

# HISTRIONIC HISTORY:

## Theatricality and Historiography in Shakespeare's *Richard III*



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*This article focuses on Shakespeare's history drama Richard III, and investigates the ambiguous intersections between early modern historiography and aesthetics expressed in the play's use of theatrical and metatheatrical language. I examine how Shakespeare sought to address and question contemporary, ideologically charged representations of history with an analysis of the characters of Richard and Richmond, and the overarching theme of theatrical performance. By employing this strategy, it was possible for Shakespeare to represent the controversial character of Richard undogmatically while intervening in and questioning contemporary discussions of historical verisimilitude.*

Historians have long acknowledged the importance of the early modern history play in the development of popular historical consciousness.<sup>1</sup> This is particularly true of England, where the history play achieved great commercial and artistic success throughout the 1590s. The Shakespearean history play has attracted by far the most attention from cultural and literary historians, and is often seen as the archetype of the genre. *The tragedie of kinge RICHARD the THIRD with the death of the Duke of CLARENCE*, or simply *Richard III*, is probably one of the most frequently performed of Shakespeare's history plays. The play dramatizes the usurpation and short-lived reign of the infamous, hunchbacked Richard III – the last of the Plantagenet kings, who had ruled England since 1154 – his ultimate downfall, and the rise of Richmond, the future king Henry VII and founder of the Tudor dynasty. To the Elizabethan public, there was no monarch in recent history with such a dark reputation as Richard III: usurpation, tyranny, fratricide, and even incest were among his many alleged crimes, and a legacy of cunning dissimulation and cynical Machiavellianism had clung to him since his early biographers' descriptions of him. From the viewpoint of Tudor historians such as Edward Hall or Raphael Holinshed, Richard's reign and defeat could be read only as divine providence: Richard was England's punishment for Richard II's deposition, and the Tudors represented the restoration of legitimate authority.

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, see Ribner 1957 or Levy 1967.

Although scholars have commented on the many ironic disruptions of Tudor ideology at work in *Richard III*, the relationship between theatricality, ideology, and the play's historiography has not yet been satisfactorily addressed. Shakespeare's Richard is a remarkably theatrical creation – simultaneously captivating and horrific. *Richard III*'s reliance on theatricality and metatheatrical rhetoric calls attention to the deeply ambiguous and central intersections of history, Tudor ideology, and theatrical representation: by constantly referring to the theatre, *Richard III* exposes the function of ideology in historical representations. Beginning with a brief presentation of the various ways the historiography of Shakespeare's first tetralogy has been conceptualized, I examine the convergence of early modern historiography, ideology, and aesthetics expressed in *Richard III*'s use of theatrical and metatheatrical rhetoric. Focusing on two scenes in particular – Richard and Buckingham's play-within-the-play and Richmond's accession speech – this article argues that Shakespeare uses theatricality in order to question contemporary ideological representations of history.

Shakespeare's history plays have been the object of extensive interest to literary and cultural historians. One of the main points of contention among scholars relates to the ideological foundations of Shakespeare's historiography. Put simply, the central question is whether the Shakespearean history play is propagandistic in its representation of English history, or whether it engages more critically with contemporary political questions. The first viewpoint is often attributed to the 'Old Historicism' of E.M.W. Tillyard, and the latter is often attributed to the New Historicism of Stephen Greenblatt, Johnathan Dollimore, and others.<sup>2</sup> Tillyard argues that Shakespeare follows and confirms the dominant Tudor ideology of his time, often referred to later as the Tudor myth.<sup>3</sup> According to this view, history is a grand, providential narrative, describing the loss of legitimate authority with Henry IV's deposition of Richard II, the tumultuous period of civil wars, and the ultimate rise of the Tudor dynasty with Henry VII's defeat of Richard III in 1485. In this interpretative framework, the Wars of the Roses and the rise of the monstrous Richard III are seen as God's punishment of England. The rise of the Tudors is then framed as a return to order and legitimate authority. Thus, the Tudor myth proposes a view of history which is strongly influenced by divine guidance and providence: history is essentially predestined, and historical persons act in accordance with the greater divine framework.

From the 1960s onwards, literary historians have questioned Shakespeare's conformity with the Tudor myth and Tudor ideology, and

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<sup>2</sup> For instance Greenblatt 1988 and Dollimore 1989.

<sup>3</sup> See Tillyard 1944, especially 320–21. Ribner agrees with Tillyard in his assessment of the second tetralogy, see Ribner 1957, 151.

Tillyard's reading of the Shakespearean history plays has been thoroughly criticized. Literary historians have since praised the Shakespearean history play for its complex, undogmatic, critical, humanistic, and/or subversive historiography.<sup>4</sup> However, most scholarship has focused on the second tetralogy (i.e. *Richard II*, *Henry IV part 1 & 2*, and *Henry V*), leaving the first tetralogy (i.e. *Henry VI part 1, 2, & 3* and *Richard III*) less explored. One of the most important studies of Shakespeare's history plays remains Phyllis Rackin's seminal *Stages of History* (1990). Here, Rackin argues for the presence of what she terms a 'Machiavellian view' of historical causation at work in Shakespeare's history plays. According to Rackin, Machiavellian history is a view of historical causation which emphasises human agency and individuals' ability to shape and control the unfolding of history.<sup>5</sup> The Machiavellian understanding of history is opposed to the theological and providential historical thinking of the Medieval period. Rackin claims that the *Henry VI* plays epitomise the Machiavellian philosophy of history in the Shakespearean canon, since the three plays dramatize the disintegration of chivalry, feudalism, and belief in a divine order. Consequentially, this leads to a break with providentialism. However, Rackin is rather dismissive of *Richard III*, claiming that:

*Richard III* offers a neat, conventional resolution to the problem of historical causation. All the cards have been stacked in advance, and the entire play reads like a lesson in providential history.<sup>6</sup>

It is hard to deny the presence and importance of providence and divine retribution in the rhetoric and dramaturgy of *Richard III*, which, understandably, has led many scholars to conclude that the play's approach to history and historiography was swayed by Tudor ideology. However, the sharp division between apologetic and propagandistic, on the one hand, and critical and/or subversive, on the other, that characterises critical approaches to Shakespeare's history drama, is damaging to a nuanced understanding of *Richard III*. In fact, *Richard III* is a play that is neither exclusively propagandistic nor critical/subversive: it is both, simultaneously. I intend to reveal some of the play's dynamics and ambiguities.

