

Sharon D. Michalove, “The Reinvention of Richard III.”

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Why has Richard III remained a presence in the popular imagination? Does his continual reinvention have meaning beyond a fascination with the man himself? A subject of controversy even before his death in 1485, over the last fifteen years, Richard has again undergone reinvention, from the scholarly biography of Charles Ross to the study of service to a late medieval king as illuminated by his reign produced by Rosemary Horrox to a renewal of vilifications by popular author Alison Weir. Our imagination is piqued by the evil prince who has his brother drowned in a butt of malmsey and his innocent young nephews smothered in the Tower of London. Generation after generation has debated Richard anew—murderer or loyal friend; greedy usurper or conscientious administrator. While the sides of the argument are sharp and clear, the picture of the central character remains unfocused.

The refashioning of a public image in a contemporary as well as in a historical context is a venerable phenomenon. To take a contemporary example, Ronald Reagan refashioned himself from a television cowboy and a sometime companion to a chimpanzee into a political force potent enough to claim the presidency of the United States. In the case of Richard III, the reinvention began when the duke of Gloucester became the Lord Protector and continued when the Lord Protector took his nephew’s place as king. Richard III carefully created the persona-that-would-be-king from that of a loyal younger brother very much in the shadow of a powerful older sibling. Henry Tudor’s humanist *protégés* recreated the former king in a malignant form—a presentation that took root in popular culture in the brilliant verse of Shakespeare. The appeal to the popular consciousness fostered by Shakespeare has led to the continuous recreation of Richard III in the succeeding centuries in a process that, through books, cartoons, films and other media, is still continuing.

In the opening monologue of the play Richard III, Shakespeare depicts the very essence of evil—crooked, twisted; full of hate, fury, envy, and malice. Was this a true picture of the historical Richard III?

Cheated of feature by dissembling nature,
Deform’d, unfinish’d, sent before my time
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 determin’d to prove a villain
And hate the idle pleasures of these days.[2]

From the facts known of his life, this unremitting portrait of evil cannot be accurate. Yet Shakespeare’s characterization of this most wicked of English kings, written over a hundred years after Richard’s death, has endured. Shakespeare’s delineation is part of the reinvention of Richard III that was begun by Henry Tudor and his propagandists after the Tudor victory at Bosworth Field. But in a perverse way, Henry Tudor’s propaganda

backfired. While Richard's character is hotly debated over 500 years after his death, Henry VII is little discussed. Shakespeare lauds Henry, but the praise of the peacemaker does not have the power of the evil King Richard, grasping for power as a substitute for love and good looks. Rather than commenting on Henry Tudor, earl of Richmond, as a mythic hero, Shakespeare prefers to descant on his role in bringing together the white rose and the red by marrying Elizabeth of York, the daughter of Edward IV.

Perhaps Shakespeare felt the necessity to gloss over Henry VII's personal attributes. Henry's reputation suffered after his death in 1509 and Shakespeare would have known about the more unsavory aspects of his character. Henry VIII used the popular perception of his father's avariciousness and the methods employed by his councillors Dudley and Empson to bolster his own popularity. Certainly, Henry's modern reputation as a grasping, greedy miser has made him a less than obvious candidate for adulation to later generations. His reputation for rapacity has been reiterated over the centuries and has not lent luster to his standing.[3]

Henry VII sought to blacken his rival's name—to have him disappear into the footnotes of history, while Richard's conqueror's name would live on gloriously as the saviour of England. But Richard III, not Henry VII, has spoken to generation after generation. Alternately reviled and lauded as either a paradigm of evil or a paragon of justice and loyalty—Richard was a man who betrayed or was betrayed. Where the truth lies will never be completely discovered. But historians revisit the issues over and over, trying to present a more accurate picture of the past. In every generation they review it and reinvent it in the image of their own prejudices and concerns. While historians have the obligation to be as objective and accurate as possible, no one lives outside his or her own time and the world view that is an intrinsic part of life.

Where do studies of historical figures such as Richard III stand in the scheme of historical writing? Did Richard's actions shape the course of the last quarter of fifteenth-century England? Or were the changes from medieval to modern models of government, the changes we see in the relationship between central government and the county communities, inexorable developments that owe nothing to any single person? The questioning of the great man theory of history is nothing new. Leo Tolstoy, in *War and Peace*, argued that the French Revolution and the subsequent invasion of Russia had little to do with Napoleon and was really the result of the unrelenting tide of human development. Tolstoy gives a forthright statement of his view of history.

