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English 1

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A "Furnace-Burning Heart":

Shakespeare's Richard III as Heroic Villain

In 1483, Richard III ascended the throne of England; a century later, reimagined by Shakespeare as a bloody, bunch-backed dissembler with an insatiable ambition toward the English crown, he ruled the Elizabethan stage in one of Shakespeare's most successful plays (Rackin 340)[1]. With an eye toward characterization—and due to a dearth of unbiased historical accounts available, even if one were desired—Shakespeare drew heavily from the dramatized description of Richard in Sir Thomas More's *The History of King Richard III,* then embellished upon it with traits borrowed from Marlowe, Machiavelli, Seneca, and the Vice character of morality plays (Hammond 74-76). Thrusting this immensely powerful creation onto center stage, giving him both a starring role in his own tragedy and a strikingly intimate rapport with his audience, Shakespeare created no mere criminal but a protagonist for the ages: a valiant warrior, brilliant schemer, cynical humorist, and merciless adversary to all who stand between him and the throne. Shakespeare's Richard is as much a hero as he is a villain, an ambition-fueled hybrid of greatness and depravity who conquers the crowd with his implacable force of will and the grand, volcanic engine in his soul.

Though remembered most as the titular character of his own play, we first meet the young man who would become King Richard III in the final act of *The Second Part of King Henry VI.* Introduced as an aggressive, impetuous warrior who does not take kindly to his

enemies' taunts about his deformities, he fights for the White Rose of the House of York alongside his brothers Edward and George and their father, the Duke of York, whose claim to the crown of England spurred the bloody Wars of the Roses. Young Richard is fearless, warlike, and competitive, with a pitch-black sense of humor. Act 1 of *The Third Part of King Henry VI* opens with Edward and a Yorkist ally recounting their martial prowess to the Duke of York and showing him the stains of their enemies' blood; Richard, not to be outdone, memorably one-ups them both by tossing the Duke of Somerset's severed head onto the table and telling it to speak for him. The most enthusiastic proponent of York's claim to the crown, Richard takes great pride in "my warlike father: / Methinks 'tis prize enough to be his son" (*3HVI*[2] 2.1.19-20), and seems to be in turn his father's favorite: Queen Margaret, upon capturing York and twisting the figural knife before stabbing him dead with a literal one, asks, "And where's that valiant crook-back prodigy, / Dicky your boy, that with his grumbling voice / Was wont to cheer his dad in mutinies?" (*3HVI* 1.4.75-77). Richard is, naturally, affected by the death of his father (and, to a lesser extent, that of his young brother, the innocent Edmund). Upon receiving news of York's demise, he utters what will prove to be the key to his nature through the rest of the tetralogy: "I cannot weep, for all my body's moisture / Scarce serves to quench my furnace-burning heart" (*3HVI* 2.1.79-80). That oath becomes the same fire that drives his obsessive ambition for the crown. He does not weep for his deformity: he weaponizes it, declaring that his monstrous body and birth consecrate his villainy; he does not weep for hopelessness in love, but is honed by his envy into a power of focus that makes love a fool's distraction; he does not weep for his father, he sublimates his revenge into his own ambition, no longer a usurper's son but a usurper himself, unleashed upon the greatest game not for the assist but for the sole victory. He is energized, set off like a short fuse, "sudden if a thing comes in his head" (*3HVI* 5.5.84): by the play's end, he

kills the imprisoned King Henry VI, plots fratricide, and finds a new confidant: the audience (*3HVI* 5.6).

That the first of Richard's major soliloquies occurs in Act 3 Scene 2 of *3 Henry VI,* the act after Richard learns of his father's death, does not seem coincidental—one wonders if they had mutually confided their schemes in each other, out of earshot even of Edward and George, or whether this hellishly invigorated Richard simply had no desire until this point to air his private plots at all. Either way, he now speaks them to the audience, both directly and intimately. These extended asides, remarkable in themselves, represent Shakespeare's own greatest stratagem in seizing our attention and allegiance, directing both entirely toward Richard.

