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Shakespeare's Richard III as a Choric Subversive

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Richard III's character as a duplicitous villain, established by Thomas More in his uncompleted Latin and English versions of his *History of Richard III*, was reinforced by the chroniclers Hall and Holinshed; however, Richard's first dramatic representation, which occurred in Legge's Latin trilogy *Richardus Tertius*, performed at Cambridge in 1579, makes him an archetypal tyrant. Offering an alternative image of the last Plantagenet, this academic tragedy modelled upon Seneca[1] was recognized for its dramatic effectiveness, but because it was not printed until the twentieth century, its contemporary influence was limited. Shakespeare may have known about Legge's dramatic version, though it is unlikely that he had access to the text. More's characterization was, on the other hand, readily available in both Hall and Holinshed, and it was a natural choice for a playwright because of the vividness of More's portrait.

Richard's deformity, which for More manifests his evil nature, is introduced in his first appearance on Shakespeare's stage. Near the beginning of Act V in Part 2 of *Henry VI*, Richard, along with his father, the Duke of York, and his brother Edward, the future

1. See my article, "Legge's Neo-Senecan *Richardus Tertius*".

king, confront the Lancastrian forces led by Queen Margaret and Clifford. In response to the queen's threatened arrest of York, Richard indicates he will use force to defend his father, to which Clifford replies, "Hence, heap of wrath, foul indigested lump,/As crooked in thy manners as thy shape!" (V.i.157-58). Richard does not answer this taunt, but before the act ends he proves his valour in battle. The youthful Richard kills the Duke of Somerset in the Yorkist victory at St. Albans just as Part 2 ends. Shakespeare begins Part 3 with Richard presenting the Duke of Somerset's head as he requests recognition of his heroic action. It is significant that, although Shakespeare calls attention to Richard's deformity, his achievement on the battle field is also emphasized. As a matter of fact, Richard is singled out by York as having "best deserv'd of all my sons" (I.i.17). Richard's reputation as a fierce warrior, which More and the chroniclers include in spite of their negative depictions, is thus linked with his deformity at the beginning of Shakespeare's creation of Richard's role.

Richard's devotion to his father is highlighted by his attempts to rescue him in the next battle; when York and his youngest son, Rutland, are captured and humiliated by Queen Margaret and Clifford, it is Richard who vows revenge, and it is Margaret who denies Richard's patrimony and by implication his noble birth, as she identifies his deformity with his destiny:

> . . . thou art neither like thy sire nor dam,
> But like a foul misshapen stigmatic,
> Mark'd by the destinies to be avoided,
> As venom toads, or lizards' dreadful stings. (*3 Henry VI*, II.ii.135-38)

This is the first of several occasions on which Margaret and Richard trade insults, and it implies that a higher power determines the actions of the participants in the drama. Margaret's role as a prophet and choric interpreter is thus linked with Richard from their first encounter, where he is represented as an outsider rejected by the nobility. Although his honour is reaffirmed a short time later by his appointment as the Duke of Gloucester, he says he would prefer the title of Duke of Clarence because of the ominous associations with Gloucester.[2] Again the element of destiny is made apparent.

2. Holinshed represents a common view on the title's associations: "Some thinke that the name and title of Gloucester, hathe bene unluckye to diverse, which for their honoures have bene erected by creation of princes, to that stile and dignitie, as Hughe Spenser, Thomas of Woodstocke, son to Kyng Edwarde the thirde, and this Duke Humphrey: whiche iij persons by miserable deathe finished their dayes, and after them king Richarde the thirde also, Duke of Gloucester, in civill war was slaine and brought to death" (p. 1257).

It is at this point that Richard reveals his true nature and his plans to gain the throne. Following immediately upon the newly crowned Edward's proposal to Elizabeth Woodville to become his queen, Richard in a lengthy soliloquy examines his situation. Recognizing that Edward's marriage may increase the number of heirs that would stand between himself and the crown, Richard briefly considers love as a consolation. However, he quickly rejects this alternative as impossible because of his physical deformity, which he angrily blames on Nature: "love forswore me in my mother's womb" (*3 Henry VI*, III.ii.153). The details of his deformity make him a pitiable victim of destiny:

