

Reasoning with the Murderer: The Killing of Clarence in *Richard III*

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When read one after the other, Shakespeare's history plays come across as a long strife for power. One king takes the place of another while the crown—the obvious symbol of power—keeps changing hands. Jan Kott draws our attention to the fact that the stories not only present this recurrent theme, but also show structural similarities in their exposition. They revolve in circles, which gives the reader the impression that for Shakespeare “history stands still.” Kott calls this the “grand mechanism” and shows the parallels in the plots of the plays: “Each of these great historical tragedies begins with a struggle for the throne, or for its consolidation. Each ends with the monarch's death and a new coronation. In each of the Histories the legitimate ruler drags behind him a long chain of crimes. He has rejected the feudal lords who helped him to reach for the crown: he murders first, his enemies, then his former allies; he executes possible successors and pretenders to the crown.”¹

What is striking in Kott's analysis of the structural and thematic similarities of the plays is the emphasis on crime and murder. It is true that in the first and second tetralogies, one hardly dies in his deathbed. The noble lords and the members of the royal family are either killed in the battleground or are locked up in the Tower of London, where they are silently murdered. Even if one manages to die in bed, horrible dreams haunt him. Suffering from the heavy burden of remorse for the evil deeds he has committed, as in the case of Henry IV or Edward IV, he usually dies as a tormented soul. Apparently it is impossible to keep your hands clean, as Kott reminds us, once you become a king. Edward IV, after he learns that Clarence has been killed in the Tower, repents his having signed a warrant for his brother's death, and blames

everyone including himself for not having moved a finger for “poor Clarence”:

But for my brother not a man would speak
 Nor I, ungracious, speak unto myself
 For him, poor soul. The proudest of you all
 Have been beholding to him in his life;
 Yet none of you would once plead for his life.
 Oh God, I fear thy justice will take hold
 On me and you, and mine and yours for this! (2.2.129-37)²

These are the last words of King Edward IV; next time we hear about him, he is dead, and we know that he died in agony.

Similarly, Henry IV can never shake the burden of having killed Richard II and usurped the throne. Before he dies he confesses to Hal how heavy the crown felt on his head all those years he has been in power:

God knows, my son,
 By what by-paths and indirect crook'd ways
 I met this crown; and I myself know well
 How troublesome it sat upon my head. (*Henry IV*, Part 2,
 4.5.183-85)³

Whether kings die in their beds or on the battlefield, crimes of the past always surface, casting a shadow on their last hours. The presence of murderous deeds is always felt in Shakespeare's historical plays, especially in *Richard III*, which can be read as a series of deadly crimes planned and plotted by the monstrous Duke of Gloucester, the most villainous of all Shakespeare characters. Many critics support the view that he is a character borrowed from Senecan plays; some believe that he is much influenced by the Vice of morality plays;⁴ but they all agree that he is one of the few purely evil characters that Shakespeare ever created. Besides, he is also equipped with a genius to cover his villainy with a false sheet of virtue. What Michael Neill says for Iago⁵ applies with equal force to Richard: he is a moral mercantilist. Being completely amoral, he bends morality according to his wish and will.

Unlike the other kings, Richard does not kill out of necessity; on the contrary, he seems to be enjoying the pain and suffering he inflicts on other people. He has a large record of crimes, including the killing of a series of characters that we meet in the plays *Henry*

VI (Parts 2 and 3) and *Richard III*: Henry VI, Prince Edward (the son and crown prince of Henry VI), Lady Anne (later the queen to Richard), Duke of Clarence (his own brother), Lord Hastings, Edward and Richard (the young princes and sons of Edward IV), Earl Rivers (brother to Queen Elizabeth), Lord Grey (son of Queen Elizabeth), Sir Thomas Vaughan (another relation on the side of the queen), and finally the Duke of Buckingham (his own confidant and right-hand man in the struggle for power).

