

## Richard III

*W.Shakespeare*

February 9–10, 2013

The dramas of Shakespeare must be read with care. They give you nothing if only skimmed through, in fact just as with music, repeated readings deepen the appreciation. A play, just as with a piece of music, can, unlike a picture, not be taken in at a glance. A picture, admittedly, can neither, further inspection reveals more and more details, but those are details, the grand design, what it is all about, can readily be ascertained, what remains is a matter of mopping up. This does not prevent you from dwelling in front of a picture, but seldom do you spend hours on it. But it is different with a play, a story, and a piece of music. You have to listen through it before you start to get this overview. Of course a piece of music, like a play, may have local pieces which you can more or less take in by a glance, but the parts relate to the whole, in ways that only reveals itself in sustained study. The magic of music lies in the repetition of themes, which are enhanced each time they are encountered. In mathematical jargon, it is a matter of monodromy.

To savor Richard III you should be familiar with the background story. Knowing the ending does not necessarily detract from the enjoyment of a piece, especially not in music, when suspense is local, and thus generated anew at each listening. Thus knowing what is going on makes you relax. Plot is secondary to any story, however necessary, just as the meat of a body is mere succulent than its mere bones. One may assume that the audiences of the historical plays of Shakespeare were familiar with the historical background, after all it only took place a century or so before. On the other hand modern audiences have only very shaky conceptions of history, including recent history, although education is supposed to be universal. On the other hand people of the past, had less history to worry about, Elizabethans needed only to have a grasp of the events of the 16th back to the 14th century say, while we moderns, have so much more to worry about, not to mention those in the distant future, whose historical curriculum must be truly daunting, (incidentally one argument for the collapse of civilization).

Now, in Shakespeare there is beauty of language, as well as humor and insight into human psychology. Let us give examples of each in the play. First let us recall Clarence the hapless older brother of the Earl of Rochester (a.k.a. Richard III)

*Act I, scene 4, lines 21-33*

*O Lord! Methought what pain it was to drown,  
What dreadful noise of waters in my ears,  
What sight of ugly death within my eyes,  
Methoughts I saw a thousand fearful wrecks,  
Ten thousand men that fishes gnawed upon,  
Wedges of gold, great ouches, heaps of pearl,  
Inestimable stones, unvalued jewels,*

*All scattered in the bottom of the sea.  
Some lay in dead men's skulls; and in those holes  
Where eyes did once inhabit, there were crept -  
As 'twere in scorn of eyes - reflecting gems,  
Which wooed the slimy bottom of the deep  
And mocked the dead bones that lay scatterd by.*

This I find marvelous, and the impression is not deflated by the following piece of humor coming straight on delivered by the warden of the charge in the Tower

*Had you such leisure in the time of death,  
To gaze upon these secrets of the deep?*

As to human psychology, we have shortly thereafter two murderers, unleashed by Richard, ordered to do poor Clarence in. They go about it professionally, delivered from any kind of responsibility due to their warrant, they nevertheless start to waver when it comes actually to deliver their assignments. There are second thoughts, quelled, yet bobbing up. The steeling themselves against natural instinctive reactions, the mind eager to construct rationalizations, as they strive hard to suppress their protesting consciences. To submit to the urgings of those is to succumb to cowardness.

*Act I, scene 4 lines 130-141*

**First murderer:** *What if it comes to thee again?*

**Secod murderer:** *I'll not meddle with it. It makes a man a coward. A man cannot steal but it accuseth him. A man cannot swear but it checks him. A man cannot lie with his neighbour's wife but it detects him. 'Tis a blushing, shamefaced spirit, that mutinies in a man's bosom. It fills a man full of obstacles. It made me once restore a purse of gold that by chance I found. It beggars any man that keeps it. It is turned out of towns and cities for a dangerous thing, and every man that means to live well endeavours to trust to himself and live without it.*

**First murderer:** *'Swounds, 'tis even now at me elbow, persuading me not to kill the Duke.*

Of course in the end they manage to overcome their scruples, they are after all professionals, and this is what professionalism is all about. But murderer or not, the audience has something to identify with, and there is suspense, even if you know that Clarence is doomed. Plot is after all secondary, it is the meat you chew. But even professional as they may be, the completion of the act does not bring relief but remorse.

*lines 266-69*

**First muderer**

*A bloody deed, and desperately dispatched!  
How fain, like Pilate, would I wash my hands  
Of this most grievous, guilty murder done.*

Now the play start with a longer soliloquy by Richard in which he deplores his lack of physical attraction and thus tries to banish from his mind all thoughts of physical dalliance satisfied, and thus as divine revenge upon fate turn himself into a villain. Of course Shakespeare says it better.

*Act I scene 1, lines 14-31*

*But I, that am not shaped for sportive tricks  
Nor made to court an amorous looking-glass,  
I that am rudely stamped and want love's majesty  
To strut before a wanton ambling nymph,  
I that am curtailed of this fair proportion,  
Cheated of feature by dissembling nature,  
Deformed, unfinished, sent before my time  
Onto this breathing world scarce half made up -  
And that so lamely and unfashionable  
That dogs bark at me as I halt by them -  
Why, I in this weak piping time of peace  
Have no delight to pass away the time,  
Unless to spy 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.*

The sentiment is easy to understand but few make good on the resolutions it may inspire. Not Richard. He goes about to woe and win the widow of a prince he killed (be it on the battle-field), and when having tired of her he goes to marry his niece, he is undeterred by all the hostility he has provoked in his family, not only by the killings of the two young princes in the Tower. At the end of course he meets his fate, he awaits with dread the coming battle, in his dream he is visited by all those whom he has done wrong and wished by them tomorrows revenge. And the battle takes place and *His horse is slain, and all on foot he fights* and his last words are the famous *A horse! A horse! My Kingdom for a horse!*. And that is it.

Posterity has not looked kindly upon the figure of Richard III, although there have been a few attempts to rehabilitate him, but the problem has been on what basis. It is true that his reputation has been formed and propagated by his enemies, and thus is subject to doubt. But it is a long way to go from doubt as to villainy, on merely principled ground, to actually to prove virtue. Incidentally a body has recently been brought up from the ground, and by radioactive dating indicated to be contemporary with the historical figure, and through genetic analysis of its mitochondrial DNA been linked via descents by females (incidentally the only truly reliable information given by genealogical tables) to a contemporary relative of the fallen king without a horse.

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