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Article

Addressing the Audience and Making History: Soliloquies in *Richard III*

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Abstract: Few plays make such varied or such bravura use of soliloquies as Shakespeare's *Richard III*. The opening forty-one-line monologue by Richard himself allows an actor to show what he can do and to capture his audience and offers a view on processes of historical causation: having started with six uses of the word 'our', Richard not only moves on to say 'I' nine times (supplemented by 'my' and 'me'), but also explains that his plans are going to affect the future of others, too. His plot to set his brothers against each other is going to change the course of history; moreover, it will do so by using the stalking-horse of a prophecy, a form of speech which presumes that the future is already unalterably fixed. Other soliloquies in the play also offer insights into historical process. This paper examines the differing tonality of the play's soliloquies and the kind of information offered in them to argue that while *Richard III* officially subscribes to Tudor myths of the past, it not only implicitly urges the audience to a more sceptical take, but in fact raises questions about whether we can ever be sure about how history was made.

Keywords: historical causation; prophecy; Tudor myth

1. Introduction

Although the reign of Richard III lasted only two years (from 1483 to 1485), it saw some of the most dramatic events in English history, and yet we know surprisingly little about the most important of them. The king almost certainly ordered the deaths of his two young nephews, but we cannot be quite sure of that, let alone of how and when they died. Shakespeare's *Richard III* ostensibly fills in the gaps in the story, but at the same time forces us to question even what we think we know. The play achieves this destabilisation of epistemological certainty through the use of soliloquies which showcase different ways of effecting historical change; in David Bevington's terms, 'Soliloquy has found a way to express a crucial turning point in English history' (Bevington 2018, p. 82).

Few plays make such varied or such bravura use of soliloquies as *Richard III*. The opening forty-one-line monologue by Richard himself has become almost as famous as 'To be or not to be'; uses to which it has been put include an advert for camping equipment which tweaked its first line to 'Now is the winter of our discount tents', which may be frivolous but testifies to its reach and recognisability. Laurence Olivier interpolated some lines from *Henry VI*, Part 3 into his filmed version of the play, but the speech is in fact perfect without them; it not only allows an actor to show what he can do and to capture his audience, but it also offers a view on processes of historical causation, because having started with six uses of the word 'our', Richard not only moves on to say 'I' nine times (supplemented by 'my' and 'me'), but also explains that his plans for himself are going to affect the future of others, too; as Wolfgang Clemen observes, 'the great opening soliloquy, delivered in prologue-like fashion by Richard alone on the stage, falls into three distinct parts: in lines 1–13 he surveys the situation; in 14–27 he describes his own appearance and character; and in 28–40 he tells of his future plans' (Clemen 2005, p. 2). His plot to set his brothers against each other is going to change the course of history; moreover, it will do so by using the stalking-horse of a prophecy, a form of speech which presumes that the future



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is already unalterably fixed. Other soliloquies in the play also offer insights into historical process. The First Murderer, left alone with the corpse of Clarence after the defection of his colleague, resolves that 'I will away, / For this will out'; he is presumably not going to talk himself and neither is Second Murderer, but murder will apparently out even where there is no visible agency. The whole of act 3, scene 6 is a soliloquy by a scrivener about the difference between the official narrative and what actually happened, while 4.3 opens with what might initially appear to be an eye-witness account of one of the greatest mysteries in English history, the fate of the Princes in the Tower, but maddeningly slides into a poetic and completely unconvincing description of remarks which seem most unlikely to have been made by two murderers. There is a more credibly elegiac tone to Queen Margaret's eight-line soliloquy in 4.4, but that essentially confirms her status as a witness of history rather than (at any rate at this point) a maker of it, while Richmond, who really does shape history in a dramatic and decisive way, uses his soliloquy in 5.3 purely to present himself as virtuous and pious in his private capacity. This paper examines the differing tonality of the play's soliloquies and the kind of information offered in them to argue that while *Richard III* officially subscribes to Tudor myths of the past, it not only implicitly urges the audience to a more sceptical take but in fact raises questions about whether we can ever be sure about how history was made.

