

King and Queen

“I am Richard II, know ye not that?” Queen Elizabeth’s famous 1601 assertion suggests not only a shared vulnerability but also an intriguingly gender-bending identity that matches Elizabeth’s image of herself as a woman with “the heart and stomach of a king.” In Shakespeare’s play, as in contemporary accounts, Richard’s self-definition too undermines traditional norms of gender and power.

The play makes Richard’s difference from his aggressively “masculine” knights immediately apparent. Bolingbroke defines himself in opposition to anything “feminine”; he spurns negotiation with Mowbray as “a woman’s war” that would degrade him to engage in. Richard describes himself as a nurturer urging compromise to protect an “infant” peace. He will later address England on his return as a “mother” does “her child.”

Renaissance audiences did not read effeminacy in terms of sexuality, which was not a defined or defining category of identity. They did equate it with immaturity. Bolingbroke describes his hard-drinking, womanizing son, the future Henry V, as a “wanton and effeminate boy,” too undisciplined to rule. And York laments that Richard prefers flattery and fashion over duty “as youth doth always.” Yet Richard’s effeminacy increasingly constitutes an alternative personal and political identity rather than an undeveloped or deficient one. The arts, fashion and luxury that York slights as boyish whims made the historical Richard’s court famous; Chaucer wrote during this period. And Richard’s preference for compromise over battle—“warred he hath not,” Northumberland grumbles—looks different when he is aligned not just with the play’s powerless, weeping women, but also with the grieving, peace-loving Christ.

Such a model of masculinity may not serve political exigencies or the priorities of a warrior culture. But Richard’s love of language and his increasingly lyrical introspection are powerful tools in a theatre. As they draw an audience in, they serve to question the sufficiency of traditional masculinity. Richard loves his male friends and also his wife. He is feeble and powerful, sensitive and oblivious, nurturing and cruel. Like Elizabeth, he offers glimpses of an identity and a culture simple binaries cannot contain.

—Judith Rosen

An edited version reprinted from OSF’s 2016 Illuminations, a 64-page guide to the season’s plays. For more information on the play, [click here](#). To buy the full Illuminations, [click here](#). Members at the Donor level and above and teachers who bring school groups to OSF receive a free copy of Illuminations.