Modern Critical

INTERPRETATIONS

Edited and with an Introduction by HAROLD BLOOM

William Shakespeare's
Richard III

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Chelsea House Publishers ◇ 1988
NEW YORK ◇ NEW HAVEN ◇ PHILADELPHIA

Printed and bound in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

∞ The paper used in this publication meets the minimum
requirements of the American National Standard for
Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials,
Z39.48–1984.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
William Shakespeare's Richard III / edited and with an
introduction by Harold Bloom.
p. cm.—(Modern critical interpretations)
Bibliography: p.
Includes index.
Contents: Dream and plot / Marjorie B. Garber—
Shakespeare's halle of mirrors / Michael Neill—Neither
mother, wife, nor England's queen / Madonne M. Miner—The
dead-end comedy of Richard III / John W. Blanpied—Military
oratory in Richard III / R. Chris Hassel, Jr.—Usurpation,
seduction, and the problematics of the proper / Marguerite
Waller—Savage play in Richard III / C. L. Barber and Richard
P. Wheeler.
ISBN 0–87754–937–0 (alk. paper) : $24.50
1. Shakespeare, William, 1564–1616. King Richard III.
2. Richard III, King of England, 1452–1485, in fiction,
drama, poetry, etc. [1. Shakespeare, William, 1564–1616. King
Richard III. 2. Richard III, King of England, 1452–1485, in
fiction, drama, poetry, etc. 3. English literature—History
and criticism.] I. Bloom, Harold. II. Title: Richard III.
III. Series.
PR2821.W55 1988
822.3 3—dc19 87–17825

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Editor's Note

This book brings together a representative selection of the best modern critical interpretations of Shakespeare's history play *Richard III*. The critical essays are reprinted here in the chronological sequence of their original publication. I am grateful to Cornelia Pearsall for her assistance in editing this volume.

My introduction briefly sets Richard in the context of the tradition he helped foster, that of the Jacobean hero-villain and his literary progeny down to our own time. Marjorie B. Garber begins the chronological sequence of criticism with a consideration of the various dreams in *Richard III*, remarking that while these dreams conform to the Renaissance idea that dreams are prophecies, they are also (especially Clarence's dream) psychologically sound.

The narcissistic imagery of mirrors is emphasized in Michael Neill's reading of Richard's character. Madonne M. Miner examines all of the play's female characters, analyzing their changing roles in the action, while John W. Blanpied presents *Richard III* as comedy gone wrong, as it were, while insisting that Buckingham is the true Machiavel, rather than Richard.

In an essay informed by Renaissance manuals on military oratory, R. Chris Hassel, Jr., contrasts Richard's and Richmond's speeches to their men before the battle of Bosworth. Marguerite Waller, setting deconstructive and feminist modes of reading against one another, achieves an original and compelling reading of the scene in which Richard's rhetoric seduces both Anne and himself.

In this book's final essay, the late C. L. Barber and Richard P. Wheeler set Richard both in his historical context and in the context of the tetralogy, examining Shakespeare's use of his sources in the play; they suggest that Richard's movement towards self-destruction is organized by a series of actions in which he cuts himself off from male fellowship.

Contents

Introduction

I

Why, I, in this weak piping time of peace,
Have no delight to pass away the time,
Unless to see my shadow in the sun
And descant on mine own deformity.
And therefore, since I cannot prove a lover
To entertain these fair well-spoken days,
I am determined to prove a villain
And hate the idle pleasures of these days.
(1.1.24–31)

The opening ferocity of Richard, still duke of Gloucester, in *The Tragedy of Richard the Third* is hardly more than a fresh starting point for the development of the Elizabethan and Jacobean hero-villain after Marlowe, and yet it seems to transform Tamburlaine and Barabas utterly. Richard's peculiarly self-conscious pleasure in his own audacity is crossed by the sense of what it means to see one's own deformed shadow in the sun. We are closer already not only to Edmund and Iago than to Barabas, but especially closer to Webster's Lodovico who so sublimely says: "I limn'd this nightpiece and it was my best." Except for Iago, nothing seems farther advanced in this desperate mode than Webster's Bosola:

