

THE PARADOX OF RICHARD THE THIRD

By

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A cursory look at its stage history is sufficient to show that Shakespeare's *Richard the Third* has always had a tremendous success on the stage. Dr. Johnson's words that "this is one of the most celebrated our authour's performances"¹ are true no less of the Elizabethan as well as of modern times than of Dr. Johnson's own day. *Richard the Third* was obviously one of the most favourite plays to Shakespeare's contemporaries. The plays which most interested his fellows, we are told, were "*Romeo and Juliet* and *Richard the Third*, and subsequently, the Falstaff pieces and *Hamlet*"². This remained the case up to the middle of the seventeenth century, and the popularity of the play has not diminished since.³ The part of the hunchback himself has been so popular with the mass of the theatre-goers⁴ that it has always been the ambition of every aspiring young actor to appear in it at one of the main London theatres. Actors like Garrick and Kean distinguished themselves in it early in their career. Even now it is not without significance that *Richard the Third* is one of the still few plays of Shakespeare selected for production on the screen.

Yet of all the protagonists of Shakespeare's popular plays there is hardly any one more bloodthirsty or further gone in the path of evil than Richard, Duke of Gloucester, or who in a spirit of cold calculation

1. Walter Raleigh, *Johnson on Shakespeare* (Oxford 1946), p. 148.

2. *The Shakespeare Allusion Book*, ed. C. M. Ingleby (Oxford 1932), vol. 3, p. xlix.

3. The fact that from 1700 to 1877 what the people saw on the stage was Colley Cibber's adaptation of the play does not seriously affect the argument advanced here, since most of the scenes upon which it is based were substantially retained by Cibber, for the obvious reason of their theatrical effectiveness.

4. This was the case even with Shakespeare's contemporaries. See the references to the admiration Burbage won in playing Richard in L.K. Chambers, *William Shakespeare*, ii, 201, 212.

paves his way to the throne with more corpses of his kinsmen and others. Of course, Iago is even more of a Machiavel than Richard, certainly a more convincing one. But our response to Iago's character differs radically from what we feel towards Richard. Richard definitely attracts us, and while he is on the stage he does for the best part of the play manage to captivate the hearts of the audience. In the case of Iago, however, there is no doubt where the sympathy of the audience lies—that is in spite of the irresistible force with which he whirls the audience, together with the other dramatis personae, along with him in his diabolic plots. In *Richard the Third* there is no Othello to secure our sympathy most of the time. But in *Othello*, even in the scenes where we admire him most, we are most critical of Iago's actions, a fact which tends to undermine any feelings of sympathy that we may have for him. And although there will always be the sentimental critic who now and again tries to show that the tragedy of *Othello* is also the tragedy of Iago, Shakespeare's intention is quite clear, as the title of the play suggests. *Richard the Third*, on the other hand, is definitely intended to be a tragic character, or, to be more precise, the hero of the tragedy. He dominates the play in the way Marlowe's heroes do. And while he is on the stage, and like most of Marlowe's heroes he is pretty often on the stage, he holds, in spite of his abominable crimes, a great fascination for the audience which can be seen in his great popularity. How does Shakespeare then make so palatable to the audience a character which is so shockingly vicious? We still remember Aristotle's discussion of the ideal tragic hero, in which he recommends that he should be a man of more than average goodness, and in which he warns the dramatist against the presentation of an extremely bad man falling from happiness into misery.¹ Are Aristotle's words then so completely off the mark?

Of course, for some recipients the problem does not exist. To Dr. Johnson, for instance, there was no paradox. For an interesting reason which we shall soon see he failed to appreciate the play and to admire its protagonist. Here is the sum of his verdict:

This is one of the most celebrated of our author's performances: yet I know not whether it has not happened to him as to others, to be praised most when praise is most deserved.

