

ANGLICA

An International Journal of English Studies

24/1

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The Progress of Evil and the Return of Justice in Shakespeare's *Richard III*

Abstract

Shakespeare's *Richard III* is a warning about the danger of tyrannical political leaders. Richard has no legitimate claim to the throne, but he devises his own way to achieve that goal. All along the path he follows, he leaves a trail of dead bodies. Richard becomes a fratricidal, child-murdering, Machiavellian usurper, who takes delight in breaking nearly every one of God's commandments. This essay traces the progress of evil in *Richard III* under the following rubrics: (1) Ambition and The Tactics of Deception, (2) The Erosion of Conscience, (3) The Deeds of a Tyrant, (4) The Return of Justice, and (5) Implications for an Education in Political Theory.

Not all the water in the rough rude sea
Can wash the balm off from an anointed king;
The breath of worldly men cannot depose
The deputy elected by the Lord:
For every man that Bolingbroke hath press'd
To lift shrewd steel against our golden crown,
God for his Richard hath in heavenly pay
A glorious angel: then, if angels fight,
Weak men must fall, for heaven still guards the right.
(*The Life and Death of Richard the Second* 3.2.54–62)

Shakespeare allows *Richard II* (*not* the Richard who is the primary subject of this essay) to state plainly the medieval view of politics and government: The Lord God will not allow a usurper to prevail against a king who has been sacramentally anointed by the Church. No merely human usurper can prevail against the angels sent to protect a king. Richard II's adversaries, however, have the popular will of the nation on their side, and they *do* win out over The Lord's anointed. Jeffrey Doty (2010) describes *Richard II* as a signal moment in English drama, one that marks the emergence of a modern public sphere in which "the people" will begin

to have a greater role than the Church in determining who will rule over a nation. In liberal political theory, popular democracy is recognized as the best way to prevent the rise of tyrants and oligarchies. Before they can win elections, leaders must build broad-based constituencies. From historical experience, political liberals know that self-interest and the drive to obtain power at the expense of others are desires that are very hard to control. The lust for domination can easily take hold of a leader's soul and overshadow whatever impulse they might once have felt to embrace justice and to work for the common good. To be sure, democratic majorities can go astray, too, and harm minorities. However, the chances of implementing political reform and building a more just order are better when power is shared broadly than when it is concentrated in the hands of a few.

1. Inside the Skull of a Tyrant: Ambition and the Tactics of Deception

In *Richard III*, however, Shakespeare's political thinking has not made it quite that far yet. Instead of fully exploring the concept of a "popular" public realm, this play focuses on the pathology of power. The most important drama in *Richard III* is the one that is taking shape inside the skull of a tyrant. Richard himself believes in a radically secular political process, and in that respect he is "ahead" of the others in the play. He has no trust in, nor fear of Divine Providence. Almost as soon as Richard comes onto the stage, he announces that he is not well-suited to live a life of peace. He believes instead that he is destined to be a warrior. He is the axis, and the world should be spinning around *him*. As a consequence, all the demonic energy he would have spent openly in war, he now uses in secret, improvising a way to gain the throne.

Richard has an uncanny ability to dissemble and hide his intentions from his victims until it is too late for them to defend themselves. His first victim is his own brother Clarence. It is easy enough to imagine that a member from one house of nobles would strike a blow against someone from another house, even in a time of peace, but Richard's transgression against filial piety is evil on a deeper level (McCullen 335). Richard reveals his design to the audience – to sow enmity between Clarence and King Edward IV (these three are brothers). When Clarence approaches under armed guard, however, Richard whispers to himself, "Dive, thoughts, down to my soul." (1.1.41).

Clarence cannot understand why he has been arrested. Richard offers a plausible explanation, though it is an utter falsehood:

Why, this it is, when men are ruled by women:
 'Tis not the king that sends you to the Tower:
 My Lady Grey his wife, Clarence, 'tis she
 That tempers him to this extremity.

