

CHESS QUEENS AND STRUCTURE IN *RICHARD III*

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Abstract

This article intends to discuss one of William Shakespeare's plays, *Richard III* in the allegorical terms of a game of chess. We will discuss an extremely well-structured play and discern two features in it the symmetrical balance of scenes and the pattern of retribution. Characters, as real people in a real historic setting, appear to be also involved in the movements of a game, they seem to act according to rules that do not belong to any real-life situation. Thus the violence and the trauma of a civil war may be somehow denied, diminished.

KEY WORDS: *characters, chess, queen, symmetry, retribution.*

Throughout the 1590s Shakespeare was committed chiefly to two prevailing genres, the Romantic Comedy and the History Drama. Why these two genres in particular? One possible answer is that the two genres appealed to him in different but related ways as exploring the dilemmas of human existence from a relatively youthful and hopeful perspective. The comedies look at problems and potentials of sexuality and gender. The English history plays examine political conflict in an attempt to understand its origins and mode of operations.

Shakespeare's approach as a dramatist to politics and political theory is essentially one of encouraging the play of ideas in a series of historical debates that are hugely relevant to his own culture. Shakespeare is not a political theorist as such, but his analytical skills are formidable, and so is his ability as a dramatist to bring issues alive on stage through the words and actions of unforgettably vivid characters. The result is both instructive and entertaining for his audiences.

What we can perhaps say is that Shakespeare is fascinated by the complexity of the political process. He sees what manipulation of public opinion can do for a ruler. He studies the arts of governing and of military leadership in all their pragmatic details. The events of the fifteenth century leading up to 1485 were closer in time to Elizabeth's subjects, and more anguishing in their account of the atrocities of civil war. Moreover, those years had culminated in the accession to the throne of Henry VII, Elizabeth's grandfather and founder of the Tudor dynasty. That event

needed to be presented as a celebration of England's emergence at long last from nearly a century of civil war. By the same token, the civil wars themselves had to be told as a horror story of brother against brother and family against family.

When discussing this rhetoric of power, we will start by analyzing the artistic structure by which Shakespeare dramatizes, in the play bearing his name, Richard III's whole career, his career as usurper and as king. We will focus first on the pattern of events in the play, and then proceed to show the ways in which Shakespeare relates Richard to the other characters in the play and to the audience.

The play begins with an event which historically took place in 1471, the victory of Richard's brother Edward over his Lancastrians enemies and his firm establishment on the English throne as Edward IV. It then compresses the events of a dozen years in about half a dozen scenes, quickly arriving at the death of Edward IV from natural causes in 1483. Then Shakespeare dramatizes more closely the three months of the nominal reign of Edward's boy called Edward V during which Gloucester slyly fights for his nephew's crown. The last two acts present the two-year actual reign of Richard, cut short at the battle of Bosworth.

The chief actions during the play are machinations from Richard's side and lamentations from the part of those he destroys in his wake. The Richard who becomes Richard III is personally responsible for many of these deaths, and indeed stands before us as the epitome of civil violence. He is the kind of evil ruler that England has brought upon itself through internal conflict. Yet his role in this carnage is at last paradoxical and ironic. Although Richard does what he does out of monstrous self-interest, and seems to be succeeding brilliantly as he maneuvers toward the throne, his murderous acts have the effect of punishing those who for the most part are guilty of punishable offences. Even those who die innocently, like Edward IV's two young sons, can be seen as sacrificial victims who must pay for the collective guilt of a country that has temporarily lost its sanity. Moreover, the violence that Richard embodies is a way of clearing out the competition for the English throne, so that when the Earl of Richmond (i.e., Henry Tudor) emerges as a claimant to the throne and to the hand in marriage of Edward IV's daughter Elizabeth, almost no one other than Richard III is standing in his way. Without his knowing or intending it, every accomplishment of Richard III turns out to be a necessary step to the coming to power of Henry VII.

It is almost exclusively a court play, dealing with intrigue and foul, violent and above all secret murders. Not until the final act do we witness a battle scene. The play is nevertheless extremely well structured; this perfect structure can be perceived in two features: the symmetrical balance of scenes and the pattern of retribution. With each Shakespeare uses materials

from his sources, at the same time realizing a brilliant transformation of the historical material at his disposal.