In *Richard III* all the murders are reported to the audience, except one—Clarence’s murder in the Tower, which Shakespeare prefers to present in great detail. He reserves a full, self-contained scene for demonstrating how the two murderers, hired by Richard himself, sneak into the Tower, meet Clarence, and kill him. The Tower, of course, is familiar to us as the setting of other murders. We have seen Richard II being murdered there, and Gloucester himself kills Henry VI in the Tower after he has been arrested following the glory of the Yorkists in the battle of Tewkesbury. Yet none of these previous murder scenes possess the dramatic quality of the killing of Clarence, which, as a separate scene, can be regarded as a short play in itself, portraying its own characters, having its own climax, and revealing its particular theme of conscience. As part of *Richard III*, on the other hand, it not only fulfills the purpose of foreshadowing the other murders to come, but since it involves the only comic element in the play—the dialogue between the murderers before they meet Clarence—it also fulfills the function of counterpoint adding to the tension, very much like the knocking at the gate in *Macbeth*.⁶

Act 1, scene 4 of *Richard III*, which is composed of Clarence’s dream and his murder, differs from preceding and succeeding scenes of the play in the sense that it presents a complete event in itself. Wolfgang Clemen in his notes on *Richard III* points to the fact that this scene is a self-contained miniature tragedy, “with a dramatic curve complete in itself.”⁷ He further comments that scenes like this were part of the pre-Shakespearean tradition followed by most Elizabethan dramatists, who often worked with single scenes as a unit rather than as part of the entire play. Then he quickly adds that Shakespeare managed to achieve both ends, i.e., constructing scenes as independent dramatic entities and linking them to the plot and the thematic structure of the whole

play. Clemen does not explicitly mention it, but when he says pre-Shakespearean tradition in drama, he must have the episodic structure of the miracle plays in mind.

Ribner, on the other hand, points to the influence of the morality tradition on *Richard III*, and draws our attention to Shakespeare's employment of the "ritual technique," which was one of the characteristics of morality plays. In addition to many other details from the play (the ghosts, the choral scene of lamentation, and so forth), he refers to Clarence's murder, saying that it is "handled in ritual fashion: his dream and his penitential lament (1.4.43-64) emphasize the divine retribution for sin which his coming murder will illustrate."⁸ It is true that Shakespeare borrowed dramatic devices, themes and characters from both the miracle and the morality plays. Yet, he blended all these elements with his own genius and came up with plays that are comparable to none produced by his predecessors—and maybe even his contemporaries.

The scene consists of three parts: Clarence's dream, the murderers' conversation before they meet Clarence, and the talk they have with Clarence before they kill him. The dream itself may be subjected to a separate analysis since it displays a rich variety of images. Yet, since the scope of this article is limited, we will concentrate only on characterization, theme, and structure in the two last episodes of the scene containing the discourse of the murderers.

The murderers appear as simple men. The first thing we notice when we meet them is that they are not given names. They are referred to as the First and the Second murderers, invoking the sense that Shakespeare deliberately robbed them of their identity, intending to present them as anonymous characters, which equips them with the quality of the "scourges of God" who have come to bring justice on Clarence. It is not important who they are; what counts is that they have come to make Clarence pay the price of his previous evil deeds. From the very first moment they meet Clarence, they remind him of his past betrayal:

Clarence. In God's name, what art thou?
First Murderer. A man, as you are.
Clarence. But not as I am Royal.
First Murderer. Nor you as we are, Loyal. (1.4.152-55)

One should also note that instead of saying, “Who are you?” Clarence asks, “What are you?”—as if he has noticed the beastly quality of the deed the murderers are planning to actualize. When the First Murderer reminds Clarence of his own mortality by saying that he is a man like everybody else, Clarence reacts vigorously, emphasizing that he is from the royal family, a sign showing that he considers himself immune to trouble brought by the hands of other people. Shakespeare, by making the murderers and Clarence engage in “a talk of equals,” shows that Clarence is stripped of his privileges as a member of the royal family and that he is as vulnerable to death as any other man.

One other reason Shakespeare did not give them names might be that the murderers appear as types rather than as fully developed characters, which may be regarded as another influence of morality plays. In general, one can say that they represent good and evil defending opposite views, but there are also some particular instances when they come so close to each other that it becomes hard to tell who is talking. Thus, it is possible to say that they can be viewed as a *doppelgänger*. Yet the question remains why Shakespeare came up with two murderers rather than presenting one single character in conflict, whose soul is torn between good and evil. Probably it is because he was aware that the dramatic effect of the conversation between the murderers would be much stronger than that of a soliloquy on conscience by a single player, as in the case of Hamlet. When portraying Hamlet, Shakespeare had a whole play to demonstrate his interiority, whereas while presenting the two murderers he has to act in a very limited space dealing with two characters whose dialectical movement he is supposed to show in few lines. He has no intention of developing the characters that will not appear in the play again. He only wants to keep them talking in that casual manner they do, which helps to increase the tension of the scene, and provides the author with a more dynamic device to further the plot.

