‘Forgiveness, horse’: The Barbaric World of *Richard II*

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The ecocritic Greg Garrard has figured the difference between animal studies and ecocriticism as being between one approach that places “emphasis on the individual organism,” and another which “demands moral consideration for inanimate things such as rivers and mountains, assuming pain and suffering to be a necessary part of nature.”[1] Such a distinction would seem to be reflected in recent essays that attend to the representation of nonhuman nature in Shakespeare’s *Richard II*.[2] Here, “animal-sensitive” readings take the play’s horses as their focus,[3] while ecocritical ones take the representation of the land as theirs. For the former, it seems, the landscape is the blank canvas onto which animal and human worlds are projected, while for the latter, the animals are absent or, as Simon Estok has put it, perhaps considered to be “outside of the environment.”[4]

This would seem to present an impasse – an unbridgeable division between the two approaches which might otherwise be expected to share so much common ground. But the essays on *Richard II* actually do more than mark out distinct critical territories; they converge in their interpretation of the play in interesting ways. They read in its transfer of power from divinely ordained monarch to astute politician a parallel shift from an enchanted to a disenchanted conception of nonhuman nature – with the latter manifested in the sense of animals as lacking agency or the land as a resource for use. What emerges at the end of *Richard II*, the different readings suggest, is not only a new conception of royal power but also a new conception of human power: nature is instrumentalized and mankind’s authority established (the masculine terminology is used deliberately).

In this essay I will track the parallels that exist between ecocritical and animal-sensitive readings of *Richard II*, and offer an alternative interpretation that builds on this work but diverges from it by suggesting that at the end of the play, in the imagined conversation Richard has with "roan Barbary," we can also trace something else, something that resists the separation of human from nature, and that reinstates humanity's place alongside rather than above animals. Voiced in defeat, for sure, but present nonetheless, this other perspective is made manifest in Richard's asking "Forgiveness, horse," which strange request suggests, I argue, that the play represents more than just the ascendancy of an instrumentalized conception of nature. But, before getting to Barbary, the essay needs to journey through gardens, encounter snakes, and ride a few other horses, because it is via the accumulation of engagements with the play's nonhuman natural worlds, and the interpretations of them, that Barbary must be approached.

Allegory and Materiality

It is well established that 3.4 of *Richard II* is an allegory of the state of the nation using the nonhuman natural world to figure rule and disorder. The garden is, in short, a microcosm of the realm, and in this moment we, with the Queen and her ladies, overhear the Gardener and his men contrasting their great care with the King's failure. One of the men asks:

> Why should we in the compass of a pale
>
> Keep law and form and due proportion
>
> Showing, as in a model, our firm estate
>
> When our sea-walled garden, the whole land,
>
> Is full of weeds …[5]

This linking of politics and horticulture, of the realm with the garden, is utterly conventional in Renaissance thought,[6] and has been taken up by critics of *Richard II* in different ways. In what is now regarded as a foundational reading from 1947, for example, Richard D. Altick argued that in the play Shakespeare uses "iterative symbolism" to construct a "unity of tone," citing sets of images including "*earth-ground-land, blood,* pallor, garden, sun, tears, *tongue-speech-word, snake-venom*" which, when repeated, "perceptibly deepen" meaning. For Altick, the "untended garden" of 3.4 is part of this iterative symbolism, and is linked in the play with other crucial ideas; in particular, with the conception of England as a lost paradise, which is voiced most clearly by John of Gaunt in 2.1.[7]

Altick's reading assumes that there is no need to venture beyond *Richard II*'s imagery to gain insight into its dramatic shifts; it supposes, as Cleanth Brooks put it, in a book published in the same year, that the literary work is a "well wrought urn," complete unto itself.[8] Such a perspective is very different from that voiced by current ecocriticism. Indeed, Jennifer Munroe has distinguished ecocritical analyses from the kind of readings Altick and Brooks perform in a helpfully succinct way, arguing that where the interpretations that focus on the words on the page regard the natural world as a source of metaphors, ecocritics concentrate on "discussion of the physical properties of and material interactions between humans and nonhumans."[9] That contrast is exemplified in Lynne Bruckner's 2013 ecocritical reading of *Richard II* which offers a different conception of the literary text, of the garden scene and of the role of the natural imagery more generally from Altick's essay, and suggests that Richard's failure as a monarch is because he fails to maintain his realm (it is over-grown with allegorical weeds, as the Gardener and his men know), and because he treats "the earth as an economic resource, rather than as a resource to be protected."[10]

Bruckner's argument emerges from a close analysis of the play's language, taking, like Altick, John of Gaunt's statement to Richard, "Landlord of England art thou now, not

king" (2.1.113), as a key. But she suggests that the king's exploitation of "the earth for immediate cash in hand" was likely to have resonated with the play's original audience – with their concerns about deforestation and the profiteering land management practices of the time, in particular.[11] That is, she does something with Shakespeare's work that Altick did not, and reads *Richard II* by looking outwards to the moment in which the play was created and first staged. For her the garden scene is not only allegorical and thematically tied in with other key image clusters in the text, it is, rather, a "nexus of materiality and allegory" in which Shakespeare's symbolism should be linked to the very pressing reality of his time: in particular to "the Little Ice Age" that was causing poor harvests and famine in England in the late sixteenth century.[12] As such, her reading moves from a detailed discussion of imagery, towards a historicist analysis that sees the play as a comment on its own times.

