

Bad history makes good drama: Richard III at Dartmouth College

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IN JULY 1980, the Dartmouth College Repertory Company of Hanover, New Hampshire, invited actor David Birney to star in their production of Shakespeare's *Richard III*. The subject of Richard happened to coincide with the research interests of two Dartmouth professors. On 22 July, Professors Peter Saccio and Charles T. Wood led a symposium dedicated to the conflicts in Richard's image, in history and in Shakespeare's play. Professor Saccio is a member of Dartmouth's English department, the author of *Shakespeare's English Kings*, and he helped cut the text of the play for the College production. Charles Wood of the history department is an honorary member of the Richard III Society, and his publications on constitutional development are seminal studies in medieval history. What follows is an edited transcript of the symposium, whose eloquence and humour clearly confirmed author John Fowles' definition that 'scholarship and solemnity are not always quite the same thing—a lesson it is a pleasure to be reminded of', and to share with a larger audience.

Professor Saccio

Shakespeare's play is composed of two markedly distinct strands which harmonise and contrast with each other. There is an historical narrative about the fall of a dynasty, and there is a leading character. These two strands appear in the current production—the historical tale of dynastic ruin, curse, and nemesis appearing in director Errol Hill's elaborate ceremonial staging, and then the striking leading character in the enormous energy of David Birney in the title role. I want to divide my remarks into two groups, talking about the historical patterns and the leading role.

The historical pattern is something that Shakespeare did not invent himself. It was bequeathed to him by the historians of his own time who were blessed by the activities of the Tudor Crown and Tudor propaganda. They gave Shakespeare a pattern for the entire history of the fifteenth century, which he worked out in a series of eight plays, of which *Richard III* is the last. The eight plays depict the house of Plantagenet in its final century from the deposition of Richard II to the fall of Richard III and the rise of the Tudors. One way I have found to describe that historical pattern in a century of turmoil is to apply three snappy slogans, which I have obviously not invented.

The first slogan is 'Decline and Fall'—of the house of Plantagenet. Shakespeare's eight history plays tell the story of a doomed royal family: a family that destroys itself, a family whose members unnaturally hate each other, and therefore fight, depose, and kill each other. That is an old tragic theme, from

ancient Greek tragedy as well, and Shakespeare reworks it into a dynastic and semi-religious pattern. In *Richard III*, we see the end of the decline and fall. In the opening scenes, the house of Lancaster is at bottom; the second scene shows us the last Lancastrian king in a coffin being bemoaned by one of the two last Lancastrian widows. The major action in Shakespeare's play is the destruction of the rest of the royal family, the Yorkist side and their relatives the Woodvilles, by their most ruthless member, Richard. By Act V, nearly all the people of the first couple of acts are dead, leaving only weeping queens and duchesses to bemoan them. Whenever I see or read the play, I experience a sense of desolation that coincides exactly with the moment when Richard finally gets the crown on his head and is enthroned. He has got what he wants, but who is there left to notice? In the earlier scenes of the play, the Woodvilles and Yorkists may be wrangling and unlovable sorts of people, but at least they are interesting. When Richard is king, England has become a wasteland, and the king sits on his throne and gnaws his nether lip.

The second pattern is 'War and Peace', a social and secular pattern running through the entire series of eight history plays. Shakespeare's history depicts a society as it oscillates between war and peace, chaos and order. To our minds, such oscillation is usually driven by large abstract factors: ideologies, the movements of population, economic factors, the price of oil. But the Elizabethans, including Shakespeare, viewed these matters more personally, less abstractly. Society was brought to order or driven into chaos by the activities and desires of individuals, particularly men in high places. This theme is a little less prominent in *Richard III* itself—Richard works so swiftly that large, external manifestations of disorder are forestalled. Rather, disorder functions within the family itself.

