

Interpretation

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Interpretation

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Shakespeare's Richard III and the Soul of the Tyrant

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Caesar's many successes . . . did not divert his natural spirit of enterprise and ambition to the enjoyment of what he had laboriously achieved, but served as fuel and incentive for future achievements, and begat in him plans for greater deeds and a passion for fresh glory, as though he had used up what he already had. What he felt was therefore nothing else than emulation of himself, as if he had been another man, and a sort of rivalry between what he had done and what he purposed to do.

Plutarch, *Caesar*, LVIII.3.

Shakespeare's Richard III differs from the tyrant Socrates describes in Plato's *Republic* in that he has an attractive quality about him, attractive in the sense of fascinating. There is something in the character of Richard which cannot fail to attract us almost against our will, which is all the more incredible since Richard from the outset is "determined to prove a villain" (I.i.30). The wonderfully versatile power of his mind, his talent for equivocation and ambiguity are objects of sheer fascination. Shakespeare has performed the extraordinary feat of presenting the serpentine wisdom of the tyrannic soul in such a way that it cannot fail to excite our sensibilities. In the satisfaction we receive in contemplating the character of Richard, in the various situations in which Shakespeare has shown him, it is almost as if we lose sight of the cold-blooded, calculating tyrant whose ugly soul is overshadowed and even to some extent obscured by the marvelous play of his intellect. But whatever plausible appeal Richard may have had because of the brilliant qualities of his mind dissipates when he orchestrates the murder of his young nephews.

Shakespeare delineates the character of the tyrannic soul in his characterization of Richard III in a more direct way than the Platonic dialogue does, for here we see the tyrant in action. Shakespeare was able to write a play in which the tyrannic soul becomes a reality rather than something which is merely the subject of conversation. The tyrant as an idea is a perfect example of limitless self-love. Richard prides himself most on his ability to deceive, to dissemble, although he is not nearly as effective on this score as he has led himself to believe. He conceives of himself, in the third part of *Henry VI*, the play which precedes this one, as someone who can prove his superiority to Machiavelli, who can accomplish feats which no one else would even attempt, so much so that the impossible becomes plausible (3 *Henry VI* III.ii.193). It seems reasonable to assume that Richard is not ignorant of the fact that Machiavelli, who

teaches rather than practices the tyrannical art, the art of deception, is more capable of dissimulation than others and therefore must be regarded as a most serious competitor for the tyrant. Richard's willingness to take on Machiavelli can therefore be understood as a challenge to the philosopher's reputed superior knowledge of political practice.

It is only too clear that the consciousness of power attending the working out of Richard's schemes is the inexorable guide of his political existence. He is driven by the restless desire of power after power, but the pleasure for him is in the pursuit rather than the mere possession of power. He is less attracted to kingship by the prospect of achieving anything with the kingship than by the exciting problems anticipated for its acquisition. Perhaps the most revealing confrontation in the entire play is that between Richard and the young Prince Edward. Edward, when he learns that he along with his younger brother is being sent to the Tower of London, indicates his unpleasant feelings about that place and asks whether Caesar had built it. He remarks, almost as an aside, that Caesar's fame has outlived his death and that death therefore makes no conquest of this conqueror (III.i.68–69, 87–88). It is obvious what the praise of Caesar implies. Caesar appears to be a model for Edward, and by bringing in Caesar, Edward introduces the thought of loftier motives than kingship or kingly power to someone whose soul has been consumed in his passion for securing the kingship. The problem for Richard is that his passion for power has nothing further to satisfy itself once he secures the throne. Richard is not like Caesar. He has no grand vision of empire as Caesar had. He even has no interest in regaining territories in France lost by his brother's predecessor on the throne, Henry VI. But Edward says that, if he lives long enough to be king, he will recover England's ancient right in France again (III.i.91–92).