Was it not she and that good man of worship,
 Anthony Woodville, her brother there,
 That made him send Lord Hastings to the Tower,
 From whence this present day he is deliver'd?
 We are not safe, Clarence; we are not safe. (1.1.62–70)

Richard's "we" is an important part of his intention to deceive: "*We* are not safe" shifts the blame to the king's wife, insinuating that it is she who has denounced Clarence. Mistrust of women in high places was commonplace in the sixteenth century. John Knox constructs a theological argument of this sort against women as rulers in *The First Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstrous Regimen of Women* (Healey 371). Female troublemakers from the Bible are cited in other political pamphlets from this time, too. *Le Débat de l'homme et de la femme*, by Guillaume Alexis, makes special mention of Delilah and Bathsheba, for example (Bossy 23).

Clarence readily accepts Richard's account, in which a woman is made the scapegoat. He does not even suspect that it is his own brother who has betrayed him. Richard's intentions remain skillfully hidden. His motive? As King Edward's health is failing, Richard is eager to dispose of Clarence, whose claim to the throne could thwart his own plans, if he is not eliminated. Yet it is not enough merely to remove Clarence from his path to the throne. Never one to let an advantage slip away, Richard pretends to suffer righteously over his brother's arrest. Beneath that appearance, the net of deception continues to widen, and others will be caught in it:

I do the wrong, and first begin to brawl.
 The secret mischiefs that I set abroad
 I lay unto the grievous charge of others.
 Clarence, whom I, indeed, have laid in darkness,
 I do beweepe to many simple gulls
 Namely, to Hastings, Derby, Buckingham;
 And say it is the queen and her allies
 That stir the king against the duke my brother.
 Now, they believe it; and withal whet me
 To be revenged on Rivers, Vaughan, Grey:
 But then I sigh; and, with a piece of scripture,
 Tell them that God bids us do good for evil:
 And thus I clothe my naked villainy
 With old odd ends stolen out of holy writ;
 And seem a saint, when most I play the devil. (1.3.22–36)

To "clothe my naked villainy / With old odd ends stolen out of holy writ" is a wicked man's riff on St. Paul's Letter to the Colossians. In Colossians 3:8–14,

Paul admonishes Christians to “take off” the old garments of sin, and put on mercy, kindness, and longsuffering – these make up the Christian’s “clothing” (Connell 28). Instead, Richard twists scripture to serve the “devices and desires” of his own heart. The *show* of religion can be helpful to a politician, says Machiavelli in Chapter 18 of *The Prince*, though true religion might restrain him and make it more difficult for him to achieve his political goals (Fontana 639). In one concerted action, then, Richard is able to (1) see his treachery against Clarence through to its end, (2) sow discord among the nobility in the court of King Edward, and (3) reap the added benefit of *playing* an upright saint whose family has suffered unjustly.

Richard has thoroughly undermined filial piety, and now he looks for another Machiavellian opportunity to move closer to the throne. Lady Anne, widow of Edward, son of Henry VI, is a most unlikely candidate. She is marching in a funeral procession for her husband Henry, murdered by Richard himself, according to *3 Henry VI*. Moreover, Richard has already confessed to the audience that he is no one’s idea of a lover (1.1.28–30) – the words have barely left his mouth. Yet, Anne is a Neville, a family with considerable property and power, and she represents an opportunity that is too good for him to ignore.

Richard approaches the procession and Anne immediately recognizes him as the embodiment of malice (Cummings 370):

Foul devil, for God’s sake, hence, and trouble us not;
 For thou hast made the happy earth thy hell,
 Fill’d it with cursing cries and deep exclams.
 If thou delight to view thy heinous deeds,
 Behold this pattern of thy butcheries [...]
 O God, which this blood madest, revenge his death!
 O earth, which this blood drink’st revenge his death!
 Either heaven with lightning strike the murderer dead,
 Or earth, gape open wide and eat him quick,
 As thou dost swallow up this good king’s blood
 Which his hell-govern’d arm hath butchered! (1.2.50–54; 62–68)

A pattern is established in this scene: Anne will accuse, and Richard will defend himself. Yet, how strange a defense! Why *did* Richard kill her husband? Because, Richard loves her himself, and desires to be her husband. He will confess that he did it, then, when he can frame his actions in a way that will serve his political ambitions. From this moment on, he wants only to serve her in love and humility. Thrusting a weapon in her hands, he offers to forfeit his life. The choice is hers. Unaccustomed as Anne is to initiating any violent action, she hesitates. A good woman might be able to redeem this sinner, she thinks. Richard’s casuistic reasoning begins to do its work, and Anne’s defenses fall away. Richard’s bold move thus subverts the Petrarchan ideal of love and wooing (Oestreich-Hart 241).