What could there be left but 'Crime and Punishment'? This is a religious and moral pattern: God visits His Divine Justice upon sin. England had consented to the removal, deposition, and therefore the death of its last unquestionably legitimate king, Richard II, in 1399. Thereafter, the remaining branches of the Plantagenet house were left to visit civil war on England in punishment, until a new royal family, the Tudors, unite the warring branches and restore England to peace. In this pattern, Richard himself plays a most interesting role. He is himself the arch-criminal, and the object of divine punishment at the end of the play. But as well as being the object of divine punishment, he is also its agent. God uses Richard to punish the wicked Yorkists and Woodvilles. That is made abundantly clear by Queen Margaret. Margaret curses them all and Richard is the agent who unconsciously fulfils the curse. Through Richard's hatred for the Yorkists and the Woodvilles, God punishes them for their own deeds. Then, He wipes the slate clean by punishing Richard himself. Richard does far more to purge England than poor Richmond does at the end of the play. Shakespeare doesn't seem to be overwhelmingly interested in the role of Richmond—a nice guy, handsome and a hero-type, but dramatically a hole in the air, the sort of man every woman yearns for—as a son-in-law.

Richard himself is unconscious of these divine purposes. He isn't interested in fulfilling the will of God. He is oblivious to this, and this is what provides the tension between the strands of the play—the leading role and the surrounding historical content. The play begins in soliloquy, the only play by Shakespeare

which begins with a soliloquy by the leading character. It begins in the narrow, closed world of Richard's egoism. The first scenes of the play gradually expand that perspective. He first encounters Anne, and must overcome her opposition in order to get what he wants. Then he encounters the Woodvilles, and they are trickier to deal with because there are so many of them and they are busy grabbing everything available in Yorkist London. Then he meets Margaret, a much more formidable person. The last of these scenes is the death of the Duke of Clarence. We begin with the closed world of Richard's egoism, and end with the dream sent to Richard, of the ghosts who tell him he is doomed. But Richard is unconscious of this for most of the play.

Richard himself is conceived of principally as an actor; that is Shakespeare's innovation on the traditional material. No previous Tudor account had stressed Richard's histrionic ability. Richard is Shakespeare's first player-king. It is the keynote struck for Richard in the third part of *Henry VI*, Richard's first big soliloquy:

Why, I can smile, and murder whiles I smile,
And cry 'Content' to that which grieves my heart,
And wet my cheeks with artificial tears,
And frame my face to all occasions.

(3 *Henry VI*, III:iii:182-5)

That is Richard the actor, whom we follow through most of the play. He describes his roles before he begins them, then he undertakes them and often comments on them—he's his own writer, producer, stage manager, director, actor, and best of all, his own critic at the end. His histrionic ability, and ability to play each role successfully, and switch roles when convenient, is the real index of his power over others and his power over us. I think the casting of Richard as an actor has a good deal to do with Shakespeare's discovery of the power of the theatre. *Richard III* is one of Shakespeare's great statements about the power of his own art.

Professor Wood

When an historian approaches any figure within history, that historian immediately thinks of the particular time period and tries to establish a context within which this person acts on the stage of history. Any historian approaching Shakespeare's play, and wondering to what extent Shakespeare has accurately portrayed this king of England, will begin thinking about the context and will arrive at the conclusion that Shakespeare's vision is not necessarily an inaccurate one. The age in which Richard lived (1452-85) is the age of Machiavelli (b. 1469), the Borgias, and Vlad the Impaler, the historical Dracula. Shakespeare's character, as he emerges on the stage, is not necessarily improbable. That may help to explain why so many historians, unaware of the facts, simply accepted Shakespeare's view of Richard III as historically true. On the other hand, historians knowing the facts *have* reacted strongly against Shakespeare.

The real problem is the difference between history and historical fiction/drama. I can illustrate this with a contemporary example. In 1975, I saw a production of *Richard III* starring Robin Gammell at the Long Wharf Theatre in New Haven, Connecticut. I had just finished a study of how Richard had become king,¹ and my counterpart at Yale, William H. Dunham, insisted that my wife and I come to New Haven so I could see the 'real truth' about Richard III. It was an

interesting production which opened with a *tableau vivant* of Edward IV dancing with a nude Jane Shore. Professor Dunham, aged 75, grew uneasy. Then the play began and given the date, Gammell played Richard as he imagined Richard Nixon sounded on the Watergate tapes. Dunham, who had never seen the play, whispered loudly, 'Don't they know this is all wrong, all historically inaccurate?'

