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Profane Icon: The Throne Scene of Shakespeare’s *Richard III*

Peggy Endel

GUIL: *Retentive*—he’s a very retentive king, a royal retainer. . . .
ROS: What are you playing at?
GUIL: Words, words. They’re all we have to go on.
—Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*

The English drama critic John Trewin first began to review Shakespeare’s plays on the London stage in 1930. In 1978, when he was seventy years old, this dean of theater critics looked back over a lifetime of what he called “going to Shakespeare” and recalled an extraordinary moment at the Old Vic in London in 1944. Remembering Laurence Olivier enthroned as Richard III in Act IV, scene ii, of Shakespeare’s play, Trewin writes, “One must always judge [Olivier’s] famous portrait from its first presentation with the Old Vic company, and not from the film. . . . Richard distilled his own darkness; and I cannot return to the play now without picturing Olivier, a cauldron-figure, crowned and sceptred, as he brooded on the throne.”1 What Trewin evokes here is a stage image so potent and so compelling that it has impressed itself on his mind’s eye for almost thirty years despite some element of resistance. Thus his negative formulation: “I cannot return to the play now without picturing . . . a cauldron-figure . . . brooding on the throne.” Trewin is responding to *Richard III* primarily as a playgoer, a spectator in the theater; and he represents all of those spectators who have found in Shakespeare’s picture of Richard darkly brooding on the throne a dramatic icon that is at once memorable, powerful, and complex.

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For many critics and editors of Richard III, however, the climactic throne scene of Shakespeare's first great play has proven to be not merely complex, but positively disquieting. As the stage directions for this scene indicate, Shakespeare raises the expectations of his audience for a scene of state which, by tradition, ought to be societal and public: "Sound a sennet. Enter Richard in pomp, crowned; Buckingham, Catesby, Ratcliffe, Lovel, [a Page, and others]." But with Richard's first words, "Stand all apart," Shakespeare frustrates at once the expectations that he himself has raised. In Richard's first act as king, he plots his nephews' deaths as though he were in private; and, as though he were in private, King Richard broods on Richmond, leaving off his meditation only to refuse Buckingham the gift that he has promised with the lines toward which the entire scene tends: "[I am not in the giving vein to-day]" (1. 116); "Thou troublest me, I am not in the vein" (1. 118).

As early as 1885, we find one distressed scholar proposing that because of the private nature of the business transacted on the throne the director of Richard III ought to stage Act IV, scene ii, not in the throne-room, but in Richard's private chamber. Wilhelm Oechelhäuser complains: "The interviews with Buckingham and Tyrell, with the courtiers grouped at the back seem utterly unnatural." If the scene is moved to Richard's private chamber, he proposes, "The mounting of the play will . . . be much simplified and the illusion will not be destroyed." Writing almost a hundred years after Oechelhäuser, Bridget Gellert Lyons voices precisely the same discomfort at the spectacle of King Richard's treating the chair of state as a private place; and, because of her uneasiness, she supports those many editors of Richard III who have accepted Edmond Malone's stage direction that Richard should descend the throne in the course of the scene, a direction that Malone first proposed in 1790. Lyons says in a footnote, "Many Shakespearian editors omit the interpolated stage direction at line 27, 'Descend from throne.' Richard's behavior, however, appears just as incongruous—probably more so—if he remains seated on the throne throughout the scene."4

Most modern editors reject Malone's stage direction that Richard descend the throne in Act IV, scene ii; but we ought nevertheless to ask why able critics and editors should feel compelled to dismantle a stage image that has created a brilliant effect in the theater. My own answer to this question is that,
while those who would take Richard off the throne have been
mistaken in their conclusions, their instincts are sound. For in
their discomfort—in sensing that there is something “unnatural”
and “incongruous” here—they are responding more fully to this
crucial scene in Richard III than those critics who have ignored
its effect.

Alan Dessen has astutely noted that on the uncluttered
Elizabethan stage any action centered on the throne is likely
to be significant since the throne is a “potentially charged”
object highly visible on the open stage; and, he goes on to say,
the more arresting or unsettling such a moment, the more
crucial it may be to the meaning of a play: “Bizarre, unrealistic
effects fit well with the open stage and the viewer’s eye. To
ignore or to play down such moments so as not to offend
realistic expectations is to pass over possibilities that may be
central to a play.”5 Such, I believe, is clearly the case here.