There is certainly no reason for thinking that Richard would have been satisfied with performing the mundane tasks of rule upon receiving the crown. He was not unaware of the fact that "the golden yoke of sovereignty" imposes "a world of cares" and a "burden" on someone like himself who has little or no interest in assuming those cares and burdens (III.vii. 145, 222, 228). But nevertheless his action is animated by his obsession for securing the English crown which he looks upon as "the high imperial type of this earth's glory" (IV.iv.245). It comes best into view in his remark that "what other pleasure can the world afford [than] to command, to check, to o'erbear? [Therefore] I'll make my heaven to dream upon the crown" (3 *Henry VI* III.ii.147, 166, 168). Prince Edward draws Richard's attention to some larger motive than the passion for kingly power by alluding to Caesar's grand vision of empire, thus moving from the petty end of Richard to the grand end of Caesar. But Richard does not leave further avenues for his lust for power beyond securing the kingship. No other pleasure comes nearer to divinity for him than this kind of pleasure. He does not have the vision to move on to greater goals.

The episode between Richard and the young Prince Edward needs further

elucidation. It is quite possible that Edward's statement about Caesar creates the shadow of a doubt in Richard's mind as to his inflated opinion of his own superiority. We sense something important about the fact that Richard does not hesitate to proclaim his superiority to Machiavelli, but not to Caesar. No difference between Richard and Caesar is more telling than that which is revealed in Richard's speech to his army before the final battle at Bosworth Field. He refers to "these bastard Bretons, whom our fathers have in their own land beaten, bobb'd, and thump'd, and, in record left them the heirs of shame," but never once does he consider the possibility of regaining England's lost territories in France (V.iii. 334–36). It is Edward's concentration on militaristic honor that leads him to emphasize a return to France. It is not impossible that Edward, after recovering England's lost territories in France, would have harbored hopes of conquering all of France, thus securing the union of France and England under the crown of England. He clearly has a vision which could easily transform itself into imperialism.

Edward is devoted to militaristic honor and hence to foreign war and conquest. He has presumably read Caesar's *Commentaries*, an account which, in his opinion, would make Caesar's fame immortal. He even goes so far as to suggest that it is the wit and wisdom encapsulated in those commentaries which make Caesar's valor live (III.i.86). Caesar's greatness will be admired and praised by many generations after his death. It goes without saying that Shakespeare made Richard III immortal, but Caesar made himself immortal first through his exploits and then through his commentaries. Caesar evidently wanted to be remembered long after his death. It is for this reason that he was constantly seeking to outdo his past accomplishments with greater and greater deeds, but the highest part of his greatness was his commentaries. His greatness is more spectacular because of his commentaries. Caesar did not need a Shakespeare to embellish his greatness. Richard receives his fame at the hands of Shakespeare, the fame of infamy, but an infamy which becomes a substitute for oblivion. The young Prince Edward's praise of Caesar makes Richard appear low.

The contrast between Richard and Caesar is perhaps nowhere more clearly seen than in reading Plutarch's characterization of Julius Caesar. Plutarch says that Caesar competed with himself to outdo himself, driven by his "plans for greater deeds [than he had already accomplished] and a passion for fresh glory, as though he had used up what he already had. What he felt was therefore nothing else than emulation of himself, as if he had been another man, and a sort of rivalry between what he had done and what he purposed to do" (Plutarch, *Caesar*, LVIII.3). Shakespeare's Richard, by way of contrast, means to prove himself to himself by overpowering others, but apparently lacks that further incentive to compete with himself, to outdo himself. He soliloquizes in order to assure himself of his own superiority. His recurrent soliloquies (with the exception of the last) can be construed therefore as exercises in self-assur-

ance in order to reinforce his sense of his own absolute worth. He is absolutely convinced in his own mind that he will be able to capture the English throne no matter how difficult that task might be, but altogether missing is the incentive or the will to compete with himself by establishing any further goals beyond that. The securing of the English throne somehow marks the limit of his aspirations. He lacks the incentive or the desire to set new goals for himself. He is constrained by the narrowness of his vision.