Dramatists frequently answer this response. A perfect example is the play *Becket* by Jean Anouilh, in which the key element is that Becket is an Anglo-Saxon. Anouilh reports that once he had finished the script:

I gave it to an historian friend of mine to read, and he roared with laughter, saying, 'Are you unaware that history, like everything else on this earth, makes progress? ... For over fifty years we have had proof that Becket was a good Norman.' I decided that if history in the next fifty years should go on making progress, it will perhaps rediscover that Becket was indubitably of Saxon origin ... I changed nothing; the play was a great success, and I noticed that no one except my historian friend was aware of the 'progress of history.'²

Certainly, as you look at the historical record, there is a great deal which would sustain Shakespeare's view. After the battle of Bosworth, Richmond (now Henry VII) called a parliament to ratify his kingship and pass a bill of attainder against the Richard he had just slain. In that bill, there is the description of 'the unnatural, mischievous and great perjuries, treasons, homicides and murders, in shedding of infants' blood, with many other wrongs, odious offenses and abominations against God and man ... committed and done by Richard, late duke of Gloucester, calling and naming himself by usurpation King Richard the Third'.³ This is the foundation for Thomas More's history, and for English History.⁴

But in recent years, there have been counter arguments. Paul Murray Kendall's 1955 biography *Richard the Third* contains many passages of strong support for the king, and attempts at explaining the contradictions:

Richard remained alive in many men's memories. But memories are mute and the written word was dangerous. Henry had the writers, and what Henry's court said was all that counted. King Richard, such as he was in life—confused and diligent and erring and earnest—was buried beneath the black alluvial deposits of the Tudor historians, who created in his stead a simulacrum—an ogre, atop which King Henry was displayed, rampant, rescuing England.⁵

In 1975, Alison Hanham published a study of Richard III as portrayed by his early historians, most of whom painted a dismal picture of the king and who were probably telling the truth. G. R. Elton reviewed the book glowingly in the *Times Literary Supplement*, and said that those who supported Richard are among the minor mysteries of English history. The next week a letter appeared in the *TLS*, part of which reads:

Not least among the minor mysteries surrounding Richard III is his posthumous flair for bringing out the worst in professional historians ... [They] should ... explain what is so special about Richard III's alleged villainy when compared with that of, say, Henry IV, Edward IV and Henry VII—to name but three usurping regicides—or numerous other blood-stained fifteenth-century toughies who somehow fail to send these historians into the strange contortions of moral posturing reserved exclusively for Richard III, perhaps the bravest and certainly, by birth and blood, the most English of our Kings.⁶

It was signed Jeremy Potter, Chairman of the Richard III Society. Moreover, on

31 July 1980, another duke of Gloucester will be coming to Leicester from whence Richard III, formerly duke of Gloucester, set forth for Bosworth. The present royal duke will be arriving by helicopter, to unveil a statue to Richard III.* In the brochure asking for contributions to build the statue, there is the comment:

Richard III's brief reign of two years is notable for the enlightened quality of his legislation to correct economic injustices and reform the machinery of law and administration. He redressed many grievances among the poor, was an implacable enemy of 'extortionists and oppressors of his Commons', and died heroically, as even his opponents admitted, 'fighting manfully among the thickest press of his enemies'.

Let us go back to Jeremy Potter's question: given the unpleasant age of the late fifteenth century, why is it that Richard is singled out? Richard's career did not possess the demonic strain depicted in Shakespeare. Historians now agree that he was not responsible for the deaths of Henry VI, Edward of Lancaster, and the Duke of Clarence. As I read Richard, he is not an evil man. I would argue that far from showing the malign genius in Shakespeare, Richard is rather an example of the Peter Principle, having been promoted beyond his abilities. He was an enormously successful governor of the north for his brother. He seems to have had a practical military mind that could deal with concrete situations, such as his successful capture of Edward V at Stony Stratford. His basic problem was that he was disliked by the Woodvilles, who immediately moved to seize control, and to exclude him from the protectorship. It was likely that Richard would have found himself dead if he had been excluded. Richard stepped in to retain his protectorship and save his own skin, but he was never able to get control of the situation. The network of personal hatreds prevented him from drawing back. When opposed, he had to strike out, and eventually he had to make himself king. Whether it was at that point that Richard decided to kill the Princes in the Tower, we will probably never know. Based on previous depositions, my bet is that he didn't—that he hoped he didn't have to, and then found it an inevitable conclusion.

