

Richard III (Summer 2005)

Like all Shakespearean histories, the three parts of *Henry VI* are named for the king under whose reign most of the action happens. Yet Henry is hardly the most significant actor in his story, except perhaps negatively—he matters mainly for what he does *not* do, for the authority he does *not* possess—and indeed in 1619 Parts Two and Three of “Henry’s” trilogy were published together under a more fitting title: *The Whole Contention betweene the two Famous Houses, Lancaster and Yorke*.

At the opposite end from *Henry VI* is *The Tragedy of King Richard III*, for Richard is the only one of any real significance in his play—with the possible exception of God. (Perhaps *Nemesis* is a better name for the force that elevates and mows down every character onstage, Richard included, though usually this force is described in Christian terms.) On the morrow of his victory over Richard at Bosworth Field, Henry Tudor—Earl of Richmond and the future King Henry VII—calls his usurping adversary “One that hath ever been God’s enemy” [V.iii.253], and the deposed Queen Margaret brands him “hell’s black intelligencer” [IV.iv.71], but the overriding irony of *Richard III* is that Richard’s victims accept his heinous crimes as well deserved executions of divine justice. The glaring exception is the offstage murder of the two innocent princes in the Tower, though Margaret does make one last appearance to remind their grieving mother, “Thy Edward he is dead, that killed my Edward; / Thy other Edward dead, to quit my Edward; / Young York he is but boot, because both they / Matched not the high perfection of my loss” [IV.iv.63–66]. She is not without bias, of course, yet ultimately her voice belongs to a deafening chorus reinterpreting Richard’s Reign of Terror as the natural culmination of the bloody and unnatural Wars of the Roses.

From this perspective, *Richard III* seems unconvincing tragedy—after England has bled sufficiently for past crimes, the final curtain becomes the threshold of a golden age to be presided over by a succession of benevolent Tudor monarchs. As the progenitor of that illustrious dynasty, King Henry VII gets the honor of closing the play:

England hath long been mad and scarred herself;
 The brother blindly shed the brother's blood;
 The father rashly slaughtered his own son;
 The son, compelled, been butcher to the sire.
 All this divided York and Lancaster,
 Divided in their dire division,
 O, now let Richmond and Elizabeth,
 The true succeeders of each royal house,
 By God's fair ordinance conjoin together.
 And let their heirs—God, if thy will be so—
 Enrich the time to come with smooth-faced peace,
 With smiling plenty, and fair prosperous days. . . .
 Now civil wars are stopped, peace lives again:
 That she may long live here, God say amen.

[V.v.23–41]

The problem is that by structuring his plot around obligatory political propaganda, Shakespeare diminishes the greatness of his main character, who if the Tudor apologists are to be believed is not the supreme Machiavel of his boasts but rather the unknowing scourge of an angry God, permitted briefly to ascend the throne only to have it yanked out from underneath by the favored Richmond once His not-so-inscrutable purposes have been served.

Surely this is blasphemy to anyone who has read or attended a performance of the play. The idea that Richard could be diminished in the slightest by the amiably uncontroversial Richmond—God or no God! From his first crookbacked appearance in Act Five of *2 Henry VI*, Richard has been the most compelling person on the stage; by the time he opens his own play with those, shall we say, famous lines about winters of

discontent, he has us eating from his cloven hands. But is Richard really the evil genius, the master of self-will, he claims to be? Shakespeare grants him a single virtuoso performance, in the play's second scene: the wooing of Lady Anne. (Richard's later, unsuccessful attempt at an encore—to win the woman who shall marry Henry Tudor—is done with much less gusto.) Otherwise, his rise to power is noteworthy largely for his lack of serious opposition. Indeed, once he attains the crown and his subjects begin rebelling, he loses his kingdom quite easily.

“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” [I.i.32–32], he is quick to inform us, and not long thereafter we see Clarence escorted under guard to the Tower of London; King Edward shall even signs the death warrant, and though he rescinds the order, he is too late to save poor Clarence from a gruesome death at the hands of Richard's assassins. That this plot actually works says more about the gullibility of the dupes—contrary to history, Clarence is presented as a model of fraternal virtue, and Edward, upon learning of his brother's death, is terminally grief-stricken—than the brilliance of the plotter. Fortunately for Richard, his victims are no subtler than he is. Part of what makes his villainy so entertaining—and shameless—is the transparent wordplay with which he professes sincerity, as though daring an impaired world to see through his act. “Meantime, this deep disgrace in brotherhood / Touches me deeper than you can imagine. . . . / I will deliver you, or else lie for you” [I.i.111–116], he assures Clarence, who nods complacently, convinced he knows every depth within Richard. Clarence's uneasy subconscious shall struggle mightily against this delusion.

