

The Man Himself

Richard III - a psychological portrait



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Does a psychological analysis tell us anything new about Richard III? This analysis by Professor Mark Lansdale and Julian Boon of the School of Psychology, University of Leicester, was commissioned for the *Looking for Richard III* project in Leicester.

On the face of it, amongst any number of historical figures, Richard III is an obvious candidate for psychological analysis. The received wisdom of Tudor calumnies and historical circumstance surrounding key events such as his assumption of the throne, the execution of Hastings and the disappearance of his nephews generates a *prima facie* case for questioning his personality even if, individually, the accuracy of Tudor commentaries and their interpretation of each of these events is, at the very least, open to serious doubt.

One might argue that historical biography is a form of psychological analysis. Indeed, by way of example, one way of looking at Kendall's excellent 1955 biography of Richard is as an extended conjecture on the nature of his personality. Beyond the clarity of writing and the attention to historical sources, much of the quality of this book lies in the coherence that his account of Richard's character brings to the interpretation of historical facts. But what is this worth? How can we know, for example, what Richard actually thought of his brother's lifestyle? Apart from the obvious formalism of style and attention to source materials, how do we differentiate Kendall's approach from fiction such as Hilary Mantel's rich portrayal of Thomas Cromwell in *Wolf Hall*? And how would psychologists go about the same enterprise differently? In this article, as psychologists who know something of the historical controversies surrounding Richard III's life, we aim to explore some psychological approaches through which we can

triangulate upon Richard in order to see whether there is anything new to be said that adds value to our understanding of him and his times. We leave it to others to judge whether this experiment succeeds.

Our approach is to start by discarding the theory that Richard was some form of Caligula-like monster. This calumny originates in the times of the Tudors, and, as Josephine Tey's *The Daughter of Time* reflects, it has stubbornly clung to Richard's name ever since. From a psychological point of view, this seems to us a very straightforward argument to make, not least because, actuarially speaking, it was always very unlikely. We then move away from the aberrantly evil to consider aspects of personality – traits that we all possess to a greater or lesser extent and which have been the object of detailed psychological study over the past 50 years – to ask how those expressed themselves in a man in Richard's circumstances. We do this in three specific ways. First, we explore the issue of Richard's putative deformity and the effects this would be expected to have had upon him. Second, we consider the notion that, as a result of his childhood, he was probably more than usually sensitive to, and intolerant of, uncertainty. This characteristic is seen in varying degrees in all adults and its expression has wide-ranging consequences for the motivations and behaviours of individuals. Finally, we consider how the circumstances of his final years would have interacted with these personality traits to account for his behaviour as events unfolded.

This is, of course, a partial analysis – there are other psychological perspectives that we do not consider. We may also fail to convince that the approaches we adopt are particularly insightful – although we would hope otherwise. Nor do we spend much time discussing the chronology and facts of Richard’s life in order to make space for our psychological arguments – we assume that readers are already familiar with this. Rather, our aim is to humanise Richard: the image of the man we have inherited from More and Shakespeare has become something of a cartoon sketch; a pantomime villain. We aim, at the very least, to consider aspects of personality that reconnect us to that obscured figure with ways of analysing his behaviour that remind us that Richard was a real human being – even if, in detail, our argument must perforce be speculative.

Was Richard a murderous psychopath?

For anyone seeking a genuine insight into the nature of Richard III, the reputation of a murderous psychopath is the elephant in the room that stubbornly refuses to leave. For that reason, we seek to dismiss it first and at some length to indicate how inappropriate the label would seem to be here. The bedrock of reliable evidence (disregarding texts that are better seen as Tudor propaganda) is ludicrously thin compared with the standards psychologists set themselves today, given that most contemporary analysis of individuals (as in, for example, the preparation of case notes for criminal proceedings) is based upon several interviews, interviews with family and acquaintances and psychometric testing. We are therefore immediately at a disadvantage in attempting to conclude anything at all about a poorly documented individual who died over 500 years ago.

Nevertheless, we believe there is no strong evidence that Richard exhibited much by way of abnormal or psychopathic personality disorders. If anything, the evidence suggests the opposite. We come to this conclusion by considering character traits that might indicate psychopathic tendencies. These include amongst others: narcissism; cowardice; thought disorder; superficial charm;

machiavellism; and the ability to control relationships.

