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Liam Brooker
Filološko-umetnički fakultet, Kragujevac

POLITICAL COMMENT IN *RICHARD III*

According to the British historian JGA Pocock:

"It was the Greeks who pioneered the writing of history as what it has so largely remained - an exercise in political ironies."

Indeed, individuals such as Thucydides or Polybius are still regarded with respect today as historians of the classical world. Nevertheless, in pre-renaissance medieval Europe, with the depth and character of much classical writing only dimly visible, the idea of history was usually far more limited. Its key genre was the chronicle, a listing of events in chronological order devoid of much analysis or comment. What we today would consider history was one of the many skills rediscovered at the Renaissance.

In the case of English history, we can date this evolution fairly closely. The accession of a new dynasty, the House of Tudor, in 1485, was soon accompanied by the production of a variety of historical works. There are several reasons underlying this development, not least among them the need for the new ruling house to legitimise its claim on the throne following fifty years of intermittent civil war. It is too simplistic, however, simply to see these new works (foremost among them the work Historiae Angliae by the Italian Polydore Vergil) as pieces of political propaganda. The fifteenth century had been a turbulent period in English history, and with new intellectual opportunities afforded by the expansion of Renaissance culture north of the Alps, the so-called Wars of the Roses offered a great deal of material for political and historical analysis.

Of all the figures involved in the politics of this period Richard III is one of the most enduring, an archeptypally 'evil' ruler who is still the source of intense argument. There is even a modern organisation dedicated specifically to rehabilitating his reputation, the 'Richard III Society.' His influence is all the more remarkable when we remember that his rule lasted less than three years, and can be traced partly to the works of the sixteenth century, in which he appears frequently. In writing his own play on the subject, Shakespeare himself had a variety of secondary source material to call upon, including the works of Holinshed and Hall, and perhaps most importantly, the narrative written in about

1514 by Sir Thomas More, one of Europe's great humanist scholars in the early sixteenth century.

Yet, with our modern tendency to compartmentalise studies under neat categories, we are inclined to forget that in the sixteenth century, history was as much a literary enterprise as an attempt to find out 'what really happened'. It is thus profitable to analyse some of the histories written in this period as literary texts, and vice versa, considering abstract notions of the ethics of rule, rather than simply attempts to introduce more sophistication into viewing of the past. The most obvious example of this phenomenon is, of course, the cycle of Shakespearean history plays, from *Richard II* to *Richard III*, dealing with about a century of history. As is well known, Shakespeare felt free to telescope chronologies into the space of a play, alter dates and ages, and tweak the known facts to fit his literary intentions, but nevertheless we still refer to 'history' plays, and to view them merely as literary works is to underplay their intellectual importance.

This is of particular importance when considering the play *Richard III*. The character of Richard is traditionally seen as a representation of a stock stage character of the period, 'the Vice,' a comic personification of evil drawn from morality plays of the period. Certainly Richard possesses many identical characteristics in his appearance, his style of speaking directly to the audience, and his characteristic love of chaos and evil. We thus have a characteristic stage 'villain', an individual who delights in doing wrong, and whose dramatic offspring are seen in any number of characters. The villain in the early twentieth century silent films, who twiddles his moustache and ties young women to railway tracks, is comparable to Richard with his easily recognisable dress and diabolical scheming.

Is Richard, however, more than this? In the above analysis, he is merely an evildoer who happens to achieve the highest office of state. Or can we introduce political analysis into a consideration of Richard - is he also a tyrant? This is not simply a matter of semantics; it cuts to the very core of the play, as this distinction moulds Shakespeare's play into a political commentary on the nature of authority. To draw the distinction between the 'tyrant' and the 'villain' is - in one interpretation at least - to separate public and private vice. *Villain* is a straightforward term, describing an individual or literary character who is morally corrupt. The term *tyrant*, however, is more complex in its implications for a sixteenth century audience. In its original Greek meaning, the tyrant was simply a ruler who seized power and ruled as an autocrat.

Thomas More has already been mentioned as an earlier historian of Richard III. More's most famous work, however, is 'Utopia', a hugely complex consideration of an imagined 'ideal commonwealth.' The modern English word 'Utopia', meaning a perfect state of affairs, is derived from More's work. This land too is ruled by a tyrant, named King Utopus, who, like Richard, usurps power and ru-

les absolutely. Nevertheless, his actions are based on reason, and he establishes More's idealised state. More, as a humanist scholar, had created in Utopus a classical tyrant; in Ancient Greek politics, tyranny was a purely political category which did not exclude the possibility of benevolent dictatorship.

To be considered a tyrant in the sixteenth century, therefore, one had to fulfil more criteria. A medieval ruler was expected to rule in concord with his nobles, absorbing their advice and considering the welfare of the entire body politic. The tyrant, by ignoring these rules, was also ignoring the commonly accepted order of the commonwealth, based upon both right and responsibility. Thus, by implication, the tyrant ruled purely in his own interests, and in doing so injured the state over which he ruled.

The crime of the villain, therefore, will be committed against the individual, whilst that of the tyrant injures the body politic. Whilst this separation may seem a little contrived, it does mirror contemporary political thought. The idea of 'state' had yet to develop out of the idea of a polity - a kingdom - as the personal property of the monarch. If this view seems too simplistic to us today, it was recognised as equally flawed at the time, offer. Political theorists thus created an idea borrowed from ecclesiastical theory. The monarch had two coexistent bodies, one which was mortal, and another, eternal body which descended from ruler to ruler without dying. It could be considered an attempt to render concrete the abstract notion of kingship. When in power, the King was legally the same ruler as his predecessors.

