

The literary construction of a monstrous portrait – *King Richard III* by Thomas More and William Shakespeare

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ABSTRACT

Thomas More's narrative *The History of King Richard the Third* (ca. 1514) and William Shakespeare's play *King Richard III* (ca. 1591) may be considered the epitomes of a tradition that has for ever vilified the last Plantagenet monarch of England. Even in later fictional works, it is hard to come across a more distorted and evil character, whose outward appearance faithfully mirrors his inner moral self. Among several other minor or major contributions to this character's vilification, Bernard André and Pietro Carmeliano had presented him as a monster, physically abominable; John Rous had registered his abnormal birth: after two years in his mother's womb, the child was born exhibiting teeth and shoulder-length hair; Polydore Vergil had explicitly accused him of the murder of the Lancastrian Prince of Wales, Henry VI's son.

It is my intention to focus on the way More and Shakespeare exploit and amplify this vituperative historiographic tradition, full of serious accusations, though mostly based on rumour, uncertainties and legendary elements. Within this widely accepted tradition, both authors manage to shape a solid portrait of a monstrous Richard, an *exemplum* not to be imitated or followed, but whose masterly performance, coinciding with the mastery of the rhetorical devices, has never failed to impress successive generations of readers and theatre-goers.

Hunchbacked, withered arm, born with teeth and shoulder-length hair after two years of gestation in his mother's womb, a murderer, a usurper, a monster. Richard III, the last Plantagenet king of England, was thus immortalized by Thomas More and William Shakespeare who, based on previous historiographical texts, created one of the best known characters in English literature.

Since the fifteenth century, the great interest in the wicked uncle who murdered his innocent nephews has given origin to the production of countless works that form the most extensive bibliography ever written on an

English monarch. Two tendencies have emerged: one centred on the horrid epithets commonly used to define Richard III, mainly created by the Tudor writers, and the other on the blurring of those epithets, in an effort to expose a set of incongruities and exaggerations, mostly based on rumour. As a matter of fact, the vilification of the king stems from such legendary and implausible elements that one is compulsively led to doubts, interrogations and even rejections.

Be that as it may, what eventually subsisted was the negative image of someone abominable, whose deeds are perfect analogies of his distorted physical figure. Legend, myth and speculation may indeed easily flourish, once hardly any official record of the reign survived. As a consequence, Richard III assumed forever a fictional dimension, more than any other character in history, in the sense that Richard III became a literary creation, a feat achieved by means of complex rhetorical devices. Fact and fiction have probably never been mixed in such an inextricable way.

Bernard André, Pietro Carmeliano, John Rous and Polydore Vergil originated the monstrous portrait, each one adding further notes of improbability; Thomas More and William Shakespeare consolidated it, by adapting many fantastical details – the first, in his narrative *The History of King Richard the Third* (ca. 1514), the second, in his play *King Richard III* (ca. 1591), although Parts 2 and 3 of *King Henry VI*, centred on other figures, also contain important sketches for a thorough characterization of the monarch.

The way Gloucester is introduced both in the play and in the narrative, will prove to be essential to his evolutionary behaviour. Right from the beginning, deformity is woven with wickedness, and from then on two major and closely intertwined processes develop side by side – the amplification of Richard's negative traits and the vilification of his image.

But, within the fictional world created by More and Shakespeare, whose guidelines seem to be these intertwined processes, as we shall see, another outstanding element may be simultaneously detected. Due to the power of the rhetorical devices, Richard III is great in his wickedness, impressive in his successful achievements, masterly in his active performance, either on the literal stage of the play or on the metaphorical stage of the narrative. He plans, and persuades, and executes always brilliantly, even if the results are catastrophic for almost everyone who surrounds him and eventually for himself.

