

---

# The Question of Free Will and Determination

'Distortum vultum sequitur distortio morum.'

[Distortion of character follows a distorted countenance.] --Thomas More

Shakespeare's Richard III from the so-titled play shares the unsettling characteristic of being expressly "determined to prove a villain" (I.i.30) with other Shakespeare creations, most notably, Iago of Othello, and Aaron the Moor of Titus Andronicus, who, like Richard is quite obviously a physical outsider. Richard's statement, which Shakespeare includes in the first scene, carries an ambiguous, double-edged meaning. First, Richard is saying by this that he is resolved to "prove" himself "a villain." This interpretation requires that the reader imbue Richard with free will. The OED's definition of "resolving" as the act of "making up one's mind" shows why. If life is pre-ordained then a man can never make up his own mind, only destiny can. Being resolved is the subject's demonstration of free will. The second possible interpretation directly contradicts the first. That is, Richard might be saying that he is "determined" as by fate (or perhaps his author, Shakespeare) to "prove a villain." In this case, he has no choice, no freedom. When we examine the most obvious question that Richard III raises -- 'What motivates Richard to be evil?' -- we must remember that the question, as revealed in Richard's opening soliloquy, might not be applicable. In a world of fate, personal motivation doesn't exist.

This said, Richard's dense line only half suggests that the tragedy takes place in a universe controlled by fate. And, there are some interesting methods of trying to understand Richard without immediately resorting to describing him, as Granville Barker reductively described Richard's descendent, Iago, as "only a poisoned and poisonous ganglion of cravings after evil" (Spivack 3). Firstly, most easily, Richard himself gives a reason from the start for acting as he does. He characterizes himself as "deformed," "unfinished," "unfashionable," and this ugliness, he claims, keeps him from being a "lover," keeps him "want[ing] loves majesty." So, he justifies, "to entertain these fair well-spoken days," he is "determined to prove a villain" (I.i.20-30). Superficially this makes sense until, in the very next scene, he successfully seduces the single woman, Lady Anne, who is (or, at least, should be) the absolutely most difficult one for him to get. If her last match counts for anything, she is presumably very pretty, but, more importantly, she is the widow and daughter-in-law of two men whom Richard himself murdered. If this

---

## Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

**GET HELP**

---

doesn't yet prove that, while his physique leaves something to be desired, his charisma is overwhelming and makes being a "lover" potentially easy for him, we see him sexually attract the only other woman who should be as difficult as Anne for him to get in a later scene. This is the "Queen," his dead brother's widow, whose sons, brothers, and brother-in-law Richard himself has killed. After a witty banter between the two, Richard and the Queen, wherein he convinces her to marry her own daughter to him, he bestows on her a "true love's kiss" (IV.iv.349). She too succumbs to him as a lover, despite his known evil and his physical deformity. Additionally, when Lady Anne has the opportunity to bewail her marital conditions, she complains that "never yet one hour in his bed have I enjoyed the golden dew of sleep... Besides, he hates me" (IV.ii.78-81). She specifically doesn't complain about his prowess in bed while awake, and doesn't even say that she has fallen out of love with him, rather, she only notes that he is not in love with her. It seems, if anything, that Richard is a fantastic lover (insofar as being such classically requires none of the true emotion). Through these two examples of nearly impossible, and yet successful, seductions, Shakespeare's audience sees that Richard III's tragic evil star is unreliable in the motives he attributes to himself. He can, if he wants, be a lover. Having dismissed the possibility that Richard himself provides us with an answer, we come back to what we started with. Either Richard doesn't possess any motives as such, or else, they aren't so obvious as to be defined by him or anyone else directly. The latter of these two options leaves us open to a more intriguing answer than Richard's own to the question of Richard's motivation.

It is a paradox -- plausible in a piece of literature that employs such paradoxical lines as "Cursed be the heart that had the heart to do it" (I.ii.15). Richard, being ugly, is classically equated with being evil. Thomas More, in his History of King Richard III, the text upon which Shakespeare primarily based his play, makes the connection between appearance and reality clear, when More describes Richard as having "evil-featured limbs, crook-backed, the left shoulder much higher than the right." As Jowett points out,

"More's vocabulary is telling in itself: the limbs are, as it were, wicked of feature rather than simply ugly; crook or crooked can mean 'deviating from rectitude,' and the left side of the body, here dominating, was associated with evil. (Jowett 32)"

Shakespeare's own secondary characters make similar equations. Margaret, the old Queen, curses Richard with dreams of "a hell of ugly devils" and goes on to cry, "thou elvish-marked...Thou that wast sealed in thy nativity the slave of nature and the son of hell"

---

## Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

**GET HELP**

---

(I.iii.224-7). Not only does she paint her devils as ugly, thereby implying the connection between ugliness and treachery, she makes the more outright connection in the phrase, "elvish-marked," which, as Jowett cites in his footnote to the phrase, "Refers to a belief that physical defects were left by malignant elves to mark an infant out for wicked deeds." Margaret categorically sees Richard's physical body as a testament to his soul's sinfulness, and she tells him so. Likewise, Richard's own mother draws a link, saying, "He [Richard] was the wretched'st thing when he was young" (II.iv.18). Rather than using a less powerful word than "wretched" that might refer solely to his physical being, the Duchess employs this strong one with many negative connotations. Finally, in Richmond's last speech, he closes the play calling England a "fair land" (V.vii.39, italics mine). Like More, Richmond uses a word that simultaneously means something moral and something superficial. In this case, the single adjective brings together justice and attractiveness.

