

A Villain and a Monster – The Literary Portrait of Richard III by Thomas More and William Shakespeare

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Richard III from the House of York has become the embodiment of distortion, wickedness and tyranny throughout the centuries, by means of an immensity of works that forms the largest bibliography ever written on an English monarch. When approaching medieval and early modern times, one must naturally bear in mind the concept of history, the nature of historiography and the specificities of biographical writings, then called *Lives* because the word ‘biography’ had not yet been coined.² However, the way the figure of Richard III has been depicted both in historiography and in literature is so extraordinary that one wonders where factuality ends and fiction begins.

The process of vilification started at the end of the 15th century and grew steadily until the 20th century, when new, more objective approaches were finally set in motion, in an effort to expose incongruities, exaggerations and implausible elements, mostly based on rumour, especially because, among several factors, hardly any official records of Richard III’s reign have survived. Legend, myth and speculation could thus easily bloom, while fact and fiction became inextricably intertwined. But, as Francis Bacon put it in one of his essays,³ “What is Truth? *said jesting Pilate, and would not stay for an answer*” (Bacon 377).

¹ This paper is part of an extensive research on Renaissance *Lives*, and was delivered at the international conference “Heroic Bodies, Bodies of Flesh: Representing the Body in Early Modern Life Narratives” / “Corps Héroïque, Corps de Chair dans les Récits de Vie de la Première Modernité”, University of Reims Champagne-Ardenne (30 May-1 June, 2012).

² *The Oxford English Dictionary* registered it for the first time in 1683.

³ “Of Truth”.

After the Battle of Bosworth Field in 1485, where Richard perished, a well-planned policy of Tudor propaganda was set in motion by Henry VII himself. The monarch commissioned a series of historiographical writings, mainly aiming at the solidification of the newly founded dynasty and the consequent, definitive annihilation of the last Plantagenet king of England, whose defeat and death on the battlefield should not by any means transform him into the victimised York hero of the Wars of the Roses. Therefore, among others, Bernard André,⁴ Pietro Carmeliano,⁵ John Rous⁶ and Polydore Vergil,⁷ each one responsible for adding further notes of improbability, delineated Richard of Gloucester as a vile, wicked, monstrous creature.⁸

The hyperbolic process of vituperation would reach its climax later, with two major early modern authors, whose literary works on the king may be considered the epitomes of the tradition that has forever shaped him as a monster: around 1514, Thomas More wrote *The History of King Richard the Third*, and around 1591, William Shakespeare created *King Richard III*.⁹ From then on Richard has been depicted as hunchbacked with a withered arm, reported as having been born with teeth and shoulder-length hair after two years of gestation in his mother's womb, and delineated as a usurper and a murderer. It is indeed hard to come across a more distorted, vicious character, whose outward appearance — an implausible body of flesh — faithfully mirrors the inner moral self, and whose deeds are, moreover, perfect analogies of his distorted physical traits.

⁴ *Historia regis Henrici Septimi*, ca. 1500.

⁵ Carmeliano was a scholar in the courts of Richard III and Henry VII. His former eulogies to Richard were replaced by harsh vituperations during the first Tudor's reign (for example, the 1486 congratulatory poem on the birth of Prince Arthur).

⁶ *Historia Regum Angliae*, known as *Rous Rolls*, written during Henry VII's reign.

⁷ *Anglica Historia*, 1505-1513.

⁸ See, for example, R.S. Sylvester (lxv-lxxx) and A.F. Pollard (228-229).

⁹ Parts 2 and 3 of *King Henry VI*, centred on other historical figures, also contain important sketches for a thorough negative characterisation of the monarch.

In the unfinished *Life* by Thomas More, the introduction of the protagonist is accomplished through a complex rhetorical process, based on a literal antithesis and on a subtle prolepsis. The first five pages are focused on Richard's family, especially on his brother King Edward IV, whose reign is referred to as a golden time and whose encomiastic portrait is powerfully condensed in the following passage: "of visage louelye, of bodye mightie, stronge, and cleane made" (More 4). The antithesis is thus achieved, once every positive trait attributed to Edward IV will, sooner or later, meet its negative counterpart in Richard: first, as Duke of Gloucester, then as Lord Protector, eventually as proclaimed, crowned and anointed King of England. Moreover, the protagonist's appearance in the narrative is anticipated by three proleptic allusions to a forthcoming age of misrule, in a crescendo of causticity. The first one is vague but it already encapsulates the entire disruption awaiting England: "after his [Edward IV's] decease, by the crueltie, mischiefe, and trouble of the tempestious worlde that folowed" (More 4). The second allusion is less vague, and announces the most condemnable deed attributed to the future monarch: "withoutte anye respecte of Godde or the worlde, vnnaturallye contriued to bereue them [Edward's children], not onelye their dignitie, but also their liues" (More 6). As for the third, it is unequivocally a reference to his deep iniquity: "what maner of manne this was, that coulde fynde in his hearte, so muche mischiefe to conceiue" (More 6).