Narcissism

In the context of personality disorders, narcissism is defined as pathological self-importance; grandiosity associated with a lack of empathy with others, extraordinary arrogance and aggression. It is one of the most common elements of a psychopathic syndrome. Obviously, when talking about medieval monarchy, some degree of narcissism could be seen as a constitutional requirement, because potential claimants to the throne would have been brought up with an obvious degree of self-importance. However, in Richard’s case, there seems little or no evidence of undue narcissism. From all accounts, his dress and demeanour were hardly grandiose and, if anything, his behaviour with confederates is more akin to *primus inter pares* (i.e. self-effacing) than one would expect from someone with a narcissistic personality disorder.

Cowardice

Although narcissists are often seen as aggressive and highly effective in engendering anxiety in the targets of their aggression, psychopathic personality disorders are often associated with forms of cowardice when an overly-developed instinct for self-preservation prevails. Thus, while such a person might strike you down from behind, when faced with a genuine threat they will not confront it but will seek other methods of response unless forced to fight to maintain face and sustain self-image. It seems unlikely that Richard showed any such pattern, as the battles of Barnet, Tewksbury and ultimately the final fateful charge at Bosworth (rather than a retreat) indicate. For him, discretion was rarely the better part of valour.

Psychosis

Although some sufferers of extreme personality disorders can be described as high-functioning (which cynically can be taken to indicate no more than the individual concerned actually does rather well in life and therefore their condition has to be defined by psychologists as being hard to detect), other psychopathic disorders are associated with

obvious psychosis, in which the individual appears not to be self-aware of disordered thought. This might express itself as ‘voices in the head’ or simply incoherent cognitions. Medieval historians were certainly capable of detecting and discussing this – as descriptions of Henry VI in his later years suggest. But again, no evidence whatsoever appears to suggest Richard III showed such tendencies. In the circumstances, were any such tendencies evident or common knowledge, we can reasonably expect that subsequent Tudor writers such as More would have happily alluded to them as further evidence of Richard’s monstrosity.

Machiavellism

Shakespeare’s characterisation of Richard as a devious, suspicious and scheming usurper is what we might expect of a disordered, narcissistic personality. In this respect, the important characteristic is that morality is completely subverted by self-interest and expediency. We argue below that while Richard has been described as Machiavellian, it is probably incorrect, with the attribution saying more about the accuser than the accused. Straightforwardness and transparency seems much more the norm. Thus, for example, we see Richard, alone among Edward IV’s delegation negotiating with the French King Louis, publicly (but apparently logically and politely) dissociate himself from his brother’s policy and leave in good grace. Nor, whatever Kendall tells us of the personal attraction Richard felt for his feckless brother George, is there any evidence that Richard colluded with, or encouraged, him. Rather Richard sticks rigidly in his loyalty to his crowned brother. These are not the actions of someone whose principal purpose was to manipulate, dissemble and draw attention away from his own stratagems. To argue otherwise requires us to produce evidence of such deviousness and as yet there is very little.

Interpersonal relationships

Psychopaths often show a complex and apparently paradoxical pattern in their interpersonal relationships. Their ability to inflict cruelty and pain upon others is often described as a lack of empathy – the inability to

understand and share other people’s feelings – but it is equally likely to betray a narcissistic contempt for others’ emotions coupled with a finely tuned ability to read other people’s emotional needs and manipulate them accordingly. The same skills also enable psychopaths to be capable of superficial charm to the point of charisma. This in turn heightens their ability to develop and exploit controlling relationships in which their objects are held, enthralled and sycophantic, to be used for whatever end. Apart from a callous tendency to drop or betray such people when their purpose has been served, and confident of their own importance and ability to reassert control at will, psychopaths can also be socially careless, showing increased likelihood of laziness, rashness, inconsistency and gratuitous abuse of those around them. To summarise, psychopaths are motivated to seek and exploit emotional vulnerability in others, but in an entirely one-sided way. Relationships in which empathy, consideration and trust are genuinely reciprocated are therefore uncharacteristic of psychopaths. This does not seem consistent with what we know of Richard. Lacking superficial charm and charisma, he nevertheless shows considerable empathy to close confederates and the ability to form close bonds with others. He showed trust in others and expected it back. However, as we see below, that characteristic came with psychological baggage of its own.