2. 'Now Is the Winter of Our Discontent'

The opening speech of *Richard III* is a soliloquy, and a long one at that—so long that (following Clemen's lead but not precisely his divisions) I propose to analyse it in sections, beginning with the first thirteen lines:

Now is the winter of our discontent
 Made glorious summer by this sun of York,
 And all the clouds that loured upon our house
 In the deep bosom of the ocean buried.
 Now are our brows bound with victorious wreaths,
 Our bruised arms hung up for monuments,
 Our stern alarums changed to merry meetings,
 Our dreadful marches to delightful measures.
 Grim-visaged war hath smoothed his wrinkled front,
 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. (Shakespeare 1968, 1.1.1–13)

There are a number of ways of considering this speech and a number of points to note about it for the purposes of my argument. Perhaps the first thing to observe is that Richard is not only speaking these words in front of us, but must be understood as doing so: whatever modern film directors may choose to do with soliloquies, we must not assume that we are being given direct access to a character's thoughts. James Hirsh has argued that 'Plentiful, conspicuous and unambiguous evidence of various sorts demonstrates that soliloquies in Shakespeare's plays and in those of his fellow late Renaissance dramatists represented the spoken words of characters rather than interior monologues' (Hirsh 2012, p. 214), and in fact we are specifically *not* allowed to see what Richard is thinking when he declares that he wants Anne 'not all so much for love / As for another secret close intent / By marrying her which I must reach unto' (1.1.157–9). Because soliloquies must be understood as performed rather than thought, the sound of the speech might thus be important as well as its content; it is not out of the question that Richard might be deceiving himself or trying to persuade himself rather than simply declaring what he knows or thinks to be true; and any puns have to work aurally as well as on the page, as sun/son does. It would therefore not be a surprise if there were points at which we could see various rhetorical forms and patterns being deployed in support of the sense, but it is perhaps less to be expected that in fact sound cuts *against* sense: the double alliteration of 'dreadful marches to delightful

measures' suggests a similarity when the whole point is dissimilarity, and 'the lascivious pleasing of a lute' is not usually heard in performance, any more than the limping Richard illustrates his reference to capering by doing so; although Genevieve Love has commented brilliantly on the ways in which this speech 'depicts dynamic scenes that put Richard in motion' (Love 2019, p. 147), they do so metaphorically rather than literally. It is a bravura performance, but, in some crucial ways, an unconvincing one.

In fact, the unconvincingness of these lines is part of their point. The second thing I want to stress is that these words were first spoken in a particular place and at a particular historical moment. Richard Wilson argues that this would crucially have inflected their meaning, since he contends that the hunchbacked Richard III would have reminded Shakespeare's first audiences of the hunchbacked Robert Cecil: 'Richard's analysis of the end of the War of the Roses could as well describe the difficulty facing England's war party in the wake of the Armada, when "all the clouds that loured" upon the house of Cecil were "In the deep bosom of the ocean buried"' (Wilson 2006, p. 104). The speech certainly seems to stress its own contemporaneity by beginning both its first two sentences with the word 'Now' and repeating it again in line 10. But in doing so, it also gives hostages to fortune by invoking a 'now' even more present and immediate than the political situation, because any mention of weather in an outdoor theatre risks inviting comparison between what a character says is happening and what the audience can all too easily observe for themselves. This seems to be a risk that Shakespeare was willing and indeed perhaps eager to take: the storm scene in *King Lear* depends entirely on the audience's willingness to believe in conditions which they were, with luck, unlikely to be actually experiencing on a summer afternoon. By referring in the second line of *Richard III* to the sun coming out, Shakespeare has thrown himself entirely on the mercy of the elements, and has in effect invited comment from them and from the audience on whether the situation as described by Richard is the same as the situation as experienced in the theatre.

This is typical of the play's attitude to historiography: events are described in ways with which those caught up in them may or may not concur, but which nevertheless take on the status of authorised versions. The potential gap between the weather we hear about and the weather we are sitting in is echoed by another potential gap between what we hear and what we experience as the soliloquy progresses:

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 an ambling wanton nymph;
I, that am curtailed of this fair proportion,
Cheated of feature by dissembling Nature,
Deformed, unfinished, 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—
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. (1.1.14–31)

