

Interpretation

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Interpretation

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Inquiries: Patricia D'Allura, Assistant to the Editor,
INTERPRETATION, Queens College, Flushing, N.Y.
11367-0904, U.S.A. (718)520-7099

Shakespeare's Demonic Prince

GRANT B. MINDLE

University of North Texas

Richard. Why Buckingham, I say I would be king.
Buckingham. Why, so you are, my thrice-renowned lord.
Richard. Ha! Am I king? (IV.ii.12–14)¹

Shakespeare's *Richard III* is the story of a man who would be king, a chronicle of a tyrant who tries to "clothe [his] naked villainy" by setting "the murderous Machiavel to school" (I.iii.335; *3 Henry VI*, III.ii.193). A murderer without a "touch of pity," a consummate "liar," a "subtle, false and treacherous" villain, Richard is perfectly, splendidly, and delightfully wicked (cf. *Disc.*, I.27). His best conspiracies are conceived and executed in the spirit of Machiavelli, exploiting the vanity of his victims.

Richard III is "the only one of Shakespeare's kings explicitly associated with Machiavelli."² There are other Shakespearean kings whose ascent and reign are marred by injustice, but their wickedness is imperfect and half-hearted and their demeanor too solemn to classify them as Machiavellian. Bolingbroke would never have deposed his cousin but for Richard II's complicity in their uncle's death. Macbeth, despite his "vaulting ambition" would never have raised his hand against Duncan but for the witches' prophecy and the intercession of his wife (*Macbeth*, I.vii.27). Their royal ambitions were kindled by their pride in their own virtue, and their consciousness of their superiority to the monarchs whose thrones they usurped. Bolingbroke hoped to "purge the throne of the stain left on it by Richard's having committed the sin of Cain," but when to his consternation he is forced to commit the same sin "he is stricken with remorse," his sense of moral superiority shattered.³ Thinking himself preeminent in manliness, Macbeth embarks upon the murder of Duncan prepared to "jump the life to come," but the weight of his actions is more than even he can bear, his "guilty conscience betray[ing] him at every turn" (*Macbeth*, I.vii.7).⁴

Unlike Richard, Bolingbroke and Macbeth have some regard for morality, for their obligations as kinsman, subject, and host (*Richard II*, V.iii; vi.24–52; *Macbeth*, I.vii.1–28; but cf. *Richard III*, III.i.108–9; IV.ii.59–64). To Richard,

This interpretation of *Richard III* was inspired by a conversation I had with Harry V. Jaffa many years ago. My debt to him is immeasurable. I also wish to thank Morton J. Frisch, Steven Forde, and Leo Paul S. DeAlvarez for their advice and criticism.

“Conscience is but a word that cowards use,/ Devised at first to keep the strong in awe;/ Our strong arms be our conscience, swords our law!” (V.iii.310–12).⁵ He is neither surprised nor unduly perturbed by the harm he does. No one murders more deliberately and seemingly more serenely than Richard III (V.iii.198). The murder of Lady Anne is anticipated prior to their marriage, and then announced to the audience in a soliloquy with a lightheartedness which is surprisingly and frightfully amusing (I.ii.227–29).⁶ Richard’s numerous professions of remorse are comical performances by a skilled actor who knows how to “quake and change [his] color” whenever the occasion requires (III.v.1; see also I.iii.305–18, 323–37; III.vii.210; IV.ii.64; 3 *Henry VI*, III.ii.182–92). The downfall of a tragic hero is inevitably an act of self-destruction brought on by pride or hubris; his suffering elicits our pity, because we mourn the loss of his virtues, and our terror, because were it not for his virtues, he would not have suffered so. But we feel no pity for Richard III (V.iii.202–4). His final words—“A horse! A horse! My kingdom for a horse!” (V.iv.13)—are more befitting a comedy than a tragedy. He is inferior to his victims, and he knows it (3 *Henry VI*, III.ii.165–67).

Hath she forgot already that brave prince,
Edward her lord, whom I, some three months since,
Stabbed in my angry mood at Tewkesbury?
A sweeter and a lovelier gentleman
Framed in the prodigality of nature
Young, valiant, wise, and, no doubt, right royal
The spacious world cannot again afford. (I.ii.239–45)

Not pride or even hubris, but what we shall call for want of a better word “self-contempt” is the key to Richard’s being. “Cheated of feature by dissembling Nature,” he cannot imagine himself worthy of anyone’s love (I.i.19). His ugliness, though he endeavors to conceal it from others, he readily and eloquently concedes to himself in his soliloquies.⁷ No one, not even his most ardent enemies, ridicules Richard half so well as Richard ridicules himself.

Richard III begins with a soliloquy, the only one of Shakespeare’s plays to begin in this way. As Tracy Strong astutely observed, what “interests Shakespeare [is] not just [Richard’s] actions,” but “what is going on inside” Richard’s head (p. 204). Not “made to court an amorous looking glass,” or “strut before a wanton ambling nymph,” Richard is “determined to prove a villain/ And hate the idle pleasures of these days” (I.i.15, 17, 30–31; see also 3 *Henry VI*, III.ii.153–71; V.vi.68–91. Cf. the reference to “ambitious leisure” in *Disc.* I. preface). Unlike Bolingbroke and Macbeth, his rebellion is kindled by his sense of inferiority. Richard has no right to rule, but also no regard for natural right.⁸ The plot of *Richard III* is not a revolution—“The first and most fundamental cause of revolution is . . . the different conceptions men have of justice”—but a conspiracy, boldly conceived and executed by one alone whose motive is surprisingly private and trivial: its author’s inadequacy as a lover.⁹

