

RII, I, 1, 1-68

PBMTQ

Context: court of Richard II, public, ceremonious scene

Richard has been called upon to arbitrate feud between Bullingbrook and Mowbray

Scene meant to emphasize R's kingship already bears the marks of B's plotting: **more is at stake than meets the eye**; undercurrents of B's duplicity undermine R's authority and suggest he is the one pulling the strings / foreshadowing the reversal of the power dynamics

Guideline: How does this exposition scene present a complex power game, foreshadowing Bullingbrook's ultimate triumph?

I/ A ceremonious scene of trial

The scene is a court scene meant to showcase Richard's kingly power and authority as he is called upon to arbitrate a feud and is given marks of respect and allegiance.

1/ A public scene showcasing Richard's kingship

The stage directions suggest that part of the court is gathered around King Richard to attend ('with other Nobles and Attendants'); here Richard is clearly called upon in a very **public** role (as opposed to more intimate scenes where another side of his personality will be on display) → The plays opens with the pomp and ceremony of the court, in what might be called a 'performance' of Richard's kingship.

Indeed at first sight the scene emphasizes Richard's power and authority: he is the first to speak, and is – at least in appearance – the one directing the ceremonial of the trial, first interrogating Gaunt (using **imperative forms** as becomes his position of command – 'tell me', 'call them'), then having the 2 protagonists of the feud come in and asking them to expose their complaints.

That Richard is here giving a performance of his kingly power is also perceptible in his repeated use of the **regal pronoun 'we'** ('our leisure', 'let us hear', 'ourselves will hear'), particularly in the expression 'our **presence**'. In the medieval period, the term 'presence' implies an official gathering of the court around the enthroned king, with certain codified gestures and behaviours (cf. Gurr's note and introduction p. 41- – the word is echoed by Bullingbrook l. 34 ('princely presence')). This is a solemn occasion indeed.

2/ Bullingbrook and Mowbray: two apparently loyal subjects

Facing Richard, the other characters in the scene behave accordingly, swearing allegiance and showing their respect and obedience. Gaunt uses both 'my liege' and 'your highness' to address Richard. As they appear before Richard, Bullingbrook and Mowbray start by ritualistic oaths of allegiance to their monarch. Bull's oath hyperbolically praises Richard:

My **gra** /cious **so** /vereign, **my** /**most lo** /ving liege.

→ interesting line where superlative form 'my most loving liege' is emphasized by three successive stresses, weighing down the rhythm and conferring solemnity to the oath. Notice also the alliterative 'loving liege', underlining the intricate relationship between the sovereign and his subject. Notice how Bullingbrook hammers the point by once again expressing his 'devotion' at the beginning of his speech.

Mowbray's praise refers to the notion of **divine right of kings** by suggesting Richard might reach immortality and be enthroned in heaven.

What is remarkable about B and Mowbray in these first lines is **how similar they appear**. This similarity is introduced by Richard who repeatedly places them on an equal footing:

'Face to face
And frowning brow to brow ourselves will hear
The accuser and accused freely speak'

The parallel expressions 'face to face', 'brow to brow' introduce a mirror-effect between the 2, while 'the accuser and the accused' also emphasizes their interchangeability. Indeed there is a **degree of manipulation in Richard's thus suggesting Bullingbrook and Mowbray are equally guilty**, as they come to 'appeal each other of high treason'. It is quite convenient for him to suggest none is better than the other – and anticipates his double banishment later on.

In their speeches, Bullingbrook and Mowbray also appear oddly similar, as if parroting each other's words – this will be even truer with the later part of the scene: while Bullingbrook calls Mowbray a 'traitor' twice, threatening to 'stuff (his) throat' with a 'traitor's name', Mowbray evokes 'these terms of treason doubled down his throat' – notice the pun on 'doubled', both suggesting the 'double' accusation of treason and the idea that it might be folded thickly down B's throat. One might suggest that Mowbray and Bullingbrook are here a 'double' of each other. (cf. also the similar references to 'happiness' in their first interventions).

These echoes between Mowbray and Bullingbrook's speeches create a sense of confusion for the audience: if both accuse each other of the same crimes, one must necessarily be lying (hence Mowbray's concluding line: 'By all my hopes most falsely doth he lie').

3/ Richard: a fair judge?

A first reading of this exposition scene thus suggests a fairly simple power dynamics, with two subjects on an equal footing, and a king called upon to arbitrate – an introductory scene reminiscent of other plays by Shakespeare, such as *King Lear* or *Midsummer Night's Dream*. Richard does not fail to take advantage of the situation to place himself above the fray and project an image of fairness and equity, by urging both protagonists to 'freely speak' (cf. later his claim: 'impartial are our eyes and ears' I, 1, 115). He also paints a picture of Bullingbrook and Mowbray as agitated by their passions, full of rage and thus in need for his objective and fair arbitration ('High stomached are they both and full of ire / In rage deaf as the sea, hasty as fire'). The elegance of these last 2 lines – a rhyming couplet, with a balanced binary rhythm, conveys Richard's linguistic mastery, contrasting with what he implies of the 2 characters' distemper.