Alongside this, Bruckner also places *Richard II* within a wider intellectual shift. She argues that John of Gaunt's speech in 2.1 presents the nonhuman world as vibrant: nature has "built" a fortress, he claims; the shore "beats back the envious siege / Of wat'ry Neptune" (2.1.43 and 62-3). In recognizing this potential for agency in the nonhuman world, Bruckner argues, Gaunt's speech offers "an important pre-Cartesian sensibility: one that understands the earth as living, lively, and nonmechanistic … filled with vitality."[13] This habit of mind persisted in the sixteenth century, she states, but was in decline, "contested (and largely eradicated) by the rise of science."[14] Richard's use of the land as a source of income epitomizes the change that is coming. "In many ways," Bruckner writes, "*Richard II* rests on an epistemological cusp – straddling the notion that the earth is/is not living."[15]

Having situated the play within this economic and intellectual trajectory, at the end of her essay Bruckner does something else again which traces the logical outcome of this move towards the instrumentalization of nature. She turns to read *Richard II* to address our present (her essay is included in a collection called *Shakespeare and the Urgency of Now*). In

particular, she uses it to think about the issue of hydraulic fracturing (fracking) in US National Parks. The play, she writes,

> evinces how the living earth too often is held hostage to a combination of financial mandates and politics as usual. In the very way in which *Richard II* may have sparked political concerns about land management and forests for Elizabethans, the play can readily evoke similar concerns in a contemporary audience. Richard's failure to make appropriate use of national land along with his violation of Bolingbroke's property … is analogous in too many ways to current environmental incursions on our federal and state lands.[16]

In undertaking this final analysis Bruckner is following an established pattern in ecocritical readings which use Shakespeare's work as a way of thinking about current environmental issues. So Sharon O'Dair, who gave the answer "no" to her question "Is it Shakespearean Ecocriticism if it isn't Presentist?,"[17] also linked *Richard II* to current debates, but rather differently from Bruckner. Once again taking the garden scene as a prompt, she focused on the Deepwater Horizon oil spill of 2010, writing: "One would like to think that the figurative descendants of Shakespeare's gardener, we who make up liberal democratic states, carried with us and enhanced the gardener's wisdom. But our record in the Gulf and elsewhere suggests that we have not."[18] Careful management, rather than profit-driven land-grabs, should be where we begin, and *Richard II* can help to remind us of this.

There is no doubting the significance of such readings which use Shakespeare's work, which has such a high cultural value, to engage with pressing concerns about human uses of and responsibilities towards the non-animal nonhuman natural world and the same impetus propels animal-sensitive readings of the play as well. Indeed, a history of the critical engagement with *Richard II*'s animals reveals a parallel to that which happened in relation to

discussions of the garden. We move, once again, from interpreting imagery to contemplating actual relationships in a way that brings Shakespeare's play into conversation with current debates.

Reading the Kings' Horses

Despite the fact that *Richard II* is not as full of animal imagery as some of Shakespeare's other plays there are creatures in it that are worth addressing. For that reason, it is odd that these are barely touched upon by Altick because, as I will show, just as the close reading of garden imagery offered up significant meanings, so the play's horses can also reveal much. And yet, Altick noted only one animal-related image set in his article – "*snake-venom*" – which he argued links "the idea of the garden on the one hand (for what grossly untended garden would be without its snakes?) and the idea of the tongue on the other."[19] That is, it connects the corruption of the natural world, figured in the serpent's tempting of Eve (the Queen has the Gardener seduced by both [3.4.75-6]), to the corruption of the political world, figured in the representation of the king's flatterers as "vipers" (3.2.129). As such, "*snake-venom*" reveals a correlation that I will argue is central to Shakespeare's use of horses in the play.

Altick, however, paid no attention to these horses, and this may be because he regarded characters' discussions of them to be referring to real but off-stage animals rather than to emblematic ones, reinforcing the sense in which his reading was focused on imagery rather than any materially real nature.[20] It is with Robert N. Watson's 1983 article "Horsemanship in Shakespeare's Second Tetralogy" that horses come to be more fully recognized as possessing symbolic meanings in the plays. In that Watson argues that "literal

and figurative references to horsemanship serve to connect the failure of self-rule in such figures as Richard II, Hotspur, Falstaff, and the Dolphin with their exclusion from political rule."[21] Such a reading relates Shakespeare's equine imagery to the figures of the horse and the charioteer in Plato's *Phaedrus* in which controlling a horse models, as Watson puts it, "restraint of unruly passions." This is an image, he suggests, that was "alive in the minds of English Renaissance authors," and so established was the idea that

> By the time Shakespeare began writing his second tetralogy, these associations had evidently been extended and transmuted into the conception of the king as a sort of horseman who must restrain and guide an otherwise unruly state, composed largely of beastly rabble and their crude appetites.[22]

As such, when Bolingbroke, in his hour of triumph, is described by the Duke of York as entering London "Mounted upon a hot and fiery steed, / Which his aspiring rider seemed to know" (5.2.8-9), Watson writes of the moment: "the horse Bolingbroke rides here reflects his burning ambitious appetites; but as he is able to modulate those appetites within himself … so he is able to regulate the actual horse and thus make a usefully impressive equestrian figure on his way to the throne."[23] This conception of the symbolic value of horsemanship would seem to be repeated at the end of *Richard II* when, in Watson's words, "Bolingbroke completes his political usurpation by yet another usurpation." Sitting in his prison cell, the deposed Richard is told by his former Groom that Barbary, "That horse that thou so often has bestrid," was ridden by the new king on his coronation day (5.5.79). That Bolingbroke is riding Richard's horse emblematizes the transfer of power: for Jennifer Flaherty, "the act of riding Barbary instils kingship in Henry, marking the shift in power as much as the coronation itself."[24]

Karen Raber has reiterated the value of equine imagery for thinking about political rule in an essay on *1 Henry IV,* reading horse riding as "an ideologically charged skill, conveying the authority of the rider to control the bestial passions of the masses as their rightful ruler."[25] But alongside this Platonic vision she also traces how, in exercising the very skills that make manifest the control that is symbolized in horse riding, something else can emerge. She turns, that is, away from the philosophical debate to think about real horses and real riding and traces these encounters back to her analysis of *1 Henry IV*. In a sense, this parallels the shift in focus from allegory to material reality that can be traced in Bruckner's reading of the garden in *Richard II,* and indeed, I am using Raber's essay as an important way of addressing that earlier play.