In a sense, First Murderer and Second Murderer resemble Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. This is so not only because they get involved in a murder knowingly or unknowingly, but also because Shakespeare seems to have divided one character in two in both the cases. Mina Urgan, in her book on *Hamlet*, writes that the two characters are so similar that it is hard to distinguish who

is talking, and this is why they have come to be called “the knife and the fork” by Shakespeare players.⁹ Tom Stoppard, in his play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, makes the two characters get confused about their own identities:

Guildenstern: Rosencrantz?

Rosencrantz: What?

Guildenstern: Guildenstern?

Rosencrantz: What?

Guildenstern: Don't you discriminate at ALL?¹⁰

The same is true for the First Murderer and the Second Murderer, especially in their dialogue with Clarence, where they seem to know what the other is aiming at and complete each other's sentences while arguing with the Duke. One could still claim that the First Murderer and the Second Murderer are slightly different from each other. First Murderer is rather rough, brutal, and loudish, whereas the Second Murderer is less violent and more intelligent. (So are Rosencrantz and Guildenstern: the former seems a little more intelligent than the latter.) Yet they can easily shift into each other's discourse and fill each other's place until the very end of the scene, where they become purely antithetical: the First Murderer gets rid of the body and runs for the reward, whereas the Second Murderer is overcome by his conscience.

Conscience is a *leitmotif* in *Richard III*; the whole play is interwoven with the several instances where Shakespeare discusses whether it is possible to run away from the evil deeds that one has committed. Even Richard himself, who seems to be free from all boundaries of “human kindness,” falls prey to Queen Margaret's curse: “The worm of conscience still begnaw thy soul” (1.3.221), and confesses at the end of the play that he feels the pressure of the murders that carried him to the throne:

My conscience hath a thousand several tongues,
And every tongue brings in a several tale,
And every tale condemns me for a villain. (5.3.195-97)

The murderers in *Richard III* talk about conscience before they meet Clarence in the Tower. The conversation between the murderers is interesting in the sense that it involves the only comic element in the play, which acts as a counterpoint and increases the effect of the tragic murder that follows it. When the First Murderer

notices that the Second hesitates, thinking that his conscience might bother him after committing the deed, he reminds him of the reward:

First Murderer: Remember our Reward, when the deed's done.

Second Murderer: Come, he dies: I had forgot the Reward.

First Murderer: Where's thy conscience now?

Second Murderer: O, in the Duke of Glouster's purse.

First Murderer: When hee opens his purse to give us our Reward, thy Conscience flies out.
(1.4.117-22)

Hence, the Second Murderer's account of conscience is rather witty in line with the general tone of the talk between the murderers, who appear as simple, practical men caring only for the reward that Richard has promised them:

I'll not meddle with it. It is a dangerous thing. It makes a man a coward: a man cannot steal, but it accuseth him; a man cannot swear, but it checks him; a man cannot lie with his neighbour's wife, but it detects him. 'Tis a blushing shamefast spirit, that mutinies in a man's bosom. It fills one full of obstacles. It made me once restore a purse of gold that I found: it beggars any man that keeps it. It is turn'd out of towns and cities for a dangerous thing, and every man that means to live well, endeavors to trust to himself, and live without it." (1.4.126-35)

Tillyard draws our attention to the fact that *Richard III* was written at a time when Shakespeare was writing one of the best of his comedies, *Love's Labour's Lost*, and that much of the prose in the former owes to the language the author uses in the latter. He also claims that the two plays have many more things in common in terms of structure and balance, but his emphasis on language is the most important point to be considered here. Tillyard suggests that the discourse of Clarence's Second Murderer on conscience is similar in its freshness to the spring and winter songs at the end of *Love's Labour's Lost*, in the sense that they are both "easy and exquisite" in their own ways.¹¹

The use of language and tone here reminds one of Falstaff talking about honor in *Henry IV, Part I*. The language employed by the Second Murderer displays the cynical attitude of the man on the

street towards the virtues imposed by the gentry. Shakespeare, in a way, suggests that for the ordinary man, virtue is a luxury enjoyed by the nobility. In its simple rationale and down-to-earthness, his voice resembles that of Falstaff when he talks to the young prince about honor. Towards the end of the play, when Hal asks him whether he does not owe anything to God, Falstaff answers saying that he has only his life that he can give, and goes on talking about honor in such a way that he evacuates the meaning of the word (which has been almost worn out by Hotspur since he has used it all through the play whenever he opens his mouth):