1. Aristotle, *The Poetics*, ch. 13.

That this play has scenes noble in themselves, and very well contrived to strike in the exhibition, cannot be denied. But some parts are trifling, others shocking, and some improbable.¹

No doubt, ultimately Dr. Johnson is right. No one can quarrel with this critical appraisal of *Richard the Third* nowadays, although we may disagree with him on which are the trifling parts, which the shocking and which the improbable. It is more useful for our purpose, however, to go to those critics who admitted that they liked the play, and who attempted in some way or other to explain to themselves what was happening in their minds while perusing or watching it. Take, for instance, Hazlitt, who may be considered typical of the critic in the theatre. Hazlitt is very frank. He starts his essay on the play by saying

Richard the Third may be considered as properly a stage-play: it belongs to the theatre rather than to the closet. We shall therefore criticize it chiefly with a reference to the manner in which we have seen it performed.²

Hazlitt, it is obvious from the whole of the essay, has great admiration for the play on the stage, but nowhere in his essay does he pause to examine why he considers the play to be "properly a stage-play" and why, in his opinion, it belongs to the theatre rather than to the closet. Had he done so, he might perhaps have arrived at a solution to this dramatic paradox. Indeed, in the course of the essay, it becomes difficult to see why he does not regard the play as fit for the study, since he lavishly praises Shakespeare's art and genius as shown in it:

The play itself is undoubtedly a very powerful effusion of Shakespeare's genius. The groundwork of the character of Richard, that mixture of intellectual vigour with moral depravity, in which Shakespeare delighted to show his strength — gave full scope as well as temptation to the exercise of his imagination.³

1. Raleigh, *op. cit.* p. 148.

2. William Hazlitt, *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays* (Oxford 1949), p. 187.

3. William Hazlitt, *op. cit.* p. 190.

The unacknowledged source of Hazlitt's criticism here, as in many other cases, is really Coleridge. Here are some of Coleridge's remarks on the play

Shakespeare's sublime morality . . . how it pervades all his great characters. (Here it deals with) the dreadful consequences of placing the moral in subordination to the intellectual.¹

The subordination of the moral to the intellectual being. As instances of the same principle in forms and under circumstances and with objects the most diverse imaginable I take Richard the Third and Falstaff.²

At times Coleridge adds to them the character of Iago.³ Both in his lectures and in his recorded conversation Coleridge grouped these three characters together as illustrations of the same truth — which reveals a wanton neglect by him of the different patterns of the plays in which these characters appear, and the different total impression each produces on us. One immediately suspects that there is something seriously wrong in an interpretation that finds *essentially* the same values in Falstaff's character as in that of Richard the Third or of Iago. Besides, a careful perusal of the play does not really show this tone of "sublime morality" which Coleridge talks about. We are fascinated by the behaviour and character of Richard himself, but our attention is not particularly drawn to "the dreadful consequences of placing the moral in subordination to the mere intellectual being." In fact what distinguishes Richard's character is the way in which, in our response to it, our moral sense is suspended. The scenes where Richard interests us most are marked by the peculiar irrelevance of any moral considerations. But of this more will be said later. Coleridge's account of the play then is not satisfactory because it is too moral, and because his approach is, like Dr. Johnson's, far too solemn. In spite of his theory of the willing suspension of disbelief Coleridge could never suspend his moral sense while reading

1. Coleridge's *Shakespearean Criticism*, ed. T. M. Raysor (Lond. 1930), I, 232.

2. *Op. cit.*, II, 30, 181, 207.

3. *Op. cit.*, I, 234.

poetry.¹ Another reason why Coleridge goes wrong is that he is here culpable of the same error which the 'character' critics commonly commit. Paradoxically enough we do not give character its due importance in the play when we concentrate exclusively on it. It is only when we view it in relation to the other characters and to the total pattern of the play that we can do it justice and hope to arrive at a just estimate of its role and its significance.

Shakespeare is compelled by history not to mitigate the extent of Richard's wickedness or belittle his criminal record. At the same time he wants to make the character appeal to his audience, a task which is exceedingly difficult. To accomplish it he has to resort to certain devices both in the drawing of the character of the protagonist himself and in the presentation of his relation to other characters. As has already been pointed out by G. Moulton in the closing years of the nineteenth century the theme of the play is crime and retribution and its recurrent pattern is Nemesis. The various lines of the plot are

linked together into a system, the law of which is seen to be that those who triumph in one nemesis become the victims of the next, so that the whole suggests a chain of destruction like that binding together the brute creation which live by preying upon one another.²

Richard's victims, therefore, are neither innocent nor harmless people. On the contrary, they have practically all been implicated in one crime or another. This has been carefully pointed out by Shakespeare, who, as all critics have noticed, makes them recall their grim past and