We also attach significance to the functional way (as opposed to anything dysfunctional) Richard ran his affairs before 1483. Psychopathic behaviour is a reasonably stable trait and it expresses itself early in life. Any such tendencies in Richard would almost certainly have been detectable well before the critical final two years of his life, when his motivation and the pressures upon him changed significantly. Overall, therefore, the pattern is of an absence of evidence for psychopathy. This goes beyond a ‘not proven’ verdict insofar as the evidence – for example, exemplified by the strong loyalty shown by the towns of the North – indicates the opposite. Further, when we think that the Tudor writers can be expected to have gone to some lengths to find such evidence, the balance of evidence tilts towards supposing that that evidence was

not there to be found. Richard was almost certainly not suffering from any personality disorder that could be described as pathological, for those times or indeed our own. This is not to say that Richard did not exhibit character traits that other people would find uncomfortable, irritating, or otherwise worthy of remark, but we are almost certainly not describing a monster.

Richard's deformity

On his brother's death, and hearing from Hastings that the Woodville clan were seeking to control the government of England, Richard proceeded south with more disadvantages than having to assert himself as Lord Protector amid a hostile court. If the skeleton unearthed in 2012 proves to be Richard's, he was also deformed. The scoliosis of his spine was very advanced, probably uncomfortable, and almost certainly very visible as one shoulder being higher than the other, even if he attempted to compensate with padded or tailored clothes and his own deportment. In the present day, 'deformity' is not a description that lies well with political correctness, and for the most part every attempt is made to avoid reference to it in any pejorative sense. However, we use it here because in medieval England, deformity was a serious business. It represented not only a physical disadvantage, but it was also taken as the visible indication of a twisted soul. To appear malformed in any way risked moral judgement.

We cannot know what judgement Richard made of himself in this respect, but it is not unusual for victims of this misfortune to project upon themselves a sense of guilt. It is therefore possible that Richard laboured against what he saw as defects in himself. Such attribution generally induces a degree of defensiveness and caution; and both of these have been used to describe Richard in the past. How he attributed such deformity would have a significant impact upon the core of his personality. However, he would not have been able to dissociate from the condition (in the way possible today) as the 'luck of the genetic draw' because the fabric of scientific understanding that underlies that attitude was simply not there. Richard may therefore have confronted this in himself as a failing, and two

possible responses come to mind, depending upon whether he attributed cause to himself. If he did, the likely response for a devout Christian was humility: seeing the disability as a burden from God requiring further penitence and piety (rather like wearing a hair shirt). If he did not, and refused to accept personal responsibility, his alternative response would be anger and denial; resulting in rather more aggressive and anti-social behaviour. Such as it is, the evidence suggests that piety and devotion was Richard's way; and that an emphasis on duty, loyalty and service was, in part, expressing a compensation for his self-perceived failings.

Whatever Richard's internalisation of his deformity was, we can be reasonably sure that he will have attributed similar attitudes to the people with whom he was dealing – particularly if he did not know them very well. Indeed, he may have amplified them in his own mind, this being a characteristic of those in this situation. Psychologically speaking, the reasoning goes as follows: (a) I am very conscious of this physical deformity; (b) it is equally apparent to this other person; and (c) therefore they have already drawn conclusions about me before we have become acquainted. In extreme cases, the response is to induce a self-stereotypy in which the individual concerned actually chooses to behave in the manner they feel is expected of them. For the same reason, overweight individuals sometimes adopt the persona of the jolly figure of fun, since it is a stereotyped role that comes with a modicum of social approval.

We can therefore speculate that Richard III struggled in everyday dealings with other people, particularly new acquaintances. Depending upon how the scoliosis developed over his life (a question to which we may ultimately get an answer), this may have been an issue for most of his adult life, or may have been one more intense in the later, more politically important, years of his life but less so in his formative years. If this analysis applies, he would have been suspicious of the motivations of everyone dealing with him. He would also be more likely to believe that his interlocutors, on the basis of his appearance, assumed his motivations were malign and devious. In these circumstances, trust would be harder to establish and

misunderstanding more likely because of the potentially vicious circle in which his likelihood in questioning other people's motivations towards him is reciprocated by exactly the same dynamic in them. In seeking evidential substance for any reputation Richard had for being devious and suspicious, this is something of a smoking gun; taking care to remind ourselves that the assumption is being made at the time of writing is that the sciolitic 2012 skeleton is indeed Richard.

