

**Urszula Kizelbach**

Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań

**Eroticism—Politics—Identity:  
The Case of Richard III**

# ABSTRACT

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Richard III's courtship of Lady Anne in William Shakespeare's *King Richard III* is a blend of courtly speech and sexual extravaganza. His sexual energy and power of seduction were invented by Shakespeare to enhance the theatrical effect of this figure and, at the same time, to present Richard as a tragic character. Richard's eroticism in Act 1 Scene 2 makes him a complicated individual. Playing a seducer is one of the guises he uses to achieve his political aims on the one hand, and, on the other, the pose of a sexually attractive lover enables him to put his masculinity to the test. Throughout the scene Richard is haunted by his deformity that, together with his villainy, makes him a stranger to the world and an enemy to his family and the court. In order to overcome his self-image of a disproportional cripple he manifests his sexuality towards Anne to boost his self-esteem and to confirm that the lady will accept him despite his obvious physical shortcomings. This article uses Georges Bataille's theory of eroticism and erotic desire to characterize Richard as a tragic individual and to explain the reasons behind his unexpected sexual behaviour in the seduction scene.

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**ABSTRACT**

Act 1 Scene 2 of Shakespeare's *Richard III* is a culmination of Richard's acting skills, where he reveals different aspects of his sexuality: he poses both as a Petrarchan lover and as a sexually aroused male. It is interesting that he should manifest his erotic desire so explicitly before Lady Anne, especially as throughout the play he is very aware of his physical deformity as a hunchback with a withered arm. At the beginning of the play alone he asserts several times: "I, that am not shap'd for sportive tricks [sexual games], . . . I, that am rudely stamp'd . . . I, that am curtail'd of this fair proportion" (*Richard III*, 1.1.14,16,18).<sup>1</sup> The role of a seducer in the wooing scene seems altogether unnatural for Richard, the crookback, in the same way as his excessive show of masculinity. This makes him a prime object of study using Georges Bataille's definition of eroticism<sup>2</sup> as "a psychological quest, independent . . . of any concern to reproduce life" (Bataille, *Eroticism* 11), during which the protagonist puts himself to the test in order to prove himself more worthy as an individual. This article argues that Richard's overt manifestation of eroticism towards Lady Anne is, first of all, a way to refuse to limit himself within his individual personality and, secondly, an attempt to deny his individual life as a cripple and a social outcast. Eroticism is also used by Richard to break social taboos in his revenge on society, mostly his mother and the court, that rejected him.

It is important to note that Richard Gloucester "fashions" himself as a lover in the same way as he plays an obedient brother towards Clarence or as a thoughtful uncle to his nephews, the young princes. "Self-fashioning" is a term for "the action or process of making, for particular features or appearance, for a distinct style or pattern," but in sixteenth-century England it comes to denote "the forming of a self" (Greenblatt, *Renaissance* 2). Fashioning is also connected with the changing of shapes or arriving at a less palpable shape such as "a distinctive personality, a characteristic address to the world, a consistent mode of perceiving and behaving" (Greenblatt, *Renaissance* 2). Self-fashioning does not exist independently of one's culture and can be compared to a certain awareness of cultural codes and

<sup>1</sup> Henceforth abbreviated to *R III*.

<sup>2</sup> In his seminal work *Eroticism, Death and Sensuality*, Bataille differentiates between two terms, sexuality and eroticism, both of which are used in the analysis. Sexuality denotes physical desire and is connected with "[s]exual reproductive activity"; eroticism is defined as "a psychological quest independent of the natural goal: reproduction" (Bataille, *Eroticism* 11), and the latter term will be more significant in the description of Richard's negotiation(s) with his identity in the wooing scene.

modes of behaviour operating in a given society. Social and cultural codes function as mechanisms of control; they “create” specific individuals or cause individuals to craft their public selves according to the socio-cultural expectations. Self-fashioning is characterized by theatrical play and a great show of acting skills; it involves the individual’s dissimulation, pretending to be someone else by wearing a mask of an actor. In the case of Richard, he dons many different social masks, presenting many selves. The mask of the lover is, on the one hand, a way of taking revenge on his family, and, on the other, a means of testing himself, and of overcoming his weaknesses and complexes as a deformed and rejected man.