Anne turns the procession over to Richard, who now takes the lead. She foolishly has foolishly put her suspicions aside, and it leads to her undoing (Clemen 24–41).

2. The Erosion of Conscience

Clarence is being conducted to The Tower in Act 1, Scene 2. Before Clarence is murdered, however, Shakespeare allows us to see a thoughtful account of what true repentance might look like (Arnold 51). Clarence's conscience accuses him of his sins, and he tells his jailer about a dream in which he cannot escape God's judgment:

A shadow like an angel, with bright hair
 Dabbled in blood; and he squeak'd out aloud,
 'Clarence is come; false, fleeting, perjured Clarence,
 That stabb'd me in the field by Tewksbury;
 Seize on him, Furies, take him to your torments!
 With that, methoughts, a legion of foul fiends
 Environ'd me about, and howled in mine ears [...]
 O Brakenbury, I have done those things,
 Which now bear evidence against my soul,
 For Edward's sake; and see how he requites me!
 O God! if my deep prayers cannot appease thee,
 But thou wilt be avenged on my misdeeds,
 Yet execute thy wrath in me alone,
 O, spare my guiltless wife and my poor children! (1.4.53–72).

Confession and repentance – Richard needs these, too, but he will never humble himself and embrace them.

Even the assassins hired by Richard show *some* signs of conscience. The First Murderer remarks that it keeps coming back, like an annoying insect (Clemen 82–88, Bonetto 512). They debate among themselves whether memories of their violent act will torment them afterwards. When they consider the payment Richard has promised them, however, their resolve is strengthened. Concerning conscience, one of them says:

I'll not meddle with it: it is a dangerous thing: it makes a man a coward: a man cannot steal, but it accuseth him; he cannot swear, but it cheques him; he cannot lie with his neighbour's wife, but it detects him: 'tis a blushing shamefast spirit that mutinies in a man's bosom; it fills one full of obstacles: it made me once restore a purse of gold that I found; it beggars any man that keeps it: it is turned

out of all towns and cities for a dangerous thing; and every man that means to live well endeavours to trust to himself and to live without it. (1.4.138–148)

So conscience is thought to be “a dangerous thing,” an obstacle to desire and action, not only for an individual, but in public life, too. Better not to give heed to its warnings, if the aim is advancement (Olk 52).

Before they fall upon Clarence with their knives, they pause long enough to hear his desperate defense (Gürle 51). He appeals to them first on the basis of temporal law. What are the charges? Who are the accusers? Where is the evidence and all the rest that makes up procedural justice? Their actions are lawful, they say, because the king has given a command. So much for procedural justice, but will these two assassins accept a command from a higher King? “The great King of kings hath in the tables of his law commanded that thou shalt do no murder.” Their answer is that Clarence himself showed no regard for this divine commandment when he betrayed and murdered Prince Edward, son of Henry VI. Clarence reveals his last hope: he still believes that his brother Richard loves him and would certainly spare his life. He recalls their father’s blessing and how, on the field of battle, he “charged us from his soul to love each other.” The murderers know the truth: Richard does not love Clarence, and wants him eliminated:

The assassins show Clarence no mercy, though afterwards one of them is troubled:

A bloody deed, and desperately dispatch’d!
How fain, like Pilate, would I wash my hand
Of this most grievous guilty murder done! (1.4.284–286)

Richard, by contrast, harbors no moral doubts and he will utter no words of repentance:

Go, gentleman, every man unto his charge
Let not our babbling dreams affright our souls:
Conscience is but a word that cowards use,
Devised at first to keep the strong in awe:
Our strong arms be our conscience, swords our law. (5.4.305–309)

In the universe Richard inhabits, human law, divine Law, brotherly love, conscience – these count for nothing (Wilks 78–99), unless they can be *used* to dissemble and to harm the unwary.