And yet there seems something very odd about this analysis. Whilst to psychologists what we have described seems a highly likely dynamic, the evidence in Richard's life offers so many counter-indicators. The first 30 years of his life show little or no evidence of the marginalisation that we might have expected. Rather, he seemed remarkably able to engender and build trust with the people with whom he worked. One possibility here is that, at this stage, the scoliosis had not yet made its impact felt. It is also striking that little or no evidence of this dynamic is seen in the critical last three years of his life, where the effects of scoliosis were at their greatest and when, socially, the most intense stress on his interpersonal relations would be felt. For example, one of the puzzles in Richard's life is why Earl Rivers and his well-armed comrades behaved the way they did at the crucial meeting in Stony Stratford as Richard travelled south to assume the role of Protector. How did Richard, with his smaller entourage, manage to separate Rivers from his army in such a way as to engineer both custody of the uncrowned Edward V and the arrest of Rivers and Edward's other protectors? This is all the more surprising when one considers that, as a Woodville, Rivers must have been aware of the threat Richard represented. And in those ages this threat was mortal. If Richard's appearance and demeanour was such as to exaggerate this threat with an overlay of deviousness, how and why did Rivers and his associates lose the initiative from a position of strength? Shakespeare, with playwright's licence, effectively takes this as evidence of just how devious and dissembling Richard could be – moving that portrayal closer to the territory of Richard being a high-performing psychopath. Thus we have to consider two extreme alternative hypotheses. One

alternative is that Richard was so devious and manipulative that he was able to conceal malign motivations, as he had done for many years. The other is that Richard was, in fact, a convincing and skilled negotiator to whom Rivers correctly (in a legal sense) surrendered authority. Richard was, after all, the legitimate Protector. Rivers' subsequent misfortunes at the hand of Richard do not in themselves vitiate that interpretation. This latter view would leave us to conclude that whilst Richard's putative deformity may have caused him some social difficulties, it was not sufficient – in and of itself – to be a major factor in subsequent events. This is not to say that it did not contribute to his overall demeanour, and in the next section we explore a second personality trait that would have combined with it to significant effect.

The 'Intolerance of Uncertainty' syndrome

Beset by threats of invasion and having lost an heir and wife in short order, in summer 1485 Richard returned to Nottingham Castle; by tradition 'the castle of his care'. In this phrase, and by the accounts at this time of a brooding personality, we see another way with which to flesh out our image of Richard III as a real man. A number of reasonably reliable indicators suggest Richard was more than usually intolerant of uncertainty in a way that will have had a marked impact upon his personality and his dealings with others.

Intolerance of Uncertainty (IU) is a common syndrome that varies between individuals in degree and is associated with their general levels of anxiety. It probably has its origins in childhood as a need to seek safety by being able to control one's environment. Thus, if a child's perception of their caregivers is as being weak or vulnerable, one (but by no means the only) response to the social anxiety associated with that is to develop a degree of self-reliance. This can take many forms associated with an IU syndrome. Without suggesting pathological degrees of this, those evident in Richard include: the tendency to show excessive trust, attachment and loyalty in his positive attachments; piety and rigid moral values, possibly to the point of priggishness and inflexibility; a strong emphasis upon

justice and the law; a high sense of personal responsibility; and a strong sensitivity to potential threats. Finally, with this constellation of traits, it would not be surprising in IU syndrome to see an attention to detail that, combined with a need for rapid closure in his preferred paths of action, could be seen as verging towards the obsessive and authoritarian.

To a greater or lesser extent, all of these tendencies have been associated with Richard, and no one can doubt that his childhood fits the pattern. He would have known from his earliest years that his family was engaged in a to-the-death conflict with another family. At the age of 6 was left with his mother and his brother George to the mercy of Lancastrians at Ludlow after his father and elder brothers fled. He will then have learned of his father and brother Edmund's death at Wakefield, and soon afterwards be forced to flee to the continent with Margaret of Anjou bearing down on London. There is no doubt that Richard will have known he was growing up in very dangerous times.

The IU syndrome is linked with one more telling pattern in this case. It is associated with a strong sense of self-control and repression. As a result, religious and moral beliefs can be extreme and inflexibly defended (for this reason this syndrome is closely associated with authoritarianism and right-wing ideology). However, it is particularly significant that the price of this control is such when these beliefs are violated, self-control is compromised and the likelihood of a disproportional and/or impulsive response is greater. The execution of Hastings might be seen in these terms. Having been persuaded (by whatever evidence) that the previously loyal Hastings was actually conspiring against him, Richard's anger at betrayal and the desire to re-establish order and certainty is extreme even if, perhaps, some regret follows. A similar argument might apply to Richard's intractable attitude to Buckingham after his rebellion. Richard was not someone to betray lightly.

