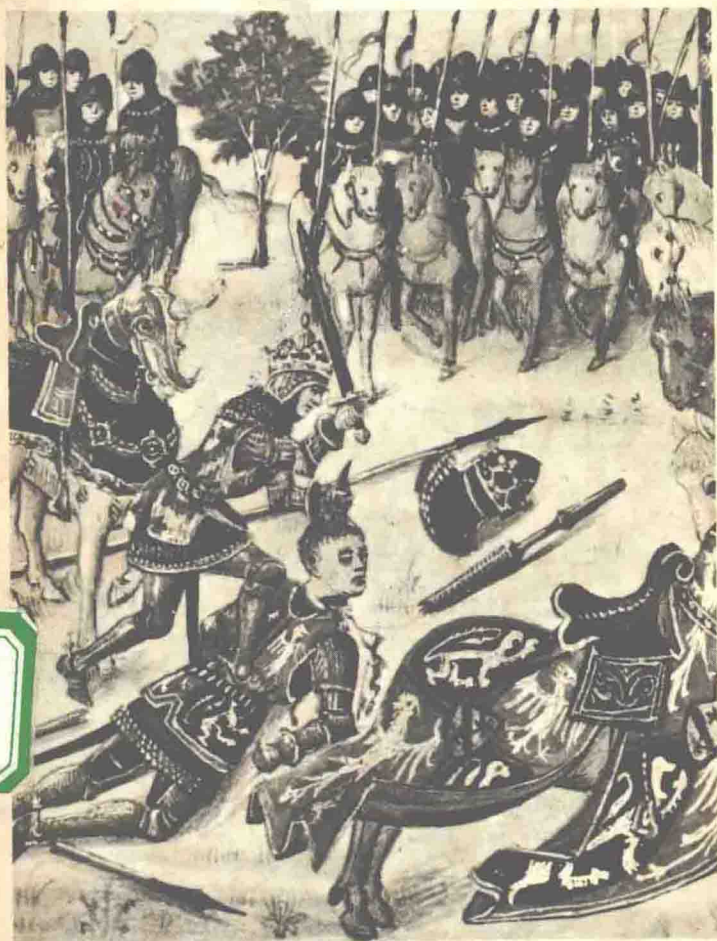


D. C. Gunby

SHAKESPEARE

Richard III



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SHAKESPEARE: RICHARD III

by

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General Preface

The object of this series is to provide studies of individual novels, plays and groups of poems and essays which are known to be widely read by students. The emphasis is on clarification and evaluation; biographical and historical facts, while they may be discussed when they throw light on particular elements in a writer's work, are generally subordinated to critical discussion. What kind of work is this? What exactly goes on here? How good is this work, and why? These are the questions that each writer will try to answer.

It should be emphasized that these studies are written on the assumption that the reader has already read carefully the work discussed. The objective is not to enable students to deliver opinions about works they have not read, nor is it to provide ready-made ideas to be applied to works that have been read. In one sense all critical interpretation can be regarded as foisting opinions on readers, but to accept this is to deny the advantages of any sort of critical discussion directed at students or indeed at anybody else. The aim of these studies is to provide what Coleridge called in another context 'aids to reflection' about the works discussed. The interpretations are offered as suggestive rather than as definitive, in the hope of stimulating the reader into developing further his own insights. This is after all the function of all critical discourse among sensible people.

Because of the interest which this kind of study has aroused, it has been decided to extend it first from merely English literature to include also some selected works of American literature and now further to include selected works in English by Commonwealth writers. The criterion will remain that the book studied is important in itself and is widely read by students.

DAVID DAICHES

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1. Introduction

The three parts of *Henry VI*, so far as is known Shakespeare's first dramatic work, brought the unknown and (in the eyes of the established university-trained writers like Nashe, Peele, and Greene) uneducated provincial to modest public notice, and drew from the dying Greene, alarmed at the prospect of mere actors usurping the dramatist's rôle, the famous punning reference to

an vpstart Crow, beautified with our feathers, that with his *Tygers hart wrapt in a Players hyde*, supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blanke verse as the best of you: an beeing and absolute *Iohannes fac totum*, is in his owne conceit the onely Shake-scene in a countrey.¹