Richard’s protracted meditation on the throne is one of
those “bizarre, unrealistic” effects that may be central to a play;
and I would suggest that the source of discomfort in this stage
image and the source of dramatic power may be, at root, the
same. For if Shakespeare’s critics have been struck—and baf-
fled—by the spectacle of King Richard doing private business
in a public place, Shakespeare himself was evidently struck by
the spectacle of Thomas More’s Richard doing public business
in a private place: Shakespeare’s powerful and unsettling stage
image of a king, crowned and sceptered, brooding on the throne,
evidently grows out of a bizarre parenthetical detail in Sir
Thomas More’s History in which King Richard and his page
devise the deaths of the two princes in the Tower while Richard
sits, not in pomp on England’s throne, but on a “draught” or
privy.

Shakespeare’s imagination is often stimulated by the smallest
details in his sources, and the glimpse that More permits of
Richard at the draft is just such a detail. Even so, Shakespeare
is not alone among his contemporaries in fastening on More’s
parenthetical remarks: in 1596, Sir John Harington—the in-
venter of the modern water closet—declares More’s peek at
Richard on the privy to be the most memorable moment in the
most celebrated of histories. In his playful book The Metamor-
phosis of Ajax—that is, the metamorphosis of a-jakes—Haring-
ton writes:
Lastly the best, and best written part of all our Chronicles, in all mens opinions; is that of Richard the third, written as I have heard by Moorton, but as most suppose by that worthy, and uncorrupt Magistrate, Sir Thomas More, sometime Lord Chancellor of England, where it is written; how the King was devising with Terill, how to have his nephews privily murdered, and it is added, he was then sitting on a draught (a fit carpet for such a counsel). 6

As Harington and Shakespeare see, a quibble or pun lies at the center of More’s version of the young princes’ “privy” murder, a secret and foul deed both private and befitting the privy. In his account of the deaths of the Princes in the Tower, More concludes, “Thus (as I have learned of them that much knew, and little cause had to lie) were these two noble princes, these innocent tender children, borne of most royal blod, brought up in great wealth, likely long to live, reign, and rule in the realm, by traitorous tyrannie taken, deprived of their estate, shortly shut up in prison, and privily slain and murdered, their bodies cast God wot where, by the cruel ambition of their unnatural uncle and his despiteous tormentors.” 7

Fatal Cleopatra or not, the quibble fascinates Shakespeare, particularly in the early 1590’s; and whether or not More intends “privily” as a quibble, Shakespeare, like Harington, probably regards it as such. Thus, in Shakespeare’s Richard III, a “privy order” dooms the princes (III.v.106); and Buckingham—whom More describes as “privy to all the protector’s counsel”—will function in Shakespeare’s throne scene as Richard’s Privy Councillor: many members of Shakespeare’s audience would have known that soon after the historic Richard III’s death in 1485, there developed in the royal Privy Chamber the office of Groom of the Stool (i.e., Groom of the Royal Close-Stool); and that by 1547, at the death of Henry VIII, the king’s Groom of the Stool had become his Privy Councillor as well. 8

There is certainly a play of wit in Shakespeare’s throne scene; but what seems to have engaged Shakespeare’s imagination most fully in More’s picture of a foul king sitting at the draft is not so much the punning historicity of More’s dubious scrap of “information” as its strange psychological vividness and mythic power. For as Shakespeare evidently recognizes, the portrait in More’s History of King Richard sitting at the draft belongs within a well-established tradition linking the King of Hell with anality. “No one,” More says—and then in parentheses—“(except the devil)” could have harmed Tyrrel so
much as Tyrrel’s friend Richard’s page; “For upon this page’s words King Richard arose”—then parentheses again—“(for this communication had he sitting at the draught, a convenient carpet for such a council.” In More’s History only these parallel, parenthetical phrases “(except the devil)” and “(for this communication had he sitting at the draught)” suggest the affinity between Richard on the privy and the Devil himself. Confronted with the interstitial character of this passage, Shakespeare chooses to read between the lines.