Raber shows how, in early modern thought, riding could also represent a kind of cross-species collaboration in that "the 'horse' becomes a reciprocal portion of that construct, the 'horse-man', which is always understood in early modern formulations as the temporary and provisional union of one perceiving and embodied creature with another." Or, as Michel Baret wrote in his early seventeenth-century horse training manual *An Hipponomie, or Vineyard of Horsemanship*: "you shall thinke to bring your Horse, and your selfe to seeme but one body."[26] This union of horse and man (and it is men who are being written of here) has a flip-side, however: "Becoming one with a horse," Raber writes, "can always slide into becoming something too much like a horse."[27] Such a double potential in the early modern understanding allows for an ambiguity to exist in the symbolic meaning of riding: a hierarchical relationship of control can become one of loss of differentiation. And it is in the context of this ambiguity that we should revisit York's description of Bolingbroke's entry into London in 5.2, because it is my argument that *Richard II* is more ambivalent in its representation of his rise to political power, and of human power more generally, than Watson and Flaherty propose.

York, as noted above, describes "great Bolingbroke, / Mounted upon a hot and fiery steed, / Which his aspiring rider seemed to know" (5.2.7-9), and Watson reads this as evidencing Bolingbroke's control – a Platonic reading that is certainly one possible interpretation of this moment. I suggest, however, that just as the man on top of the horse which symbolizes human dominion can become the image of a bestialization of the rider, so another reading of York's description might be available. The line "[w]hich his aspiring rider seemed to know" is ambiguous: the "which" refers to the animal as the subject of the sentence (which horse seemed to know his rider), an image that reiterates Gaunt's sense of the active presence of the nonhuman world. But there is the chance that the "which" in York's description might also be referring to the horse as the passive object of knowledge (which horse the rider seemed to know). As such, Bolingbroke's horse could be read as the embodiment of the "epistemological cusp" that Bruckner wrote of: it is a creature that "is/is not living." But I think we can also link the ambiguity of York's "which" to Raber's reading of horsemanship. In this triumphant entry the animal fits the man to the extent that human and horse, subject and object, cannot be told apart, and this moment of conquest is shadowed by an image of Bolingbroke as less than properly human.

The slippage from human to beast that Raber finds in horse riding, and that I am tracing at this moment in *Richard II,* is made present in another way in 5.2 in a possible echo of a text from less than a decade earlier. In *Tamburlaine* II.4.3*,* Marlowe's hero, who is, like Bolingbroke, a self-made rather than God-ordained monarch, enters the stage in triumph in a chariot pulled by two kings: he has literally bridled and made-horse those he has defeated. Timothy Francisco states that Tamburlaine's actions push his captives "along the species grid from animalized human, to animalized animal, and finally to object, denied any semblance of agency." In enacting his triumph in this way, however, Francisco argues that it is Tamburlaine's own status that is undermined: "Marlowe's play evokes chivalric masculinity

… only to reveal the violent, bestial core of the martial subject position. In so doing, the play ultimately reduces violent masculine subjectivity to brute animalism."[28] Riding, as Raber showed, slides into becoming beast. Now, Bolingbroke, of course, has not literally bridled Richard as he enters London, but York's description of this moment does offer a perspective that has the potential to undermine the new king. In an echo of Francisco's reading of Tamburlaine pushing his rivals "along the species grid," York tells how "rude misgoverned hands from windows' tops / Threw dust and rubbish on King Richard's head." (5.2.5-6) In this image it is as if Richard has not only ceased to be regarded as king but has ceased to be regarded as human and has been objectified, made into a cadaver fit only to be interred beneath the ground.[29] But, as in *Tamburlaine,* the moment also signals Bolingbroke's undoing: the "hands" that throw the dust are "misgoverned;" their new king, riding a hot and fiery steed, is not actually in control at all.

York's subsequent description of Bolingbroke in 5.2 reinforces this reading in that it continues to problematize his status. Responding to the popular acclaim – "all tongues cried, 'God save thee, Bolingbroke!'" (5.2.11) – Bolingbroke, York says, "Bare-headed, lower than his proud steed's neck, / Bespake them thus: 'I thank you, countrymen'" (19-20). The image is of social parity, with Bolingbroke leaning over so as to place himself on a level – literally and socially – with the on-lookers. Jeffrey S. Doty has written of this moment: "Just as his courteous gestures efface differences in rank, so too does his language introduce terms of fraternity," but this reading can only work if the presence of the animal is ignored.[30] If we keep the horse in focus, as York's description requires us to do, then Bolingbroke's riding posture becomes central. His strange position – "lower than his proud steed's neck" – suggests that his presentation of equality might also be read as being a contortion of what is correct.

In addition, and bringing the Platonic conception back into view, in performing equivalence and placing his head below his horse's, a link between Bolingbroke's mind and the animal's is surely being made. Indeed, this moment in *Richard II* seems to be staging a diametrically opposite vision of kingship to that which was presented just over forty years later in a painting of another king on horseback. Raber and Treva J. Tucker have argued that Anthony Van Dyke's 1638 *Equestrian Portrait of Charles I* is "part of a general salute to Charles' rational rule." In the image, they note, "the king's head … is nearly as large as the horse's unusually diminutive noggin … indicating the triumph of royal intellect over bestial power."[31] Bolingbroke's head being "lower" than his animal's at this moment should thus perhaps be read to suggest much about what is to happen under his governance, and as such, it is possible to see that this is not simply, as Watson had it, a play in which representations of horsemanship evidence Bolingbroke's success. The equine imagery reveals an ambiguity in the play's representation of power.