Greene died early in September 1592, the month in which his attack on Shakespeare appeared in *Greene's Groats-worth of Wit*. By then, it may well be, Shakespeare was already working on his fourth play, one which, by its great and immediate success, would have alarmed Greene much more than *Henry VI*. In the event, Shakespeare had plenty of time to ensure that *Richard III* was as far refined as his dramatic and poetic skills then allowed, for the London theatres were closed on account of plague between June 1592 and late 1593, with only a brief opening for five weeks in January 1593. During this period, it seems, Shakespeare also wrote *Venus and Adonis*, and it has been conjectured that part, at least, of the period when the London theatres were closed was spent at Titchfield, the home of the dedicatee to that poem, the Earl of Southampton. This,

¹*Greene's Groats-worth of Wit*, quoted in E. K. Chambers, *William Shakespeare* (2 vols., 1930), II, p. 188.

Note:

Quotations from and references to *Richard III* are based on John Dover Wilson's edition in *The New Shakespeare Series* (1965). Other Shakespeare plays are cited from editions in the same Series.

however, is perhaps less likely than the view, equally a conjecture, that Shakespeare spent a good portion of this time touring the provinces with his company, the Earl of Pembroke's Servants, who were eking out a bare living by this means, and in fact are recorded as returning to London bankrupt from one such tour in August 1593.

Much surrounding the writing of *Richard III* is, then, conjecture. The date of its first performance is little less so. Philip Henslowe, the theatrical entrepreneur, records in his Diary a performance of 'Buckingham' on 30 December 1593, and three further performances (1, 10, and 27 January) within the month. These performances, which were by the Earl of Sussex's Men, probably took place at the Rose Theatre, on Bankside. Even if we accept that Henslowe's 'Buckingham' is Shakespeare's *Richard III*, however (and this is possible, given Henslowe's cavalier way with titles), there is no certainty that the 30 December performance was the first. Henslowe generally (though by no means always) marked new plays 'ne'. 'Buckingham' is not so marked, though 'Titus & Ondronicus' is on 23 January. All in all, it seems safest to assume that *Richard III* was first performed sometime prior to 30 December 1593, and that the four entries noted by Henslowe mark frequent repeats of a popular and lucrative play.

How successful *Richard III* was must be measured not in terms of the frequency of performance or the size of the takings, for in neither case do we have sufficient information even to begin such a survey, but by less direct means. One such is the frequency with which the play is alluded to in the literature of the period, another the number of editions of the play which appeared prior to the Folio of 1623. In each case *Richard III* stands very high on the list. For not only are there more contemporary allusions to it, or imitations of it, than of any other Shakespearean play except *Hamlet*, but it was produced in a number of quartos, six, equalled only by *1 Henry IV*.²

The reason for *Richard III*'s success is not hard to find. Like *Hamlet* and *1 Henry IV* (and indeed like contemporary non-Shakespearean successes

²The Quartos appeared in 1597, 1598, 1602, 1603, 1604, 1605, 1612, and 1622.

like Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy* and Marlowe's *Tamburlaine*, *Dr Faustus*, and *The Jew of Malta*), the play contains a central figure of immense and compelling magnetism. Richard Crookback, Duke of Gloucester and afterwards King Richard III, is what R.G. Moulton described as 'a picture of ideal villainy',³ a figure fascinating alike in the totality of his commitment to evil and in the nonchalant ease with which he achieves his wicked ends. As such he has always been a vehicle for the greatest actors of the age. Richard Burbage, the first great virtuoso of the English stage, may well have been the original Richard Crookback, and certainly made the rôle his own, while since then Garrick, Kemble, Kean, Irving, Wolfit, and Olivier have all performed notably in the title part, with the last translating the play, albeit conflated with parts of *3 Henry VI*, into a memorable film. After nearly four centuries, Shakespeare's first great stage creation still enjoys a steady success. In discussing and evaluating *Richard III* this study will be seeking, amongst other things, to explain why.

³*Shakespeare as a Dramatic Artist* (2nd ed., 1888), p.90.

