

To what extent is the Shakespearean portrayal of Richard the Third distorted?

Richard III is clearly one of the most maligned figures in English history. William Shakespeare's portrayal of the Yorkist king in his plays, *Richard III* and *Henry VI Part 3*, have been a strongly influential source in assessing this controversial monarch. Richard was, according to Shakespeare, evil personified with his deformed and repulsive exterior matching his deceitful and murderous nature; plotting without conscience the violent deaths of many of his contemporaries, including infamously his nephews in the Tower. Nonetheless, one must question Shakespeare's purposes for writing this supposed 'historical play', and scrutinize the sources from which he formed the caricature of Richard III of England. There are two distinctive camps of opinion in the debate of Richard III, one which asserts Richard as a tyrant, England's own Machiavellian prince, and in contrast there are those historians who oppose this so called Tudor propaganda as a denigration of a king who had many good characteristics and has been unfairly treated, an apparent example of history being written by the victors.

Shakespeare's "Crookback Dick"¹, a man whose evil mind was reflected in his bodily deformity, is a source of some controversy amongst historians. The first account of Richard's deformities, and also his two year gestation, arguably originates from John Rous after Richard's death, of note is Rous' earlier commendations of the King which he suppressed as the Tudor reign began in 1485. In the Rous Rolls he produced a physical monster to support Richard's apparent tyrannous nature. Rous stressed the King's mother's pregnancy in which Richard emerged "with teeth and hair to his shoulders"². We must question Rous' credibility as a source, being a hermit living in Guy's Cliffe he was far from the politics of Westminster. What followed was Polydore Vergil's Tudor history of Richard, like Sir Thomas More's later work, it also stressed Richards ill-featured limbs, crooked back, his left shoulder much higher than the right. David Hume was evidently

¹ W Shakespeare *Richard III*

² K Dockray p11

impressed with More's bodily description of Richard, agreeing that his body was "in every particular no less deformed than his mind."³ Yet, as Professor Myers suggests, the facts of Richard's real appearance "have been buried under a great mound of tradition"⁴. All contemporary sources are silent on Richard's alleged physical deformity and unnatural gestation. Furthermore, two contemporary sources from Poppelau and Whitelaw give somewhat enigmatic descriptions of Richard III, and have no mentions of deformity.⁵ Also there are many contemporary accounts that describe Richard as a successful general, his bravery at Barnet and Tewkesbury combined with Mancini's account of Richard's "renown for warfare"⁶ seem to be evidence against a bodily deformity. Thus, one must treat such assertions of Richard as the "foul misshapen stigmatic"⁷ as unmerited, from a lack of such negative contemporary descriptions that originate only after his death, and for Shakespeare purely serving the purpose of embellishing his caricature of the archetypal tyrant king.

Richard III is accused by Shakespeare of setting his sights on the throne before the death of Edward IV, Vergil supports this view describing Richard as determined "to accomplish his purposed practice by subtlety and sleight"⁸. Like Richard's alleged physical deformities, some crimes attributed to the king can be dismissed almost immediately, namely the murder of Edward IV after the battle of Tewkesbury, the murder of Henry VI and the murder of George Duke of Clarence, drowned in a "butt of malmsey wine"⁹. Edward IV died at the battle of Tewkesbury, and if anyone was responsible for the death of Henry VI it was Edward IV, who also ordered the execution of his son Duke of Clarence for multiple charges of treason. Moreover, the alleged murders of Richard's only son and wife, Anne Neville may also be dismissed. Much evidence instead points to Richard being distraught at the deaths of his son and wife, for example the

³ *ibid* xxvii

⁴ J Gillingham p141

⁵ C Ross p139

⁶ J Gillingham p99

⁷ W Shakespeare Henry VI, Part 3 Act II sc 2

⁸ K Dockray xxviii

⁹ W Shakespeare Richard III Act I sc 4

Crowland Continuator¹⁰ stresses Richard grieving at the loss of his only legitimate son. In opposition to this view that Richard had some redeeming features, is More who held a similar stance to Shakespeare. Although More may hold a good reputation as the 'man for all seasons', a martyr with considerable integrity, we must still assess the credibility of his "History". Horace Walpole described More's History as having "truth only as cement in a fabric of fiction"¹¹, such a view can certainly be strongly supported. Notably, More had no first hand experience of Richard III reign, his work is frequently historically inaccurate, with a third of the text consisting of invented speeches and of course his work was unfinished and un-revised. Furthermore, some historians have tried to illustrate that More may have been demonstrating his classical scholarship, with his portraits of Edward IV and Richard III being similar to Tacitus'; the good emperor Augustus, and the monster Tiberius. Nonetheless, we can not ignore More's work, it does inform us on the political need of the Tudor dynasty which had to discredit the predecessors reign, and can be helpful even if we just use the "cement" and ignore the elaborations.