For Raber, this ambiguity is put to rest in *1 Henry IV* where she argues that that "Hal's supposed triumph over Hotspur proleptically performs Cartesianism's abstraction of mind from body, and the reduction of equine other to mere machinery."[32] That is, she argues that the moment when Hal kills Hotspur marks a shift in authority in the play, for sure; but that it marks something else as well. Hal is described as riding in his armor, thus separated from his horse by a layer of metal (flesh does not meet flesh), while Hotspur is presented as being embodied in and through his horse. It is this difference which presages not only Hal's emergence as the true heir to his father's throne, but also a new sense of the human. In Raber's reading, Hal's armor-plating is a kind of physical manifestation of the separation of human from animal that was happening in the intellectual sphere, and his victory marks the triumph of that worldview.

Like Bruckner's then, Raber's reading has Shakespeare pointing towards a new conception of the human, and her thinking fits also with Bruce Boehrer's argument in *Animal Characters* where he suggests that René Descartes' ideas resolved the crisis caused by the entanglement of human and nonhuman that classical thought had bequeathed to the Renaissance "by granting humanity exclusive access to consciousness."[33] And Boehrer's discussion of this emerging Cartesian sense of self is illustrated through a reading of *Richard II,* a reading that takes us, finally, to Barbary.

Barbary and Barbarity

When, having been told that Bolingbroke rode Barbary on his coronation day, Richard asks the Groom "How went he under him?" (5.5.82) This question is not only an acknowledgement of the link between horsemanship and kingship that Watson and Flaherty have noted. Rather, Boehrer argues, it also invokes the story of the stallion Baiardo who appears in Ariosto's *Orlando furioso,* a text from 1516 which was first published in English in 1591, just four years before the likely date of *Richard II*. In possession of what Ariosto termed "intelletto umano," Baiardo, in Boehrer's words, "distinguishes between persons, responds to certain ones with loyalty and intimacy, and confronts others with willful resistance."[34] In short, this horse refuses to be ridden by any but his true owner. Following this lead, Boehrer argues that Richard's question about Barbary is invoking Ariosto's story of Baiardo and that, through this connection, Shakespeare presents his deposed monarch holding on to a worldview in which a horse can possess human qualities; in which nature can have agency. Richard discovers that Barbary is no such creature when, in response to his question,

the Groom tells him that the horse went under Bolingbroke "So proudly as if he disdained the ground," (5.5.83) and the deposed monarch responds:

> So proud that Bolingbroke was on his back?
> That jade hath eat bread from my royal hand;
> This hand hath made him proud with clapping him.
> Would he not stumble? Would he not fall down,
> Since pride must have a fall, and break the neck
> Of that proud man that did usurp his back? (5.5.84-9)

For Boehrer, this moment signals the beginning of what he calls "a post-Baiardan universe, marked by the absence of equine reason, equine agency, and a sympathetic concord between human and nonhuman animals." "The play performs," he writes, "the loss of an entire world and the language that conjured it into being."[35] What Gaunt had warned of three acts earlier has come to pass.

Boehrer's reading, like Bruckner's ecocritical one and Raber's animal-sensitive one, thus places *Richard II* within its historical context, here reading it alongside *Orlando furioso*. In particular he links Shakespeare's representation of Barbary to the way Sir John Harington's English translation of Ariosto departs from its original in its downplaying of "the moments … that endow the horse with intelligence and agency." Boehrer argues that Harington's changes seek to

> reaffirm the categorical distinction between human and nonhuman animals[, and] it seems reasonable to read [his] translation as participating in broad cultural anxieties concerning the character of humanity, anxieties which were also coming to the fore in the philosophical discourse of Harington's contemporaries.[36]

As with Raber's reading of Hal, and Bruckner's reading of the rise of science, so Boehrer's reading sees Harington as presaging a dualist view that classical ideas never suggested. In those classical ideas, in Juliana Schiesari's terms, there is "a continuum of life in which humans also partake reciprocally in animal characteristics,"[37] in this new worldview, however, the human is figured as being utterly separate from the nonhuman natural world.

What is clear from the various essays that have underpinned my analysis so far, then, is that a connection exists between the ecocritical and the animal-sensitive readings. Despite their very different foci, all converge on a view that the plays are offering insight into Shakespeare's sense of writing at a moment of profound change in relationships with the natural world, changes which saw a shift from a conception of humans living in a world of lively nature to one in which nature was instrumentalized. And although the explicit presentism of ecocritical readings is more difficult to trace in animal-sensitive ones, there is a clear connection there too. The ecocritical readings use *Richard II* to point beyond the early modern to the present: to oil spills and fracking, while the animal-sensitive ones consider the implications of the changes they trace for conceptions of the human; but it is these humans, of course, who are creating the oil spills, doing the fracking. What emerges from *Richard II* in these readings, in short, is the advent of a dualist conception in which humans are using nature as a resource rather than viewing themselves as embedded within an animated nonhuman world.

There is no question that these readings are right in their tracing of this shift in Shakespeare's second tetralogy, and, my particular focus, *Richard II.*[38] But I wonder if something else might be present at the end of that play as well, something that undercuts their sense of the completeness of the shift from one way of being to another (a completeness proved, you might say, by the appearance of Descartes' ideas forty years later). I think the play might harbor doubts about the shift, and my reassessment of York's representation of

Bolingbroke's entry into London in 5.2 is an attempt to show one place where we might trace them.