It is true that Richard thinks he can accomplish almost anything, but only within the narrow confines of maneuvering his way to the crown. He has no interest in the burdens of statecraft or the pursuit of empire. Richard gives us to understand that he has the power of going to any length in contriving anything, employing only speech, only persuasion (*3 Henry VI* III.ii.182–93). He accomplishes feats which no one else would even think of attempting, like wooing Lady Anne in the presence of the corpse of her murdered husband's murdered father, both of whom he had admittedly murdered. Who would ever think that she could be maneuvered into the intolerable position of having to live with a second husband responsible for her first husband's death? He glories in the sweetness of his triumph over Anne. But he overestimates his own abilities, for his deceitfulness and deviousness are rather transparent to those who know him well. He may be able to break down the walls of Anne's restraint, but the former Queen Elizabeth is not taken in by the pretense of his profession of love for her daughter, the Princess Elizabeth. She feigns a reluctant acquiescence to his proposal of marriage to her daughter which has Richard convinced that he has won her support. It would be fair to assume that Richard deceives himself into thinking that Elizabeth is convinced of his sincerity. He appears to have no sense of his own limitations. He cannot see himself correctly.

Richard hardly ever lets his conscience get the better of him, but his conscience asserts itself in his sleep when the spirits of those he has murdered or arranged to have murdered appear to him in a dream. This cold, unmoving rock of a man, claiming as he does that he fears neither heaven nor hell, finally dissolves under the pressure of conscience, brought on by the burden of a troubled soul (*V*.iii.179–204). He claims that he is not touched by conscience, but the moment he is willing to admit that his "coward conscience" inspires him with fear, he does not seem to be the same Richard as before (*V*.iii.179). There is a decided difference in tone, for Richard is only Richard without a conscience. But even before this admittedly frightful encounter, Lady Anne, now his wife, reveals that she had never spent a restful night in his bed without being awakened by his frightful or timorous dreams (*IV*.i.82–84). We are left wondering whether he had had previous encounters with the conscience he scorns and despises in the timorous dreams which only his wife is able to bring to our attention. The former Queen Margaret, addressing Richard earlier in the play, prophesizes that "no sleep [will] close that deadly eye of thine unless it be while some tormenting dream affrights thee with a hell of ugly devils," but we

are given no more information than that (I.iii.225–57). It seems not improbable at all that Richard is plagued nightly after Margaret's curse by the tormenting dreams she prophesizes, for when contemplating the murder of the young princes, he refers to them as "foes to my rest and my sweet dream's disturbers" (IV.ii.72). What might have caused him to sleep uneasily was the anxiety brought about by his memory of the prophecies of Henry VI and a bard of Ireland that Richmond would be "likely in time to bless the regal throne" (3 *Henry VI* IV.vi.74), and that he would not live long after he saw Richmond (IV.ii.94–96, 104–5).

Richard successfully conceals his nightmares for a long time. He rarely mentions his troubling dreams prior to the one nightmare which almost completely unnerves him. One may surmise that he suppresses them, but whatever one's conclusion on that, it seems evident that he does not tell us everything that goes on in his thoughts. The dark shadow of guilt, dimly perceived in the deepest recesses of his soul, does not appear to surface until toward the end of the play. He does not have to face up to the horror of his catalogue of crimes until the visitation of the spirits of his victims at that time. He awakens to conscience only after he is cursed by the ghosts of his murdered victims.