1. Such is the importance Coleridge attaches to morality that in his discussion of dramatic illusion while he believes that the power of judgment is suspended, he still asserts that we can never "suspend the moral sense". (*Biographia Literaria*, ed. Shawcross, II, 197). Also in the Fragment of an Essay on Beauty he maintains that whereas in music and painting it may be possible occasionally to do without moral feeling, in poetry this is impossible. (*Biographia Literaria* II, 252). Coleridge, therefore, could at times be just as much of a serious moralist as Dr. Johnson. It is interesting to note that like Dr. Johnson he found much to object to in *Richard the Third*. In fact he maintained that of this play Shakespeare could not have written more than the part of Richard himself, which he brought himself to like by endowing Shakespeare's treatment with a solemnity and a high moral seriousness it does not really possess.

2. Quoted by J. Dover Wilson in the introduction to his edition of the play: *Richard III* (Cambridge 1954), p. xli.

Into this breathing world, scarce half made up,
 And that so lamely and unfashionable
 That dogs bark at me as I halt by them:
 Why, I, in this weak piping time of peace,
 Have no delight to pass away the time,
 Unless to spy my shadow in the sun
 And descant on mine own deformity:
 And therefore, since I cannot prove a lover,
 To entertain these fair well-spoken days,
 I am determined to prove a villain
 And hate the idle pleasures of these days. (I. i. 14-31)

We therefore realize that if this man (with his thorough awareness of his own deformity) attempts to woo a woman it will only be to essay his powers, it will rather be in the nature of a challenge for him. It is only as a challenge, therefore, that we watch the scene, but it is a verbal challenge, in which we admire his energy, dazzling wit and his powers of persuasion. If, however, we fail to respond to the scene in a detached intellectual manner, if, in other words, instead of abstracting from the situation only certain elements, we insist on considering seriously all the facts of the situation, we cannot but be shocked by its gross improbability. Shakespeare does not want us to think of the act of Lady Anne's yielding to Richard under those circumstances in itself or to judge it psychologically, but only to think of it as a tribute to Richard's remarkable powers. If Shakespeare was after psychological truth or realism he could have done something to mitigate the inherent improbability of the situation: he could, for instance, have avoided making Richard woo Lady Anne over the corpse of his victim, or elaborating on Richard's deformity. Instead he deviates from history or tradition in order to increase the improbability of the situation. He could have told us that Richard had been interested in Anne before her betrothal to Prince Edward, or could have resorted to some such convenient device as making them old lovers. Of course, there are dramatic reasons why Shakespeare does not do that. He does not want us to become emotionally engaged on behalf of Richard, and by increasing the difficulties of the situation he only wishes to enhance his admirable qualities and his histrionic powers. We are supposed to imagine that the situation from which Richard emerges triumphant is exceedingly difficult but are not meant to probe the nature of these difficulties. And because we are not allowed to do so we do not find ourselves emotionally involved in the serious interaction between mind and

mind (as we do, for instance, in the temptation scene in *Othello*), we do not consider every facet of the situation, identifying ourselves with the hero and imaginatively placing ourselves in his predicament. Instead we find ourselves interested only in a verbal match in which Richard fights against great odds and displays many essentially admirable qualities. And lest we should take the scene unduly seriously Shakespeare gives this comment to Richard:

I do mistake my person all this while:
Upon my life, she finds, although I cannot,
Myself to be a marvellous proper man.
I'll be at charges for a looking-glass,
And entertain some score or two of tailors,
To study fashions to adorn my body:
Since I am crept in favours with myself,
I will maintain it with some little cost.
But first I'll turn you fellow in his grave;
And then return lamenting to my love.
Shine out, fair sun, till I have bought a glass,
That I may see my shadow as I pass. (I. ii. 253—264)

The man, who at the beginning of the play says ironically that he is not made to court an amorous looking-glass because of his deformity, decides now to buy a glass. This puts an end to any feelings of pity we may ever have for the hunchback, and, in fact, is a warning against the sentimental and mistaken conception of Richard as a truly tragic character who suffers from an inferiority complex.¹ We are shown Richard playing a superb practical joke, of which he enjoys the playing, and when it is over he comes forward to tell us what a good and enjoyable joke it has been.