Everything Richard does, every lie, every betrayal, every murder, is premeditated. "Plots have I laid, inductions dangerous/ By drunken prophecies, libels, and dreams/ To set my brother Clarence and the King/ In deadly hate the one against the other" (I.i.32–34). Seven lines later, Clarence appears on stage accompanied by an armed guard appointed by the king to convey him to the Tower. Throughout the play, this pattern is repeated again and again. Richard tells us what needs to be done, does it, and then pauses to pat himself on the back. His successes are so astonishing, his conceits so clever, his victims so foolish, and his sense of humor and self-contempt so wonderful that we are apt to hate him less than we should. "I am possessed with admiration of the genuine Richard, his genius, and his mounting spirit, which no consideration of his cruelties can depress."¹⁰

The England portrayed in the opening lines of Richard's first soliloquy is at peace (I.i.1–2). After years of civil war, the time has come to put away our "bruised arms" and "barbed steeds," and dedicate our lives to dancing and romance. Love is the order of the day. And yet, the passions which seem to stir the hearts of Edward IV's subjects most fervently are ambition and revenge (II.iii.27–28). Buckingham covets title to the earldom of Hereford and its movables (IV.ii.87–90); Lord Hastings is eager "to give them thanks/ That were the cause of [his] imprisonment" (I.i.127–28). So great is the suspicion, ill-will and injustice in Edward's England that the most frivolous of accusations commands a sympathetic hearing: "This day shall Clarence closely be mewed up/ About a prophecy which says that G of Edward's heirs the murderer shall be" (I.i.38–40; II.i.133–34) (Stubbs, quoted in Furness, p. 1).

Surrounded by fools less proficient in the use of arms than he, Richard has no difficulty sowing dissension within the ranks of the nobility. Like his teacher, the notorious Machiavel, he wages war by force and especially fraud. Richard is truly an "artist in evil," and yet, the righteous have no cause to criticize Richard's handiwork (Rossiter, quoted in the Signet edition, p. 248). With the possible exception of the young princes, Edward V and Richard, Duke of York, the victims of his tyranny are justly punished (but see I.iii.198–208; II.i.133–34; ii.33–35; IV.iv.61–66). Lady Anne is the butt of her own curse: "If ever he has wife, let her be made/ More miserable by the life of him/ Than I am made by my young lord and thee!" (I.ii.26–28, 113, 131–32; IV.i.58–62, 65–86). George, Duke of Clarence, is guilty of perjury and murder (I.iii.134–38, 312–14; iv.46–68, 204–18, 223–26; 3 *Henry VI*, V.v.34–40). Rivers, Grey, Vaughan, and Hastings stood by while Edward Prince of Wales was "stabbed by bloody daggers" (I.i.127–28; iii.89–91, 209–13; II.i.7–27; III.ii.99–103; iv.14–16; IV.iv.68–70). Hastings, contrary to his oath "swear[ing] perfect love" to the Queen's brethren, was overjoyed by their arrest and sentencing: "This day those enemies are put to death,/ And I in better state that e'er I was" (II.i.9–28; III.i.181–85; ii.49–103; iv.87–92). Buckingham is the author of his own punishment: "This, this All Souls' day to my fearful soul/ Is the determined respite of my wrongs./ That high All-seer which

I dallied with/ Hath turned my feignéd prayer on my head/ And given in earnest what I begged in jest./ Thus doth he force the swords of wicked men/ To turn their own points in their masters' bosoms" (V.i.13–29; II.i.29–40). Anne, Clarence, Rivers, Grey, Vaughan, Hastings, and Buckingham die cursing themselves for their fate (cf. I.iii.318). Robbed of their dignity, their death is no tragedy. "Richard's victims are first made into fools, and then into corpses" to the delight of his audience, and in accord with everyone's sense of justice, including that of his victims (Jaffa, "The Unity of Tragedy," p. 287).

Some critics have called Richard an "avenging angel," a "scourge of God," an "angel with horns."¹¹ But Richard is no angel. He has no regard for justice, and unlike everyone else in the play, no desire for vengeance. Incapable of anger, he feigns moral indignation whenever it suits his purpose (I.iii.42–81; II.i.79–82; IV.ii.27–31). His conduct is dictated by cold, calculating reason, by the necessities imposed upon him by his desire to be king (I.ii.229; II.i.140; II.148–50; III.i.94, 158–93; vi; IV.ii.5–23, 49–61; iv.294–496; 3 *Henry VI*, V.vi.84; vii.31–34).¹² Hastings and Buckingham are unjust, but it is not their injustice (their injustice was useful to Richard), but their scruples which cost them his favor. Hastings is executed because he will not countenance the dethronement of Edward IV's children: "I'll have this crown of mine cut from my shoulders/ Before I'll see the crown so foul misplaced" (III.ii.38–55). Buckingham's fall from grace begins when he balks at arranging the murder of Richard's nephews: "High-reaching Buckingham grows circumspect" (IV.ii.5–31).

Richard never curses anyone in earnest (I.iii.58), perhaps because he is the only one who blames nature for his misfortunes. He is too ugly, or so he assumes, to be worthy of anyone's love (e.g., IV.iii.47–57; cf. *King Lear*, I.i). Richard "loves no one, trusts no one, strange to say, *hates* no one, but uses all" (E. B. Warner, quoted in Furness, p. 15, emphasis added). He is amazed that Lady Anne should find him, though he himself cannot, "a marv'rous proper man" (I.ii.254). The target of his nephew's barbs, he magnanimously applauds the young man's wit:

- Buckingham. Think you, my lord, this prating York
Was not incenséd by his subtle mother
To taunt and scorn you thus opprobriously?
- Richard. No doubt, no doubt. O, 'tis a parlous boy,
Bold, quick, ingenious, forward, capable:
He is all the mother's, from the top to toe.
(III.i.151–56)