2. Background

RICHARD III: HISTORY AND MYTH

The fascinating villain who dominates *Richard III* has little to do, save in the most general sense, with the historical Richard III (1483 – 85). Even though not all historians would go so far in sympathetic revaluation of the last of the Yorkist kings as does the author of the standard modern biography, Paul Murray Kendall, and none would subscribe to the starry-eyed whitewashing which is enshrined in the Fellowship of the White Boar (in England) and the Friends of Richard III, Inc. (in the United States), it is generally agreed that Richard III was very far from the monster of vice that he is made out to be in Shakespeare's play. As E.F. Jacob most temperately puts it, 'That there was a sound constructive side to Richard III is undoubted. He was very far from being the distorted villain of tradition.'⁴

Space does not permit an account of the historical Richard's career, for which readers are referred to Kendall's *Richard III* (1955). By way of setting Shakespeare's villain in perspective, however, it may be noted that though the historical Richard was either directly guilty of, or morally responsible for, the deaths of the two 'Princes in the Tower', and certainly rid himself over-expeditiously of Lord Hastings, he had warrant for the despatch of the Woodvilles and Buckingham, who were in league against him, and was not guilty of Clarence's death (which he opposed) or that of Edward, Henry VI's son, at the Battle of Tewkesbury. Equally, though as Constable of England Richard perhaps oversaw the death of Henry VI in the Tower in 1471, it was an action carried out on the orders of Edward IV and his council, and hence not his personal responsibility.

And his deformity? His crookback? This too is myth, along with the two-year period of gestation and all the other accoutrements of monstrosity. As Paul Murray Kendall remarks:

⁴*The Fifteenth Century*, Oxford History of England (1961), vi, p.645.

Though one of Richard's shoulders was slightly higher than the other, he had no withered arm nor hunched back nor game leg; he was a prince of sensitive, even intellectual mien, probably somewhat stiff and reserved; he showed himself hardy in the exercise of arms and a successful commander; he spent his happiest years when dwelling in Yorkshire as Lord of the North, and remained popular there; as King, he proved himself, though harried, an accomplished and conscientious ruler; but he could not live down—probably in his own mind as well as in the minds of his subjects—the ruthless and violent means by which he thrust himself into power.⁵

How then did a man become a monster, the historical Richard III become the villainous hero of Shakespeare's play, a 'lump of foul deformity' and 'hell's black intelligencer'? How could the basic facts become so distorted that in *3 Henry VI* we find Richard, Duke of Gloucester, taking a ferocious part in battles fought when he was not yet nine, and espousing the *realpolitik* of Machiavelli when, in 1464, he was but 12? In answering these questions we need not merely to look at the source material of which Shakespeare made use, but also to consider what, in the sixteenth century, history was thought to be.

SHAKESPEARE'S HISTORICAL SOURCES

Geoffrey Bullough lists 15 major historical sources for the life of Richard III known to scholars in the sixteenth century, and concludes that Shakespeare knew at least five: Edward Hall's *Union of the Noble and Illustre Famelies of Lancastre and York* (1548), Richard Grafton's *Continuation of Hardyng's Chronicle* (1543), Raphael Holinshed's *The Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland*, 2 vols. (1578), enlarged into 3 vols. (1587), Robert Fabyan's *Chronicle* (1516 et seq.), and John Stow's *Annales* (1580, 1592).⁶ It seems quite possible, however, as Bullough's careful comparison of the sources and the play shows, that in fact Shakespeare used only Hall and Holinshed, since details derivable from Grafton, Fabyan, and Stow were available also in these two great chronicle sources.

⁵*Richard III: The Great Debate*, (New York, 1965), p.20.

⁶*Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare* (6 vols., 1957–75), III, p.227.

Yet even if Shakespeare's historical reading about Richard III was limited to two works, this is not to say that no other historical writing *influenced* the composition of *Richard III*. For just as Holinshed used Hall freely in the compilation of his *Chronicles*, so Hall in turn used Grafton, and Grafton, More and Polydore Vergil. Given this complicated pattern of borrowing it is perhaps best to preface an examination of Hall and Holinshed, Shakespeare's sources proper, with a brief account of the two seminal works in the historiography of Richard III, Polydore Vergil's *Anglica Historia* and Sir Thomas More's *History of King Richard the Third*, looking there for the genesis of the monster-king whom Shakespeare so masterfully brings to completion.

