

A Villain of Language: Manipulation and Verbal Power in Shakespeare's Richard III

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ABSTRACT

This essay reads Shakespeare's Richard III as a study in rhetorical rather than martial conquest. Scholarship has long tracked how Shakespeare's heroes command language; his villains, despite frequently sharper verbal gifts, have drawn comparatively little sustained attention on this front. Richard offers the clearest test case. Working from three set pieces — the wooing of Anne beside her father-in-law's coffin, the stage-managed ruin of Clarence, and the mayoral pantomime that delivers him the crown — the essay traces a consistent pattern: each victory is won by speech alone, with blame for every act systematically displaced onto others even as Richard privately owns his design. Building on Wolfgang Clemen's account of the play's rhetorical architecture and setting Richard against the Vice-figure lineage identified by Bernard Spivack and A. P. Rossiter, the essay argues that reducing him to a stock morality-play villain undersells what unites his set pieces: language deployed as an instrument of psychological mastery, sharper than any sword the play puts on stage. Richard's fluency, on this reading, is less an ornament to his villain than its actual mechanism.

Keywords: Shakespeare; Richard III; rhetoric; villainy; Vice tradition; verbal manipulation; Machiavel

Language has served two masters since the first recorded sentence: it tells the truth, and it sells a lie just as fluently. We have flattered beloveds with sonnets. We have sent soldiers to die with a speech still ringing in their ears. Kings, generals, preachers — anyone who has ever needed a crowd to feel something it did not feel a moment earlier has reached for the same tool. Scholars have mostly followed the heroes who wielded it well. Villains get less of that attention, though their command of the word is often sharper, because a villain cannot afford the crowd's love; he has to manufacture it from nothing. What does the wicked man's fluency tell us about language that the hero's does not? Surprisingly little sustained work asks the question directly. Shakespeare's greatness needs no defending here, least of all before readers who have spent years inside his plays — that would be holding a candle up to the sun. He took whatever lay to hand, chronicle and myth and morality play and gossip half-remembered from Holinshed and made every bit of it entirely his own. Outside a seminar room nobody reads Holinshed for pleasure, or Kyd, or Thomas More's history of King Richard except as a quarry for footnotes. Everyone who has heard of English literature has heard of Shakespeare. Lear's plight, Macbeth's spiralling self-justification, Hamlet's stalling, the courtroom standoff between Shylock's letter of the law and

Portia's appeal to mercy — none of it would have reached us without him. And among his rarer gifts, he painted his villains with the same brush he used for his heroes. It took critics two centuries, and a poet as sharp as Keats, to name that quality properly. Writing to Richard Woodhouse in 1818, Keats observed that the poetical character "has as much delight in conceiving an Iago as an Imogen" (Keats). His kings have fallibilities, his villains have grandeur, his women out-manoeuvre the men around them, and everybody thrives, or fails to, on a dilemma of Shakespeare's own making. The ingratitude of Iago, the cold calculation behind Goneril and Regan, Lady Macbeth's blind reach for the crown — every one of them reads as human rather than monstrous. Richard of Gloucester belongs in that company. If anything, he has received rather less of this attention than he deserves.

Richard III sits exactly where politics, psychology, and performance meet. The story it tells is easy to summarise and hard to watch. Gloucester wants the crown. Between him and it stands a queue of kinsmen, and the queue shortens, one name at a time, until nobody is left standing in it at all. George of Clarence goes first, locked in the Tower on the strength of a prophecy about the letter G that Richard himself set rigging in motion, then murdered there at his younger brother's order. Edward, the eldest, is already unwell; grief over Clarence finishes what illness began, and that grief too is Richard's handiwork, however indirect. His body is deformed — Shakespeare tells us so within minutes — but the sharper deformity sits inside him: a serpentine intelligence working behind the crooked back. He can draw pity from an audience in one scene and revulsion in the next, and no reading of his character gets very far until it looks closely at how the man actually talks. Wolfgang Clemen showed, scene by scene, how much of the play's power rests on rhetoric rather than action (Clemen), and even Richard's harshest critics concede that he is formidable with words. Call him, without much exaggeration, Shakespeare's study of evil as a form of psychological mastery — a man who moves people by speech alone, and asks what words won him that swords never could have reached. Quotations below follow the Folger Shakespeare Library text; citations give act, scene, and line.

Notice first that Richard carries no illusions about himself. That clear sight into his own defects is exactly what frees him to go after the throne — no complaint about the twisted body, no scruple about method, those being, in his own accounting, for losers. He says as much in the opening soliloquy:

*Deformed, unfinished, sent before my time / Into this breathing world scarce
half made up... / I am determined to prove a villain (1.1.20, 28, 30)*

The play opens with Richard already having read the board. Edward lies gravely ill, and the moment has to be seized now or never. Power hunger drives him, certainly, but so does a colder arithmetic: nearly everyone standing between him and the crown must go, and nobody clears an entire court in a single stroke. The movement has to be a serpent's — through sand, through straw, the strike delivered at precisely the right instant. Through five acts he manages exactly that, and his opening move alone counts among the boldest in the whole canon. Consider the ground he chooses for it. Anne walks behind a funeral procession carrying the coffin of Henry VI, her father-

in-law, murdered — she knows this — by Richard's own hand; her husband, the young Lancastrian prince, died at that same hand. She has every reason on earth to despise the man now stepping into her path, and it is exactly this procession, of all the ground available to him, that Richard picks for a courtship. Her first response is precisely what one would expect.