Shakespeare’s idea to present his character as a hunchback comes mainly from Sir Thomas More’s *History of King Richard III* (1513) and from Edward Hall’s *The Union of the Two Noble and Illustre Famelies of Lancastre and Yorke* (1548), which was largely based on More’s story. Much as in Hall’s chronicle “the portrait [of Richard III] is not wholly dark” (Bullough 226), More’s Richard had to be villified because he was part of the Tudor propaganda. According to More’s very hostile account, Richard “transforms his nature, increasing the tyrant’s villainy at all points” (Bullough 226). More’s work is an outcome of his personal experience that he had gathered while serving as a page in the household of John Morton, the Archbishop of Canterbury and Chancellor under Henry VII, in the years 1489–92, only half a dozen years after Bosworth Field (1485). More was also acquainted with Robert Fabyan, the London chronicler, and Polydore Vergil, Henry VII’s historian, who consistently and intentionally upheld the Tudor myth in his depiction of history. The blackness of Richard as a character in Thomas More is linked with his physical deformity:

. . . little of stature, ill-featured of limbs, crook-backed, his left shoulder much higher than his right, hard-favoured of visage and such as is in princes called warlike, in other men otherwise. He was malicious, wrathful, envious, and, from before his birth, ever froward. . . . It is for truth reported that the Duchess his mother had so much ado in her travail that she could not be delivered of him uncut, and that he came into the world with his feet forward and (as the fame runs) also not untoothed: either men out of hatred report above the truth or else nature changed her course in his beginning who in the course of his life many things un-naturally committed. (35)

In More’s *History* Richard’s physical deformity is an external sign of his malign nature. Shakespeare, naturally, follows More in his depiction of Richard III, but apart from some common allusions to Richard as the allegorical Vice figure, Shakespeare’s character is not a “motiveless villain” (Haeffner 16). In Shakespeare, Richard’s physical deformity influences his

Machiavellian attitude to the world and the people around him, and he is aware of the fact that his very birth was a curse to his mother, who hates him. Misshapen and devoid of maternal affection, he breaks all ties with his family and the court, disclosing his thoughts and plans only to the audience, as we read in *3 Henry VI*:

I that have neither pity, love nor fear.  
 . . .  
 I have often heard my mother say  
 I came into the world with my legs forward.  
 . . .  
 The midwife wondered and the women cried,  
 O, Jesus bless us, he is born with teeth!  
 And so I was, which plainly signified  
 That I should snarl, and bite and play the dog.  
 Then since the heavens have shaped my body so,  
 Let hell make crooked my mind to answer it  
 I have no brother, I am like no brother.  
 And this word love, which greybeards call divine  
 Be resident in men like one another  
 And not in me: I am myself alone.  
 (*3 Henry VI*, 5.6.65–83)

Both More and Shakespeare make references to Richard's unnatural birth and to the idea that he came into the world with his legs forward or that he was born with teeth; the latter functions as common gossip,<sup>3</sup> which was retained and popularized by Hall's chronicle. Shakespeare presents his Richard as very conscious of his drawbacks also in the opening soliloquy in the play *King Richard III*, which serves as a prologue to his tragedy. Richard's idea of himself is that of a man "cheated by dissembling nature," "deformed, unfinished," "so lamely and unfashionable . . . that dogs bark at [him]" (*R III*, 1.1.19–20, 22–23). It seems that his deformity and villainy should prevent any success in wooing, and yet he remains victorious as a lover.

<sup>3</sup> This and other (pseudo)facts concerning Richard's deformity in More's *History* are questioned by contemporary researchers and are believed to have only a fictional basis. For example, Annette Carson recounts the scene from Shakespeare's play in which Richard III thrusts his withered arm into Hastings's face and accuses all present of witchcraft. Shakespeare's depiction of Richard as a one-armed hunchback is, again, modelled on More's account and has very little to do with reality, as, Carson says, stories of Richard as a crookback "are disproved by his well-attested prowess in battle, and no one who is known to have seen him ever mentioned deformity or disability" (Carson 89). This article focuses on Richard's deformity as it was presented by Shakespeare, regardless of its factual or fictional origin.