Richard seems willing to acknowledge the power of conscience as he attempts to defy it, for in his remarks to his retinue made shortly after his dream, he says that "conscience is but a word which cowards use, devised at first to keep the strong in awe" (V.iii.310–11). He had never dreamed it possible that his conscience could get under his skin, but he is evidently intimidated by the power of conscience. By his own admission, he is at war with his conscience. Conscience is a diabolical enemy to be overcome. The action of the play moves between Richard's announcement in the opening scene of his determination to prove himself a villain and the eventual realization, after the ghosts of those murdered ones appear to him in a dream, that he is a villain (V.iii.192). The promise that he made to himself to prove himself a villain, the desire for his own perfection as a villain, has been fulfilled. It is a moment of frightened self-awareness in which he confesses to himself that he hates himself for the hateful deeds he has committed (V.iii.190–91). He is stricken with remorse. He almost completely loses his presence of mind, crying to Jesus for mercy (V.iii.179). Richard, who refuses to recognize the existence of conscience, gives himself over to the terrible tortures of conscience, but one cannot say that he was restrained by conscience.

It can be shown that the love of honor is a possible remedy for the misuse of political power, for the desire for recognition makes it possible for rulers to perform selfless acts for selfish reasons; but it is not a sufficient corrective, since the appeal to honor must be perfected by being in the service of something far more exalted than honor. We are led to reflect on the possibility of Richard III becoming a beneficent tyrant, but there is absolutely no suggestion that he could have become that, inasmuch as he reveals a remarkable indif-

ference to honor and praise and therefore lacks the incentive to measure up to some standard of praise. He apparently has no need for recognition from others. It seems evident that there is no potential for goodness in Richard Plantagenet. It would be accurate to say that Shakespeare's characterization of Richard goes a long way toward showing the impossibility of transforming the soul of the tyrant into something fine. One cannot fancy Shakespeare, from the standpoint from which he viewed the actions of the unjust tyrannical soul, holding the view that the correction of tyranny is possible through the conversion of the tyrant from badness to goodness. Shakespeare did not consider Richard perfectible, his last soliloquy notwithstanding.

Richard III is the only one of Shakespeare's kings explicitly associated with Machiavelli. Machiavelli may not be Shakespeare's model of a philosopher, but he is the only philosopher to whom Richard could conceivably relate. Richard knows without having to be reminded that he is not a philosopher in spite of his offer in *3 Henry VI* to take Machiavelli to school. It can hardly be said that he is reflective. We obviously cannot take seriously Buckingham's characterization of Richard as someone bent on meditation and contemplation in the interest of his soul rather than having an interest in worldly pursuits, for that is simply a ploy to feign a reluctance on Richard's part to accept an offer of the crown (III.vii.72, 74, 76). It is not the contemplative life to which Richard turns. The most that we can expect from him in a reflective posture is that he derives delight from contemplating his shadow in the sun, his own projected image of himself (I.i.25–26; ii.267–68). The fact that he mentions Machiavelli does not prove that there is anything philosophic in him, but it should not surprise us that practitioners of politics are for the most part defective in theoretical understanding.

We are always confronted with tyrants and, incredible as it may seem, they continue to be a subject of peculiar fascination and attractiveness by virtue of their remarkable capacity for ruse and deception. Richard wishes to prove himself best, but only to his own satisfaction. He is not at all concerned with being admired or praised by others. Self-admiration or self-satisfaction does not have to be confirmed by the admiration of others, but without the acclaim of others, Richard can only prove himself best to himself by overpowering others. The intensity of his will to power is clearly manifested in his remark that, if the crown were further off than it is, he would still pluck it down, but more than that the very impossibility of the enterprise becomes a supreme challenge to him (*3 Henry VI* III.ii.194–95). It is hardly necessary to say that the work of the true statesman is to raise politics to its highest possible level, but Richard does not possess the moral equipment necessary to make Englishmen good citizens of England, inasmuch as he cannot be presumed to be guided by any concern with the common good. His statement that he is "unfit for state and majesty" is truer than he realizes (III.vii.204). This greatest of English tyrants attempts in Machiavellian fashion to set aside the moral order of the world

through a policy of ruse, treachery, and murder. His ruthless statesmanship, a calculated ruthlessness characteristic of Machiavelli, succeeds in acquiring kingly power, and in preserving it for so short a time, but his vow to outdo Machiavelli never comes to pass. It appears to be a vauntingly ambitious claim to a superiority which could not be achieved, for he has hardly been crowned before his house of cards begins to collapse. He cannot maintain the sovereignty he has so recently acquired (IV.ii.60–61). There is no indication that Richard could ever rule England.

