

Richard III: Fact, Myth, Fiction¹

1 INTRODUCTION

On an August afternoon in 1485 near Market Bosworth in Leicestershire, the last significant battle of the Wars of the Roses was won by Henry Tudor (later Henry VII), and Richard III, crowned in July 1483, was slain. The dead king was carried naked on horseback to Leicester and buried in Greyfriars Church. Due to the dissolution of monasteries in the late 1530s and subsequent development of the site, the tomb was lost. In 2012, human remains, showing *in situ* signs of spinal deformity, were discovered and excavated under a car park where Greyfriars used to stand. Mitochondrial DNA proved that the remains were indeed Richard's (King et al. 2014). Richard's death marked the end of three centuries of Plantagenet rule, a civil war and the Middle Ages, and the beginning of the Tudor dynasty, a time of peace and prosperity and the English Renaissance (Schwyzer 2013: 1).

Richard's case is both historically significant and interesting for literary studies because prior to the rediscovery of the remains, both the body and character of the king were surrounded by myth and political propaganda: Tudor chroniclers sought to discredit

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Richard as a usurper to reinforce Tudor legitimacy, which lacked strong hereditary grounds. The most well-known depiction of Richard is of course Shakespeare's. Drawing on his contemporary historical sources, Shakespeare portrays Richard as a deformed, limping, villainous hunchback with an arm like a 'blasted sapling withered up' (3.4.69).²

Richard's posthumous image relied on the Tudors. In their time, the medieval association of deformity with sin and evil still lingered (Comber 2010). A crooked back was considered, as Elizabethan historian Thomas Hill (1571: 179) writes, to 'innuate the wickednesse of conditions: but an equalitie of the backe, is then a good note'. Richard's crooked outer form reflected his crooked morals and Early modern audiences would have recognized Richard's physical deformity and moral depravity 'as a synecdoche for the state' (Charnes 1993: 30). Over time, some suspected that the wickedness and deformity of Richard were exaggerations (see e.g. Hay 1754; Legge 1885; Carson 2013; Comber 2010), but without the earthly remains, the deformity could not be proven.

The rediscovery finally answered the question of deformity. Richard had scoliosis (Appelby et al. 2014). No evidence of limping or a withered arm was found. 'So much for Shakespeare's medical credibility' (Modern Healthcare 2014: 36), it was declared. The story of Richard's twistedness was 'the work of Tudor propagandists, especially Shakespeare' [sic] (Meikle 2014). The myth of the defamed king was busted—or was it?

This chapter aims neither to confirm nor deny the accuracy of the scientific, mythical and fictional depictions of Richard, nor to address his biography, given an abundance of post-excavation research (e.g. Ashdown-Hill 2016; Baldwin 2015; Hicks 2019; Horspool 2015; Lewis 2019; Skidmore 2018). We address the unique cross-genre nexus between historiography, Shakespeare's drama, and modern medical writing to

² All the Shakespeare quotations are from Greenblatt et al. 2008.

evaluate the received histories of Richard's body—whether mythical, factual, fictitious, or scientific—and to find out what role interpretation and truth play: How is Richard's body described and interpreted within different genres? What kind of implications do interpretation and truth have for different genres that address Richard's body?

Drawing on literary studies, disability studies, health sciences, and the work of Horkheimer and Adorno (2002), we argue that both myth and science are modes of representing Richard that seek to control truth and draw conclusions regarding the uncertain and unknowable, thus relying on interpretation and speculation. The post-excavation science is not opposed to myth and fiction, but a perpetuation of mythology mediated by Richard's mythical and historical baggage. The fictional body of Shakespeare's Richard has 'truth content' (Adorno 1997) because it challenges the disabling and stigmatising attitudes toward bodies that are 'different' by highlighting the disabling attitudes that caused Richard to 'prove a villain' (1.1.30). Richard's body bears a socially constructed disability; however, the real bodily deformity also mediates his actions. Thus, for disability studies the case of the 'carpark king' (Buckley et al. 2013) problematises disability as either physical or social; it is both. Regarding literary studies, analysing the cross-genre nexus demonstrates that subjectivity is inseparable from interpretation and reflection regardless of genre, and truth never appears unmediated. Therefore, making subjectivity visible in analyses is not undesirable; it is indispensable.