### **Representing Richard: Historical and literary sources**

Many scholars agree that the main purpose and use of history in early modern England was to produce *exempla*, morally exemplary and instructive tales for

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<sup>4</sup> For instance, see Greenblatt 1988, Leggat 1988, Watson 1990, Rackin 1991, Pugliatti 1996, Walsh 2009, Parvini 2012, and Bezio 2015.

<sup>5</sup> See Rackin 1990, especially 40–85.

<sup>6</sup> Rackin 1990, 63–64.

the reader to either imitate or oppose.<sup>7</sup> As the Tudor villain *par excellence*, Richard III's story was a rich source for illustrating the dangers of corrupt rule and tyrannical power. The two most important early Tudor chronicles of the reign and life of Richard III were Polydore Vergil's *Anglica Historia*<sup>8</sup> and Sir Thomas More's *History of Richard III*.<sup>9</sup> Although the largely providential narrative of the *Historia* was undoubtedly highly influential,<sup>10</sup> More's *History* had the more substantial effect on Shakespeare.<sup>11</sup> More writes that Richard was "little of stature, ill-featured of limbs, crook-backed, his left shoulder much higher than his right, hard-favoured of visage", and his birth was no less bizarre, as "he came into the world with the feet forward (as men be borne outward) and, as the fame runneth, also not untoothed...".<sup>12</sup> Short, ugly, hunch-backed, deformed; in short, Richard was born a monster. These physical deformities were later copied by Hall and Holinshed,<sup>13</sup> and incorporated into their own works.<sup>14</sup> Shakespeare frequently mirrors this physical description of Richard, having various characters describe him as a

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<sup>7</sup> See Pugliatti 1996. It is worth noting that English history writing in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries was in no way a homogenous genre; instead, it was characterized by many different subgenres, intellectual currents, and historiographic schools – for instance humanistic, antiquarian, and providential – whose methodologies were very different. See Levy 1967, Kamps 2003, and Woolf 2005 for lengthier discussions of early modern English historiography and its intellectual origins. See Grafton 2007 and Schiffmann 2011 for a European perspective.

<sup>8</sup> The *Historia* was commissioned by Henry VII, and the first version was finished between 1512 and 1513, but not published until 1534. It was revised and expanded in two later editions that were published in 1546 and 1555.

<sup>9</sup> More wrote two versions of the *History*, one in English and one in Latin. The *History* was probably composed between 1512 and 1519, but for unknown it reasons remained unfinished at the time of More's death in 1535.

<sup>10</sup> Although Vergil's *Historia* does indeed promote a providential view of history, Hanham 1975 argues against the tendency to discredit Vergil as a Tudor propagandist. See Hanham 1975, 126–29.

<sup>11</sup> For a detailed study of the similarities, parallels, and differences between Shakespeare's and More's conceptions of Richard, see Hallett & Hallett 2011.

<sup>12</sup> More 2005, 10.

<sup>13</sup> Here, I refer to Edward Hall's *The Union of the Two Noble and Illustre Families of Lancastre and Yorke* (1548), whose title implies its strong providential tendencies, and Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland* (1577). As is commonly known, these two works were the prime sources for Shakespeare's history plays. Anderson also notes Richard Grafton's *Abridgement of the Chronicles of England* (1563) and John Stow's *Annales, or a Generale Chronicle of England from Brute until the present yeare of Christ 1580* (1580) as another possible source. See Anderson 1984, 110. For an exhaustive study of the sources of Shakespeare's early history plays, see Goy-Blanquet 2003.

<sup>14</sup> Pugliatti states that "For the Tudor historian, history-writing was not the outcome of enquiry; rather, it almost implied the obligation not to enquire further once what was taken to be the acceptable tradition was established. Almost invariably, writing about history was considered a part of re-writing and telling a matter of re-telling." Pugliatti 1996, 32.

“foul lump of deformity”,<sup>15</sup> an “elvish-marked, abortive, rooting hog”, and as a “slave of nature and the son of hell”.<sup>16</sup> The strange circumstances of Richard’s birth described by More are also paraphrased in *Henry VI, part 3* by Richard himself:

I came into the world with my legs forward.  
...  
The midwife wondered and the women cried,  
‘O, Jesus bless us, he is born with teeth!’  
And so I was, which plainly signified  
That I should snarl, and bite and play the dog.  
Then, since the heavens that have shaped my body so,  
Let hell *make* crook’d my mind to answer it.<sup>17</sup>

Here, Richard explicitly makes clear what is implicit in More’s description of his monstrous birth and physical deformities: that his deformity and evil nature are directly linked.<sup>18</sup> This connection between his physical and psychosocial deformity may also be traced back to More’s *History*. Moreover, Richard presents himself as morally determined by his deformity, yet paradoxically free enough to choose evil (“let hell *make* crook’d my mind to answer it”).<sup>19</sup> Concerning Richard’s psychological nature, More writes:

He was close and secret, a deep dissimuler: lowly of countenance,  
arrogant of heart; outwardly companable where he inwardly hated, not  
letting to kiss whom he thought to kill; dispiteous and cruel, not for

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<sup>15</sup> *Richard III* 1.2.57.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* 1.3.227, 1.3.229.