1. E.g. John Masefield, *William Shakespeare* (The Home University Library, 1919) p. 97: "It is tragical to be deformed, it is tragical to have an intellect too great for people to understand". Lamb, whose justly praised essay on 'Cooke's Richard the Third' contains some of the best criticism written on what I may call here the early Richard (i.e. Richard before the murder of the princes) is much nearer the truth when he says, "Surely the *Richard* of Shakespeare mingles in these allusions (to his deformity) a perpetual reference to his own powers and capacities, by which he is enabled to surmount these petty objections; and the joy of a defect *conquered* or *turned* into an advantage, is one cause of these very allusions, and of the satisfaction with which his mind recurs to them. These allusions themselves are made in an ironical and good humoured spirit of exaggeration: the most bitter of them are to be found in his self-congratulating soliloquy spoken in the very moment and crisis of joyful exultation on the success of his unheard of courtship". Charles Lamb, *Critical Essays*, ed William Macdonald (London 1903), p. 14.

This is true of the other scenes of the play in which we cannot resist the attraction exercised by Richard's character, for instance, the scene in which he announces the death of Clarence, or the council scene in which he, as the Lord Protector, denounces Hastings and condemns him to death. But perhaps the best example in the play is the election scene. Fundamentally what we are watching here is a scene of great treachery in which the people are grossly fooled with disastrous results to the whole realm. Yet what Shakespeare emphasizes at this point is neither the treachery nor the disastrous results, but the skill of the villain and his ability to fool others. The account of the plot in Shakespeare's source is written in a very grave tone, but Shakespeare lessens this gravity, and instead of giving us a scene in which Buckingham tries to fool the anxious and puzzled people (as he does later in *Julius Caesar*) Shakespeare is content with reporting what has happened. The bishops between whom Richard appears with a book of prayers in his hand are mere nonentities about whom we are told nothing by the poet, and they therefore do not excite our sympathy. It is obvious then that the scene does not address itself to our emotions. We are rather amused and entertained by the spectacle we are watching. Again we are interested in what is going on as we would be if we were watching an interesting game, and as in a game our moral sense is in abeyance. The whole thing, we are made to feel, is a huge practical joke devoid of any serious significance. Shakespeare deliberately makes us forget the evil in Richard's character by concentrating on the entertaining aspect of the situation.¹ In fact, we secretly want Richard to get the throne since this, we feel, would be the crowning achievement of a superb piece of acting. It is a fact that Richard is a consummate actor, and that in the best scenes we find ourselves enjoying his acting as acting without ourselves being emotionally involved in the action. His powers of acting have been commented on by critics, ranging from Lamb, who wrote of his "predominant and masterly dissimulation" to Mark van Doren, who tells us that Richard is not just hypocritical but histrionic, and that "the assertions of his innocence are always supported by elaborate acting". In fact Shakespeare seems to have been so profoundly influenced by the theme of Richard's acting in the play that we find him

1. Cf. Edward Dowden, *Shakespeare, His Mind and Art* (London 1889), p. 184: "Richard's cynicism and insolence have in them a kind of grim mirth; such a *bonhomie* as might be met with among the humourists of Pandemonium. His brutality is a manner of joking with a purpose". It would be wrong, however, to miss the ironic tone of Shakespeare which is unmistakable throughout the scene.

using an unusually large number of metaphors from the stage.¹ It seems sufficiently clear, then, that in such a scene we are made to enjoy the joke and the acting for their own sake, irrespective of the moral or immoral issues involved. We do not judge an actor by his moral goodness or his wickedness, but according to whether he is a good or a bad actor. Nor do we get emotionally involved in the action when we are reminded all the time that an actor is only an actor.