2 HOW THE MYTH CAME ABOUT

During Richard's reign, John Rous (n.d.) wrote that he was a 'mighty prince' beloved of his subjects and an upholder of the law. Rous revised the favourable character

descriptions in his *Historia Regum Angliae*, which he had begun before Richard's reign in 1480 but finished only after Richard's death in 1486. The work, dedicated to Henry VII, mentions points in Richard's favour, but highlights Richard's crude deformities and 'excessively cruel' character (Hanham 1975: 137). He describes Richard as 'small of stature, with a short face and unequal shoulders, the right higher and the left lower' (Hanham 1975: 121).

To justify Tudor reign, contemporary historiography latched onto depictions of Richard as evil, a crooked mind in a crooked body. Polydore Vergil (1846: 227), Henry VII's official chronicler, repeated Rous' depiction almost verbatim:

He was lyttle of stature, deformyd of body, thone showlder being higher than thother, a short and sowre cowntenance, which semyd to savor of mischief, and utter evydently craft and deceyt.

Thomas More, central in forwarding the mythology, wrote in his *History of King Richard III* (written between 1513–1524), echoing Rous, that Richard was 'little of stature, ill-featured of limbs, crook-backed, his left shoulder much higher than his right, hard-favoured of visage' (More 2005: 9–10; xxi–xxiii). More's writing is crucial because he fleshed out the witty, evil crook-back seen in subsequent works (Hammond 1981: 77; Jowett 2000: 16; Muir 1977: 32; Myers 1968:184).

Edward Hall used both Vergil and More in his propagandist account of Richard. His *Union of the Noble and Illustre Families of Lancastre and York* of 1548 gives two descriptions: 'he was litle of stature, eivill featured of limnes, croke backed, the left shulder muche higher than the righte, harde favoured of visage' (Bullough 1975, 253).

Hall follows More, though adding to Richard's infamy by substituting 'ill-featured' for 'evil-featured'. Hall's other description resembles Vergil's:

As he was small and litle of stature so was he of body greatly deformed, the one shoulder higher then the other, his face small but his countenance was cruel, and such, that a man at the first aspect would judge it to savor and smel of malice, fraude, and deceite (Bullough 1975, 300).

Hall degrades Vergil's 'sour countenance' and 'mischief', 'craft and deceit' to 'cruel countenance', linked with 'malice, fraud, and deceit'. Holinshed's *The Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland* (1587 enlarged edition) mimics Hall: the Vergil description is nearly verbatim. Holinshed retains More's 'ill featured' but adds a 'rule of physiognomie' pertaining to Richard, 'Distortum vultum sequitur distorsio [sic] morum' [distortion of character follows a distorted countenance] (Holinshed 1804, 362; Jowett 2000, 386).³

Two points emerge in the transmission of Richard's description: first, Rous' description of the right shoulder being higher became the left being 'much higher' in More, Hall, and Holinshed—Vergil being non-committal on laterality and severity. Second, the further Richard's death receded into the past, the greater the severity of characterization. Richard became more evil. In this respect, More is the main perpetrator: he adds the 'crook-back' and shifts the deformity to the left side, making it 'much higher'.

³ Jowett looks to attribute this passage by Holinshed to More, but the quote could not be found in the corresponding passage in More, at least in the Logan edition (More 2005).

Jowett (2000, 32) points out that ‘*crook* or *crooked* can mean “deviating from rectitude”, and the left side of the body, here dominating, was associated with evil’.

Shakespeare’s character is inherited, particularly from Rous, Vergil, More, Hall, and Holinshed.⁴ While Shakespeare’s Richard was undoubtedly influenced by Tudor agenda (Garber 1987), it also evoked the association of deformity with evil. Shakespeare’s misshapen Richard has been interpreted by scholars as ‘the primary embodiment of the sinister’ (Slotkin 2007: 26) and argued to ‘embody’ the political turmoil of his times (Charnes 1993: 30).

How did Shakespeare describe Richard? The character appears in three plays: parts 2 and 3 of *Henry VI* and *Richard III*—bodily descriptions appearing in the latter two. In 3 *Henry VI*, Queen Margaret calls Richard ‘valiant crookback prodigy’ (1.4.76). Richard describes his body with physical detail:

Why, love forswore me ...
And, for I should not deal in her soft laws,
She did corrupt frail nature with some bribe,
To shrink mine arm up like a wither’d 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, or an unlick’d bear-whelp (3.2.153–19)

⁴ For the seminal study on Shakespeare’s sources see Bullough 1975 (for a fuller list of historical sources see esp. pp. 222–8).

