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Violence Ad Nauseam in Elizabethan-Shakespearean Theatre: The Case of *Richard III*

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ABSTRACT

The staging of violence in William Shakespeare's *Richard III* provides a privileged vantage point from which to examine and interrogate dramatic writing and its capacity to represent History. In this perspective, the power of theatre lies in its ability to stage the violence of History and that of political power, to compile an archaeological inventory of all manner of bloody deeds, physical and verbal brutality, reaching back to medieval England. A theatre of violence and cruelty that oscillates between brutality and grotesque buffoonery simultaneously attracts and repels, provoking nervous laughter through various forms of pleasurable violence that ultimately spill over onto the spectator himself, who is, in turn, violated.

Keywords: Elizabethan theatre – violence – political philosophy – power – tragedy – dramatic writing

Introduction

Violence is most commonly understood in its broadest sense as physical violence, as defined by Furetière, without distinguishing the subtle nuances that exist, for example, between violence and force. The legends and History of mankind are made of wars, struggles, murders and atrocities. When suspense is lacking, human imagination gladly invents horrors – as seen in disaster films. Painting and architecture are affected by the same phenomenon, and so, of course, are literature and theatre in every age and nation. Elizabethan England was no exception. Violence, in this sense, can be regarded as a perennial news item, predestined by its spectacular nature to be staged in every art form – whether collective, group or individual violence, directed against others or against oneself. It is the subject par excellence of theatre, and of Elizabethan theatre in particular. If one seeks the defining characteristic of Elizabethan tragedy, violence immediately springs to mind. It is omnipresent, insistent and evocative, like a leitmotiv composed of battles, murders, hangings, beheadings and ghosts.

Richard III is a play steeped in an atmosphere of violence: the evocation of the tyrant's past and future crimes, the mental suffering of his victims, and the defection of his allies haunt the spectator's mind through the power of images and metaphors that act upon the imagination, reinforced by the tension of visual exposition. Certain scenes are deeply moving without any bloodshed, yet violence reaches its climax. Shakespeare, however, does not limit himself to suggestion; he does not shrink from showing forms of violence that were technically feasible on the Elizabethan stage.

The present study therefore aims to interrogate the different modes of staging violence in the tragedy *Richard III* and to analyse the affects provoked by that violence, which contribute to the conception of a distinctly Shakespearean form of catharsis. We shall see that Shakespearean drama is a dramaturgy of monsters, staging heroic butcheries (to paraphrase Voltaire) centred on a Vice- figure assimilated to a villain. We shall subsequently examine verbal violence – personal attacks, threats, curses and insults – as well as the violence of the victims themselves, who function as Fates weaving the destiny of the characters or as Nemeses. The representation of violence thus oscillates between attraction and repulsion: the spectator's nervous laughter and guilty admiration blur moral judgement, confronted as he is with bloodthirsty scenes inscribed under the sign of pleasurable violence.

Richard III: A Tragedy of Violence

The eponymous character opens the full spectrum of archetypes: he is at once heir to the medieval Vice, to the biblical tyrant Herod (slayer of all who threaten his power), and to the Elizabethan stereotype of Machiavelli – a name that had become synonymous with evil ("a make-evil"). The bestiary mobilised throughout the play exhibits Richard's monstrous and bestial nature. He enters at the very beginning and describes himself thus:

"But I, that am not shaped for sportive tricks, Nor made to court an amorous looking-glass; I, that am rudely stamped… …Deformed, unfinished, sent before my time Into this breathing world scarce half made up…" (I.1)

The opening monologue saturates the description with adjectives and adverbs of deformity. This syntactic excess mirrors the excess of Richard's body: the verse line cannot contain the description, producing enjambments because ordinary metre cannot hold the proliferating terms – just as Richard's monstrous body overflows normal limits. Monstrosity is thus foregrounded from the exposition scene and meticulously constructed through lexical saturation, testifying to Shakespeare's particular fascination with monsters.

