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A GUIDE TO

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE
RICHARD III

C. W. R. D. MOSELEY

*'No Vice
ever took
an audience
for such
a ride...'*

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*William Shakespeare:
Richard III*

C. W. R. D. Moseley

A Note on the Author

Dr Moseley is Fellow and Tutor of Hughes Hall, Cambridge, and Director of Studies in English for that College and for St Edmund's College. He teaches Classical, mediaeval and Renaissance literature in the English Faculty of the University of Cambridge, and is the author of many books and articles, not all in his specialist fields. He has travelled widely in the Arctic, and is a member of the Arctic Club. He has been elected to Fellowship of the Society of Antiquaries of London and of the English Association. He is also a member of the Society for Nautical Research.

He is General Editor of the Literature Insights series, to which his contributions will include studies of *The Tempest*, and Shakespeare's treatment of *Henry IV*, together with a companion to all our Renaissance Drama titles: *English Renaissance Drama: a Very Brief Introduction to Theatre and Theatres in Shakespeare's Time*.

Contents

A Note on the Author

Introduction

1. ‘Jacobethan’ Attitudes

- 1.1 History and Politics
- 1.2 The Model of the World
- 1.3 Free Will and the Fall of Man
- 1.4 Macrocosm and Microcosm
- 1.5. The Failure of the Model

2. Theories of Drama

History and Tragedy

3. History, Tragedy, and Politics

4. The Sources and their use

5. The Figure of Richard

- 5.1 Richard and the Morality Vice
- 5.2 Richard and the machiavel

6. Richard’s Performance

7. Conscience and the King—Some Themes of the Play

- 7.1 Justice, Vengeance, Revenge
- 7.2 Time and the Importance of Margaret

8. The Structure of the Play

9. Language, Style and Rhetoric

10. Afterword

Appendix: The Text of the Play

Further Reading

Conceptual Index

Hyperlinked Text

Introduction

Elizabethans and Jacobean expected plays to amuse and divert them. If they failed to do so their authors and the companies they worked for did not make a living in a very cut-throat market. In the new permanent commercial theatres of the later Elizabethan period, attitudes to drama and expectations of its **conventions**¹ had been formed by centuries of religious and ritual drama—the Mystery and **Morality** plays. And although by definition what we see on the stage is not ‘the real thing’, but a representation through illusion, neither that nor its amusement value prevents theatre being a highly self-conscious and serious intellectual pursuit, recognized as such by audiences and playwrights, actors and critics. The profundity of Shakespeare’s concerns and their analysis in his plays may be unusual in degree, but those concerns are shared by his fellow-dramatists.

This book deals with only one play, but that play is very much part not only of one man’s work with a particular group of actors, but also of a general theatrical culture which was one of the only two mass media of the period, to which everyone more or less went and to which nobody could not have an attitude. (The other was sermon.) I therefore RECOMMEND STRONGLY THAT THIS BOOK BE READ IN CONJUNCTION with my *English Renaissance Drama: a Very Brief Introduction to Theatre and Theatres in Shakespeare’s Time* (hereafter VBI) in this series. What follows is based in some degree on the assumption that it will be.

Those familiar with the background of Elizabethan culture can skip sections 1.1 to 2 and go straight to the discussion of the play, always bearing in mind the close connection in that society between theatre and politics: theatre provided one of the few spaces where the undiscussable could be discussed through a fable and a large number of people at once could in the ritual space of the theatre face the problems of the real world transmuted into fiction. No wonder the authorities were so nervous of the theatres, and keen at the same time to use to their own purposes

¹ No society, or art can work without conventions: briefly, an area, or areas, of agreement between author and audience where the referents need not be stated. If you do not know the conventions, you are bound to get things seriously wrong.