3. The Deeds of a Tyrant

According to Machiavelli, tyrants must learn when to act slyly, like Foxes, and violently, like Lions (Armstrong 19). Thus far, Richard has acted the clever Fox, but the time is approaching when he must play the Lion and strike more violently. The death of King Edward, announced in Act II, moves Richard closer to the throne. Edward's two young heirs, however, still block his path. His nephew Edward is too young to ascend directly to the throne, and Richard will trap him by appointing himself Edward's "protector." As for the younger brother, Richard dispatches his accomplice Buckingham to separate the boy from those who would shield him from harm. The Cardinal who has this responsibility at first resists Buckingham's suggestion that the young duke be handed over to him. "Not for all this land," would he violate the boy's right to sanctuary, the Bishop declares (McSheffrey 483). Buckingham's sophistry, however, quickly peels away this superficial loyalty:

You break not sanctuary in seizing him.
 The benefit thereof is always granted
 To those whose dealings have deserved the place,
 And those who have the wit to claim the place:
 This prince hath neither claim'd it nor deserved it;
 And therefore, in mine opinion, cannot have it:
 Then, taking him from thence that is not there,
 You break no privilege nor charter there
 Oft have I heard of sanctuary men;
 But sanctuary children ne'er till now. (3.1.47–56)

The Bishop folds quickly then, and from that moment the fate of the brothers is sealed. Rivers, Grey, Vaughan, and Hastings, the lords who might have come to their aid, are also taken into custody and murdered.

A short time later, Old Elizabeth and Anne come to see the boys, but they are turned away. Sensing that this is the end for the young brothers, and that more lives will be destroyed before Richard is stopped, Elizabeth advises her son Dorset to flee to France:

If thou wilt outstrip death, go cross the seas,
 And live with Richmond, from the reach of hell
 Go, hie thee, hie thee from this slaughter-house,
 Lest thou increase the number of the dead;
 And make me die the thrall of Margaret's curse,
 Nor mother, wife, nor England's counted queen. (4.1.41–46)

When Richard issues the order to murder the young brothers, Buckingham hesitates and asks for time to consider: “Give me some little breath, some pause [...]” Richard takes this to be a sign of fading loyalty and assigns two other executioners to perform “The most arch deed of piteous massacre that ever this land was yet guilty of.” Buckingham reappears a short time later, asking that Richard make good on the lands and money that Richard has promised him. Like so many others, however, he has fatally miscalculated. Richard refuses to honor his part of their unholy bargain, and secretly orders the execution of his former accomplice (Robson 22).

So Richard the tyrant knows when to play the Fox and when to play the Lion. He knows how to sow dissension where once there was unity and love, and how to strike swiftly against those who would frustrate his ambitions (Spivack 397). From this time on, however, those arrayed against him will steadily gain momentum.

4. The Return of Justice

Richmond (later to become Henry VII), has been raising an army in France to march against Richard, and he rallies his troops with these words:

God and our good cause fight upon our side [...]
 For what is he *they* follow? truly, gentlemen
 A bloody tyrant and a homicide;
 One raised in blood, and one in blood establish'd;
 One that made means to come by what he hath,
 And slaughter'd those that were the means to help him [...]
 If you do sweat to put a tyrant down,
 You sleep in peace, the tyrant being slain [...];
 Then, in the name of God and all these rights,
 Advance your standards, draw your willing swords. (5.3.239;244–248;254–255;
 262–263)

For his part, Richard has had a disturbing dream on the eve of the decisive battle. All his victims have appeared in a procession, to curse him. Meanwhile, these same ghosts also appear to Richmond on the other side of the battle line, to encourage him in his struggle against Richard:

Prince Edward, stabbed at Tewksbury
 King Henry VI, murdered in the Tower
 Clarence, the brother betrayed by Richard
 Rivers, Grey, Vaughan, and Hastings, swept away by violence
 The two young princes, who stood in Richard's way
 The ghost of Richard's murdered wife, Anne
 Buckingham, the accomplice who tried to leave him

Together these ghosts are said to cause more fear in Richard's heart than ten thousand of Richmond's soldiers, and against the odds, Richmond's smaller army prevails against him. Richard dies on the field, and no one mourns the passing of this tyrant (Goodland, Reynolds 19). Richmond then speaks:

Proclaim a pardon to the soldiers fled
 That in submission will return to us:
 And then, as we have ta'en the sacrament,
 We will unite the white rose and the red:
 Smile heaven upon this fair conjunction,
 That long have frown'd upon their enmity!
 What traitor hears me, and says not amen?
 England hath long been mad, and scarr'd herself;
 The brother blindly shed the brother's blood,
 The father rashly slaughter'd his own son,
 The son, compell'd, 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 [...] (5.5.16-33)

There has been a famine in the land for justice, and that is why the people rise up against him so decisively in the end.

5. Themes for an Education in Political Theory

What are the implications of Richard's villainy for an education in political theory? For E. M. W. Tillyard, *Richard III* continues the development of the overarching themes that bind the first set of Shakespeare's historical plays together, making them a tetralogy: order/chaos, politics/civil war, crime/punishment and, at long last, God's mercy on a chastened and long-divided England (199–201). On Bosworth Field, Richard and Richmond (Henry VII) are vying for the soul of the *Respublica*. It is Richmond who is The Lord's Anointed, and his victory over Richard invests his coming reign with piety and faith. The Tudors prevail, and this can be attributed to God's Providence in an altogether straightforward way.

Lily Campbell approaches the theme of Providence in a somewhat different fashion. For her, the genres of tragedy and history meet in *Richard III*. The key is found in a letter that Spenser wrote to Raleigh: God avenges private sins in tragedies, while the proper dramatic genre for public sins is history. As Richard's sins first begin to accumulate in his quest for the throne, the play most resembles

a tragedy. However, with the murder of the young princes in the Tower and Richard's attempts to eliminate his former accomplices, his destructive actions take on a wider scope. From that point on, if there is to be a remedy, it must be portrayed through the genre of history.

In Jan Kott's view, however, there is no such thing as Providence, and the names of those who rise to power are of little import. What *does* matter is that Shakespeare's play reveals the "Grand Mechanism" by which those who aim to be king ascend and then lay hold of the throne:

Feudal history is like a great staircase on which there treads a constant procession of kings. Every step upwards is marked by murder, perfidy, treachery. Every step brings the throne nearer, or consolidates it [...]. From the highest step there is only a leap into the abyss. The monarchs change. But all of them — good and bad, brave and cowardly, vile and noble, naive and cynical — tread on the steps that are always the same. (10)

By Kott's reading, the "lesson" of *Richard III* is that history has no discernible moral meaning. Richmond may very well declare: "In God's name, cheerly on, courageous friends, / To reap the harvest of perpetual peace / By this one bloody trial of sharp war" (5.2.15–17). However, Richmond is only engaging in self-deception. The most certain feature of political life is the cycle in which the power of a new leader is ascendant, and the power of the former leader is slipping away into the shadows. If Richmond means to hold the throne for anything other than a very short time, he will undoubtedly have to resort to deadly force again. The logic of this realism is remorseless, and the common man does well to avoid being caught up in its violence, if he can.

The more weight we assign to Kott's view, however, the more we are forced to ignore or discount the procession of ghosts and the moral message they deliver in Act V, first to Richard, then to Richmond (Greenblatt 180). What is the role of the ghosts? They symbolize an ongoing relationship between the order that existed in the past and the broken community of the present:

These tragedies may or may not end with the establishment of a new community. [...] Each play performs the unraveling of a community, its inability to maintain itself against the transgressions of villains. [...] For the characters in a play, ghosts are terrifying category violations, dead persons who nonetheless still affect the world of the living. Ghosts are unnatural, wrong, a sign that the order of the universe has been disturbed (Monette).