This is the point at which Richard moves from 'our' to 'I', a word which he uses six times (lest anyone suppose that a soliloquy is by nature a form in which a character is likely to say 'I' a lot, it is worth noting that the 'To be or not to be' soliloquy in *Hamlet* contains not a single instance of 'I' or 'me', and 'my' occurs only after Hamlet has noticed the presence of Ophelia). Despite Richard's professed reluctance to 'descant on mine own deformity',

that is exactly what these sixteen lines allow him to do, and in many productions, they have allowed the actor to establish exactly what kind(s) of disability he is proposing to affect. Not until the casting of Arthur Hughes for the Royal Shakespeare Company in 2022 is any actor with a real disability known to have been cast for the part in a major professional production. From Richard Burbage onwards, they have all been able-bodied actors wearing a hunchback, adopting a limp, or using crutches, though Antony Sher developed back trouble as a result of his performance at Stratford-upon-Avon and Kenneth Branagh let it be known that his first move when he played Richard at the Crucible Theatre in Sheffield was to consult an orthopaedic surgeon in the hope of sparing himself the same fate; however, so central is ‘the performance of the performance of disability’ to the role that Paul Menzer suggests that publicising this supposed fear could have been a publicity ploy (Menzer 2015, pp. 151, 154). This opening speech is the actor’s opportunity to define and showcase how he will convey Richard’s ‘deformity’, as entertainingly shown in Branagh’s film *In the Bleak Midwinter*, in which actor after actor comes on to imitate the mannerisms of Laurence Olivier’s Richard as their audition piece, and the three line-opening trochees of ‘I, that’ (twice) and ‘Cheated’ offer a chance to underline the idea of an individual deviating from the norm, in ways that underline the force of Genevieve Love’s ingenious analysis of how ‘Richard establishes a world of variable difference’ (Love 2019, p. 131). But to flaunt the skill with which one acts ‘deformity’ is a very different thing from being a person with an actual ‘deformity’, and the disjunction between the two can be glimpsed in an early modern anecdote about a female spectator whose response to Burbage’s performance in the role was to send him a note making an assignation, as Marjorie Garber highlights (Garber 2002, p. 63). That story may not necessarily be true, but it was obviously considered credible, and the handsome actor who is pretending to be hideous becomes another of the ways in which the play is not showing us what it tells us it is showing us.

The final section of the opening soliloquy moves on from Richard’s person and his private feelings to his part in public affairs:

Plots have I laid, inductions dangerous,
By drunken prophecies, libels, and dreams,
To set my brother Clarence and the King
In deadly hate the one against the other;
And if King Edward be as true and just
As I am subtle, false, and treacherous,
This day should Clarence closely be mewed up
About a prophecy which says that G
Of Edward’s heirs the murderer shall be.
Dive, thoughts, down to my soul—here Clarence comes! (1.1.32–41)

Here is a disconnect of another kind, centring on the difference between what ‘G’ will convey to King Edward (George, the first name of his brother the Duke of Clarence) and what the audience can easily guess it must actually stand for: the initial letter of the ducal title of Gloucester borne by Richard himself, who, we thus learn, is planning the destruction of his nephews as well as his brother. Richard prefaces this disclosure with reference to two suggestively varying ways of representing and understanding events: he himself has created ‘plots’ and ‘inductions’, two terms connected with the theatre which here take on metatheatrical force, but the tactics through which his strategy will be accomplished belong to the rather different order of ‘drunken prophecies, libels, and dreams’. Plots and inductions speak of deliberate control, effectively figuring Richard as dramatist and Edward and Clarence as his puppets; prophecies, libels, and dreams are different from each other but all relate in similar ways to external events, in that they all involve a marked degree of interpretation of what happens (or will happen) rather than even pretending to any kind of objective recording process. The person who lays plots and inductions influences history; the person who prophesies, dreams, or concocts libels is influenced by it. Traditional historiography foregrounds individual agency (usually male agency), but *Richard III* offers a more agnostic approach in which the causes and processes of historical

change are riddled and complex, and human reaction to them provisional and subjective. Not for nothing do so many crucial scenes of the play take place at night, with Clarence, Lord Stanley, and Richard all having dreams which may simply foretell what is to come but could equally help determine it by putting the dreamers into a particular frame of mind.