> To shrink mine arm up like a withered shrub;
> To make an envious mountain on my back,
> Where sits deformity to mock my body;
> To shape my legs of an unequal size,
> To disproportion me in every part,
> Like to a chaos, or an unlick'd bear-whelp
> That carries no impression like the dam. (*3 Henry VI*, III.ii.156-62)

His withered arm, hunchback, and unequal legs suggest a grotesque appearance that sets him apart from society and shows, as Queen Margaret had earlier charged, that he bears no resemblance to his mother. Shakespeare significantly expands on More's depiction of Richard's deformity. In comparing Richard to his brothers, King Edward and George Duke of Clarence, More notes that "in witte and courage" Richard was equal to his brothers, but in "bodye and prowesse farre under them bothe, little of stature, ill fetured of limmes, croke backed, his left shoulder much higher then his right, hard favoured of visage, and suche as is in states called warlye, in other menne otherwise" (p. 7). Polydore Vergil's and other contemporary accounts mention some of the same physical details, but the withered arm and the legs of unequal size appear to be a later elaboration. More also relates Richard's physical deformity to his evil nature: "He was malicious, wrathfull, envious, and from afore his birth, ever frowarde"; the fact that he was a breach birth (his mother "coulde not bee delivered of hym uncutte;... hee came into the worlde with the feete forwarde") and also born, according to rumour, "not untothed" (More, p. 7) pointed in the contemporary view to demonic associations.

After considering his options, given the limitations imposed by his physical deformity, Shakespeare's Richard determines his course of action:

Then since this earth affords no joy to me
But to command, to check, to o'erbear such
As are of better person than myself,
I'll make my heaven to dream upon the crown,
And, whiles I live, t'account this world but hell,
Until my misshap'd trunk that bears this head
Be round impalèd with a glorious crown. (*3 Henry VI*, III.ii.165–71)

His goal to attain the crown is clear, but the means to achieve it offers a special challenge. It is at this point that Shakespeare represents the real nature of Richard's role as the subversive. Using classical archetypes to highlight his position, Richard declares that he will attain his end by adopting a deceptive role, by appearing to be a wise counsellor like Nestor, while in fact he is emulating the sly deceiver Ulysses. He takes for his basic model Machiavelli, who had by the late sixteenth century become the epitome of the deceiver, an embodiment of the archetypal seducer, Satan. The tradition of the subversive force in drama had been firmly established in the figure of the Vice in the morality play, earlier in the sixteenth century, and by the early 1590s, he had been manifested in a variety of forms, particularly by Marlowe. Mephistopheles in *Doctor Faustus* complicates the role of the Vice through irony, while Barabas in the *Jew of Malta* is a victim of social injustice who develops the qualities of the Vice into a way of life. Barabas may be an obvious precedent for Shakespeare's Richard III, as John Jowett claims (p. 28), but the recasting of the historical king into a Machiavellian villain required careful manipulation of source materials, as well as the embellishment of certain factors associated with his history.

Shakespeare represents the consolidation of the Yorkist victory over the Lancastrians at the end of *3 Henry VI* by staging the killings of Henry and his son; Richard joins his brothers in stabbing the unarmed Prince Edward, but Richard alone kills the passive deposed king. Again Shakespeare introduces Richard's deformity, as Henry VI prophesies Richard's violent future, which he links to evil omens at Richard's birth:

The owl shriek'd at thy birth, an evil sign;
The night-crow cried, aboding luckless time
Dogs howl'd, and hideous tempest shook down trees;
...
Teeth hadst thou in thy head when thou wast born,
To signify thou cam'st to bite the world. (*3 Henry VI*, V.vi.44–54)

Richard silences him by stabbing him and then responds to the rumour that he was born with teeth, which he claims "signified/That I should snarl, and bite, and play the dog./Then since the heavens have shap'd my body so,/Let hell make crook'd my mind to answer it" (V.vi.76-79). He concludes his soliloquy by denouncing his bond of brotherhood and threatening his brothers' lives. Linking physical deformity to his destiny, he justifies his evil designs, which he now will pursue. The role Richard projects for himself is symbolized in the final scene of *3 Henry VI* by Richard's kissing King Edward's infant son, the new heir to the throne—a kiss which he compares to Judas's in the betrayal of Christ (V.vii.33-34).

