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The Necessity of the Wooing of Anne in *Richard III*

Andrew and Gina Macdonald

Richard's wooing of Anne has strained the credibility of modern audiences and readers to an extent unparalleled by any other scene in Shakespeare.[1] Much critical attention has focused on attempts to defend the realism of the scene. Denzell S. Smith, for example, shows how Richard "changes his pose to accord with the natural progression of Anne's emotions," from forceful prince, to "pleader," to "innocent," to "brazen lover"[2] and so on as he anticipates Anne's reactions and meets them with a response that is psychologically (and dramatically) convincing. Anne's reaction to Richard is that of a defenseless small animal to a cobra: he hypnotizes her with his rhetorical motions, and refuses to release her until she yields.[3] Anne's capitulation can be explained nicely in terms acceptable to modern students of human behavior.

Yet the problem of credibility remains, for as Smith points out, the scene is very short (193 lines) and very outrageous: the killer of husband and father-in-law pitching woo during the funeral procession of the latter is more a premise for modern black comedy than for Renaissance historical tragedy. We need more than a recognition of Richard's "measureless contempt for human nature"[4] or of Anne's believable weakness; we need an explanation of why Shakespeare would begin a play with such a risky episode, a scene which strains our suspension of disbelief, and, in a less than ideal production, threatens the bulk of the play by beginning with low and vulgar farce.[5] The most likely explanation is that Shakespeare had more than realism in mind when he chose to make the wooing scene Scene Two of the First Act.

The dramatic expectations of Shakespeare's audience were different from ours, although since we share some of them, we might not always be aware of these differences. Graham Hough puts it best; in Shakespeare,

> theme and image are completely fused and the relation between them is only implicit, never open or enforced. We have not yet found a name for this. For want of a better I shall call it incarnation. . .Incarnational literature is that in which any "abstract" content is completely absorbed in character and action and completely expressed by them.[6]

It is no contradiction to search for an "abstract" in the wooing scene while yet accepting its psychological realism, for this is what Shakespeare's audience would have expected. The result of such a search is to find the scene with Anne a prefiguring of the action of the play, a kind of "dumb show" with dialogue which captures the essence of Richard's behavior and the responses of his adversaries. The ceremony of the funeral procession and Richard's stagy actions in fact beg for the scene to be staged as a "living tableau," a series of emblems which communicate at a level beyond dialogue.

Shakespeare's rhetorical and political problem in *Richard III* is to explain how a monster like Richard (so the Tudor Myth) could have effectively taken charge of England with the cooperation of people far less monstrous. To indict all of Richard's supporters would be to indict much of England, and by implication, supporters of the Tudors past and present, a less than politic suggestion in an age of monarchial absolutism. So Richard must be made the final and sole cause of evil, a complete scapegoat for all resistance to the Tudors. If no one else can be blamed, and if Richard is so sublimely evil, Shakespeare's dramatic problem is to explain how good, decent, virtuous Englishmen (and by extension "England" as a political concept) could succumb so easily to an obviously evil man.

The mysterious forces of seduction are the perfect, and perhaps the only, metaphor with which to approach the unlikely Tudor thesis that one man, with the help of a few confederates, swept an entire nation off its feet. In Act I, Scene I Richard declares his intention to embrace evil; he demonstrates these intentions with Anne in Scene II. Anne, overcome with grief because of her losses, is a nice analog to England grieving and disoriented by the War of the Roses. She is not to blame, really, especially if her capitulation is made psychologically credible. Only Richard is at fault; England has been seduced at a time no gentleman would take advantage of.

Anne's seduction is the first in a series of violations of innocence; her fall anticipates the doom of Clarence, Hastings, the young princes, and all the other characters gulled and conquered by Richard. Richard's weapon throughout is language; his virtuosity in the impossible task of convincing Anne thus makes credible his success in manipulating others to gain the throne. Queen Margaret, Queen Elizabeth, and the Duchess of York attempt to counter Richard's rhetorical skill with curses, but fail since their language, like Anne's, is in reaction to past events rather than, as with Richard's, a cause of events.[7]

Shakespeare's skill at "incarnational" literature is such that the scene with Anne operates as pageant, with the speech of the characters complementing their behavior, rather than being necessary for a clear understanding of what is occurring. Anne opens the scene, accompanying the funeral procession of Henry VI as mourner. The procession stops for her speech, but then Richard enters to interrupt its further progress ("Stay, you that bear the corse, and set it down" - I.ii.33).[8] Richard and Anne debate, and her behavior toward him changes from near violence (*SD:* "She spitteth at him"-I.ii.145) to scornful looks (I.ii.171) to a recognition of his dominance, when she drops the sword he has given her and refuses to kill him. Ironically, he has gotten on his knees before her when he offers his breast to the sword, and is thus in the traditional position of a suitor. Anne has two long speeches at the beginning of the scene, of thirty-two lines and seventeen lines respectively; by the middle of the scene Richard's control is such that her responses are restricted to one line for the most part, with only a few longer speeches of no more than three lines. Richard, on the other hand, has a thirty-two line speech in the middle of the scene and an even longer one at the end (thirty-seven lines) while he stands alone on the stage. The basic symbolic thrust of the scene, then, should be clear even to the monolingual speaker of Tagalog: Richard has stopped a funeral procession,

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accosted the female mourner, through persuasion changed her attitude toward him from hatred to grudging respect and perhaps even admiration, and by force of personality completely triumphed, even to the point of leaving himself defenseless before his adversary. He stands alone at the end, the funeral procession continuing with, in effect, his permission. Richard's ironic "Was ever woman in this humour woo'd" (I.ii.228) is redundant, since his point has been made with great economy by the setting, stances of the characters, and relative length of speeches.

The wooing of Anne is a necessary introduction to *Richard III.* The scene, if played properly, makes credible Richard's rhetorical skill in capturing England: a man who can woo a woman in such a humour is capable of anything. It establishes Richard's cold-hearted willingness to take advantage of a grieving woman, and a grieving nation; it suggests the weakness and vulnerability of each to determined and shameless assault by a physically unprepossessing but rhetorically skilled suitor. Richard is shown to be willing to break all the rules of civilized behavior, and thus to be capable of murdering his nephews -- the Tudor version of history is thus made believable. Finally, by relying on visual as well as auditory evidence, the scene emphasizes Richard's mysterious, almost super-natural power, the force of darkness triumphing, however briefly, over the powers of light.

NOTES

[1]A near rival would be the handkerchief scene in *Othello*, but its incredibility seems more apparent to readers than to viewers.

[2]Denzell S. Smith, "The Credibility of the Wooing of Anne in *Richard III*," *Papers on Language and Literature*, 7 (1971), pp. 199-202.

[3]Sexual fascination also figures in the scene. Though not generally acknowledged, young, sheltered women of unremarkable decency can become captive of males who negate all their values. The puzzling behavior of Patty Hearst comes to mind.

[4]John Palmer, *Political and Comic Characters of Shakespeare* (London, 1964), p. 84.

[5]Even the magnificent Olivier shied away in his film version from playing the scene as written.

[6]*A Preface to The Faerie Queene* (New York, 1963), p. 107.

[7]See Act IV, Scene iv. At the end of the scene Richard repeatedly tells Elizabeth that her curses reveal an obsession with the past, and no concern for her future. For a different view of the curses, see Alice Lotvin Birney, *Satiric Catharsis in Shakespeare* (Berkeley, 1973), pp. 20-46.

[8]All Shapespearean quotes are from *Richard III* in *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, ed. Hardin Craig (Chicago, 1961).