When we meet him again in the famous opening soliloquy of *Richard III,* we find a more mature, refined version of his character; if the fevered, rabid froth of his previous speeches has been wiped mostly away, his cunning intellect, cynical wit, and subversively seductive charm make him all the more formidable and dangerous a power. Richard immediately establishes his intimate connection with the audience not only by virtue of the nature of direct address itself, but by the startling carnality of his content. Over one-third of his opening soliloquy describes either sexual exploits or his own deformities; essentially, the first thing that happens in the play is for Richard to speak to us privately, tell us about his body, place himself into a sexual context precisely by claiming that he has no hope in such endeavors, and then invite us to accompany him in his preferred mode of conquest instead, which is to begin by setting his brothers, now Duke of Clarence and King of England, fatally against each other (*RIII* 1.1.12-40). On the surface, this is an exceedingly engaging dramatic device: Richard is a gleefully devious liar and self-described villain who selects us for his confidants, bares to us his innermost thoughts, and is honest and true to us alone. Deeper down, it is outright seduction.

Having been (wittingly or not) on the receiving end of Richard's sly advances, we soon accompany our partner in crime to the scene of his next great performance: he will now execute an elaboration of the same technique to seduce the wrathful Lady Anne. A noblewoman of the influential House of Neville, married into the House of Lancaster (the House of York's arch-enemy), Anne's role in the play is limited almost entirely to this, perhaps its most memorable scene. She exists in Shakespeare for no other reason than to provide Richard with a truly sensational test of his intellect, will, and powers of temptation. The scene is fantastically lurid, the odds impossible: we find Anne vengefully grieving—all spite, spit, and vitriol—over two recent deaths: her husband the Lancastrian prince, killed by Richard and his brothers; and her father-in-law, King Henry VI, killed by Richard alone. Henry is present as a corpse, his wounds bleeding afresh for Richard's arrival (*RIII* 1.2.57-58). After all this about being unable to "prove a lover" (*RIII* 1.1.28), Richard will now attempt the most improbable seduction imaginable, and for only a "secret close intent" (*RIII* 1.1.162) which, while assumed to be political, he never quite defines.

Richard's sexual magnetism—a product primarily of his immense, burning life force; secondarily of his intelligence and humor—is complicated, as is so much of his character, by his nuanced and contradictory relationship to his malformed body: his hunched back, his withered arm, his limp; his birth, feet-first, with teeth. As Richard is both fascinated and repulsed by his own body, so too does he encourage his audience to regard it with a similar mixture of attraction and revulsion, because he understands how this gives him the upper hand. His body sets him apart from society; his separation from society gives him power; his power enforces his relentless will. Every aspect of himself he bends to his own advantage. If it shocks or offends, he will flaunt it, and he will either manipulate or simply bludgeon his detractors into regarding it as

superior, into wanting to either be it or bed it, because in this way he upends and conquers the kingdoms of mundanity and convention.[2] Both by critics and within the plays themselves, he is identified as an actor (Rackin 344), and while this is certainly true, he is more specifically a salesman: the actor in his warrior aspect, who acts not purely for art's sake, but to create desire in others for his personal benefit. Whether this means desire to do what Richard wants, or desire for Richard himself, the game is ultimately the same. The physical war has come to a pause, but Richard cannot sit still; his peacetime salesman's battle for the crown is less overtly violent (he hires others to do his dirty work; the deaths of his marks are all offstage), but no less brazenly bold. The adult Richard is both more cerebral and more impish than the bloodthirsty young man, and this is an intellectual and rhetorical challenge in which he takes a particularly devilish delight. In Richard's seduction of Anne, he masterfully toys with the attraction that is inherent in revulsion, the penetrable film between hatred and desire; their war of wits and wills is an audacious perversion of courtly love, littered with images of Heaven, hell, and earthly sensuality. Whether she accepts his ring purely because she can no longer resist the taboo of his magnetism, or because she imagines a strategic ally in his impressive display of power, the result is the same. He wins, of course.