1. ‘Jacobethan’ Attitudes

1.1 History and Politics

Richard III is one of very many ‘Jacobethan’¹ plays about (mainly English) history. (Shakespeare himself wrote nine before 1600—a quarter of his whole canon of thirty-seven plays, and several others draw subjects from British or Roman history.) Their past fascinated the Elizabethans, who sought in it guidelines for a future that seemed fraught with danger. The old Queen was without a clear heir, and refused to arrange the succession. Her whole reign had seen constant unrest at home and abroad. Although she managed to keep the loyalty of most of her Catholic subjects—after all, the admiral who defeated the Armada in 1588 was Catholic—the religious question was bubbling away like a pressure cooker, and it seemed it could at any time tear the commonwealth of England apart (especially after Pope Pius V in 1570 encouraged good Catholics to conspire against and assassinate Elizabeth). One had only to look at France and the Low Countries to see the havoc caused by religious strife between Catholic and Protestant; there was no guarantee it could not happen in England. Civil war, dynastic or religious, was really possible when the Queen died, and of course eventually in 1642 it came—though not for the expected reasons. The Elizabethans’ fear of this most terrible of conflicts was reasonable: recent English history included a century of piratical nobles wrangling over the crown, and the wrong done to ‘this noble realm of England’ is the text to which nearly all chronicle or history plays of the period are glosses. The orotund opening sentence of Hall’s *Union of the Noble and Illustre Families of Lancastre and York* (1548), one of Shakespeare’s sources for *Richard III*, expresses the revulsion:

What mischief hath insurged in realms by intestine division, what depopulation hath ensued in countries by civil dissension, what detestable murder hath been committed in cities by separate factions, and what calamity hath ensued in famous regions by domestic discord and unnatural controversy,

¹ By this ugly word I mean the years between, say, 1585 and 1615: Elizabeth died in 1603 to be succeeded by James of Scotland.

Rome hath felt, Italy can testify. France can bear witness, Beaume [Bohemia] can tell, Scotland can write, Denmark can show, and especially this noble realm of England can apparently declare and make demonstration.

Nowadays history's social and political importance of is easily forgotten, when the subject seems, for most, to have been reduced from the high philosophic search for humane understanding to gossip about grandparents, but George Orwell's *1984* expresses chillingly an idea which every generation until our own would have understood: 'Who controls the past controls the present; who controls the present controls the future.' The seriousness with which totalitarian regimes, whether fictional or as regrettably real as Hitler's Germany or Soviet Russia, take the past reminds us of its importance in forming social and moral values and acting as a yardstick for the present. The Jacobethans were not merely curious, or wanting a romp through their more successful heroes' glamorous exploits; they sought to understand and evaluate the present, and history plays reached more people more often than any other form of historical discussion. The phenomenon of these plays' existence is a historical and cultural fact of major consequence.

No attempt to understand the nature and morality of human societies can avoid assuming some theory of the nature of man and the world he lives in. The Greeks and Romans saw history as a series of cycles, where ultimately all returned to its beginning and started again; the Jews, followed by the Christians, introduced the idea that history was linear, where God Himself intervenes, which would one day come to an emphatic end when the meaning of all would be made plain, as the last paragraph of a novel fits the last piece of stone into the arch. (The Marxists happily took over the idea of history as a progress to a goal, but ditched the spiritual and theological aspects that gave that goal infinitely extensible meaning.) It is, of course, the Christian understanding of human life on earth we have to assume for the reading of Renaissance literature of any kind, and Christian thought heavily influences the model of the universe, which accounted for all the known scientific facts at that time, that had developed over many centuries. This point is very important, for many people attempt what is impossible: to understand the literature, art and politics of the Renaissance—or any other period—with only the sketchiest knowledge of a) what Christians believe and b) the Bible. For the Bible is, with the remains of Classical literature, the basis of Western culture and values, constantly fertilizing the minds of succeeding generations, providing values that really do affect men's behaviour. Any student expecting to be taken seriously, therefore, should get themselves a Bible and read it. We also do our fathers great disservice if we do not bother to find out what

understanding of the nature of Man in Christianity it was for which and by which they lived, died—and killed.

