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Shakespeare's *King Richard the Third*: A Study of 'Vice Revisited'

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For Shakespeare, a ruler, especially someone as negative as Richard III, almost appears to be a Vice-like figure who is entirely Machiavellian in his conception. In an age in which the general "world picture" propagated the "divine right" theory, this conception appears to be strange enough. Antony Hammond points out:

Of the sixty odd characteristics of the 'formal vice' listed by Happe', the following can be recognized in the Richard of Shakespeare's plays: the use of an alias, strange appearance, use of asides, discussion of plans with the audience, disguise, long avoidance, but ultimate suffering of punishment, moral commentary, importance of name, and reluctance concerning it, self-explanation in soliloquy, satirical function which include an attack on women and various signs of depravity such as boasting and conceit, enjoyment of power, immoral sexuality. (100-101)

Some critics attribute the popularity of the play *King Richard III* mainly to the attraction of Richard's character, like Satan's in Milton's epic. In the earlier history plays, the powers of darkness, though just nominally presented through supernatural agencies, were actually dramatized in the forms of devilish nexus of the lords trying to destroy order in England. In the present play, the supernatural is projected mostly in the form of the ghosts of the murdered people and also through some forebodings, curses and anticipations. But the highest representation of the dark forces is in the character of Richard himself. As Tillyard rightly comments:

He is the great ulcer of the body politic into which all its impurities is drained and against which all the members of the body politic are united. It is no longer a case of limb fighting limb but of the war of the whole organism against an ill which has now ceased to be organic. The metaphor of poison is constantly applied to Richard, and that of beast, as if here were something to be excluded from the human norm. Queen Margaret [actually Queen Elizabeth in IV.iv.81] unites the two metaphors when she calls him "that poisonous bunch-back'd toad" and that "bottled spider", the spider being proverbially venomous. (208-209)

Does Shakespeare tend to connect Richard's monstrosity of character with his physical deformity? Though there is no definite justification for such an assumption, we find some textual suggestions about Richard's physical deformity seeking psychological compensation through diabolical activities. The play enacts how Richard, Duke of Gloucester, aims at the throne of England and resorts to the darkest and cruelest forms of villainies to achieve his goal. The play opens with his soliloquy, in which he explains his motives in his own way:

But I, that am not shap'd for sportive tricks,
Nor made to court an amorous looking-glass;
I, that am rudely stamp'd, and want love's majesty
To strut before a wanton ambling nymph:
I, that am curtail'd, of this fair proportion,
Cheated of feature by dissembling Nature,
Deform'd, unfinish'd, sent before my time
Into this breathing world scarce half made up –
(I, i, 14-21)

This is an entirely negative presentation of a man whose physical deformities reduced him almost to the level of a beast man. Indeed, it is significant that the bard of a nation which believes in the divine right of a ruler, which looks upon king as God's representative on Earth should thus powerfully impose so much bestiality upon a would-be ruler. Moreover, it is not the mere physical deformity of Richard III that Shakespeare shows. In fact, he makes his royal aspirant go a step further and hints at his own deformed inner nature:

And therefore, since I cannot prove a lover
To entertain these fair well spoken days,
I am determined to prove a villain,
And hate the idle pleasures of these days.

(I. i. 28-31)

So, right at the commencement of the play it is established that Richard III is a villain, and a villain by choice. As an externalization of his innermost sores and boils, he was malcreated by nature even physically. Hammond rightly comments that Richard's "deformity is an outward and visible sign of his inward spiritual gracelessness" (105). Thus we see that his journey begins in dark motives and acts, and goes on generating greater evils. There is not one relationship whose holy bondage Richard III maintains. He is not merely a murderer of his hapless enemies such as the goodly king Henry VI and his angelic son prince Edward. He is even a betrayer of the family blood – he is a blood-thirsty brother and even bloodier uncle.

It is not to his own kin alone that Richard proves to be the hungry fox. He perpetrates multiple villainies which are presented in the play from different angles. Lady Anne, widow of Edward (Henry VI's son), at the very outset, accuses Richard of killing both Henry VI and his gentle son Edward:

Be it lawful that I invoke thy ghost
To hear the lamentations of poor Anne,
Wife to thy Edward, to thy slaughter'd son,
Stabb'd by the selfsame hand that made these wounds.

(I. ii. 8-11)

But she (Lady Anne) is entirely unaware of the sad fate that awaits herself. Richard first overcomes all her hatred to pay courtship to her but his purpose is suspect – "I'll have her, but not keep her long". This intention is soon confirmed when he grimly looks forward to her death:

I say again, give out
That Anne, my queen, is sick and like to die.