Can honor set-to a leg? no: or an arm? no: or take away the grief of a wound? no. Honour hath no skill in surgery then? no. What is honour? a word. What is that word, honour? air. A trim reckoning!—Who hath it? he that died o' Wednesday. Doth he feel it? no. Doth he hear it? no. Is it insensible, then? yea, to the dead. But will it not live with the living? no. Why? detraction will not suffer it. Therefore I'll none of it: honour is a mere scutcheon:—and so ends my catechism. (5.1.131-40)

Yet, while Falstaff remains faithful to his own wisdom until the end of the play, the Second Murderer changes his cynical attitude towards conscience at the end of the scene, when he sincerely repents what he has done. First Murderer, on the other hand, blames him for changing his mind halfway of the task, and says that he will go to Richard and ask for the reward he has promised them.

Second Murderer: Take thou the Fee, and tell him what I say,
For I repent me that the Duke is slain.
First Murderer: So do not I: go Coward as thou art.
Well, I'll go hide the body in some hole,
Till that the Duke give order for his burial:
And when I have my meed, I will away,
For this will out, and then I must not stay.
(1.4.265-71)

One significant reason that Shakespeare keeps the murderers talking is that they serve as a device to postpone the action. All through the scene we are kept in purgatory, not knowing whether the murderers will be defeated by their conscience and give up the plan or whether they will stick to it and kill the Duke. The murder

is eventually actualized at the very end of the scene, after tension builds up following the two long conversations.

As opposed to the comic quality of the conversation in prose between the murderers, the conversation they lead with Clarence is in verse and much more serious. Clemen draws our attention to the difference in the tone and style between the two dialogues involving the murderers, and states that this change signifies a shift in the author's attitude towards the function of murderers: "The noticeable break between these two parts raises the question of the ways in which they are linked. For in the prose dialogue, the murderers show themselves to be jocose, clownish ruffians, while in the scene with Clarence they are eloquent accusers, and at the same time solemn instruments of a divine fate, using language and scriptural references quite out of character with the brutish murderers of the prose dialogue."¹²

Once they enter the room in the Tower where Clarence is kept, the Second Murderer wants to kill him immediately—probably because he is worried that he might change his mind any minute. The First Murderer, however, stops him and says, "No, we'll reason with him." Our first impression is that there is no apparent reason for the murderers to talk to their victim before killing him, but as the conversation develops, we find that the First Murderer wants to talk Clarence into his death. When he finally kills Clarence at the end of the end of the scene, he actually stabs a corpse since the Duke has already been gradually killed in the conversation with his murderers. And as Clemen remarks they do it with great skill, both using wit and demonstrating their knowledge of the Scriptures and the Prayer Book.¹³

This "reasoning with the victim" starts with reflections of the rather humorous dialogue between the murderers that we have discussed before. Having heard the murderers talking outside Clarence's room, we are already informed that they are planning to kill Clarence and throw him into the malmsey butt (a barrel of sweet wine) in the next room. The next episode in the scene opens with Clarence asking for some wine—only to be told that he will have more than enough very soon:

Clarence: Where art thou keeper? Give me a cup of wine.
Second Murderer: You shall have wine enough, my lord, anon.
 (1.4.150-51)

The murderers, while they are talking to Clarence, keep their composure. They look as if they have completely forgotten how they hesitated outside Clarence's door. Once they enter the room where the Duke is kept, they look rather self-possessed, calm and a little bit distant. The modern reader would call them "cool."

In fact, they seem to possess the first seeds of a series of hit men to be portrayed in Hollywood movies much later.¹⁴ While watching them talk, one is reminded of the gigs of *film noir* characters, the hardboiled detectives in movies like *Maltese Falcon* or the professional killers in more recent films like *Pulp Fiction*. In this respect, the scene has the quality of a gangster story, where the hired guns finally find the victim and make him understand why he is getting killed. When Clarence asks, "Wherein have I offended you?" they assure him that it is nothing personal, and he will be killed because he has offended the King. Their tone in delivering this piece of information, the very essence of their being as hired guns, reminds one of characters in Hemingway stories such as *The Killers*, where gangsters reveal the purpose of their visit:

"What are you going to kill Ole Anderson for? What did he ever do to you?"