In regard to the migration of the peoples it does not enter anyone's head today to suppose that the renovation of the European world depended on Attila's caprice. The farther back in history our observation lies, the more doubtful does the free will of those concerned in the event become, the more manifest the law of inevitability. [4]

The Russian winter, the soul of the Russian people, the restlessness of the European population are the elements that precipitate events—not Napoleon, General Kutuzov, Prince Andrei Bolkonsky, or Pierre Bezukov. Many contemporary historians also seem interested in looking at history without 'great' men. But just as Tolstoy's characters have more fascination for readers than do his historical theories, many historians and aficionados of history still find the actors compelling. What stirs the imagination is history with heroes and villains. Napoleon has not been forgotten in the history of the French revolution and empire. Richard III has functioned as both hero and villain to many generations of historians and has captured the popular imagination since before the time of Shakespeare.

How has Richard III become an enduring symbol of evil and conversely a white knight whose honor has been besmirched by his enemies? To answer this question, an understanding of the tensions inherent the political situation in late fifteenth-century England is essential. The battle at Bosworth Field is sometimes considered the end of the Hundred Years' War as well as of the Wars of the Roses. The conflict began in 1450, with Richard, duke of York's challenge to the rule of the Lancastrian king Henry VI, but the roots went back to the deposition of Richard II by his cousin Henry Bolingbroke. The dynastic disagreement that ensued meant that both families felt that they had a legitimate claim to the throne. In 1455, this quarrel turned into civil war.

When Richard, duke of York, was killed in 1460, his eldest son Edward, along with the duke of York's nephew by marriage, Richard Neville, earl of Warwick, continued the fight. Edward defeated Henry VI and his supporters in 1461, taking the throne as Edward IV. When Edward died unexpectedly in 1483, his brother Richard was one of the most powerful men in the kingdom. George was already dead, having had been executed for treason in 1478—drowned in the famous barrel of Malmsey wine. King Edward's sons were still minors and their uncle,

Richard, duke of Gloucester, was named Protector. The boys soon disappeared from their quarters in the Tower of London and Richard, who had had them declared illegitimate, became King Richard III.

In the popular imagination of the twentieth century, the name Richard III might conjure up Shakespeare's hunchback king, played by Sir Laurence Olivier, hobbling around the stage crying 'a horse, a horse, my kingdom for a horse.'^[5] A movie buff might picture him as Vincent Price, knocking down little dolls as a symbol of killing off his family right and left, in *The Tower of London* (1958). A mystery reader might see a 'kinder, gentler' Richard III as Josephine Tey portrayed him in her play, *Dickon*. Another reinvention is kind Uncle Richard III, playing with his nephew Edmund Blackadder, who accidentally kills him at Bosworth Field, on the popular British television series, *Blackadder*. One of the more recent depictions of Richard in Shakespeare's play was Sir Ian McKellen's production, where Richard was portrayed as Hitler. Richard has had his supporters and detractors for centuries, inspired especially by the mystery of whether or not he was responsible for the deaths of the princes in the tower. Perhaps the first reinvention of Richard III was his own recreation of himself as the worthy successor to an unworthy brother. Richard had been a staunch supporter of and councillor to Edward IV. After his brother's death, Richard charged that the king 'led by sensuality and concupiscence, followed the counsel of persons insolent, vicious and of inordinate avarice [this was a slap at the king's wife and her family as well as one of the king's best friends, William, lord Hastings], despising the counsel of good, virtuous and prudent persons [such as Richard].'^[6] Richard declared his brother's children illegitimate. He is even said to have hinted that Edward IV himself was illegitimate—which would surely have antagonized their mother, Cecily Neville, who was still alive. Another of Richard's nephews, Edward, the son of George, duke of Clarence, might have had a better claim to the throne, but was unable to succeed because of his father's attainder.^[7]

The true reinvention of Richard III began just after his death on 22 August 1485, at Bosworth Field. The outcome at Bosworth was by no means certain on the day. If the powerful Stanley brothers, one of whom was married to Henry Tudor's mother, Lady Margaret Beaufort, had remained neutral, or had supported Richard as they promised, he would have won, and his reinvention would have taken a very different course. But Sir William Stanley decided late in the day to support Richard's opponent. Henry Tudor, earl of Richmond, now King Henry VII by right of conquest and some rather tenuous hereditary claims, felt he needed to justify his own actions at Bosworth. He issued a royal proclamation, dated the day before the battle, declaring himself the rightful king of England and condemning Richard as the rebellious subject. With the execution of James Tyrell in 1503, supposedly for his part in the death of the sons of Edward IV, the story of the murder of two innocent young boys could become the centerpiece of their usurping uncle's wickedness. This refashioning of history continued through Henry's reign and that of his descendants. Sir Thomas More's unfinished *History of Richard III*, Polydore Vergil's *History*, and the chronicles of Edward Hall and Raphael Holinshed painted a consistent picture of Richard's villainy and influenced Shakespeare's portrait of the last Plantagenet king.