(IV. ii. 56-57).

His wife's death does not dishearten him; rather, he plans his future matrimonial alliance with the prospect of enhancing his political fortunes, and without the smallest consideration of the moral aspect of the alliance:

I must be married to my brother's daughter,
Or else my kingdom stands on brittle glass.

(IV. iii. 60-61).

This, in a nutshell, is the character of the evil minded and devilishly formed ruler, King Richard III. But can Shakespeare be supposed to make an entirely evil character be of pivotal interest in his play? What possibly could have been Shakespeare's reason for such a portrayal of a historical figure? A search in this matter obviously leads us to Shakespeare's age and the various source materials utilized by him.

II

Peter Saccio adequately sums up the situation in *Shakespeare's English Kings*. He reviews Shakespeare's portrayal of Richard III and comments:

This lurid king, hunch backed, clad in blood spattered black velvet, forever gnawing his nether lip or grasping for his dagger, has an enduring place in English mythology. He owes something to the facts about the historical Richard III. he owes far more to rumor and to the political bias, credulity and especially the literary talent of Tudor writers. A Warwickshire antiquary of Henry VIII's time stated the tale about Richard's prolonged prenatal life. Polydore Vergil, the Italian humanist hired by Henry VII to write the history of England, placed Richard in the framework of God's providential scheme for the fifteenth century. Early in the reign of Henry VIII, St. Thomas More started a history of Richard III, a gem of ironic narration that established the popular image of the King (the crooked shoulders, the withered arm, the gnawed lip) And the popular account of the fate of his nephews. More reported many details as mere rumor, but his readers tended to accept them as fact. The Chronicler Edward Hall, completing a corrupt tint of More's tale and fitting it within his own elaboration of Polydore's providential scheme, fused the two to form the climax of his *Union of Two Noble and Illustre Houses of Lancaster and York*. Raphael Holinshed, in his *Chronicles of England*, stole from Hall and out of them Shakespeare created his Richard III. (158)

Now, a close study of these "sources" of Shakespeare reveals that none of them was entirely independent creation. As Antony Hammond points out in his introduction to *King Richard III*:

All the sources available to Shakespeare about Richard III were interlinked, More's *History* being incorporated in Grafton, and Hall, who incorporated Vergil, and who was in turn incorporated by Harding, Stowe and of course Holinshed. (74-75)

In fact, there exists so many contradictions and inter-borrowing among these texts that one almost begins to question the historical accuracy of these texts. Alison Hanham in *Richard III and His Early Historians* offers the view that More's *History* is to be read as a play rather than a serious non fictional work (164). However, More did offer a definite portrait of Richard III as a hunchbacked, ill-favoured and short man who " as the fame runneth" was two years in the making (8).

Edward Hall in his Chronicle *The Union of Two Noble and Illustrate Families of Lancastre and York* almost duplicates the view expressed by More:

Richard duke of Gloucester the third sonne was in witte and courage egall with the other, but in beautee and liniaments of nature for underneath bothe, for he was litle of stature eivill featured of limnes, croke backed, the left shulder muche higher than the righte, harde favoured of visage, such as in estates is called a warlike visage, and emonge commen persones a crabbed face. He was malicious, worthfull and envious, and as it is reported, his mother the duches had much a dooe in her travail, that she could not beedelivered of hym uncut, and that he came into the worlde the fete forward, as menne bee borne outwarde, and as the fame ranne, not untothed....(342)

These views were again shared by other contemporary "historians" such as Holinshed and Polydore Vergil. But all these views are almost entirely negative and have resulted in many conjectures among modern historical critics. For instance, Norrie Epstein in *The Friendly Shakespeare* has argued, "in some cases, Shakespeare's fictional accounts of people and events have become more real than actual history. More people knew Richard III as the

hunchback villain of Shakespeare's play than the real Richard, who was a rather nice man" (165).

In order to understand such a widely accepted negative presentation of a royal figure, we must initially reflect upon "history" as understood in Shakespeare's day or the era preceding his. Beth Marie Kosir in her article "*Richard III: A Study in Historiographical Controversy*" points out that in that age:

History was often used and studied to teach moral lessons. It fulfilled a dual purpose; it was for people to learn about and to learn from. consequently, to make history more palatable, or to make a stronger moral statement, bits of fiction were often sprinkled into the description of actual events, in an effort to ensure that all those who partook of that history, either in written or oral form, had no doubt as to the moral of the story.