Indeed, there is more to say about that scene to reinforce this point, and to link it to Barbary's appearance three scenes later. After he has told of Bolingbroke's entry, York turns once again to describe how Richard, coming in after his conqueror, was regarded with "contempt" by the crowds: "No man cried God save him!", he says, and he repeats the image from earlier in the scene as if to emphasize its import: "But dust was thrown upon his sacred head." (5.2.27, 28 and 30). He goes on:

> had not God for some strong purpose steeled
> The hearts of men, they must perforce have melted
> And barbarism itself have pitied him. (5.2.34-6)

The people, it seems, like the horse later, might have acted differently but did not: barbarism could be transformed into pity but wasn't. And York's use of 'barbarism' here links this moment linguistically to Barbary through his name which invokes the horse's North African origins.[39] As such, the connection made between these two moments once again reinforces Raber's sense of the potentially double-edged meaning of horse riding: just as Tamburlaine's animalizing of his rivals dehumanized himself, so the dust-throwing crowd's lack of pity reveals their savagery, and their reduction of status is reinforced through their linguistic link to a horse.[40]

The coincidence of barbarity and a victory parade that can be traced here is repeated in a much later text that, while an accidental connection, offers another way of thinking about this moment in *Richard II.* In his 1940 *Theses on the Philosophy of History,* Walter Benjamin wrote:

> Whoever has emerged victorious participates to this day in the triumphal procession in which the present rulers step over those who are lying prostrate. According to traditional practice, the spoils are carried along in the procession. They are called cultural treasures, and a historical materialist views them with cautious detachment. For without exception the cultural treasures he surveys have an origin which he cannot contemplate without horror.[41]

The role of the materialist critic in response to recognizing the horror, Benjamin writes, is to "brush history against the grain" – to read in a way that interrogates the apparently smooth inevitability of the exercise of power.[42] Benjamin is not, of course, writing about *Richard II* but his ideas seem to fit. York's statement that "had not God for some strong purpose steeled / The hearts of men" they would have acted differently implicitly claims a divine mandate for Bolingbroke's usurpation: the fact that the onlookers did not pity Richard is presented as evidence of God's agreement to the transfer of power. Such a reading, of course, makes true, inevitable, and right the change but, in invoking God's purpose at the point at which a divinely ordained monarch has been overthrown, York is also, I suggest, inviting us to doubt its presence, is asking us, you might say, to read against the grain. And what that reading reveals is the brutality of the usurpation: is a vision of power exercised with unvarnished violence in which Richard is dehumanized, becoming simply one of the spoils of war.

Benjamin continues, echoing York's use of "barbarism" (in Benjamin the German term is "Barbarei"): "There is no document of civilisation which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. And just as the document is not free of barbarism, barbarism taints also the manner in which it was transmitted from one owner to another."[43] This is not only a fortunate repetition of terms; the ideas presented by Benjamin offer more than a linguistic link to York's description. They offer a way of understanding why the ambiguity that I suggest exists in *Richard II* may not have been attended to in other critical readings.

Benjamin's ideas suggests that it is possible that readings that assume links between political rule and human dominion, and which regard *Richard II* as a play that marks the emergence of instrumentalized conception of nature, might be tainted by the very "barbarism" they are holding up for scrutiny. We might view such readings as having been written, you might say, after Cartesianism has triumphed. In what remains of this essay I want to read *Richard II* "against the grain"; to show that Bolingbroke's rise to power and the parallel shift in attitude to the nonhuman world can be interpreted as presenting, in addition, a glimpse of a very different conception of human status. Such a view is undoubtedly in a marginalized position in the play, but its presence, if quietly, undermines the sense of the completeness of the victory of the oncoming Cartesianism that *Richard II* seems to project.

God a Mercy Horse

Having complained that Barbary did not stumble when asked to carry Bolingbroke, Richard states:

> Forgiveness, horse. Why do I rail on thee,
>
> Since thou, created to be awed by man,
>
> Wast born to bear? I was not made a horse,
>
> And yet I bear a burden like an ass,
>
> Spurred, galled and tired by jauncing Bolingbroke. (5.5.90-4)

It is possible to hear a double meaning like the one that persists in the "which" in York's description of Bolingbroke's fiery steed here. "I was not made a horse" is obviously a simple claim about species (I was created a human), and yet it could be read as a reference to the kind of transformation that happened to Tamburlaine's rivals who were literally bridled. This

did not happen in *Richard II* but perhaps stating "I was not made a horse" raises it as a possibility.

But even if we ignore this potential ambiguity, the slippage of human into animal in Richard's speech is worth contemplating from another perspective. It seems ironic that at the very moment when Barbary has been relegated to the role of mindless tool – "born to bear" weight rather than meaning – the former king directly addresses the absent creature as if he were a fellow being rather than a lesser one. But the fellowship here emerges as a logical outcome of the shift in power in the play. By 5.5, this is Bolingbroke's England and, just as the horse has become an animal incapable of possessing meaning beyond his function for humans, so the former king by this point recognizes himself as being an outdated symbol – like the idea of the loyal horse. Richard comes to see, in short, that he also has no place in Henry IV's kingdom.

His claim to kinship with the horse ("I bear a burden like an ass") thus seems to end almost as soon as it begins and it seems strangely appropriate that this moment is prologue to Richard's assassination. His role is over; his supernatural, divinely-ordained, rule is no longer required or relevant in this new world. But there is something else going on here as well, something that might offer a hint that an alternative to the instrumental view of nature might be present as the play ends. This is not a return of the enchanted world in which a kind of reciprocity might exist between human and nonhuman nature, that "This earth shall have a feeling" as Richard had declared before his defeat (3.2.24). Rather, it is to be found in the persistence of the very doubt that Descartes' philosophy was an attempt to overcome.

A prompt for this suggestion comes through a possible connection between Richard's "Forgiveness, horse" and words attributed to the comedian Richard Tarlton (d.1588) in a posthumously recorded story of his encounter with Morocco the Intelligent Horse at the

Cross Keys Inn in London.[44] Morocco, who was still performing at the time *Richard II* was first staged, appeared to be able to count, answer questions and make judgements, and on the day Tarlton went to see the horse perform, so the narrative has it, the comedian was spotted in the crowd by Morocco's owner, Banks, who

> (to maketh the people laugh) saies *Signior* (to his horse) Go fetch me the veryest foole in the company. The Jade comes immediately, and with his mouth drawes *Tarlton* forth: *Tarlton* (with merry words) said nothing, but *God a mercy Horse*.