In his long, gloating soliloquy that follows—Richard sends Anne away so he can tell us at great length how spectacularly this all went—Richard thrills in the exultation of the conquest, in the virtuosic achievement of a victory that impresses even himself, but evidences little interest in the prize: not only does he not plan to "keep her long" (*RIII* 1.2.249), but he does not ever seem to father an heir, and never mentions Anne again until he decides finally to put her to death. Anne comes to deeply regret their marriage, but voices no specific marital complaints other than Richard's nightmares keeping her awake (*RIII* 4.1.69-91). Richard is now invincible; if he can

seduce a woman, and under such outrageous circumstances, he can do anything. Once the seduction is complete, however, she may as well be a trophy on his shelf, a static souvenir of personal triumph but source of no particular pleasure in itself. He may say that villainy was only his second choice of profession after counting out romance, and we sense more than a little jealousy in his repeated, vitriolic mocking of "lustful Edward" (*3HVI* 3.2.129) and anyone else who "capers nimbly in a lady's chamber" (*RIII* 1.1.12)—indeed, his seduction of Anne is almost certainly to outdo Edward's inelegant wooing of Lady Grey (*3HVI* 3.2)—but, his goal attained, the desire quickly fades. Richard's only true lust is conquest—"this earth affords no joy to me / But to command, to check, to o'erbear" (*3HVI* 3.2.165-166)—and not its fruits. But oh, what a joy to him is that conquest. The world may afford him only one pleasure, yet he seems to be the only joyful character in his play, the only one having any fun, the only one in on the great farce of his own existence—and by extension, of our own.

This is part of the great duality of Richard. He is at once attractive and repulsive, remarkably honest (to us and, mostly, himself) and utterly false (to everyone else), powerfully sexual and aggressively disinterested; he is also, as we shall see, both the most immoral and most morally-aware of his circle of ignoble noblemen, both merciless and too merciful for his own good; how fitting, then, that both in the Lady Anne scene and throughout the play, he continually explains and entertains himself in the interplay of the sacred and the profane. This is another facet of his competitive drive: Richard will be the best, or he will be the worst—it scarcely matters which—but he will not fall in with that mediocre rabble of men with "lukewarm blood" (*3HVI* 1.2.34); he will not be outdone. Somerset's head should have told us as much.

It is only fitting that a man of contradictions and extremes should be at once villain and hero. In his book *The Villain as Hero in Elizabethan Tragedy*, Clarence Valentine Boyer initially

defines the villain-hero as simply a villainous character in the role of protagonist (8). In Richard, however, he finds "not only bad qualities, but admirable qualities, and admirable in the highest degree" (85), identifying him as much more than merely an evil central character:

> Richard, besides being the protagonist, the technical hero of the play, has many of the characteristics of the popular hero, the epic hero—"a man distinguished by extraordinary valour and martial achievements; one who does brave deeds; an illustrious warrior."[4] He is fearless, bold, and tremendously intellectual. These are qualities which we cannot help admiring wherever found. (91)

Thus Richard, villain though he may be, fits also the mold of hero; to understand both the humanity and the superhumanity of Shakespeare's Richard is first to banish the simplistic notion that villainy and heroism are either opposite or mutually exclusive. He is heroic certainly not due to his moral choices, but because of what Boyer calls the "elements of greatness in his nature" (86), which far exceed those of ordinary men. His great energy, the towering elemental force of his will, is in particular remarked upon by critics with overwhelming consistency: to Harold Bloom, Richard has "exuberant appeal: endless gusto appears to be his secret, energy that delights and terrifies" (71), and to Phyllis Rackin, he "threatens to subvert the providential moral of his story by the sheer energy and dramatic force of his characterization" (343); he has "the seductive appeal of an irresistible gusto" and "volcanic Renaissance energies" (Rossiter 83); "he cannot rest—that is a main point about him, and his energy is fearful" (Spivack 389); he is "above all gifted with almost superhuman energy of will" (Boyer 81). Inherent in Richard is the greatness both of stature and of deed that defines the epic or classical hero; that his greatness is employed to ends we find morally reprehensible makes him a villain, but does not erase his heroism. In greatness's logical extreme, we stand in awe of Richard's power "because it is as far

beyond the reach of ordinary mortals as is sainthood, and is somehow more attractive to us" (Burton 113), and in this sense of immensity and transcendence, the "poisonous bunch-backed toad" (*RIII* 1.3.260) rises from slime to sublime.

