A Comparative Study: *Macbeth* and *Richard III*

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IN almost every high school across these United States, the Shakespearean play being taught in English literature classes is *Macbeth*. The choice is a good one. Of Shakespeare's four truly great tragedies, this one presents the fewest problems to understanding. It does not have the gross sexuality of *Othello*, the extreme length and complexity of *Hamlet*, nor the immensity of *King Lear*—sometimes deterrents for their use with high school students. Also, *Macbeth* is the shortest of the tragedies and the one most filled with action; and for what may be, for some students, their first encounter with Elizabethan drama, these features are no mean commendation. Were I restricted to teaching but one Shakespearean play, *Macbeth* would be my choice.

However, most teachers are not so restricted. To provide students with a richer experience, the teacher frequently goes beyond this one anthology selection and teaches a second play of Shakespeare's. He most often chooses a comedy for contrast or one of the other tragedies for greater depth. I have done each and been satisfied with the specific, though somewhat different, goals I was able to achieve. But, after five years of teaching a semester-length Shakespeare seminar, I have come to believe that another play not in popular use in high schools has more to offer when paired with *Macbeth* than any other single play I have ever used—and that play is *Richard III*.

Written more than a decade earlier than *Macbeth*, *Richard III* is unquestionably artistically inferior to other more frequently taught Shakespearean plays. It is, nevertheless, an extremely interesting work. Students respond well to it. I have never had a class fail to enjoy it, a few even preferring it over some of Shakespeare's "better" works. The reason, of course, lies with the figure of Richard himself. He is so diabolically shrewd, so insidiously evil, that everyone falls under his spell. Because he captivates their reluctant admiration, students are lured into eagerly following the events depicted.

Only one difficulty arises in high school students' study of *Richard III*: they are unfamiliar with the history of

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the times in which it is set. Consequently, the teacher needs to prepare them to some extent before they begin reading. I usually present a very brief account of the Wars of the Roses to bring them up to the years just prior to that famous battle which brings both the Wars and the play to an end and sets the Tudors on the English throne. There is no need for more than a skeletal overview, merely enough detail to put them into the picture. I also pass out a copy of the genealogies of the Lancasters and the Yorks listing only those family members whose relationships need to be kept straight for an understanding of the play. The first few scenes confuse students until they begin to get these relationships established clearly in their minds, especially since so many characters bear the same given names. After the first few scenes, however, all these details seem to fall into place and students seldom have any further problems.

Despite this difficulty and the play's lack of artistic merit in comparison to some of Shakespeare's other plays, *Richard III* has more to recommend it as a parallel study to *Macbeth* than sheer enjoyment. Pairing the two offers insights into each which would be considerably more difficult to gain if each were taught singly. First, this study reveals the maturing of Shakespeare's artistry. Second, it clarifies the nature of tragedy. Third, it provides a better understanding of character. And, fourth, it illuminates one aspect of Shakespeare's philosophy as it reflects contemporary thought. These insights should not be considered as distinctly separate from each other as my itemizing of them might tend to suggest, since considerable overlapping occurs in the actual study of the works. For example, though I have delineated the maturing of Shakespeare's artistry as one insight to be gained, it is, of course, inherent in the other three. The discussion which follows should make this evident.

ANY study of *Macbeth* must take into account the dramatic form by which it is structured. And I have found that students can better understand the form of tragedy if they have a similar play using a different form with which to compare it. Despite the fact that the earlier work bears the title *The Tragedy of Richard III*, it is, in literary terminology, more accurately a chronicle or history play. As such, it primarily concerns the public actions of the title character, those actions which affect the entire nation because they directly shape the history of the times depicted and indirectly influence the times that follow. The audience is absorbed in what Richard will *do* next, not how he will *feel*—in the actions he performs, not in the consequences he undergoes. The main thrust of the action is always outward to the world of political action and repercussion, to a confrontation between powerful political forces released by the struggle for the throne. Quite a different concern is manifest in *Macbeth*. What Macbeth does is not nearly so important as how he feels about it. The audience is more concerned with his private values and morals than with his public actions. It is the man himself who absorbs them. It is true, of course, that his actions do produce public effects. Scotland bleeds under his reign, the guilty and innocent alike suffer, divided loyalties increase, and civil war erupts. But all this is secondary: the focus remains always upon the psychological struggles within the king himself.