<http://www.r3.org/bookcase/shaksper/Kosir.html>.

So, "history" was intended to state a moral thesis, and people were satisfied with certain amount of fictionalization of it as long as the moral purpose was fulfilled. King Richard III has often been denoted in terms of the popular "Vice" of morality drama – for instance, Bernard Spivack points out that Richard's dialogue with himself prior to the Battle of Bosworth is "precisely in the tradition of morality drama" (378); and for this purpose a blackening of his character has been effected. This idea establishes itself when we go through the diary account of Dominic Mancini, a contemporary of Shakespeare. Mancini never really refers to Richard's deformities, what so ever, but rather defends him against all allegations of having master-minded his brother Clarence's death. Mancini blames the Queen and her supporters for the crime and states that Richard only attempted to avenge the death (105).

Beth Marie Kosir makes an in-depth study of this controversy raging around the so-called fictionalized historical presentation of Richard III to comment:

Richard III has been grist for both the literary and history mills for over five hundred years. Such noted personalities as Jane Austen, Sir Francis Bacon and Charles Dickens have found Richard to be a worthy topic for their literary efforts. Still, the debate over whether he was a good man or a bad man continues to rageRichard deserved better treatment at the hands of both contemporary chroniclers and modern historians.

<http://www.r3.org/bookcase/shaksper/Kosir.html>.

The very fact that a controversy has raged through centuries does point to the conception that certain purposeful maligning of the portrait of this last Yorkist ruler had indeed been effected. But it is almost impossible to believe that a sensitive, humanitarian author like Shakespeare would indulge in blindly supporting any kind of smear campaign against a good ruler. Most of the historical facts known to Shakespeare gave him reasons to take Richard as a dark force throwing the country into chaos. So Shakespeare's Richard III is every bit the villain which contemporary history points him out to be.

III

It is therefore quite natural that Shakespeare would utilise the popular appeal of the old Morality Plays, particularly the character of Vice, which may be supposed to embody many of man's moral depravities. Shakespeare seems to have targeted Richard from the foregoing play *Henry VI, Part 3* where he is made to glorify himself for some capabilities which reveal his evil nature:

Why, I can smile, and murder whiles I smile,
And cry 'Content!' to that that grieves my heart,
And wet my cheeks with artificial tears,

And frame my face to all occasions
 I'll drown more sailors than the Mermaid shall;
 I'll slay more gazers than the basilisk;
 I'll play the orator as well as Nestor,
 Deceive more slyly than Ulysses could,
 And, like Sinon, take another troy.
 I can add colours to the chameleon,
 Change shapes with Proteus for advantages,
 And set the murderous Machiavel to school.

(III. ii. 182-193).

So, by his own admission, Richard is a Machiavellian villain, a “modern” incarnation of the medieval “Vice”. Bernard Spivack in *Shakespeare and the Allegory of Evil* shows how in the Elizabethan stage Vice survived “by fusion with the character and behavior of some person of serious stature, whose evil career has come to the attention of the dramatist out of literature of life” (339). Spivack goes on to point out that Shakespeare’s Richard III was indeed a Vice figure who would stop almost at nothing. In fact, as Spivack points out, Shakespeare even uses the word “Vice”. His Richard III comments:

Thus like the formal Vice, Iniquity,
 I moralize two meanings in one word.

(III. ii. 82-83)

By his own acceptance, therefore, Shakespeare’s Richard III is “Vice revisited”. Again, Richard III’s mother, bewails her relation to him just after the murder of Clarence and refers to his Vice-like nature:

Ah, that Deceit should steal such gentle shape,
 And with a virtuous vizard hide deep Vice!
 He is my son, ay, and herein my shame;
 Yet from my dugs he drew not this deceit.

(II. ii. 27-30)

When the Duchess of York (Richard’s mother) and the widow of Edward IV, Queen Elizabeth, accuse Richard of murders of their sons and also of Rivers, Vaughan and Grey, and condemn him as a “villain” and a “toad”, Richard angrily gives command to his men to drown their voices and complaints in the sound of the trumpets:

A flourish, trumpets! Strike alarum, drums!
 Let not the heavens hear these tell-tale women
 Rail on the Lord’s anointed.