Richard III is fundamentally ironic: Robert Ornstein observes that the words of other characters such as Hastings and Buckingham are undercut by their imperfect grasp of the situation, as when 'Buckingham declares (more truly than he knows) that he and Richard know each other's faces but not each other's hearts' (Ornstein 1972, p. 70), and Moody E. Prior notes that '*Richard III* is more thoroughly permeated by suggestions of a providential order and the operations of divine retributive justice than any of the other history plays' (Prior 1973, p. 43) but that Shakespeare seems unable to fully subscribe to the idea that everything is under divine control: 'To the strict providentialist, God's justice is not only beyond human power to comprehend in every instance, but also inexorable. . . It appears likely that Shakespeare refused to accept the total rigor of this view' (Prior 1973, p. 57). This ironic, sceptical perspective on events leads to a tentative and noncommittal form of historiography for which the soliloquy is the perfect vehicle, foregrounding the subjectivity of individuals but also making their thoughts and impressions take on the fixed shape of spoken words in the patterned and closed form of verse. We see thoughts becoming concrete and sentences which might have had many possible endings settling into one final and definite unit of syntax, rhythm, and sense. We see, and participate in, the writing of the historical record.

3. 'False, Fleeting, Perjured Clarence'

This sense of history being shaped in front of us is also created by a speech which is not technically a soliloquy but shares some of the qualities of the form: the final part of Clarence's description of his dream about drowning to the Keeper of the Tower of London:

No, no, my dream was lengthened after life.
O then began the tempest to my soul!
I passed, methought, the melancholy flood,
With that sour ferryman which poets write of,
Unto the kingdom of perpetual night.
The first that there did greet my stranger soul
Was my great father-in-law, renowned Warwick,
Who spake aloud, 'What scourge for perjury
Can this dark monarchy afford false Clarence?'
And so he vanished. Then came wandering by
A shadow like an angel, with bright hair
Dabbled in blood, and he shrieked out aloud,
'Clarence is come—false, fleeting, perjured Clarence,
That stabbed me in the field by Tewkesbury.
Seize on him, Furies, take him into torment!' (1.4.43–57)

Clarence offers a vision of a situation about which almost nobody (with the possible exception of those who have been pronounced dead and resuscitated) can offer credible personal testimony: post-mortem sensations, including a journey to an apparent afterlife. But this apparent glimpse of what is to come may in fact tell us more about what has been, for in 'Shakespeare's Clarence: The Medieval Shell-Shocked Soldier', Linhan Gan argues that Clarence's vision of a literal hell to come is informed by the metaphorical hell of his battle experience: 'So far as Clarence is concerned, the survival into a post-war era, rather than enabling him to rejoice in "piping time of peace", paradoxically catapults him to an incomprehensible future that is haunted by the ghost of the unresolved past' (Gan 2021, p. 64). The speech also makes history as well as offering a glimpse of it, because Clarence's description of himself has stuck in a way that Shakespeare could scarcely have foreseen; among many other reuses of those three damning adjectives, Michael Hicks's 1980 biography of the duke is called *False, Fleeting, Perjur'd Clarence* (Hicks 1980). The

Shakespearean phrase has shaped historians' image of Clarence and has not been contested in the way that the actions of Richard himself have been.

The most striking thing about this speech, however, is its ideological promiscuity. The landscape is clearly that of the pagan underworld rather than the Christian hell, but Prince Edward of Westminster, the Lancastrian heir, is 'like an angel', even though he is apparently in a position to give orders to the Furies. That he does so might draw our attention to Warwick's description of the ambiguous location as 'this dark monarchy'. Technically, the classical hell was indeed a monarchy, ruled over by a deity known variously as Pluto, Dis, or Erebus; Shakespeare would refer to this story in *The Winter's Tale* and it would have been well known to all those of his audience with a grammar school education. But the phrase savours of a political situation which still obtained in the late sixteenth century just as it had a hundred years earlier and hints at the kind of contemporary applicability which would soon get both Shakespeare and Jonson into trouble in *Richard II* and *Sejanus*, respectively. Richmond, the good guy of *Richard III*, was the queen's grandfather and Shakespeare is certainly adhering to the contours of the Tudor myth, but he has smuggled in a quiet reminder that Clarence's personal future shares a shape with the political future of England, and the ghostly Prince Edward of Westminster, once the heir to the English crown, might remind us that the ageing Elizabeth had no heir.