The appearance of the ghosts signifies that an injustice has been committed, and they will not be at rest until the debt of injustice that Richard owes them has been satisfied.

The laments and mourning of the women in Act IV likewise give witness to a deeper moral order (Goodland, Miner 17). Richard has made a habit of regarding women merely as scapegoats or as currency to barter with in his quest for political power. Eventually, however, Richard is forced to recognize that though women have no military or bureaucratic power, they *do* sometimes have “soft power” (Nye 94).

After Hastings' execution in Act III, Richard tries to suppress the women's wailing, before they can gain a wider hearing. Nonetheless, in Act IV, Scene 4, The Duchess of York, Queen Elizabeth, and Old Queen Margaret join in a ritual of mourning for those who have “disappeared” during Richard's rise to power. “Wilt thou, O God, fly from such gentle lambs, / And throw them in the entrails of the wolf? / When didst thou sleep when such a deed was done?” (4.4.22–24). Richard does what he can to drown them out: “A flourish, trumpets! strike alarum, drums! / Let not the heavens hear these tell-tale women / Rail on the Lord's anointed: strike, I say!” In the end, however, his attempts to suppress them are futile.

Closer to our own time, a similar public drama was played out in Argentina. From 1977–2006, women who had lost loved ones in Argentina's “Dirty War” gathered regularly for a peaceful demonstration at The Plaza del Mayo. “The Mothers of the Disappeared” mourned for their children and at the same time mounted an effective protest against a tyrannical government (Fabj 1).

In Richard's final soliloquy, he is disturbed by the return of his conscience, which accuses him with “a thousand several tongues”:

And every tongue brings in a several tale,
 And every tale condemns me for a villain.
 Perjury, perjury, in the highest degree,
 Murder, stern murder, in the direst degree,
 All several sins, all used in each degree,
 Throng to the bar, crying all, ‘Guilty! Guilty!’
 I shall despair. There is no creature loves me;
 And if I die, no soul will pity me. (5.4.194–201)

What is revealed in this passage is Richard's utter *isolation*. The skills that have brought Richard to the throne — deception, manipulation, and deadly violence — prove to be advantages only so long as he is moving toward his objective. Once a ruler occupies the throne, however, his subjects expect him to have *some* regard for the common good, and the strengths Richard would need to guide his actions in that direction are altogether missing from his narcissistic character (Glad 1). Richard is not a figure who inspires generalized trust, social capital, or the friendships that would strengthen civil society (Stortz 409).

It is commonly observed in discussions of *Richard III* that goodness appears to be bland when compared to villainy (Desmond 140). Richard's energy does

indeed provide more of a spectacle than Shakespeare's sketch of Richmond's campaign against him. Moreover, political philosophers are often wary of political figures who are motivated "too much" by goodness. Better to act only where duty or "our economic interests" are clearly at stake (Vice 460). Liberal societies have their own well-thought-out reasons for being suspicious of those who enthusiastically claim to know the good and seek to impose their vision on others. The French Wars of Religion and the English Civil War often figure into the accounts of this suspicion. As a consequence, liberal theorists hope to keep the ambitions of someone like Richard hemmed in by *tolerating* many religious views, as Locke advises (Stanton 84); by enumerating *inviolable rights*, as Madison does (Holmes 152); by a *separation of powers*, as Montesquieu recommends (Krause 231); or by encouraging the presence of many robust *civic associations*, as De Tocqueville recommends (Galston 64).

In none of these liberal political theorists, however, do we find a normative vision of the good or of virtue. For my own part, I think the vision of goodness narrated in Christian worship continues to be worthy of any government's careful attention. There is no better foundation for a *polis* than the goodness that evokes the confession of our sins and that is manifestly present in The Eucharist. To be sure, none of these affirmations escapes the conflict of interpretations, nor are they exempt from contestation in the public square (Goossen 217, Meilander 170). I do think, however, that it would take spiritual resources of that magnitude to defeat the evil that lurks in the depths of a tyrant's heart, a tyrant such as that awful one we see in *Richard III*.

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