1.2 The Model of the World

The world model can be summed up in the word ‘Degree’—an order or rank in which everything in the universe, from the highest seraph to the lowliest element, had a specific place, a specific job which only it could do for the glory of God. Virtue, basically, consisted in doing that job, working with the grain of the universe, singing in harmony with it. The idea, current for several centuries and still leaving fossils in our language and thought, is most powerfully expressed in 1.iii of *Troilus and Cressida*:

The heavens themselves, the planets, and this centre,
 Observe degree, priority, and place,
 Insisture, course, proportion, season, form,
 Office, and custom, in all line of order.
 And therefore is the glorious planet Sol
 In noble eminence enthroned and sphered
 Amidst the other, whose med'cinable eye
 Corrects the ill aspects of planets evil.
 And posts like the commandment of a king,
 Sans check, to good and bad. But when the planed
 Is evil mixture to disorder wander,
 What plagues and what portents, what mutiny,
 What raging of the sea, shaking of earth,
 Commotion in the winds, frights, changes, horrors,
 Divert and crack, rend and deracinate
 The unity and married calm of states
 Quite from their future! O, when degree is snaked,
 Which is the ladder to all high designs,
 The enterprise is sick. How could communities,
 Degrees in schools, and brotherhoods in cities,
 Peaceful commerce from dividable shores,
 The primogeniture and due of birth,
 Prerogative of age, crowns, sceptres, laurels,
 But by degree stand in authentic place?
 Take but degree away, untune that string,

And hark what discord follows! Each thing meets
 In mere oppugnancy. The bounded waters
 Should lift their bosoms higher than the shores,
 And make a sop of all this solid globe;
 Strength should be lord of imbecility,
 And the rude son should strike his father dead;
 Force should be right, or, rather, right and wrong –
 Between whose endless jar justice resides –
 Should lose their names, and so should justice too.
 Then everything includes itself in power.
 Power into will, will into appetite,
 And appetite, an universal wolf,
 So doubly seconded with will and power.
 Must make perforce an universal prey,
 And last eat up himself.

This speech assumes a universe with a spherical earth at the centre of a series of concentric spheres, each dominated by living beings whose physical manifestation we perceive as the planets. Those planets move in a great harmonious dance through the heavens, making the mathematical music of the spheres, inaudible to the ears of those clothed in this “muddy vesture of decay”, as Lorenzo tells Jessica in *The Merchant of Venice* 5.i. They pour down on the earth the combined power of their ‘influence’.¹ The mainspring of the universe is love: the love of God that calls it into existence, the love that his creatures return to him and give to each other. The universe is utterly hierarchical, in a ladder of degree that reaches up to the angels who sing around the throne of God Himself. At the bottom is mere physical matter, composed of its four elements², devoid of life and merely existing. Then come those creatures with the power only to grow and reproduce: the plants, which have a ‘vegetable’ soul. Next are creatures that are not just alive, but have senses: the animals. Man combines these two souls, ‘Sensible’ and ‘Vegetable’, with a third, the Rational—the ability to reason and understand, and Man is at the summit of the material creation. Above him are spiritual beings, who are defined by rationality, which they share with man, and the intuitive faculty. Those spiritual beings, angels, rise through Nine Orders to the high-

1 This substance, infinitely varied in its mix of what each planet gives, has great effects on earth, both good and bad. An epidemic inexplicable before you have a theory of germs, for example, is attributable to ‘*influenza*’.

2 According to Aristotle, Earth, Air, Fire and Water

est ranks of all, the cherubim and seraphim who are in the presence of God.¹ Within this basic hierarchy, each order of being has a subsidiary order: the oak is King of trees, the lion of beasts, and man himself is ordered into states and polities headed by a ruler whose position is analogous to God at the head of the entire creation, and analogous also to the heads of all other orders. (A fruitful source for the expression of all sorts of ideas, from political persuasion to heraldry to the imagery of plays and poems.) The model therefore implies an understanding of the nature of the universe and human life within it where order, the keeping in one's proper station, is fundamental to peace and harmony, as Ulysses in this speech demonstrates: 'untune that string, And hark what discord follows!'