Richard III is the most exclusively political of Shakespeare's history plays. The tragic history of Richard III is not simply the tragic history of England consumed in a civil war, the War of the Roses, England's greatest disaster, but an attempt to sharpen our sense of the potential for tragedy in political life through the depiction of the actions of an unjust tyrannical ruler. The murder of the young princes, a deed which is unqualifiedly evil, exceeds the greatest cruelties of the War of the Roses and shows how ugly or deformed a tyrant's soul can be. Shakespeare does not say so in so many words, but it would be reasonable to assume that he believed that the responsible exercise of political power, the rule of wisdom with its very strict standards, is seldom available to political society. The rule of wisdom is very difficult to achieve. Henry V represented England's finest hour, but in a very short time, the horror of the War of the Roses, culminating in the tyranny bred by these civil dissensions, and the resurrection of that regime out of the long madness that had scarred England, would be succeeded only by a future fraught with uncertainty. It would seem that the potentiality for absolute evil in human affairs is too great to expect a transformation of the harshness of political life.

There is simply no sufficient explanation for the villainy of Richard, inasmuch as he is not really interested in being burdened with the responsibilities of a sovereign. He proves indifferent to the responsibilities of power other than its retention. One would be hard pressed therefore to argue that his villainy derives mainly from his desire to reign as king. Richard is much more of a schemer than an opportunist. He has an irresistible impulse to manipulate. It would seem that villainy has become an end in itself, that is, that the means to an end which is not really an end has supplanted the end and become an end in itself. It seems almost impossible to suppose that what Richard has in mind is simply to prove himself a villain, to live for nothing except the need to assert himself violently, unless of course it is intended as a test of his mettle. But there can be little doubt that Richard is much happier when he is seeking the throne than after he possesses it, for what gives him most pleasure is the expectation of a satisfaction which is always and essentially in the future rather than the reality of that satisfaction. We can say therefore that the pursuit is more enjoyable for him than the attainment of the end, but that enjoyment ceases once the object of the pursuit is obtained. It is not hard to understand that the motivation which had spurred Richard on to his course of action is no longer there once he

becomes king. Richard of Gloucester plotting to take the throne is in his element, but as king he is reduced to merely securing his position. He cannot enjoy his power.

But however we are to understand Richard's motives, it is certainly most significant that, when he realizes that he is a villain, he is appalled at the very thought. The nightmare has now fully invaded his consciousness. In the most astounding of turnabouts, he faces up to his own villainy in his monologue after his dream, but it is too late to seek his own salvation. Richard is what he is by virtue of the character of his actions. He does not have the means to correct himself. He defined himself with precision earlier on when he said, "I am in so far in blood that sin will pluck on sin" (IV.ii.63–64). He is imprisoned by his own treachery. His astonishing statement that he hates himself must be taken at its face value, although nothing in his previous experience can account for the sentiment he now experiences. He apparently does not like what he sees in himself. He is not even sure of his villain's role any more. It almost borders on self-contempt. It certainly seems that his conscience takes the heart out of him, but it would be a gross overstatement to say that Richard is repentant. It would be more accurate to say that he is ambivalent, for he both affirms and denies his guilt virtually in the same breath.