<sup>17</sup> *Henry VI, part 3* 5.6.71–79, emphasis added.

<sup>18</sup> This description is essentially an example of the body politic of the medieval and renaissance periods, which Ernst Kantorowicz has famously analysed. See Kantorowicz 1997. Marjorie Garber argues that Richard’s deformity is a reflection and metahistorical commentary on the distortive process of the writing of history: “Richard is not only deformed, his deformity is itself a deformation. His twisted and misshapen body encodes the whole strategy of history as a necessary deforming and *unforming* – with the object of *reforming* – the past. ... Created by a similar process of ideological and polemical distortion, Richard’s deformity is a figment of rhetoric, a figure of abuse, a catachresis masquerading as metaphor.” See Garber 1987 35, 36.

<sup>19</sup> In his 1916 essay, titled “Some Character-Types Met with in Psychoanalytic Work”, Freud defines a personality type he calls ‘the exceptions’. The exception is a person who, owing to a traumatic event in early childhood, does not feel that he or she is bound by the same moral constraints that apply to others. As an example of this personality type, Freud mentions Richard, stating that he is an “enormous magnification of something we find in ourselves as well. We all think we have reason to reproach Nature and our destiny for congenital and infantile disadvantages; we all demand reparation for early wounds to our narcissism, our self-love”. Freud 1957, 314. Freud’s essay presents some valuable insights into the psychological mechanism of Richard, but also gives interesting conclusions concerning the identification dynamic at work between Richard and the audience.

evil will always, but offer for ambition, and either for the surety or increase of his estate. Friend and foe was much what indifferent: where his advantage grew, he spared no man's death whose life withstood his purpose.<sup>20</sup>

The description of Richard as a dissembling, ambitious, and cruel king proved very enduring, and it gained further traction over time. One of the reasons for this is the connection between Richard, deceit, and dissimulation. The concept of dissimulation was politically and ethically problematic, and it occupied a central position in many early modern historiographies, political theories, and history plays.<sup>21</sup> Though this was the case in most of Europe, it was especially present in Elizabethan England, where religious unrest and political conspiracies posed a continuous threat to the country's security and stability. Many of the negative responses to the use of dissimulation derive from its association with the writings of, or rather, with the popular understanding of, the Italian humanist and political thinker, Niccolò Machiavelli.<sup>22</sup> Chapter 28 of the herostratically famous *The Prince (Il principe)*,

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<sup>20</sup> More 2005, 12.

<sup>21</sup> The word *dissimulation* signifies a specific form of deception, in which an individual conceals his or her thoughts or motives from others by remaining silent, by telling half-truths, or speaking or acting hypocritically. The word is closely related to 'simulation', which indicated a more devious or sinister act of deception, in which one directly and consciously lied about, or misrepresented oneself. However, the two words were often used interchangeably or synonymously during the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. In the essay *On Simulation and Dissimulation*, from the 1625 edition of the *Essays*, Francis Bacon distinguishes among "three degrees of this hiding and veiling of a man's self": secrecy, dissimulation, and simulation – the most problematic of the three, since it seeks to hide "a mind that hath some main faults...". In his treatment of the concepts, Bacon warns about the consequences of a reputation for dishonesty, but he nevertheless acknowledges the necessity of secrecy: "The best composition and temperature is to have openness in fame and opinion; secrecy in habit; dissimulation in seasonable use; and a power to feign, if there be no remedy." See Bacon 1962, 17, 18, 19. It is also necessary to note that the use of dissimulation was in no way limited to the political sphere. As a social practice, dissimulation was widely practised by various religious minorities during the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries as a way of avoiding persecution, see Zagorin 1990. Dissimulation was also a useful concept for strategic self-representation, as a way of avoiding oppressive political power, see Snyder 2009 and Cavaillé 2002.

<sup>22</sup> The early reception of Machiavelli's work is very extensive and complex and thus has been the object of numerous volumes of scholarly work. In England and France, Machiavelli was initially met with hostility and condemned as irreligious and amoral. However, Machiavelli had a significant number of defenders in England. Sir Richard Moryson referred frequently to Machiavelli in his polemical pamphlets of the 1530s, defending the divorce of Henry VIII and the royal supremacy of the Church, while simultaneously attacking the Pilgrimage of Grace, a popular insurrection in October of 1536, and condemning Cardinal Reginald Pole as a traitor. Bishop John Jewel also understood Machiavelli as an anti-papal historian. See Anglo 2005, 90, 329–30. Many historians have also noted the importance of Machiavellian concepts in English republicanism, especially during the Civil War and the

published in 1532, proved especially provocative and problematic. In a famous and oft-quoted passage, Machiavelli describes the need for a prince to know the art of dissimulation:

Therefore, a prudent ruler cannot keep his word, nor should he, when such fidelity would damage him, and when the reasons that made him promise are no longer relevant. [...] But foxiness should be well concealed: one must be a great feigner and dissembler. And men are so naive, and so much dominated by immediate needs, that a skillful deceiver always finds plenty of people who will let themselves be deceived.<sup>23</sup>

Machiavelli's political theories were often associated with hypocrisy, deceit, atheism, or at least irreligion, and the notion that 'the end justifies the means'. Reductive as this understanding is, it became very influential, especially in the wake of the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre, in 1572.<sup>24</sup> This event, where between 5,000 and 30,000 French Huguenots were killed, was later interpreted as a direct result of the influence of political Machiavellianism, and was both condoned and reviled by writers of the period.<sup>25</sup> Arguably the most famous and influential of the condemnations of Machiavelli is Innocent Gentillet's work, commonly known as the *Anti-Machiavel* of 1576. This work had a great impact on the perception of Machiavelli in England.