1.3 Free Will and the Fall of Man

But if this were all the truth, there would be no room for the calamities that overtake earthly existence and for the active evil that men do. When God made the world through His love, He gave His creatures freedom, according to their capabilities, to choose to love Him, or not. Only if a creature has the capability of not loving, of rejecting love, is any love it does give of any reality. A universe of automata would know no evil; but it would know no good either. Moreover, God gave the universe and everything in it an existence that ran according to certain intricately linked rules—which our ancestors would have called Nature or 'Kind', and we might call physics; the universe is thus subject to cause and effect. No action, however small, is without consequences that themselves have consequences till the last syllable of recorded time. The freedom of God's creatures necessarily implies that if they freely give back the love He gives them, the universe runs beautifully, but if they don't, the universe goes sour. And God, by His own rules, His own generosity in giving creatures the dignity of agents, cannot just intervene with a cosmic fire-engine to damp down the trouble that rejection of Him on whom everything depends inevitably brings. Cause will have effect; all moral beings—angels, or men—can do is seek to follow His will even if they are fallen, and all God can do is become Man Himself in a rescue operation from *within* the revolted state.

Free Will therefore entailed necessarily the possibility that some creatures would reject the role God had planned for them; and that rejection would dislocate the whole system, and go on doing so, to an extent that would reflect the importance of the

1 In descending order Cherubim, Seraphim, Thrones, Dominations, Virtues, Powers, Principalities, Archangels and Angels.

offender. Lucifer, brightest of all the angels, denied his nature or kind, his creaturely relationship to his maker, becoming Satan, forever racked by the pain of his rejection of what still sustained him. He became the Enemy, a thing of shadows and darkness. Yet Satan still had the power to tempt others by false words and false appearance—and as we shall see Shakespeare deliberately gives Richard just such devilish power. And when Eve fell for Satan's wiles in Eden, all the creation given into her and Adam's charge was affected too, just as what is on the bottom half of ladder is bound to fall if the ladder fails higher up. Man's fall brought woe into the world, and Adam's sin is passed on to, warps the existence of, all his descendants. But the mercy of God still operates in the free world He gave to His creatures; He still loves and sustains even those who curse him, and the lineaments of the original design are everywhere to be seen, giving glory to God.

1.4 Macrocosm and Microcosm

This model, complete with the idea of the Fall, is originally at least theological and philosophical. But it is also capable of special applications. The alchemists, to whose work we owe a good part of the development of modern science, built their theories of the nature of matter on it; the political thinker relied on it to understand how human states worked; the physician and surgeon understood the operations of the human body in terms of a proper balance of the four basic bodily fluids, the Humours¹, and their proper ordering under Reason, the King of the soul. For the shape of the greater world, the macrocosm, was reflected in every detail within it, and man himself was a little world, a microcosm, organized exactly like a polity, or the revolutions of the spheres. Thus a Prince in his parliament is like the sun throned among his planets, at the head of the hierarchy of his kingdom—and the symbolism with which Renaissance men customarily expressed this idea survives even in the shape and ceremonial of our own Parliament today. A body out of order could be diseased; and so, by an easy transference of ideas, could the state². Similarly, if a King—like Lear—abrogated his

1 Melancholy or black bile, Phlegm, Blood, and Choler

2 Rebellion, for example, is customarily described in precisely the medical term, 'coming to or making a head', that would be used of a rash of spots, or a boil, breaking out on the skin.. A Prince could fail of his duty; his subjects then had the difficult moral choice whether to be obedient and put up with his rule, or to attempt to right it by revolt. Shakespeare's later tetralogy of history plays, from *Richard II* to *Henry V*, Gaunt says that even a bad King may be best left alone: 'But since correction lieth in those hands / Which made the fault that we cannot correct / Put we our quarrel to the will of heaven; / Who, when they see the hours ripe on the earth, Will rain hot vengeance on offender's heads' (*Richard II*, 1.ii.4-8). The body politic, sick by the action of its head, might well suffer greater disease, for more likely than the taking of Gaunt's advice was that the subject would rebel.