One of the first of the Tudor propagandists was the respected lawyer and scholar, Sir Thomas More, who became chancellor of England in the reign of Henry VIII. More's picture of Richard is that of a man who is 'little of stature, ill featured of limbs, crook backed, his left shoulder much higher than his right, hard favored of visage . . . he was malicious, wrathful, envious and, from before his birth, ever froward.'^[8] More grew up in the household of Cardinal John Morton, one of the councillors of Henry VII and a sworn enemy of Richard III. More's account has been given credence because of its contemporaneity—it was written sometime between 1513 and 1521—because he was noted for his learning, and because he was a martyr. More himself was only seven in 1485. His picture of the deposed monarch is drawn from the stories of Richard's enemies. More was also, at that time, a valued member of Henry VIII's court. The type of history he produced had to be colored by all these factors. Whether or not Richard was a villain, he was bound to be portrayed in the blackest hue by the beneficiaries of the current regime. More's history, although never finished in either the Latin or the English version, was then built upon by other Tudor apologists. Hall described Richard as 'small and little of stature, so was he of body greatly deformed, the one shoulder higher than the other, his face small, but his countenance was cruel, and such that a man at the first aspect would judge it to savour and smell of malice, fraud and deceit . . .'^[9] This is similar to the physical description given by More. Holinshed repeats More's words in his own chronicle.

Even foreign observers passed judgment on Richard and his reign. In the early 1490s, a Frenchman, Philippe de Commines, wrote

The duke had his two nephews murdered and himself made king, with the title King Richard. . . . All his late brother's servants, or at least those he could capture, were killed on his orders. . . . God raised up an enemy

against him A battle was fought. King Richard was killed and the earl of Richmond was crowned king of England on the field with Richard's crown. Should one describe this as Fortune? Surely it was God's judgement.[10]

In less than a decade after his death, Richard was already being used as a powerful symbol of evil in all the influential places of Europe—France, Burgundy, Spain, and Germany—as well as in England.[11]

The victor will always have the better propaganda machine—even though few propagandists, witting or unwitting, are as gifted as William Shakespeare. A playwright dependent on the patronage and good will of the ruling elite, Shakespeare was not likely to revise the Tudor view of Richard III. Shakespeare's portrait, unlike that of earlier writers, was complex and richly textured. Richard is cynical and manipulative when wooing the widowed Anne Neville after killing her husband Prince Edward, the son of Henry VI. But he is still human enough to fear the terrors of the unknown and to be haunted by visions of the victims of his bloodthirsty regime. The ghosts of his dead arrive to taunt him on the eve of his battle with Henry Tudor. This does not stop Richard from bravely taking to the battlefield at Bosworth and dying while trying to reach and destroy his enemy. Richard was a noted soldier and the line 'A horse, a horse, my kingdom for a horse' referred to earlier alludes to his heroic qualities in battle. Even the hostile *Crowland Chronicle* records, 'while fighting, and not in the act of flight, King Richard was pierced with numerous deadly wounds, and fell in the field like a brave and most valiant prince.' [12] By giving the fiend a human face, Shakespeare made his portrait of Richard III endure.

Richard III did have his supporters from the very beginning. Thomas Langton, who had just been made bishop of St David's in Wales, was undoubtedly as prejudiced as a beneficiary of Richard's generosity as More was as a beneficiary of the Tudor court. Langton does, however, give a contemporary view of Richard III in a private letter of September 1483, when he wrote to William Sellyng, prior of Christchurch, Canterbury,

He contents the people where he goes best that ever did Prince, for many a poor man that hath suffered wrong many days hath been relieved and helped by him and his commands in his progress. And in many great cities and towns were great sums of money given him which he hath refused. On my trouth I liked never the conditions of any prince so well as his; God hath sent him to us for the wele of us all.[13]

Dominic Mancini, who was one of the foreigners to accuse Richard of murdering his nephews, still had good things to say about him as duke of Gloucester after his brother Clarence's death.