Richard is a devil, albeit one more apt to arouse our admiration than our hatred (A. W. Schlegel, quoted in Furness, p. 15; Richardson, quoted in Furness, p. 555; Bewley, quoted in Furness, p. 568). He is unbelievably ugly, but his physical deformity, the root of his worldly wisdom, candor, and good humor, is mitigated by his *virtù* (cf. *Disc.*, I.55). Originally by virtue of the defects of

his body, and thereafter by virtue of the operation of his mind, he seems to stand outside the natural order of the universe. "I have no brother, I am like no brother;/ And this word "love," which graybeards call divine,/ Be resident in men like one another/ And not in me: I am myself alone" (3 *Henry VI*, V.vi.80–83). He loves no one. His family means nothing to him, and unlike Bolingbroke and Macbeth he has no desire to be a father and founder of a political dynasty. He has no friends; there is "absolutely no soul in whom Richard could confide."¹³ He treats everyone and everything, including himself, "without any respect" (cf. *Disc.*, I.preface). He is incapable of reverence, and therefore shameless. Nothing is holy to him. There is no principle he will not betray, no trust he will not violate, no human being he will not sacrifice should the necessity to do so arise. The lines nature and piety would have us draw between public and private, friend and foe, kinsman and stranger are blurred by Richard's Machiavellianism. Its unit of currency is the individual, while the communities and associations to which he belongs are derivative and of secondary importance.

One cannot speak of Richard's nature, because he has none. His being is art, and art alone (Strong, pp. 205, 213–14). As an actor, he is, so to speak, always on stage, and strangely, never more so than in his soliloquies (H.N. Hudson, quoted in Furness, p. 565). His twelve soliloquies and four asides, constituting nearly five per cent of the play, testify to his isolation as a human being. "Richard is the quintessential individualist" (Jaffa, "The Unity of Tragedy," p. 287; see also Strong, pp. 213–14). He is truly *uno solo*, but an *uno solo* who by virtue of his isolation dominates every scene whether or not he is physically present (the phrase is Machiavelli's, see *Disc.*, I.9). As it is, Richard appears in 14 of the play's 25 scenes, delivering 32 per cent of its lines.¹⁴

His birth is unnatural, and his misshapen body the original provocation for his war against nature (I.i.20–27; II.iv.127–28; IV.iv.49; 3 *Henry VI*, III.ii.153–62) (Strong, pp. 194–95; cf. *Disc.*, I.1–3 on the insufficiency of nature). In Richard's case, nature dissembled by providing him with a body incommensurate with his spirit. Sent into the world "scarce half made up" (Soulless? Cf. Strauss, p. 31), Richard finds himself surrounded by men and especially women for whom the body—or more generally, appearances—are everything. "Men in general judge more by their eyes than by their hands. . . . Everyone sees how you appear, few touch what you are; . . . For the vulgar are taken in by the appearance and outcome of a thing, and in the world there is no one but the vulgar" (*Prince*, ch. 18). Everyone in Richard's world is vulgar. In their own way, the victims of his deceits are even uglier than he. They are shallow and vain, their souls too simple and plain to sustain his admiration for long (I.i.118; iii.327–28). "He entertains at bottom a contempt for all mankind, for he is confident of his ability to deceive them whether as his adversaries or his instruments" (Schlegel, quoted in Furness, p. 584).

We cannot help laughing when Clarence chastises his murderers for speaking ill of his brother: "O do not slander him, for he is kind" (I.iv.226–46).

“With curses in her mouth, tears in her eyes/ The bleeding witness of my hatred by” (I.ii.233–34; IV.i.65–80), Lady Anne succumbs to Richard’s profession of love and penitence. Hastings, despite mounting evidence of Richard’s duplicity, absurdly exclaims on the eve of his own execution that “there’s never a man in Christendom/ Can lesser hide his love or hate than he,/ For by his face straight shall you know his heart” (III.iv.48–53). To Richard, the world is a stage and the actor is king. “Why I can smile, and murder whiles I smile,/ And cry ‘Content’ to that which grieves my heart,/ And wet my cheeks with artificial tears,/ And frame my face to all occasions” (*3 Henry VI*, III.ii.182–85; *Richard III*, I.iii.47–53). Armed with “honey words” to mask his “deep intent,” Richard knows how to seem a saint when most he plays the devil (I.iii.337; IV.i.79). His ugliness and reputation for villainy—handicaps which were it not for Richard’s (and Machiavelli’s?) example might seem insuperable—are nothing to him because he knows it is not virtue, but *virtù*, the appearance of virtue, that matters (II.ii.27–28; III.v.29; cf. *Prince*, ch. 15).

“Names” and “name-calling” are integral to the action of the play. George, Duke of Clarence, is arrested because his name begins with “G.” Edward (Prince of Wales), Henry VI, Clarence, Edward V, and Richard (Duke of York) are murdered, and Anne and the younger Elizabeth are courted and married because their surname might give them or their husbands the right to lay claim to the throne. Queen Margaret, having no arms she can call her own, is reduced to cursing and name-calling. Her admonition to “take heed of yonder dog, . . . when he fawns, he bites,” is ignored, because even her insults are useful to Richard. He is the first to acknowledge the extent of Margaret’s suffering, and the first to publicly repent the wrongs he has done her, thereby giving his enemy, Lord Rivers, cause to commend him for his moral virtue: “A virtuous and Christianlike conclusion/ To pray for them that have done scathe to us” (I.iii.216–337). Later, Richard stands between two churchmen with a prayer book in his hand so that the Lord Mayor of London will call him pious (III.vi.98–100; vii.46–47).¹⁵

A vicious man may appear virtuous provided that he is sufficiently artful (III.i.7–15). This is so, because to determine the morality of a deed, the author’s motive or intention must always be considered. To be moral, one must not only do what is right, but one must do “it for the right reason or for the love of God” (Mansfield, “Introduction,” pp. x–xi). All morality then presupposes a “profession of good” (*Prince*, ch. 15). It is Richard’s awareness of the primacy of speech, and especially his own speech, which allows him to seem a saint when most he plays the devil. Baffled by the impossibility of discerning Richard’s heart, Anne wonders whether or not to take him at his word: “I would I knew thy heart./ Tis figured in my tongue” (I.ii.192–93). Machiavelli’s best disciples are known less by their prowess on the battlefield than by their skill in waging war with their tongues, by their ability to manipulate the criteria by which praise and blame are assigned (see *Prince*, chs. 15 and 18).