High sto / mached are / they both / and full / of ire

In rage / deaf as / the sea / , hasty / as fire

Of course, as already implied, the symmetry between Mowbray and Bullingbrook, implying they might both be guilty, is misleading and only a produce of Richard's manipulative tactics. Beyond the first impression of a fair king ruling over two quarrelsome subjects, the scene displays a complex political game already sowing the seeds of Bullingbrook's victory.

II/ A complex political game

1/ Pulling the strings: Bullingbrook's double dealing

Despite Rich's efforts indeed, it is clear that the instigator of the scene – and thus, symbolically, the one responsible for launching **the plot** (in all meanings of the word) is Bullingbrook. He is the one accusing Mowbray, not the other way round, and Richard is forced to have him speak first. Mowbray, as a result, can only react to B's accusation, and is forced into a **defence position**.

B's relation with Richard is also quite different from Mowbray's, since he is **his cousin**. This Richard is also forced to acknowledge ('Cousin of Herford'); while Mowbray pretends it will not deter him from challenging B ('setting aside his high blood's royalty / And let him be no kinsman to my liege').

Part of the mystery and confusion of the scene is that, at this point, **no clear accusation is formulated**, beyond the vague repeated term of 'treason'. Only later will B explicitly accuse M of Gloucester's death – and only during Gaunt's and the Duchess of Gloucester's exchange will it become clear that Richard is ultimately guilty of Gloucester's death. Bullingbrook is here **tactically accusing Mowbray to target Richard**. He is laying the bomb that will blow up the king, but he must be careful not to fire it too soon: he would mar his far-seeing strategy by a premature move – hence the hushed-up atmosphere of this first scene, where everyone seems to be compelled to silence for different reasons.

B's accusations thus remain **veiled and use roundabout allusions** to denounce Mowbray's duplicity: 'Since the more fair and crystal is the sky / The uglier seem the clouds that in it fly'. Resorting to elemental imagery, B suggests that Mowbray's crimes are like stains on a clear sky. This is quite ironic since it is Bullingbrook himself who may be accused of **playing a double game** in this whole scene. Indeed his repeated, insistent oaths of allegiance to Richard ring hollow when one is aware of his ulterior motive:

'In the devotion of a subject's love,
Tendering the precious safety of my prince,
And free from other misbegotten hate,
Come I appellant to this princely presence'

Bullingbrook is guilty of hypocrisy here, as he is almost speaking in antiphrasis, saying the exact opposite of what he means – he is, indeed, animated by another ‘hate’ than simply his hostility towards Mowbray. One might go as far as suggesting the whole of Bullingbrook’s accusation displays a form of **double enunciation**, or several layers of meaning: **beyond what his words appear to suggest** (in compliance with the rules of the court where no direct accusation against Richard would be acceptable) **there are implied threats that Richard is sure to understand.**

2/ Cornering Mowbray (and Richard)

Mowbray’s long, protracted speech, full of circumlocutions, reflects his unease and his embarrassment about how to answer B’s accusations. It takes him about 15 lines to explicitly respond to B’s accusation, and his denegation is not very effective since it remains as vague as the accusation was (boiling down to calling B a liar). All the beginning of Mowbray’s speech suggests he is in a tight corner, and is muzzled because of the situation (both he and Richard know that B’s accusations are true):

‘the fair reverence of your highness curbs me /
From giving reins and spurs to my free speech’

→ double meaning here also. Surface meaning: it would be unbecoming at court to use violent words against Bullingbrook. Real meaning: the obedience owed to his monarch prevents Mowbray from telling the truth, i.e. that it is Richard who has asked him to kill Gloucester. Double enunciation here also – contrasting with Richard’s invitation to ‘speak freely’, Mowbray’s tongue is tied.

Notice how many times Mowbray suggests he is under some pressure or obligation – with the use of passive forms as in ‘to be hushed’, or later ‘were I tied to run afoot’... Even though Mowbray claims he cannot be ‘hushed’, and say ‘naught at all’, all his speech suggests he is forced into silence – his hands are tied by the crime committed for Richard. Hence, also, the rather allusive, almost cryptic effect of his words: too much remains unsaid for his speech to be entirely clear to the audience at this point. Notice the striking premonitory quality of the end of the speech: when he defies Bullingbrook and challenges him to a duel, he claims that he is prepared

‘to run afoot
Even to the frozen ridges of the Alps,
Or any other ground inhabitable
Where ever Englishman durst set his foot’

This is an uncanny prophesy of the fate awaiting Mowbray later in the play: he will indeed be banished from his mother country, and will lament this estrangement from his ‘native English’ in I, 3, 160. It almost seems as though Mowbray anticipated this banishment, almost fatalistically acknowledging his inevitable defeat.

