

**The politics of ambiguity:
The case of *Richard III***

Zohreh Ramin

Ph.D. Student, University of Tehran

Fazel Asadi

Associate Professor, Tarbiat Moallem University

Abstract

Critics have long been obsessed with the ambiguous nature of Shakespeare's *Richard III*. Richard, the protagonist whose name bears the very title of the play, is portrayed as ostensibly an evil figure, and whether his actions are the result of the incarnation of the devil in human form or the result of a mind disturbed as result of physical deformity has long been observed and discussed. However, the present reading, relying on new historicist notions of power and subversion, aims to look at the play from a significantly different perspective. Richard usurps the throne by killing his brother, King Edward IV, and to maintain his authority and sovereignty is compelled to commit more crimes. At the same time, his eloquence and power to control the course of events as well as other characters, specifically in the first part of the play, has long appealed to audiences and critics, attributing a somewhat productive and dynamic quality to his character. The present paper attempts to uncover glimpses of possible reasons for two closely related ambiguities which have long problematized the play. The first aspect is related to the genre of the play, vacillating between two poles; while the play apparently depicts Richard as one of the King's of England, recorded in the history books of Hall and Holinshed, yet Richard embodies certain characteristics which can align

him with the tragic hero. The second is related to the very character of Richard, at once a villain and a redeemer. Many critics have praised him, for his power of eloquence and aptitude to govern those around him, simultaneously recognizing the evil and villain in him.

Keywords: Richard III, ambiguous, deformity, historicist, subversion, genre

If any reductive generalization about Shakespeare's relation to his culture seems dubious, it is because his plays offer no single timeless affirmation or denial of legitimate authority and no central, unwavering authorial presence. Shakespeare's language and themes are caught up, like the medium itself, in unsettling repetitions, committed to the shifting voices and audiences, with their shifting aesthetic assumptions and historical imperatives that govern a living theater. (Greenblatt, 1984, p. 254)

1. Introduction

According to Tillyard, Shakespeare's history plays are sites of justification for the Tudor monarchy. In his book *The Elizabethan World Picture* (1943), Tillyard portrays the great chain of being as the backbone and order required in the human world of social order. Hence he equates political order with cosmic order. "Order", Watt mentions was a key word for Tillyard since it was the underlying idea and structuring tenet of the history plays. Yet as Watt mentions, the major objections to Tillyard's view of the plays were that "they include his monarchism and his monolithic view of culture" (Watt 2)

Watt links Tillyard's way of analyzing the plays with the specific conservative and nationalistic politics taking place in the 1940s as the basic background and major impact on Tillyard's notion of the Tudor monarchy and the concept of an authoritarian and monolithic regime. So Tillyard depicts a Shakespeare who was conservative and one dimensional, whose intention in writing the plays were a reflection of the interests of the monarchy, namely justification and the rightness of the prevalent rule and order as reflection of what existed in the cosmos, hence a divine justification for a mundane ends.

Ramin and Asadi

However, the advent of modern and postmodern thinking has by far exceeded such oversimplifications as regards Shakespeare's intention in writing the plays. One such reading which has surpassed and rejected Tillyard is that of the new historicist reading of the plays. As early as the 1970s, Watt declares, there were critics such as H.A. Kelly who had doubted Tillyard's view of a "unitary model of the Elizabethan World Picture and the Tudor Myth" (Watt 3) from the 1980s onward, critics left Tillyard far behind and new historicist readings such as those offered by Stephen Greenblatt and Louis Montrose, opened up a new horizon of considering the plays.

Perhaps what makes one return in the present age to what seems to be an outdated reading of Shakespeare by Tillyard, is what made critics realize, as a revelatory factor about the very notion of literary criticism itself; " literary criticism, far from being what it appears, a disinterested inquiry into the meaning and value of an accepted canon of masterworks, is instead a complexly over determined discourse shaped by politics, aesthetics and institutional discipline' (Watt 3). Though Tillyard is no longer accepted, yet his observations of the plays as reflecting political intentions, though with a different view, are still prevalent.

Tillyard saw the plays as reflections of Shakespeare's contemporary concerns, as if constructed unconsciously, as structuring the very mind and mentality of writers of the age, and perhaps Shakespeare's as the best representative. However, modern critics, who do not totally reject such political implications, observe the plays as conscious historiographies of the age. As Watt cites an interesting passage from Grady, what Tillyard was doing was "borrowing a form from the larger culture and reading it back into Shakespeare" (Grady in Watt 4). Yet what recent critics have attempted to uncover has been " a plurality of concurrent and conflating `histories` rather than a single `history`. Contemporary readings are no longer in search of such grand narratives as those which Grady uncovers in Tillyard, and are more interested in oppositional and conflictual aspects of works.

2. The Ambiguity of Genre: History or Tragedy?

Shakespeare builds the character of Richard based on history, foregrounds his evil nature but does not show him as totally negative. The reason for this, I will argue, is the way Shakespeare opens the possibility for what cultural critics consider as instance of the possibility of subversion. Richard manages

to subvert and oppose the system of monarchy which was intended to go to his brother's young son, Prince Edward. All this he manages through the power he exercises over the weakness of other characters in the play. This is the reason why critics have admired him, for his power, his intelligence, and his manipulative employment of language.