In the *Prince* and the *Discourses*, Machiavelli redefines virtue and vice, treating tyranny under the rubric of a new and more favorable name so that men will learn *how* to be not good, how to excuse behavior which were it not for Machiavelli's instruction would otherwise be condemned. When Clarence tells Richard the cause of his arrest—"Because my name is George"—Richard suggests that Clarence be "new christ'ned" (I.i.46, 50; cf. *Prince*, chs. 15–17; *Disc.*, I.25–27). Redemption through new christening may be accomplished in one of two ways: by reinterpreting the accused's motive (*Disc.*, I.9, 18, 29); or by feigning subjection to some necessity to conceal one's strength and the exercise of one's will (*Prince*, ch. 15; *Disc.*, I.10, 17 and 29).¹⁶ A new prince ought to govern his subjects indirectly (*Prince*, ch. 3; I.iii.329–34; iv.221; IV.iv.225–26). Machiavelli prefers the word "executive."¹⁷ An executive is a prince who appears in the guise of a servant ostensibly ministering to the needs of others with little or no regard for himself. The greatest prince is the one whose rule is most indirect and invisible, that of Machiavelli himself, a prince who graciously offers to serve others by teaching them how to acquire and maintain states of their own (cf. *Prince*, ch. 11).

Richard begins his ascent with a descent, by humbling himself before his beloved in order to disguise his own selfish ambition (I.i.76–80; ii.127–30; iii.124; II.i.74; III.i.132–35; vii.17, 153–63, 204; IV.iv.336; cf. *Disc.*, I.preface; II.13). Officially, he is not a ruler, but a "poor devoted servant" (I.ii.206; iii.121–24; IV.iv.355; cf. *Prince*, Epistle Dedicatory, and ch. 6's reference to Moses as a "mere executive"). Since a profession of love is a tacit admission of weakness, incompleteness, and inferiority, the lover is necessarily and logically subordinate to his beloved. His love invests her with the opportunity and the right to rule, to dictate so to speak the terms of his surrender.¹⁸ This hierarchy of authority, however, is reversed when the prince merely impersonates a lover. By placing his beloved on a pedestal, by elevating her to a position of honor, the relative status of both parties is radically altered. Since the lover is free to withdraw his affection and proclaim his subjection to another as soon as it is to his advantage to do so, his beloved, especially if she is proud of the stature conferred by her lover's profession of love, is more dependent upon him than he is on her.¹⁹ Professions of love are difficult to resist, because it is "a quarrel most unnatural to be revenged on him that loveth thee" (I.ii.134), and because we want to be admired. Professions of love appeal to our vanity and our self-esteem (cf. *Prince*, ch. 23). Richard is impervious to flattery, because he is consumed by self-contempt. The reason he "cannot prove a lover" (I.i.28) is not his physical deformity (he is not unloved), but his conviction that anyone who loves him is a fool.

Richard's "love" impoverishes his beloveds by robbing them of their dignity. Their dignity is diminished as soon as they succumb to Richard's rhetoric, not merely in Richard's eyes, but also in the eyes of his audience. The recipients of Machiavelli's favor are similarly impoverished. His exaltation of the

state is accomplished by means of argument which reduces the political community to a gang of pirates.²⁰ His use of *stato* is never impersonal; patriotism is devotion to someone's state, one's own or somebody else's.²¹ It is either selfishness or foolishness, depending upon whether or not one happens to be a member of the ruling class (cf. *Florentine Histories*, III.13). The state is no longer an association dedicated to virtue and the common good, but a vehicle for the expression and satisfaction of a subtler, more insidious, and potent form of human selfishness.

Machiavelli is eager to show men less gifted than he how to satisfy their selfish ambitions. Rarely, if ever, do his disciples notice the price they pay in return for his assistance.²² A Machiavellian prince governs his subjects indirectly, under the cover of a profession of love in order to disguise his authority and facilitate attribution of his "sins" to his solicitude for their welfare (I.ii.38–39; cf. *Prince*, ch. 26; *Disc.*, III.41). To govern in this way, a prince must first divest himself of pride, lest he take for granted his right to rule and claim by right what can only be his "by force or by fraud" (*Florentine Histories*, III.13). Natural right is absent from Machiavelli's political science, because no one has a right to rule over others by virtue of his nature; a prince, if he wishes to maintain himself, must not only be bad, he must know how to be bad; he must be devoid of reverence and psychologically prepared to woo his subjects (*Disc.*, 1.27). It is no accident that Richard's greatest accomplishment, his most memorable and Machiavellian moment, is the wooing of Lady Anne. (On the wooing of *Fortuna*, see *Prince*, ch. 25.)

Edward, Prince of Wales (Anne's husband), was killed at the battle of Tewkesbury in 1471. His father, Henry VI, died of unknown causes while imprisoned in the Tower of London that same year. In 1474, Richard married Anne. Shakespeare exaggerates Richard's villainy so that he might dazzle us with the power of Machiavellian *virtù*.²³ In *3 Henry VI* and *Richard III*, the historical sequence of events is compressed so that the murder of Anne's husband and her father-in-law and Richard's proposal of marriage occur within days of one another. (On the necessity of committing all of one's cruelties "at one stroke," see *Prince*, ch. 8.) In *3 Henry VI*, Edward IV, followed by Richard, and then Clarence stab Anne's Edward, their insolent and unarmed prisoner after the battle is over (V.v.38–40). Richard, acting on his own initiative, then hurries off to the Tower to murder King Henry VI (*3 Henry VI*, V.v.46–50; vi.56–67). "[U]nder what seem wantonly unfavorable circumstances," during the burial procession of Henry VI, Richard proposes marriage to Lady Anne. The scene is so wildly implausible that it is usually considered "an unplayable strain on credulity"²⁴; perhaps, but it is also a tour de force so dauntless that the audience is stunned and stupefied (I.ii.44–45; cf. *Prince*, ch. 7).