He kept himself within his own lands and set out to acquire the loyalty of his people through favours and justice. The good reputation of his private life and public activities powerfully attracted the esteem of strangers. Such was his renown in warfare, that whenever a difficult and dangerous policy had to be undertaken, it would be entrusted to his discretion and his generalship.[14]

After Richard's death in 1485, the councillors of the city of York expressed their sorrow that, 'King Richard, late mercifully reigning upon us, was, through great treason of the Duke of Norfolk and many others that turned against him, with many other lords and nobility . . . was pitiously slain and murdered, to the great heavyness of this city' [15] Obviously Richard had engendered loyalty in some of his subjects that was strong enough to brave the wrath of the Tudor regime.

By the seventeenth century the hostile climate had changed somewhat. The Tudors had been replaced by the Stuarts, who did not have the same vested interest in portraying Richard as evil incarnate. William Cornwallis defended Richard's reputation in 1617 in *Essayes of Certain Paradoxes* by publishing an anonymous defense thought to have been written in the early sixteenth century as a response to More's history, in this case questioning the story of Richard III's manipulation of the citizens of London in his bid for the throne. Richard had commanded that a certain Dr. Shaa give a sermon in London suggesting that the duke of Gloucester should be king rather than the son of Edward IV. The anonymous author counters,

Never was he noted all the life of King Edward to thirst after the kingdom; never denied he any commandment of his prince, but performed all his employments discreetly, valiantly, successfully. . . . Then how do our chroniclers report for truth, were not their malice greater than either their truth or their judgment? But they are Historians, and must be believed.[16]

This defense was continued in the eighteenth century by the novelist Horace Walpole in his *Historic Doubts* (1768), in the nineteenth by Caroline Halstead in her two-volume *Richard III as Duke of Gloucester and King of England* (1844), and at the very end of the nineteenth century by Clements Markham, an English civil servant, sailor, novelist, and friend of Scott of the Antarctic. Verbally jousting with the foremost historian of fifteenth-century England at that time, James Gairdner, Markham published an article in the *English Historical Review* in 1891. He questioned how Gairdner, who had written what was then considered the definitive biography of Richard, could admit that was Richard ‘a good general in war, and that he was liberal even to the extent of imprudence. . . . As king he seems really to have studied his country’s welfare; he passed good laws, endeavoured to put an end to extortion’[17]and still believe that he was

a venomous hunchback from his birth, that he committed two peculiarly atrocious assassinations before he was nineteen, that he murdered his brother, poisoned his wife, waded through innocent blood to a usurped crown, and completed a career of diabolical wickedness by strangling two innocent children who were his nephews.[18]

In 1906, Markham wrote his impassioned *Richard III: His Life and Character*, extolling a ‘verray, parfit gentile’ Richard as an imperial statesman—a man for Markham’s own time.

In our own time, Richard III has continued to be a symbol of one kind or another. Debate has not died down since the advent of the romantic but well-researched biography by professor of English literature Paul Murray Kendall in 1955 and the scholarly biography by historian Charles Ross in 1981, both entitled merely *Richard III*. The 1983 anniversary of Richard’s accession to the throne produced several books that combined biography with reexaminations of Richard III’s reputation. Jeremy Potter, then chairman of the Richard III Society, wrote *Good King Richard?*, a vindication, while journalist Desmond Seward countered with *Richard III: England’s Black Legend*. Giles St. Aubyn, head of the History Department at Eton College, contributed *The Year of Three Kings 1483*, which was also anti-Richard.[19]

The central mystery of the fate of the princes in the Tower was brought back to the public consciousness in the 1930s when the bones of two young boys were examined to see if they were actually the Edward V and Richard, duke of York.[20] The bones had been found in the seventeenth century, accepted as those of the sons of Edward IV and moved to Westminster Abbey.[21] In 1933, the Home Office and King George V agreed to allow an examination of the bones. A historian, Lawrence Tanner, and a professor of anatomy, William Wright, analyzed the bones and published their report, ‘Recent Investigations regarding the Fate of the Princes in the Tower’ in the journal *Archaeologia*. Tanner and Wright concluded that the bones were indeed those of the princes. [22] These findings have been controversial. In recent years, London Weekend Television created ‘The Trial of Richard III,’ which was broadcast on Nov. 4, 1984. A four-hour courtroom trial by jury (and television audience) was held to decide whether or not Richard III was guilty of murdering his nephews. After hearing testimony for the prosecution and defense from well-known scholars, the jury found him not guilty. Still of perennial interest, that mystery has led to many books, including one by novelist Elizabeth Jenkins, who wrote *The Princes in the Tower* (1977), which judged Richard guilty. Another nonscholarly study was produced by Audrey Williamson, whose book is entitled *The Mystery of the Princes*, exonerated Richard of the crime and proposed the possibility of a conspiracy engineered by Henry Tudor and Bishop John Morton, carried out by the Duke of Buckingham. Williamson’s book was named best nonfiction mystery in Britain in 1978. Historian A. J. Pollard prefers a more judicious, less sensational approach, giving a history of the myths surrounding the deaths of the princes. His lavishly illustrated book, *Richard III and the Princes in the Tower*, assesses the original sources, explores Richard’s life and reign, and concludes that the combination of a lack of contemporary evidence and the mythic quality of the ‘received’ stories make a definitive conclusion impossible. His illustrations include Richard III comic strips from the 1980s, yet another example of how Richard III has claimed a place in popular culture. Most recently, Alison Weir, a journalist, wrote *The Princes in the Tower*, which was deemed a popular enough subject to be selected by the Book of the Month Club and the History Book Club. Weir again finds Richard guilty.