Such limited imaginations doom enemies as well as allies. None of Richard's

rivals at court—Queen Elizabeth, Rivers, Dorset, Grey—is fooled by his “wronged man” persona, not when he undercuts each wounded protest with an insult:

Richard: They do me wrong, and I will not endure it.
 Who is it that complains unto the king
 That I forsooth am stern and love them not?
 By holy Paul, they love his grace but lightly
 That fill his ears with such dissentious rumors.
 Because I cannot flatter and look fair,
 Smile in men’s faces, smooth, deceive, and cog,
 Duck with French nods and apish courtesy,
 I must be held a rancorous enemy.
 Cannot a plain man live and think no harm,
 But thus his simple truth must be abused
 With silken, sly, insinuating Jacks?

Grey: To who in all this presence speaks your grace?

Richard: To thee, that hast nor honesty nor grace.
 When have I injured thee? when done thee wrong?
 Or thee? or thee? or any of your faction?
 A plague upon you all! His royal grace
 (Whom God preserve better than you would wish!)
 Cannot be quiet scarce a breathing while
 But you must trouble him with lewd complaints.

[I.iii.42–61]

Grey and the others hear Richard’s condescension perfectly well—who could miss it?—but their new titles make them overconfident; though they dislike the snobbish Duke of Gloucester, like Clarence they cannot imagine the depths of his malice until their heads are on the chopping block. On the contrary, they are eager to join Richard in a temporary show of solidarity against such common foes as the Lancastrian Margaret, just as Hastings and Buckingham—birthright aristocrats and eventual victims—share Richard’s contempt for newly ennobled upstarts such as Queen Elizabeth and her relatives.

No one fully appreciates Richard’s insincerity for another, simpler reason: All are too busy keeping up their own pretenses. Richard unloads heaps of bull during brother Edward’s attempt to reconcile the feuding members of his extended family:

Among this princely heap, if any here
 By false intelligence or wrong surmise
 Hold me a foe—
 If I unwittingly, or in my rage,
 Have aught committed that is hardly borne
 By any in this presence, I desire
 To reconcile me to his friendly peace.
 'Tis death to me to be at enmity;
 I hate it, and desire all good men's love. . . .
 I do not know that Englishman alive
 With whom my soul is any jot at odds
 More than the infant that is born tonight.
 I thank my God for my humility.

[II.i.54–73]

He is practically begging for someone, *anyone*, to clear his throat and note—if nothing else—Richard isn't being humble now, by God. But no one cries foul, for Elizabeth, Rivers, and the rest have been dissembling just as flagrantly. Courtly life in *Richard III* is a game, and often only Richard seems to know the stakes are life and death.

Such knowledge, however obvious it should be, gives Richard the advantage of surprise. Many of his victories are due less to skillful manipulation than to the fact that Richard strikes first and with greater numbers. In this manner go Rivers, Grey, and Vaughan to their deaths, as well as their sworn enemy, Hastings. Richard's "accusation" against Hastings in the Tower is so ludicrous one wonders why he bothers with it, unless to mock its absurdity:

Richard: Look how I am bewitched. Behold, mine arm
 Is like a blasted sapling, withered up;
 And this is Edward's wife, that monstrous witch,
 Consorted with that harlot, strumpet Shore,
 That by their witchcraft thus have markèd me.
Hastings: If they have done this deed, my noble lord—
Richard: If? Thou protector of this damnèd strumpet,
 Talk'st thou to me of ifs? Thou art a traitor.
 Off with his head!

[III.iv.68–76]

Hastings is executed because he is outnumbered, while the few friends he might have had, Lord Stanley and the Bishop of Ely, sit helplessly by, more concerned with saving their own necks.