In these character traits we also see a possible motive for the behaviour of Stanley and Percy at Bosworth. As representatives of the landowning aristocracy both of these men – Stanley particularly – show a contrasting

personality profile to Richard's, in which opportunism and a very high tolerance for uncertainty run hand-in-hand. In Stanley's case this extended as far as gambling with his son's life at Bosworth. It may well be that both men saw this contrast in Richard and with it a serious threat. Instead of the wheeler-dealer opportunism of previous monarchs – even Edward IV – in which past or current misdemeanours were overlooked in transactions of land and power as short-term expedients (one is reminded of Richard's distaste at Edward IV's dealings with Louis XI of France), here was a man who favoured consistency, justice and the law over opportunism. He introduced legislation, for example, in the composition of juries and the declaration of interests. The threat of this would be to reduce the power of magnates such as Stanley and Percy yet further. No wonder the common folk of the North were loyal, but for these warlords, Richard could have seemed like an inflexible, sanctimonious prig who threatened their autonomy in the north and who was unlikely to give up easily in his chosen path. While Edward IV was alive, these barons may well have been sufficiently satisfied with Edward's judgement to feel disposed to some co-operation with Richard in the North. Subsequently, it may well be that, unfettered by Edward, the speed of his legislation in the short time of his own reign and the inflexibility of Richard's character might have sealed his fate at Bosworth. It is a common fate of modern political leaders ultimately to be laid low when they threaten the self-interest of those whose support they rely upon to remain in power.

The transition to monarchy, 1483–5

'Personality' does not exist in isolation and the very essence of some personality traits is entirely dependent on circumstances and an individual's perception of how events are unfolding. Therefore, whilst of obvious significance to the history of England, the years 1483–5 are also of great significance in the psychological analysis of Richard's personality because this covers his transition from Lord of the North (with little expectation of accession to the throne), to Protector, and then to king. Richard's rise and fall can be said to fit a very common pattern – that of the loyal

and hard-working deputy who, coming to power after the passing of a long-standing, powerful leader, is overcome by events in relatively short order. In recent British political history three similar cases come to mind in Prime Ministers Eden, Major and Brown. Following the dominance of Churchill, Thatcher and Blair respectively, these certainly had hard acts to follow, as did Richard following Edward IV.

The diversity of these three figures – and the different reasons why each of them might have shared a common fate (we do not need to explore them here) – should immediately alert us to the dangers of generalising about Richard III from this perspective. We cannot conclude that these three prime ministers were similar in personality to each other because of what happened to them. But from the psychologists' perspective, this context is still an interesting one to view Richard; this time not looking so much at traits of the individual personality to draw conclusions about motivations and personality, but looking at the interaction of that personality and dynamics of the environment and context in which people are placed. Is there anything about the dynamics of transition from deputy to king that can be used to cast further insight into this more bloody stage of Richard's career without resorting to ideas of an abnormally disordered personality?

The first point of note is that for ten or more years prior to Edward's death, Richard was being strongly reinforced in his modus operandi. Service and loyalty to his brother had served both well, and his role as viceroy in the North further allowed him significant freedom in how he conducted his affairs. He was surrounded by a loyal team, was fulfilling his duty to the king and was not exposed to the uncertainties and vicissitudes of the Woodville-packed court. This arrangement was mutually beneficial. With his expectation that his brother would rule for sometime and then be replaced by Edward V in due course, any resentments (even if he was aware of them) he might already be generating in the likes of Stanley and Percy were hardly likely to cause him to lose much sleep. Therefore, at an age when most apprentice politicians (who are not tied into office by birth) are required to be flexible and adaptive, Richard's experience served to

emphasise the reverse. Paradoxically, at a time of relative security and peace, these circumstances will have reinforced the behaviours that reflected Richard's underlying IU syndrome (the origins of which lay in insecurity and strife). At this stage, the life experiences that would have led to a more adaptive mentality, and with it a more finely tuned political sensitivity and ability to compromise, were substituted by experiences that reinforced the status quo.