The meeting of Richard and Anne is a metaphorical encounter of ugliness and beauty; his eroticism in the scene is aimed at a destruction and profanation of female beauty. Bataille believes that the function of eroticism is to desire beauty, which is usually found in the lover's face, only later to "befoul" it "not for its own sake but for the joy brought by the certainty of profaning it" (*Erotism* 144). The union of two bodies presents a contrast between the purest nature of mankind (love) and a hideous, animal-like quality of sexual organs. The face and its beauty have to be profaned by, for example, revealing the woman's secret parts and, next, by conjoining with male organs. Beauty is an important aesthetic aspect in eroticism, because it is only beauty that can be spoilt—ugliness cannot be profaned—and to "despoil" and "transgress" the beautiful is the aim of eroticism. Eroticism acquires sense only when it is juxtaposed with real beauty, physical or moral. Bataille notes that "[h]umanity implies the taboos, and in eroticism it [humanity] and they [taboos] are transgressed" (*Erotism* 145). Richard's eroticism in the seduction scene challenges the greatest social taboos of his time: he decides to seduce Anne in front of the corpse of her father-in-law. The lady's humanity stands in opposition to his villainy and cruelty. Anne will turn out to be the victim of Richard's sexual conquest; her beauty in the play is a necessary sacrifice to ascribe meaning to his ironic and grotesque performance. As Bataille states: "In sacrifice, the victim is chosen so that its perfection shall give point to the full brutality of death" (*Erotism* 144). The wooing scene is a prognostication of death for Anne, and Richard does not leave any doubt that it will be otherwise.

The seduction scene in the play has no antecedents in Hall's or Holinshed's chronicles and is Shakespeare's pure invention (Chernaik 57). Lady Anne, historically speaking, had only been betrothed to king Henry VI's son, Edward; however, Shakespeare in the play presents her as Edward's wife (Greenblatt, "Richard III" 320). The scene begins with an elegiac spectacle—there is Anne lamenting the death of her husband and father-in-law, standing in front of the open coffin with Henry's corpse. We do not learn much about Anne, as she utters conventional set phrases that are characteristic of the language of the elegy. Anne's oration abounds in apostrophes, deictic gestures, ritualistic repetitions, and her speech can be classified as self-address:

Set down, set down your honourable load  
 (If honour may be shrouded in a hearse)  
 Whilst I awhile obsequiously lament  
 Th' untimely fall of virtuous Lancaster.  
 (*R III*, 1.2.1–4)

She soon turns to cursing Richard, the perpetrator of both murders, and her lament, which is very official in tone and based on set phrases (“I . . . obsequiously lament . . . Th’ untimely fall”), acquires the form of a personal imprecation that is accompanied by emotional outbursts. Anne’s curse evokes the images of hand, heart and blood, which additionally draws attention to Richard as a murderer: “O cursed be the hand that made these holes, / Cursed the heart that had the heart to do it / Cursed the blood that made this blood from hence” (*R III*, 1.2.14–16). She associates Richard with venomous animals, “adders, spiders, toads, / Or any creeping venom’d thing that lives” (*R III*, 1.2.19–20). Finally, she puts a curse on any child he may father, relating to Richard’s own misshapen body: “If ever he have child, abortive be it: / Prodigious and untimely brought to light, whose ugly and unnatural aspect / May fright the hopeful mother at the view” (*R III*, 1.2.21–23). All accusations directed at Richard are spoken with bitterness and scorn; the lady no longer laments the death of her husband but she wishes his murderer ill: she would like Gloucester’s children to be as misshapen in body as he is. Anne utters her words before Richard appears on the stage. The encounter of the murderer and the victim takes place next to Henry’s corpse, which highlights the “preposterous and paradoxical nature of the situation” (Clemen 24).

Richard now enters the stage: Anne continues with her insults, but he patiently waits until her first outburst of anger subsides. There is a clear contrast in the first part of their exchange between the contemptuous language of Anne’s and the flattering words of Richard’s (Clemen 27): “dreadful minister of hell” (*R III*, 1.2.46), “foul devil” (*R III*, 1.2.50) (the first time of many in the play when Richard’s diabolical nature is mentioned), “[u]nmanner’d dog” (*R III*, 1.2.39), “hedgehog” (*R III*, 1.2.104) (a scornful reference to his crest, the boar), and these are juxtaposed with Richard’s “sweet saint” (*R III*, 1.2.49), “lady” (*R III*, 1.2.68), “madam” (*R III*, 1.2.116), “divine perfection of a woman” (*R III*, 1.2.75). Anne is described in angelic terms, as opposed to the devilishness with which Richard is associated. Richard’s verbal boldness is to be admired, for he is a foul murderer who very openly admits his crimes before the lady:

ANNE. . . . dead they are, and, devilish slave, by thee.