In the latter half of his last Henry VI play, Shakespeare thus prepared his audience for Richard's role in the sequel he had probably already begun. Richard's character was now fully developed, and as he launches the continuation of the historical action, he reiterates the connection between his deformity and his destiny. Francis Bacon in his *Essays* succinctly describes the relationship between deformity and character that underlies Shakespeare's creation of Richard III:

> Deformed persons are commonly even with nature; for as nature hath done ill by them, so do they by nature; being for the most part (as the Scripture saith), "void of natural affection"; and so they have their revenge of nature... it is good to consider of deformity, not as a sign, which is more deceivable; but as a cause, which seldom faileth of the effect... all deformed persons are extreme bold. First, as in their own defence, as being exposed to scorn; but in process of time by a general habit. Also it stirreth in them industry, and especially of this kind, to watch and observe the weakness of others, that they may have somewhat to repay. (pp. 99- 100)

The perception that deformity is not so much a sign of character as the cause of particular behaviour implies that deformity determines one's actions. Extreme boldness results from being subjected to scorn, but also the industry stirred may be manifested in ambition, and the weakness observed in others may be readily exploited to redress a perceived injustice. Bacon's reflections on the nature of deformity may shed light on Shakespeare's Richard III, but his dramatic portrayal is somewhat more complex.

Richard emerges as a major player in *3 Henry VI*, and in the tragedy that follows he dominates the action from the beginning to the end. He also serves as a choric commentator, interpreting and emphasizing aspects of the action as the play proceeds. His choric introduction to the English world after the Yorkists have gained control contrasts an idyllic peace with the violence of war. However,

it is a world from which he sees himself excluded by his deformity. His self-pitying mode is quickly succeeded by anger, as he justifies his intended villainy:

> Cheated of feature by dissembling nature,
> Deform'd, unfinish'd, sent before my time
> Into this breathing world, scarce half made up,
> And that so lamely and unfashionable
> That dogs bark at me as I halt by them—
> . . .
> 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. (I.i.19-31)

His perception is completely self-oriented, and, as he goes on to explain, he means to reconstruct the world to suit his desires. It is at this point that Richard adopts the role of formulator of the action of the drama; his manipulation of others' lives affords him particular delight. The figure upon which Shakespeare models Richard appears to be the Vice from the early sixteenth-century morality play. However, unlike the Vice, Richard is motivated, not by mischief or even evil in itself, but rather by selfish political and personal ambition. The glee he displays when his plotting appears successful evokes self-congratulation, as it demonstrates the self-conscious nature of Shakespeare's character. The fact that Richard's initial success leads him to over-estimate his power and to succumb to the lure of hubris distinguishes Shakespeare's tragic hero from the morality play Vice.

Richard's first manifestation of his skill as a manipulator of the action occurs immediately after his initial soliloquy in his plot to kill George, Duke of Clarence. Given that Richard had been shown in *3 Henry VI* particularly devoted to his father and his brothers, now he seems especially treacherous, as he puts his personal ambition before family loyalty. What Shakespeare does not allude to at this point is Clarence's historical treachery in conspiring with the Earl of Warwick to gain the crown. Instead, Shakespeare turns the occasion into a comic moment, in which Clarence becomes the naive butt of Richard's trickery. Richard's dismissal of his brother, as the latter is ushered off stage by his guards, illustrates the underlying ironic tone of the scene and Richard's essential attitude: "Simple plain Clarence, I do love thee so/That I will shortly send thy soul to heaven/If heaven will take the present at our hands" (I.i.118-20). However, it is

Richard's second action after his opening soliloquy, the seduction of Anne, that most fully reveals his character and the art of his role-playing.

We must remember at the beginning of our examination of this scene that the historical Richard would have known Anne, the second of the Earl of Warwick's daughters, very well. He had stayed at the Warwick family home on several occasions, and his brother Clarence was married to Anne's sister.[3] Warwick's betrothal of Anne to Prince Edward, Henry VI's son and heir, was apparently part of "the Kingmaker" Warwick's plan to gain royal power. No contemporary historical evidence indicates Anne's personal feelings about her arranged marriage with the prince or her attitude toward her father-in-law, whose corpse she is following when she is introduced. Shakespeare has, in fact, created this scene for the major purpose of illustrating the character of Richard. It has been argued that the scene may have been inspired by Legge's *Richardus Tertius,* where Richardus behaves in a similar manner when his wooing of his niece is rejected (Churchill, pp. 287-89; Bullough, pp. 236-38). The offer of suicide by the rejected suitor is, of course, not uncommon in love stories, but Shakespeare's adoption of the motif here may indicate that Legge's portrayal was well known in theatrical circles, even if a text of the Latin play was not available to Shakespeare. However Shakespeare may have known about this portrayal of Richard III, the dramatic intuition of the playwright led him to adapt the scene with greater intensity and flamboyance than his Latin precedent offered.