How far does Shakespeare succeed in this most difficult task of making us suspend our sense of moral values? It must be readily admitted that Shakespeare succeeds only up to a point, and then at an exorbitant price. For, although we usually consider *Richard the Third* a history play nowadays, we must remember that Shakespeare intended it to be a tragedy. After all, all the six quartos as well as the First Folio bear the title "The Tragedy" of king Richard the Third. The course of a wicked monarch rushing to his bad fate provided one of the patterns of Elizabethan tragedy, a pattern a mature version of which is *Macbeth*. It is a pattern which Madeleine Doran has recently classified as the *De casibus* form of tragedy.² It is therefore not altogether irrelevant to judge it as a tragedy, and as a tragedy it is only too obvious that it fails. Critics have already pointed out reasons for its falling below the highest tragic level, and there is no need to repeat them here. To these reasons, however, I would venture to add one. It is that when we are attracted by the protagonist's character, as we should be in a tragedy, we are not allowed to take his actions seriously. "The sprightly colloquial dialogue, and soliloquies of genuine humour" which Lamb and every theatre-goer who admires the play find in it act against the high seriousness that is necessary for a tragedy proper. The play, therefore, despite its countless murders, is not the one 'serious' action which Aristotle insists on in his famous definition of tragedy.³ This is the awful price Shakespeare pays for concentrating on the amusing side of evil, and for making us suspend our moral sense. Shakespeare has learnt his lesson in *Richard the Third*, and nowhere in the great later tragedies does he dissociate moral considerations from his tragic conception of life.

1. On the significance of these metaphors see J. Middleton Murry, *Shakespeare* (London 1936), pp. 125 ff.

2. Madeleine Doran, *Endeavors of Art* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1954), pp. 114 ff.

3. *The Poetics*, chapter 6.

But the success of doing without moral considerations in *Richard The Third* is only partial. Shakespeare points out that Richard's victims deserve their fate and makes an attempt, which is only too palpable, to find in his deformity a partial explanation of his evil. We all agree with Lamb, especially as regards the first part of the play, that Richard is not just "a very wicked man, and kills little children in their beds, with something like the pleasure which the giants and ogres in children's books are represented to have taken in that practice".¹ But after the murder of the princes in the Tower it must be admitted that he comes perilously near "the very wicked man who kills little children in their beds". From now on we cannot but feel that, in the words of Van Doren, "he is a murderer by nature and that he likes to kill". Shakespeare is too great an artist, even at this stage of his development to trample moral values under foot. He can emphasize the amusing nature of an evil action, but he cannot but be shocked at actions of pure horror. There is neither wit, subtlety or amazing power of intelligence in the murder of innocent children in their sleep. In fact, at this point Shakespeare deliberately emphasizes the horrific nature of the deed (which is a crime against order in all senses, especially as Richard was the Lord 'Protector') resorting to a number of effective devices. To begin with, he shows us that Buckingham, who has so far and without the least scruple, accompanied Richard on the path of evil, pretends at this juncture not to understand his meaning when the latter expresses the desire to be rid of the children, and openly hesitates to arrange for the murder when the desire is made only too explicit to him. No doubt, it is necessary for Buckingham to break with Richard eventually on this or on some other point, so that he may realize that he has been fatally deceived in him. It is part of the scheme of things in the play, and of its great theme of nemesis and crime and punishment. Buckingham should not go unpunished, and Margaret's curses on him should be fulfilled as they have already been fulfilled in other cases. However, the hesitation of such a villainous character as Buckingham (which is obviously the result of his realization of the enormity of the crime) does reflect upon the extent of evil that is in Richard. Besides, Shakespeare makes the two murderers, Dighton and Forrest, weep when they narrate the grim story of the children's murder. Tyrrel himself, who suborned these murderers, gives a detailed description of the murder which is obviously meant to direct our response to the play, to incense us against Richard :

1. Charles Lamb, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

Tyr. The tyrannous and bloody deed is done.
 The most arch act of piteous massacre
 That ever yet this land was guilty of.
 Dighton and Forrest, whom I did suborn
 To do this ruthless piece of butchery,
 Although they were flesh'd villains, bloody dogs,
 Melting with tenderness and kind compassion
 Wept like two children in their deaths' sad stories.
 'Lo, thus,' quoth Dighton, 'slay those tender babes':
 'Thus, thus,' quoth Forrest, 'girdling one another
 Within their innocent alabaster arms:
 Their lips were four red roses on a stalk,
 Which in their summer beauty kiss'd each other
 A book of prayers on their pillow lay;
 Which once' quoth Forrest, 'almost changed my mind;
 But O! the devil'—there the villain stopp'd;
 Whilst Dighton thus told on: 'We smothered
 The most replenished sweet work of nature,
 That from the prime creation e'er she framed.'
 Thus both are gone with conscience and remorse:
 They could not speak; and so I left them both,
 To bring this tidings to the bloody king,
 And here he comes.