Richard, for some reason that we never learn, blurts out that he hates himself for the hateful deeds he has committed. It is at first impossible to believe that one who is so apparently convinced of his own superiority would ever experience such a sudden change of attitude toward himself. We have no indication from any of his previous remarks that he ever entertained any misgivings concerning his conduct, but this in no sense implies that he did not harbor some silent doubts. Why should the mere appearance of apparitions in a dream induce him to change his estimate of himself, unless of course they were in fact conjured up by his own imagination in order to create a confrontation with himself? Richard might have intended to seek from such a confrontation an exoneration of his consciousness of his own guilt. By concealing, or leaving to inference, this side of Richard, Shakespeare leaves to be figured out the reasoning by which he led himself to think of himself as deeply immoral. His reasoning remains unknown to us, leaving us wondering what he had in mind. It is altogether possible that Shakespeare wanted to tell us that conscience is a force to be reckoned with in a conscience-ridden world, and that even someone as impervious to conscience as Richard cannot extricate himself altogether from that moral consciousness. We are confronted with a tyrant who, at least momentarily, is out of heart with tyranny, who has just declared that he hates himself for the hateful deeds he has committed. Shakespeare's play shows that a tyrant who lacks both goodness and conscience, one could even say that goodness goes against his grain, nevertheless recognizes himself as a hateful creature, because he does not know how to be altogether evil.

Richard's greatest passion as it appears is to manipulate or overpower

others. It hardly needs to be said that it is in the nature of the desire for power that it can never be fulfilled. The desire for power must feed upon more power. The pursuit can be satisfying only as long as the end recedes, and unless the end is continuously redefined, the pursuit will be over and the satisfaction will cease. Richard thought that he wanted to become king, but what he really wanted was to prove himself capable of becoming king. The effort is everything for him; the result is inconsequential. The pursuit of power or the tyrant's activity has no end other than more power, which is precisely Richard's problem. There is a certain reasonableness in Richard's actions, inasmuch as it is not unreasonable for a prince of the realm to think in terms of his possible succession to the throne, but that is where his reasonableness ends, for the objective itself is unimportant to him. Shakespeare demonstrates, through his treatment of tyranny, a clear awareness of the delusions of power, that there is no inherent satisfaction in satisfying the desire for more, since there is no end in view. The end is endless.

We have seen that Richard is more interested in proving himself capable of becoming king than in performing the role of a ruler, but more than that he is unable to see that he was striving for something that he never really wanted. He only thought that he wanted to be king. It is conceivable that his wish to be king is simply a projection of his youthful wish for his father, the Duke of York, to become king. In the third part of *Henry VI*, the young Richard tries to convince his father to seize the crown, saying: "And, father, do but think how sweet it is to wear a crown," and only after his father's death does he say that he would make his heaven to dream upon the crown (*3 Henry VI* I.ii.28–29; III.iii.168). There can be little doubt that Richard thinks he wants the crown, but he can have been projecting what was originally a wish for his father without giving little more than a thought to what is actually involved in performing the functions of kingship. He has no interest in that kind of thing, but he never abandons his youthful addiction to the crown. Shakespeare seems merely to attempt to show that Richard seeks to be king, but in the course of the play it becomes quite clear that Richard does not really know what he wants. He does not know his own mind.

It must above all be emphasized that, from Shakespeare's point of view, the soul of the tyrant, given its highest expression in this play, represents the darker side of human nature, exhibiting qualities residing in the human character itself. It is even conceivable that the gulf which separates Richard Plantagenet from the rest of the world is not as great as might be imagined at first appearance. Shakespeare's absorption in the character of Richard which emerges from the soliloquies he has written for him reveals a remarkable sensitivity to that possibility. Richard represents a disposition by no means uncommon if we are to take seriously Socrates' remark that "surely some terrible, savage and lawless form of desires is in every man, even in some of us who seem to be ever so measured" (Plato, *Republic*, 572b). It would seem as though Shake-

spere wanted to show utter depravity as it might be experienced in a human soul, the soul of a tyrant; revealing the inadequacy of the tyrant's conception of what constitutes human happiness, and all that this implies for the human condition. It would be a real question for Shakespeare whether everyone seeks to have more, to overreach others, as his later contemporary, Thomas Hobbes, was to maintain.