This is the first of many scenes in this play in which Richard is identified with hell and the devil; when he first appears to Anne she identifies him as a "fiend" (I.ii.34) and first addresses him as "thou dreadful minister of hell" (46), then as a "foul devil" who has "made the happy earth thy hell" (50-51). This association of Richard with evil and her accusation that he has murdered both her husband and her father make Richard not just her personal enemy, who has robbed her of happiness, but the very source of the evil that has transformed her world. She is also the first of several characters to link Richard with wolves, spiders, toads, and creeping venomed things (19-20), but the fact that she puts these repulsive creatures in a curse on Richard that comes to incorporate a

3. Oestreich-Hart comments: "We know that Richard and Anne probably played together as children and that they may have loved each other for years. We know that he actually courted her for two years, remained married to her for over a decade, and fathered her son Edward, over whose death as a child both he and Anne grieved" (p. 243).

future wife turns the power of the curse back upon herself. Thus, through irony, Shakespeare undercuts Richard's victims while enhancing his power. Although Richard is called a hedgehog by Anne, he himself never alludes to his physical deformities when he is with her, and when she contemptuously spits at him in response to his proposal of marriage, he turns her insult into compliment. She declares, "Never hung poison on a fouler toad" (146), and, ordering him away, she accuses him of infecting her eyes as if casting a spell on her. Of course, the most audacious action on Richard's part is to bare his breast and offer her the sword with which to kill him, as he admits to having killed both her husband and her father. Richard claims that it was Anne's beauty that provoked him, which suggests that she must share his guilt, insofar as she accepts his praise of her body. She allows Richard to place his ring on her finger, thus demonstrating her capitulation, and she also abandons her mission to accompany the corpse of her father-in-law and former king.

On the surface, Richard has accomplished the impossible, and he serves again as the chorus to herald his skill and celebrate his amazing feat:

> 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? (I.ii.227-37)

In summarizing his achievement, he points to all of the factors that make his seduction seem unbelievable—a demonstration of the power of his words and his oratorical skill. He has just proven that, in spite of Nature's marking him with deformity, he can amble with a lady, perhaps not in her chamber, to the pleasing notes of a lute, but in a solemn funeral procession. Richard then elaborates on his physical unfitness for the role of seducer he has just played by comparing himself to the young prince Edward, whom he has supplanted. His self-satisfaction has fed his vanity, as it has removed his justification for his villainy—it appears that he can be a villain and a lover at the same time—but most important it contributes to his hubris, which leads him to believe that if he can deviously cause

his brother's death, and can woo and win a widow in mourning, he is capable of reshaping the world to his own satisfaction.

Richard seems to be remarkably successful at the beginning of his endeavours, but Shakespeare quickly introduces both old adversaries and new contenders to complicate Richard's struggle for the crown. The death of his brother Edward IV creates a crisis for the monarchy but also an opportunity for Richard to forward his plan of kingship. His new opponents, the queen's family, intend to use the child heir to the throne to gain power in the kingdom, and the young Prince Edward becomes a pawn in the struggle. Richard ultimately outflanks the queen's brother, Earl Rivers, and her sons, Lord Grey and the Marquess of Dorset, by seizing control of the prince on his way to London after the death of his father. Richard's manoeuvres are attested by contemporary accounts and by the chroniclers, but Shakespeare adapts a scene that was added by Thomas More to make Richard's role in the transfer of power more suspect. In his representation, Shakespeare, using the dying king to provide the context, brings together the queen's faction and their opponents, Richard and Lord Hastings. Richard reiterates his role as an outsider when he blames his lack of success upon his inability to be devious and dishonest:

> Because I cannot flatter and look fair,
> Smile in men's faces, smooth, deceive, and cog,
> Duck with French nods and apish courtesy,
> I must be held a rancorous enemy.
> Cannot a plain man live and think no harm,
> But thus his simple truth must be abus'd
> With silken, sly, insinuating Jacks? (I.iii.47–53)

Feigning indignation that the corrupt world will not tolerate a simple, plain-spoken man, Richard charges his enemies with the very qualities that he most obviously exhibits and frequently brags of possessing. He makes no allusion at this point to his own physical deformity; rather, from a position of royal superiority, he scorns the queen's family as ambitious "wrens": "Since every Jack became a gentleman,/There's many a gentle person made a Jack" (I.iii.70–72). Jack, of course, is synonymous with knave, a term which connotes both a member of the vulgar lower class and an evil dishonest fellow.

The tone changes altogether when Richard's old adversary, Queen Margaret, makes her appearance. Historically, Margaret had returned to France after the Lancastrian defeat and therefore was not present at the Yorkist court; in

fact, she preceded Edward IV in death.[4] However, Shakespeare, who had made Queen Margaret the leader of the Lancastrians in the *Henry VI* trilogy, retains her in the sequel as Richard's mighty opposite and a counterpoint to his role as choric subversive. She takes on other dimensions as the tragedy moves to its conclusion, but at this stage of the action she emerges as Richard's major challenger. Queen Margaret focuses first upon Richard as the murderer of her husband and her son; identifying Richard as a "devil" (I.iii.117) and a "cacodemon" (143), she reminds her courtly audience of the personal losses she has suffered—losses which, as Richard reminds her, fulfilled his father the Duke of York's curse on her for mocking him with a paper crown after his capture and for murdering Rutland, Richard's youngest brother. Shakespeare thus connects the events of the preceding play to the enfolding action by recalling Queen Margaret's previous villainy. The cycle of revenge begun in her court continues in the world of her successors, the Yorkists, but, as she points out, the pattern is made particularly striking by the repetition of names such as Richard (in three generations) and Edward (her murdered son, the dying king, and the heir-apparent). Margaret's revenge extends to Richard's new rivals (Queen Elizabeth and her faction), as well as Richard's allies, particularly Hastings and Buckingham, but she reserves her most deadly curse for Richard.

After dooming Richard to suffer from sleeplessness and pangs of conscience, Margaret focuses upon Richard's deformity as symbolizing his evil:

> Thou elvish-mark'd, abortive, rooting hog!
> Thou that wast seal'd in thy nativity
> The slave of nature and the son of hell!
> Thou slander of thy heavy mother's womb!
> Thou loathed issue of thy father's loins!
> Thou rag of honor! thou detested— (I.iii.227-32)

Richard cries, "Margaret", before she can conclude the curse, comically turning Margaret's curse back upon herself. Momentarily silenced, Margaret is a comic butt very briefly; she returns immediately to her cursing vein and to Richard, "this poisonous bunch-back'd toad" (245), whose supporters, Hastings and Buckingham, are next doomed by Margaret. Richard ends the scene by ordering Clarence's execution, but before commanding the murderers, Richard

4. Queen Margaret left England in 1476, after spending five years in captivity. She died on 25 August 1482. Edward IV died on 9 April 1483

manically delights in his own duplicity. Again recalling the choric Vice, Richard describes how he can "clothe my naked villainy/With odd old ends stol'n forth of holy writ,/And seem a saint, when most I play the devil" (335-37). The first three scenes of Shakespeare's *Tragedy of Richard III* clearly set out Richard's essential character, as well as the roles he will adopt to achieve his goal.

What is not revealed is the degree of success Richard achieves with his *modus operandi* or the discrepancy between his perception of events and their reality as Shakespeare represents them. An ironic effect is conveyed by Richard as choric subversive and by his adversarial counterpart, Queen Margaret. Once Richard puts his plot in motion, we discover that matters do not proceed as simply as he had planned. The imprisoned Clarence suffers a bout of conscience before he sleeps such as Margaret had wished upon Richard, establishing a pattern for the Yorkists as they meet their fates. The murderers engage in macabre comic wordplay before awaking their victim, who is naively unaware of Richard's duplicitous part in ordering his death. Anticipating the later murder of the young princes, these murderers are contrasted in their reactions to their guilt: one is struck by pity, while the other is preoccupied by the promised reward. Richard accomplishes his plot to remove Clarence from the line of succession, but his control of the plotters appears tenuous.

