

In my last column I looked at the way Shakespeare, in making his point about power, ambition, and the evil it generates, managed to blacken the name of an innocent historical figure earlier in his career. This was not the first time he performed such a character assassination. Richard III is today almost universally known as the villainous hunchback who murdered his nephews to gain the throne. This play is another powerful and mesmerising study of evil and the corrupting power of ambition. Unfortunately, however, this portrait of Richard does not accord with the facts as we now

know them. Although this viewpoint has been consistently debunked over the centuries by various historians, the myth persists. This is largely due to the power and popularity of Shakespeare's play.

Richard III is a very

complex play, because of all the politics involved. To make sense of it and to follow the complicated twists of the plot, one has to understand the historical background, and know how all the characters fit into the historical context. It is a culmination of a cycle of history plays beginning with Richard II, and continuing through the reigns of Henrys IV, V and VI, taking in the bloody civil war between the houses of Lancaster and York, known as the Wars of the Roses. At the opening of Richard III, the war is over, having been won by the Yorks, and Richard's brother is on the throne as Edward IV. The queen, Elizabeth, has a vast, grasping and ambitious family, including her brother and two grown-up sons from a previous marriage, as well as seven children from her marriage to Edward. Richard is the Duke of Gloucester.

According to Shakespeare, Richard was a hunchback, whose deformity becomes a physical manifestation of his twisted mind. In his own words, he is 'subtle, false and treacherous', totally corrupted by his ruthless pursuit of power. It is a superb study of evil, of crime and retribution, and of the corrupting power of ambition. It struck me, on re-reading it, how very similar the themes are to those of Macbeth. Richard III was written early in his career as a playwright, while Macbeth was produced much later, at the peak of his dramatic powers. Richard could almost be seen as a practice run for Macbeth. At one point Macbeth actually says,

'...I am in blood
Stepped in so far, that, should I wade no more,
Returning were as tedious as go o'er.'

This is an echo of Richard's words:

'I am so far in blood that sin will pluck on sin.'

Where did Shakespeare get this idea of Richard as the manifestation of evil, which subsequent historians have pretty consistently disproved? The source for all Shakespeare's history plays is the historian Holinshed, whose **Chronicles of England** appeared during the Tudor reign of Elizabeth I. Holinshed based his account of Richard on, amongst others, the writings of Sir Thomas More. More describes Richard as an evil villain who plotted his way to the throne through a path of blood. His account includes a description of the drowning of the Duke of Clarence (Richard's younger brother) in a butt of malmsey wine, and the suffocation of the two young princes in the Tower. It was hardly a contemporary, eye-witness account, however: More was only eight years old when Richard died at the battle of Bosworth. As a boy, however, he had been employed in the household of John Morton, who was

Bishop of Ely under Edward and Richard, and who actually plotted to overthrow Richard and supplant him with Henry VII, the first Tudor king. He was substantially rewarded for his treachery by Henry. So he can hardly be described as an unbiased observer of Richard's actions.

The ever-quotable Winston Churchill is said to have remarked: 'History will be kind to me for I intend to write it.' History is always written by the victors. It was in the interests of both Morton and his king to gloss over the betrayal of Richard and the usurpation of the throne. Henry's claim to the crown was extremely shaky, so it was vital for him to destroy Richard's reputation. Historians writing during the Tudor reign presented a view of history which legitimised and justified Henry's overthrow of Richard by portraying him as an evil monster, an usurper with no legal claim to the throne, hated by his people. The ascent of Henry, on the other hand, is portrayed as ushering in a time of peace and prosperity after the horror of the previous decades of unrest and civil war. Exactly the reverse was true.

In 1952, the mystery writer Josephine Tey wrote a fascinating detective novel, **Daughter of time**, in which Superintendent John Grant, confined to bed with a broken ankle, investigates the mystery of the murder of the little princes by applying police methods to the problem. He unravels this tissue of lies, exposing Henry for an idle opportunist, displaying the very characteristics that have been imputed to Richard - and completely exonerates Richard, who emerges, in Grant's version, as a perfectly honourable man of the most profound good sense.