Meanwhile, Richard's allies are just as eager to help their master advance as he is to make use of them, a point that Laurence Olivier emphasizes in his filmed version of the play. So thoroughly does Olivier's Richard come to rely on his henchmen—in particular Ralph Richardson's insinuating Buckingham—that during several scenes his best-laid plans seem about to collapse until Buckingham props them up with a bit of quick thinking. When Richard is informed that Queen Elizabeth has fled with her youngest son to sanctuary, Olivier stares in total frustration at Richardson, who takes the hint and—supported by the oblivious Hastings—manages to bully the Lord Cardinal into tearing the young prince from his mother's arms. Olivier's film also makes clear that the Cardinal has not been won over by Buckingham's sophistries; rather, he recognizes that at the moment Richard and Buckingham have more friends.

At times Olivier seems to have taken seriously Richard's flattering words to Buckingham, "My other self, my counsel's consistory, / My oracle, my prophet, my dear cousin, / I, as a child, will go by thy direction" [II.ii.151–153]; in general, he plays Richard as a man so single-mindedly driven to win the crown that he cannot be troubled with the nuts and bolts of plotting, preferring to delegate such details to subordinates. Gone is the Richard of *3 Henry VI*, who eagerly stabs King Henry and Prince Edward and would have similarly dispatched Queen Margaret had not his brothers restrained him; in his place is a murderer who does not actually murder anyone. Instead he selects from a seemingly bottomless pool of assassins, though in Richard's two most damning crimes—

the murders of his blood relatives Clarence and the young princes—the assassins very nearly give in to their protesting consciences.

Richard is less fortunate in his reliance on others. A master manipulator during the play's first half, when he can focus his efforts on one or two people at a time, after he is crowned king he is confronted with the impossible task of controlling all his subjects at once. Worse, his skills begin to desert him. He completely bungles the situation with Buckingham, converting his most useful ally into a rebel by mistaking for sedition the duke's hesitation to execute an unconscionable order; though he shows better judgment in suspecting Stanley of plotting to help Richmond, ultimately Richard is powerless to prevent Stanley's defection. "Stanley, [Richmond] is your wife's son. Well, look unto it" [IV.ii.85], Richard threatens, and for once he fails to hear the irony. Stanley does indeed "look unto it," supporting Richmond all the way to his coronation as Henry VII. Richard's army "trebles" Richmond's [V.iii.11], as the king boasts before his final battle, only if Stanley proves loyal. When Stanley does not show, Richard finds himself at last on the short end of the numbers game, and he dies willing to trade everything for a single horse.

Why does Richard seem so diabolically in control if he is—at least dramaturgically—the pawn of Providence? Is he merely the greatest actor by far in an otherwise forgettable melodrama? Richard lacks the terrible depths of Shakespeare's supreme villains; in contrast to Iago's "motiveless malignancy," for example, Richard's motive seems perfectly clear—he shares it with us several times in *3 Henry VI* ("I'll make my heaven to dream upon the crown" [III.ii.168]), and nothing in *Richard III* leads me to doubt his self-awareness on this point. Indeed, it helps to explain why Richard

loses his footing so quickly once he achieves his goal: With nothing remaining to strive for, his heaven collapses under his paranoia.

Richard's excuses for his villainy—though neither unreasonable nor inconsistent with his character—are mainly variations on the same unsatisfying theme:

But I, that am not shaped for sportive tricks
 Nor made to court an amorous looking glass,
 I, that am rudely stamped, and want love's majesty
 To strut before a wanton ambling nymph,
 I, that am curtailed of this fair proportion,
 Cheated of feature by dissembling Nature,
 Deformed, unfinished, sent before my time
 Into this breathing world, scarce half made up,
 And that so lamely and unfashionable
 That dogs bark at me as I halt by them—
 Why, I, in this weak piping time of peace,
 Have no delight to pass away the time,
 Unless to see my shadow in the sun
 And descant on mine own deformity.
 And therefore, since I cannot prove a lover
 To entertain these fair well-spoken days,
 I am determinèd to prove a villain
 And hate the idle pleasures of these days.