It is also worth noting what Clarence does *not* talk about here. Although he correctly predicts that he will die, the potential threat posed by his bloodline will continue, because he leaves behind two children, a daughter called Margaret (the future Countess of Salisbury) and a son, Edward, whose title of earl of Warwick in the right of his mother Isabel Neville was unaffected by his father's disgrace and who 'Whichever way it was considered. . . was as royal as they came' (Amin 2020, p. 64). Although he was well treated by both Edward IV and Richard III, the young earl of Warwick's Yorkist blood caused him to be seen as a serious threat by Henry VII, who first locked him up—John Ashdown-Hill declares that 'In effect, he became the third "prince in the Tower"' (Ashdown-Hill 2015, p. 95)—and then judicially murdered him after the pretender Lambert Simnel had masqueraded as Warwick with such success that he was actually crowned king in Dublin Cathedral. Warwick's sister Margaret survived the reign of Henry VII, but she too was seen as a threat by the Tudors and in 1541, at the age of 67, she was beheaded by Henry VIII. It is no surprise that the play does not want to talk much about Clarence's children, since to remember them would entirely undercut the supposed contrast between Richard III and the Tudors, but Clarence's reference to 'renowned Warwick' and his invocation of a dead prince named Edward do smuggle in a potential reminder that the accession of Henry VII did not finish the story and did not lead to universal peace and love.

After Clarence has met the death he foresees, one of his murderers also has a vision of the future:

Second Murderer. I would he knew that I had saved his brother!

Take thou the fee and tell him what I say,

For I repent me that the Duke is slain. *Exit.*

First Murderer. So do not I. Go, coward as thou art.

Well, I'll go hide the body in some hole

Till that the Duke give order for his burial;

And when I have my meed, I will away,

For this will out, and then I must not stay. (1.4.279–86)

Second Murderer repents and First Murderer does not, but it is First Murderer who is afforded the luxury of a soliloquy, an unusual privilege for someone of his class and with so minor a role. In it, he declares his resolve to conceal the body temporarily and then depart for an unspecified location because 'this will out'. How will it? Presumably neither First Murderer himself nor the repentant Second Murderer is going to advertise what they have done, and the traditional test of cruentation—the phenomenon of a murdered body bleeding afresh in the presence of the murderer—cannot apply here because Clarence was drowned and therefore there is no wound for him to bleed from. The proverbial phrase

‘Murder will out’ implies that no agency is required; the fact of murder speaks with a voice of its own which is invariably heard and attended to. Sometimes, the presence of a murdered body makes the deed obvious, but Clarence’s corpse will show no visible signs of violence and those of the Princes in the Tower were not found until at least the seventeenth century (and there is only a very tentative identification of the bones that were then proposed as theirs); nevertheless, they rapidly came to be considered murder victims. First Murderer and Second Murderer both have agency, as demonstrated by the fact that they are in the same situation but have made different choices, and both have voice, but Murder, disembodied and invisible though it may be, seems also to have agency and voice and to affect how history is made and written.

4. ‘Upon Record, or Else Reported’

It is the question of *writing* history that is central to an apparently casual conversation between the new King Edward V and the Duke of Buckingham:

Prince Edward. I do not like the Tower, of any place.

Did Julius Caesar build that place, my lord?

Buckingham. He did, my gracious lord, begin that place,
Which, since, succeeding ages have re-edified.

Prince Edward. Is it upon record, or else reported
Successively from age to age, he built it?

Buckingham. Upon record, my gracious lord.

Prince Edward. But say, my lord, it were not registered,
Methinks the truth should live from age to age,
As ‘twere retailed to all posterity,
Even to the general all-ending day. (3.1.68–78)

Kai Wiegandt observes of this exchange, ‘at the very centre of *Richard III*, Shakespeare inserted a dialogue on the very questions of whether historical documents give later generations access to the past, and how these documents should be interpreted’ (Wiegandt 2020, p. 332). Noting that ‘Buckingham associates reliability with the written record, Prince Edward with the oral report’ (Wiegandt 2020, p. 334), he argues that

truthfulness is inherent neither exclusively to oral reports nor to written records, and neither exclusively to historicizing nor to presentist readings of these reports and records. This implication is supported by Richard’s breaking of the fourth wall in his asides: he lays bare the theatrical situation of an actor speaking to an audience in words that are both spoken and scripted. Prince Edward’s praise of oral speech is scripted. The script, in turn, becomes invisible in the performance of the spoken word—including Buckingham’s pronouncement that the written word is the medium of truth. The dialogue between Edward and Buckingham thus metatheatrically reveals the history play’s complex role in the transition from oral to written history. Although the theatre relies on written scripts and these scripts rely on written materials such as Holinshed’s *Chronicles*, performing a history play like *Richard III* was also a continuation of oral history with new means: a form of popular oral history educating those who did not have access to written history. (Wiegandt 2020, pp. 335–6)