The formidable circumstances of his birth are told in a crude, violent way, openly announcing the implicit malevolence:

... his mother had so muche a doe in her trauaile, that shee could not bee deliuered of hym vncutte: ... hee came into the worlde with the feete forwarde, as menne bee borne outwarde ... also not vntothed ... (More 7)

The signs inferred since the moment he came into this world take then full shape when Gloucester is physically described:

... little of stature, ill fetured of limmes, croke backed, his left shoulder much higher then his right, hard faouered of visage ... (More 7)

The corrosion of his image is underlined by More's insistence on expressions like "It is for trouth reported"; "as the fame runneth"; "as menne constantly

saye”; “as menne demed” (More 7-8). Although they emphasise the nature of the history, historiography and literature of those times, as well as the usual confidence in oral, spurious sources, such expressions result odd, as if the author was seeking some kind of justification for the extraordinary things he was telling. Be that as it may, Thomas More develops a substantial set of caustic insinuations before he literally introduces Gloucester in the narrative.

William Shakespeare’s rhetorical process is diametrically opposed to More’s, although the ultimate result is the same. The play starts by bluntly exhibiting Gloucester alone on the stage, vicious in body and in mind. In the powerful opening soliloquy, Richard uses epithets to underline his own deformities and, in direct speech, draws the symbiosis between his exteriority and his interiority, found in More’s narrative:

I that am rudely stamped ...
 (...)

 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,
 ... so lamely and unfashionable
 (...)

 I am determinèd to prove a villain
 And hate the idle pleasures of these days.
 Plots have I laid, inductions dangerous,
 (...)

 ... I am subtle, false, and treacherous,
 (Shakespeare, *R III* 52-53).

In another soliloquy (*King Henry VI*), another blatant self-portrait is drawn, according to the vituperative tradition:

She¹⁰ did corrupt frail Nature with some bribe
 To shrink mine arm up like a withered shrub;
 To make an envious mountain on my back
 Where sits Deformity to mock my body;

¹⁰ The Duchess of York, his mother.

To shape my legs of an unequal size;
 To disproportion me in every part,
 Like to a chaos ...
 (Shakespeare, *H VI* Part 3 139)

In the same work, Clifford's corrosive words about young Richard enclose the sense of disruption, inversion and iniquity, also anticipating his future complex behaviour ("Hence, heap of wrath, foul indigested lump, /As crooked in thy manners as thy shape." – Shakespeare, *H VI* Part 2 205-206).

The insistence on Richard's physical deformity seems to go beyond the intention of portraying him. In Thomas More's work, there is never the possibility of regeneration. The sense of inversion and distortion, introduced with "hee came into the worlde with the feet forward", will be continuously explored and expanded, and will assume different metaphorical angles that result in the shaping of a monster. The most determinant one is the correspondence between Richard's outer and inner features, which will prevail until the end of *Life*: "... malicious, wrathfull, enuious (...) close and secrete, a deepe dissimuler, lowlye of counteynaunce, arrogant of heart, ... dispitious and cruell ... (More 7-8).

The literary speeches are full of violence whenever Richard is mentioned, and, in the case of the play, literally shown. Every one of his decisions is said to be premeditated and to have a double meaning, while every one of his relationships is said to have a specific purpose, in an oriented crescendo leading to his ultimate destruction. Besides the capital crimes that are attributed to Richard III (the assassination of his young nephews¹¹ being the most hideous one), three of his actions may exemplify the cold premeditation and the deep ambition that characterise him. In a context of permanent cruelty, the annihilation of Hastings, the imprisonment of Jane Shore, the bastardisation of some members of his family, and the implicit accusation of the Duchess of York, his own mother, of adultery, for example, deepen the sense of monstrosity; in fact, these characters, together with the young Princes in the Tower, become distressed victims, no matter the circumstances of their own contingent faults. However, in such a brutal scenario, Richard III's paramount transgression manages to go far beyond

¹¹ Edward IV's sons: Edward V and Richard Duke of York.

the hideous crimes he is literally accused of by More because his paramount transgression is the way he is, or, more accurately, the way More and Shakespeare tell he is.