Sources provided Shakespeare with the information that at the end of his reign, after his wife Queen Anne had died, Richard courted his sister-in-law, the dowager queen Elizabeth for the hand of her daughter, his niece, Elizabeth of York, in order to strengthen his own position on the throne and to prevent his arch-rival Henry Tudor from marrying her. This appalling proposal, in fact a proposal of incest (uncle marrying niece), gave Shakespeare the idea for a major scene in Act Two. Historical sources are mute about Richard's previous courtship, a courtship that took place before he became king. Shakespeare takes the cue from the later wooing and zestfully imagines Richard's macabre wooing of Lady Anne over the corpse of her father-in-law, the late Henry VI.

The obvious parallelism of the two scenes draws attention to the curb of Richard's success within the play. At first, he is spectacularly successful with Anne, as he manages to persuade a woman whose husband and father-in-law he had personally killed to marry him. The scene is meant to be disturbing but it is by no means meant to show, as **Hamlet** will do later on, the weakness of the female sex.

What we are shown is the extraordinary power of persuasion Richard is endowed with. We are told, in fact, by the character himself at the end of the scene that we have witnessed something perfectly astonishing, a rare feat of persuasion.

Was ever woman in this manner wooed?

Was ever woman in this humour won? (1.2, 215-216)

These are the rhetorical questions Richard asks the audience. The entire scene is there to reveal Richard's manipulative abilities. He is crafty, he picks a time when Anne is particularly vulnerable, her political influence dwindling to the point of non-existence, as she is a Lancastrian widow in a world dominated by Yorkist males. She is distraught with grief and on her way to bury her father-in-law but she is strong enough to curse him. But her cursing is just an example of emotional outpouring; she hasn't got Queen Margaret age and expertise in the matter. At the same time she hasn't got Queen Elizabeth's skill in court intrigue, in verbal in-fighting.

And Richard is excellent in this fight. Anne fights with a man undisturbed by emotions, who has no scruples and who thinks faster than she does. He uses her curses against her. His rhetorical game is to let her commit herself to some shrill enunciation and then to twist her own words back at her.

*Lady Anne: Dost grant me, hedgehog? Then, God grant me too
Thou mayst be damned for that wicked deed.
O he [Henry VI] was gentle, mild, and virtuous!*

Richard Gloucester: *The better for the King of Heaven that hath him.*

Lady Anne: *He is in heaven, where thou shalt never come.*

Richard Gloucester: *Let him thank me that help to send him thither, For he was fitter for that place than earth.*

Lady Anne: *And thou unfit for any place, but hell.*

Richard Gloucester: *Yes, one place else, if you will hear me name it.*

Lady Anne: *Some dungeon.*

Richard Gloucester: *Your bed-chamber.*

Lady Anne: *Ill rest betide the chamber where thou liest.*

Richard Gloucester: *So will it, madam, till I lie with you.*

Lady Anne: *I hope so.*

Richard Gloucester: *I know so. [...] (1.2, 103-114)*

He keeps responding to her one-liners until she finds herself emotionally trapped. He then gives Anne his sword and bares his chest, daring her to slay him. He does this having the certitude that Lady Anne will not be able to kill a man in cold blood.

But the situation is different three acts later when Richard comes to woo the dowager queen for the hand of his daughter. He has lost his spellbinding power, his skill at keeping the upper hand. When he tries to convince Elisabeth he truly loves her daughter and that he will treat her as it befits a queen, she is able to refute cleverly and immediately everything he tries to swear by.

King Richard: *Harp not on that string, madam. That is past.*

Queen Elizabeth: *Harp on it still shall I till heart-strings break.*

King Richard: *Now, by my George, my garter, and my crown -*

Queen Elizabeth: *Profaned, dishonored, and the third usurped. [...]*

King Richard: *Then, by myself -*

Queen Elizabeth: *Thy self is self-misused.*

King Richard: *Now, by the world -*

Queen Elizabeth: *'Tis full of thy foul wrongs.*

King Richard: *My father's death -*

Queen Elizabeth: *Thy life hath it dishonored.*

King Richard: *Why, then, by God -*

Queen Elizabeth: *God's wrong is most of all. [...] (4.4, 295- 308)*

We can observe now that the roles are reversed; the queen is now in the answering position, rhetorically she is on top of the conversation, she controls it. She proves even more skillful than Richard has proved with Anne. She is faster; she placates him in half lines while he has counteracted Lady Anne's curses in full lines. More importantly, she wins the exchange, as she fools Richard completely. Elisabeth leaves the stage promising

Richard that indeed she will persuade her daughter to marry him, and he's completely taken in by her promise; he is even mocking the queen after she exits: "*Relenting fool, and shallow, changing woman!*" (4.4, 362) But in fact Elizabeth's next action is to write a letter promising her daughter to Henry Tudor. Richard is fooled so completely he doesn't even know he is fooled, and it's the first time this happens in the play.