RICHARD. I did not kill your husband.

ANNE. Why then he is alive.

RICHARD. Nay, he is dead;

...

ANNE. Thou wast provoked by thy bloody mind,

That never dream’st on aught but butcheries.

Didst thou not kill this King?

RICHARD. I grant ye, yea.

(*R III*, 1.2.91–94, 101–4)

Richard's strategy in this conversation is to provoke Anne to even greater outbursts and accusations while he himself remains withdrawn; he is a listener and avoids lengthy monologues. The mistake on Anne's part is that she actually enters into dialogue with Richard, which encourages him to take the floor and control their conversation. Ornstein believes that Richard "kills" with words (66); he seems bored by his crimes, which makes him even more distanced from his villainous acts. His dialogue with Anne is another challenge, something that he will take up as "an opportunity to bustle, a goal worthy of his extraordinary energies and talents" (Ornstein 67). Richard is bold enough not only to admit his foul crimes, but also to be sexually extravagant in his speech. His repartees are laden with straightforward sexual allusions:

ANNE. And thou [are] unfit for any place but hell.

RICHARD. Yes, one place else if you will hear me name it.

ANNE. Some dungeon?

RICHARD. Your bed-chamber.

ANNE. I'll rest betide the chamber where thou liest.

RICHARD. So will it madam, till I lie with you.

(*R III*, 1.2.111–16)

From a self-conscious crookback "where sits deformity to mock [his] body" (*3 Henry VI*, 3.2.158), he turns into a sexually aroused and attractive male who demands Anne's bed chamber (Chernaik 57–58). Richard's sexual allusions manifest his want of destruction and transgression. In his eroticism he transgresses social taboo by wooing a widow whose husband he killed and who is his future victim. Bataille asserts that "[o]ften the transgression is permitted, often it is even prescribed" (*Eroticism* 63). Taboos are there to be violated: the murder of the king was more rewarding simply because it was banned and, similarly, seducing Anne is worthwhile because she represents another taboo (the king's wife) that Richard must challenge on his way to the throne. Thus, Anne's body is a prohibition which has to be transgressed, and Richard's fascination with this taboo necessitates its violation, to use Bataille's terms (*Eroticism* 68). It should be noted that the transgressor derives great joy from violating the erotic taboo. Eroticism or erotic desire can also be dangerous for an individual: it creates a sense of horror at the feeling of loss, which Bataille calls the "[d]esire horrified at losing and at losing oneself" (*Accursed* 103). It is so because our eroticism often makes us want things that are unattainable for us; our wants and desires often exceed our real capacities and only the men of the most strength "risk the greatest losses and go to meet the most serious threats" (Bataille, *Accursed* 104). Such a man is Richard III: he has not got "the means to want it" (Bataille, *Accursed* 104), he is a cripple,

a deformed villain, and yet when faced with a challenging wooing, he decides to manifest his sexuality in language and behaviour and “expose himself to danger” (Bataille, *Accursed* 105). Self-exposure to danger (or ridicule) is a risk Richard has to take in order to grapple with his identity and prove himself successful, even at the cost of “losing [him]self” (Bataille, *Accursed* 103).

It is thanks to his verbal art and manipulation of the conversation that Anne yields to Richard’s verbal charm in the scene. Richard very skillfully changes his tactics, springing his erotic desire on lady Anne, who is now the cause of everything. Having been given a chance to explain his actions and to defend himself, he starts to fall back on the image of Anne’s beauty<sup>4</sup> that haunts him at night, which, he claims, was his only reason to kill her husband:

ANNE. Thou wast the cause and most accurs’d effect [of Edward’s death].