[I.i.14–31]

It is difficult to pinpoint my objection to these rationalizations. I do not think Richard is fooling himself, though he may well be fooling us. An actor could smirk his way through these and similar lines, as though wanting little more than to mock society's superficial assumptions. I hear such glibness in the moments following his impossible wooing of Lady Anne:

And will she yet abase her eyes on me,
 That cropped the golden prime of this sweet prince
 And made her widow to a woeful bed?
 On me, whose all not equals Edward's moiety?
 On me, that halts and am misshapen thus?
 My dukedom to a beggarly denier,
 I do mistake my person all this while!
 Upon my life, she finds (although I cannot)

Myself to be a marvelous proper man.
 I'll be at charges for a looking glass
 And entertain a score or two of tailors
 To study fashions to adorn my body.
 Since I am crept in favor with myself,
 I will maintain it with some little cost.
 But first I'll turn yon fellow in his grave,
 And then return lamenting to my love.
 Shine out, fair sun, till I have bought a glass,
 That I may see my shadow as I pass.

[I.ii.246–263]

Here Richard is self-deprecating for sport, but in his first soliloquy he sounds serious, even angry at “dissembling Nature,” which though it may not have endowed him with the looks to properly wive, has overcompensated with respect to wit. Yet how petty Richard seems when we follow his lead and attribute crooked soul to crooked body, as though he would have leapt at virtue had he not been teased as a child!

The problem of psychology belongs equally to play and character: Richard does not need psychological depth to conquer his shallow rivals for the crown, any more than a vampire or werewolf needs a fully realized personality to stalk its prey. Yet they are no less terrifying for what they lack—the existence of evil is one of this world’s givens, and even love, so sorely absent from Richard’s life, cannot keep all of us from darkness. Iago’s achievement is both more impressive and unsettling because his victims are magnificent—if Othello and Desdemona can be destroyed, who among us is safe?—but Richard, as Harold Bloom suggests [73], is Shakespeare’s most effective monster. He charms even as he tempts us to our graves.

Nowhere is Shakespeare’s attempt to flesh out Richard more distracting than during his unexpected attack of conscience the night before his death at Bosworth Field. Moments after he is visited by his victims’ ghosts, Richard jolts awake and, for thirty

awkward lines, seems to suffer from temporary amnesia; his sense of self, once so secure, fragments into rebellious pieces:

What do I fear? Myself? There's none else by.
 Richard loves Richard; that is, I and I.
 Is there a murderer here? No. Yes, I am.
 Then fly. What, from myself? Great reason why—
 Lest I revenge. What, myself upon myself?
 Alack, I love myself. Wherefore? For any good
 That I myself have done unto myself?
 O no, alas, I rather hate myself
 For hateful deeds committed by myself.
 I am a villain. Yet I lie: I am not.
 Fool, of thyself speak well. Fool, do not flatter.
 My conscience hath a thousand several tongues,
 And every tongue brings in a several tale,
 And every tale condemns me for a villain.

[V.iii.183–196]

To borrow from Horatio, there needs no ghost come from the grave to tell us this.

Richard has always embraced his villainy; it is perhaps his greatest source of pride.

Likewise, the epiphany that follows this lurching speech—“There is no creature loves me; / And if I die, no soul will pity me” [V.iii.201–202]—echoes Richard’s younger self in *3 Henry VI* (“I have no brother, I am like no brother; / And this word ‘love,’ which graybeards call divine, / Be resident in men like one another / And not in me” [V.vi.80–83]), though then it did not trouble him.

Let us set aside the poor quality of the writing. Even if Shakespeare, at this point in his career, had been able to meld profound insights with sparkling verse, I suspect Richard would have been just as ill-served. He is most appealing when he delights in his wickedness; it is the greatest part of his nature and of the play. But such wickedness does not require for its effectiveness much thinking (though it may blissfully contemplate its own image, as Richard does). All it needs is the opportunity to exert itself in action; thus

when Richard finally seizes the crown, he is left reeling from lost momentum. Only when Richmond's rebellion plunges Richard back into his natural habitat, a state of war, does the king rediscover his energy. His oration to his soldiers is his finest moment since before his coronation (when he and Buckingham fleeced the Lord Mayor and citizens of London):

What shall I say more than I have inferred?
 Remember whom you are to cope withal:
 A sort of vagabonds, rascals, and runaways,
 A scum of Bretons and base lackey peasants,
 Whom their o'erloyed country vomits forth
 To desperate adventures and assured destruction.
 You sleeping safe, they bring to you unrest;
 You having lands, and blest with beauteous wives,
 They would restrain the one, distain the other.
 And who doth lead them but a paltry fellow,
 Long kept in Bretagne at our mother's cost,
 A milksop, one that never in his life
 Felt so much cold as over shoes in snow.
 Let's whip these stragglers o'er the seas again,
 Lash hence these overweening rags of France,
 These famished beggars, weary of their lives,
 Who, but for dreaming on this fond exploit,
 For want of means, poor rats, had hanged themselves.