Novelist Josephine Tey, author of *The Daughter of Time* (1951), was deeply influenced by Markham’s work, and painted a sympathetic portrait of Richard, as did Rosemary Hawley Jarman, author of the popular *We Speak No Treason* (1971). Richard III has been a popular subject for novelists. In fact, since 1974, more than thirty-four novels have been written about Richard III.

A new development is the creation of the Richard III Museum, located within the medieval walls surrounding the oldest parts of the city of York; a city that retained its loyalty to Richard III long after his death. On display is an exhibit of tabloid front pages that delineates Richard's rise to power in late twentieth-century terms. *The Shield*, as this tabloid is named, has such headlines as 'Gotcha! 'Tricky-Dicky' Seizes Boy-King' and 'It's Teddy Tights-Down!' This satirization of both Richard Nixon and the current problems of the present royal family, also capitalizes on enduring interest in Richard III.

In the end, what do we get from this jaunt through a history of the histories of Richard III? Was he a black hat or a white one? Did he kill his nephews or was he trying to save England from the disastrous consequences of a minority reign? Was he a good king, an innovative administrator, a murderer, or merely a bungler? While these are the questions that have fascinated historians, this paper has been concerned with perception rather than reality. Every age needs the good guys and the bad guys. Janus-like, Richard III represents the duality of human nature. Novelists, screen writers and historians give us the noble and the ignoble; the good, the bad, and the ugly if you will. While the definitions of objectivity and the purposes for writing history change, the need for mythic figures persists. Although he invoked King Arthur as a forebear, Henry VII has never made a very satisfactory hero. But Richard III, who was king for only two years touches our sensibilities. We can get a vicarious thrill when watching the evil machinations of Shakespeare's hunchback, we can respond to the emotional partisanship of Horace Walpole and Clements Markham, or we can assess the differing biographical views of Charles Ross and Paul Murray Kendall. Through Desmond Seward's eyes we can see him as 'England's black legend.' Or, with Josephine Tey's detective hero Alan Grant we can gaze at his portrait and see 'someone used to great responsibility, and responsible in his authority. Someone too conscientious. A worrier; perhaps a perfectionist.'^[23] Someone like us. But to the intuitive policeman who believes in the truth of physiognomy, not a murderer. For the seeker, Richard III can embody both good and evil. He can be a mirror of the soul. And as such he is reinvented over and over again, generation after generation.

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Notes and References:

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 12. *The Crowland Chronicle* quoted in *To Prove a Villain*, p. 95.
 13. Quoted in P. W. Hammond, 'The Reputation of Richard III,' in Gillingham, p. 134.
 14. Dominic Mancini, *The Usurpation of Richard III*, trans. C. A. J. Armstrong, (Oxford, 1969, reprinted Gloucester, 1984), pp. 63-65.
 15. Robert Davies, *Extracts from the Municipal Records of the City of York, during the Reigns of Edward IV. Edward V. and Richard III*. (London, 1843, reprinted Dursley, 1976), p. 218, spelling modernized. As the editor of the volume points out, the reference to the Duke of Norfolk seems to have been an error.
 16. Anonymous, 'The Praise of King Richard the Third,' excerpted from William Cornwallis' *Essays of Certain Paradoxes* (1617), *To Prove a Villain*, pp. 78-79. The brackets are mine. It has been brought to my attention that in the modern edition of Cornwallis, the phrase 'were not their malice greater than either their truth or their judgment' is given as 'their malice greater than either their proof or their judgement,' which seems a more sensible rendition. A. N. Kincaid, ed., *The Encomium of Richard III* (London, 1977), 11.
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