The contrast of these two wooing scenes in Act I and in Act IV underlines a change in the way Richard is perceived, by the other characters as well as by the audience. Richard has lost his all-important and all-powerful control over the others.

The second feature of structural firmness in the play is the pattern of retribution, which is embodied by Queen Margaret. Here Shakespeare uses historical truth loosely and takes some liberties with it. Un-historically, and even unrealistically he brings back the old Lancastrian Queen into the action as in reality she had spent her last years in exile in France, and had died there in 1482, a year before Richard usurped the throne. Shakespeare introduces her in two scenes, one in the first act, one in the fourth. She makes a perfect voice of the past as she has lived all the past history of the War of the Roses, of all the atrocities that the reign of Richard III wraps up. Shakespeare brings her back in the royal palace lurking about, half madwoman half witch, a kind of personification of vengeance. In the First Act she curses all the Yorkists for all the misfortune they have brought upon her house, and in Act Four she gloats over their misfortunes. All her curses come true and are underscored over and over again. Queen Elizabeth, Buckingham, Rivers, Hastings, all remember what Margaret has said when they come to meet their dooms.

The very names of the main contestants underscore the dismal business of reciprocity. As the widow Queen Margaret sums up the grisly account in *Richard III*, in the aftermath of the fighting:

*I had an Edward, till a Richard killed him;
I had a Harry, till a Richard killed him;
Thou hadst an Edward, till a Richard killed him;
Thou hadst a Richard, till a Richard killed him.*
(4.4, 40–3)

That is to say, Queen Margaret's son Edward, the Lancastrian crown prince, was killed by Richard of Gloucester, and so was her husband Henry (Harry) VI, whereas the widow Queen Elizabeth, to whom Margaret is speaking, has lost her two sons, Edward (Edward V) and Richard, at the hands of Richard of Gloucester. The Duchess of York adds to this grim list that she too had a Richard, namely, her husband Plantagenet, and also a Rutland, her youngest son, both of them slain, as we have seen, by Margaret and her Lancastrian supporters (4.4, 44–5).

Queen Margaret sees a necessary justice of revenge in all these deaths:

*Thy Edward, he is dead, that killed my Edward;
Thy other Edward dead, to quite my Edward.*
(4.4, 63–4)

In other words, King Edward IV has justly died for having killed the Edward who was Lancastrian crown prince, whereas Edward V (the ‘other Edward’) has paid with his life to even the tally for the death of Margaret’s son Edward.

Such direful reciprocity is clearly presented as part of a game that takes turns in these plays. So firm a structure made up of repetitions, parallel scenes, fulfilled curses, accurate predictions made by ghosts (acknowledged or not) may make the play seem like an algebraic equation: everything that is done on one side has to be done on the other. This mirror-like image is also reminding us of the game of chess, and the queens in the scenes we have just dealt with are very much like the queens on a chessboard. Even the colours of the roses are helping with the metaphor. The terrible Red Queen Margaret is replaced by a woman of humble origins, a pawn of History who, through great force of will maintains her marriage to the one who becomes king. Elizabeth Woodville is the pawn tuned into the White Queen of York. The destiny of Anne Neville is even more surrealistic in terms of the game of chess. She was meant to become a Red Queen as she had married the last direct Lancastrian. Instead she will be the last Yorkist White Queen along with Richard, the last king of the War of the Roses.

The Queen who restores the balance is Elisabeth of York, wife to Henry Tudor. Here the chess metaphor ends, there will be only a queen from now on, white and red are united under the same crown. It is well mentioning that historically Elizabeth of York is the only English Queen to have been a wife, daughter, sister, niece and mother to English Kings.

The Shakespearian play preserves the chess metaphor up to the end and the Red and White queens change places in a “danse macabre” that gives **Richard III** the air of a surrealistic work. Pawns turn Queens and Fools take Queens in a game that seems to have nothing to do with reality. Maybe thus the atrocities depicted in the play and all the abhorrence we as an audience may experience towards the actions of Richard are somewhat atoned by the feeling of unreality. And life seems but a game, perhaps a game of chess.

Note: The quotations from **Richard III** are taken from *The Oxford Shakespeare. The Complete Works*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1998

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