A few lines later, he refers to his ‘misshaped trunk’ (3.2.170). In the penultimate scene, he repeats the physiognomic rule: ‘since the heavens have shaped my body so, | Let hell make crooked my mind to answer it’ (5.6.78–9). He also remarks: ‘This shoulder was ordained so thick to heave’ (5.7.23–24).

Richard never gives an exact description of his deformity in *Richard III*, with one exception in 3.4 (see below). Interestingly, there is an oblique reference to his body when, after unexpectedly succeeding in wooing Anne, Richard says: ‘I’ll be at charges for a looking-glass | And entertain a score or two of tailors | To study fashions to adorn my body’ (1.2.242–4). Margaret makes oblique animal references to Richard’s body, alluding to the shape of his crooked back: ‘Thou elvish-marked, abortive, rooting hog ... bottled spider ... this poisonous bunch-backed toad’ (1.3.225, 240, 244). Richard describes his body in the opening soliloquy of the play as ‘not shaped for sportive tricks | Nor made to court an amorous looking-glass’ (1.1.14–15), ‘rudely stamped’ (1.1.16), ‘curtailed of this fair proportion’ (1.1.18), ‘cheated of feature’ (1.1.19), ‘deformed, unfinished’ (1.1.20), and ‘half made up’ (1.1.21).

The one exception in *Richard III* in which he directly describes his body occurs in the scene where the Yorkist stalwart Hastings is arrested due to his hesitance to believe that Richard’s arm was ‘like a blasted sapling withered up’ due to witchcraft (3.4.68–9). This imagery repeats the ‘arm like withered shrub’ from *3 Henry VI*. Moreover, this is the most direct intrusion of the historical sources, regarding bodily description. This scene is already present in Vergil (1846: 180–1), but More (2005: 55–6) is the clearest influence (copied by Hall (Bullough 1975: 264) and Holinshed (1804: 380)). More (2005: 55) writes: ‘upon his left arm, ... he showed a wearish [shrivelled], withered arm and small’.

Shakespeare never specifies which arm is 'withered' but also adds the horticultural imagery of 'shrub' and 'sapling'. Shakespeare also omits that 'no man was there present but well knew that his arm was ever such since his birth' (More 2005: 56; Bullough 1975: 264; Holinshed 1804: 380).

There is a curious distinction between the two plays. In *3 Henry VI*, Shakespeare's description comes closer to the language of his sources: 'crookback', 'thick shoulder', 'withered arm', 'mountain on my back', 'deformity to mock my body', 'legs of an unequal size', 'misshaped trunk'. *Richard III*, on the other hand, is more abstract: 'not shaped', 'not made to court', 'rudely stamped', 'curtailed of fair proportion', 'cheated of feature', 'deformed, unfinished', 'half made up'. Omitting to mention body parts in *Richard III* links to a kind of creative agency: expressions have an artisanal quality yet aestheticised abstractedness that lacks bodily specificity. This is mostly Richard's self-description but the same abstractedness occurs in Margaret's shift from a straightforward 'crookback' to allusive animal imagery. Moreover, a socially reflective aesthetic in *Richard III* is hinted at with 'looking-glass', 'amorous', 'courting', and 'tailors ... fashions to adorn my body'.

Shakespeare clearly follows the spirit of Tudor tradition especially in *3 Henry VI*, where Richard utters the physiognomic rule of a deformed body inhabiting a deformed mind central to the myth. As Jowett (2005: 11) points out, due to governmental scrutiny of plays, Shakespeare's 'freedom to vary from sanctioned accounts was limited'. However, Shakespeare is clearly doing something different, especially in *Richard III*, which is partially explained in the genre shift from historical to dramatic narrative. Shakespeare makes Richard more diabolically extreme, for example, by making him

responsible for Clarence's death, which none of the aforementioned historical sources do. Jowett (2005: 19) well encapsulates the tension:

Shakespeare played up to the image of a villainous and deformed Richard. The "facts" of the play are uglier than those of his sources, but Shakespeare complicates things by making Richard charismatic and attractive in spite of them.