Further accusations by Shakespeare which blacken Richard's reputation are as follows - the execution of Lord Hastings without charge, the arresting of Rivers, Grey and Vaughan at Stony Stratford and their later execution, and the execution of Duke of Buckingham. These charges against Richard III are hard to deny, but pro-ricardian historians have sought to consider such actions in the context of the time. The power politics of the day meant that monarchs regularly had to act ruthlessly and decisively to defend their position. The execution of the Woodvilles could well be viewed as an act of self defence against a Woodville conspiracy, although on the other hand this can be deemed an excuse by Richard to strengthen his control over Edward V, an argument C Richmond agrees with, asserting Richard's 'self defence' to be "patently untrue". In the case of Duke of Buckingham, previously Richard's strongest ally, he was executed for treason after attempting rebellion, thus this execution is difficult to be interpreted as a crime on Richard's behalf. But, there is a notable danger in judging individuals in terms of context, in so far as such

¹⁰ The Crowland Continuator is a key contemporary source in the analysis of Richard III.

¹¹ C Ross xxvii

James Fleming

judgement can become chronocentrism - our age is both technologically and morally superior.

This assumption may lead Turner onto weak ground, as he argues, Richard "did not live in an age of modern moral sensibilities"¹². In contrast, one could argue such incidents demonstrate Richard's ability to handle faction and potential rebellion effectively and decisively.

From the crimes attributed to Richard discussed thus far, it would appear that he is unjustifiably characterized as the epitome of evil that Shakespeare portrays. But the main area of controversy, which has fuelled the debate, is the case of the murder of the princes in the Tower. Richard III's vilified reputation essentially depends on whether he ordered the murder of his nephews, historians who dispute this either offer the Duke of Buckingham or Henry VII as alternatives, both have potentially strong motives. On the death of Edward IV in April 1483 his eldest son Edward was twelve and Richard Duke of York was ten. By Edward IV's will this meant Richard of Gloucester, his brother, was to be Protector of Edward V. Of note is Richard's keen interest of maintaining control of his nephews; crushing a supposed Woodville conspiracy, and ordering the princes to live in the Tower of London [at the time the Tower was not a prison, but merely a secure royal residence.] By June 1483, Parliament had accepted the evidence that Edward IV had already been married before his marriage to Elizabeth Woodville, therefore meaning his sons' claim to the throne was illegitimate. Richard was thus crowned in July 1483¹³. As the Act of Parliament was passed approving the accession, Richard's right to the crown was unassailable and the boys were legally out of the succession and theoretically posed no threat to him.

Dominic Mancini is a key contemporary source in the analysis of the disappearance of the princes, sent by the French to record the political events in England, he reported rumours of the disappearance of the boys dated on the 6th July 1483, "there was a suspicion that Edward had been done away with"¹⁴. Mancini could be viewed as an impartial foreigner, as AJ Pollard highlights, Mancini holds the most consistent contemporary perspective. On the other hand,

¹² J Gillingham p13

¹³ Appears in Act IV sc 2 in Shakespeare's *Richard III*.

¹⁴ K Dockray p77

James Fleming

Mancini stayed solely in London and only for 3 months, additionally his account is not free from factual errors and the "suspicion" he reports must be stressed as it was purely a rumour.

Nevertheless, Mancini's account is an indispensable contemporary source and does not paint a wholly bad picture of Richard, emphasising in parts the king's good reputation for his private life and public activities. The other contemporary source, written from about October to November 1483, is the Crowland Continuator, although anonymous the author was clearly well informed and appears to be at the centre of events during Richard's reign. Here the author states "it was spread abroad that King Edward's sons were dead, by what manner of violent death it was unknown"¹⁵.

One must note that this was written at the same time as Buckingham's rebellion, and was possibly subject to rumours spread by Buckingham to blacken Richard's reputation.

Tudor accounts namely that of More, Vergil and the Great Chronicle of London, all condemn Richard III of ordering the murder of Edward V and Richard Duke of York in the Tower, and therefore agree with Shakespeare's portrayal. But these sources do not agree on the manner of death; More asserting they were smothered by Sir James Tyrell, Vergil stating that the "kind of death these innocent children were executed, it is not clearly known"¹⁶, and the Chronicle of London also attesting that the manner of death was unknown. Markedly, all of the Tudor sources are what pro-ricardian historians term as Tudor propaganda, used to justify Henry VII's kingship and destroy any lingering nostalgia "for Richard's good government...and beneficial legislation" which Hicks says "persisted well into Henry VIII's reign"¹⁷. Henry VII had a weak claim to the English crown - through an illegitimate female line originating from Kathryn Swynford a mistress of Edward III, thus he was continually under the threat from pretender kings such as Lambert Simnel and Perkin Warbeck. Even in 1502, Henry VII appeared nervous after his eldest son Arthur died, leaving only one son Henry to continue the fragile dynasty. Consequently perhaps, Tyrell confessed to the murder of the princes in the Tower before his execution, maybe an attempt on Henry's behalf to remind the English of his "evil" predecessor. What must be noted is that