(IV. iv. 149-151)

It almost seems antithetical that the ruler who identifies himself with Vice and Iniquity, later goes on to refer to his own status as the “Lord’s anointed”. The divine right theory of the ruler is here shown to be a mere tool with which rebellion can be curbed. This concept, as employed by Shakespeare here, appears to provide adequate subterfuge to a villainous, Machiavellian ruler. For after all, as Graham Holderness in his Introduction to *Shakespeare’s History Plays: Richard II to Henry V* points out, “later critics found in Shakespeare’s plays a secular and ironic investigation of the processes of political change curiously akin to the understanding of the Machiavelli” (4).

But, if we return, once again, to the Morality figure of Vice, we find that since its conception it has always been in league with the Devil and hence is an embodiment of the “anti-Christ”. Richard himself is related to the Devil many times in the play. Right at the beginning of the play, for instance, the bereaved and mourning Lady Anne (widow of Edward, Henry VI’ son) comments:

Alas, I blame you not, for you are mortal,

And mortal eyes can not endure the devil.
Avaunt, thou dreadful minister of hell!

(I. ii. 44-46)

Again, the ex-Queen Margaret upbraids Buckingham:

What, dost thou scorn me for my gentle counsel,
And soothe the devil that I warn thee from?

(I. iii. 297-298)

In fact, a time comes when Richard himself accepts the appellation of Devil as a normal adjunct to his name:

Eliz. Shall I be tempted of the devil thus?

K.Rich. Ay, if the devil tempt you to do good.

(IV. iv. 418-419)

So, it is almost apparent that the portrait of Richard III as presented by Shakespeare is that of a devilish, anti-Christ figure. Viewed in this light, Richard himself appears to be a “dark force” both on account of his evil deeds as well as inner propensity for evil. What Dowden said more than hundred years ago on Richard’s energy born of a single-minded diabolism is quite significant even in the context of modern criticism:

His dominant characteristic is rather a daemonic energy of will... he is single-hearted in his devotion to evil... He has a fierce joy, and he is an intense believer, - in the creed of hell. And therefore he is strong. He inverts the moral order of things, and tries to live in this inverted system. He does not succeed; he dashes himself to pieces against the laws of the world which he has outraged. (182)

Again, this very Richard (as Duke of Gloucester), who is a devil by accusation as well as self-confession, accuses others of the dark sin of witchery. The ex-Queen Margaret is forever a witch in Richard’s eyes. He denounces her in the following words:

Foul wrinkled witch, what mak’st thou in my sight?

(I. iii. 164)

And after her scathing curses he can only utter:

Have done thy charm, thou hateful wither’d hag.

(I. iii. 215)

In course of time, the target of Richard’s accusation shifts, but always the epithet of witch continues to be applied. For his own brother’s wife and his other wife-like companion (mistress Shore), he vociferously declares:

And this is Edward’s wife, that monstrous witch,

Consorted with that harlot, strumpet Shore,

That by their witchcraft thus have marked me.

(III. iv. 70-72)

So, for the Machiavellian aspirant to the throne, the term “witch” becomes an easy weapon which served well the purpose of castigating the person who earned his displeasure. Witchcraft or sorcery is another common ploy used by Shakespeare’s Richard to liquidate even the mighty men who might have posed obstacles to his high ambition. In his introductory speech, Richard, the Duke of Gloucester and King-aspirant, speaks elaborately of the trap set by him for his brother George, the Duke of Clarence:

Plots have I laid, inductions dangerous,

By drunken prophecies, libels, and dreams,

To set my brother Clarence and the King

In deadly hate, the one against the other.

And if King Edward be as true and just

As I am subtle, false and treacherous,

This day should Clarence closely be mew'd up
About a prophecy, which says that 'G'
Of Edward's heirs the murderer shall be –
(I. i. 32-40)

So, in this play too, as in *King Henry VI, Part 2*, false prophecies and witchcraft serve as ploys to entrap a political enemy. This ploy hardly ever failed. King Edward IV is made to take action against his brother Clarence who as prophecies are going about might murder him. And almost immediately the Duke of Clarence is brought in chains. Richard's plot had served its purpose and on his way to the Tower, Clarence comments:

- But, as I can learn,
He hearkens after prophecies and dreams,
And from the cross-row plucks the letter G;
And says a wizard told him that by 'G'
His issues disinherited should be.
And for my name of George begins with G,
It follows in his thought that I am he.
These, as I learn, and such like toys as these,
Have mov'd his highness to commit me now.
(I. i. 53-61)

Such a scene of entrapping the enemy through witchcraft occurs, again in Act III of the play when the unsuspecting Hastings falls a prey to it. Here, too, with a show of innocence, Richard lays the ground for destruction of Hastings:

I pray you all, tell me what they deserve
That do conspire my death with devilish plots
Of damned witchcraft, and that have prevail'd
Upon my body with their hellish charms?
(III. iv. 59-62)

Hastings walks almost blindfolded into the snare and supports Richard's proposal for punishment of the supposed conspirator against his life:

The tender love I bear your Grace, my lord,
Makes me most forward in this princely presence,
To doom th'offenders, what so'er they be:

I say, my lord, they have deserved death.
(III. iv. 63-66)

But when Hastings understands that the Lord Protector's (Richard's) wrath is directed towards King Edward's widow and mistress Shore, he expresses his reservations for which he is reprimanded, at once, by Richard, declared a traitor and sentenced to be beheaded:

If? Thou protector of this damned strumpet,
Talk'st thou to me of ifs? Thou art a traitor:
Off with his head! Now by Saint Paul I swear
I will not dine until I see the same.
(III. iv. 74-77)

Both these instances reflect Shakespeare's own attitude towards witchcraft accusations as an aspect of the Vice. Once more, we find, powerful men using the supernatural as a kind of ploy to entrap their enemies. The so called concept of the "dark forces" is being called into question here. Is it the ruler, with his inner propensity for evil, the actual "dark force" or the innocent victim? Are the dark forces really supernatural in their origin and function, or fundamentally based on and manipulated by political powers and motives. In his dark endeavours Richard is aided by clergymen and religion, who together, as pointed out by the

dramatist, are able to dupe and mislead common men. The Duke of Buckingham advises Richard:

The Mayor is here at hand. Intend same fear;
Be not you spoke with but by mighty suit.
And look you get a prayer-book in your hand,
And stand between two Churchmen, good my lord:
For on that ground I'll build a holy descant.

(III. vii. 44-48)

Accordingly, the hypocritical show is undertaken, and Sir Catesby (Richard's trusted follower) informs the assemblage of citizens, aldermen and the Lord Mayor that Richard is at the moment "divinely bent to meditation" along with two reverend priests:

He doth entreat your Grace, my noble lord,
To visit him tomorrow, or next day;
He is within, with two right reverend fathers,
Divinely bent to meditation;
And in no worldly suits would he be mov'd
To draw him from his holy exercise.

(III. vii. 58-63)

This religious pretext helps the villainous aspirant to the royal throne in scoring a point over his brother, the late King Edward IV. Edward, though a just and competent ruler, was a licentious private man with many amorous adventures. Therefore, Richard's pretension to a life of piety facilitates his supporter Lord Buckingham's strategy of presenting before the public the image of a man entirely given to other-worldliness:

Ah ha, my lord, this prince is not an Edward!
He is not lolling on a lewd love-bed,
But on his knees at meditation;
Not dallying with a brace of courtesans,
But meditating with two deep divines;
Not sleeping, to engross his idle body,
But praying, to enrich his watchful soul.
Happy were England, would this virtuous Prince
Take on his Grace the sovereignty thereof.

(III. vii. 70-78)

Finally, when Richard appears with two Bishops beside him, the argument regarding kingship is convincingly settled in his favour:

Mayor. See where his Grace stands, 'tween two clergymen!
Buck. Two props of virtue for a Christian Prince,
To stay him from the fall of vanity;
And see, a book of prayer in his hand-
True ornaments to know a holy man.

(III. vii. 94-98)

So the Bishops here serve as "props of virtue" not for a holy man, but rather, for a dark, Machiavellian ruler. If Richard represents the real dark forces, if he were anti-Christ and Satanic in his deeds, then, his supporters and aides obviously belong to the dark end of the spectrum. Shakespeare's intension here appears to be clear enough. It is Richard and the clergymen together who constitute the actual "dark forces" for Shakespeare. Rather, as M.M. Reese points out in *The Cease of Majesty*:

He is obviously wicked; but his wickedness should not blind us to the complicity of many other people. No crime escapes its penalty, and crime and punishment are so fastidiously matched that the play is almost an

Aeschylus exercise in the justification of God's way to men.....Obliquely Shakespeare makes the point that evil such as Richard's could only exist in a world already habituated to it; and through a variety of characters he creates a frightening picture of the conditions in which tyranny becomes possible. (214-215)

The contemporary English society, therefore, as presented by Shakespeare, appears to be in the grip of a nexus of evil forces that almost stop at nothing. And the fate of these evil forces is portended through supernatural means who represent "Medieval Vice" in a new *avatar*. Indeed here Richard III becomes a case of "vice revisited".

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