According to ancient traditions, exterior negative traits are the manifestation of personality degenerations, as well as the sign of the connection to the so feared *maleficium*: "... beware of all persons that have default of members naturally, as of foot, hand, eye, or another member; one that is crippled ...".¹² Francis Bacon also registered several considerations on the traditional view:¹³ "... as nature hath done ill by them [deformed persons], so do they by nature; (...) [they are] void of natural affection." (Bacon 480). In More's text, Richard's vile character corresponds to the misshapen physical portrait and is delineated through many derogatory attributes, among which the epithet "dissimuler" and the comparison to Judas are the most outstanding ones — "outwardly coumpinable where he inwardely hated, not letting to kisse whome hee thoughte to kyll" (More 8).

Concomitantly, Richard III's negative outer and inner traits are the antithetical correspondents of the saints' marks, i.e. of the visible manifestations of clarity and positivity received from God, so frequently referred to in hagiographies. As Francis Bacon also mentioned,¹⁴ "virtue is best in a body that is comely ... as if nature were rather busy not to err, that in labour to produce excellency." (Bacon 478-479). Moreover, the saints' marks have a correspondence in the royal thaumaturgical capacity, within the theory of the divine origin of the royal power. Such origin may be materialised in the healing capacity of the monarch, whose power comes from God and whose nature consists of two entities — the terrene and the mystic. Richard's alleged physical deformities, the totality of his exteriority and the suffering inflicted to his mother when he was born are, contrariwise, powerful signs of darkness and malignity. Even the martial

¹² *The Compost of Ptolomeus*, ca. 1600. Due to the impossibility of having access to this popular work that circulated in England at the end of the 16th century/beginning of the 17th (there is a copy in the British Museum), I quote this passage from Keith Thomas 677.

¹³ "Of Deformity".

¹⁴ "Of Beauty".

bravery and the military deeds recorded by the Tudor historiographers, difficult or even impossible to attribute to such a crippled character, are intentionally underestimated and distorted, even ignored, in More's text.

The emblematic, decisive Battle of Bosworth Field may then be seen as the providential instrument to cease chaos because, according to these views, the universe governed by the last Plantagenet king had become an aberration. The battle, vividly told by Shakespeare, closes the play and contains the protagonist's final, expected punishment, although the monarch is eventually allowed a dimension of brave warrior. Something totally different happens in Thomas More's *Life*. The strategic, paradoxical, somehow mysterious omission of the battle, together with the allusion to the king, brief but full of corrosion, have a devastating effect that coincides with the climax of vilification:

... Kinge Richarde ... slain in the fielde, hacked and hewed
of his enemies handes, haryed on horseback dead, his here in
despite torn and togged lyke a cur dogge. (More 87)

In fact, the mutilation inflicted on the king's corpse, meaning total opprobrium, deprives him of every sense of decency, integrity or respect, as if the reposition of order were thus rendered more effective. Richard III's defamation seems therefore to constitute the necessary epilogue in the two literary portraits imbued with the didactic dimension inherent to biographical texts since Antiquity:¹⁵ this king has indeed become an *exemplum*, but not to be imitated or followed.

Evidence that Edward IV had trusted his brother Gloucester (in the form of rewards, appointments, lands and titles), the acknowledged military deeds, the confirmation by Parliament of the Lord Protector's title to the crown (the *Titulus Regius* of 1484) and his own motto ("Loyalty binds me", or "Loyaulté me lie") constitute some of the few surviving elements that, in one way or another, contradict the demolishing, prevailing tradition, as well as the inconsistencies in the written sources. On the other hand, beyond historical, circumstantial facts, beyond the way the sequence of

¹⁵ The *Lives* written by Plutarch and Suetonius. The medieval hagiographies contain a similar didactic intention.