In Elizabethan England, Machiavelli quickly became a theatrical stock character, known as the Machiavel. One can only think of Christopher Marlowe's prologue to *The Jew of Malta*, which is spoken by a character named Machiavel. Looking at the character of Richard III, it is clear that Shakespeare was indebted to this tradition of popular, melodramatic Machiavellianism.<sup>26</sup> Shakespeare's Richard even identifies directly with the

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Interregnum. See Pocock 1975, Kahn 1994, and Sullivan 2004. For a recent revisionist reading of Machiavelli's ethical philosophy, see Brenner 2009.

<sup>23</sup> Machiavelli 2003, 62.

<sup>24</sup> The massacre caused an international crisis, and later became the subject of Christopher Marlowe's history play, *The Massacre of Paris* (1593), and Nathaniel Lee's play of the same name (1689).

<sup>25</sup> According to popular legend, Philip II of Spain laughed for the only time in known history when he was told the news.

<sup>26</sup> It is unclear to what extent Shakespeare, or indeed any of the other dramatists of the period, had actually read Machiavelli. The first English translation of Machiavelli's *The Prince* was not published until 1640. However, a French translation from 1553 did exist, and it is known that the printer John Wolfe brought an Italian edition of *Il principe* to England in 1584. Thus, it seems plausible that a manuscript translation of the work was circulated in London at the time. Roe 2002 argues that one of the defining features of the Shakespearean history plays is that their representation of politics essentially draws on Machiavellian notions. Roe also notes that Shakespeare's treatment of politics became more and more Machiavellian as time went by.

stage Machiavel, claiming he “can set the murderous Machiavel to school”, in *Henry VI – part 3*.<sup>27</sup> However, Richard also owes a great deal to the Vice character from the Medieval allegorical morality play.<sup>28</sup> The Vice was a character who, like Richard, was characterized by his rhetorical brilliance, his equivocation, and his diabolical nature.<sup>29</sup> The Vice was also a humorous, even comedic character, characterized by a “formal incongruity between the serious and the comic”, which destabilizes static meanings.<sup>30</sup> Thus, Shakespeare’s Richard presents himself as a combination of the Machiavel and the Vice – a plotting, irreligious, dissembling trickster whose mingling of theatrical genres undermines the seriousness of historical representation. But he is also highly conscious of his theatrical genesis. Richard also appeared frequently in other forms of popular entertainment: he was the object of ballads, satires, sermons, and, most significantly for our purposes, in several plays. At least two other plays about Richard III were written and performed before Shakespeare’s: Thomas Legge’s Latin *Richardus Tertius*, performed at St. John’s College, Cambridge, in 1580, and the anonymous *The True Tragedy of Richard III*, performed by the Queen’s Men and published in 1594. Legge’s play was not published until much later, and the similarities between *Richard III* and *The True Tragedy of Richard III* are limited.<sup>31</sup> Richard was also featured in the 1559 edition of the *Mirror for Magistrates*, where his portrayal follows the general outline of a murderous, villainous tyrant whose downfall and death were God’s just punishment for his wickedness, as laid out in the chronicles.

### Stage plays played upon scaffolds

Thus, Shakespeare inherited a highly negative and ideological perception of Richard and of English history in which the notion of divine providence plays a central and fundamental role. *Richard III* was probably written in 1593, and dramatizes events which took place between 1483 and 1485. The play tells the story of the rise of Richard, Duke of Gloucester, his crimes, and his ultimate defeat at the Battle of Bosworth Field. One of the most characteristic features of Shakespeare’s Richard, and perhaps his most original contribution to the historiography of the king, is Richard’s histrionic personality and the

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<sup>27</sup> See *3H6* 3.2.16.

<sup>28</sup> *RIII* 3.1.82–83.

<sup>29</sup> See Spivack 1958.

<sup>30</sup> Weinman & Bruster 2008, 26–27.

<sup>31</sup> However, Shakespeare did likely know *The True Tragedy*, and some lines in *Richard III* do indeed mirror *The True Tragedy*, most notably the famous “A horse, a horse, my kingdom for a horse!”, but it is in *Hamlet* that the most allusions to the anonymous *True Tragedy* occur. See Walsh 2009. For an interesting analysis of the differences between the accession of Henry VII in *The True Tragedy* and *Richard III*, see Kewes 2011.



continuous identification between Richard, the theatre, actors, and acting. Many commentators, critics, and literary historians have noted this identification, but few have examined it in relation to the play's historiography.

Besides Richard's identification with the Machiavel and the Vice, he presents himself as an actor. In *Henry VI – part 3*, Richard famously boasts of his acting abilities, claiming that he “can add colours to the chameleon”, and “Change shapes with Proteus for advantages”.<sup>32</sup> This identification continues in *Richard III*, and develops further historical significance as Richard takes centre stage, and delivers one of the most famous soliloquies in the Shakespearean *œuvre*. After having given a brief, ironic account of England's new-found peace, Richard voices his growing dissatisfaction with the times and his isolation:

And therefore, since I cannot prove a lover  
To entertain these fair well-spoken days,  
I am determined to prove a villain  
And hate the idle pleasures of these days.  
Plots have I laid, inductions dangerous,  
By drunken prophecies, libels and dreams,  
To set my brother Clarence and the King  
In deadly hate, the one against the other;<sup>33</sup>

Lamenting his physical deformities, Richard addresses the audience directly, and informs them of his diabolical plans, making them both his confidantes and co-conspirators. This very self-conscious theatrical dynamic between Richard and the audience forms the basis of much of the play's irony and comedy, as we will later see. It is also important to note that Richard uses theatrical terms to describe his plans – both *plots* and *inductions* have strong literary and theatrical connotations. The line, “determined to prove a villain” may be read in two ways. It may be read as Richard being predestined, by divine providence, to become the villain – a reading that is strongly supported by the importance of curses, prophecies, and dreams throughout the play. This understanding is also in line with official Tudor ideology, which saw Richard as an illegitimate king whose historical role was to be defeated by Richmond. From this perspective, Richard is indeed *determined* by his physical deformities to be villainous, to be the scourge of England, and he seems to accept his historical role. From this perspective, Richard's moral culpability is significantly downplayed, as he is only acting according to his predestined role. In other words, he has no choice but to be “subtle, false and

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<sup>32</sup> *3H6* 3.2.191–92.