O direful misprision!
I will not imitate things glorious
No more than base: I'll be mine own example.—
On, on, and look thou represent, for silence,
The thing thou bear'st.
(5.4.87–91)

Iago is beyond even this denial of representation, because he does will silence:

> Demand me nothing; what you know, you know:
> From this time forth I never will speak word.
> (5.2.303–4)

Iago is no hero-villain, and no shift of perspective will make him into one. Pragmatically, the authentic hero-villain in Shakespeare might be judged to be Hamlet, but no audience would agree. Macbeth could justify the description, except that the cosmos of his drama is too estranged from any normative representation for the term hero-villain to have its oxymoronic coherence. Richard and Edmund would appear to be the models, beyond Marlowe, that could have inspired Webster and his fellows, but Edmund is too uncanny and superb a representation to provoke emulation. That returns us to Richard:

> Was ever woman in this humor woo'd?
> Was ever woman in this humor won?
> I'll have her, but I will not keep her long.
> What? I, that kill'd 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 my 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!
> Hah!
> Hath she forgot already that brave prince,
> Edward, her lord, whom I, some three months since,
> Stabb'd in my angry mood at Tewksbury?
> A sweeter and a lovelier gentleman,
> Fram'd in the prodigality of nature—
> Young, valiant, wise, and (no doubt) right royal—
> The spacious world cannot again afford.
> And will she yet abase her eyes on me,
> That cropp'd the golden prime of this sweet prince
> And made her widow to a woeful bed?
> On me, whose all not equals Edward's moi'ty?
> On me, that halts and am misshapen thus?
> My dukedom to a beggarly denier,
> I do mistake my person all this while!
> Upon my life, she finds (although I cannot)

Myself to be a marv'llous proper man.
I'll be at charges for a looking–glass,
And entertain a score or two of tailors
To study fashions to adorn my body:
Since I am crept in favor with myself,
I will maintain it with some little cost.
But first I'll turn yon fellow in his grave,
And then return lamenting to my love.
Shine out, fair sun, till I have bought a glass,
That I may see my shadow as I pass.
(1.2.227–63)

Richard's only earlier delight was "to see my shadow in the sun /And descant on mine own deformity." His savage delight in the success of his own manipulative rhetoric now transforms his earlier trope into the exultant command: "Shine out, fair sun, till I have bought a glass, / That I may see my shadow as I pass." That transformation is the formula for interpreting the Jacobean hero-villain and his varied progeny: Milton's Satan, the Poet in Shelley's *Alastor*, Wordsworth's Oswald in *The Borderers*, Byron's Manfred and Cain, Browning's Childe Roland, Tennyson's Ulysses, Melville's Captain Ahab, Hawthorne's Chillingworth, down to Nathanael West's Shrike in *Miss Lonelyhearts*, who perhaps ends the tradition. The manipulative, highly self-conscious, obsessed hero-villain, whether Machiavellian plotter or later, idealistic quester, ruined or not, moves himself from being the passive sufferer of his own moral and/or physical deformity to becoming a highly active melodramatist. Instead of standing in the light of nature to observe his own shadow, and then have to take his own deformity as subject, he rather commands nature to throw its light upon his own glass of representation, so that his own shadow will be visible only for an instant as he passes on to the triumph of his will over others.

Dream and Plot

Marjorie B. Garber

The great popularity of the dream as a dramatic device among the Elizabethans is surely due at least in part to its versatility as a mode of presentation. Both structurally and psychologically the prophetic dream was useful to the playwright; it foreshadowed events of plot, providing the audience with needed information, and at the same time it imparted to the world of the play a vivid atmosphere of mystery and foreboding. Thus the Senecan ghost stalked the boards to applause for decades, while the cryptic dumb show, itself a survival of earlier forms, remained as a ghostly harbinger of events to come.

Even in his earliest plays, Shakespeare began to extend and develop these prophetic glimpses, so that they became ways of presenting the process of the mind at work in memory, emotion, and imagination. What was essentially a predictive device of plot thus became, at the same time, a significant aspect of meaning. Dream episodes, in short, began to work within the plays as metaphors for the larger action, functioning at once as a form of presentation and as a concept presented. This is clearly the case with the dramatic action of *Richard III*. From Queen Margaret's curse to Clarence's monitory dream and the haunting nightmare of Bosworth Field, omen and apparition define and delimit the play's world.