If his previous experience made it difficult for Richard's character to adapt to the different role of king, the immediate crises of his reign – in particular the executions of Hastings and Buckingham – will have served to have the same effect. He appears to have trusted them, and they were probably more adept than he at the social skills of politics. But consistent with an IU syndrome Richard placed too much store in his associates' trust and loyalty. For their part, perhaps Hastings and Buckingham came to believe – as we speculate that Stanley and Percy eventually did – that here was a man already too flawed, too inflexible, to broker compromise and in any sense share power. They may therefore have concluded (possibly even with regret) that they had levered the wrong person into power. Whatever they believed, the effect of their loss would have been to make it less likely that others could influence Richard in that way. In the nature of personalities characterised by IU, betrayal will have rendered Richard even less likely to trust new people and new ideas as they came along. To summarise, the interaction of established character traits and the immediate pressures of the transition to monarchy could have had the effect of amplifying those traits in what is a self-reinforcing cycle of behaviour and feedback. It is a moot point whether that tendency, in itself, made the crises with Hastings and Buckingham inevitable (in which case one would conclude that Richard's personality profile was sufficiently extreme as to undermine his ability to reign effectively), whether they were merely treacherous, or whether (as seems most likely) the truth lies somewhere between the two. Whatever, such crises had the effect of removing key personalities capable of mediating between Richard's particular style of management and

the more opportunistic expectations of the powerful subjects upon whom he would need to rely.

This issue is subtle and hard to judge, and perhaps we should be careful not to overstate the effects of this transition. There is little reason in documented records to think that the dynamics we describe produced much that was obviously aberrant. The factors governing Richard's personality would not be very remarkable in terms of his overt behaviour, however fundamental they may have been to his motivations and ultimately to other people's estimate of him as a leader. By way of contrast, to make this point, consider ex British Foreign Secretary David Owen's 2007 account of the 'Hubris Syndrome'. This book attempts to account for the behaviour of powerful leaders such as Margaret Thatcher in terms of the results of similar self-reinforcing patterns of behaviour. But the dynamics of this seem quite different, as a potted selection from Owen indicates in describing the Hubris Syndrome:

- a narcissistic propensity to see the world primarily as an arena in which they can exercise power and seek glory;
- a disproportionate concern with image and presentation;
- excessive confidence in their own judgement and contempt for the advice or criticism of others;
- recklessness and impulsiveness;
- loss of contact with reality;
- incompetence in carrying out a policy . . . self-confidence has led the leader not to bother worrying about the nuts and bolts of a policy.

To us at least, this does not sound like Richard. True, medieval monarchs did have a propensity to behave hubristically as a matter of expectation. But if anything, the record of legislation and of command and control in his years of monarchy suggest a far more controlled and balanced pattern of behaviour than is associated with other monarchs of the time. Rather, we suggest that the key element here is this sense of control and engagement. This, from all we have seen, is characteristic of Richard and is a predictable element of the IU syndrome. In modern parlance, such behaviour is sometimes associated with 'control freaks',

and in using such terms, we are able to exemplify how variably this can be perceived by others in the context in which they work. At one extreme, some individuals are tolerated with good humour and friendship for their endearing qualities – they may be a bit of a pain sometimes, but their heart is in the right place. At the other extreme, perhaps where social discretion is replaced by managerial authority and a palliative sense of humour is missing, such control freaks can be perceived as vindictive and sanctimonious prigs.

In our assessment of Richard, the point here is that how his personality was perceived is an interaction between how extreme certain personality traits were, and the perceived functional relationship between the people making that assessment. Clearly, some of his close associates, both in the North, but also in his monarchy, showed great loyalty and attachment. Others, such as Stanley and Percy, by their behaviour, did not. But these latter individuals cannot be expected to have found Richard's monarchy very palatable and would have felt their interests to be compromised by those controlling characteristics. Those characteristics need not have been very extreme to produce the response in Stanley and Percy we observe – nor even in Hastings and Buckingham if we accept that they believed that, in those times, Richard's inflexible or controlling style would ultimately lead to more trouble. For these reasons, we speculate that Richard would have been recognised as of a personality type in which rectitude, justice, piety and loyalty were valued highly and which might also have been seen as verging towards the sanctimonious and/or authoritarian. However, it seems unlikely that this would have been seen as extreme to the point of abnormality. In that case, Richard's misfortune was that the febrile state of England and its aristocracy were not ready for him and his style of monarchy.