Richard, that enthusiastic proponent of his own extremes, would likely agree. We find again his abhorrence of the mundane in Plato's notion "that great villainy may be more akin to great virtue than mere mediocrity" (Danziger 41); Richard has precisely what George Eliot's *Middlemarch* calls the "sense of a stupendous self and an insignificant world" (615). In this, Richard resembles yet another facet of protagonist: he brushes his humped shoulder with the very definition of the rebellious Romantic hero. Frederick Garber, in "Self, Society, Value, and the Romantic Hero," differentiates the "romantic hero as rebel" from the "true villain" in that "the romantic rebel . . . has a social feeling that prompts him to set himself up as an antagonist, an antisocial being who works under a compulsion to affirm the validity of his own values. The true villain feels no such compulsion because he is already so secure in his standards that ambiguities and ambivalences cannot bother him" (329). Richard presents himself as a villainous force of nature, untouched by ambiguities, but it is precisely his announcements of his nefarious role that suggest a strong interest in continuing to define his values against those of society. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine a more succinct and potent distillation of the Romantic hero's assertion of the primacy of self and its distinction from society than Richard's "I am myself alone" (*3HVI* 5.6.83), though the line is not delivered under the most heroic of circumstances: Richard speaks over the body of Henry VI, whom he just stabbed to death. He will repeat this sentiment in the final act of *Richard III* as he wakes from nightmare on Bosworth Field, his coming battle cursed in dreams by the ghosts of his victims—but this time his Romantic's

affirmation is a parodic weak echo, like an anxious, stuttered prayer: "Richard loves Richard, that is, I am I" (*RIII* 5.3.195).

As the play progresses toward this end and the "worm of conscience" picks up pace in its secret begnawing of Richard's soul (*RIII* 1.3.233), he loses some stature as both Vice and villain-hero: the mustache-twirling is subdued; the great, hellish soul-engine begins to misfire. Yet what moves him from one model of hero moves him toward another. More human, no longer so certain of his standards, by the end of his murderous career his secret misgivings and valiant final battle slide him further toward the standard of the Romantic hero. Richard, the consummate self-made villain, cannot seem ever to escape heroism completely.

All great heroes must have a tragic flaw, and Richard's, so often identified as ambition, is nothing of the sort. Ambition, rather, is his greatest source of strength, both the fuel and the flash of that "furnace-burning heart." Richard *is* his ambition, he cannot exist without it; even his entry into life is implicitly presented as a fact of his audacity and impetuous drive: the mythological quality of his birth suggests not a human nativity, but a half-formed changeling that crashes out into the world through sheer will. Young Richard may have run on wrath in days of war, but the adult Richard cannot live now without his ambition to the crown, as it is this that gives him a single-minded focus so intense it overrules the chaos of his body, this that gives him power and will and purpose; it is a fire that, once sparked, consumes him until he seems made entirely of fire. It is his life, his desire, his joy and his tormenting addiction—he is "addicted to nothing else" (Spivack 390)—and without Richard's "unrighteous, unrestrained ambition acting as a great, overmastering passion" (Shepherd 342), there is simply no story at all. An unambitious Richard would be left impotently descanting on his own deformity (*RIII* 1.1.27), content in idle malcontent. His flaw is instead the Romantic hero's flaw, "the one moral or decent aspect in a

nature that tries hard to be unsociable or wicked" (Garber 332): his conscience. Richard falters not because he is a monster, but because, to sustain the balance of his violence, he is not monstrous enough.