[V.iii.315–332]

Here at last is Richard's supreme confidence, his infectious blend of martial rhetoric and comedy. If not quite up to his earlier standards, it is enough to jolt us awake after an eternity of exchanges—between Richmond and Stanley, the Yorkist women and Queen Margaret, Richard's victims and their consciences—back to the vivid nightmare that is Richard's England. He shall die soon enough, a sacrificial boar upon the alter of Richmond, but Richard alone shall survive the final curtain, haunting our imaginations like few stars in the Shakespearean universe. Surely—and in spite of the protests of historians, who note the *real* Richard III was probably a decent king, or at least no worse

than most—this is a better legacy than Richmond’s, who doesn’t even get a history play of his own. Time has distanced us from the atrocities committed by both sides during the Wars of the Roses; Shakespeare’s Richard remains unnervingly close.

Richard and Lady Anne

Perhaps the reason I find *Richard III* to be mediocre drama is that its main source of tension comes from the absence of anyone but the villain to root for. For me there is one exception: Very early in the play, an adversary briefly capable of matching wits with Richard forces him to devise a more devious, subtle—even psychologically compelling—plan of attack. It therefore seems only fair, after having devoted so many paragraphs to Richard’s failings, to devote a comparable length to his most impressive triumph.

Let us begin by considering why, despite her protests to the contrary, Anne Neville might welcome Richard’s courtship. Yes, Richard murdered her husband and father-in-law; her grief seems genuine, but note how much of it she expends, not on her dead husband, Prince Edward, but on his father, the “gentle, mild, and virtuous” Henry VI [I.ii.104]. The monologue Anne speaks to open the scene—one of the few set pieces for an actor other than the star—is directed almost entirely to Henry’s “key-cold” corpse [I.ii.5]. It is not difficult to guess why Anne has so little to say about Henry’s son: He died in an earlier play and she is only now making her first entrance. Of course, Shakespeare could purple passages on any theme, and he might easily have given Anne ten or twenty lines extolling the manifold virtues of noble Edward, whether she’d ever actually witnessed them. Yet the moment she tries, Richard deftly steers her back to his own lover’s suit:

Anne: It is a quarrel just and reasonable,
To be revenged on him that killed my husband.

Richard: He that bereft thee, lady, of thy husband,
 Did it to help thee to a better husband.
Anne: His better doth not breathe upon the earth.
Richard: He lives, that loves thee better than he could.
Anne: Name him.
Richard: Plantagenet.
Anne: Why, that was he.
Richard: The selfsame name, but one of better nature.
Anne: Where is he?
Richard: Here.

[I.ii.136–144]

Note that I am not suggesting Anne did not, or does not, love Edward—simply that an actress playing Anne need not burden herself with devotion to the memory of that love. Why speculate on an unrealized future with a bit player in Richard’s world? Anne will never know if Edward would have made a better husband, and the audience isn’t given much reason to care. Instead, she centers her grief upon the chaste King Henry’s corpse—and leaves herself more open to Richard’s advances.

Whatever her feelings for *anyone*, Anne has practical reasons to consider an alliance with Richard. As the widow of the former crown prince—and the daughter of one of the present regime’s most prominent enemies, the now-deceased Earl of Warrick—Anne cannot feel secure in her new position at court, if indeed she still has one. Suddenly, in her moment of greatest despair, one of the most powerful men in the kingdom declares he loves her. So what if her new suitor caused much of her past grief? He claims his actions were motivated *by love*, and anyway, Prince Edward died a soldier’s death on the battlefield, and Henry was an old man with no future but a lonely incarceration; as Richard helpfully points out, “The better for the King of Heaven that hath him” [I.ii.105].

Add to these factors Richard’s undeniable charisma, and it is no wonder that

Anne—like audiences everywhere—falls for him. Even so, she tries valiantly to resist; though Richard is clearly holding back—his aim is to placate her, not trade insults—she manages like few others to keep verbal pace:

Richard: Lady, you know no rules of charity,
Which renders good for bad, blessings for curses.