Was ever woman in this humor wooed?

Was every woman in this humor won?

I'll have her, but I will not keep her long.
What! I that killed her husband and his father
To take her in her heart's extremest hate
With curses in her mouth, tears in her eyes
The bleeding witness of my hatred by
Having God, her conscience, and these bars against me,
And I no friends to back my suit at all
But the plain devil and dissembling looks,
And yet to win her, all the world to nothing!
(I.ii.227–37)

When Richard accosts Anne, she is overcome by grief and thirsting for revenge. “Curséd be the heart that had the heart to do it! Curséd be the blood that let this blood from hence!” (I.ii.14–15). Richard is evil incarnate, a “black magician,” a “dreadful minister of hell,” a “lump of foul deformity,” a beast who knows no “touch of pity,” a “diffused infection of a man” who is “fouler than heart can think thee,” and a “devilish slave” (see also I.iii.229). There is nothing Richard can say, and but one thing he can do to excuse his conduct: “Thou canst make no excuse current but to hang thyself” (I.ii.84).

Richard needs to marry Edward's widow in order to strengthen his claim to the throne (I.i.58–59). But why would someone as clever as Richard choose this particular moment to ask for Anne's hand in marriage? Would it not have been more prudent to wait a while to allow Anne's grief time to subside? The historical Richard waited three years. Only a fool would choose a moment as inauspicious as this to proclaim his love, and yet, Richard's “madness” is more Machiavellian than it seems. The timing of Richard's proposal is a stroke of genius. To win Anne's heart, Richard must find a way to dispel her suspicions. Richard is a clever villain, but his reputation for cleverness is a handicap, a handicap he cleverly exploits. By imprudently asking for Anne's hand when her hatred of him is at its zenith, Richard looks like a man so blinded by love that he is incapable of thinking clearly. He masquerades as the perfect Christian, overlooking Anne's insults, and rendering “good for bad, blessings for curses” (I.ii.69; iii.334). To Richard, Anne is a “sweet saint,” an “angel . . . fairer than tongue can name thee” whose beauty haunted him even in his sleep.

If thy revengeful heart cannot forgive,
Lo, here I lend thee this sharp-pointed sword;
Which if thou please to hide in this true breast
And let the soul forth that adareth thee,
I lay it naked to the deadly stroke
And humbly beg the death upon my knee.
(I.ii.173–78)

But Richard must do more than convince Anne of his sincerity; he must also acquit himself of his “supposed crimes.” But how? Richard blames Anne for

his conduct (cf. *Prince*, ch. 18; *Disc.*, I.29; *Florentine Histories*, III.13). He disclaims responsibility for Edward's death, but Anne knows better: "In thy foul throat thou li'st! Queen Margaret saw/ Thy murd'rous falchion smoking in his blood" (I.ii.93–94). He compounds his dilemma by answering Anne's question, "Didst thou not kill this king?" (I.ii.101), affirmatively. Undaunted, Richard asks Anne a question of his own, a question which leads to another, that of motive, which he alone can answer: "Is not the causer of the timeless deaths/ Of these Plantagenets, Henry and Edward,/ As blameful as the executioner?" (I.ii.117–19).

The distinction Richard makes between cause and effect catches Anne by surprise: "Thou wast the cause and the most cursed effect" (I.ii.120). The plausibility of Richard's assertion to the contrary—"Your beauty was the cause of that effect" (I.ii.121)—is enhanced by the timing of his marriage proposal. Having already condemned Richard for his "heinous deeds," Anne must now reconsider her verdict in the light of his motive. To her dismay, she discovers that she cannot condemn Richard without condemning herself as well. If Richard is a murderer, then she is his unwitting accomplice. Haunted by Anne's beauty, Richard would have undertaken "the death of the whole world" in order "to live one hour in [her] sweet bosom" (I.ii.123–24). Anne of course is no more liable for her "heavenly face" than Richard for his physical deformity, but she believes otherwise: "If I thought that, . . . These nails should rend that beauty from my cheeks" (I.ii.125–26; cf. IV.iv.216–18).

Richard's descent, his profession of love, reverses everything. Her wretchedness pales in comparison with his. Anne is his day and his life (I.ii.130), his ruler, and his accessory, however inadvertently, to the deaths of "these Plantagenets, Henry and Edward."

Richard. Thine eyes, sweet lady, have infected mine.
 Anne. Would they were basilisks to strike thee dead!
 Richard. I would they were, that I might die at once;
 For now they kill me with a living death. (I.ii.149–52)

Prior to Richard's profession of love, Anne could do nothing but shake her fist in impotent rage and pray for divine vengeance, but now, Richard offers her the opportunity to punish him herself.

Richard. Then bid me kill myself, and I will do it.
 Anne. I have already.
 Richard. That was in thy rage.
 Speak it again, and even with the word
 This hand, which for thy love did kill thy love,
 Shall for thy love kill a far truer love.
 To both their deaths shalt thou be accessory. (I.ii.186–91)

Richard's descent is Anne's undoing. She cannot bring herself to execute Richard or bid him to commit suicide. Already an accessory to two murders, she is

reluctant to become an accessory to yet a third (I.ii.185). But having declined to punish Richard, she no longer has the right to ask God to revenge Henry's death or to stand fast by her belief that Richard "canst make no excuse current but to hang [him]self." Eager to "make the wench amends" by becoming "her husband and her father," Anne can hardly say no to the man who purged her of her grief and "help[ed her] to a better husband" (I.i.155–56; I.ii.138–44).²⁵ A moment ago, Richard was a "villain" who "know'st nor law of God or man," but now Anne consents to accept his ring, and gladly grants the boon he asks of her, to allow "him who hath most cause to be a mourner" to oversee the interment of "this noble king" (I.ii.70) (Cf. The account of this scene in Strong, pp. 206–8.). Her joy at seeing Richard "become so penitent" is exceeded only by his at the success of his performance: "And will she yet abase her eyes on me . . . On me, whose all not equals Edward's moi'ty" (I.ii.210–20, 246–50).