RICHARD. Your beauty was the cause of that effect:

Your beauty, that did haunt me in my sleep

To undertake the death of all the world,

So I might live one hour in your sweet bosom. (*R III*, 1.2.124–28)

Anne represents a beautiful object of Richard’s erotic desire, which he wants to possess and fears to lose. He tries to pacify Anne’s anger and accusations by telling her that her beauty was responsible for the murders he had committed, saying: “your beauty was the cause of that effect” (*R III*, 1.2.125). He indicates that the perspective of being with her, possessing her as a woman and lying on her “sweet bosom” (*R III*, 1.2.28) was what encouraged him to kill Edward. Bataille believes that “[p]ossession accentuates the objective quality of whatever may induce us to transcend our own limitations” (*Erotism* 142). Richard’s erotic seduction in this scene has a clear aim: to undertake a challenge and possess a beauty outside his reach, and thus to face his limits as a deformed villain, and, maybe, to feel a different man. Anne as the object of desire has a potential to get him closer to the kind of life he would normally never experience if it was not for his desire. Richard’s verbal eroticism

<sup>4</sup> We have to refute another myth, this time concerning Lady Anne’s beauty. Recent anthropological findings have proven that Anne’s jaw displayed a peculiar dental anomaly; she suffered from hypodontia, which “must almost certainly have descended to her via her Neville ancestry” (John Ashdown Hill qtd. in Carson 197–98), which resulted in Anne’s missing six teeth. In Shakespeare’s play, however, Richard only refers to her beauty, as in: “Your beauty was the cause of that effect: / Your beauty, that did haunt me in my sleep” (*R III*, 1.2.125–26).

is indicative of his sense of “continuity” and “discontinuity” (Bataille, *Erotism* 140); he stands between two different realms: on the one hand, the world of desire, which fulfils his sense of possession and makes him feel a full-fledged man, and, on the other, the real world which leaves him disillusioned, rejected, and all too aware of his limitations. What contributes to Richard’s tragedy as an individual is the fact that his existence, both as a man and as a lover, verges on “continuation” and “discontinuity” (Bataille, *Erotism* 140). In one way, he rejoices in playing the lover and paying Anne fake compliments, but in another it is only a false pose. Richard, being himself, is so unattractive that only as an actor can he gain success in social interactions: he plays an obedient brother to Clarence and a true friend of Hastings’s to have their trust, and in the same way he plays the heart-broken lover in front of Anne to make her pity him and accept him as her suitor.

As the scene progresses, Richard openly declares his love and devotion, which Anne is very close to accepting even though she spits at him; their closeness is, actually, visible in the shift from the verbal (Anne’s imprecations) to the physical (Anne’s spitting). Clemen believes that Richard’s sudden change from dissimulation towards an open declaration of affection makes her accept his honesty as something genuine, so that she believes in his love and remorse (32–33). Now Richard decides to direct the focus of the conversation on himself. We can observe Richard as a courtly lover; he still maintains that his murderous deeds he performed in the name of his lady’s beauty. While Anne is still talking of revenge, he asserts that “[i]t is a quarrel most unnatural, to be revenged on him that loveth thee” (*R III*, 1.2.138–39) and that he killed Edward to “help [her] to a better husband” (*R III*, 1.2.143), and that man is himself. His style of addressing Anne is elegant and even studied (Ornstein 67). He continues in the same vein when the lady wants him out of her sight and says his sight is poisonous to her. Richard pronounces the wish that her eyes were like basilisks, relating to a mythical animal that killed with its very sight; he wants the lady to infect him with her eyes and strike him dead. This is a sudden change of heart, as Clemen notes (33), with no logical reasons that would account for it. He plays the part of a great orator, who uses courtly discourse to persuade Anne to yield to his charm. His language now, very rhetorical and poetic in tone, differs from the abrupt dialogues that have gone before. It is important to emphasize the antitheses between “mine eyes” and “thine eyes” as in: “Those eyes of thine from mine have drawn salt tears” (*R III*, 1.2.157), which are words aimed at Anne, and which might relate to their mutual suffering after the king’s death. Richard’s speech relies on courtly convention: sonnet-like images of tears and eyes or the lover’s cheeks wet with tears (Clemen 34); he also strives

to express Anne's beauty indicating that he is not a good speaker:<sup>5</sup> "[m]y tongue could never learn sweet smoothing word" (*R III*, 1.2.172).

These elements of the courtly love-poetry that Richard employs are additionally emphasized by the lady's tyranny, which is directly indicated in the words: "Teach not thy lip such scorn, for it was made / For kissing lady, not for such contempt" (*R III*, 1.2.175–76). Anne spits at Richard and casts scornful glances, as the stage directions inform. Richard's speech is very theatrical in nature, which is also manifested in his behaviour: in a very theatrical manner he gives Anne the sword, asking her to kill him. He kneels before her and lays his breast open, urging her to do it:

[*Kneels*] *he lays his breast open, she offers at it with his sword.*

RICHARD. Nay, do not pause, for I did kill king Henry—

But 'twas thy beauty that provoked me.