The story has it that the comedian was "angry inwardly," and took his revenge by requesting, in turn, that the horse should

> bring me the veryest whore-master in this company. He shall (saies *Banks*) *Signior* (saies he) bring Master *Tarlton* here the veryest whore-master in the company. The horse leades his Master to him. Then God a mercy horse indeed, sayes *Tarlton*.

The anecdote concludes with a claim: "ever after, it was a by-word thorow *London, God a mercy Horse,* and so is to this day."[45]

The assertion that "God a mercy horse" became a familiar part of the city's conversation is difficult to substantiate, of course, but a basic search on the Early English Books Online Text Creation Partnership website for "mercy horse" reveals "God-a-mercy horse," along with "cry you mercy horse" and "gra-mercy horse," in sixteen texts from the period, the earliest dating from 1613.[46] The same search on the English Broadside Ballad Archive website reveals another usage, from c.1619-29. In "Ragged, and Torne and True. / Or, the poore mans Resoltion [sic]" one verse tells how:

> The Hostler, to maintaine
>   himselfe with money ins purse,
> Approves the Proverbe true,

and says Gramercy Horse:

He robs the travelling beast,

that cannot divulge his ill,

He steales a whole handfull at least,

from every halfe peck he should fill.[47]

This is hardly evidence of common usage, but such repetition does suggest that the phrase had some popular value, and I wonder if Richard II's "Forgiveness, horse" might also be read as another rendition of it.

What would it mean to have the deposed king invoke for his audience the encounter between a recently deceased clown and a performing horse? It is, of course, another way of diminishing Richard's status: the former monarch becomes the "veryest foole in the company," like his namesake the comedian. But I think this possible connection also allows us to see Richard's "Forgiveness, horse" as a glimpse of another way of being in the world. I have suggested elsewhere that Tarlton's response to Morocco is a popular instantiation of the scepticism that was increasingly significant in intellectual debate in the late sixteenth century.[48] In this philosophy human superiority was challenged in part through a consideration of animals' engagement with the world. Their capacities for self-medication, home-building, rearing their young – all done without the aid of books – were represented as contesting the apparently natural superiority of humans: for if human superiority was so natural, why did humans require guidance to do these things? In the story of Tarlton's encounter with him, Morocco's calling Banks a "whore-master" is a mark of something more than obedience; it is a performance of an animal's capacity to think for itself in a way that counters human wishes. At this moment Morocco appears to undo his master's mastery.

The classical foundation for early modern scepticism was Sextus Empiricus' second-century CE *Outlines of Scepticism,* which was first printed in 1562. A partial English translation – *The Sceptick* – was circulating in manuscript in the 1590s,[49] and this translation focused on the importance of the senses to human understanding of the world, recognizing that we need to think, for example, about the nature of eyes in order to properly consider what is seen with them, and the point of reference here is animals' different sensory engagement with the world. This leads the author of *The Sceptick* to ask:

> why should I presume to prefer my conceit and imagination in affirming that a thing is thus or thus in its own nature, because it seemeth to me to be so, before the conceit of other living creatures, who may as well think it to be otherwise in its own nature, because it appeareth otherwise to them than it doth to me?[50]

The aim of asking this question is not to answer it: "The Sceptick doth neither affirm nor deny any position," the author writes.[51] Rather, the point of sceptical inquiry is to pause over the human sense of superiority – the human's triumphal procession of knowing, you might say – in order to undercut it. And the aim of this suspension of judgment is, as Sextus Empiricus put it, "the hope of becoming tranquil," of letting go of the reins, you might say.[52]

David Bevington has written that while "'Sceptic,' 'sceptical,' and 'scepticism' form no part of Shakespeare's vocabulary … he may have pondered what we would call sceptical ideas," and he is not alone in tracing these, in particular, in plays written in the fifteen years after *Richard II.*[53] I am suggesting that the link to Tarlton's encounter with Morocco might reveal an earlier engagement with at least a popular conception of sceptical ideas. And if this is so, then it is possible that the appearance of Barbary might be read not only as another rendition of Bolingbroke's usurpation of the throne but as something more disruptive. "Forgiveness, horse" is a version of *The Sceptick*'s refusal to affirm or deny in the face of

animal being. It is a moment in which order, and the exercise of power it is based upon, is suspended; in which fellowship rather than dominion is possible.

By 5.5 Richard has thus come to recognize that his earlier claim that "Not all the water in the rough rude sea / Can wash the balm off from an anointed king" (3.2.54-5) is a lie, and that the divine purpose that underpins such an idea is absent. Instead he comes to realize that a king is, in fact, a human construct: that a monarch can be "kinged" and "unkinged" (5.5.36 and 37). As a parallel – and the political and the natural spheres have been constantly paralleled in the play – asking forgiveness of Barbary could be an acknowledgment that humanity's special status might also be a construction made by humans rather than a product of divine fiat. At the end of *Richard II* it is possible, then, that while we are looking at the emergence of a new world of instrumentalized nature, the play also suggests that this world – this barbaric construction – can also be seen, if only briefly, for what it is: not natural, inevitable, unquestionable, but just one possible outcome.

Richard dies, though. He launches himself at his assassins with a cry of impatience which seems completely at odds with the tranquility that scepticism is meant to bring, and is killed in the struggle just twelve lines after asking "Forgiveness, horse." As such, this seems to cancel the possibility of the scepticism he has voiced persisting in the play. It seems to suggest that this is simply Richard's fantasy of another way of being, akin to his imagining himself to be a beggar (5.5.33). But as the scene which follows shows, his murder is far from ending his power.