This is a provocative and sophisticated reading whose implications are worth pursuing. Oral history depends on what is remembered by the speaker; it may well privilege what is relevant to the speaker and it may also acquire new meanings in new contexts. Shakespeare himself might, for instance, have remembered that when he was growing up, the tallest tower at Warwick Castle (where Clarence’s son Edward of Warwick had been born) was called Caesar’s Tower; either Caesar was a very busy builder or his was a name likely to accrue to impressive buildings in ways which might or might not indicate any genuine connection with them. It is also worth noting that although both Wiegandt and the Penguin edition term the younger speaker in this debate ‘Prince Edward’, that is a misnomer: even

though he was never crowned, he is in fact King Edward V, as attested by the fact that Henry VIII's son (and Queen Elizabeth's half-brother) became King Edward VI until he died in his teens in 1553. The oldest audience members in the 1590s might just remember that boy-king and observe some suggestive parallels between him and the Edward V of the play, particularly the fact that the latter's interest in Julius Caesar suggests that he, like Edward VI, had received a Humanist education ([Hadfield 2005](#), pp. 127–29). Anyone who had seen the earlier plays in the tetralogy, or even had been paying attention to speeches by Clarence and Margaret earlier in *Richard III* itself, would certainly be likely to recall that Prince Edward of Westminster had also once been heir to the crown, and perhaps to know that Richard III's son Edward of Middleham would also die young and that Clarence's son Edward of Warwick would be killed by Henry VII. They might think too of Edward of Woodstock, better known as the Black Prince, whose early death precipitated his son Richard II onto the throne and could thus be seen to be a root cause of the conflict between Lancaster and York, or Edward Courtenay, Earl of Devon, a grandson of Princess Catherine of York who had been touted as a suitable husband for either Mary Tudor or her sister Elizabeth but had instead died abroad at the age of 29. Wiegandt is certainly right to observe that 'Prince Edward's praise of oral speech is scripted', but it is also scripted to be delivered by a character whose name and status situate him in a long line of princes and kings called Edward who would either fail to inherit the crown to which they were heir or would wear it for only a very short time. Again, any political or historiographical lesson that Shakespeare's audiences might have detected in this scene is thus one that they might also have been tempted to apply more widely and to see as relevant to their own century as well as to the preceding one.

5. What the Scrivener Saw

A sense of contemporary relevance might be felt even more strongly during arguably the most terrifying soliloquy in the play, one that occupies an entire scene by itself and again showcases the words of a character who appears only here:

Enter a Scrivener, with a paper in his hand
 Here is the indictment of the good Lord Hastings,
 Which in a set hand fairly is engrossed
 That it may be today read o'er in Paul's.
 And mark how well the sequel hangs together.
 Eleven hours I have spent to write it over,
 For yesternight by Catesby was it sent me;
 The precedent was full as long a-doing;
 And yet within these five hours Hastings lived,
 Untainted, unexamined, free, at liberty.
 Here's a good world the while! Who is so gross
 That cannot see this palpable device?
 Yet who's so bold but says he sees it not?
 Bad is the world, and all will come to naught
 When such ill dealing must be seen in thought. (3.6.1–14)

Brian Walsh notes that

The Quarto text of *Richard III* indicates that the Scrivener carries a prop: "Enter a Scrivener with a paper in his hand." The previous scene had featured another prop, albeit a considerably more sensational one: "*Enter Catesby with Hast[ing's] head*". In the course of the Scrivener's speech we learn that the paper retroactively authorized the decapitation. The juxtaposition of the objects—first the grotesque and then the mundane. . . is chilling in the understated connection that is revealed to be between them. ([Walsh 2013](#), pp. 100–1)