<sup>33</sup> *RIII* 1.1.28–35.

treacherous”,<sup>34</sup> thus denying himself any real historical agency. However, the word *determined* may also mean that Richard has chosen to become the villain, of his own free will. This reading of the lines emphasises the notion of *acting* or *playing*, and by using *prophecies* and *dreams*, Richard very effectively manipulates providential signs to serve his own means. However, these two readings are not mutually exclusive, but they share Richard’s transparency with respect to the audience, and his awareness of himself as a historical and theatrical construct and character.

The motif of theatricality is also central to More’s *History*. Shortly after Richard’s accession, the citizens of London meet and reflect on recent political events.<sup>35</sup> The immediate context is an episode at Baynard Castle, where Richard has successfully manipulated the mayor of London and the city’s aldermen into believing that he is worthy of being king. The entire episode is, of course, a clever deception, orchestrated by Richard and his accomplice, the Duke of Buckingham, to make Richard appear to be a pious, noble duke with no ambitions for power. As the readers of the *History* know very well, this is an obvious deception, as Richard has proven himself to be neither pious nor noble. In fact, this entire scene is the conclusion of Richard’s master plan to usurp the throne from his nephew, the young prince Edward, who Richard has declared illegitimate. Ultimately, Richard’s performance is successful, and he, ostentatiously reluctant, agrees to be king. When the citizens meet the following day, they describe Richard’s accession to the throne by comparing it to a play:

And in a stage play all the people know right well that he that playeth the sowdaine is percase a sowter. Yet if one should can so little good to show out of season what acquaintance he hath with him, and call him by his own name while he standeth in his majesty, one of his tormentors might hap to break his head, and worthy, for marring of the play. And so they said that these matters be kings’ games, as it were, stage plays, and for the most part played upon scaffolds, in which poor men be but the on-lookers. And they that wise be, will meddle no further. For they that sometimes step up and play with them, when they cannot play their parts, they disorder the play, and do themself no good.<sup>36</sup>

More’s citizens are very perceptive and aware of the theatrical dimensions of power: they essentially describe politics as a *theatrum mundi*, a theatrical performance of power, in which a shoemaker (‘sowter’) might play the role

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid. 1.1.37.

<sup>35</sup> It has been suggested that this incident was Shakespeare’s inspiration for *Richard III*. See Hallett & Hallett 2011.

<sup>36</sup> More 2005, 94–95. Many commentators have noted the dramatic elements of More’s *History*. See Hanham 1975, Anderson 1984, Goy-Blanquet 2003, and Hallett & Hallett 2011.

of the sultan ('sowdaine'). Though the political game is remarkably transparent to the citizens, they are well aware of the potential dangers of disrupting the 'kings' games'. This knowledge reduces the citizens to passive 'spectator-subjects',<sup>37</sup> unable to do anything about the situation. Thus, More's *History* presents a particularly bleak view of politics that we also find in Shakespeare's treatment of the incident. In *Richard III*, Shakespeare chooses to translate More's theatrical metaphor into a literal performance, as he presents the entire situation as a spontaneous play-within-a-play.<sup>38</sup> This scene is the dramatic turning point of *Richard III*, since it marks the beginning of Richard's reign, and his ultimate downfall. Immediately before the mayor and the citizens arrive, Buckingham quickly devises a plan that involves Richard playing a pious ascetic man:

The Mayor is here at hand. Intend some fear.  
Be not you spoke with but by mighty suit;  
And look you get a prayer book in your hand,  
And stand between two churchmen, good my lord,  
For on that ground I'll make a holy descant.  
And be not easily won to our requests;  
Play the maid's part: still answer nay, and take it.<sup>39</sup>

One cannot help but be amused and amazed by Richard and Buckingham's resourcefulness, and their improvised theatrical manoeuvres that follow. In this quotation, we again find an emphasis on acting and theatrical language (Richard must "Play the maid's part"). Whether or not their plan succeeds depends entirely on their performance and their abilities as actors. When the mayor and the citizens of London arrive at the castle, they find Richard absent. According to Catesby, Richard is "Divinely bent to meditation",<sup>40</sup> and the citizens are urged to return the following day. Stressing the urgency of the matter, Buckingham convinces Catesby to disturb Richard, who soon after appears before the mayor, the citizens, and the audience "*aloft, between two*

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<sup>37</sup> Hodgdon 1991, 100.

<sup>38</sup> A point of contention among Shakespeare scholars is whether Richard's performance and acting abilities actually fool anyone. Watson 1990 argues that Richard's acting cannot be considered convincing: "What attracts us to Richard is less his consummate skill as an actor than his audacity and his delight in villainy...". By stressing Richard's nerve and *sprezzatura*, I believe Watson downplays the fact that Richard's acting abilities, although they do not fool everyone, do in fact deceive most of the other characters. See Hallett & Hallett 2011 for a comparison of More and Shakespeare's portrayal of the scene at Baynard Castle. Roe examines Richard's audacity by comparing it to Machiavelli's concepts of *virtù* and *virtuoso*. See Roe 2002, 17–21.