5.6, *Richard II*'s final scene, begins with reports confirming Bolingbroke's victory which is evidenced by the display of the spoils yet again. The heads of his enemies, we are told, have been sent to London, and the listing of those who have been decapitated – Salisbury, Spencer, Blunt, Kent, Brocas, Sir Bennet Seely (5.6.8 and 14) – underlines the

very real violence that underpins his rise to power. And it is at this moment that Richard's body is brought onto the stage. Here is another of the spoils that have ensured Henry's ascent; here is another piece of barbarity. But Bolingbroke's response is far from triumphant; it does not reflect a clarity of mind that might be expected of the new ruler of the realm: "Though I did wish him dead, / I hate the murderer, love him murdered." (5.6.39-40) What we are seeing here is a king whose mind is divided, whose desires (wishes, hates, loves) seem contradictory, seem to exceed what is reasonable and orderly. And so when he states "I'll make a voyage to the Holy Land / To wash this blood off from my guilty hand" (5.6.49-50) this appears to be a solution to the upheaval. But, just as his feelings of hate and love dispute with one another, so his invocation of Pontius Pilate works against him. The image of hand-washing gives Richard a Christ-like status which, in turn, suggests he has an enduring power. And this is a power that can be traced right through to the very end of the second tetralogy where, in the final speech in *Henry V,* the Chorus takes us right back to the story's beginning and reminds us of Richard's failures by extolling Henry V's great achievement as being the creation of "the world's best garden." But this accomplishment is temporary: the Chorus follows with a brief history of the reign of Henry VI, during which "they lost France and made his England bleed." The world's best garden, like Gaunt's England, was destroyed, "Which oft our stage hath shown."[54] Victories are momentary; triumphal processions performances; new worldviews provisional; alternatives available.

As such, the ecocritical and animal-sensitive readings that see *Richard II* as marking the emergence of modernity through land and equestrian imagery, are surely right. But there is also something else possible; something that might challenge the sense of the completeness of the transformation of political and human power that appears to be in place at the end of the play. This other perspective can be a call for tranquility, for a pause over what is considered to be true and unquestionable, and as such "Forgiveness, horse" could be read as

an act of standing-down rather than a call to action. But Richard's final fight tells us that from a realization that things are not as they have to be can come a refusal to accept how things are. The sceptical question, how do I know?, is a call to action that can challenge what is, apparently, inevitable and natural. "Forgiveness, horse," as such, is a humbled way forward, not just a regretful recollection of what has been lost.

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[1] Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism* second edition (London: Routledge, 2012), 149.

[2] Charles R. Forker, the editor of the Arden edition used here, gives the play the title *King Richard II*, but I have opted to call it by its more familiar title *Richard II* throughout.

[3] I take the adjectival form "animal-sensitive" from Sandra Swart, "Settler Stock: Animals and Power in Mid-Seventeenth-Century Contact at the Cape, circa 1652-62," in *Animals and Early Modern Identity* ed. Pia F. Cuneo (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), 258.

[4] Simon Estok, "Theory from the Fringes: Animals, Ecocriticism, Shakespeare," *Mosaic* 40:1 (2007): 69.

[5] William Shakespeare, *King Richard II,* ed. Charles R. Forker (London: Arden, 2002), 3.4.40-44. Subsequent references to this edition are included in the text.

[6] See Andrew Cunningham, "The Culture of Gardens," in *Cultures of Natural History*, ed. N. Jardine, J.A. Secord and E.C. Spary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), especially 41-7.

[7] Richard D. Altick, "Symphonic Imagery in *Richard II*," *PMLA* 62:2 (1947): 339, 359, 340 and 351.

[8] Cleanth Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (London: Dobson Books, 1947).

[9] Jennifer Munroe, "Shakespeare and Ecocriticism Reconsidered" *Literature Compass* 12:9 (2015): 462. In another essay, Munroe writing with Rebecca Laroche offers a reading of the garden scene with "a focus on intersecting material practices related to the female body, animals, and plants": Laroche and Munroe, "On a Bank of Rue; Or Material Ecofeminist Inquiry and the Garden of *Richard II*," *Shakespeare Studies* 42 (2014), 42-50.

[10] Lynne Bruckner, "'Consuming means, soon preys upon itself': Political Expedience and Environmental Degradation in *Richard II*," in *Shakespeare and the Urgency of Now: Criticism and Theory in the 21st Century*, ed. Cary DiPietro and Hugh Grady (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 128.

[11] Bruckner, "'Consuming means,'" 133 and 135-6.

[12] Bruckner, "'Consuming means,'" 131. The relevance of these contemporary concerns to *Richard II*'s representation of the nonhuman natural world is also outlined in Amy L. Tigner*, Literature and the Renaissance Garden from Elizabeth I to Charles II England's Paradise* (London: Routledge, 2012), 13.

[13] Bruckner, "'Consuming means,'" 133.

[14] Bruckner, "'Consuming means,'" 133. Carolyn Merchant, traced the wider shift from a nature recognized as full of life, to an object to be penetrated, categorized and used in the development of the new science in her classic *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution* (London: Harper Row, 1980).

[15] Bruckner, "'Consuming means,'" 133.

[16] Bruckner, "'Consuming means,'" 143-4.

[17] Sharon O'Dair, 'Is it Shakespearean Ecocriticism if it isn't Presentist?,' in *Ecocritical Shakespeare,* ed. Lynne Bruckner and Dan Brayton (London: Routledge, 2016): 71-85.

[18] Sharon O'Dair, "'To fright the animals and to kill them up': Shakespeare and Ecology," *Shakespeare Studies* 29 (2011): 81. See also Heidi Scott, "Ecological Microcosms

Envisioned in Shakespeare's *Richard II," The Explicator* 67:4 (2009): 267-71, for another reading that brings *Richard II* into conversation with current ecological issues.