The juxtaposition is indeed chilling but also draws attention to the way words stand for things and, by implication, to the problematic but inescapable way that written records

come to encapsulate and define the potentially chaotic series of events which make up the national past: a head becomes a piece of paper, a battle which may have had many severed body parts becomes a chronicle (or a history play). The audience is invited to consider the veracity and provenance of what they themselves read ‘in Paul’s’, that is in the churchyard of St Paul’s Cathedral where stationers had their stalls, and perhaps also to note Richard III’s own predilection for swearing by St Paul, which I have suggested elsewhere to be a way of capitalising on ‘the strong association of St Paul with the theory of the King’s Two Bodies’ and thus deflecting attention from his defective physical body onto what he hopes to present as his unassailably legitimate political one (Hopkins 1999, p. 11). Anyone who does not take up the Scrivener’s implied invitation to understand the realities behind the smokescreen must be ‘gross’, an epithet to which few would have wished to aspire. Marjorie Garber says of the Scrivener’s speech, ‘Borrowed by the playwright from his chronicle sources, this scene becomes in its dramatic embodiment a model of history as a kind of ghost writing’ (Garber 2002, p. 70), but one could equally see it as a kind of sleepwalking to disaster in which silence is collusion. Buckingham tells Richard that the invitation to acclaim him is not obeyed because ‘the people were not used/To be spoke to but by the Recorder’ (3.7.29–30), but it is not good enough to be passive accepters of how things are recorded; if evil is to be thwarted, good citizens need to participate in the making of the record.

If the Scrivener shows us the brutal reality of cover-ups and *realpolitik*, the murderer James Tyrrel offers a very different take. We might initially think that Tyrrel can supply us with something absolutely invaluable: an eye-witness account of one of the most notorious and puzzling disappearances in history. Instead, he seems to take delight in deliberately toying with and mystifying us:

The tyrannous and bloody deed is done,
 The most arch deed of piteous massacre
 That ever yet this land was guilty of.
 Dighton and Forrest, whom I did suborn
 To do this piece of ruthless butchery,
 Albeit they were fleshed villains, bloody dogs,
 Melting with tenderness and mild compassion,
 Wept like to children in their death’s sad story.
 ‘O, thus,’ quoth Dighton, ‘lay the gentle babes.’
 ‘Thus, thus,’ quoth Forrest, ‘girdling one another
 Within their alabaster innocent arms.
 Their lips were four red roses on a stalk,
 Which in their summer beauty kissed each other.
 A book of prayers on their pillow lay,
 ‘Which once,’ quoth Forrest, ‘almost changed my mind;
 But O! The devil’—there the villain stopped;
 When Dighton thus told on—‘We smotherèd
 The most replenishèd sweet work of nature
 That from the prime creation e’er she framed.’
 Hence both are gone with conscience and remorse.
 They could not speak; and so I left them both,
 To bear this tidings to the bloody King.
 And here he comes. All health, my sovereign lord! (4.3.1–23)

Only two things about this speech seem absolutely clear and unambiguous, and those are the opening statement about what has happened and the closing switch out of soliloquy into dialogue, which confirms that Tyrrel has been alone until the entrance of the king. We might have hoped that what we heard from him under such conditions would have been the truth, but he first goes out of his way to distance himself from the actual murder by introducing the figures of Dighton and Forrest, and secondly proceeds to put into their mouths a number of speeches which seem highly unlikely to have been spoken by such

men in such a situation and have much more the flavour of John Everett Millais' sentimental Victorian painting of the boys. These two rough killers have both a remarkably poetic vocabulary and a mastery of iambic metre and have apparently gone away repenting, like First Murderer, to an equally unspecified location and fate. All we glean is that the princes are definitely dead and Richard III definitely responsible, but the play seems to be deliberately reminding us that details of state-sponsored crimes may never be publicly known and that rumour, conjecture, and hearsay may be all there ever is to go on. Such an account certainly does nothing to dispel the vagueness and uncertainty which fuelled the rash of pretenders which so plagued Henry VII, and there is also a marked contrast between the lack of detail here and that offered by a ballad of the period which not only recounts how the murderers used bedclothes and pillows to stifle the princes and then buried the bodies under a staircase but also observes 'As in the chronicle you there may read' (Passamezzo 2020).

There is even less sense that we can see history being made in a soliloquy that, in terms of plot development, counts for nothing at all, even though it is spoken by someone who was once a queen of England:

So now prosperity begins to mellow
And drop into the rotten mouth of death.
Here in these confines slyly have I harked
To watch the waning of mine enemies.
A dire induction am I witness to,
And will to France, hoping the consequence
Will prove as bitter, black, and tragical.
Withdraw thee, wretched Margaret! Who comes here? (4.4.1–8)