Shakespeare's imagery is more vivid than the sources but at the same time less specific in bodily detail. Although Shakespeare's more extreme depiction of Richard can be read subversively (more below), it clearly bears the hallmarks of the Tudor myth as Myers (1968: 181) clarifies: 'Shakespeare has given immortality to a view of Richard III which was profoundly influenced by the political and emotional needs of Tudor England'.

3 THE MODERN HISTORICAL NARRATIVE

The Tudor myth has not gone unchallenged. Myers (1968) provides an overview of Richard's historiography, dividing historians on their pro or anti stance on the 'Tudor Saga'—the main interest being in how historians were influenced by contemporary opinion. This work is influenced by Carr's (1987: 21) seminal work on modern historiography, according to which history consists in 'seeing the past through the eyes of the present and in the light of its problems' and the job for the historian 'is not to record but to evaluate'. Modern historiography puts the historian as the evaluative and interpretative agent at the centre of the process. In contrast, Holderness (2000: 43) remarks that 'history' in the early modern period was influenced by Cicero and meant 'a

recovery of the past; a revival of things lost and forgotten; and a renarration of recuperated oblivion'. These ideas 'became a cornerstone of sixteenth century historical thinking, terms that have become for history in our own day intensively problematised: truth, memory, and instruction' (Holderness 2000: 46). The tension between early modern and modern historiography can be seen in how the Tudor period necessitated a skewed view of their near past and how truth, memory, and instruction needed to play along. As interpreters, chroniclers were conditioned by their time to see Richard in this now mythical light.

Goy-Blanquet (2002: 65) maintains that modern historiography satisfies four criteria: secularisation; experimental research; a sense of historical development; and the delimitation of an area of research. Rous, Vergil, More, Hall, and Holinshed could hardly live up to these modern requirements, leading to their being read as more propagandistic historical texts. As the historian Jacob (1961: 645) writes, Richard 'was very far from being the distorted villain of tradition' and undoubtedly there 'was a sound constructive side' to his story. Writing in the Cold War, Myers (1968: 201) points out that to those

who have lived through an epoch of Nazi and Communist double-talk and brainwashing, it seems natural for the untrained mind to think of a Tudor government in terms of equal propagandist efficiency.

In terms of re-drawing history, Logan (More 2005: 11) notes that, an x-ray of one of the earliest surviving portraits of Richard revealed tampering: his 'right shoulder has been repainted to suggest deformity, and the eyes narrowed'.

Historiographically, the myth of a deformed, evil Richard has hardly survived intact. The obvious propaganda has been challenged by the fact of Richard being popular among contemporaries in the North of England and Ireland (Myers 1968: 190; Jacob 1961: 629). However, the moralistic view of Richard—the remains of the instructive strain of early modern historiography—is something we should be suspicious of, so as not to insert archaic connections between physical appearance and ethical activity. Physiology does not prescribe psychology. Skidmore (2018: 7), writing post-excavation, laments the debate around Richard remaining ‘depressingly predictable’: his life and reign are defined by the question ‘Was he a good or a bad king?’ Skidmore reminds us that Richard acted as expected of kings before and after him. Therefore, instead of creating ‘a white legend of Richard’s personality’—while perpetuating ‘a sterile debate’ between ‘good’ and ‘bad’—Skidmore (2018: 10) calls for balance and more accurate scholarship. Again, the historian as interpretative agent emerges. However, despite these objections and qualifications, the myth of the mentally and physically deformed Richard, mediated by Shakespeare’s historical fiction, still persists.

4 THE LEICESTER CARPARK FINDINGS

The research team that examined the remains affirmed that Richard had a severe right-sided thoracic scoliosis (with 70–90° Cobb angle), which is a lateral bending of the spine convex to the right, with some axial rotation. The findings were compatible with idiopathic—spontaneous, cause unknown—adolescent scoliosis. The thoracic curve was King-Moe type 3, meaning it was well-balanced with cervical and lumbar spine aligned. The team concludes with a description, containing a Shakespearean echo on tailoring:

The physical disfigurement from Richard's scoliosis was probably slight since he had a well-balanced curve. His trunk would have been short relative to the length of his limbs, and his right shoulder a little higher than the left. However, a good tailor and custom-made armour could have minimised the visual impact of this. A curve of 70–90° would not have caused impaired exercise tolerance from reduced lung capacity, and we identified no evidence that Richard would have walked with an overt limp, because the leg bones are symmetric and well formed (Appelby et al. 2014: 1944).