Blush, blush, thou lump of foul deformity... Thy deeds, inhuman and unnatural (1.2.60, 62)

Her fury, unlike his, is honest, and it spends itself entirely in words: "Villain, thou know'st nor law of God nor man. No beast so fierce but knows some touch of pity" (1.2.71–72). Richard, never one to answer heat with heat, replies with something close to boredom — he knows none, and is therefore no beast (1.2.73). The flattery starts before she can recover her footing; he calls her divine perfection and begs only to acquit himself by circumstance (1.2.75–77). Then comes the masterstroke inside the masterstroke: he admits the murders outright and lays the blame at the door of her beauty, which, he tells her, haunted his sleep and drove him to it (1.2.126–27). The ground keeps shifting under her feet. She quarrels on; he tightens the argument rather than loosening it —

It is a quarrel most unnatural / To be revenged on him that loveth thee (1.2.144–45)

She tries reason instead. He offers her his sword and dares her to use it, admitting to Henry's murder and to young Edward's in the same breath, and blaming her heavenly face for both (1.2.179–83). She cannot do it. So he asks whether he should do it himself, at her own word — has she not already said the word? — and answers his own question before she can:

This hand, which for thy love did kill thy love, / Shall for thy love kill a far truer love (1.2.191–92)

One rarely meets a stranger wooing scene in the whole of English drama. Richard walks in from nowhere and wins, by speech and nothing but speech. He knows exactly how outrageous the feat is — he has courted a grieving widow beside her father-in-law's own bier, having killed both the man in the coffin and the husband she is mourning — and his own astonishment at what he has just managed is worth hearing in his own words:

Was ever woman in this humour wooed? / Was ever woman in this humour won? (1.2.227–28)

He answers himself with the honesty he saves for soliloquy alone: he will have her, he says, but not keep her long.

He never looks back, and the same craft of the tongue carries him from success to success, his own brother now counted among the wreckage. Clarence goes to the Tower through Richard's contrivance and dies there on his order, and the blame, exactly as with Anne, gets farmed out elsewhere: before the dying king and a court staged for reconciliation, Richard springs the news of Clarence's death at the cruellest possible moment, lets the reprieve that arrived too late do its work on Edward's conscience, and points an open finger at the queen and her kindred (2.1). Grief

hurries the sick king to his grave. His death leaves a boy heir and Richard standing beside an empty throne, and the Protectorship — meant only to hold the realm in trust until the prince comes of age — passes to him as one more instrument to be used rather than honoured. Both of Edward's young sons end up lodged in the Tower and quietly killed there. From guardian to king is, for Richard, one short step, and it is worth pausing on the fact that even this last ascent is won by theatre rather than force. The citizens will not simply shout for him, so a performance gets mounted for the Lord Mayor: Buckingham plays the desperate suitor pleading with a reluctant saint, while Richard appears aloft between two clergymen, prayer book conspicuously in hand, protesting his unfitness for the crown and yielding, at last, to the very thing he has spent five acts scheming for (3.7). The crown is won in the mouth before it is ever set on the head.

But how far can guile actually travel? Serpents move cleverly; they rarely move far. Richard falls, in the end, as the stage-Machiavel of the whole tradition must fall — driven by ambition and manipulation, and, like every true Machiavel, constitutionally incapable of owning a fault. Charged with anything, his preferred mask is injured honesty, the plain man wronged by a flattering court:

Because I cannot flatter and look fair... I must be held a rancorous enemy
(1.3.47, 50)

How strange that a character built almost entirely out of deceit should see the world around him so clearly. Shakespeare lets him comment, in the very breath that serves his own self-interest, on every corrupt age since:

The world is grown so bad / That wrens make prey where eagles dare not perch (1.3.70–71)

And in a single soliloquy, stripped of any audience to perform for, he lays his whole technique bare — the secret mischief he sets in motion and lays at the door of others, the simple gulls he feeds a story about the queen's allies, the piece of scripture he reaches for once they believe him:

I clothe my naked villainy / With odd old ends stol'n forth of Holy Writ, / And seem a saint when most I play the devil (1.3.336–38)

Critics have long traced his lineage back to the Vice of the morality stage, and some have found him unidimensional for it — an out-and-out villain and nothing more (Spivack; Rossiter). Perhaps. But the charge misses what the wooing of Anne, the ruin of Clarence, and the pantomime with the prayer book actually share: each is a victory won by the word, not the sword. Read this way, Richard becomes Shakespeare's demonstration of what sheer verbal gift, married to a mind that reads people without a trace of pity, can achieve. He is not merely a villain of action. He is a villain of language — and that, more than the murders, is what keeps him alive on the stage and unsettling in the criticism four centuries on.

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