Richard's conscience is with him from at least his opening soliloquy. He understands the roles available to him, and of his own free will he consciously selects villainy, so boldly explicit in his choice that he announces to the audience he is "determinèd to prove a villain" (*RIII* 1.1.30); in a later aside, he compares himself to the Vice (*RIII* 3.1.83-84). We should have suspected him of conscience from the start: here is a man who believes in the existence of abject villainy, a man to whom good and evil are not one and the same. For all his cunning treachery toward the gulls he delights in conquering, in his remarkable honesty to himself—and to us, his audience of confidants—he never once attempts to frame his actions as being righteous, good, or even justifiable beyond political imperative. Even his deformity, presented by Richard as a cause, is never quite used as an excuse; it is a weapon now, a source of more power than pathos. That he names himself a villain demonstrates a mental differentiation between right and wrong, an awareness of morality that paradoxically exceeds that of his victims,[5] who vilify Richard for his crimes as they themselves go about their business of shameless self-advancement, albeit on a far less virtuosic level. Richard, in his formidable intellect, surely knows how the Vice's story ends; so do we, and we know also that Richard's position as a villain who understands the villainy of his actions is unsustainable: we wait for the wheels to fall off, to see how long and how far the titanic force of his ambition can resist the entropy of conscience. One thing is certain: Richard goes to his doom. His course has been charted from the first act, his "vitalism transmogrified into the death drive" (Bloom 71); but with the Wars of the Roses in a temporary lull, what role other than that of the villain could contain the immensity of his life force, or

provide him the stage upon which to unleash the burning will that drives and defines him? For Richard, to live boldly—the Romantic rebel's assertion of self against society—is worth even death; better to do and then to die than to linger in mediocrity, one of those idle "men like one another" (*3HVI* 5.6.82) whiling away the time in "this weak piping time of peace" (*RIII* 1.1.24).

Act 4 Scene 1, Richard's first scene after his acceptance of the crown, is the beginning of his end: here is the first mention of Richmond (*RIII* 4.1.45) and also of the "timorous dreams" (*RIII* 4.1.89), both of which foreshadow the fateful Battle of Bosworth Field. In the next scene Richard "gnaws his lip," which Catesby announces, perhaps in purposeful flattery, as anger (*RIII* 4.2.29). It is more likely anxiety: having attained the throne, Richard's game has changed from offense to defense. He is out of his element; his days of battling, questing, ascending are over, and his hero's heart, suited to striving, is uncertain. There is nothing more to conquer: in achieving his greatest victory, he loses his life's sole joy. His hellish ambition burns low, and with it, his vitality ebbs. He is no longer himself. Conscience—Richard's secret, fatal flaw, the only thing that can undo him utterly—creeps in. Before, he killed for ambition and the exercise of his intellect, for a kind of terrible sport; now, he must kill to keep the crown, because he must keep the crown to survive. The prize for his murderous schemes is now his own life, "so far in blood that sin will pluck on sin" (*RIII* 4.2.67). His hired assassination of the young Princes in the Tower is a turning point. Like all of his murders by proxy, it is politically expedient: Richard systematically eliminates rival claimants (such as the child princes), opposing factions, and dithering allies, because they either impede his way to the crown or threaten his ability to survive wearing it. This time, however, there is a dark pall that settles over Richard's kingdom: the death of the princes is clearly meant by Shakespeare to be at last the "one unforgivable crime" (Boyer 95) that makes us question our allegiance with our erstwhile co-conspirator, a loss not only of

innocent lives but in a sense of Richard's innocence as well; so too the death of Anne, which sees Richard finally destroy the trophy of his giddy earlier triumph. She was his first crown—the thrill of the fight, the disinterest in the prize—but then, at least, he had still the crown itself on the horizon. She is killed to make way for another outlandish seduction, this one necessary to secure the throne, but in this second courtship he is merely clever, not brilliant. Those days of gloating over an impossible seduction, where all dreams of dominion at once became attainable, seem now long gone.