Summary

This brief analysis points to simple summaries of Richard's personality. We argue that any suggestion that Richard was a murderous, Machiavellian psychopath is highly unlikely and lacks evidence. Furthermore, most of the expected attributes of such an aberrant

personality type are contra-indicated by evidence. But, as is sometimes the case, we do not wish the exclusion of one extreme hypothesis to be taken as evidence for its polar opposite. This, in itself, is not evidence that Richard was a charismatic or saintly monarch. There is nothing beyond a comparatively efficient government in the time available to him to suggest that Richard was significantly more 'good' than any other monarch. To flesh out his personality a little more, we speculate that his behaviour as king and human being was influenced by two things. First, his deformity would have led to greater reserve and social caution, both on his part and his interlocutors (except possibly the most intimate). This could have been interpreted as controlling and cautious and, in the extreme, verging towards the devious and dissembling. This was probably not a serious impediment, but it probably nuanced all interactions negatively. Second, his childhood, and the repeated accounts of adult characteristics such as piety, loyalty and a sense of justice (to name a few) all point to an individual for whom control and the reduction of uncertainty was important. The evidence does not suggest that this was expressed in an extreme way, but we have tried to argue that the interaction of this tendency with the needs and expectations of others may well nevertheless have had dire consequences, either because he would be disliked on a personal basis as a controlling, authoritarian individual, or, more importantly, because he communicated a real threat to the power of those whose support he needed. Overall, this portrays a slightly damaged, but within his own lights, sincere and effective individual who is projected into circumstances for which he ultimately lacked the political flexibility and luck to prevail.

As we have said, this analysis is based upon thin evidence and we suspect any number of other psychological approaches will also generate interesting alternative perspectives of Richard. It is an experiment in historical analysis in which we have sought to apply psychologically oriented guiding principles to such evidence as is available to provide a plausible account of the man. If this, or indeed any other psychologically oriented, approach adds any value to the historical process, it must

be to inform the way we see the key events of Richard's life, where questions remain unanswered. We now turn to some of these briefly by way of speculation in the light of the tentative conclusions we have drawn.

What does Hastings' execution tell us?

It is not clear what it is that Hastings was accused of, but it is clearer that, however alarming and rushed the events were, Richard is probably operating within his authority in ordering this summary execution. With the character of Richard that we have portrayed, it is entirely consistent for him to have behaved somewhat extremely and impulsively on discovery of some betrayal or other (although that betrayal is surmise). It is equally characteristic that he should have shown magnanimity to Hastings' family subsequently. The crucial evidence here, however, is missing. If we were more sure why it was that Hastings had given of fence, we would be in a better position to judge the proportionality of Richard's response and with it his state of mind. All we can do without that information is to comment that any number of plausible scenarios can be identified in which Richard's response would not have seemed particularly remarkable.

Could Richard have murdered his nephews?

Richard seems, above all other things, to have been a careful person. However abhorrent the double murder of minors might seem to us today, it was usual for displaced monarchs to be disposed of. Since other kings were happy to do this, there is no reason to rule out the possibility that Richard felt compelled to do likewise, for similar reasons to theirs. That lower threshold for murder accepted, it was never an act to be considered lightly, and we need to think about why Richard should wish to destroy them and whether our assessment of his personality gives any useful insight upon this. His legal claim to the throne, once the princes' illegitimacy was established, was strong. With the law on his side, he might have felt that this was sufficient to minimise the risk of their being the focus of a rebellion. Nor was a serious attempt being made to abduct the

royal children and use them in this way (unless we accept the hypothesis that Buckingham was conducting some nefarious operation prior to his rebellion). Furthermore, if the princes were indeed dead for whatever reason, little advantage would follow from not telling anyone. On the other hand, had they been sent to a secret place of safety, silence was essential. For a controlled and careful man, with a keen sense of justice, it is more in character to have done this than to have carried out a pre-emptive murder without then appropriately clarifying (i.e. tidying up and reducing uncertainty) the situation afterwards. In sum, our analysis of Richard would point to his being more likely to have removed the princes to a secret place of safety and less likely to have been complicit in their murder.

Was he Machiavellian?

The concept of being Machiavellian emphasises political expediency above moral or ethical considerations. In Machiavellian politics, truth and justice are more likely to be defined post hoc rather than determining what the ends of those politics should be. In this respect, whilst doubtless Richard was capable of shrewdness and possibly diplomacy amounting to economies with the truth, it seems more likely than for other monarchs that his policy was driven by what he believed was right. Indeed, we have argued earlier that this fixity of purpose may have been seen by the magnates of the time as a threat, precisely because Richard was less likely to be swayed or deflected from his purpose by the Machiavellian operators around him. It is easy to see, with a reserved manner and cautious demeanour he could be attributed with Machiavellian motives, but we suggest that this could be a complete misreading of his character.