<sup>39</sup> *RIII* 3.7.44–50.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.* 3.7.61.

*Bishops*”,<sup>41</sup> as the stage direction says, with a prayer book in his hands, like a theatrical prop. Buckingham urges Richard to claim the throne, since Edward IV’s children have been declared illegitimate – a lie which Richard himself had propagated. Just like More’s description of the scene, Richard is reluctant and repeatedly rejects Buckingham’s pleas, claiming he is neither willing nor able to become king. However, towards the end of the scene, Richard finally gives in, and agrees to become king.

This scene illustrates the full power of Richard’s dissimulation and its relationship to the theatre. Moreover, the audience cannot help but be amused by Richard’s and Buckingham’s gambit, and their successful manipulation of the mayor and the aldermen. The comedic effects of this play-within-the-play derive from the ironic, asymmetric relationship between what the audience know about Richard (that he is *not* a peaceful, pious man with no ambitions to become king), and what the citizens, the audience of the play-within-the-play, know about him. Thus, in this scene, Richard becomes the cunning, dissembling Machiavel and Vice character of the Elizabethan stage, blurring the lines between the serious and the comedic. The effect of this scene is deeply ambiguous. On the one hand, the scene enforces the view of Richard as cynical, dissembling, and Machiavellian, but when we consider the acting advice that Richard and Buckingham exchanged a few scenes earlier, the effects of the play-within-the-play are seen in a different light.

RICHARD

Come, cousin, canst thou quake and change thy colour,  
Murder thy breath in middle of a word,  
And then again begin, and stop again,  
As if thou were distraught and mad with terror?

BUCKINGHAM

Tut, I can counterfeit the deep tragedian,  
Speak, and look back, and pry on every side,  
Tremble and start wagging of a straw,  
Intending deep suspicion. Ghastly looks  
Are at my service, like enforced smiles,  
An both are ready in their offices,  
At any time to grace my stratagems.<sup>42</sup>

Recalling the praise of his own acting abilities in *Henry VI – part 3*, Richard assumes the role of the director, carefully instructing Buckingham on how to manipulate and deceive. In describing their acting techniques, both Richard and Bucking describe excessive body language (“quake and change thy

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid. 3.7.93, SD.

<sup>42</sup> *RIII* 3.5.1–11.

colour”, “Tremble and start wagging of a straw”, “Ghastly looks”) and violent emotional expressions (“Murder thy breath... As if thou were distraught and mad with terror?”, “counterfeit the deep tragedian”, “Speak, and look back, and pry on every side”) as essential elements of acting convincingly. However, the subtlety of their acting must be seriously questioned. Are the two plotters actually describing convincing emotions and acting techniques, or are they describing the histrionics of melodramatic overacting? Read in conjunction with the hyperbolic and melodramatic acting advice that Richard and Buckingham exchange, the play-within-the-play seems to be a self-conscious theatrical moment, ironically referring to the theatre’s role in reconstructing and reconfiguring history, underscoring the theatre’s function as a co-creator of ideology. Again, it is important to emphasise that the theatrics of the play-within-the-play both confirm Tudor ideology and also question it through the ambiguity of metatheatrical language.

### Playing with providence

As noted earlier, the theme of providence plays a prominent part in *Richard III* and, to a great extent, determines the ways in which characters relate to Richard. Although this is true of many characters, it is expressed most clearly in the character of Queen Margaret, the widow of Henry VI. From her first appearance in act 1 scene 3, Margaret continuously invokes God’s retribution on Richard for being responsible of the death of her husband and son. However, as Donald G. Watson makes clear, Margaret’s belief in divine justice is primarily motivated by egoistical reasons and her burning desire for revenge:

Can one entertain the concept of a God who fulfils Margaret’s curses or who advances His schemes for the Tudor hegemony through the deaths of young Edward and York? What Shakespeare has accomplished is not the discrediting of the providential ritual of Edward Hall and the other chroniclers, but by displacing this view on to a character who can by no means claim any authority, he makes us question the reductiveness of any simplistic accounting procedure.<sup>43</sup>

The displacement of providence that Watson finds in *Richard III* is especially significant towards the end of the play. On the night before the decisive Battle of Bosworth Fields, Richard and Richmond set up camp on opposite ends of the stage, splitting the stage into two symmetrical spaces.<sup>44</sup> In their tents, Richmond and Richard plan their strategies and go to sleep. During the night,

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<sup>43</sup> Watson 1990, 121.

<sup>44</sup> For a detailed analysis of the significance of vertical and horizontal symmetry in Shakespeare’s history plays, see Dillon 2012.

the two are visited by ghosts of the people Richard has killed: Prince Edward, Henry VI, Clarence, Rivers, Grey, Vaughan, the two princes in the Tower, Hastings, Lady Anne, and Buckingham (in that order). Some of the murders occur in *Richard III*, whereas others – Prince Edward and Henry VI – take place in *Henry VI – part 3*. One by one, the ghosts confront Richard and curse him, before turning to Richmond, to cheer him on. Brian Walsh has argued very convincingly that this scene “[exemplifies] the human agency that goes into the construction of historical knowledge”, as the stage is split into two halves right before the audience, exposing the human activity that goes into theatrical representations of the history.<sup>45</sup> The ghosts’ presence alludes to theatrical traditions of the period, but also highlights “the dependence of historical consciousness on the cultural production of theater...”,<sup>46</sup> as the presence of the ghosts works as an intertextual reference to the three *Henry VI* plays. Walsh elaborates:

The ghosts highlight the constructedness of theater and so also foreground the fact that providential theories of history are themselves human constructions... By exposing the imaginative labor that goes into historical representation, Shakespeare suggests that providence itself is an effect that is created to appear innate to the Richard III story.<sup>47</sup>

Walsh’s analysis of the ghost scene is very convincing, and effectively draws attention to the question of theatricality in *Richard III* and its relationship to the historiography of the play. However, Walsh does not examine the ways in which providential history is questioned through the character of Richmond. This is particularly relevant with regard to Richmond’s final speech, as it is full of Tudor ideology.