Anne: Villain, thou know'st nor law of God nor man.
No beast so fierce but knows some touch of pity.

Richard: But I know none, and therefore am no beast.

Anne: O wonderful, when devils tell the truth!

Richard: More wonderful, when angels are so angry.
Vouchsafe, divine perfection of a woman,
Of these supposed crimes to give me leave
By circumstance but to acquit myself.

Anne: Vouchsafe, diffused infection of a man,
Of these known evils, but to give me leave
By circumstance t' accuse thy cursèd self.

Richard: Fairer than tongue can name thee, let me have
Some patient leisure to excuse myself.

Anne: Fouler than heart can think thee, thou canst make
No excuse current but to hang thyself.

Richard: By such despair I should accuse myself.

Anne: And by despairing shalt thou stand excused
For doing worthy vengeance on thyself
That didst unworthy slaughter upon others.

Richard: Say that I slew them not?

Anne: Then say they were not slain.
But dead they are, and, devilish slave, by thee.

Richard: I did not kill your husband.

Anne: Why, then he is alive.

[I.ii.68–91]

Richard's strategy is persistence. He has no real attachment to Anne, and he can afford to prolong the confrontation for as long as her humor requires; by contrast, she is grief-stricken and confused and eventually exhausts her supply of comebacks. The turning point comes when Anne, finally at a loss for words, can only spit her frustration in Richard's face. He stays cool—perhaps we hear a hint of suppressed anger in his response, “Why dost thou spit at me?” [I.ii.144]—and before she can recover her footing

he launches into a thirty-three-line speech, stuffed with flattery and crocodile tears, the masterstroke occurring when he places his fate literally in her hands:

If thy revengeful heart cannot forgive,
Lo, here I lend thee this sharp-pointed sword,
Which if thou please to hide in this true breast
And let the soul forth that adareth thee,
I lay it naked to the deadly stroke
And humbly beg the death upon my knee.

[I.ii.173–178]

But Anne, as Richard knows, is no killer. His confidence spurred to thrilling new heights, he plunges between confession and accusation:

Nay, do not pause, for I did kill King Henry—
But 'twas thy beauty that provokèd me.
Nay, now dispatch: 'twas I that stabbed young Edward—
But 'twas thy heavenly face that set me on.

[I.ii.179–182]

By now Anne is reeling from conflicting emotions—anger, fear, intrigue, guilt—plus the awesome responsibility of passing judgment—if not a death sentence—on the man, bare-breasted and kneeling, at her feet. For Richard has offered her the very thing for which entire armies have fought and died: power. But Anne is neither soldier nor politician; she is an inexperienced girl—historically only fifteen when Prince Edward died and eighteen when she married Richard—who must be utterly baffled by Richard's ultimatum, "Take up the sword again, or take up me" [I.ii.183]. There must be other options, yet from this point Anne is lost, though Richard shrewdly allows her to exit believing she has regained the upper hand:

Richard: For divers unknown reasons I beseech you
Grant me this boon.

Anne: With all my heart, and much it joys me too
To see you are become so penitent.
Tressel and Berkeley, go along with me.

Richard: Bid me farewell.

Anne: 'Tis more than you deserve;
But since you teach me how to flatter you,
Imagine I have said farewell already.

[I.ii.217–224]

Shakespeare, equally shrewd, proceeds to banish Anne from the play; she makes one final appearance, in Act Four, before Richard—who has already begun his quest for wife number two—casually reports her offstage death. It could not be otherwise, for what more do these absurdly mismatched figures have to say to each other? In winning Anne, Richard has pulled off the impossible; in convincingly dramatizing their courtship, so has Shakespeare, and rather than risk further exchanges between them, he lingers long enough for Richard to gloat, in lines that might speak for the young playwright himself, “Was ever woman in this humor wooed? / Was ever woman in this humor won?” [I.ii.227–228].