responsibilities, that breaking of order would be reflected in the non-human world: the King's madness is illustrated by and causes the tempests on the heath. But the inertia of the system was such that, like a spinning top momentarily deflected in its smooth revolution, it would try to right itself and purge the disorder. In that righting the human costs to innocent and guilty alike would be huge. So Richard III's usurpation of the throne, which is itself a symptom of a deep disorder stretching back into history, disturbs the movement of the dance to a degree that can only be put right by general catastrophe that affects the whole of his kingdom; and once introduced, as it was originally by the deposition of Richard II that sparked off the entire sequence of what Shakespeare has taught us to call the Wars of the Roses, disorder or sin persists unto the third and fourth generation. Eventually, in the fullness of time, the discord of man's sin will be resolved into the unbroken concord of the young-ey'd cherubim, just as Lear's madness is eased by music. But the disorders of nations and states are not tractable to sackbuts and hautbois. Blood, horror, violence, war are the purgatives that cleanse the body politic—just what we watch in Richard III.

1.5. The Failure of the Model

The imaginative force of the model is due not only to its having developed over many centuries into an intricacy now hardly imaginable but also to the fact that it accounted for many of the mysteries of human existence. But it did not account for all, and as we all can now know, in certain fundamental respects the model was plain wrong. (That is not to say it has not still got a moral or mythic truth we could attend to with profit.) As a physical description of the universe, it was under increasing attack in the sixteenth century; as a theory on which to base technological work, it was challenged, eventually successfully, throughout the seventeenth century; as a way of understanding politics and human behaviour, it was simply not accounting for all the facts—and it never had done, however beautiful the theory. In his later tetralogy, *Richard II*, *Henry IV* Parts 1 and 2, *Henry V*, Shakespeare devotes much attention to the validity of the model as diagnosis of the human condition, and he suggests only equivocal answers. Later, in *Troilus and Cressida*, the powerful speech of Ulysses I quoted is in a context ironic in the extreme, for the play is one which examines the breakup of these very ideas in the way men behave as moral and political animals. Shakespeare, man of his time as he was, undoubtedly felt the emotional and moral force of the old ideas that formed the model, but he is also aware that men who refuse consent to be bound by this vision of order have, *ipso facto*, a terrible power against those who do.

The resourcefulness of evil is unbounded; good by its very nature is vulnerable even if, generations of innocent suffering later, it is ultimately victorious. And what sort of a victory is it that has to be established by the pointless suffering of the innocent? King Lear gives us a terrible vision of the universal wolf's career before the balance that alone makes societies workable is in some way restored—but the suffering that precedes and conditions that restoration is so appalling that the memory of it simply cannot be forgotten nor its meaning fully understood.

Even as early as *Richard III*, the problem interests Shakespeare. Like Edmund in *King Lear*, Richard is just such a universal wolf, as the imagery of beasts of rapine and violence applied to him reminds us; he is the 'new man', the disciple of [Machiavelli](#), who rejects the civilized conventions which other people assume as the ground rules. But the play stresses the irony that in the end he is unwittingly not only acting as agent of Heaven's vengeance on people who are self-evidently and self-confessedly guilty—and for most of whom we feel scant pity—but calling forth by so acting a response which destroys him. At last he 'eat[s] up himself'. In this play at least, Heaven seems to be acting on the strictest positivist principle of justice, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. A facile view would be that Richmond's succession means that the universe's order is vindicated after the generations of crime, but even in this highly patterned early play, to it we could give no more than a hesitant consent. For among all the guilty sufferers, there are the innocent and pathetic figures of the Princes, and Shakespeare underlines that because the settlement is so dependent on the character of the ruler, only an interim of equilibrium has been reached. There is no assurance that bottled spiders are now extinct for good.

To discern a pattern of human history, particularly against this background of a cosmic and moral theory, is therefore fundamentally important to men's understanding of the nature of the world they inhabit: an understanding that partly conditions that world. Shakespeare never lost interest in the topics of guilt, innocence and consequence:

The evil that men do lives after them;
The good is oft interred with their bones
(*Julius Caesar*, 3.i.80)

At the end of his career, in *The Tempest*, he returns to a discussion the relationship between the suffering of the past and new fruitfulness in the future.