This entirely expedient concept gained new importance when it became increasingly clear that Elizabeth I would die childless, and arguments flared over a suitable successor for her. Its relevance to the question of tyranny and Richard III is rather different, however. The monarch, in the above theory, has two bodies, public and private. It thus follows that if the monarch is possessed of two such distinct bodies, then his private and public behaviour can be similarly considered. If the monarch is a villain, his crimes devolve upon his mortal body; tyranny, on the other hand, is a crime committed by the eternal, political body.

Shakespeare spent much of his working life associating and living with legal experts and jurists, and it is in no way fanciful to argue that he was well aware of this theory and its implications. Nevertheless, it seems unlikely that they would be uppermost in his mind when writing his plays. He was, after all, a working playwright who needed to attract as many customers as possible to remain financially secure. There is, in any case, another objection to this theory of separation. By governing in a manner which was so contrary to both custom and notions of political morality, the tyrant had also demonstrated his moral corruption. Political and private behaviour were, in the sixteenth century, deeply and inextricably linked, since the latter demonstrated the 'measure of a

man' - it is only necessary to consider the nature of *Richard III* from the very outset of Shakespeare's play to see this principle in action. Furthermore, given that the eternal body is by nature inviolable, such base behaviour could only arise from the corporeal, human element of the ruler.

In one sense, therefore, Richard is clearly a villain; his being a tyrant presupposes as such. Such considerations of 'private' and 'public' misdemeanour, however, though attractive, are perhaps inadequate in thoroughly judging the role of *Richard III*. There is, however, another issue at stake. I have suggested that morality is too all-encompassing a concern to allow us to create a separation between Richard as villain and as tyrant. There is, however, also the issue of legitimacy. If Richard can be demonstrated as a usurper in some way - not a legitimate ruler - then he can be reasonably dubbed a tyrant.

In a hereditary monarchy, of course, the principle of legitimacy is an issue of birth; the closest living relation of the monarch is his legitimate heir. Already, however, this proves a problem for Shakespeare. At the outset of *Richard III*, Richard is fourth in line for the throne. The eventual victor, the Duke of Richmond, who becomes Henry VII, is separated by more than fifty degrees. Apart form anything else, this is a dangerous implication to make whilst under the rule of Henry's granddaughter. It also creates a philosophical problem, however. How is Richmond's success, in beating Richard in battle and then ruling successfully, to be reconciled with his hereditary distance?

The solution is to invoke the displeasure of providence. Any man could theoretically achieve the highest office of state using wiles such as Richard's but to be an effective king requires the authority which only the divine can convey. Whilst plotting his rise and seizure of power, Richard is the clever, witty, louche villain who is so familiar to us. However, for all his definite skills in worldly matters, Richard is no king. To this end, his reign is dramatised as a series of crises. So long as Richard is master only of his own destiny, his abilities are unquestionable, used even to persuade a deeply suspicious and hostile Anne Neville to become his wife. When Richard assumes the crown, however, both his control over events and his own composure rapidly deteriorate. Whilst Buckingham, his erstwhile ally, revolts, even his personal affairs are subject to collapse, with Anne Neville describing her life with Richard as 'a prison,' and describing how he is unable to sleep at night, but is wracked with terrible dreams - a sign of impending doom and divine displeasure.

Richard is a tyrant precisely because of his lack of divine authority - he must try to hold power as he has seized it, through purely worldly means , the one element of kingship he can neither acquire through dubious means nor counterfeit. When he meets Richmond on the battlefield, the latter delivers prayers to God for the safety of his men. This stands in opposition to Richard's aggressive oration; whilst this may be a better piece of pre-battle rabble-rousing, Richard

cannot even claim the divine as an ally. At this point in the play, his mental deterioration too is complete. The lack of true control that Richard exerts over his realm extends even to the personal. To use the terms outlined above, the canker which Richard has tried to instil into the body politic has instead affected his body actual; his physical disability was a mere harbinger of this final collapse.

If Richard lacks any true authority - if he is a tyrant - then paradoxically we also have an answer for one of the play's most important questions. If he is not simply a comic-book villain, then why is Richard so very likeable? He murders and deceives, but remains utterly charming almost throughout. This is partly a dramaturgical necessity; to sustain watchable action for several hours requires an interesting central character. It is also possible because we know from the outset Richard's fate - he will lose his crown in death at the Battle of Bosworth. This overthrow is possible, however, because we are fully aware that in the grand scheme of monarchy, Richard is an irrelevancy, an interruption. He cannot be king because he lacks the innate authority of kingliness. To borrow the political philosophy mentioned earlier, he lacks the eternal body of the monarchy.

Shakespeare's *Richard III* is, therefore, not simply a dramatic presentation of evil. It is, of course, partly this, but simply adopting this explanation is to ignore the importance of its underlying philosophy, its consideration of the role of morality and authority in the duty of rule. It is also to ignore a good deal of the significance of sixteenth century literature. Without divisions and specialisation in thought, and with rapid growth in education, and intellectual horizons, far more sophisticated discourses concerning the role of power and authority within a commonwealth could develop. History was not simply the realm of the historian, and politics was not simply examined by philosophers and politicians. We should certainly be careful not to stray too far down an alternative route, and seek precise parallels with contemporary events. Such investigations could and did lead to salutary punishments, and the wise writer would be careful what he commented upon and how he presented his comments. Nevertheless, without acknowledging the presence of such concerns in writers such as Shakespeare, we are in danger of missing much of what is most interesting in his philosophy.