There is a curious discrepancy between the team's reports. An earlier report by Buckley et al. (2013: 536) suggests that although not all people with scoliosis experience pain, Richard's scoliosis 'may have been progressive and would have put additional strain on the heart and lungs, possibly causing shortness of breath and pain'.

Why the two opposing views? Today a similar spinal condition with Cobb angle over 50 degrees would indeed be considered progressive from adolescence to adulthood and therefore prompt preventive interventions: intensive rehabilitation, using a back brace and in some cases surgery (Negrini et al. 2018). The research reports interpreting Richard's remains did not, however, extensively consult clinical research of this fairly common condition. Rather, the interpretative discrepancy between the reports suggests that there is a limit to scientific certainty in drawing conclusions about Richard's body.

The scientific reports and the often sensationalist popular media reporting bear a striking similarity. Kostihova (2016: 2) observes that in the 'public spectacle of excavation' and 'theatre of discovery' both scientific and popular reporting constantly

evoked references to Shakespeare, but there was also conflation between the remains and what the remains could reveal about Richard's psychology, his intentions, and preferences. Connecting Richard's medical condition and psychology—'as if one might finally uncover Richard's "real" nature by scrutinizing the truths of his "real" body', as Hobgood (2014: 24) poignantly put it—unwittingly confirms the persisting putative causal link between bodily impairment and psychology. Furthermore, as Kostihova (2016: 3) elaborates, the scientific reports did not succeed 'in steering clear of the voyeuristic sensationalism of scrutinizing Richard's deformed body' which the media further bolstered. Such media reporting declared Shakespeare as a propagandist who 'ensured Richard has been seen as hunchbacked for centuries' (Meikle 2014). In a Daily Mail article, Phil Stone, chair of the Richard III society, proclaims that Richard's scoliosis confirms the Shakespearean description of a 'bunch-backed toad' is as 'complete fabrication—yet more proof that, while the plays are splendid dramas, they are also most certainly fiction not fact' (Daily Mail 2014). The scientific evidence, in turn, helped the king once 'stripped by the victors' to be 're clothed in his true identity' (Mantel 2013). Both scientific and media reporting seemed preoccupied with Shakespeare's falsity, not with what modern medical science is able to tell us about Richard's condition without unwittingly evoking the physiognomic rule. The evidence was neither reported nor received with the 'neutrality' or 'objectivity' expected of science.

5 ENLIGHTENMENT REVERTS TO MYTH: THE MATERIAL ASPECT

We suggest that the scientific facts do not stand against myth and fiction but rather transgress the boundary of medical writing and perpetuate Richard's mythology. To

understand this argument, Horkheimer and Adorno's (2002: xviii) thesis that 'myth is already enlightenment, and enlightenment reverts to mythology' proves helpful. Enlightenment, they write, is 'the advance of thought [that] has always aimed at liberating human beings from fear and installing them as masters' (Horkheimer & Adorno 2002: 1). The historical period of Enlightenment and the rise of modern science sought to 'dispel myths, to overthrow fantasy with knowledge' (ibid.). Quantifications and classifications of science were to explain and control nature, replacing myth. The twist to their argument, on which ours is based, is that myth was an early rationalisation of nature—it sought to control and explain it, and liberate from the fear of external nature—and not dissimilar to the mode of enlightenment thinking, and therefore 'myth is already enlightenment' (Horkheimer & Adorno 2002: xviii). In turn, enlightenment thinking, the all-permeating standard of calculability and utility of instrumentalised scientific knowledge, has become a new mythology: thus 'enlightenment reverts to mythology' (Horkheimer & Adorno 2002: xviii).

Horkheimer and Adorno suggest a continuum from myth to science rather than science simply dispelling myth or standing against it. Indeed, in Richard's case historiography, myth, fiction, and even modern science are all rationalisations that seek to control truth and draw conclusions regarding the uncertain and unknowable; but are also inherently interpretative. Truth, here, does not belong to either myth or science, but is found somewhere in between their blurred boundaries. Drawing conclusions about limping, royal tailors, or lung capacity without observing and examining 'the patient' is at best educated guesswork and at worst guesswork communicated as truth with the authority of objective scientific research. Interpretation and speculation are necessarily at play in the scientific reporting—necessary because examining bones confirms little about

Richard's psychology or his animated body, although revealing certain lifestyle, structural, and postural information.

