“Wand’ring with the 
Antipodes”: Witchcraft, 
Statecraft, and Stagecraft in 
Richard II
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Whether “imagined as real or imagined as imaginary,” Stephen Greenblatt has argued, witchcraft is “a recurrent, even obsessive feature in Shakespeare’s cultural universe.” Richard II is absent from Greenblatt’s survey of dramatized witches and explicit “metaphorical projections” of witchcraft in the canon (120-25). Yet this play also evinces Shakespeare’s demon-haunted universe, though subtly and indirectly, as Katharine Eisaman Maus has suggested in passing. At the deposition, Richard encourages “doubts about the legitimacy of the usurpation” in the formalized speech by which he undoes himself (4.1.204-15), for “reversing the [coronation] ceremonies--taking off the crown rather than putting it on, relinquishing rather than accepting the sceptre--suggests [the] special scandal . . . [of] reversing beneficent ceremonies [to evoke] their diabolical opposites. One called up devils by reciting Scripture passages backward, or bound oneself to Satan by performing an inversion of baptismal rites.” While I agree that Richard deliberately mimics inver­sive witchcraft ritual to diabolize and hence invalidate Bolingbroke’s cere­monialized usurpation, this is only the most conspicuous example of Richard II’s demonological resonances. Indeed, the play’s tissue of verbal and gestural signification is interwoven with witchcraft allusions and with patterns of inversion, opposition, and contrariety that implicate both Richard and Henry in demonic perversions of power. Focusing on three of Richard’s key speeches at the play’s fulcrum (3.2), we can recog­nize that Bolingbroke’s “rebellion is as the sinne of witchcraft” (1 Samuel 15:23), explore some major expressions of Richard’s demonic kingship, and gauge the extent and ideological significance of the demonic in the play’s political imagination.

I

As Stuart Clark’s Thinking with Demons has masterfully demonstrat-
ed, witchcraft was neither irrational nor some marginal aberration but a coherent discourse solidly rooted in the main areas of orthodox early-modern intellectual pursuit: science and medicine, historiography, theology, and political theory. The primary vehicle of thought was a cognitive scheme of binary opposition. Within the patterns of polarity, opposition, antithesis, and contrariety that this epistemic conceptualization produced, “the devil was not just another component . . . ; he was one of the foundations” (80). As a universal principle, inversion--based ultimately on Lucifer’s attempt to oppose and then “ape” God--is at the center of all theories of disorder, whether moral, social, familial or political. The interchange between demonology and other intellectual discourses was, moreover, on-going and complementary. As a result, the subject of witchcraft was “a means for thinking through problems that originated elsewhere and that had little or nothing to do with the legal prosecution of witches”; demonology should therefore be understood as an important “intellectual resource” of early-modern culture (Clark, Thinking viii; “King James’s” 177). Such habits of thought were pervasive, so that everything from marital discord to armed uprising was understood in relation to the primordial biblical-metaphysical rebellion; in fact, aside from “a few extreme sceptics, the great majority of people believed that there was a diabolical anti-world in which normal polarities were reversed and of which human beings had only very partial glimpses” (Briggs 25).

Early-modern literary texts assimilate this discourse through allusion, oblique echo, gestural reminiscence, or implied metaphor, creating oppositional patterns of thought and belief that Elizabethan audiences could immediately infer. A historicized close reading can tease out strands of demonological inference that lead to momentary open spaces, turnings, or vantage grounds from which our glimpses of demonic signification--and our understanding of its ideological import--become less partial.

Shakespeare’s history plays are a key site for such work, not the least because Elizabethan political theory was tightly intertwined with witchcraft theory. As Stuart Clark stresses, the inversions of witchcraft are “political” at root: “Since concordia discors conformed to divine laws of proportion, accounts of universal contrariety were invariably couched in the language of government. . . . Inversion in whatever context, then, was necessarily a political act” (Thinking 72). English writers on politics and witchcraft often cited 1 Samuel 15:23; “For rebellion is as the sinne of witchcraft,” and the scripture’s key terms became virtually identifiable. Indeed, there was a “familiar association between treason and the demonic.” It was also a commonplace, however, that the good prince