Although Richard III is a strangely compelling figure, he is not a tragic hero. Macbeth is. In most Shakespearean tragedies, the hero is engaged not only in an external struggle with a force which ultimately serves as the instrument of his death, but also in an internal struggle which embroils his very soul. It is this inner conflict which most engrosses the audience. That the hero dies, in a physical sense, is of no real consequence. What

happens to the man within is what matters. Richard's conflict is almost totally involved with external forces; he contends very little, if at all, with any inner spiritual force. Even the ghosts of his victims do not generate any meaningful encounter deep within his being. He is shaken, it is true, when he first awakens from his nightmare, but what conflict there is seems to occur at a very shallow depth. For the moment he may actually be moved, but he very quickly recovers and no further semblance of serious inner strife emerges. On the other hand, not only does Macbeth's seditious ambition lead him into open battle with the loyalty and patriotism of Macduff, Malcolm, and those who align themselves with these two men; but at the same time these abstract powers collide within and divide his very soul. It is this latter struggle which is most essential in a Shakespearean tragedy.

Furthermore, as Shakespeare conceived of tragedy, the hero must be a man of grandeur, a man fundamentally good. He must not be flawless, of course, for his destruction would be too shocking in its injustice. Nor must he be basically an evil man, for the annihilation of evil can scarcely be tragic. But a man of essential goodness who through his own free will makes certain choices which lead ultimately to his own destruction—when his basic character and intensity of drive might have led him instead to approach the heights of the gods—that man is truly a tragic hero. Ironically, it is often his very strength of character, his virtue even, which proves his undoing. And there must come to such a man that moment of tragic recognition when he realizes the implications of the situation which he has himself created.

RICHARD obviously does not fit into this concept of the tragic hero. He is evil from the beginning of the play to the end. In his opening soliloquy he says, "I am determined to be a villain," and he sets out immediately to act upon that decision. There is nothing ennobling in the man, no grandeur, no heroic stature. He does not deteriorate from a man fundamentally good, because the basic goodness is never there. In fact, little change in the character takes place. He is perhaps toward the end less assured, less quick-witted—but he is the same monster he was at the beginning. His death is, therefore, hardly tragic. No one can honestly say, "What a pity! What a loss! What a falling off was here!"

With Macbeth a different situation exists. At the beginning of the play he is returning victorious from battle. He has stood out above all others for his great physical courage and extraordinary skill. Praises ring out from lowly soldier, king, and equal. Honors are heaped upon him, and the future promises continued respect and prosperity. But Macbeth is an ambitious man. He is not content to bask in the reflected glow of past glories. The same drive which had made him an outstanding soldier in the service of Duncan now pushes him to acquire the throne for himself. Not that his better feelings do not exert themselves against his baser desires—they do! But they are overcome, and Macbeth begins his downward course with the decision to murder his king. Each act takes him progressively deeper into evil until he finally has even women and children slaughtered, not because they present any threat to him but because their deaths satisfy some vindictive urge. But Macbeth knows what he has become, and the audience responds with pity and regret when he faces his loss:

> My way of life
> Is fall'n into the sear, the yellow leaf;
> And that which should accompany old age,
> As honor, love, obedience, troops of friends,
> I must not look to have; but in their stead,

Curses, not loud but deep, mouth-honor, breath,
Which the poor heart would fain deny, and dare not.

When Macbeth's fall comes, no one questions the necessity—or even the justice—of it. But one is, nevertheless, moved to bemoan the waste. The grandeur, the power, the greatness of soul, the tremendous human potential that were Macbeth's have all been swept away. And like Ophelia, we weep, "O, woe is me,/ To have seen what I have seen, see what I see!"

STUDENTS will immediately recognize a similarity between Richard and Macbeth: both are apparently capable warriors who glory in warfare, both burn with ambition to be king, both are willing to destroy those who stand between them and the throne or who threaten their security once they achieve that lofty height, and both are ultimately consumed by the flames for which they ignited the tinder. Yet, despite this similarity of goal and of destructive drive, the pairing of the two will reveal important differences between them and distinguish them as individuals. Had time slipped and brought them face to face, it is doubtful that either would have recognized a kindred spirit in the other. Macbeth is motivated by the desire to be king and to be "safely thus"—pure and simple ambition, that and nothing more. Richard's motivations seem more complex (though the man himself is considerably less complex than his Scottish counterpart). He wants to be king—true, but that goal seems not so much an end in itself as a visible symbol of his triumph over other power-hungry but shallow sycophants whom he detests and to whom he feels, paradoxically, both inferior and superior. He has not, as he himself acknowledges, the social graces and personal charm to compete in the courtly pursuits of "this weak piping time of peace." His body is "rudely stamped," "not shaped for sportive tricks." But he has a mind keener than all the rest, a skill in dissembling that is unencumbered by conscience, a courage to reach for that which seems most out of reach. Thus, though he may have a body at which even the dogs bark, housed in that deformed body are an intellect and a nature capable of maneuvering, of manipulating, of gaining advantage over those who scorn him. He takes sheer delight in his successful machinations; each victory exhilarates him.