Certain monsters in the play function as allegories linked to the aesthetics of the grotesque comic. The analogies drawn between Richard and various animals (toad, spider, hedgehog, boar) symbolise the forces of evil. The spider, for instance, is biblical hunter; its web is not a fabric but a trap. As the prophet Isaiah reminds us, the spider's thread can never become cloth. Evil cannot produce good. Although the word "monster" appears only three times, the theme of monstrosity is central, materialised on stage and mediated through discourse. In Bill Alexander's 1985 production, Richard used his crutches as extra "legs", giving literal force to the spider imagery. By definition, the monster knows no bounds – a truth Richard demonstrates brilliantly. In a world of bloody political competition, every adult character has committed or exploited at least one murder, yet Richard stands out by his outrageous excess.

Machiavelli famously wrote: "It is better to be feared than loved, if one cannot be both." Richard perfectly embodies the logic of force and violence, never staying his murderous hand, eliminating even his closest relatives. His unbridled, pathological desire for the throne unleashes the violence that runs through the entire play, recalling Plautus' "*Homo homini lupus*" and Hobbes' "*Bellum omnium contra omnes*". The latter needs nuancing: it is Richard who declares war on everyone. The other characters – the Duchess, Queen Elizabeth, Lady Anne – are powerless before the calculating monster consumed by thirst for power, spiralling toward destruction that ends only with his death. On the battlefield he cries: "A horse! A horse! My kingdom for a horse!" – expressing the wish to exchange the devouring power that never granted him invincibility.

The tyrant's excessive taste for blood and butchery is repeatedly named: Hastings calls him "bloodthirsty Richard" (IV.3), Lady Anne evokes his "butcheries" with horror (I.2), and his own mother testifies to her revulsion. The lexicon of the slaughterhouse recurs, notably in Tyrrell's description of the princes' murder. Following Étienne de La Boétie's typology of tyrants, Richard belongs to the second and third categories: he uses violence to legitimise his power and because he was born and raised within tyranny. His accomplices – above all Buckingham – are equally cruel, greedy for money and power. Yet, as La Boétie observes, the tyrant has no true friends. Buckingham is merely a pawn on Richard's chessboard of butchery; Richard is the maestro and choreographer of the dance of death that stops only when he decides – or when fate decides for him.

The play thus becomes a mirror of outraged violence that makes blood flow in profusion. That effusion entertained not only theatre audiences but also Shakespeare's contemporaries who attended public executions. The taste for violent spectacle was commonplace: executions were staged on platforms at eye level, surrounded on three sides by spectators – a configuration that strikingly recalls the open-air theatres of England. Every detail was calculated so that nothing escaped the crowd's gaze. Real-life staging of violence finds echoes in the play, where wounds become recurring motifs. The wounded body is simultaneously an object of compassion and a spectacle. Lady Anne's apostrophe to the corpse of Henry VI – "O, gentlemen, see, see! Dead Henry's wounds / Open their congealed mouths and bleed afresh!" (I.2) – is emblematic.

The allegory of death as a levelling force serves as a *memento mori*, reminding us of the vanity of power. Wounds and scars bear witness to past events and enable their resurgence. They narrate without artifice the history of the body that bears them, stabbed by a monster. The testimonial value of the scar – its size, its location – provides information about the man who received it. As Lady Anne declares, the wounds "speak" and complexify the dead character without textual explanation: the wound is a text incarnate. At the crossroads of writing and body, text and performance, the said and the shown, the language of wounds is a language of inscribed signs. But language itself, as part of discourse, is equally capable of wounding.

The Wounds of Violent Language

Verbal violence runs throughout the play in the form of curses, insults and calumnies. The lemma "curse" (curse, cursed, accursed, etc.) is the most frequently repeated performative speech act and becomes the driving force of the dramatic project. Cursing appears from the earliest scenes, especially in the mouths of Lady Anne and Queen Margaret. The female characters not only ensure cyclical return but also embody Nemesis. Verbal violence operates through the magical speech of the curse that acts and annihilates. "To curse when one cannot act" is the motto of those who feel powerless before a bloodthirsty tyrant.