Let us consider a few examples. Appleby and colleagues (2014) concluded that Richard did not have one leg shorter than the other and therefore probably did not limp. However, unequal leg length is not the only cause of limping. People with adolescent scoliosis may show an asymmetry of gait, a sideways sway caused by a difference in the stance-phase duration or a slight muscle imbalance on one side (Bruyneel et al. 2009; Haber & Sacco 2015; Kuo et al. 2011; Syczewska et al. 2012; Yang et al. 2013) that can appear to clinically untrained eye as limping. Moreover, there might not have been an 'envious mountain' on his back but scoliosis does cause a unilateral protrusion of the ribcage when bending forward—a common test used to examine scoliosis—and sometimes the protrusion is visible when standing up or lying down. There are also countless physiological and cultural factors that affect the animated body, from metabolism to cultural expectations and habitus. Differences in motor skills—balance, agility, coordination, speed, power and reaction time, which often depend not only on learning and skills but also on the nervous system—and differences in muscle strength, muscle balance and flexibility, joint range of motion, and different qualities of connecting tissues, also affect how the body moves. There are too many factors that an accurate retrospective functional analysis is simply impossible. Although bones tell us a lot, they tell little about the animated body; remains and a living body are very different things.

Any speculation, the above included, about Richard's 'past living body' makes, shapes, and disciplines it to fit our modern understanding of scoliosis: it sees 'the past through the eyes of the present' (Carr 1987: 21) because it is all it can do. The truth, here, is not about whether Richard had a limp. It is about the scientific discourse—albeit

bearing facts that dispelled some rumours—operating between science, fiction and myth and thus perpetuating Richard’s mythology in its own way. There is a continuum from historiography, myth and fiction to the post-excavation science forming the modern mythology of Richard.

6 ABILITY AND SHAKESPEARE: THE SOCIAL ASPECT

To complete Horkheimer and Adorno’s chiasmic argument, we argue that Richard’s fictional body in Shakespeare’s plays has ‘truth content’ (Adorno 1997), thus ‘myth was already enlightenment’. To elaborate this, we turn to Shakespearean disability studies (e.g. Gottlieb 2018; Wilson 2018; Comber 2010; Hobgood 2014; Mitchell & Snyder 2000; Love 2019; Williams 2009; Williams 2013; Wilson 2017; Wood 2013).

Applying disability studies to Shakespeare might seem anachronistic because in Shakespeare ‘disability’ is not employed in the modern sense of pre-existing or acquired impairment. The modern sense of disability started to emerge only in the 18th and 19th centuries (Davis 2002: 3; Metzler 2006: 6). To be ‘disabled’ in Shakespeare means to ‘experience a physical, moral, or economic slowdown’ clarifying disability ‘as a temporary state conferred upon one by another’s—or by one’s own—actions or prejudice’ (Iyengar 2015: 9). The terminology of ‘disability’, therefore, raises the question of how we talk about disability in Shakespeare (Wilson 2017). Our use of the terminology of disability is not intended to make claims about early modern language but rather our contemporary understanding of disability—acknowledging ourselves as part of the myth-perpetuating discourse described so far, with necessary elements of anachronism in reading Shakespeare through 20th century critical theory and disability

studies. We suggest that a degree of ‘deliberate anachronism’ (Williams 2009) functions as a useful vehicle to convey social criticism. As Wood and Hobgood (2013: 190) have suggested, early modern disability studies methodology need not be fixed to historicism but rather ‘develops from a flexible array of historicist and presentist methodologies and textual- and performance-related concerns’. We follow this suggestion because, we aim to show, Shakespeare has relevance to the critical understanding of disability in modern society, not merely in early modern England, and therefore restricting interpretation to the early modern period would restrict the power of interpretation Shakespeare’s Richard holds.