In his History, More associates King Richard’s draft with the Devil’s privy through the most subtle indirection; but the association between the demonic and excrement recurs throughout medieval and Renaissance thought, and nowhere more vividly than in More’s own attack on the “heretic” and “Antichrist” Martin Luther. In the Responsio (published in 1523 a few years after the History), More’s bluff speaker William Ross rails at Luther as “the sludge of sin” in “the sludge of Satan,” a “cacodemon” whose breast is a “bilge” and whose “filthy mouth” is a “privy” that spews “muck, filth, dung, shit” onto God’s apostle and the holy Church. More’s speaker uses the idiom of Luther’s own “dungy writings” for, he says, “as long as your reverend paternity will be determined to tell these shameless lies, others will be permitted, on behalf of his English majesty, to throw back into your paternity’s shitty mouth, truly the shit-pool of all shit, all the muck and shit which your damnable rottenness has vomited up, and to empty out all the sewers and privies onto your crown.” Sister Scholastica Mandeville, the translator of this pungent passage, apparently sees that More is not simply indulging in coprophilia here, but rather is responding in kind to a Protestant polemic that uses scatology to empower itself both theologically and politically.

Perhaps the most familiar visual analogue to Shakespeare’s Richard seated on the throne is Hieronymus Bosch’s Satan seated on a privy in the Hell-panel of the Millennium (fig. 1), a painting that reaches back to the cannibalistic, defecatory, three-headed Satans of the Italian trecento for its visual vocabulary (fig. 2). Monstrous, insatiable, Bosch’s bird-beaked, cauldron-crowned King of Hell is enthroned high on a stilted close-stool, where, with one motion, he devours and defecates the damned. Like Bosch’s defecatory Satan, Shakespeare’s King of Hell is a “cacodemon,” that is, a kaka-demon or devil of dung. Thus Queen Margaret’s aside early in the play,
Hie thee to Hell for shame, and leave this world,
Thou cacodemon, there thy kingdom is.
(I.iii.142-43)

Unlike the Satanic prototype, however, the cacodemon Richard is costive—that is, he is “not in the giving vein.” Shakespeare’s diabolic king sits and broods on his privy-throne for 112 lines. And if some theater-goers have felt this protracted meditation on the throne to be unnatural, that is, I believe, precisely Shakespeare’s intent. For Richard is, among other things, contra naturam—a physical and metaphysical outrage that has lodged in the body politic. He is, to quote from the plays, “an indigested and deformed lump” (3 Henry VI V.vi.51), a “lump of foul deformity” (I.i.57),

A base foul stone, made precious by the foil
Of England’s chair, where he is falsely set;
One that hath ever been God’s enemy.
(V.iii.250-52)

Toward the end of Thomas More’s History, Buckingham complains bitterly that Richard denied him his promised gift both before and after becoming king; in the throne scene of Richard III, Shakespeare conflates More’s picture of Richard on the throne with More’s picture of Richard on the draft, and then introduces the withholding of a gift into that conflation.

By creating a devil-king who is not in the giving vein, the dramatist can align the Satanic prototype with a familiar Elizabethan character type—the costive melancholic who is the wretched child of Saturn. One might illumine Act IV, scene ii, of Richard III much as Erwin Panofsky has illumined Dürer’s complex engraving Melencolia I—and with much of the same literary and iconographic evidence. In Melencolia I, Dürer depicts a seated, brooding woman, head on hand, whose closed fist and mental perplexity develop from an earlier pictorial tradition in which pinched, avaricious Melancholy supports his head with one hand, while, with the other, he clinches a closed purse filled with coins. Relating Melencolia I to earlier versions of melancholy, Panofsky traces the evolution of Avarice into perplexed thought by noting the artist’s tendency, with time, to intellectualize Melancholy’s costiveness or avariciousness. Shakespeare’s stage image of King Richard—a man seated, perplexed, perhaps head on hand—is related formally to Dürer’s Melencolia I; but in spirit and intent Shakespeare’s Devil-king
is akin to the wintry old men and crabbed misers with their money-bags in visual representations of Melancholy as an unredeemed humoral type.

In the Ptolemaic poetic the human body occupies the center of an elaborate set of analogies; and Shakespeare's hoarding figure on the throne embodies the disorder in the microcosm that corresponds to the disorder in the macrocosm. Richard III is, as Emrys Jones has said, an "end-of-the-year, end-of-the-cycle" play in the course of which England is to negotiate its critical dynastic change. This play dramatizes the butt-end of civil war, the dregs of history in its demonic phase, the desperate way the old world ends within the frame of the Tudor myth; and melancholy—the dregs or faex of black bile—is one semiotic term in the language of last things—the most calamitous of the four humors; associated with cold, dry winter, the most severe of the four seasons; with old age, the most discontented of the four ages; with earth, the grossest of the four elements; and with cold, dry Saturn, the planetary god of death and dung, whom iconographers depict as a savage king, enthroned, devouring a living child.