VERGIL AND MORE: THE ORIGINS OF THE RICHARD MYTH

A scholar of international repute, Polydore Vergil came to England in 1502 on Papal business, and was encouraged by Henry VII to stay and to write a history of England.⁷ A scholarly and sophisticated work in the new humanist manner, attentive to sources and critical of the legendary, Vergil's *Anglica Historia* (1534) has often been presented as essentially a propagandist work on behalf of the Tudors. Recent studies of Vergil discount this and its concomitant – that the history sets out deliberately to blacken Richard III's character. Certainly the portrait of the usurper-king is a black one, but as Duke of Gloucester Richard is shown in a generally favourable light, with only two crimes against him – the deaths of Henry VI (in the Tower) and of his son Prince Edward (at the Battle of Tewkesbury). That he was responsible for Clarence's death is nowhere suggested.

With Sir Thomas More's *History of King Richard III* we are at once in a different world. Here we have no loyal younger brother, as in Vergil, but one who from the first displayed characteristics which we might, anachronistically, call Machiavellian. Moreover this innate viciousness is matched, in More's portrait, by physical deformities of the type familiar to us in Shakespeare's Richard. He was, we are told, 'little of stature,

⁷On Vergil, see Alison Hanham, *Richard III and His Early Historians* (1975) pp.125 – 47.

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'.⁸ As More's portrait of Richard begins, so it continues, with crime after crime attributed to him, including complicity ('some wise men also think', says More) in the murder of Clarence, and an ambition, deeply-settled well before Edward IV's death, to be king.

Inevitably, so black and vivid a portrait of Richard has led to controversy, with historians taking sides for or against More just as (and indeed largely according to the way) they take sides for or against Richard. Current thinking, however, tends to see the *History* less as history than as literature, and to stress the work's dramatic qualities rather than fidelity to fact, so much so that the most recent investigator of Richard III's reputation can argue that the *History* forms 'in some important respects ... a lucianic, and so irreverent, comment on the whole craft of history', and that 'it is more profitable to regard it as literature than as a work of scholarship embodying the results of historical research'.⁹

Whatever modern historiographers may think, however, More was certainly taken during the sixteenth century to be as fully in possession of the facts as Polydore Vergil, while the strongly dramatic narrative, with its many reputedly verbatim conversations between the principal characters, naturally attracted far wider attention than did Vergil's sober Latin account. Hence it is More who, despite the fact that his *History* is unfinished, chiefly moulds the thinking of Tudor historians, and indirectly, therefore, provides the basis for Shakespeare's magnificent villain.

HALL AND HOLINSHED: THE MYTH DEVELOPED

More's *History* was written in 1513, but not published until 1557. Like Vergil's *Historia*, however, it was well known in manuscript, and Hall made extensive use of it in the 1540s, employing Vergil only where More

⁸I quote from the text of More's *History* given in Kendall's *Great Debate*, p.35.

⁹Hanham, p.155.

was not available. A reading of *The Union of the Noble and Illustre Famelies of Lancastre and Yorke* (1548) reveals why. Hall is clearly interested in the dramatic representation of history, and he seizes on such elements in More, developing and amplifying them both by borrowing from Vergil and by the creation of additional dialogue. Even in making the usurping Richard III a tyrant and murderer of the blackest kind, however, he does not entirely abandon the facts as transmitted by Vergil. For having remarked on the young Richard's fidelity to his brother and skill in war, Hall concludes that if he had not aspired beyond the Protectorship, 'no doubt but the realme had prospered, and he much prayesd and beloved as he is nowe abhorred and vilipended'.¹⁰

Hall not only builds up the dramatic effect by developing the black Richard transmitted to him by More, but also by contrasting the usurper's villainy with the innocence of his young victims – the two Princes in the Tower are now 'innocent babes' – and the transcendent virtue of his opponent. In Hall, the Earl of Richmond is presented as 'so formed and decorated with all gyftes and lyniamentes of nature that he semed more an angelical creature then a terrestriall personage', while his speech to his troops at Bosworth – invented (as is Richard's to *his* troops) by Hall – is delivered 'with such gesture of his body and smiling countenance, as though all redye he had vanquyshed hys enemies and gotten the spoyle'.