All hail, my sovereign liege!

K. Rich. Kind Tyrrel, art thou happy in thy news?

Tyr. If to have done the thing you gave in charge
 Beget your happiness, be happy then,
 For it is done, my Lord.

K. Rich. But didst thou see them dead?

Tyr. I did, my lord.

K. Rich. And buried, gentle Tyrrel?

Tyr. The chaplain of the Tower hath buried them;
 But how or in what place I do not know.

K. Rich. Come to me, Tyrrel, soon at after supper,
 And thou shalt tell the process of their death.
 Meantime, but think how I may do thee good,
 And be the inheritor of thy desire. (IV. iii. 1-34)

This scene is, in fact, a turning point in the emotional structure of the play. From now on we find ourselves emotionally involved in the action; we can no longer suspend our moral judgment. The impression of Richard's vices becomes uppermost in our consciousness, and so we look forward to his downfall. To call Tyrrel 'kind', immediately after we have been told of what he has done, is no longer witty or amusing or even bad taste but is downright shocking, and to say that "we like and admire Richard" at this point because "he knows, as the politicians seldom know, precisely what he is doing."¹ is to betray utter insensitivity. Tyrrel himself, like Macbeth and Lady Macbeth later, resorts to circumlocution when he refers to the crime, because it is too grim to be faced squarely and called by its real name. After this scene the tone of the play becomes much more sombre and we get the really moving and justly praised scene of the three lamenting women, the two queens and the Duchess, in which Dowden found "a Blake-like terror and beauty."² Even the verse becomes for a while much more serious, at moments foreshadowing the superb tragic poetry that is to come :

So, now prosperity begins to mellow
And drop into the rotten mouth of death. (IV. iv. 1-2)

To indicate the shift in the emotional structure of the play it would perhaps be helpful to compare the two scenes which occur at different points in the play, and which are so parallel in many respects that they obviously invite comparison. I mean Act I, scene ii, where Richard woos Lady Anne and Act IV, scene iv, in which he courts Queen Elizabeth for her daughter's hand. The parallelism between the two scenes is so obvious that it is sufficient to summarize it here. The situation in both is very similar. In the first the lady's betrothed has been murdered by Richard, who woos her before the corpse of King Henry the Sixth, his father, whom he himself has ruthlessly butchered in prison. In the second Richard has put to death the children of the lady for the hand of whose daughter he is making a bid. Likewise, the style in both scenes is roughly the same : it is predominantly artificial and relies heavily upon stichomythia. The outcome of both Richard believes to be successful, although the subsequent turn of the events shows that he is really outwitted by Queen Elizabeth. Yet here the resemblance between the two scenes ends. Much of the brilliance and buoyancy of the earlier scene,

1. John Palmer, *op. cit.*, p. 161.

2. Dowden, *op. cit.*, p. 181.

the critics now, has gone, and the second scene is described as a "pale reflection" of the first.¹ This, however, is not simply the inevitable result of repetition. The fact is that after the murder of the children our attitude to Richard has drastically changed. We are much less inclined to accept his humour than before. Our moral sense is now awakened with the result that we can no longer treat the scene as a game or look upon it as a practical joke. Instead we judge it seriously, and so we are profoundly disturbed by questions of improbability — the thing which never happened to us when we properly responded to the earlier scene. It seems that Shakespeare was instinctively aware of this, as he intimated towards the end of the play that Richard did not have it his own way this time, but was in fact fooled by the Queen.