He sets about his investigation into the murder of the two princes in a methodical, policemanly fashion, examining the known facts and asking some pertinent questions. First he examines the movements of all the interested parties following Edward's death. Far from hustling the young princes off to the Tower as Shakespeare, Holinshed and More would have us believe, he puts down a rebellion threatened by the Queen's brother, and then sets about preparing for the young king's coronation.

These preparations are interrupted by a bombshell dropped by one Robert Stillington, Bishop of Bath. Shortly before the coronation he announces at a meeting of the Council, that he had married Edward VI to Lady Eleanor Butler, thus nullifying Edward's later marriage to Elizabeth Woodville, mother of the young princes, and making them illegitimate, and making Richard, the King's brother, the rightful heir. This announcement was accepted by Parliament, which passed an Act, the *Titulus Regius*, awarding the crown to Richard. He was, therefore, the legitimate king, and had no need to do away with his nephews.

In fact, there is no evidence of a contemporary accusation against Richard for the boys' murder, or indeed any outcry against the supposedly missing princes. Moreover, Richard stayed on friendly terms with the boys' mother, which would hardly have been the case had he been suspected of murdering his nephews. In the Bill of Attainder brought by Henry against Richard after the Battle of Bosworth, accusing him of numerous crimes, there is no mention of the murder of the little princes, which would surely have been the most damning accusation he could bring against him. The rumours of the missing boys only began to spread early in Henry's reign, and it was only some twenty years later that the murderer, Tyrrel, 'confessed' to his crime, which he claimed had been ordered by Richard, now safely dead and unable to defend himself.

Grant next asks the obvious question: who stood to gain the most from the murder of the little princes? Even had he not been the legitimate king, the murder would actually not have benefited Richard in the least: there were nine other heirs in the house of



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York who would have taken precedence over him: Edward's children, the two offspring of his brother George, and the son of his sister, Elizabeth. He appears to have made no move at all against any of these potential rivals standing in the path of his supposed ambition - on the contrary, he contributed generously towards their upkeep and wellbeing.

In contrast, the case against Henry is positively damning. He had absolutely no claim to the throne - Richard had named Warwick, son of his brother George, as his heir. Henry had most to lose by the continued existence of the young princes. Eighteen months after his succession, he deprived Edward's widow Elizabeth of her living, packing her off to a nunnery, and the rest of the legitimate heirs were confined and quietly done away with.

Looking at the reigns of the two monarchs give us a clue to their characters. Richard was a brave and competent soldier, who remained loyal to his brother Edward throughout the wars of the Roses. He proved himself to be an able and sensible administrator, who ruled wisely and justly, introducing some sensible reforms, and whose only parliament was the most liberal and progressive on record. He was also magnanimous and merciful toward those who had plotted against him, and provided generously for all his relatives.

While there is little evidence of the insatiable greed attributed to Richard, this is not the case with Henry. His reign is chiefly remembered for the introduction of Morton's Fork, named after the same John Morton on whose account of events Thomas More based his history. It has come to mean, in bridge terms, a manoeuvre in which

the defender has two options, both doomed to failure. It refers to Morton's methods of extracting revenue from London merchants. If the merchant lived ostentatiously, he was assumed to have enough spare income to donate generously to the king's coffers. If, on the other hand, he lived parsimoniously, it was assumed that he had vast savings stashed away, and could therefore contribute.

There is also no evidence that Richard had any physical deformity. This was another myth which first appeared in More's account. The portrait of Richard, which hangs in the National Gallery, shows a face full of nobility and suffering. Henry, in contrast, is reputed to have been somewhat unprepossessing in appearance, with thin, wispy hair.

According to Al Pacino, Richard III is Shakespeare's most popular play, performed even more often than Hamlet. Several films have been made of it, including one directed by Laurence Olivier, who also plays Richard, and another directed by Al Pacino, also playing the lead, and one with Ian McKellen. In the 1980s the South African actor Anthony Sher, playing Richard's supposed deformity for all it was worth, delivered a masterly performance in the title role in an acclaimed Royal Shakespeare Company production of the play. Sher gives a fascinating account of this in his autobiography **The year of the King**. This is evidence of the power of Shakespeare's writing. Despite all this overwhelming proof to the contrary, the Richard myth persists, and is almost universally accepted as gospel, clung to and perpetuated, even by those who should know better.