"He never had a chance to do anything to us. He never even seen us."

"And he is only going to see us once," Al said from the kitchen.

"What are you going to kill him for then?" George asked.

"We're killing him for a friend, just to oblige a friend, bright boy."¹⁵

Shakespeare's murderers and Hemingway's killers have many things in common. They kill their victim to oblige a "friend of theirs" and for having "double-crossed somebody," and they both sound as if they had practiced the scene before—or probably had done the same thing many times before. As Clarence desperately struggles for his life, trying to persuade the murderers that he is innocent and should not be killed, they keep their distance and talk in their professional casualness. The artificial quality of their wit has a grim implication, which Clarence fails to grasp: these people are professionals, and he will get killed no matter what happens. At some points, the conversation turns into a mechanized gag. This is true especially for the First Murderer, who is contemptuous and

bored to see that Clarence fails to understand that it was Richard who ordered his death:

Clarence: Bid Gloucester think of this, and he will weep.

First Murderer: Ay, millstones, as he lessoned us to weep.

Clarence: O, do not slander him, for he is kind.

First Murderer: Right, as snow in harvest. (1.4.227-30)

The irony of Clarence's faith in his brother's kindness gets darker when he remembers how he parted with Richard before he was sent to the Tower by the King's command. In the First Murderer's answer we hear Richard's voice saying that he loves "poor, plain Clarence" so much that he is ready to send his soul to heaven:

Clarence: It can not be, for he bewept my fortune
And hugged me in his arms, and swore with sobs
That he would labor my delivery.

First Murderer: Why, so he doth, when he delivers you
From this earth's thralldom to the joys of heaven.
(1.4.233-37)

This last dialogue also functions as a thread to unite the whole scene, repeating the theme of conscience presented in the first movement: the dream episode. Clarence has already dreamed of himself being taken to the underworld by a boatman and ending up in the torments of hell. As he dreams of all the people he betrayed, he breaks under the heavy weight of his guilty conscience. Clarence has betrayed his liege by breaking the oath that he had taken to fight on the side of Henry VI. He has taken part in the murdering of Prince Edward, Henry's son and heir to the throne, and he knows that there is blood on his hands. He subconsciously admits that he is guilty, which is reflected in the way the spirit of Edward salutes him in his dream: "Clarence is come—false, fleeting, perjured Clarence" (1.4.55).

We are repeatedly reminded in this scene that Clarence's hands are not clean. In fact, none of Richard's victims are purely innocent except the two young princes. Shakespeare seems to have preferred to present Richard, the absolute evil, on a background of lesser evil. In his famous article, "Angel with Horns," Rossiter argues that the Tudor audience might have well approved Richard's doings since he was bringing God's punishment upon the people that deserved to be punished.¹⁶ In support of his claim, Rossiter

quotes Goethe's *Faust, Part I*: "Ein Teil von jener Kraft/Die stets das Böse will, und stets das Gute schafft" ("A part of that Power which always wills evil, and yet always brings about good").¹⁷

If we regard Richard as God's instrument who intends evil but ends up doing good by cleaning up the world from people who deserve punishment, then the murderers themselves are also doing something "good" since they are "the instruments of the instrument" itself. The murderers start talking to Clarence, possessing the knowledge that Clarence is not as innocent as he claims to be. Clarence, however, shows an immense effort to prove that he does not deserve to be killed, a point which he himself does not seem to believe from the bottom of his heart. This is how the duel of words begins. Clarence directly appeals to the conscience of the murderers, while they stand firm and successfully eliminate all the blows that the Duke strikes. Blow after blow, Clarence finds himself trapped in his own rhetoric of conscience, which the murderers borrow from him and use against him. In this sense, Clarence dies in a battle, where one strikes not with spears, swords and daggers, but with "words, words, words."