Such is not the case with Macbeth. Never does he thrill to his successes; never does he feel more than momentary satisfaction in them. His are self-defeating triumphs driving him to desperate evils to consolidate his gains; Richard's are glorious achievements stimulating him to seek actively for further challenges. Macbeth suffers from a conscience. Richard is little burdened by such. Macbeth is stirred by a poetic imagination which visualizes the consequences of his acts. Richard seldom thinks beyond the immediate act. Never could Richard lament, as Macbeth does, "Oh, full of scorpions is my mind, dear wife." Instead, when Richard is shaken by the visitation of his victims' ghosts prior to his battle on Bosworth Field, he prosaically argues with himself:

What do I fear? Myself? There's none else by.
Richard loves Richard: that is, I am I.
Is there a murderer here? No. Yes, I am:
Then fly. What, from myself? Great reason why:
Lest I revenge. What, myself upon myself?
Alack, I love myself. Wherefore? For any good
That I myself have done unto myself?
O, no! Alas, I rather hate myself
For hateful deeds committed by myself.
I am a villain. Yet I lie, I am not.
Fool, of thyself speak well. Fool, do not flatter.

Each man is brutally honest with himself. Richard can say, "I am determined to prove a villain. . . . I am subtle, false, and treacherous"; but he cannot visualize the cost of his actions as can Macbeth. Only the latter has the sensitivity and imagination to describe Duncan's proposed murder in such poetic images as these:

> . . . his virtues
> Will plead like angels, trumpet-tongued
> . . . And pity, like a naked new-born babe,
> Striding the blast, or heaven's cherubin horsed
> Upon the sightless couriers of the air,
> Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye,
> That tears shall drown the wind.

And only he could describe his motivations as "vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself." Two men of like ambition—but each must "wear [his] rue with a difference."

RICHARD dazzles the audience with his audacity, but he does not involve their emotions as Macbeth does. It is not merely that the two men are different, but that the latter is presented with considerably greater depth. Students should have no difficulty in seeing that the artist has matured in his craft with the later play. An examination of supporting characters and the depth of their portrayals will further support this view. (An interesting question to explore with a strong class is whether the characters in *Richard III* are shallower because of Shakespeare's difference in purpose or because of his difference in skill.)

The sensitive reader will see additional evidence of Shakespeare's greater mastery of his craft in his polishing of lines in *Richard III* to be used thirteen years later with increased effectiveness in *Macbeth*. Thus, Richard's "Look, what is done cannot be now amended" becomes Lady Macbeth's more poignant "Things without all remedy/ Should be without regard; what's done is done" and her heartrending utterance during the sleepwalking scene of "What's done cannot be undone." Richard's "But I am in/ So far in blood that sin will pluck on sin" emerges in Macbeth's more vivid imagery as a veritable swamp of gore: "I am in blood/ Stepped in so far that should I wade no more,/ Returning were as tedious as go o'er." Echoes of still other lines yield themselves up to the alert reader.

An additional advantage to pairing *Macbeth* with *Richard III* rather than teaching it as a separate entity is the opportunity this provides for studying the repeated dramatization of Shakespeare's underlying philosophy. As an artist he could not write in isolation, divorced from the prevailing attitudes of his time. He drew from this intellectual climate to formulate his own views. And these two plays (along with several others of his plays) reflect clearly at least one important adherence to Elizabethan thought. During Shakespeare's time it was a generally accepted belief that there was an eternal law created by the hand of God, a natural order in the universe. All living beings, heavenly bodies, systems of government, ranks of society, etc., had their place in this single structural unity. Therefore, each part was interrelated to every other part and each depended on the others to perform their own distinct function and maintain the essential harmony. Any violation to one part was felt throughout the whole structure. Man's obligation, then, was to discover this natural order and his role in it, and to attempt to fulfill that role so as not to disturb the harmony of the whole. One of man's functions was obviously to govern his world, and in Britain the system of government which had evolved to carry out this function was, of course, the monarchy. The king represented a universal principle of justice: he ruled by divine right. Thus, any effort to overthrow the lawful order by usurping the position of the rightful king invited disaster both to the state and to the usurper.