Enter Richmond. He is from a Tudor historical perspective[6] the most important character in the play, and yet "a pallid figure with a minimal part" (Rackin 339). Richmond is blandly heroic, a kind of Tudor Dudley Do-Right, here to save the day we are not entirely sure we want saved. He comes with his army to usurp the usurper; he is commonly aligned with God and righteousness, because he speaks constantly of God and righteousness—but so does Richard, of course, when it suits his advantage. Nonetheless, we think we know a hero when we see one, and Richmond's monochrome morality is comfortingly average after all this time with Richard. If we side with Richmond, we imagine ourselves rescued from Richard's ambiguities. We can watch, safely detached, as our former ally awakens from nightmare in his tent, sweaty and conscience-stricken, alone, unnerved, and undone on war's morning in a losing battle with his tormenting guilt (*RIII* 5.3.189-218); we can listen at a distance to his brazen oration to his troops, where his "Let us to it pell-mell— / If not to Heaven, then hand in hand to hell!" (*RIII* 5.3.330-331) so fittingly mirrors a line from his very first appearance*:* "If not in heaven, you'll surely sup in hell" (*2HVI* 5.1.216). Here again is open war, and here again is Richard the valiant warrior, restored to his venturous youth, leaving life as he entered it. Even unhorsed he is undaunted, "seeking for Richmond in the throat of death" (*RIII* 5.4.5-6), killing five Richmonds on his way to the sixth

(*RIII* 5.4.11-12). This is a dramatic reversal as sly as Richard himself: the master thespian, the villain and dissembler, armed now with no artifice but his sword and his fortitude, here battles and kills five decoys—actors—employed to their deaths by the shining hero, Richmond. But it is too late for our sympathies—or so we tell each other. Richard dies in combat at Richmond's hand. Publicly, we call Richmond the hero, praise his righteousness, assure society and ourselves that we are relieved our horrific run with the wolves has ended and "the bloody dog is dead" (*RIII* 5.5.2). Privately, we are less certain: true to the play's original title, this has the whiff of tragedy; we sense, as keenly as we allow ourselves, that something great and bold and untamed has gone out of the world. Boyer calls it a sensation of "waste," that it saddens us to imagine Richard "having turned his talents and enormous energy—capable of so much good in the world—to evil ends resulting in his own death" (94). This is not untrue, though it does not account for the whole of the sensation: our primary loss is not a theoretical Richard as he could have been, but the devil we know, who charmed us as much spite of his perversity as because of it; even in the face of his career of blood and treachery, in our heart of hearts we miss at least a little our bunch-backed toad, whose brave, audacious, profane vivacity had more life than could beat in the bosoms of a thousand Richmonds. And thus, our public and private morality neatly bifurcated, our thoughts dived down to our souls (*RIII* 1.1.41), Shakespeare's grand heroic villain has one last exultant triumph, and that is to make Richards of us all.

Notes

1. Thank you to Professor Brian Asis for his support and enthusiasm.

2. *2HVI*, *3HVI*, and *RIII* are here used in citations to reference *The Second Part of King Henry VI*, *The Third Part of King Henry VI*, and *The Tragedy of Richard III*, respectively.

3. Inspired in part by Bernard Spivack's notion that since Richard "cannot abolish the disabilities with which others taunt him throughout three plays, he will disable the taunters and triumph over the world of grace and beauty" (390).

4. Boyer's citation for this definition reads simply "New Eng. Dict."

5. At least, so far as we know. One might imagine that the "deep-revolving witty Buckingham" (*RIII* 4.2.45), for instance, could have an inner life in which he, too, considers his chosen role in the proceedings as he schemes for power—but Shakespeare scarcely invites us to consider it, as this is Richard's story almost exclusively, and all set against him are hopelessly outmatched.

6. The Richmond character is Henry Tudor, Earl of Richmond. He becomes King Henry VII, the first Tudor king.

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