

Intro: Hi I'm Bryn Boice and this is The ShakesDown, a podcast where I explore meaning and hidden clues within Shakespeare's text in a fun and accessible way. The ShakesDown is for Shakespeare lovers and haters, students, teachers, aficionados, or really anyone who likes a lil language puzzle from time to time. Let's get started!

It's been a hot second since we did an installment, and that's because we've been hard at work getting the 30th anniversary of Commonwealth Shakespeare Company of Boston planned. Think of this episode as a little extra bonus and a launch pad for another great year of ShakesDown content.

As mentioned on previous episodes, I think this podcast is most satisfying when you have the text in front of you, and it's even better if you have a pencil to mark that bit of text up. But we're not all such TEXT nerds, so you do you, ShakesDown fans. This is all about joy, and I'm here for however this podcast brings joy!

Today's episode explores a gorgeous speech from the play Richard II, spoken by the ailing John of Gaunt, aka the Duke of Lancaster. This can be found in Act 2, scene 1, lines 33-71. I chose this piece a long time ago, actually—it feels like a good piece to pull out when you are feeling like your country is being ripped apart, but you still REALLY LOVE YOUR COUNTRY.

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For some historical context and some play context all at once, John of Gaunt—called such because he was born in Ghent (which is a city in present day Belgium, but the Brits referred to it as Gaunt in Shakespeare's time—and in fact going a little deeper, it was Shakespeare who sort of popularized this name, John of Gaunt; Supposedly no one really called him that outside his boyhood). I digress, a tad. So John of Gaunt was one of the younger brothers of Edward the Black Prince, aka Edward III. Richard II, his son, was crowned such at the young and easily spoilable age of 10 and John of Gaunt his uncle was basically Regent during Richard II's early life, while he was too young to make big consequential decisions. John of Gaunt is also, mind you, the father of Henry Bolingbroke, who, in the course of the play, gets a real bum deal and is banished by Richard instead of being allowed to finish a duel with Thomas Mowbray. So he's sort of wussily banished, and like immediately stripped of his birthright and lands and title. And this in turn, sets off a course of rebellion. Henry enlists other people that agree that this punishment and pillaging of his rights by birth is wrong, and people all around Henry begin joining the rebellion because Richard is a weird willy-nilly decision maker, he's weak, he's a spendthrift, and it's starting to really effect the country. Henry SPOILER!, it's been 429 years, y'all, I can't wait forever for you to read this, so sorry, Henry ends up winning the fight, and he is who we know as Henry IV. He wins, he ascends the throne. Before all of this though, in Act 2, as Henry has received this totally "lawful" but really unfair banishment, John of Gaunt is, well,

already pretty old, and is basically heart stricken, and on his deathbed, he delivers this speech to his brother, York. The Duke of York, another uncle of Richard and of Henry. John of Gaunt laments the terrible state that England is now in, to York who he can be totally honest with, he laments what England has become. What the promise of England has become. So let's give it a simple read:

### JOHN OF GAUNT

Methinks I am a prophet new inspired  
And thus expiring do foretell of him:  
His rash fierce blaze of riot cannot last,  
For violent fires soon burn out themselves;  
Small showers last long, but sudden storms are short;  
He tires betimes that spurs too fast betimes;  
With eager feeding food doth choke the feeder: F (39)

Light Vanity, insatiate cormorant,  
Consuming means, soon preys upon itself.

This royal throne of kings, this scepter'd isle,  
This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars,  
This other Eden, demi-paradise,  
This fortress built by Nature for herself  
Against infection and the hand of war,  
This happy breed of men, this little world,  
This precious stone set in the silver sea,  
Which serves it in the office of a wall,  
Or as a moat defensive to a house,  
Against the envy of less happier lands,

This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England, F (52)

This nurse, this teeming womb of royal kings,  
Fear'd by their breed and famous by their birth,  
Renown'd for their deeds as far from home,  
For Christian service and true chivalry,  
As is the sepulchre in stubborn Jewry,  
Of the world's ransom, blessed Mary's Son,  
This land of such dear souls, this dear dear land,  
Dear for her reputation through the world,

F (57)

Is now leased out, I die pronouncing it,  
Like to a tenement or pelting farm:

England, bound in with the triumphant sea

TROCHEE

Whose rocky shore beats back the envious siege  
Of watery Neptune, is now bound in with shame,  
With inky blots and rotten parchment bonds:  
That England, that was wont to conquer others, F  
Hath made a shameful conquest of itself.  
Ah, would the scandal vanish with my life,

EPIC CAESURA (65)

How happy then were my ensuing death!

Oh man, I just love that. I love the absolute love he has for his country, and all of the things that makes it so special and jewel like in the world, and that he is now just sick with disappointment at what the country has become. Let's break it down so you can really hear that. So he says

I feel like a prophet, I'm newly inspired,

and as I die here, I'm feeling psychic & I predict this:

His awful behavior can't last,

just as raging fires burn themselves out;

Another example, small rain showers last long,

but more sudden storms are short;

Another example, the man who rides his horse, who spurs, too fast

will quickly tire himself out, exhaust himself;

And he who eats too quickly will choke;

This Light/Silly quality he has, Vanity, is like the always hungry vulture (Insatiate)

Will soon feed on itself.

This country with its kingly royal throne, this crowned and sceptered island,

this land of majesty, this seat of war, this place just like Eden—this almost paradise—

this fortress, which, built by Nature as her own home against disease and wars or invasion,

this happy race of men, this little world unto itself,

this precious stone (if you think of it, this island from afar looks like a precious stone that is set

in the silvery sea surrounding it

(which acts as a wall or a moat that defends a castle against the jealousy of nations who aren't

as happy),

this blessed plot of land, this piece of earth, this realm we live in, this England, OUR COUNTRY  
he finally says it—it's a lovely feminine ending here)

this **nurse**, think of this like, the one who has delivered us from our birth,  
this birthplace of royal kings who are feared and respected for their birth (their ancestry) –  
as famous for their deeds of Christian-like service and true chivalry as is the tomb of Jesus, son  
of Mary!

This land of such dear good souls, this dear dear land, revered and beloved for her reputation  
through the world—is now rented out, I die just saying it out loud, like a **tenement** (in this sense  
a run down piece of divided property) or a paltry little farm. England, surrounded by the  
triumphant sea, with a rocky shore that beats back the jealousy of Neptune, the god of the sea,  
is now fenced in by its own shame, sealed with rotten ink-smeared legal documents. The  
England that used to conquer other people, other lands, has made a shameful conquest of  
itself, like it's a vampire feeding on itself.

Ah ,man, if the scandal of it all could just end with my life, I would die happy!

Isn't that a beautiful speech? I just love it. I picked this particular piece last year when I was thinking about the ShakesDown lineup, to go with November and elections, and it feels even more current now.

Ok! So let's talk about scansion. It's pretty regular in terms of its rhythm and meter, but I want to point out a few lines that can be helpful to the actor.

(SCANSION SECTION)

So fairly regular here, but with a few important clues for the actor where John of Gaunt is feeling it. So let's give it another read!

GOOD READ

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Well friends, that's it for this episode of The ShakesDown. As you can see, there is so much to shake down in even one small passage in a Shakespeare play. This is Bryn Boice. Thanks for

joining me—and please remember to support this show by following or subscribing wherever you listen to podcasts.

AND stay tuned for our next episode, in honor of our 30th season of Shakespeare on the Common, where I'll be breaking down another powerful bit from our summer production OF: [horn] A Midsummer Night's Dream! [more sfx] Good night, sweet pod!