Clarence seems to have the upper hand first. He uses his power as the Duke and refers to the earthly laws, which forbid subjects from revolting against the members of the royal family. Then, when this does not prove to be adequate to stop the murderers, he uses his knowledge of the Scriptures and refers to God's laws, which, he hopes, will protect him from being killed. Yet the murderers do not give up so easily. Strangely enough, they are well informed both in history and theology. They quickly gain advantage, attacking the poor Duke from both sides, quoting the Bible whenever it seems necessary. When Clarence says that God's vengeance will hurl upon them if they kill him, the murderers remind him of his own guilt: "And that same vengeance doth He hurl on thee / For false-swearing and for murder too. / Thou didst deceive the sacrament of fight / In quarrel of the House of Lancaster" (1.4.190-93).

The rhetoric of the murderers attains a quality similar to that of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern here, when they start arguing against the Duke, picking up phrases from each other's mouths, filling in the silence that the other leaves, and talking as if they were one man. Shakespeare makes them talk breathlessly, attacking

Clarence from both sides and bombarding him with words that he does not want to hear. It looks as if the murderers are talking to us—the audience—rather than addressing the Duke, with the intention of persuading us that Clarence does not deserve to stay alive. He has broken God's laws, and he must be punished. In fact, like Clarence himself, we know the Duke is a dead man once he loses the battle of words.

The scene in the Tower is an excellent example that demonstrates Shakespeare's brilliance as a dramatist. He gradually builds up tension, giving clues about the murder by providing a detailed account of Clarence's horrifying dream; then he shifts into a rather relaxing atmosphere of the humorous and casual talk between the murderers; and finally he presents us with the life-and-death struggle between Clarence and the killers. Clarence's talk with the murderers is the climax of the whole scene. The suspense of the scene stems from the very fact that Clarence may be murdered in front of our eyes any moment. On one hand, we are almost sure that he is going to be killed; on the other hand, there is still some amount of doubt involved in the talk. We know that the Second Murderer is hesitant. Outside the room, it is he who talks about the Judgment Day, who does not want to kill Clarence when he is asleep, and who says conscience is "now at my elbow, persuading me not to kill the Duke" (1.4.136-37). When they finally enter the room, and verbally attack Clarence from both sides, he actively takes part in the deadly play; but having a much softer tone than his companion, he always remains in the background. Then, towards the end of the conversation, before Clarence is killed, we arrive at a moment of silence. Clarence feels that he is totally defeated and almost dead. He uses the last bits and pieces of his power to stay alive. It is at this point that the Second Murderer looks into the eyes of the first and says, "What shall we do?" (1.4.244), which provides an unexpected moment of hope for both Clarence and the audience. Shakespeare never allows the tension to fall, and by presenting us with such moments of hesitation even towards the close of the scene, he keeps us nailed in our chairs.

Clarence gets killed when he loses the battle of words. Towards the end of the scene, we see him gradually turning into a preacher: "Relent, and save your souls" (1.4.245). However, he

manages to inflict guilt on only one of the murderers, and that is hardly enough to stay alive. He seals his own doom when he starts begging, which triggers the First Murderer into action. The Second Murderer, however, moved by Clarence's speech, tries to warn him to look behind so that he can escape the coming blow, but he is too late: the Duke is stabbed. At this point, we understand that Clarence's last appeal to the conscience of the Second Murderer—"My friend, I spy some pity in thy looks" (1.4.252)—has been successful. The scene ends with the two murderers each going his own way; one follows the road of redemption, and the other that of remuneration.

One could argue, of course, that it was perfectly possible for Shakespeare to avoid this scene in the Tower and come up with a reported version of Clarence's murder—as he does in the case of the two princes, for instance. Yet, without this scene we would not have developed some kind of insight into the devilish quality of Richard's deeds that we come to witness throughout the play. Richard's presence is felt all through the scene, though we do not see him in person. He is there in Clarence's dream, in the murderers' talk outside the room where Clarence is kept, and also in the conversation they lead with the Duke. His very presence seems to have penetrated to all the lines in the scene—and in the play. Even if he does not materialize before our eyes, he is always there. One reason Shakespeare came up with this scene is probably to show us that the Richard's presence is felt most strongly when he is absent, which adds to his quality of an abstraction as pure evil.

One other point is that the scene foreshadows many other murders to be committed in the course of the play. Rivers, Grey, Hastings, Buckingham, and the two princes are killed similarly. Once we know how things work in the Tower, we can imagine how dreadful it must have been for them to meet their fates by the hands of murderers. This is especially true for the young princes. We hear the voices of the characters before they get killed, but Shakespeare keeps the princes silent. It is only Tyrell, the murderer, who reports their last hours in the Tower. It was probably too much for the Tudor audience to watch children murdered on the stage. Yet, equipped with all the details of Clarence's murder, they could imagine how it might have taken place. Shakespeare, who

wanted the audience to think of the worst thing they can, knew that the biggest trick a dramatist can play on the audience lies in providing them with hints and relying on their imagination rather than fully demonstrating violence on the stage.