The consciousness of dreaming which is to dominate the play throughout makes its first striking appearance in Richard's opening soliloquy:

From *Dream in Shakespeare: From Metaphor to Metamorphosis*.

> Plots have I laid, inductions dangerous,
> By drunken prophecies, libels and dreams,
> To set my brother Clarence and the king
> In deadly hate the one against the other.
> (1.1.32–35)

Dreams here appear in what will become a familiar context for the early plays, clearly analogous to "plots," "prophecies," and "libels" as elements of the malign irrational. Richard has deftly contrived to manipulate circumstance by preying upon the vulnerability of the superstitious king. Encountering his brother Clarence on his way to the Tower, he is told what he already knows: the king, says Clarence,

> harkens after prophecies and dreams,
> And from the crossbow plucks the letter G,
> And says a wizard told him that by G
> His issue disinherited should be;
> And, for my name of George begins with G,
> It follows in his thought that I am he.
> (1.1.54–59)

The poetry here halts and stammers, a mirror of the simplicity and confusion which make Clarence such an easy target. He considers himself a reasonable man, and, confronted by unreason, he is both impotent and outraged. Yet such an absolute rejection of the irrational is a fatal misjudgment in the world of *Richard III*, and Clarence's skepticism becomes a means to his destruction, just as later his determined denial of the truth of his own dream will lead directly to his death.

Here, in the first scene of the play, a sharp contrast is already apparent between the poles of dream and reason. Significantly, Richard, the Machiavel, defines himself as a realist, in contrast to the foolish Clarence and the lascivious Edward; he intends to control his fate and the fate of others through an exercise of reason. Yet the very first evidence of his supposed control, the false prophecy of "G," is truer than he knows: not George but Gloucester will disinherit Edward's sons. Clarence's passive skepticism about the irrational is but an image of Richard's more active scorn, and Richard's vulnerability to the powers of the imagination at Bosworth is prefigured by Clarence's prophetic dream of death.

The basic pattern of dream as prophecy is exemplified in simplest form by the dream of Lord Stanley as it is reported to Hastings in act 3:

> He dreamt the boar had rased off his helm.
> . . . . . .
> Therefore he sends to know your lordship's pleasure,
> If you will presently take horse with him
> And with all speed post with him to the north
> To shun the danger that his soul divines.
>
> (3.2.11,15–18)

But Hastings, like Clarence, reacts with instinctive disbelief:

> Tell him his fears are shallow, without instance;
> And for his dreams, I wonder he's so simple
> To trust the mock'ry of unquiet slumbers.
>
> (3.2.25–27)

In the dream and its reception we have the fundamental design of early Shakespearean dream: the monitory dream which is true, but not believed. Stanley dreams that Richard—the boar—will cut off their heads, and Hastings rejects this suggestion absolutely. He reasons, further, that to react to it will have the undesirable effect of making the prophecy come true, since if it is known that they distrust him, Richard will give them reasons for distrust.

> To fly the boar before the boar pursues
> Were to incense the boar to follow us
> And make pursuit where he did mean no chase.
>
> (3.2.28–30)

This is a politic and sophisticated conclusion; it is also a false one, and it places Hastings in the revealing category of those who scoff at omens. He is in fact a prisoner of his own reason. "A marvelous case it is," remarks Holinshed, with customary exactitude, "to hear either the warning that he should have voided or the tokens that he could not void." It is only hours later, when he hears himself condemned, that he at last grasps the enormity of his mistake.

> For I, too fond, might have prevented this.
> Stanley did dream the boar did rase our helms,
> And I did scorn it and disdain to fly.
> Three times today my footcloth horse did stumble,
> And started when he looked upon the Tower,
> As loath to bear me to the slaughterhouse.
>
> (3.4.80–85)

This belated account of an earlier omen, equally disregarded, establishes even more clearly Hasting's distrust of the entire realm of the irrational. It is only in the developing context of supernatural warnings that he, too late, can interpret the sign correctly.