Shakespeare devotes most of Acts II and III to Richard's progress toward the throne. His plotting appears successful, as he uses Clarence's death to spoil the reconciliation between the Queen's family and the Yorkists that Edward had hoped to achieve in order to ensure the succession of his son. Again building on More, Shakespeare adapts a fictional event to demonstrate Richard's duplicity. Richard's choric soliloquies are somewhat reduced, and in their place Shakespeare creates choric scenes that develop emotional dimensions of the action and provide reactions to Richard's actions. The first of these scenes is the second scene of Act II, where the Duchess of York, Queen Elizabeth, and the children of Clarence are brought together to mourn the deaths of Edward and Clarence from the perspectives of mother, wife, and offspring. Their shared grief is highlighted by the melancholy repetition of the mourners:

> *Queen Elizabeth.* What stay had I but Edward? and he's gone.
> *Children.* What stay had we but Clarence? and he's gone.
> *Duchess.* What stays had I but they? and they are gone.
> *Queen Elizabeth.* Was never widow had so dear a loss.
> *Children.* Were never orphans had so dear a loss.
> *Duchess.* Was never mother had so dear a loss. (II.ii.74-79)

Richard's insensitivity to the mourners' sorrow is demonstrated by his breezy interruption of the reverential mood, after which he abruptly turns his mother's requested blessing into a joke. The following scene represents three citizens registering their concerns at having a child-king and expressing their fears for the future conflict between Richard and the Queen's faction. This choric scene is designed to extend the canvas to the effects of the impending action on society.

Richard sets the tone at the beginning of Act III for a series of variations on the relationship between appearance and reality. Warning his nephew Edward, the heir to the throne, that the world is a deceitful place, and that men's "outward show.../Seldom or never jumpeth with the heart" (III.i.10-11), Richard seeks to destroy the prince's trust in his maternal uncles, but moments later, in a sinister allusion to the prince's early death, Richard identifies himself with "the formal Vice, Iniquity", in moralizing two meanings in one word (III.i.82-83), thereby demonstrating that in reality it is he himself, the prince's paternal uncle, whom the prince should be most wary of. The discrepancy between appearance and reality is played out in a more striking key with Richard's allies, Hastings and Buckingham. Shakespeare emphasizes the theme especially through Hastings, who claims to know Richard's mind, which he declares is reflected in his face; Buckingham more cautiously admits to knowing only Richard's appearance, while his true nature remains hidden. The climactic conclusion to this sequence is again drawn by Shakespeare from More's imaginative account of a confrontation between Richard and his followers, during which Edward IV's widowed queen and his former lover, Mistress Shore, are accused of witchcraft (2: 48). Proving their guilt by showing his withered arm, Richard represents his deformity as having been created by malevolent forces directed by his adversaries. The audacity of Richard's preposterous accusation is topped only by his charge of treason against Hastings, who is implicated by his association with Mistress Shore. It appears that, for Richard, reality is what he seeks to make it.

The next stage of Richard's progress toward the throne involves his more complicated manipulation of reality to create an appearance that is designed to destabilize the kingdom and cast him in the role of saviour of the realm. Richard's attempts to control the action become increasingly bolder as his subversive plot is revealed. His undercutting of the legitimacy of Edward IV's heirs on the grounds of the king's dubious formal and informal relationships with various women is compounded by Richard's suggestion that Edward himself is illegitimate because of his mother's adultery. The doubts cast on the previously accepted

reality prepares for Richard's assumption of the throne through a series of staged scenes in which citizens demonstrate the discrepancy between reality and the illusion created by Richard, Buckingham, and their co-conspirators. Epitomizing this segment of Richard's subversive plot is the context, again first provided by More (2: 77-81), of the public appeal to Richard to accept the kingship: appearing as a pious penitent between two priests in Shakespeare's version, Richard is made more hypocritical in his reluctance to assume the role portrayed as his royal obligation, the goal for which we know he has been striving almost from his first appearance on Shakespeare's stage.

