apparatus': 'Richard III comes from elsewhere: his ventures, including those with women, derive more from a war machine than from a State apparatus. He is the traitor, springing from the great nomads and their secrecy' (*A Thousand Plateaus* 126).
35. Only when Lady Anne's outsider status ends by marrying Richard does she seem to be in the position to become a victim of his brutality. Is it the same 'law' that protects the outsider Richard when Lady Anne points his sword at him?