Richard appears both here and elsewhere as an executive, seemingly acting in concert with others and at their behest in order to diffuse responsibility for his actions and disguise his ambition to be king (I.i.63–65, 106; iii.89–90, 173–80, 323–30; iv.171; II.ii.21, 151–54). When Richard finally accepts the crown, he claims to do so "against [his] conscience and [his] soul," reluctantly sacrificing his will to that of his countrymen (III.vii.140–72, 203–25, 230–35). Richard may "want love's majesty" (I.i.16), but his ugliness does not prevent him from impersonating a lover and feigning subjection to the will of his beloved.

A magnanimous man is too proud of his superiority in virtue to demean himself before his inferiors, and too contemptuous of honor to stoop to chicanery and flattery to secure that honor which is his by right and which cannot be justly refused (Jaffa, "The Unity of Tragedy," p. 288). Yet the honor due to the virtuous is often withheld. To Richard, the untimely demise of Edward, Henry VI, and Clarence, whose virtues are superior to his, is proof that the earth is no proper home for the practice of moral virtue (I.i.118–20; ii.104–8, 239–45; III.i.79, 94). Richard's conclusion is reminiscent of Machiavelli's declaration in the fifteenth chapter of *The Prince* that he "who wants to make a profession of good in all things must come to ruin among so many who are not good." Lest we condemn Richard too harshly for the murder of his nephews, it should be noted that were it not for "Richard III's desperate attempts to gather the varied strands of legitimacy to himself . . . the cycle of rebellion and misrule that . . . plagued England for a hundred years" would have continued.²⁶ Richard needs to "murder [Elizabeth's] brothers and then marry her" not only "to stop all hopes whose growth may damage" him, but also to bring peace to England (IV.ii.57–61; iv.471–72). Richmond obviously agrees. He marries Elizabeth to unite "the true succeeders" of the houses of York and Lancaster to put an end to England's "civil wounds." Richmond's conduct is equally determined by political necessity, and not love, although Richmond is somewhat more honest about it than Richard (IV.iii.40–42; iv.256, 343, 416; V.v.29–40).

There is another and more disturbing parallel. Shortly before his death, Clarence asks God to spare his “guiltless wife” and his “poor children” (I.iv.72). Richard spares them, but only because they pose no threat to his reign: “Inquire me out some mean poor gentleman,/ Whom I will marry straight to Clarence’s daughter./ The boy is foolish and I fear him not” (IV.ii.52–54; iii.36–37; iv.145–46). When Clarence’s children appear on stage to bewail their fate—“What stay had we but Clarence? And he’s gone” (II.ii.75)—it seems to be a dramatic device for intensifying our hatred of Richard by showing us the innocent victims of his tyranny. But the presence of Clarence’s children on stage simultaneously casts a dark shadow over Richmond’s subsequent assertion of moral superiority (V.iii.241–72). An Elizabethan audience would have known that Clarence’s “last prayer had not been answered, for the destruction of his wife and children by Henry VII and Henry VIII, who feared their possible claims to the throne, was an oft-told tale.”²⁷ Clarence’s wife and children were “foes to [their] rest and [their] sweet-sleep’s disturbers,” and therefore beheaded lest *their* kingdom stand “on brittle glass” (IV.ii.60, 72).

Margaret (see *3 Henry VI*, I.iv.79–180; I.iii.173–86), Edward IV, Clarence, Richard, Rivers, Vaughan, Grey, Hastings, and Buckingham were no innocents. None of them is free of sin (II.iii.27–28). The same, of course, might be said (and is said by Shakespeare, albeit more subtly) of Henry VII and Henry VIII. Were it not for his soliloquies, Richard’s conduct might seem no worse than theirs (Strong, p. 201). With the possible exception of Margaret and Henry VII, of whom nothing is explicitly said, everyone in *Richard III* suffers from a guilty conscience, even the allegedly conscienceless Richard (IV.i.82–84; V.iii.73–74, 119–223).

Is Richmond’s victory a refutation of Machiavellianism? Or does Richard fail because in the end, his Machiavellianism is inferior to Richmond’s? In his oration to his soldiers, Richmond’s affirmation of the justice of their “good cause” is capped by an appeal to his soldiers’ greed. Richard’s soldiers, despite their numerical superiority, need cheering up, but Richard is inexcusably silent about the justice of their cause, dwelling instead upon the inferiority of their enemies—“Remember whom you are to cope withal,/ A sort of vagabonds, rascals, and runaways/ A scum of Britains and base lackey peasants”—and his soldiers’ fear for the safety of their “lands” and “beauteous wives.” Richard would have his soldiers believe that Richmond is a “paltry fellow” whose army consists of “overweening rags of France,” and “famished beggars, weary of their lives,/ Who, but for dreaming on this fond exploit,/ . . . had hanged themselves.” Had Richard prevailed, his victory would have brought him no glory, a victory over these “poor rats” merits no commendation, and yet he needs “to carry on some great enterprises and to give rare examples of himself” (the phrase is Machiavelli’s, see *Prince*, ch. 21) to mask his own injustice. His use of fear to strengthen his soldiers’ resolve is foolish, for as Richmond shrewdly observes, “Richard except, those whom we fight against/ Had rather

have us win than him they follow" (V.iii.11, 238–72, 315–42). Richard is successful when he conceals his selfishness beneath a plausible profession of love, but he fails miserably whenever he is compelled to rely upon naked fear, fear unadorned by love or deceit (IV.iv.494–96; V.iii.343–45).²⁸