Nay, now dispatch: 'twas I that stabbed young Edward—

But 'twas thy heavenly face that set me on.

*She falls the sword.*

(*R III*, 1.2.183–86)

Richard's "self-fashioning" as a courtly lover has one aim: to make an impression upon Anne. His baring of his chest for the sword-thrust is a highly melodramatic gesture, which, somehow, lacks spontaneity; his acting consists in "calculated changes of mood [that] are unpredictable" (Ornstein 67). Richard's wooing is clearly an effect of previous study and cool calculation, but he adapts his theatrical performance so well to the need of the situation that he manages to dupe Anne with his pretended protestations of affection. Thus, from Anne's initial reaction [*she offers at it with his sword*] we can observe that she experiences a change of heart, which she demonstrates in her final gesture [*she drops the sword*], and in her words to Richard: "Arise dissembler" (*R III*, 1.2.188). Anne symbolically accepts his remorse and mercifully decides to spare his life. Richard in a very shrewd, diabolical manner appeals to her good nature, which stops her from the sword-thrust. Anne does not want to carry out the judgment herself; she says: "I will not be thy executioner" (*R III*, 1.2.189). In

<sup>5</sup> We know that this is not entirely true, because Richard actually prepared himself quite well for seducing Anne and even when he says that he is not skilled at courtly speech, the lady's reaction proves otherwise. Ornstein believes that if Richard "applied himself to seduction, he might have rivaled Casanova" (68). His false humbleness in this scene resembles Henry V's political wooing of Princess Katherine of France, where the king, certain of his conquest, admits that he is only a plain soldier, who is not trained in paying compliments or behaving like a courtly lover: "I cannot look greenly nor / Gasp out my eloquence, nor I have no cunning in / Protestation, only downright oaths, which I never use / Till urged" (*Henry V*, 5.2.143–46).

a stichomythic dialogue at the end, Anne develops some more intimacy with Richard, and she is clearly overcome by him:

ANNE. I would I knew thy heart.  
 RICHARD. 'Tis figured in my tongue.  
 ANNE. I fear me both are false.  
 RICHARD. Then never was man true.  
 ANNE. Well, well, put up your sword.  
 RICHARD. Say then my peace is made.  
 ANNE. That shalt thou know hereafter.  
 RICHARD. But shall I live in hope?  
 ANNE. All men, I hope, live so.  
 RICHARD. Vouchsafe to wear this ring.  
 ANNE. To take is not to give.  
 (*R III*, 1.2.196–206)

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Anne accepts the ring and yields to Richard's undeniable charisma, despite her initial hatred and scorn. To some extent it could be said that Anne is gullible and is easily misled into believing in Richard's affection by his perfect "fashioning" as a courtly lover. In contrast, she may just as well be aware of the fact that she is an element of some political game, and she consciously decides to play her part, counting for a gain. Anne is sometimes thought to be easily impressionable, "frivolous," "incapable of deep affection" (Richardson 19) and her mourning at the king's coffin may seem unnatural and insincere, simply too theatrical. In such case, recognizing Anne's changeable nature, Richard

addresses her with the most perfect knowledge of her constitution. He knows that her feelings are violent; that they have no foundation in steady determined principles of conduct . . . that the undecided mind, without choice or sense of propriety, is equally accessible to the next that occur. (Richardson 19–20)

One possibility is that Anne is by no means naïve but that she actually wants to be seduced, and her invectives and imprecations result from the resentment which is caused by Richard's coolness and lack of concern at her abuse (Richardson 20–21). One way or the other, the task of seducing Anne is not easy regarding the circumstances (she is courted by the murderer of her husband), and it requires from the lover much verbal skill and acting to prove his affection.