Shakespeare gives Richard little time to enjoy his triumph. His success appears to have given him a false sense of his own power but an uneasy sense of security. When Richard determines to eliminate the major challenge to his rule by having Edward IV's sons killed, he not only loses the support of his major ally, Buckingham, but also he loses control of the action. Shakespeare's representation of the murder of the nephews through the narrative of the hired killers may remind us of the henchmen Richard sent to kill Clarence, but there is no comic dimension in the smothering of the children; instead, it is played strictly for pathos. The hardened criminals emphasize the innocence of the children with their prayer book on their pillow, which almost causes the killers to abandon their mission. Any sympathy with Richard as a witty underdog that the audience might have developed as he moves toward the crown must be completely dispelled by Richard's response to the criminals' report. Expressing not a shred of pity or remorse for the infanticide he commanded, he looks forward to the death of his wife Anne, who he implies is leaving this world through his help, and to the wooing of his niece in order to thwart his impending rival, the Earl of Richmond. However, Richard's control of events has dissipated, and he is no longer capable of supplying reliable choric guidance to the action that follows. His wooing of his niece becomes a parody of the seduction of Anne which demonstrated his power at the beginning of the play, though his incestuous design is muffled by being directed through the adversarial former queen, rather than made directly to her daughter, the young Elizabeth. His justification of murder because of his love for his intended new bride may remind us of his earlier defence for killing the father-in-law and husband of Anne, but it rings even more hollow here because of its repetition, and it becomes absolutely disgusting when he promises to father brothers to replace those she has lost. The scene regresses into verbal combat between old enemies, which becomes increasingly ironic as Richard

assumes that he is being successful again, when he is not. His conclusion that he has triumphed, as he had with Anne, leads him, not to self-congratulation, as earlier, but rather to contempt for his sister-in-law: "Relenting fool, and shallow, changing woman" (IV.iv.431).

A further indication that Richard is losing control of the action is his striking of the messenger who brings him the bad news that Richmond is gathering his forces to challenge Richard's rule and that Buckingham has deserted Richard's cause. Reports that Richard's forces are dropping away, while Richmond's are gaining strength, signal the doom that Richard must face. Stanley's announcement that Edward's widowed queen has consented to her daughter's marriage to Richmond underlines how futile Richard's wooing for his niece's hand has been. Shakespeare focuses in the final act on Richard's crumbling subversive design and his confrontation with forces that prove superior to the power he believed he could command. In the latter part of the tragedy, as Richard's power proves to be illusory, the strength of the curses of his counterpart, Queen Margaret, is enhanced. She appears to be a Nemesis to those she had cursed, as they meet their fates; Rivers, Hastings, Queen Elizabeth, Buckingham, and others remember Margaret's curses as they are fulfilled. Other curses, such as Anne's ironical cursing of herself when she first confronts Richard, and the prophecies of Richmond's victory highlight the role of providence in the historical tragedy Shakespeare has drawn from Thomas More and the chronicles.

The final act of *Richard III* represents the ultimate failure of Richard's subversive plan, as providence emerges as the dominant force in the play. Casting the concluding action allegorically, Shakespeare dichotomizes the contending forces into groups of good and evil. Placing the camps of Richard and Richmond on opposite sides of the stage, the drama offers a simultaneous contrast between the leaders, as they interact with their soldiers and the spirits of Richard's victims. There is no question of the outcome of Richard's last battle because providence has joined Richmond's side, as Shakespeare portrays the action. However, it is significant that Richard, like Margaret's other adversaries, in a momentary bout with conscience recognizes his guilt, even though he does not reform; instead, his nightmare of the morrow's battle leads him to desperation and the rejection of conscience as cowardly. His isolation from supporting forces almost brings him to despair, but his self-orientation and pride provide the strength that lead him to his valiant but ironic end. Richard calls for a horse, for which, in his desperate plight, he is willing to exchange the kingdom he has spent his life attain-

ing. However, he is also determined to fight to the end: "I have set my life upon a cast,/And I will stand the hazard of the die" (V.iv.9-10). Ironic to the end, Richard seems in these last words to have accepted the fate that awaits him. Unable to create the outcome he had intended, he receives the retributive justice providence has determined. Shakespeare may simplify the tragedy of Richard III in the final act, but he nevertheless allows Queen Margaret to accomplish her revenge upon her old adversaries and new enemies. Queen Margaret triumphs by merging her role with providence.

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