Machiavelli's teaching is easily and frequently misunderstood; his object is not the resurrection of spiritedness, but rather the manipulation of love, and professions of love. A Machiavellian prince governs not by impressing others with his moral virtues, but through a blend of humility and audacity intended to leave his subjects satisfied and stupefied, or rather, grateful and fearful. Neither Machiavelli nor his pupils can afford to be spirited or angry, lest they come to demand by right what can only be theirs by force or fraud. It is no accident that Machiavelli is the author of three comedies (*The Woman from Andros*, *Clizia*, and *Mandragola*), and no tragedies, and that in each of his three plays the object is to overcome the obstacles which stand in the way of the union of a man and a woman.

Richard has no difficulty deceiving the nobility and the Lord Mayor of London, but his rhetoric is ineffectual with the multitude, because his strategy for wooing the many is not at all Machiavellian (II.iii; III.v.75–94; vii.1–42). Richard asks Buckingham when he speaks to the multitude to "infer the bastardy" of both Edward IV and his children, and "urge his hateful luxury/ And bestial appetite in change of lust" (III.v.80–81). Does Richard honestly believe that a few allusions to Edward IV's "vices," his nephews' bastardy, and his own "superior" lineage will persuade the multitude to demand his coronation instead of his nephews (II.iii.8–15)? It is absurd for Richard to advance his claim to the throne on the basis of his "form and nobleness of mind," his "discipline in war, wisdom in peace," his "bounty, virtue, [and] fair humility" (III.v.14–17). Richard has never done anything, at least so far as we know, to curry favor with the multitude (cf. the account of Caesar's liberality in *Prince*, ch. 16).

Richard's approach to foreign policy is also contrary to Machiavelli's teaching. Unlike Henry V and the young Edward V, Richard has no imperial or Caesarean ambitions (Frisch, pp. 2–4). Henry V went to war with France to disguise the illegitimacy of his title to the throne, but Richard is strangely content to be king of England, and of nothing else (*2 Henry IV*, IV.v.213–14).²⁹ The villain who rejects Edward IV's peace because he "hate[s] the idle pleasures of these days" is the author of a conspiracy whose goal is ironically the creation of a more profound and enduring peace than the one he spurns. If Richard had had his way, there would have been no one left to contest his right to be king: "What heir of York is there alive but we?! And who is England's king, but great York's heir" (IV.iv.471–72)? What Richard does not seem to realize is that Richmond has as much right to wrest the crown from him, if he can, as Richard had to wrest it from his nephews. A Machiavellian prince has no right to take his legitimacy for granted.

Edward V, assuming he meant what he said to Buckingham about his desire, once he becomes a man, to go to war to “win our ancient right in France again,” has no more regard for peace and justice than Richard (III.i.69–93) (Bloom with Jaffa, pp. 113–14; Alvis, pp. 109–12). I rather doubt that Shakespeare would have approved of Edward V’s ambition to emulate the tyrant Caesar. It is no accident that *Richard III* literally begins with a celebration of peace, albeit by a man contemptuous of the virtues of peace, and ends with Richmond’s prayer that peace “may long live here, God say amen!”

In *Richard III*, Shakespeare gives us cause to wonder whether Richard’s tyranny would have been possible without Christianity, and whether Christianity might not itself stand in the way of England’s peace and happiness. The science of indirect government as expounded and practiced by Machiavelli is inspired by his reflections upon the Christian conquest and governance of Rome. The priest rules over monarch and subject alike, but in the name of God, or as Machiavelli intimates, by feigning submission to the will of God in order to conceal his own rule.³⁰ Similarly, Richard is most successful when he governs his subjects under the cover of a profession of love and subjection to the will of his beloveds.

Richard whets Derby, Hastings, and Buckingham’s appetite for revenge against the Queen’s brethren, but then sighs, and “with a piece of Scripture/ Tells them that God bids us do good for evil” (I.iii.328–34). Is not Christianity guilty of doing the same thing? Does it not command charity as it indulges and whets our appetite for vengeance? Time and again, the victims of injustice in *Richard III* implore God to avenge their injury, not merely in the next world, but also here on earth. To Richard, the murder of Henry VI and Edward is an act of divine vengeance so that, in truth, it is “God, not we, [who] hath plagued thy bloody deed” (I.iii.173–80, 185). Although Christian doctrine teaches that “If God will be avengèd for the deed,/ O, know you yet he doth it publicly./ Take not the quarrel from his pow’rful arm./ He needs no indirect or lawless course/ To cut off those that have offended him,” its doctrine of divine providence offers cover to those who undertake on their own initiative the punishment of their enemies (I.iv.218–22). Richmond does not ask for divine authorization to assemble an army and set sail for England, waiting instead until the eve of his battle with Richard to pray that God “make us thy ministers of chastisement,” because his ambition to be king is sufficiently compelling (V.iii.114).

The doctrine of divine providence is a godsend to ambitious men. Or as Machiavelli puts it, “let a prince win and maintain his state: the means will always be judged honorable, and will be praised by everyone” (*Prince*, ch. 18). The ordinary citizens in *Richard III* are too mindful of Christianity’s injunction to “leave it all to God” to exercise a salutary restraint upon the conduct of the nobility, and the nobility is too ambitious to restrain itself (II.iii). Since each of God’s “ministers” is himself in need of chastisement, a moral justification for

selfish ambition and vengeance against one's enemies is never lacking, leaving the state always on the verge of civil war.