Did he usurp the throne opportunistically?

By the same token, we surmise that Richard, in moving to legitimise his monarchy, was not driven by ambition. Even whether or not he was pleased to become king is debatable. The question could be framed in terms of whether he felt he had a choice. Despite recognising how his political enemies would interpret the

course of events, were it the case that the illegitimacy of the princes was established, a man of his demeanour and position would have no choice but to regularise the situation by enabling the lawful process of succession to go ahead. That is entirely consistent with the character we have painted. Equally, for a man whose entire career had apparently been based upon the carrying out of his duty according to the station he had inherited by birth, it seems unlikely that he would suddenly become skilled in a coherent act of deception that appears never to have fallen apart and thereby revealed its true nature. The alternative hypothesis that Richard was a long-term usurper who had been biding his time for the whole of his adult life lacks evidence or plausibility.

Why did he die at Bosworth?

With Percy's ambiguous inactivity at Bosworth, Richard might well have withdrawn to fight another day; as had many successfully before him. His chances of regrouping, as the legitimate king, were reasonable, and it is far from clear how the future would have unfolded afterwards. Instead he chose to gamble on what proved to be an ill-fated chance. Why? We suggest the following logic. First, he was the anointed king and it was the will of God whether he remained so. For a man of his piety it was his duty to defend his monarchy to the death. Fatalism is not unusual with his character traits (although we note it is less likely in psychopathic personalities). Second, he was a seasoned warrior and quite capable of executing the manoeuvre he proposed. These points given, perhaps at this crisis in the battle (and indeed in his life, this battle following on so soon after the loss of his wife and son), he is decisive: Richard's aversion to the uncertainty that would follow his retreat makes common cause in his mind with the opportunity to put an end to Henry Tudor for once and for all, and the product is a chivalric *coup de main*. It may have been seen as a desperate, impulsive act as the fortune of battle swung against him, but we argue that Richard may have construed it as a duty and an act of faith in God. History tells us that when the character traits we have attributed to Richard appear in leaders – traits which are self-reinforcing and less likely to

lead to compromise – an uncompromising and sudden end is the likely outcome. If so, had Richard's reign not ended at Bosworth Field, it might well have ended soon enough in similar circumstances.

Postscript

If the purpose of historical analysis is to relate the flow of events to the personality and motivations of the characters within them, it seems logical that psychological analysis of individuals could be used to inform historical debate. However, judging by critical reviews, historians might previously have made a better show of informing psychological insight than have psychologists influenced the historical interpretation of events. One thinks, for example, of John Keegan's influential and beautifully written *The Face of Battle* as an example of the former. On the latter side, historians seem unimpressed with the psychologist's approach: the brickbats hurled at Norman Dixon for his analysis of Douglas Haig in *The Psychology of Military Incompetence* still echo through the literature of the Great War. Arguments swing from side to side. Historians argue the analysis is silly to the point of character assassination. Psychologists (including Dixon himself) would argue that historians have missed his point and failed to grasp the subtlety of psychological analysis. The truth is that two disciplines, with even so obvious a common ground as the study of people in historical events, struggle to exploit it. This is in part because both disciplines come

with long and established cultures and the different expectations that go with them. Largely covert in works such as this, these cultures contextualise in the reader's mind what the authors intend. If the readers come from a different culture, then the words used by authors often take on different and unwelcome meanings. Perhaps it must necessarily be so. Either way, it leaves our foray into historical analysis flawed: psychologists may feel that we have been incautious in our speculation beyond what meagre evidence allows; historians may feel that our inexpert grasp of late medieval history undermines our ability to understand the cognitions of fifteenth-century figures. We accept both limitations and offer this defence: if we accept that there is no single correct interpretation of history – or indeed of human behaviour – then the one thing we can be sure of is that it is a mistake to seek orthodoxy and to close down new or challenging approaches. Our purpose here has been to think as psychologists about Richard III to offer plausible hypotheses that might add flesh and humanity to the bones of the historical record. For us, our version of Richard has emerged as someone sharing character traits we see all around us: some good and some bad. We can also see how those character traits played out in the constraints and demands of his social station and his times. Whether this analysis is right or wrong, we cannot say. The debate is all. But if its effect is to reconnect us with Richard's humanity, warts and all, that, at least, is something.