events is organised by Thomas More and William Shakespeare, and despite the tight coincidence between the deformity of the body and the iniquity of the mind, other contradictions arise, ironically and paradoxically, both on the metaphorical stage of the narrative and on the literal stage of the play. In fact, the protagonist's distortions in the literary portraits are counterbalanced by his eloquent, brilliant speeches,¹⁶ by the report of his successful plans,¹⁷ and by the acknowledgement of his victorious achievements that ultimately led him to the throne.¹⁸ Regardless of the catastrophic consequences for almost everyone who surrounds him and eventually for himself, Richard III of England, villain and monstrous as he is, has simultaneously assumed a powerful, intriguing dimension because through the art of writing he was indeed made a masterful monster.¹⁹

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¹⁶ A few examples: "*The protectours oracion*" (More 25-27); "*The counsell in the tower*" (More 46-49); "*The kynges answer to his mother*" (More 63-64); the soliloquies (Shakespeare, *R III* 52-53, 198-199; *H VI* Part 3 137-141).

¹⁷ "*Shores wife*" (More 54-56); the murder of Clarence (Shakespeare, *R III* 86-97).

¹⁸ "*The protectours proclamacion*" (More 53-54); "*The mayers commynge to Baynardes castel*" (More 77-80); the king making strategy (Shakespeare, *R III* 136-152).

¹⁹ On February 4, 2013, in a press conference broadcasted by *The Telegraph*, the University of Leicester confirmed, based on DNA analyses, that the skeleton exhumed at Greyfriars, Leicester, in August 2012 is Richard III. These constitute extremely relevant elements to complement and/or shed new light on the study of the king and his time.

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ABSTRACT

The process of vilification of Richard III started at the end of the fifteenth century, when a well-planned policy of Tudor propaganda was set in motion by Henry VII himself, who commissioned a series of historiographical writings, mainly aiming at the solidification of the newly founded dynasty. One of the strategies, probably the major one, consisted in the definitive annihilation of the last Plantagenet king of England, whose defeat and death on the battlefield should not by any means transform him into the York victimised hero of the Wars of the Roses. Thus, various historiographers delineated Richard of Gloucester as a vile, wicked, monstrous creature. But the hyperbolic process of vilification undoubtedly reached its highest climax with two major early modern authors. The *Life* written by Thomas More – *The History of King Richard the Third* (ca. 1514) – and the play written by William Shakespeare – *King Richard III* (ca. 1591) – may be considered the epitomes of the tradition that has forever shaped the king as a monster.

In this text, I focus on the way More and Shakespeare exploit and amplify the vituperative historiographical tradition, though mostly based on rumour, uncertainties and legendary elements. Within this widely accepted tradition, both authors manage to shape a solid portrait of Richard III, an *exemplum* not to be imitated or followed, but whose performance, built through a set of powerful rhetorical devices, is masterful, both in the *Life* and in the play.

KEYWORDS

Tudor historiography; biographical writings; vilification; *exemplum*.

RESUMO

O processo de vilificação de Ricardo III teve início em finais do século XV, quando uma bem planeada política de propaganda Tudor foi posta em marcha pelo próprio Henrique VII, que encomendou uma série de escritos historiográficos com o objectivo primordial de cimentar a dinastia recentemente fundada. Uma das

estratégias, talvez mesmo a principal, consistiu na aniquilação definitiva do último rei Plantageneta de Inglaterra, cuja derrota e morte em campo de batalha jamais o poderia transformar no herói vitimizado das Guerras das Rosas. Assim, diversos autores delinearão Ricardo de Gloucester como uma criatura vil, malévola e monstruosa. Mas o processo hiperbólico de vilipêndio atingiu indubitavelmente o seu auge com dois autores maiores do período 'Early Modern. A *Vida* escrita por Thomas More – *The History of King Richard the Third* (ca. 1514) – e a peça escrita por William Shakespeare – *King Richard III* (ca. 1591) – podem ser consideradas os epítomes da tradição que moldou para sempre o rei como um monstro.

Este texto centra-se na forma como More e Shakespeare exploram e amplificam a tradição historiográfica vituperativa, a qual, no entanto, assenta sobretudo em rumores, incertezas e elementos lendários. No âmbito desta tradição amplamente aceite, ambos os autores conseguem moldar um retrato sólido de Ricardo III, um *exemplum* a não imitar ou seguir, mas cuja actuação, construída através de um conjunto de recursos retóricos poderosos, é magistral, tanto na *Vida* como na peça.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

historiografia Tudor; escritos biográficos; vilificação; *exemplum*.