¹⁵ *ibid* p78

¹⁶ P Vergil *English History*

¹⁷ M A Hicks *Richard III as Duke of Gloucester: A Study in Character*

James Fleming

Shakespeare's ultimate patron was Queen Elizabeth I, Henry VII's granddaughter, and indeed these were censorious times, as a result anything printed against Elizabeth would be repressed. Shakespeare essentially is the culmination of the Tudor tradition surrounding Richard III, and in Paul Kendall's words "shaped popular imagination"¹⁸.

It is clear that as a usurper Henry VII's position was by no means strong, consequently some historians have suggested that if contemporary sources were incorrect and the princes were alive after Bosworth, Henry would have a strong motive to kill the princes as they would have had a better claim to the crown. If Richard had killed the princes it would seem obvious to accentuate this, instead in an act of attainder Richard was accused of tyranny and cruelty, but no explicit reference was made to the murder of the princes, only an oblique allusion to the "shedding of infants' blood"¹⁹. This argument in defence of Richard was innovatively set out in Josephine Tey's murder mystery novel in addition to the works of some historians. Significantly, Henry VII deprived the princes' mother of her livings and consigned her to a nunnery, in contrast in Richard's reign Elizabeth Woodville was receiving a pension from Richard and allowed her daughters to attend Richard's court and Palace festivities. The proponents of this argument assert that this evidence combined, allows for a conclusion that the princes were alive at the beginning of Henry's reign and were killed under his command.

Another potential suspect, instead of Shakespeare's Richard III, for the murder of the princes is the Duke of Buckingham. He had the same opportunity to kill the boys as Richard, as Constable of the Tower he could also come and go as he pleased. His motive for murder is arguably as strong as Richard's with his royal lineage, if the princes did die in 1483 only Buckingham and Richard could have murdered them, but if as according to the Great Chronicle of London they died in 1484, he can not be held responsible as he was executed in November 1483. Some historians have suggested that Buckingham had a stronger motive than Richard, as the king had an

¹⁸ P Kendall *Richard III*

¹⁹ Act of Attainder of October 1485

James Fleming

unassailable right to the crown through Parliament, whilst Buckingham would need to remove the princes from the equation. But, if this had been the case Richard would have presumably used this to his advantage when Buckingham rebelled in 1483 and rumours were circulating concerning the fate of Edward V and his brother.

When assessing whether Shakespeare's portrayal of Richard is distorted, one must also consider the inherent historical inaccuracies within his play. Of primary note is the compression of time and the temporal rearrangements, the historical sequence which is covered in *Richard III* stretches over a period of 14 years, from the funeral of Henry VI in 1471, Clarence's imprisonment in 1478, Edward IV's death in 1483, and Richard's death on Bosworth in 1485. Although the first six scenes are clearly telescoped, the sequence of events is fairly accurate. Chronological problems arise after Richard's coronation; the gap between Buckingham's rebellion in 1483 and the battle of Bosworth two years later is condensed into a hundred lines in Act IV scene 4. Further historical errors are that Queen Margaret died in 1482, before Edward IV, but Shakespeare lengthens her life by three years, importantly this is crucial to the plot so her curses can be fulfilled when she is still alive. Also, unlike More and the chroniclers, Shakespeare's Richard deliberately plots George Duke of Clarence's death, in addition Clarence's wife was not alive at his death and Clarence's dreams and murder are further inventions of Shakespeare. Nevertheless, Shakespeare was a playwright not a self proclaimed historian, and the artistic license used, although historically inaccurate heightens the plays drama and perhaps also underlines the moral of the drama - the abuse of power and the consequences of tyranny.

It is clear that the Shakespearean portrayal of Richard III and his reign has been extremely influential in creating the popular opinion of Richard, through the combination of Shakespeare's genius and the Tudor propaganda of his day, resulting in the first great villain of Elizabethan drama. But we must be clear that, although *Richard III* and *Henry VI Part 3* may be termed 'historical drama' their purpose was primarily to entertain, thus the many historical and chronological inaccuracies may be expected. Also importantly is the context from which

James Fleming

Shakespeare wrote, where legitimising the Tudor dynasty was crucial, and the denigration of its predecessor critical to its survival. After close analysis and in the light of all the evidence, one must argue against Gairdner's view that, from detailed inspection of this controversy we must accept "the general fidelity of the portrait with which we have been made familiar by Shakespeare"²⁰. Instead, as demonstrated, we can acquit Richard III of most of his 'crimes', although the possibility of Richard ordering the murder of Edward V and Richard Duke of York in the Tower of London remains controversial.

²⁰ J Gillingham p144

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