For his part, Richard follows the same course with Hastings as he did with Clarence and Edward: he pretends to have discovered "devilish plots / Of damnèd witchcraft" (3.4.59–60), ostensible reasons for his own deformity, and condemns Hastings to death for his cautious skepticism. Once again, he employs witchcraft as a device, something to be used rather than believed in. Apparently, then, he and Hastings occupy positions at opposite ends of the rationalist scale: Hastings the victim, warned by true omens he chooses to ignore; Richard the victor, creating false signs and prophecies through which he controls the superstitious and the skeptical alike. Yet they are more alike than they seem at first. When Richard himself becomes the dreamer, the recipient of omens and supernatural warnings, his rationalist posture is susceptible to the same immediate collapse; the terrifying world of dream overwhelms him, as it has overwhelmed Clarence and Hastings, at the critical moment of his ill-starred defense on Bosworth Field.

The double dream at Bosworth is an apparition dream, related to the risen spirits in *2 Henry VI* and *Macbeth* as well as to the ghosts of *Hamlet* and *Julius Caesar*. Richard and Richmond, encamped at opposite ends of the field, are each in turn visited by a series of ghosts representing Richard's victims: Edward Prince of Wales, Henry VI, Clarence, Rivers, Gray and Vaughan, Hastings, the two young princes, Anne, and Buckingham. As each spirit pauses he speaks to Richard like a voice of conscience within the soul: "Dream on thy cousins smothered in the Tower" (5.3.152); "Dream on, dream on, of bloody deeds and death" (l. 172). And then, in a formal counterpoint, each turns to Richmond and wishes him well. The whole scene is symmetrically arranged, the contrast of sleeping and waking, despair and hopefulness, emphasized by the rigidity of the form. For Richard, "guiltily awake"(l. 147), this is the fulfillment of the last term of Margaret's curse:

> The worm of conscience still begnaw thy soul!
> Thy friends suspect for traitors while thou liv'st,
> And take deep traitors for thy dearest friends!
> No sleep close up that deadly eye of thine,
> Unless it be while some tormenting dream
> Affrights thee with a hell of ugly devils!
>
> (1.3.221–26)

Richard's sleeplessness, like Macbeth's, is the mark of a troubled condition of soul, the outward sign of an inward sin. Margaret in her self-chosen role as "prophetess" (1.3.300) has called it down upon him, adding yet another to the series of omens which culminate in dream.

The terror which this dream evokes in Richard's mind is explicitly shown in his frightened soliloquy ("Is there a murderer here? No. Yes, I am" [5.3.185]), and even more in his subsequent conversation with Ratcliff. "O Ratcliff," he exclaims, "I have dreamed a fearful dream!" This is a very different man from the bloodless Machiavellian who plants the seeds of Clarence's execution in his brother's brain. His cry is now the Shakespearean equivalent of Faustus's last speech:

> KING RICHARD: O Ratcliff; I fear, I fear!
> RATCLIFF: Nay, good my lord, be not afraid of shadows.
> KING RICHARD: By the apostle Paul, shadows tonight
> Have struck more terror to the soul of Richard
> Than can the substance of ten thousand soldiers.
> (5.3.215–19)

In his fear he hits the point precisely: the "shadows," because they arise from the symbol-making unconscious, are more threatening than the substance. The Richard who can say "Richard loves Richard: that is, I am I" (5.3.184) must create his own omens if they are to strike him with terror. Consciousness is the one enemy he can neither trick nor silence. From the controller of dreams he has become the controlled, the victim of his own horrible imaginings.

The Bosworth dream, like the predictive dream of Stanley, serves a structural purpose as well as a psychological one. The apparitions of murdered friends and kinsmen recall to the onlooker all the atrocities that have gone before, the perfidies of *3 Henry VI* as well as the events of the present play. The device is dramatically useful because of the complexity of the historical events involved; many in the audience will probably not remember whose corpse is being mourned at the play's beginning, nor what relation the Lady Anne bears to the Lancastrian monarchy. Points of history are thus clarified at the same time that a psychologically convincing "replay" takes place in Richard's mind. The direct inverse of the prophetic dream, this recapitulation simultaneously furthers the ends of psychological observation, historical summation, and structural unity, so that the sequence of dreams and omens which are the formal controlling agents of *Richard III* are all embodied in the last revelation at Bosworth.

As useful a device as this final dream proves to be, it carries with it