Curses are primarily the prerogative of female characters who believe in the efficacy of the word. Margaret is repeatedly called a "witch", a term that acknowledges the magical power of her speech. The Duchess of York, Richard's own mother, curses her son with equal expertise. Margaret's imprecations echo and come true, cultivating the memory of the word. Each misfortune is recognised as the fulfilment of one of her curses, proving the performativity of the verb. Lady Anne even physicalises the curse by spitting in Richard's face. The Duchess declares that misery is the source of curses. In the great concert of female lamentation and imprecation (IV.4), the women attempt to act through words while remaining victims. Their laments and curses function like ancient defixion tablets, aiming to submit another to their will and serving as exorcisms or outlets for grief.

Insult operates as the corollary of anger on a binary model (insulter / insulted). Richard is the primary target, and each insult rewrites and prolongs his portrait. When Anne hurls venom, he responds with hyperbolic praise, following theological injunctions to repay insult with blessing. The stichomythic alternation of insult and praise creates grotesque contrast and provokes laughter that attenuates the tragic horror. Richard even turns the exchange into an amorous lovers' quarrel, thereby defusing its tragic dimension. His refusal to return insult for insult also stems from fear of the boomerang effect of curses – a belief rooted in religious culture. By cursing Richard, Anne curses herself: "for in cursing you curse yourself."

In his opening monologue Richard presents his weapons: "Since I cannot prove a lover […] I am determined to prove a villain / And hate the idle pleasures of these days. / Plots have I laid…" Calumny and rumour-mongering are thus the very essence of the villain's politics. He slanders his own family (questioning the princes' legitimacy, staining his mother's and brother's reputation) while pretending that others spread the rumours. Deforming reality, calumniating, and rumour-mongering are the tyrant's stock-in-trade, demonstrating with virtuosity that language is the linchpin of political power.

A Shakespearean Catharsis?

Shakespearean "pleasurable" or "jouissive" violence is cathartic only under certain conditions. Shakespeare retains Aristotelian mechanisms (pity and terror provoked by the tragedy of power) but adds admiration – a crucial affect in the constitution of tragic heroes. Courageous, resolute, audacious, rhetorically brilliant, a master manipulator and fearless soldier (Bosworth), Richard ticks every box of the epic hero – yet deploys his talents in the service of evil. This degradation of the tragic hero produces problematic affects in the spectator, who oscillates like a pendulum between enjoying the political entertainment fabricated by violent language and pitying the victims annihilated by the villain.

Richard's tragic dimension lies in the solitude to which he is condemned (abandoned on the battlefield) and in the monstrosity he flaunts throughout his thirst for power. Terror arises from his excessive bloodthirstiness; pity from his final abandonment, tormented conscience and punishment – aligning him with the tragic hero who suffers divine providence. Yet his utter lack of remorse and extreme criminal vocation prevent him from being a full tragic hero. Clarence Valentine Boyer calls him "the villain as hero in Elizabethan tragedy," simultaneously cynical bloodthirsty tyrant and quasi-tragic hero, switching between the two registers according to dramatic necessity.

Shakespeare preserves the mechanism of catharsis while inverting its purpose: not to purge passions but to awaken antithetical affects and inner conflict in the spectator. The protean Richard – seductive, witty, violent, tyrannical – disturbs because the audience sympathises with an admirable monster. Guilty sympathy and nervous laughter stem from the ambiguity of judging a malefic yet comic character, perfect heir to the Vice and the fool. Unlike classical tragic heroes who renounce freedom at some point, Richard enjoys absolute liberty: "I am determined to prove a villain" expresses deliberate will rather than fate.

The spectator is torn between sympathy and rejection.

Conclusion

Dramatic art is ultimately an act of creation based on what the playwright can imagine about human reality. It remains a social manifestation and a contribution to civilisation. Shakespearean theatre is nothing other than a mirror of conflicts, hopes and fears. By choosing a subject punctuated by a series of violent actions, Shakespeare acknowledges the necessity of representing violence on stage. He positions himself as a witness of his time, proposing an ethics indirectly through his literary production rather than direct commitment.

Excessive violence and force bring ruin and desolation, yet after the categorical elimination of the troublemakers – Richard and his clan – calm and peace are restored. The happy, optimistic ending assures humanity's perennial rebirth from its own ashes, like the phoenix.

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