As the final line suggests, we are hearing from Queen Margaret, a figure in one sense so important that her speeches across the tetralogy have been brought together to make her the heroine of her own play (Schafer 2016), yet in another sense completely peripheral; indeed, she is talking to herself here because she has nobody else left to talk to, and she is also a walking anachronism in that the historical Margaret of Anjou did not head back to France at this point in the story but had already done so long since. But the play's Margaret figures both the onstage and the offstage audiences, not quite knowing what is going to happen but hoping it is going to be enjoyably bloodsoaked and correctly (and metatheatrically) understanding events as the product of an 'induction', Richard's own term for the plots he was proposing to lay at the beginning of the play. Moreover, the term 'tragical' not only highlights the theatrical nature of events but signals a genre, and one which is not chronicle history. The anonymous *A Warning for Fair Women*, acted at the Globe in 1599 in the same season as Shakespeare's *Henry V*, opens with a battle between History and Tragedy, which Tragedy wins; Margaret's speech seems to be foreshadowing or perhaps even influencing that contest and implicitly reminding us that history is not the only paradigm conditioning the ways in which things can become part of a collective cultural memory (as attested by the long afterlives of plays such as *Tamburlaine* and *The Spanish Tragedy*, which were quoted and joked about for many years after their first performances even though nobody supposed either of them to tell a true story).

Richmond's soliloquy on the eve of battle is also an essentially private rather than public affair and indeed takes the form of a prayer:

O Thou, whose captain I account myself.
Look on my forces with a gracious eye;
Put in their hands Thy bruising irons of wrath,
That they may crush down with a heavy fall
Th'usurping helmets of our adversaries;
Make us Thy ministers of chastisement,
That we may praise Thee in thy victory.
To Thee I do commend my watchful soul
Ere I let fall the windows of mine eyes.

Sleeping and waking, O defend me still! (5.3.109–18)

The obvious functions of this speech are to establish Richmond as the virtuous opposite of Richard and to tender the comforting suggestion that an all-powerful God is in charge of events and will respond to the prayers of the righteous. Brian Walsh argues that ‘to understand the play as history means to understand history more broadly as providential’ (96), but he also suggests that the play can ‘prod audiences to reflect on . . . how Richard became king in the first place’ and notes that Brecht drew heavily on it for *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* (Walsh 2013, p. 109). If *Hamlet*’s question is ‘To be or not to be’, *Richard III*’s might well be seen as the equally resonant (and regrettably still equally relevant) ‘Can tyrants be stopped?’, which in turn invites us to consider how and by what means historical change can be effected.

6. Conclusions

Richard III may be a play about the past, but like so many (if not all) early modern history plays, it intervenes in debates about the present. The phrase ‘in good time’ occurs fifteen times in the play, more than in any other play by Shakespeare, and Richard declares that he was born before his time, i.e., prematurely; we are thus implicitly invited to consider what it means to be ‘in good time’ and when is the right time for something to happen. Alexandra Gajda has discussed how the Earl of Essex’s interest in Tacitean history led him to commission a special performance of a play (almost certainly by Shakespeare) about another king considered a tyrant, Richard II, on the eve of his rebellion against Elizabeth I (Gajda 2013, p. 237), and has illuminatingly explored the political implications of this particular branch of historiography. Andrew Hadfield argues that the conversation which follows Edward V’s question about Julius Caesar and the Tower also bears on contemporary political debates:

This is a complex and immensely important exchange which draws together most of the significant issues raised not just in *Richard III*, but also the *Henry VI* plays. It has no source, and has tended either to baffle commentators, or has been read as a comment on the vicissitudes of fame. However, the scene assumes a whole new range of meanings when read in the light of the republican analysis of civil war. (Hadfield 2005, p. 127)

Rob Carson also suggests that the play has political agency: noting that it ‘vilifies Richard. . . but in the process it also establishes the instability of Tudor political discourse’ (Carson 2013, p. 82), he observes that ‘If there is anything resembling a political argument to be found in the play as a whole, it seems to me to be the idea that kings are ultimately to be judged by their actions’ (Carson 2013, p. 84). Carson does not trumpet this idea as radical, but in fact it is very much so, especially in the last play of a tetralogy which has been all about hereditary right rather than merit and in the context of a late sixteenth-century succession debate fixated on the question of descent from John of Gaunt. *Richard III* tells a story about what happened in the past, but it also invites its audiences to reflect on what is happening in their own time and how they might intervene in the making of history, and it does so primarily through the use of soliloquy, which, as a means of talking oneself from one place to another, is in itself a microcosm of historical change.

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