Knowing, as Richard does, that the nature of someone's true person is commonly derived from his outward appearance, and knowing, as Richard does, that he is ugly, it makes sense that he should want to undermine the equation. This conjecture would explain his will to deception. If he can trick people, he will effectively demonstrate that appearance does not reveal reality, in fact, he will prove just the opposite. Logically, this would show that his ugliness does not make him evil. One of Richard's shining moments comes when he gives advice to his nephew, "Your Grace attended to their [your uncles] sugared words," he says, "But looked not on the poison of their hearts" (III.i.13-14). In expressing this sentiment, he is simultaneously able to deceive magnificently by taking the Christian moral high-ground, and expounding the basic philosophy he wants to convey, that appearance does not necessarily reflect reality. His co-conspirators, Buckingham and Catesby, both recognize the importance of deception as well, "I can counterfeit the deep tragedian" (III.v.6), declares the first, while the latter states, "My heart is ten times lighter than my looks" (V.iii.3). And, Richard's skill in deception successfully teaches his lesson to his enemies. Hastings, for instance, realizes, as he goes to his Richard-ordained death, "Who builds his hopes in air of your [worldly man's] fair looks Lives like a drunken sailor on a mast, Ready with every nod to tumble down Into the fatal bowels of the deep" (III.v.103-6). Richard's mother, the Duchess of York, makes a similar statement when she sees that her son has duped his nephew, her grandchild, "O that deceit should steal such gentle shapes," she laments, "and with a virtuous visor hide foul guile!" (II.ii.26-7). Even Richard's brother, Clarence, unwittingly has a visually powerful revelation along the same lines the night Richard incites his death. Here, he sees in a dream, "Some [jewels] lay[ing] in dead men's skulls, and in those holes where eyes did once inhabit there were crept... reflecting gems" (I.iv.27-9). Although Clarence himself is unaware of his dream's meaning, the audience knows it is a prophesy of his near death. It is also a clue as to what he has failed to see up to that point, that what something seems to be is the opposite of what it really is inside: the skull, impoverished of life and humanity on the outside is rich with "unvalued" items on the inside just as Richard is brimming with kindness on the outside while he is a deceiving "wretch" within.

---

## Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

**GET HELP**

---

Ironically though, Richard's method of proving the appearance / reality opposition by "seem[ing] a saint when I most play the devil" (I.iii.338) actually proves the initial assumption he was working against. That is, he shows himself to be terribly evil, and this perfectly reflects his physical deformity on the traditional level Margaret so callously outlines. As Aaron the Moor "makes his heart black like his face," so too does Richard make his heart crooked like his body. The night before Richard's "bloody death" on the battlefield, his mostly successful attempts to divide himself into opposing factions, one inner, the other outer, comes to haunt him in wakefulness. "Is there a murderer here?" he asks, alone, terrified, "No. -- Yes, I am," he replies, "Then fly." he orders, "What, from myself?" he again retorts. His ability to divide himself has not only crushed those around him, it has also crushed and hurt himself. The unnatural division he inspired in himself to try make a point to those around him results in being the beginning of the end for him.

This all aside though, it might be, as Bernard Spivack implies in his book, *Shakespeare and the Allegory of Evil*, and, as Richard himself accounts for in his opening soliloquy, that looking for a motivation in Richard to account for his acting evil is unnecessary and unfounded. Spivack draws our attention to the fact that Richard compares himself to "Iniquity" (III.i.79), the popular name of for the comic character that represented vice in the old morality plays. Spivack further says that Richard draws his "unmistakable vocabulary" from "the morality play," and this shows Richard III's "cradle in allegory" (399). Specifically, Richard is a brilliant user of homily, albeit ironically, which is the principal technique morality plays adopted in order to achieve their aim of spiritually edifying their audiences. Spivack reminds us that "Elizabethan drama was preceded and deeply influenced by [this] popular dramatic convention that was not naturalistic" (453). Perhaps looking for Richard's motives is simply a Freudian anachronism.

#### Works Cited

Shakespeare, William. *The Tragedy of King Richard III*. Ed. John Jowett. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. Including Jowett's Introduction and notes.

Spivack, Bernard. *Shakespeare and the Allegory of Evil: the history of metaphor in relation to his major villains*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1964.

---

## Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

**GET HELP**