However, the most important function of the scene is that it helps Shakespeare demonstrate that the world is “out of joint.” He does not want Clarence to die an innocent man. In fact, as we have noted before, nobody is quite free from guilt in this play. *Richard III* is populated by characters who all have their share of evil, which they exercise freely until Richmond comes to set things right. Women are either devilish like Margaret or shallow and fickle like Elizabeth and Anne. Strong or weak, they are all hungry for power like their male counterparts. Men are either sneaky and unreliable like Stanley or actively involved in crime like Buckingham. Everybody is somehow tainted with crime—even “poor, plain Clarence.”

By making him reason with his murderers, Shakespeare provides him with a last chance to fight for his life, which proves to be a battle he is doomed to lose. At a time when the holy chain is broken and power is unleashed, evil becomes contagious and spreads infinitely. The killing of Clarence is no simple matter; on the contrary, it becomes the demonstration of a world where “purest faith unhappily forsworn / And gilded honor shamefully misplaced” (Sonnet 66).¹⁸

Notes

1. Jan Kott, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, trans. Boleslaw Taborski (London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1967), 6.

2. Unless stated otherwise, the Shakespeare references in the text are to the following edition of *Richard III*: William Shakespeare, *Richard III*, ed. William Raffle Burton and Harold Bloom (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).

3. William Shakespeare, *Henry IV, Part One and Part Two*, ed. David Bevington (London: Bentam Books, 1988).

4. The best known treatment of Richard as Vice is provided by Bernard Spivack, who argues that no formal Vice weeps more fluently than Richard, “none enjoys a happier intimacy with the audience,” and “by none is the art of deceit so lavishly cultivated.” See Bernard Spivack, “Shakespeare and the Allegory of Evil: The History of a Metaphor in Relation to his Major Villains,” *Renaissance News* 11, no. 4 (Winter, 1958): 279-81.

5. Michael Neill, *Putting History to the Question* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 215.

6. The reference here is to the famous article by Thomas De Quincey, "On the Knocking of the Gate in *Macbeth*," where he discusses the dramatic effect of the scene when the drunken Porter mocks the knocking at the gate in *Macbeth* at a time when everybody in the castle sleeps, unaware of the fact that the king is murdered.

7. Wolfgang Clemen, *A Commentary on Shakespeare's Richard III* (London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1957), 64.

8. Irving Ribner, *The English History Play in the Age of Shakespeare* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1964), 119.

9. Mina Urgan, *Shakespeare ve Hamlet* (Istanbul: Altın Kitaplar, 1984), 418.

10. Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (London: Faber and Faber, 1967), 25.

11. E.M.W. Tillyard, *Shakespeare's History Plays* (Harmondsworth; New York: Penguin, in association with Chatto & Windus, 1991), 199.

12. Clemen, *A Commentary on Shakespeare's Richard III*, 79-80.

13. Clemen refers to Whitaker here, who claims that "in outrageous defiance of decorum, the murderers are as learned in the Scriptures and the Prayer Book as [Clarence] is." See V. K. Whitaker, *Shakespeare's Use of Learning* (San Marino, CA, 1953), 62.

14. The characters here are not the only professional killers portrayed in Elizabethan drama. Probably, one of the most interesting murder scenes is written by Marlowe in *Edward II*, where the king gets killed by a murderer hired by Mortimer, who usurps his crown.

15. Ernest Hemingway, *The Nick Adams Stories* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972), 63.

16. A.P. Rossiter, "Angel with Horns: The Unity of *Richard III*," in *Shakespeare the Historian: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Eugene M. Waith (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1965), 78.

17. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Sämtliche Werke, Briefe, Tagebücher und Gespräche*, Frankfurter Ausgabe in 40 Bänden (Frankfurt: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1985), quoted in Rossiter, "Angel with Horns," 78.

18. William Shakespeare, *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, ed. Sir Donald Wolfitt and Dr. Bretislav Hodek (Prague: Hamlyn, 1983), 1051.