Despite Richmond’s importance to the narrative and dramaturgy of the play, he is absent throughout most of the play, as he is in exile in France. In fact, Richmond does not appear until the final act of the play, and he is not mentioned before the first scene of act four. Richmond’s return from exile, appearance on the stage of English politics, and his almost messianic role in the play function like a *deus ex machina*; a dramatic choice that underscores the artificiality and constructed nature of providence.

Just as the play begins with Richard delivering a monologue, it ends with Richmond delivering a monologue. This creates a strong symmetry in the play’s dramatic structure, and it also brings out the contrasts between the two characters. But this symmetrical composition also creates a subtle

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<sup>45</sup> Walsh 2009, 158–59.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. 159.

<sup>47</sup> Walsh 2009, 161.

identification between the two characters *qua* the rhetorical and theatrical strategies they employ:

We will unite the white rose and the red.  
 Smile heaven upon this fair conjunction,  
 That long have frowned upon their enmity.  
 What traitor hears me and says not amen?  
 England hath long been mad and scarred herself:  
 The brother blindly shed the brother's blood;  
 The father rashly slaughtered his own son;  
 The son, compelled, been butcher to the sire.  
 All this divided York and Lancaster,  
 Divided in their dire division.  
 O, now let Richmond and Elizabeth,  
 The true succeeders of each royal house,  
 By God's fair ordinance conjoin together;  
 And let their heirs, God, if Thy will be so,  
 Enrich the time to come with smooth-faced peace,  
 With smiling plenty and fair prosperous days.  
 Abate the edge of traitors, gracious Lord,  
 That would reduce these bloody days again  
 And make poor England weep in streams of blood.  
 Let them not live to taste this land's increase  
 That would with treason wound this fair land's peace.  
 Now civil wounds are stopped; peace lives again.  
 That she may long live here, God say amen.<sup>48</sup>

Referring to the white rose of the House of York and the red rose of the House of Lancaster, Richmond delivers a rhetorically brilliant historical account of the devastation of the Wars of the Roses in language strongly infused with notions of divine providence, stressing the need for national reconciliation, order, and the re-establishment of legitimate authority. This is achieved by contrasting the chaos of the civil war of the past with the peace and prosperity that the future Tudor dynasty will bring about. Just as in the ghost scene, Richmond makes clear the link between historical representation and the theatre as he alludes to *Henry VI – part 3* 2.5. Here, a distraught Henry sits alone, contemplating the horrors of war, as a father who has killed his son and a son who has killed his father enter the stage, lamenting their respective fates. By referencing these lines from an earlier play, the role of the theatrical representation of history is highlighted again.<sup>49</sup> Even though the Elizabeth of this quote is Elizabeth of York, Richard's niece, the reference to Queen

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid. 5.5.19–41.

<sup>49</sup> Also see Walsh 2009.

Elizabeth I would have been fairly obvious to contemporary audiences. Thus, Richmond creates an ideological link between the historical past and Shakespeare's time, framing history as a teleological movement, moving towards the restoration of legitimacy with the Tudors.

Though Richmond presents himself as the true heir to the throne, his claim to the throne was, in fact, far from being self-evident. The son of Edmund Tudor – 1<sup>st</sup> Earl of Richmond and half-brother to Henry VI – and Margaret Beaufort – the daughter of John Beaufort, 1<sup>st</sup> Duke of Somerset and great-grandson to Edward III through his third son, John of Gaunt – Richmond's claim to the throne was dubious at best. The first years of his reign saw several contenders to the throne, insurrections, and pretenders, most notably Perkin Warbeck.<sup>50</sup> In fact, the Tudors never completely secured their position as the legitimate heirs to both the Lancastrian and Yorkist claims.<sup>51</sup> Consequently, Richmond had to construct his legitimacy through rhetorical stratagems, similar Richard's deceptions. By mimicking the language of a sermon ("Smile heaven upon this fair conjunction", "By God's fair ordinance conjoin together", "God, if Thy will be so", and "That she may long live here, God say amen"), Richmond delivers a cunning performance of power, creating a fiction of divine providence and of authority that simultaneously labels all dissent as dangerous ("What traitor hears me and says not amen?", "Abate the edge of traitors, gracious Lord", and "Let them not live to taste this land's increase/That would with treason wound this fair land's peace") and enforces the complete submission from his subjects. Through his appropriation of the symbolism of York and Lancaster (the white and red rose respectively), Richmond mimics the royal pageantry of the Tudors.<sup>52</sup> Richmond's final speech, although much subtler than Richard's histrionics, is no less theatrical, and consequently, he appears no less Machiavellian than Richard. Commenting on a wider tendency in Renaissance England, Stephen Greenblatt has stated that:

Power ... is not the ability to levy taxes or raise an army but the ability to enforce submission, manifested in those signs of secular worship – bowing, kneeling, kissing of rings – that European rulers increasingly insist upon. If these signs always have an air of fiction about them ... so much the better, because, as we have argued, one of the highest achievements of power is to impose fictions upon the world and one of

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<sup>50</sup> See Ridley 1998, 1–7. The story of Perkin Warbeck's rebellion was later dramatized by John Ford in the eponymous *Perkin Warbeck*, probably first performed in 1634. The play is one of the few Caroline history plays, and one of the last of the English renaissance.