RICHARD and Macbeth violate this unity in two ways. First, they transgress against the moral order of the world; and, second, they subvert the natural order of royal succession. (By "moral order" I refer not only to moral good or evil but also to all that is admirable or base in man. The "moral order" shows itself favorable to good and inimical to evil in these broadened terms.) Their actions bring about the destruction of harmonious order within the state. Before the opening of the play Duncan's supporters have successfully quelled an insurrection and warded off a foreign invasion. The good old king, surrounded by his loyal subjects, governs over an established society. Macbeth's disruption of this order with his murder of the rightful king precipitates the disorder which follows. Even Nature itself is thrown out of balance: chimneys are blown down, strange shrieks fill the night, the earth shakes, daytime resembles night, a "mousing owl" kills a "towering" falcon, trained stallions turn wild and eat each other. Such disturbances portend the disintegration of the state which quickly follows. In England the Scottish exiles lament the condition of their homeland: "It weeps, it bleeds . . . ." Their descriptions of what Scotland has become under the tyrannical reign of Macbeth vividly testify not only to the changes thrust upon their country but also to the changes wrought in the victorious general of the opening scenes. Macbeth's transgressions against the moral order of the universe have disrupted his own inner order and harmony and resulted in the deterioration of a once-noble being. As the closing battle approaches, he summarizes his own disintegration: "I have supped full with horrors;/ Direness, familiar to my slaughterous thoughts,/ Cannot once start me."

Richard's course is like Macbeth's in that his usurpation of the English throne and his slaughter of those who oppose him or even innocently stand in his way contribute to the disintegration of the whole state. There is none of the violent revolt in Nature reported in *Macbeth,* but there does come the same convulsive uprising from a nation oppressed. However, Richard is not totally to blame for the disintegration of the state; he is merely the last of a line that has kept England embroiled in civil strife for almost three decades in an unholy struggle over the throne. In *Henry VI,* which depicts the time immediately preceding this play, Shakespeare had shown the disastrous results to a country when order is violated through the weakness of its king and the machinations of its noblemen to unseat that king. After years of debilitating war, the kingdom has been bled of its strength and character. It is at the nadir of its existence and ripe for Richard's plucking. Richard, therefore, is both a fulfillment and an extension of the evils of the preceding years. His malformed body is a twofold symbol. First, it represents the corruption brought about by England's decades of bloody strife and her inability to protect the royal succession. Second, it gives a visible shape to the deformed soul within. His reign, therefore, is England's punishment for her transgressions against the natural order of the universe.

In the final scenes of both plays, order is restored by the destruction of the hero who has violated it. All parts of the universal system fall once more into a harmonious relationship. Macbeth dies to clear the way for the virtuous Malcolm to take his rightful place on the throne; Richard and his evil fall before the righteous Richmond. Their deaths result in the resolution of conflict and the unification of the state. Malcolm forgives those who out of fear had served "the dead butcher," rewards his own followers, and calls home the exiles. He promises to perform his kingly duties "by the grace of God." Richmond closes the earlier play on a similar note:

We will unite the White Rose and the Red.

. . . . . .

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 they will be so,
Enrich the time to come with smooth-faced peace,
With smiling plenty, and fair prosperous days!

To me, these are the important insights which make the pairing of these two particular plays a really rewarding study. I have not attempted to exhaust the areas of comparison. Some classes might respond to an exploration of repeated themes, such as sin and retribution, the role of the supernatural, the view of children, appearance vs reality—to name but a few of the possibilities. Shakespeare has planted here a garden of inexhaustible riches. Swing wide the gate and invite your students in!

Recess

I talked to a tree today
about
the last time
a boy
broke beyond his mother's voice
range, on a red-appled
yellow-flaked
afternoon's school day.

The tree opened its bark,
letting me in. And
though I am a grown man
I felt like Alice
traipsing through the glass
of Wonderland. While

the carillons of autumn
dinged, donged,
dinged;
donged;
like a harbor seal's clapper.

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