[19] Altick, "Symphonic," 351.

[20] Indeed, it is as a kind of mid-point between Altick's reading and one that might reflect on the reality of horses that we can read Harry Levin's "Falstaff Uncolted." Here it is the very off-stage-ness of the horses that is the focus – they are used by Shakespeare, he argues, to think about the limits of the theater. Levin, "Falstaff Uncolted," *Modern Language Notes* 61:5 (1946): 305-10.

[21] Robert N. Watson, "Horsemanship in Shakespeare's Second Tetralogy," *English Literary Renaissance* 13: 3 (1983): 274.

[22] Watson, "Horsemanship," 274-5, 276 and 278.

[23] Watson, "Horsemanship," 285.

[24] Jennifer Flaherty, "'Know Us by Our Horses': Equine Imagery in Shakespeare's *Henriad*,' in *The Horse as Cultural Icon: The Real and the Symbolic Horse in the Early Modern World* ed. Peter Edwards, Karl A. E. Enenkel, and Elspeth Graham (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 315.

[25] Karen Raber, "Equeer: Human-Equine Erotics in *1 Henry IV*," in *The Oxford Handbook of Shakespeare and Embodiment: Gender, Sexuality, and Race* ed. Valerie Traub (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 348.

[26] Raber, "Equeer," 355 and citing Michel Baret, *An Hipponomie, or Vineyard of Horsemanship* (1618), 356.

[27] Raber, "Equeer," 356.

[28] Timothy Francisco, "Marlowe's War Horses: Cyborgs, Soldiers, and Queer Companions," in *Violent Masculinities: Male Aggression in Early Modern Texts and Culture* ed. Jennifer Feather and Catherine E. Thomas (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 59 and 48. Thanks to Holly Dugan for drawing my attention to this essay.

[29] This is also an echo of Richard's request to be "buried in the King's highway," uttered as he acknowledged his defeat (3.3.155).

[30] Jeffrey S. Doty, "Shakespeare's *Richard II*, 'Popularity,' and the Early Modern Public Sphere," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 61:2 (2010), 195. My analysis here echoes Raber's reading of Jonathan Goldberg's and Matt Bell's readings of *1 Henry IV* which responds to the fact that both "ignore entirely the animals upon whose backs the whole image rides." Raber, "Equeer," 350.

[31] Karen Raber and Treva J. Tucker, "Introduction," in *The Culture of the Horse: Status, Discipline, and Identity in the Early Modern World* ed. Raber and Tucker (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 16.

[32] Raber, "Equeer," 360.

[33] Bruce Thomas Boehrer, *Animal Characters: Nonhuman Beings in Early Modern Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 10. On the relationship between Descartes' ideas and earlier thinking in English culture, much of which was informed by classical ideas, see also Erica Fudge, *Brutal Reasoning: Animals, Rationality, and Humanity in Early Modern England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006).Boehrer, *Animal Characters*, 10.

[34] Boehrer, *Animal Characters*, 29.

[35] Boehrer, *Animal Characters*, 54 and 50.

[36] Boehrer, *Animal Characters*, 38 and 41.

[37] Juliana Schiesari, "Rethinking Humanism: Animals and the Analogic Imagination in the Italian Renaissance". *Shakespeare Studies* 41 (2013): 61.

[38] The shift the ecocritical and animal sensitive readings trace mirrors that which Terence Hawkes traced in a different register in 1973. He argued that the 'central dramatic concern with opposition [in *Richard II*], embodied in its most extreme form as a civil strife, is quite

literally made manifest through the language of the play.' Richard, Hawkes suggests, believes that 'he can mould reality (and so society) as *he* wishes, simply by the use of "comfortable" words [ignoring] a reality larger than himself.' For Bolingbroke, on the other hand, 'reality cannot be changed by language.' Hawkes, *Shakespeare's Talking Animals: Language and Drama in Society* (London: Edward Arnold, 1973), 76, 86 and 94.

[39] See Paul Fatout, "Roan Barbary," *The Shakespeare Association Bulletin* 15:2 (1940): 67-74; and Sandra Swart, "Dark Horses: The Horse in Africa in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries," in *Horse as Cultural Icon*, 241-260.

[40] See Patricia Parker, "Barbers and Barbary: Early Modern Cultural Semantics," *Renaissance Drama* 33 (2004): 201-244.

[41] Walter Benjamin, *Theses on the Philosophy of History* (1940), in *Illuminations* ed. Hannah Arendt (London: Fontana, 1992), 248.

[42] Benjamin, *Theses,* 248.

[43] Benjamin, *Theses,* 248.

[44] I have written about Morocco at greater length in "A Reasonable Animal?" in Fudge, *Brutal Reasoning,* 123-46.

[45] Richard Tarlton, *Tarltons Jests* (London: I.H., 1638) , C2r-v.

[46] https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebogroup/ - accessed 7.3.19.

[47] "Ragged, and Torne and True. / Or, the poore mans Resoltion", EBBA 30240 (c.1619-29), British Library, Roxburgh Ballad: https://ebba.english.ucsb.edu/ballad/30240/xml - accessed 7.19.19.

[48] Fudge, *Brutal*, 144.

[49] On the dating of this MS see William M. Hamlin, "A Lost Translation Found? An Edition of *The Sceptick* (c.1590) Based on Extant Manuscripts [with text]," *English Literary Renaissance* 31:1 (2001), 36.

[50] Anon, *The Sceptick*, in Hamlin, "Lost Translation," 45.

[51] Anon, *The Sceptick*, 42.

[52] Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism* trans. and ed. Julia Annas and Julian Barnes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 5.

[53] David Bevington, *Shakespeare's Ideas: More Things in Heaven and Earth* (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2008), 9. [ebook]

[54] William Shakespeare, *Henry V*, in *The Complete Works* ed. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), Epilogue 7 and 12-13.