This heightening of the portrait of Richmond, effective as it is, serves not only immediate ends, however, but also wider dramatic and thematic purposes. The title Hall gave his work points to his grand design in writing the history, while the remainder of the title page develops it more fully in describing how the 'continuall dissension of the crown of this noble realm . . . beginning at the time of King Henry the Fourth, the first author of this division' is solved by the marriage of Henry VII and Elizabeth of York, and crowned by the 'reign of the high and provident prince, King Henry the Eighth, the indubitable flower and very heir of the said lineages'. The whole work is designed to develop and

¹⁰Hall's *Union* is cited in the selections provided by Bullough in *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare III*, pp.249 – 301.

illustrate this theme, and to do it dramatically. Even the chapter headings emphasize this:

- i The unquiet time of King Henry the Fourth.
- ii The victorious acts of King Henry the Fifth.
- iii The troublous season of King Henry the Sixth.
- iv The prosperous reign of King Edward the Fourth.
- v The pitiful life of King Edward the Fifth.
- vi The tragical doings of King Richard the Third.
- vii The politic governance of King Henry the Seventh.
- viii The triumphant reign of King Henry the Eighth.

Commenting on these headings, E.M.W. Tillyard remarks:

Hall knew and rejoiced that this list can provide more than one pattern. There were four successful and four unsuccessful kings in his list and they fall into a sort of drama form. Call the unsuccessful *a* and the successful *b*, and you get the form *a b a b a a b b*. It was not for nothing, too, that the *victorious acts* of Henry V are matched by the *tragical doings* of Richard III. *Acts* or *doings* are confined to these two kings, whose history is presented in a quite exceptionally dramatic manner.¹¹

With Hall the mythic Richard III is nearly completed, with amplifications and inventions adding to the formidable portrait to which Shakespeare was heir. It is Hall who devises an account of Prince Edward's capture and death at Tewkesbury, for instance, who explains Burdet's case, referred to by Buckingham (III, v, 75–8), adds the taunting response of Richard to Buckingham's request for the Earldom of Hereford, Buckingham's abhorrence of the murder of the princes, the flood which destroys Buckingham's army and the couplet found on Norfolk's gate (or, in the play, on his tent, V, iii, 304–5). Raphael Holinshed takes over all this material and to it adds very little, save a visit to Exeter, in which Richard is dismayed at the Rougemont – Richmond resemblance (IV, ii, 100–4), and the bleeding of Henry VI's wounds (I, ii, 55–9).

¹¹Shakespeare's *History Plays* (1962), p.43.

Nonetheless, Holinshed's account of Richard emerges as, if anything, blacker even than Hall's, not least because it is a truncated version of the earlier work. *The Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland* (2 vols. 1578, enlarged to 3 vols. 1587) is enormous in scope, extending as it does from Noah to Queen Elizabeth. Hall's *Union*, by contrast, covers a century and a half of solely English history. In abbreviating Hall, Holinshed not only condenses and paraphrases but, in the case of Richard, omits references to his earlier and better qualities. It is the last stage in the progression from the recognizably historical Richard III (in Vergil) to the mythic monster-king, child-murderer, and usurper.

SHAKESPEARE'S LITERARY SOURCES

The major historical sources for *Richard III* are, as has been said, Hall's *Union* and Holinshed's *Chronicles*. From these two works Shakespeare could derive both a fully developed myth involving a monster-king and an overall moral design involving the suffering and redemption of England.

So egregiously interesting a reign as Richard's did not only capture Shakespeare's interest, however, and there are several literary works written prior to *Richard III* which can claim in some degree to be sources for his play. One is the anonymous *True Tragedy of Richard III*. Published in 1594, but almost certainly written in 1590 or '91, the *True Tragedy* seems to have been in many respects a crude play, though its merits are difficult to assess in the only surviving text, a 'bad' or reported Quarto. Nonetheless there are a number of striking verbal parallels between it and *Richard III*, including one involving the most famous line in the latter, 'A horse! a horse! my kingdom for a horse!' (V, iv, 7).¹² There is also a parallel in structure, for as in *Richard III* so in the *True Tragedy* the material is organized around a single dominating figure. Moreover the two plays adopt a similar approach to problems of organization, unifying the episodic material by compressing and in some cases altering the chronological sequence.

¹²See Bullough, p. 238.