Scholars involved in the great debate over Johnson’s politics have gone over most of Johnson’s writings with a fine-tooth comb.¹ They have scrutinised not only Johnson’s political writings, but also his poems, letters, travel writings and biographies. However, neither side has paid any substantive attention to Johnson’s 1765 edition of Shakespeare.² In this essay I wish to correct this oversight by drawing attention to some politically suggestive notes on Richard II. These notes are fragmentary and sometimes difficult to interpret, but they nevertheless suggest that Johnson was substantially more sympathetic to the Stuarts, up to and including James II, than supporters of the Hanoverian Johnson have been willing to admit.³

A number of Johnson’s notes on Richard II are politically suggestive. The first such note occurs in Act II, scene ii of Johnson’s edition.⁴ In this scene the moribund John of Gaunt upbraids Richard for governing England poorly and ‘deposing himself’:

Why, Cousin, wert thou Regent of the world,
It were a shame to let this Land by lease;
But for thy world enjoying but this Land,
Is it not more than shame to shame it so?
Landlord of England art thou now, not King.
Thy state of law is bondslave to the law.⁵

In the eighteenth century the last line of this passage became a textual crux. Bishop William Warburton, a previous editor, had argued that Shakespeare could not have had the concept of absolute sovereignty in mind when he wrote the line in question. Warburton glossed the line as follows:

*State of law, i.e. legal sov’rainty.* But the Oxford editor [Thomas Hanmer] alters it to *state o’er law*, i.e. *absolute sov’rainty*. A doctrine, which, if our poet ever learnt at all, he learnt not in the reign when this play was written, Queen Elizabeth’s, but in the reign after it, King James’s. By
bondslave to the law, the poet means his being inslaved to his favorite subjects.

Johnson liked to boast that he would never contradict a bishop, but in this case he did just that. Against Warburton’s interpretation, Johnson set his own, which was in many ways a restatement of Hanmer’s position:

This sentiment, whatever it be, is obscurely expressed. I understand it differently from the learned commentator, being perhaps not quite so zealous for Shakespeare’s political reputation. The reasoning of Gaunt, I think, is this: By setting thy royalties to farm thou hast reduced thyself to a state below sovereignty, thou art now no longer king but landlord of England, subject to the same restraint and limitations as other landlords; by making thy condition a state of law, a condition upon which the common rules of law can operate, thou art become a bondslave to the law; thou hast made thyself amenable to laws from which thou wert originally exempt. Whether this interpretation be true or no, it is plain that Dr. Warburton’s explanation of bondslave to the law, is not true.

Warburton had tried to distance Shakespeare from any understanding of the concept of absolute sovereignty. He had declared that Shakespeare could not have known of this doctrine in the 1590s when he wrote Richard II because the doctrine was not promulgated until the reign of the first Stuart King, James I. Johnson rejects Warburton’s reading out of hand. He asserts that Gaunt is indeed referring to the king’s being above the law. We may say that Johnson corrects Warburton because he wishes to establish the true meaning of Shakespeare’s text, but we should recognise that the textual meaning that Johnson seeks to establish also has political ramifications. If Shakespeare was able to articulate the doctrine of absolute sovereignty in the 1590s, this proves that the Stuarts did not invent that doctrine, as many Whigs liked to claim. Johnson’s note, therefore, functions not only as a partial clarification of the text but also as a partial vindication of the Stuarts.

In his note Johnson suggests that one of the reasons why he disagrees with Warburton is that he is ‘perhaps not quite so zealous for Shakespeare’s political reputation’. This is a tantalising remark, but it is not immediately clear how we ought to read it. Does Johnson mean that Warburton cares about Shakespeare’s politics, but he himself does not? This reading seems unlikely. As we shall see, Johnson returns again and again in his notes to political issues, and especially to issues of absolute sovereignty and hereditary, indefeasible right. He clearly shares Warburton’s interest in Shakespeare’s political ideas. If there is a difference between the two men it must lie in the points of view that they bring to bear on those ideas. Johnson