I am inclined to think that Brackenbury is speaking for Shakespeare when he observes that,

Princes have but their titles for their glories,
An outward honor for an inward toil,
And for unfelt imaginations.
They often feel a world of restless cares;
So that between their titles and low name
There's nothing differs but the outward fame. (I.iv.78–83)

If so, then contrary to Machiavelli, the most important lesson of Shakespeare's *Richard III* is the insufficiency of glory, and by implication, the superiority of private life (*Disc.*, III.2; cf. Plato's *Republic*, 620c–d).

NOTES

1. All unidentified citations are from the Signet edition of Shakespeare's *Richard III*, ed. Mark Eccles (New York: New American Library, 1964). Citations to Machiavelli's *Discourses* are abbreviated as *Disc.* All quotations from Machiavelli's *The Prince* are from the edition translated by Harvey C. Mansfield, Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

2. Morton J. Frisch, "Shakespeare's *Richard III* and the Soul of the Tyrant," *Interpretation* 20(1993) 280; cf. Tracy B. Strong, "Shakespeare: Elizabethan Statecraft and Machiavellianism," in *The Artist and Political Vision*, eds. Benjamin R. Barber and Michael J. Gargas (New Brunswick: Transaction Books), pp. 201, 215–16.

3. Allan Bloom, "*Richard II*," in *Shakespeare as Political Thinker*, ed. John Alvis and Thomas G. West (Durham, N.C.: Carolina Academic Press, 1981), pp. 51–52, 60.

4. Harry V. Jaffa, "The Unity of Tragedy, Comedy, and History: An Interpretation of the Shakespearean Universe," in *Shakespeare as Political Thinker*, pp. 284–86.

5. Cf. *Prince*, ch. 12, on good arms and good laws, and *Disc.*, III.6, where conscience is defined as "confusion of the brain."

6. Cf. Mansfield, "Introduction" to *The Prince*, p. 10; Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1969), p. 292: "In Machiavelli we find comedies, parodies, and satires but nothing reminding of tragedy. . . . There is no tragedy in Machiavelli because he has no sense of the sacredness of 'the common.'"

7. H. Knight, quoted in *A New Variorum Edition of Shakespeare, Richard III* (hereinafter abbreviated as Furness), ed. H.H. Furness, Jr. (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1909), p. 562; H. Giles, quoted in Furness, pp. 563–64.

8. Justice is no great theme for Machiavelli either; see Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, p. 295.

9. Harry V. Jaffa, "Aristotle," in *History of Political Philosophy*, 2d ed., ed. Leo Strauss and Joseph Cropsey (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1972), p. 122; Aristotle, *Politics* 1031a36–39.

10. Charles Lamb, quoted in the Signet edition of *Richard III*, p. 211; see also A.P. Rossiter, quoted in the Signet edition, p. 247; Jaffa, "The Unity of Tragedy," p. 287.

11. Rossiter, quoted in the Signet edition, p. 248; Holinshed, quoted in the Signet edition, p. 189; E.M. Tillyard, *Shakespeare's History Plays* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1951), pp. 204–8.

12. Cf. *Prince*, ch. 3 on the wisdom of the Romans, ch. 4 on the necessity of eliminating the bloodline of the previous monarch, and *Disc.*, III.2 on the insufficiency of private life.

13. Warner, quoted in Furness, p. 15; cf. *Prince*, ch. 19, and *Disc.*, I.10 on the superiority of adoption.
14. Webb, quoted in Furness, p. 191; Larry S. Champion, *Perspective in Shakespeare's English Histories* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1980), p. 61.
15. On the piety of the ordinary citizen, see II.iii where the word "God" appears seven times in forty-seven lines; cf. *Prince*, ch. 18, on the need to appear religious.
16. See my article, "Machiavelli and Caesar," in *Natural Right and Political Right*, ed. Thomas B. Silver and Peter W. Schramm (Durham, N.C.: Carolina Academic Press, 1984).
17. Harvey C. Mansfield, Jr., *Taming the Prince: The Ambivalence of Modern Executive Power* (New York: Free Press, 1989), pp. 121–49.
18. Allan Bloom with Harry V. Jaffa, *Shakespeare's Politics* (New York: Basic Books, 1964), pp. 51, 133–35.
19. See, for example, III.v.24–32; cf. the account of Lady Fortuna and her suitors in Mansfield, "Introduction," p. xxiv.
20. *Prince*, ch. 16; Clifford Orwin, "Machiavelli's UnChristian Charity," *American Political Science Review*, 72 (December 1978).
21. On Machiavelli's use of *stato*, see Harvey C. Mansfield, Jr., "On the Impersonality of the Modern State," *American Political Science Review*, 77 (December 1983).
22. See my article, "Machiavelli's Realism," *Review of Politics*, 47 (April, 1985), pp. 226–29.
23. Horace Walpole, *Historic Doubts on the Life and Reign of King Richard III*, 1767, reprinted in *Richard III: The Great Debate*, ed. Paul Murray Kendall (New York: Norton Press, n.d.), pp. 160–65.
24. F.S. Boas, quoted in Furness, p. 54; Strong, pp. 202–3, 206; Wolfgang Clemen, "Tradition and Originality in Shakespeare's *Richard III*," *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 5 (1954), 254.
25. Cf. the reference to Callimaco as Lucrezia's father in *Mandragola*, V.iv.
26. Strong, p. 201. See also II.iii.30 where England is called a "sickly land," and V.v.15–41 where she is said to have "long been mad and scarred herself."
27. Lily B. Campbell, quoted in the Signet edition pp. 223–24; Wright, quoted in Furness, p. 5 n30; cf. *Disc.*, III.4.
28. On how love and fear may be combined according to Machiavelli, see Orwin, pp. 1224–1226.
29. John Alvis, "The Career of Henry Monmouth," in *Shakespeare as Political Thinker*, pp. 107, 111.
30. Cf. *Disc.*, I.11 where Machiavelli speaks of Numa's feigning converse with a nymph.