Richard’s deformity has been analysed from opposing perspectives on a social/metaphorical-material spectrum. Hobgood (2014: 24) argues that throughout *Richard III* Shakespeare’s ‘intense pathologizing of Richard’s physical health through medical discourse’ engages an early modern medical model of disability: Richard’s disabled body is not merely metaphorical but material. Williams (2009) reads Richard more metaphorically as compensating for the negative associations of his bodily form by employing rhetorical power and performative ability: Richard foregrounds his deformity to advance his political power. Similarly, Comber (2010: 183) argues that people are always affected and disabled by their societies and constructs that convey the meaning of ‘difference’: people are ‘never *just* physically impaired’. For Comber (2010: 183), Richard is ‘disabled by an amalgamation of the religious, political, social and dramatic contexts and prejudices of society’. The interplay between material and social/metaphoric echoes the disability scholar Tom Shakespeare (2006) who argues that the social model of disability—the claim that disability does not reside in the body but in the social and physical environment—is not sufficient to account for the experiences of disabled people.

Although the social model presents important criticism of the medical model that sees impairments as problems that can be fixed or cured (Eyer 2016: 4), the bodily impairment is not insignificant for disability: it is ‘always an interaction between individual and structural factors’ (Shakespeare 2006: 55). Shakespeare’s Richard, his deformity (impairment) and disability (stigmatisation) are similarly a sum of different factors.

Indeed, Richard’s evil deeds are as much the product of attitudes towards his nature as they are of his nature. Richard is shunned for what his body signifies. He decides to play the part because there is no alternative; but not because of some link forged by nature but because it is expected of him:

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. (1.1.28–31)

The material and social/metaphorical aspects of Richard’s body can be read as social criticism. As Wilson (2017: n.p.) argues, encountering disability in Shakespeare kindles philosophical and social questions about the ‘place of those who are different from the norm’. Shakespeare’s Richard bears important ‘truth content’ which refers to socially critical knowledge—that is not straightforwardly communicable nor irrational—about the modern conditions of life that resides in the experience of an artwork (Adorno 1997). The truth content of Richard is possibly more significant compared to the ‘scientifically accurate’ Richard, because the play can offer a fruitful medium for challenging disablement, normativity and normalisation. As Heller (2002: 371) argues, we can

recognise ourselves in Shakespeare's 'revelatory truth': 'We are revealed to ourselves'. Holderness (2000: 49) has also argued that '[i]n the historical plays themselves we can find examples of drama both claiming a truth-function, and admitting its own insubstantiality'. Thus, Richard makes an interesting point of contemplation—with critically deliberate anachronism—for disability studies. Richard's socially constructed disability and real bodily deformity mutually mediate his actions, but also critically foreground the disabling and stigmatising attitudes toward bodies that are 'different'.

An important distinction between capacity and disability is in order. In both the historical and fictional body of Richard, his physical deformity does not make him incapable. Hammond (1981: 76) remarks that in historical research, Richard 'was generally conceded to be a brave and effective soldier'. Even Tudor historiographers acknowledge this. At Bosworth, Hall (Bullough 1975: 297) describes how Richard 'overthrew' and 'slew' significant enemies and as

kynge Richardes men were driven backe and fledde, and he him selfe manfully
fyghtynge in the mydell of his enemies was slayne and brought to his death as he
worthily had deserved.

Moreover, in Vergil's account (1846: 227), Richard could have fled but decided against it:

his corage also hault and fearce, which faylyd him not in the very death, which,
whan his men forsooke him, he rather yealded to take with the sword, than by
fowle flyght to prolong his lyfe, uncertane what death perchance soon after by
sicknes or other vyolence to suffer.

Furthermore, Richard's abilities as military leader garnered praise from More (2005: 10):

None evil captain was he in the war, as to which his disposition was more meetly than for peace. Sundry victories had he, and sometimes overthrows, but never in default as for his own person, either of hardiness or politic order.

Similar military prowess can be seen in Shakespeare's drama. In his final battle, Richard—while seeking a horse to continue the battle—wonders: 'I think there be six Richmonds in the field. | Five have I slain today, instead of him' (5.7.11–2). Furthermore, besides the many battles of *3 Henry VI*, Shakespeare makes the curious decision to insert Richard into the first battle of St Albans depicted in parts 2 and 3 of *Henry VI*—the historical Richard was under three years old and in France. Not only did Shakespeare have him participate but, as Heller (2002: 231) sees it, makes him the hero of the battle by having him thrice save the earl of Salisbury (*2 Henry VI* 5.5.12–24) and brandish the head of the duke of Somerset to the praise of his father, Richard of York: 'Richard hath best deserved of all my sons' (*3 Henry VI* 1.1.18).