In the opening line of Richard III Shakespeare distills and psychologizes this entire system of analogies. Into Richard's first line, "Now is the winter of our discontent," the dramatist compresses the opening stanzas of his chief poetic source, Sackville's Induction, which begins,

The wrathful winter prochinge on a pace
With blustring blastes had al ybard the treen
And old Saturnus with his frosty face
With chilling colde had pearst the tender green.17

Wrathful Winter; Boreas; cold, dry, barren earth; and, above all, ascendant "olde Saturnus with his frosty face"—this is the setting for Sackville's descent with Sorrow into Hell, where the Duke of Buckingham will tell his horrifying tale of the reign of the tyrant Richard III who devoured his own nephews. In Shakespeare's Richard III, at the death of King Edward, the choric Third Citizen has a premonition that such, too, will be the Hell that is England under Richard:

When clouds are seen, wise men put on their cloaks;
When great leaves fall, then winter is at hand;
When the sun sets, who doth not look for night?
All may be well; but if God sort it so,
'Tis more than we deserve or I expect.

(II.iii.32-37)

Enthroned in his demonic epiphany, Shakespeare's saturnian and saturnine King of Hell is costive and asstricted in every sense—retentive, "bound" in brain and bowel, close, hard, cold, and parsimonious.

Confronted with this profane icon in 1592, Shakespeare's audience can draw on the vast mythological and characterological tradition that surfaces visually in images like that of Bosch's Satan and Dürer's Melencolia. In the 1980's, we, presumably, cannot. The iconography of evil accessible to Shakespeare's audience has presumably been lost to us in the theater; and yet audiences continue to find Richard enthroned a powerful, unsettling, and memorable image. If this is so, it is perhaps because of the cultural codes that have created an area of overlap between Elizabethan and twentieth-century structures or mythologies of the mind. The mythological and characterological traditions available to an audience in 1592 have their correlate in twentieth-century psychoanalytic theory. Freud, in his work on melancholy and sado-anal-eroticism, in a sense reformulates features of a continuous tradition. When, for example, Freud anatomizes melancholy in his essay "Mourning and Melancholia," he is using the archaic Galenic term "melancholy"—that is, literally, "black choler." Elizabethan and classic Freudian theory seem to be parallel or analogous modes of organizing and interpreting human behavior. Within a definable cultural matrix, the common ancestor of both modes is Galen.

In trying to account for audience response, I am reminded of the play-goer who was so impressed with the psychological complexities of Measure for Measure that he assumed that it was Jonathan Miller—and not Shakespeare—who had set the play in Vienna. Shakespeare's climactic stage image in Richard III seems iconic, preverbal, gestural. And its power to disturb seems to depend, in some measure, on its ability to touch and to reveal the depths of the hidden man. Shakespeare succeeded where no one has succeeded before or since in writing plays that appear to pass through many stages of consciousness. Perhaps this is one reason why, despite himself, fifty years after the fact, John Trewin finds himself saying "I cannot return to the play now without picturing Olivier, a cauldron-figure, crowned and sceptred, as he brooded on the throne."
NOTES


2 This and all other quotations from Shakespeare's plays are from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans et al. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974).


9 Holinshed, p. 401.


11 The entire panel is illustrated in Walter S. Gibson, *Hieronymus Bosch* (New York: Praeger, 1973), fig. 79.

12 I have chosen as an illustration to accompany this paper an engraving by Baldini (1460-80) that is after the fresco of the Inferno according to Dante at Pisa (Hind, *Early Italian Engraving*, A.1.59).

13 The imitative root ‘caco-,’ is derived from the child’s word meaning “feces” or “to defecate” (see Ernest Klein, *A Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the English Language* [Amsterdam: Elsevier, 1966], I, 217). In *Richard III*, Shakespeare, like More, chooses the word “cacodemon” with a keen sense of its etymology.

14 ‘Costive’ and ‘constipated’ are used interchangeably in the sixteenth century to designate a physical disorder: “Suffering from hardness and retention of the faeces; ‘bound’ or confined in the bowels” (*OED*). In addition, ‘costive,’ which derives from L. constipatus, signifies related character traits or personality disorders: (1) “Slow or reluctant in action; esp. in speech or utterance: Close, reticent, uncommunicative (obs.)”; and (2) “Reluctant to give, niggardly, stingy” (*OED*)—that is, “not in the giving vein.”