2. Theories of Drama

Playwright and audience shared the expectation that as well amuse and divert a play could raise serious moral issues, and not to do so would be as significant as doing so. The inheritance from the [Morality](#) tradition determines one sort of expectation of drama author and audience would have. But the more educated would be aware of the growing body of theoretical philosophical criticism that took drama seriously: and Aristotle's *Poetics* was rediscovered in the late fifteenth century. The book relates drama to psychology and moral philosophy, and Renaissance commentators on Aristotle are much exercised to elucidate the views of one who had enormous weight as a major founder of Western philosophy. Francisco Robortello, for example, writing in 1548, sees drama as holding up examples of morality and virtue for imitation by an audience whose emotional response has engaged them with the characters. The influential Julius Caesar Scaliger in 1561 argues that writers have a responsibility for the moral education of audiences, teaching them how to avoid bad actions in favour of good. Poetry—which includes drama—is for him very much a part of ethics and politics, and by representing good models, helps the community towards the achievement of harmony or happiness through proper and virtuous action.¹ This discussion—more complex than I have indicated—was certainly known in England; Philip Sidney's *Defence of Poesie* (1595) shows thorough understanding of the debate's terms, and Shakespeare clearly knew all about it too. For Sidney and Shakespeare the high art of the poet lies not in mere imitation of things as they are, but in the representation of things as they could or should be—an expression of an ideal which will fire the imagination to virtuous action.

The application of these ideas to plays dealing with historical event is complex. The contemporary understanding of history and historiography, and the nature of the history play—even if not described as a 'tragedy', as *Richard III* is—will have considerable bearing on an audience's possible response to a drama, and set some limits

¹ Note the huge irony Shakespeare focuses on Richard if we bring this idea into play: Richard, acting a part, stage managing others, even suggesting what is to be said to the Mayor and citizens, is in one sense a playwright in league with his audience. But his motives are far from virtuous, he invites delight in crime and trickery—yet is upstaged by the audience's knowledge of his future fall.

to the playwright's freedom in writing it. If, moreover, the play *is* defined as a tragedy, a literary form which is related to history, further expectations are triggered.

History and Tragedy

Dionysus of Halicarnassus first made the often quoted remark that 'History is Philosophy teaching by examples'. We do well to remember that for our ancestors philosophy—the pursuit of wisdom—was one of the highest human endeavours. Wisdom is not just knowledge, but understanding the context and meaning of that knowledge; ultimately it aims at a moral, even a theological or devotional end. There is good Biblical authority for the importance of this quest in the *Proverbs* and the *Wisdom of Solomon*, and good pagan authority; see Plato, or Aristotle¹, or Epictetus. If history is then subservient to philosophy it follows that reading history will ultimately be a moral activity, an attempt to understand the nature of our predicament by studying individual examples. The historian's job was not primarily with chronology, or even with the mechanisms of society: it was to range across the wide fields of Time, gathering men and events and seeking to understand the principles of human conduct.

English history is, of course, included in the concept of history as a purposive process. Modern people are deeply affected by their forefathers and would equally deeply affect their children. The topical issues in Shakespeare's day could only be discussed by appeal to the evidence they had, that from history. A playwright who tackles the difficult ideas of political legitimacy, of the nature of kingship, of the relationship between Prince and country—all much discussed in the unhappy 1590s—will be drawn inescapably to history. The history of England that Shakespeare uses allows author and audience to come to terms with themselves, to formulate, express, evaluate their values in a communal and serious activity. The playwright, then as now, both responds to and modifies preoccupations and issues in society and formulates them (it is arguable which comes first). A society much concerned about legitimacy of succession, succession itself, and the nature of the ruler's title must discuss these issues. In its understanding of the past—or at least isolation of its problems—it may well

1 Aristotle's remark in the *Poetics* that tragedy *is* more philosophical than history is rather important in the context of this book: both are concerned with the pursuit of wisdom, but because tragedy, which is based on happenings (or what might happen), escapes the demands for factual accuracy that limit history, it is freer to search for significance and meaning and express those things through its form and shape. Aristotle is also suggesting that tragedy teaches wisdom in its own right, and is thus closely related to the highest discipline, philosophy.

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