The conclusion seems to be that half way, or rather more than two thirds of the way, through the play Shakespeare changed his mind about the character of Richard. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that up till Act IV, scene iii what interested Shakespeare most in Richard was precisely what could not make of him a tragic character: wit, brilliance, intellectual subtlety, resourcefulness, 'alacrity of spirit', all of which qualities could only be appreciated if dissociated from the evil nature of the actions in which they are revealed, if, in other words, we suspended our moral judgment and did not take the actions seriously. Then Shakespeare changed his mind, possibly because he could not blind himself to the atrocious nature of the murder of the children, or possibly he remembered that he was after all writing a tragedy, an action which has to be taken seriously. So he tried, unfortunately too late, to make his protagonist behave like a tragic hero, he awakened his moral sense, made him suffer from bad dreams, and from the pricks of conscience, and in the end made him resort to wine to holster up his spirits.² But all these

1. John Palmer (*op. cit.*, p. 104), says, "The first, fine careless rapture is exhausted". Cf. M. C. Bradbrook, *Shakespeare and Elizabethan Poetry* (London 1951), p. 134 "The wooing of Elizabeth has not the brilliance of the wooing of Lady Anne, with which it stands in ironic contrast".

2. E. M. W. Tillyard, *Shakespeare's History Plays* (London 1944), p. 211: "His irony forsakes him; he is unguarded not secretive in making his plans; he is no longer cool but confused in his energy, giving and retracting orders; he really does not sleep; and, when on the eve of Bosworth he calls for a bowl of wine because he has not "that alacrity of spirit nor cheer of mind that I was wont to have", he is the genuine ancestor of the villain in a nineteenth century melodrama calling for whiskey when things look black". Tillyard's admirable treatment of the unconvincing change in Richard's character deserves in fact to be read in its entirety.

are merely tricks to bring to terms a recalcitrant character and to end the play tragically. And the result is pure melodrama in which action does not arise spontaneously from character and from the nature of the particular human situation, but is arbitrarily forced upon them. We may be able to accept that in the theatre, as the later Richard occupies very little of the play, and the action culminating in his downfall moves very fast. But outside the theatre the dichotomy is only too palpable. We cannot accept the later Richard because he is not convincing. As for the earlier Richard we can only accept him when we do not take him seriously and when we suspend our moral judgment; he, says one of his great admirers, "turning his conscience out of doors, promises his audience a moral holiday."¹ Dover Wilson may be right in saying that

in the post-medieval world, half-Christian, half-pagan and not in the least rationalistic in our sense of the word, it was not only possible but for persons of any intelligence almost a matter of course to entertain two or three apparently inconsistent attitudes or values at the same time. Nor was there anything novel in condemning on moral or religious grounds a character thoroughly enjoyed on aesthetic ones. By Shakespeare's day playgoers had been accustomed to such 'ambivalence' for centuries.²

But he seems to forget that such a character, if it presents an absolute opposition between the moral and aesthetic, as Richard does in the early part of the play, can never be truly tragical. No great tragedy worth the name can do without moral considerations altogether, that is in the wide sense of the term moral, in the sense that the profundity of Antony and Cleopatra's passion is still a moral value in spite of their illicit relation. In spite of Richard's admirable qualities there is no sense of waste in his death; in spite of his downfall there is no real feeling of pity for him. It is true that "it is tragical to be deformed, it is tragical to be

1. Palmer, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

2. Dover Wilson, *op. cit.*, pp. xvi-xvii.

an intellect too great for people to understand";¹ but Shakespeare does not avail himself of the tragic possibilities in these things; he chooses not to emphasize their serious aspect.

If the foregoing discussion is sound it cannot then be maintained, as is often done by critics, that the character of Richard the Third in the play that bears his name is simply a continuation of Gloucester in the *Third Part of King Henry the Sixth*. Admittedly towards the end of the earlier play the character of Gloucester becomes very dominant, but there is a marked difference in Shakespeare's treatment of him in the two plays. In the earlier play Shakespeare gives us a study in intensity of passion, but the humour, wit and resourcefulness are conspicuously absent from the earlier portrait, a difference which is peculiarly relevant to the argument of this essay, and which is commonly neglected by those who treat the characters in both plays as if they were the same conception, without any regard to the different tone, form and structure of each play. Who, for instance, could imagine the protagonist of *Richard the Third* uttering these words, in which Gloucester in the earlier play, consumed by passion, gives vent to his vehement feelings, after having enviously watched his brother Edward court Lady Grey :

Ay, Edward will use women honourably.
Would he were wasted, marrow, bones and all,
That from his loins no hopeful branch may spring,
To cross me from the golden time I look for !
And yet, between my soul's desire and me —
The lustful Edward's title buried —
Is Clarence, Henry, and his son young Edward,
And all the unlook'd for issue of their bodies.
To take their rooms, ere I can place myself :
A cold premeditation for my purpose !