Shakespeare's *Richard III* can be read subversively. The shift of genre from historical chronicle to art form (Shakespeare even titles it a 'tragedy') also shifts interpretative framework. Jowett (2000: 21) points out that 'the play is perhaps now more relevant as a study of history as representation, of the politics of historical narrative'. Holderness (2000: 82) instructively deconstructs Richard's character through the phrase 'determined to prove a villain' arguing that it captures the

paradoxical nature of Richard's self-definition, which turns precisely on the relation between historical causation (the modern sense of 'determined', here of course derived from the early modern legal sense of 'limited', 'set by cause') and voluntaristic 'self-fashioning', personal resolution, the freedom to determine one's own destiny.

This is how Shakespeare's extreme depiction can be seen as the Tudor myth externally imposed on the character but at the same time expressing a sense of free will. Holderness (2000: 85) continues:

the decision to 'prove a villain' is as much a gesture of self-casting, the choice of a character, as it is a resigned submission to historical determinism; and an indication that Richard, the historical character, represented via the dramatic role, is presented as self-consciously aware of his own actorly status: he is an actor within the medium of a historical narrative, since he is conscious that his 'character' can be enacted only by the presence of such an actor in concrete theatrical realisation.

This is in line with the abstract quality of the vocabulary Shakespeare employs to describe Richard compared to *3 Henry VI*. The lack of clear and distinct bodily descriptors (as discussed above) suggests this abstract, artisanal, metatheatrical quality in Richard's opening soliloquy: he is a malleable creature to be moulded or stamped to perform the function he determines. Moreover, commenting on Richard's performed manipulation of events and his exchange on history and fame with his nephew Edward V, Holderness

(2000: 99) speaks to the power Shakespeare's use of the Tudor myth⁵ yields: 'The substance of history' does not lie not in 'physical remains and documentary characters, but rather in myth and legend, oral tradition and story'.

The cross-genre reading of Richard's body teaches us that the 'deformed' and 'disabled' body has political power: Richard's body was used both against him and by him to political ends. Richard is perhaps the most able character in Shakespeare and his body is central: it signifies the deeds that drive both his success and downfall. Reports of the historical Richard's battle skills affirm his physical prowess. Even Rous, the original maligner of the king, writes that

he bore himself like a noble soldier and despite his little body and feeble strength, honourably defended himself to his last breath, shouting again and again that he was betrayed, and crying 'Treason! Treason! Treason! (Hanham 1975: 123).

Evidence of his military prowess—both historical and osteoarchaeological (Buckley et al. 2013; Kendall 2002)—have been seen as evidence of a non-disabled body. Herein lies a problem. We simply do not know the extent to which Richard was impaired by the scoliosis or disabled by the social norms of his time. There is a degree of paternalism, which is opposed within disability studies and disability rights movements, in retrospectively labelling Richard. When disability is considered negative and undesirable, in addition to the stigmatising presumption that disability and psychology are causally

⁵ Heller (2002, 100) rightly points out that '[t]he stage is essentially historical. Thus, history is the *medium* of the Shakespearean history plays, tragedies, and certain romances and comedies'.

connected, then the discourse of Richard reverts to the ‘depressingly predictable’ writing that Skidmore (2018: 7) has rightly criticised.

7 CONCLUSION

Richard III mythology has gained a new afterlife in the scientific post-excavation discourse, that constantly evoked myth and fiction. It seems that Myers’ (1968: 202) analysis on the interaction between Shakespeare and Ricardian tradition still holds true:

Shakespeare’s spell ensures the immortality of the hostile Tudor tradition; it probably also ensures that someone will always be kindly disposed towards the last Plantagenet king.

In the mythology, consisting of historical, mythical, fictional and factual elements, truth is not reliant on empirical verification nor myth reliant on historical fabrications. Truth transgresses the boundaries of genre, as does interpretation. In the case of Richard III, medical facts cannot escape mythology, and fiction offers a fruitful medium for understanding society through reading Richard’s body as socially disabled but physically—and politically—capable. The interpreter’s subjectivity and reflection are inseparable from the text and discourse produced, and truth never appears unmediated: there are always subjects, traditions, myths, methodologies, ideologies at play. Rather, than being undesirable, subjectivity is inevitable. Therefore, it should be made visible to increase the rigour—even objectivity—of analyses across genres.

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