→ Hence the scene contains underlying tensions revealing the complex power game going on between the 3 protagonists. At this point Richard is still powerful and can still afford to show off his

kingliness in his debonair, offhand way. But we understand that his power is undermined, that his majestic appearance may hide pernicious flaws.

Ultimately the scene appears as a war of words, where language and power are intrinsically linked and where words are weapons with the power to destroy a king.

III/ A war of words

1/ 'High blood': a heated exchange

The omnipresent elemental imagery is meant to convey undercurrents of violence that run through the scene, beneath the surface of the courtly ceremonial.

Richard evokes the 2 elements of water and fire when referring to the 2 plaintiffs' agitation – suggesting, maybe, that the real antagonism in the scene is not Bullingbrook vs. Mowbray but Bullingbrook vs. Richard (since water and fire are the 2 elements they are repeatedly associated to in the play).

Another opposition in the scene is that between air (associated, in the theory of elements, to the humour of blood) and fire (associated to anger, 'choler'): Mowbray repeatedly alludes to blood ('the blood is hot that must be cooled for this', 'his high blood's royalty').

As for Bullingbrook, his speech repeatedly evokes images associated with the air element (heaven, sky, clouds); we know that in the play, 'air' is also associated with speech, words.

This complex imagery, insisting on clashing humours and elements, may suggest that some physical disease is taking hold of the kingdom, a conflict that will need to be purged: Mowbray implies this by suggesting 'the blood is hot that must be cooled for this', an allusion to medicinal bloodletting, purgation by bleeding, which was thought to cool the body as well as releasing the excessive 'humour'. Richard, later on in the scene, will take up this metaphor by urging the 2 enemies to settle their dispute without letting blood:

'Wrath-kindled gentlemen, be ruled by me.
Let's purge this choler without letting blood.
This we prescribe though no physician.
Deep malice makes too deep incision.
Forget, forgive, conclude and be agreed.
Our doctors say this is no month to bleed'.

With this extended metaphor, what Richard implies is that **words should be enough to settle the matter, without the need to fight**. This is something Mowbray dismisses in the scene: to him, this dispute can only be resolved in a duel, as he argues at the beginning of his speech:

Let not my cool words here accuse my zeal
'Tis not the trial of a woman's war,
The bitter clamour of two eager tongues,

Can arbitrate this tongue betwixt us twain'

Using an openly misogynistic comparison, Mowbray here suggests that his conflict with Bullingbrook is not a mere dispute between two quarrelsome women, and that a simple 'trial' will not be enough to resolve it – the only solution is to take up arms and fight.

2/ From words to swords

Language in this scene reflects the balance of power. We may indeed contrast Mowbray's challenge to a duel, and his suggestion that words will not suffice to settle the dispute, with Bullingbrook's much more level-headed and masterful handling of language. One key distinction here is that Bullingbrook speaks in **rhymed couplets** – and he is the only character to do so in this passage, as even Richard uses blank verse. This is a sign of his **verbal superiority**, his verbal mastery contrasting with Mowbray's stuttering, repetitive and perplexing words.

Bullingbrook is also very confident in the potency of his words (ie, his accusations):

'for what I speak

My body shall make good upon this earth

Or my divine soul answer it in heaven'

→ Bullingbrook is so certain of his right that he is ready to prove it with 'his body' (ie in a duel) or to answer for it in heaven, before God.

The end of his speech is more explicit still:

'What my tongue speaks my right drawn sword may prove'

The parallel between 'words' and 'swords' is here manifest; yet Bullingbrook's position differs from Mowbray's in that he does not need 'swords' to prove he is right: he knows he is, and knows he can win a war of words; while the 'sword' is Mowbray's only weapon, since he is lying.

Bullingbrook's parallel between 'his tongue' and 'his drawn sword' hints at the **performative value of his accusations**, here taken as actual weapons, carrying the value of actions. Similarly, Mowbray's 'I do defy him' is a performative utterance – a challenge to a duel – which will be followed up with his throwing of the gage, immediately after Mowbray's last line in this excerpt.

Beneath the veneer of courtly language, thus, the scene offers a **verbal joust**, where repeated accusations are thrown and barely veiled threats are made, conjuring up the spectre of physical violence – particularly so in the case of Mowbray since killing Bullingbrook is the only possible outcome for him. Cf the violence of 'I spit at him', or 'These terms of treason doubled down his throat'.