In More's text, the introduction of the evil protagonist is carefully prepared. Richard's absence in the first seven pages is filled with the presence of his brother, Edward IV, "of visage louelye, of bodye mightie,

stronge, and cleane made” (4/17),¹ whose reign is referred to as a golden time. Here and there, however, subtle references to a future of misrule and sadness soon start haunting the state of prosperity. A sense of antithesis is thus inserted, which, together with metaphor and metonymy, will be used throughout the text. The first allusion, vague as it is, contains the entire disruption awaiting England: “after his [Edward IV’s] decease, by the crueltie, mischiefe, and trouble of the tempestious worlde that folowed” (4/1-3). The second, less vague, announces the most condemnable deed attributed to the future king: “withoute anye respecte of Godde or the worlde, vnnaturallie contrived to bereue them [Edward’s children], not onelye their dignitie, but also their liues” (6/6-7). A third allusion, which follows shortly after, but before Richard Duke of Gloucester makes his appearance in the narrative, refers directly to his deep iniquity: “what manner of manne this was, that coulde fynde in his hearte, so muche mischiefe to conceiue” (6/10-12).

The extraordinary circumstances of his birth function as a sort of prediction, or irrefutable signs, surrounding him with an aura of malevolence since his delivery:

... his mother had so muche a doe in her trauaile, that shee could not bee deliuered of hym vncutte ... hee came into the worlde with the feet forward, as menne bee borne outwarde ... also not vntoed ... (7/23-27)

On the other hand, when Gloucester finally appears as a character, the antithetical effect established between the two York brothers has already given consistency to the subtle allusions, and strengthened the sense of negativity associated with the protagonist. Edward’s “visage louelye, ... bodye mightie, stronge, and cleane made” may therefore be literally contrasted against the crippled Richard: “... little of stature, ill fetured of limmes, croke backed, his left shoulder much higher then his right, hard fauoured of visage ...” (7/19-21)

Whereas More develops a set of insinuations before Gloucester is introduced in the narrative, Shakespeare opens his play *King Richard III* by exhibiting him without a hint of subtleness. The deformity is bluntly underlined, supported by the impact of direct speech. It is Shakespeare’s Richard, himself, who draws his own portrait:

¹ Number 4 refers to the page, number 17 to the line on that page. The same proceeding is used for every quotation of More’s work.

I that am rudely stamped ...

...

I that am curtailed of this fair proportion,
Cheated of feature by dissembling nature,
Deformed, ...

...

... so lamely and unfashionable
That dogs bark at me as I halt by them
(I.1.16-23)

In another soliloquy of *King Henry VI*, another self-portrait is drawn, maybe even more blatantly, combining the elements hitherto seen and bringing together almost all the details fixed by tradition:

Why, Love forswore me in my mother's womb

...

She did corrupt frail Nature with some bribe
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 ...
(Part 3, III.2.153-161)

In every text under consideration here, the insistence on Richard's physical deformity seems to go beyond the mere intention of describing him. From the beginning, we sense a sort of violence in the speech that, in fact, develops in other directions soon after the character makes his appearance.

In More's narrative, the literal antithesis between the two York brothers is undoubtedly an important element, even because it will be present throughout the text, more or less explicitly. The most determinant factor in the protagonist's characterisation is, however, the direct correspondence established between his outer and inner features. The physical portrait finds its almost exact parallel when Gloucester is said to be

... malicious, wrathfull, enuious ... close and secrete, a deepe dissimuler,
lowlye of counteyenance, arrogant of heart, ... dispitious and cruell ...
(7/22-23, 8/7-10)

The possibility of regeneration is totally rejected. The sense of inversion introduced with Richard's birth – "hee came into the worlde with the feet forward" – will be continuously explored, together with the

negative level where he is placed. This literal inversion will indeed assume many metaphorical angles which will result in the shaping of a monster.