<sup>51</sup> See Bezio 2015.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 25–26, 91.



its supreme pleasures is to enforce the acceptance of fictions that are known to be fictions.<sup>53</sup>

Richmond's strength as a ruler lies in his ability to impose such fictions on the audience, refashioning history as a grand, providential movement on which his authority depends. This is an aspect of Shakespeare's representation of Richmond which has not been sufficiently explored by scholars. Kristin M.S. Bezio notes that the Tudor 'orthodoxy' of Richmond derives from contemporary concerns about royal succession and the fear of another devastating civil war.<sup>54</sup> Focusing on the cathartic elements of Richard's defeat, Ralf Hertel argues that Richard's death "portrays the cleansing of the nation through the rituals of the theatre", and argues that *Richard III* is a cautionary tale about the dangers of partisan and factious politics.<sup>55</sup> Bezio's and Hertel's comments are correct, but they fail to acknowledge the ambiguity that permeates Richmond's speech. However, as I have demonstrated above, Richmond's self-representation as a divinely ordained ruler is a product of a metatheatrical strategy that Shakespeare employs through self-reflective rhetoric and theatrics.

The relationship between performance and theatricality, on the one hand, and royal absolutism and power, on the other, formed a cornerstone of the Tudor dynasty's construction of authority and legitimacy,<sup>56</sup> and in the 1570s and 1580s, efforts were made to stablish bureaucratic structures to monitor, censor, regulate, and control the commercial playhouses.<sup>57</sup> However, as Bezio points out, the theatre was a deeply ambiguous and potentially seditious place:

In short, while offering a site of governmental ideological dissemination, playhouses nevertheless implicitly threatened the very regime that sanctioned their authority, in large part because of the scope and impressionability of the audience contained within their walls, but also because of the potential of the plays themselves to influence that audience.<sup>58</sup>

Therefore, the theatre had to balance on a knife's edge between conforming to Tudor ideology and exploring potentially subversive subject matter. A useful concept for describing *Richard III's* engagement with Tudor ideology and historiography is Dirk Niefanger's notion of 'verdeckte Ambiguität'; or

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<sup>53</sup> Greenblatt 1980, 140–41; also quoted in Watson 1990.

<sup>54</sup> Bezio 2015, 92.

<sup>55</sup> Hertel 2014, 108, 114.

<sup>56</sup> For instance, see Bezio 2015, Watson 1990, and Greenblatt 1988.

<sup>57</sup> Watson 1990. See Lake 2016 49–58 for a succinct discussion of censorship in late-Elizabethan England.

<sup>58</sup> Bezio 2015, 52.

concealed ambiguity.<sup>59</sup> The idea is that the early modern drama could not openly contradict the official ideology and historiography of the state, owing to various factors such as censorship or state patronage.<sup>60</sup> Therefore, early modern drama had to address problems that were believed to be contrary to the official view through complex aesthetic strategies that were not immediately decipherable; they had to be articulated discreetly, or be concealed.<sup>61</sup> Although Niefanger describes the German context, his concept is equally true of the Elizabethan *fin de siècle*.

I suggest that we find a similar strategy in Shakespeare's representation of history in *Richard III*. The many cases where Richard identifies with actors, identifies with the Machiavel or the Vice, addresses the audience, and frames his deceptions as a play-within-the-play show the fundamental illusive character and 'constructedness' of history, to use Walsh's terms, and official state ideology. They are no more real than the fictions on stage. The same is true of Richmond's concluding speech. The play shows us that his reframing of history in providential terms, and his polarizing rhetorical strategies may be seriously questioned. Thus, Shakespeare lays bare the underbelly of Tudor ideology: that it is built on successful displays of legitimacy and power. Thus, to use Richard's own words, the play does indeed "moralize two meanings in one word",<sup>62</sup> as history is represented both in line with the Tudor ideology, and as a remarkably fictitious, theatrical construction. The metaphors of acting and theatrical language are well-suited to demonstrating this ambiguity. The actor is two things at once: in the moment of performance he is *both* himself and the character he portrays. The history play is fiction *and* historical truth operating at the same time. When *Richard III* constantly uses

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<sup>59</sup> Niefanger 2005. In many ways, the idea of *verdeckte Ambiguität* is similar to Greenblatt's notion of containment and subversion. According to Greenblatt, early modern drama's ironic subversions of dominant discourses paradoxically end up confirming the dominant discourses. As Greenblatt has stated in the famous and paradigmatic essay "Invisible Bullets": "Within this theatrical setting, there is a remarkable insistence upon the paradoxes, ambiguities, and the tensions of authority, but this apparent production of subversion is, as we have already seen, the very condition of power. ... It is precisely because of the English form of absolutist theatricality that Shakespeare's drama, written for a theater subject to state censorship, can be so relentlessly subversive: the form itself, as a primary expression of Renaissance power contains the radical doubts it continually produces." Greenblatt 1988. Although such an approach has its merits, the idea that the subversive potential of a work of art inevitably ends up reinforcing the dominant ideological position it sought to displace is problematically absolute. Parvini 2012 presents a similar argument, claiming that new historicist and cultural materialist criticism has resulted in a dehumanizing of Shakespeare's play. Thus Parvini attempts to reinstate what he calls 'humanism' in Shakespeare studies.

<sup>60</sup> See Lytle & Orgel 1981 for a closer look at patronage in the English Renaissance.

<sup>61</sup> Greenblatt 1988.

<sup>62</sup> *RIII* 3.1.83

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theatrical and metatheatrical rhetoric, Shakespeare breaks down the borders between historical truth and theatrical fiction. The paradox of *Richard III* is that both these effects are achieved by the play's theatrical and performative representational strategies. In a sense, Shakespeare's aesthetic representation of history is a form of dissimulation, concealing and telling half-truths about the past, but simultaneously pointing these out as fiction and ideological constructions.

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