1. John Masfield, *op. cit.*, p. 97. It seems absurd, therefore, to see in the play a tragedy which is not there, as Masfield does, endow the character of Richard with a nobility he does not possess ("Richard is a bloody dog let loose in a sheep-fold. It is a part of the tragedy that he is nobler than the sheep that he destroys", p. 96), and arrive at the false and morally revolting conclusion that "it is a part of Richard's tragedy that it is not intellect that triumphs in this world, but a stupid, though a righteous something, incapable of understanding intellect". (p. 99)

Why, then, I do but dream on sovereignty;
 Like one that stands upon a promontory,
 And spies a far-off shore where he would tread,
 Wishing his foot were equal with his eye,
 And chides the sea that sends him from thence,
 Saying, he'll ride it dry to have his way :
 So do I wish the crown, being so far off;
 And so I chide the means that keeps me from it:
 And so I say, I'll cut the causes off,
 Flattering me with impossibilities.
 My eye is too quick, my heart o'erweens too much,
 Unless my hand and strength could equal them:
 Well, say there is no kingdom then for Richard;
 What other pleasure can the world afford?
 I'll make my heaven in a lady's lap,
 And deck my body in gay ornaments,
 And witch sweet ladies with my words and looks.
 O miserable thought ! and more unlikely
 Than to accomplish twenty golden crowns !
 Why, love forswore me in my mother's womb;
 And for I should not deal in her soft laws,
 She did corrupt frail nature with some bribe,
 To shrink mine arm up like a wither'd shrub;
 To make an envious mountain on my back,
 Where sits deformity to mock my body;
 To shape my legs of an unequal size;
 To disproportion me in every part,
 Like to a chaos, or an unlick'd bear-whelp
 That carries no impression like the dam.
 And am I then a man to be beloved?
 O monstrous fault, to harbour such a thought!
 Then, since this earth affords no joy to me,
 But to command, to check, to o'erbear such
 As are of better person than myself,
 I'll make my heaven to dream upon the crown,
 And whiles I live, to account this world but hell,
 Until my mis-shaped trunk that bears this head
 Be round impaled with a glorious crown.

And yet I know not how to get the crown,
 For many lives stand between me and home :
 And I, like one lost in a thorny wood,
 That rends the thorns and is rent with the thorns,
 Seeking a way and straying from the way ;
 Not knowing how to find the open air,
 But toiling desperately to find it out, —
 Torment myself to catch the English crown :
 And from that torment I will free myself,
 Or hew my way out with a bloody axe. (III. ii. 124—181)

It is precisely this sense of 'torment' that we do not find in the essentially non-serious Richard of *Richard the Third*.

But if *Richard the Third* suffers as a tragedy it does not mean that it is completely devoid of any serious meaning. Moulton's analysis of the plot is only too well known, and Tillyard has shown the religious significance of the play,¹ and pointed out that its business is "to complete the national tetralogy and to display the working out of God's plan to restore England to prosperity".² This is the serious meaning of the play, which can only be seen if *Richard the Third* is taken as a history play, in which the significance of the role of Richard is greatly minimized. It is not, however, the meaning that the average theatre-goer, at least nowadays, sees; nor does it account for the play's great popularity on the stage. The play is popular because of its theatricality, because of the wonderful chances it offers a good actor, since so much of it depends on the protagonist impressing us by his consummate acting and fooling other characters. Besides, the play does not make great claims on the audience's intelligence: in the last two acts it is pure melodrama³, while in the first three we are not meant to take the action seriously at all, but are in fact given "a moral holiday". Moral holidays may be very enjoyable, but no great dramatist can afford to have them in a tragedy.

1. Tillyard, *op. cit.*, pp. 204 ff.

2. Tillyard, *op. cit.*, p. 199.

3. In Colley Cibber's version of the play, which held the stage until the time of Macready, or, to be more accurate, Irving (who in 1877 managed to make Shakespeare's play displace Cibber's version altogether), we notice that "the cuts of whole scenes leave Richard always in the centre of the action" and make of him an even more melodramatic villain. See Dover Wilson, *op. cit.*, p. 1.