But why *is* Richard singled out? It *is* a bloody period—at least twelve descendants of Edward III died unnatural and violent deaths. Part of the problem was that Richard was succeeded by a new dynasty with no one to defend him. The real element, however, is those little Princes. If you are in a period in which life is nasty, brutish and short, you find that people set up safeguards and limits beyond which violence should not go. One of those limits has to do with children—thou shalt not kill children. They are innocents, and innocents in the sense of Herod and the Massacre of the Innocents, three days after the birth of Christ. Holy Innocents' Day, the anniversary of that slaying, was enormously important in the fifteenth century. The day of the week on which it fell was considered unlucky throughout the following year.⁷ In 1460, Innocents' Day fell on a Sunday: Edward IV was crowned on *Sunday* 28 June 1461 (an innocents' day), and because no new ventures should take place on that day, Edward had himself recrowned shortly afterwards on a day other than Sunday.

With the alleged murder of the Princes, Richard stepped beyond the pale. He massacred innocent children—off-limits, the symbol of safety in society. That element sets Richard apart, *even on the strength of rumour*.

Furthermore, although Shakespeare may not get all his facts straight, in

terms of the nature of the human condition and the divinely ordered universe, he is accurately capturing the sense of true history. As people in the sixteenth century viewed history, they wanted to learn its lessons: what was history but philosophy teaching by example? One wanted to learn not about particular individual and unique characters, but about certain types of characters and what they can tell us about the nature of the history that we all go through. In that sense, getting the facts straight doesn't really make much difference. If you don't have them, you can create them as long as they tell the truth of the matter. Obviously, this is not the same sense of history that the twentieth century possesses.⁸ But the best synthesis, of Elizabethan and modern and Shakespearean views of history, was expressed recently by E. F. Jacob in *The Oxford History of England*:

That there was a sound constructive side to Richard III is undoubted. He was very far from being the distorted villain of tradition ... But when the change of government came he could not be content with the large but temporary authority offered him by the protectorship ... The fatal step was the murder of Hastings: after that the seizure of the throne was inevitable. He had found, under pressure of his own reserved, tense, and uncommunicative nature, the Renaissance way to quick results, and that way, the way of removal, was to determine his control of events ... Having begun by strong illegal action, he was forced to continue it. There was no drawing back.⁹

In that sense, Shakespeare has captured it beautifully.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. C. T. Wood, *The Deposition of Edward V*, *Traditio*, 31 (1975), pp.247-86; Wood and W. H. Dunham, Jr., *The Right to Rule in England: Depositions and the Kingdom's Authority, 1327-1485*, *American Historical Review*, 81 (1976), pp.738-61.
2. J. Anouilh, *Becket*, trans. L. Hill (New York, 1960), pp.vii-viii.
3. *Rotuli Parliamentorum*, VI, pp.275-8.
4. E.g., W. Stubbs, *The Constitutional History of England* (3 vols., Oxford 1890), III, p.232.
5. P. M. Kendall, *Richard the Third* (New York 1955), p.464.
6. *Times Literary Supplement*, 24 October 1975, p.1264.
7. J. Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages* (London 1924), pp.138-9.
8. David Pownall approaches the problem in the final lines of his play *Richard III Part Two* (London 1979, p.92), when Richard asks, 'Are you aware of what you're doing to me?/. . . There's no chance you're going to get me right . . . / Has anyone here ever heard/ of a whore called Historical Accuracy?'
9. E. F. Jacob, *The Fifteenth Century* (Oxford 1961), p.645.

*The editors wish to point out that the symposium took place before the statue of Richard III was unveiled in Leicester. The ceremony was not conducted by HRH Prince Richard, Duke of Gloucester, but by his mother, HRH Princess Alice, Duchess of Gloucester.