Clarence’s Dream

The Duke of Clarence’s breathtaking, prophetic dream heads a very short list of indelible moments in *Richard III* that do not involve the title character. For me, the main question is why Shakespeare lavishes such imaginative effort on this tangent; the play is plenty long enough already (not that Shakespeare was one to fear getting lost in tangents). Clarence’s dream is one of the few instances in early Shakespeare of great poetry for its own sake; in a play so overwhelmingly devoted to the development of one character, Shakespeare gives some of the finest lines to a minor figure whom Elizabethans remembered primarily for his drowning in a barrel of wine.

Whether fact or fiction, the legend of Clarence’s murder must have been impossible for Shakespeare to ignore—a hack would have recognized its dramatic potential. Yet Shakespeare finds an unexpectedly dignified route through the gore—a

choice (as *Titus Andronicus* proves) he did not always make. Clarence begins his long speech with an image of fraternal solidarity he shall cling to even in the face of Richard's executioners:

Methoughts that I had broken from the Tower
 And was embarked to cross to Burgundy,
 And in my company my brother Gloucester,
 Who from my cabin tempted me to walk
 Upon the hatches; there we looked toward England
 And cited up a thousand heavy times
 During the wars of York and Lancaster
 That had befall'n us.

[I.iv.9–16]

Dream Richard then stumbles and knocks Clarence—"that thought to stay him" [I.iv.19]—overboard. Oblivious to the warnings of his subconscious, Clarence recalls each detail so vividly that his keeper exclaims, "Had you such leisure in the time of death / To gaze upon these secrets of the deep?" [I.iv.34–35]. Says Clarence:

O Lord, methoughts what pain it was to drown,
 What dreadful noise of water in mine ears,
 What sights of ugly death within mine eyes.
 Methoughts I saw a thousand fearful wracks,
 A thousand men that fishes gnawed upon,
 Wedges of gold, great anchors, heaps of pearl,
 Inestimable stones, unvalued jewels,
 All scattered in the bottom of the sea.
 Some lay in dead men's skulls, and in the holes
 Where eyes did once inhabit, there were crept
 (As 'twere in scorn of eyes) reflecting gems,
 That wooed the slimy bottom of the deep
 And mocked the dead bones that lay scattered by.

[I.iv.21–33]

In contrast to the storm that has raged above for three-plus plays, there is tranquility beneath the waves, and after Clarence dies his skeleton shall become just another container for riches we cannot take with us.

The real horrors of death are reserved for the soul. As Clarence remembers,

I passed, methought, the melancholy flood,
 With that sour ferryman which poets write of,
 Unto the kingdom of perpetual night.
 The first that there did greet my stranger soul
 Was my great father-in-law, renowned Warwick,
 Who spake aloud, "What scourge for perjury
 Can this dark monarchy afford false Clarence?"
 And so he vanished. Then came wand'ring by
 A shadow like an angel, with bright hair
 Dabbled in blood, and so he shrieked out aloud,
 "Clarence is come: false, fleeting, perjured Clarence,
 That stabbed me in the field by Tewkesbury.
 Seize on him, Furies, take him unto torment."
 With that, methoughts, a legion of foul fiends
 Environed me, and howlèd in mine ears
 Such hideous cries that with the very noise
 I trembling waked, and for a season after
 Could not believe but that I was in hell,
 Such terrible impression made my dream.

[I.iv.45–63]

Yet it is precisely this "terrible impression" that saves Clarence, who sets the pattern for Richard's later victims by dying better than he lived. The inevitability of death pricks Clarence to repent; his selfless prayers for those who remain behind—"O God, if my deep prayers cannot appease thee, / But thou wilt be avenged on my misdeeds, / Yet execute thy wrath on me alone. / O, spare my guiltless wife and my poor children" [I.iv.69–72]—shall be echoed by Rivers, Hastings, and Buckingham as they await their own executions.

But Clarence is "saved" by his dream in another sense, for the brilliance of its language transforms an otherwise forgettable character into a voice of conscience. As ancient poets were inspired by Muses, so Clarence becomes the vessel for a greater spirit: Shakespeare himself. In this unexpected turn we can find one of the play's big themes: Our lives are shaped by forces more powerful than we. These forces raze the strongest as easily as they raise up the weakest; in this respect there is no difference between Richard

at Bosworth Field and Clarence in his prison cell—both are at the mercy of fortune (or at least the playwright), even as they take dramatically different paths to their common end. Perhaps what most unsettles us about the play they share is that, in spite of conscience, we prefer traveling with Richard.

Works Cited

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