In *King Henry VI*, the first reference to young Richard's features comes from Clifford, whose vituperative direct words already encapsulate the strong sense of disruption, inversion and iniquity, anticipating his later complex behaviour:

Hence, heap of wrath, foul indigested lump,
As crooked in thy manners as thy shape.
(Part 2, V.1.157-158)

The same process of parallelism is prolonged in Shakespeare's *King Richard III*. In the first soliloquy, Gloucester, vicious in body and in mind, continues to underline his deformity and to draw, in direct speech, the symbiosis between his outer and inner features found in More's narrative:

I am determinèd to prove a villain
And hate the idle pleasures of these days.
Plots have I laid, inductions dangerous,
...
... I am subtle, false, and treacherous
(I.1.30-37)

Here, the antithesis between the two brothers is also established, although the rhetorical process, when compared with the narrative one, is much more elaborate. The play opens with the same sense of a golden time associated with Edward IV's reign, in opposition to an age of misrule:

Now is the winter of our discontent
Made glorious summer by this son of York,
And all the clouds that loured upon our house
In the deep bosom of the ocean buried.
(I.1.1-4)

The opposition, now established with the recent past when a Lancaster ruled, is naturally projected into a negative future as well, due to Richard's acid words about himself in his self-portrait, which may be seen as anticipating his impending downfall.

On the other hand, the praise that Edward continuously receives throughout More's text, both in a literal and in a metaphorical sense, is almost immediately destroyed in the opening soliloquy by another sort of causticity. The glory, the victories, the prosperity and the sense of joy

achieved by Edward are destitute of all trace of positivity when Richard violently criticises, and even ridicules, the king:

And now, instead of mounting barbèd steeds
To fright the souls of fearful adversaries,
He capers nimbly in a lady's chamber
To the lascivious pleasing of a lute.
(I.1.10-15)

The literary speeches are full of violence whenever Richard is mentioned, and, in the case of the plays, literally shown. Every one of his decisions is said to have a double meaning and every one of his relationships a specific purpose, in an oriented crescendo leading to his complete destruction. Although the capital crimes he is accused of, namely the murders of Henry VI, Clarence and the young Princes in the Tower, are intrinsically condemnable, the amplification of his wickedness and the vilification of his image take place on another level. In fact, the paramount transgression is the way he is, or, better, the way More and Shakespeare tell he is – a dissembler, full of ambition and cruelty, permanently guided by premeditation. It is through a dissection process of his utmost inner characteristics that Richard III becomes a monster. Thus the importance of the parallelism between outer and inner features, and, probably, the authors' insistence on his physical portrait, enabling the visibility of his mind and soul.

Besides the capital crimes attributed to Richard, the assassination of his nephews being the most hideous, three of his actions may exemplify the cold premeditation and the deep ambition that characterise him. In a context of permanent cruelty, the annihilation of Hastings, the imprisonment of Jane Shore and the 'bastardisation' of some members of his family, implicitly accusing the Duchess of York, his own mother, of adultery, definitely deepen the sense of monstrosity because these characters, together with the young Princes, also become distressed victims, no matter the circumstances of their own contingent transgressions.

The emblematic Battle of Bosworth, vividly told by Shakespeare but omitted by More, may be seen as the providential instrument to cease chaos: in fact, the universe governed by the last Plantagenet king had indeed become an aberration, just like its ruling figure. The decisive event in the history of England closes the play and contains Richard III's final and expected punishment, although the king is ultimately allowed a dimension of brave warrior, despite the vituperative process which corrodes his image along the text. Something very different happens, however, in More's narrative. The omission is extraordinarily and paradoxically meaningful

because it is replaced by such a caustic brief allusion that its effect becomes devastating and coincides with the climax of vilification:

... Kinge Richarde ... slain in the felde, hacked and hewed of his enemies
handes, haryed on horseback dead, his here in despite torn and toggged lyke a
cur dogge. (87/4-6)

In fact, the mutilation inflicted on the king's corpse, meaning total opprobrium, deprives him of every sense of decency or respect, as if the reposition of order were thus rendered more effective.

Beyond the factual elements, the historical circumstances and the way each author organises the sequence of events, Richard III's destruction appears therefore as the necessary and desirable epilogue of two works centred on a king masterfully made a masterful monster.

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