The audience is now left alone with Richard, who rejoices in his political success; with evident satisfaction and a touch of irony he acknowledges the fact that his wooing is grotesque, a deformed lover winning the hand of his future victim:

Was ever woman in this humour woo'd?  
 Was ever woman in this humour won?  
 I'll have her, but I will not keep her long.  
 What, I that killed her husband and his father:  
 To take her in her heart's extremest hate,  
 With curses in her mouth, tears in her eyes,  
 The bleeding witness of her hatred by,  
 Having God, her conscience, and these bars against me—  
 And I, no friends to back my suit at all  
 But the plain devil and dissembling looks—  
 And yet to win her, all the world to nothing!  
 Ha! (*R III*, 1.2.232–43)

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Richard's final exclamation reflects his surprise and self satisfaction; he congratulates himself on his skillful play—Richard-the actor has achieved something that was out of reach when he was himself—the lady chose him. Much as his wooing is a political undertaking and a cool-calculated decision, Meredith Anne Skura notes that his delight is genuine (66). Anne has accepted all his moral drawbacks and physical deformity: “And will she yet debase her eyes on me, / . . . On me that halts and am misshapen thus?” (*R III*, 1.2.251, 255). Ironically, Richard admits that he does not even in one half equal Edward, Anne's late husband: “On me, whose all not equals Edward's moiety?” (*R III*, 1.2.254). He is unique in his courtly-sexual rhetoric, in his melancholic and simultaneously ironic attitude. At the end of the scene Richard invokes an image of a looking glass to reflect his shadow: “Shine out, fair sun, till I have bought a glass, / That I may see my shadow as I pass” (*R III*, 1.2.267–68). However, what he is bound to see is always the shadow of a cripple.

Richard of Gloucester possesses a clear family background in Shakespeare's play: the mother who did not approve of him from his birth and to whom he is “one false glass / that grieves [her] when [she sees her] name in him” (*R III*, 2.2.53–54), and the father, the Duke of York, who was a political failure. In the play Richard is presented as a social outcast whose physical deformity is an external mark of his villainous, “deformed” identity. The figure of Richard strikes us as somebody who is very much aware of his drawbacks, both moral and physical, and also as an individual who, struggling with his identity, wants social acceptance. Therefore, he “fashions” himself into many different roles, among which is the part of an ardent lover to Anne. Despite his villainy and the joy he derives from it, he is a tragic character and his personal tragedy is emphasized by his public performance, as well as by the variety of roles he embodies: a good brother, a protective uncle, a genuine friend. His “self-fashioning” as a lover ends in the successful accomplishment of this role: wooing the widowed lady

Anne. This part in particular gives him satisfaction and, it could be argued, serves as a psychological rescue for Richard. Some critics claim that this marriage, actually, did not “advance” his political status and that Richard in the seduction scene is in need of love more than it seems (Skura 66; Clemen 19). Anne, therefore, also has a role to play: she arises as Richard’s “amorous looking-glass” (*R III*, 1.2.260), and the moment she capitulates and succumbs to his charm “she mirrors back a more handsome image of himself” (Skura 66).

There are several functions of eroticism in the seduction scene in Shakespeare’s play: revenge, negotiation with one’s identity, and attaining the sense of “continuity” (Bataille, *Erotism* 15). First, Richard transgresses erotic taboos, as he is a crookback who woos his victim, and, eventually, he is a villainous crookback who turns out to be a master of seduction. He violates social stereotypes because he wants to take revenge on the court that stigmatized him. Secondly, his physical ugliness causes him to befoul all beauty around him; he seduces Anne because he takes pleasure in destroying her beauty. Anne’s accepting Richard’s offer of marriage marks the beginning of her downfall as a woman and puts her moral beauty—integrity and moral values—into question. The “profanation of beauty” (Bataille, *Erotism* 145) and the “transgression” (Bataille, *Erotism* 63) of taboo are not only connected with Richard’s want of possession, but they also help the protagonist negotiate his troubled identity. We can see that Richard is playing all the time and this is because he finds it difficult to accept the man he has become. In fact, only as an actor can he be accepted by others (Anne), and he proves to be successful in his undertakings; acting makes it easier to transcend his limitations. Finally, Richard’s unexpected turn to eroticism in language is his way to overcome uncertainty about his position, which is when the feelings of “continuity” and “discontinuity” linger on. According to Bataille, “[t]he transition from the normal state to that of erotic desire presupposes a partial dissolution of the person as he exists in the realm of discontinuity” (*Erotism* 15), therefore an important role of eroticism is to “substitute for the individual isolated discontinuity a feeling of profound continuity” (*Erotism* 17). Surely, Richard attains the sense of “continuity” in the seduction scene, because, for a moment, he feels a different man (not himself), and because this grotesque wooing allows him to see his crooked shadow reflected in his lover’s eyes.

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