But such subversion could not be tolerated, specifically that it was written within the genre of theatricality. It would be dismissed since it was a threat to the prevailing system; that a young man, through reliance on his inner power, intellect, and gift of eloquence should manage to overthrow those whom it was *their right* to the throne and thus to surpass all those around him. To contaminate such subversion, Shakespeare needed to rely on historical facts; the real death of King Richard III as stated in the historical records of Holinshed and Hall.

Shakespeare in this play has taken privilege from the play of ambiguity; on one hand he has depicted a character whose very nature and deeds would appeal to the audience's perception through his ability to exercise power over those above him, and at the same time contaminate him by drawing back or relying on the historical records and emphasizing his deformity. This employment of the historical reliance for the play would safeguard it from proving to be threatening to the throne.

So on one hand the play reveals a successful instance of subversion by a powerfully minded character, who embodies the characteristics of a tragic hero. Yet on the other hand, safeguards it by determining the ending from the very start, that Richard was to die thus such threatening instances to subversion were doomed to failure. To contaminate such subversion, history was the best means since it was a safety valve; Richard would die by the end anyway.

It is also worth mentioning at this point, Shakespeare's specific employment of Medieval Christian doctrines of divinity and morality in the world of the play.

Ian Johnson in his lecture on *Shakespeare's transformation of medieval tragedy and an introduction to Richard III* outlines the difference between two modes of tragedy; the Medieval Christian Tradition and the Traditional Classical kind of tragedy, and outlines the difference between the two as relying respectively upon the presence and absence of belief in life after death.

In the first case, divine providence and justice found a profound influence upon the major character and the world of the play, and the life of the

Ramin and Asadi

individual would not end with death. Death, in fact, was considered as a passage to communal life.

In the traditional sense, however, and due to lack of divine presence, the death of the major tragic character would be accompanied by pondering the significance upon the life and deeds of the protagonist while he lived, stressing his achievements and attributing prominence to his accomplishments while alive. Tragedy, in the traditional classical sense then, required death as an ending as the significance of the hero's life would end with his death.

Shakespeare's *Richard III* is classified as a history play, yet at the same time, the play has employed elements of Medieval Christian tragedies. The moral which such tragedies are based upon are summarized in the opening lines of Chaucer's Monk's Tale;

I wol Biwaille, in manere of tragedie,
 The harm of hem that stode in heigh degree,
 And fillen so ther nas no remedie
 To brynge hem out of hir adversitee,
 For certain, what that Fortune list to flee,
 Ther may no mn the cours of hire withhold.
 Lat no man truste on blynd propersitee;
 Be war by thise ensamples trewe and olde.

Thus Chaucer outlines the rise and fall of characters in history, based upon the Christian moral vision, which is later emulated by Renaissance playwrights including Shakespeare, as the main structure of their plots. The fall of the tragic hero would be a just result of his avaricious nature, compensating for his former sins.

If the play had been a tragedy in the traditional sense, it would have meant that Richard should have been regarded as a hero, and the elevation of his actions and the significance of his life and deeds would have followed. The employment of history does not give his life and deeds a heroic significance, and Shakespeare intended it not to since such a threatening and subversive character who manages to disrupt social order must not be glorified, or at least his portrayal had to remain ambiguous and uncertain. Death and lament over death of the tragic hero in the closing act of classical tragedies "is never a reflection on what lies in store for him. It is, by contrast, a lyrical evocation of what his life (now over)has meant, what it has revealed

about the mystery of existence for those who remain. ... the tragic (life) looks back at the heroic life which has just concluded, leaving the audience to ponder its significance." (Johnson 1). It is this aspect, highlighted by Johnson; which creates the paradox in the case of *Richard III*. The play contains the medieval notions of tragedy; and yet it is not classified accurately as a tragedy as the story of the plot is taken from historical records of English Kings.

Thus Shakespeare manipulates the genre of history for his deliberate ends; to create an ambiguous situation; if not regarded as a true story, the play depicts the rise and fall of the protagonist whose gift of eloquence bestows upon him the possibility to overpower others around him. Observed as history, Richard is the evil villain whose final death is the just consequence of his evil deeds. Richard is not meant to be lamented or his life glorified for it would mean the ultimate glorification and exaltation of subversive and oppositional forces. Yet at the same time, the very existence of tragical elements within the play does uphold such dissident voices and glorifies them as affirmative.

The play draws heavily upon the operation of providence, specifically with regards to Richard's justification of his killing people as acting out God's providential plans. The presence of Queen Margaret is also a reminder of the operation of providence as a moral force embedded within the play. Such Christian conceptions of tragedy were a way of reinforcing Christian doctrines regarding the prevalence of evil in history. But Shakespeare's employment of religion as justification of justice carried out by Richard in the first half of the play can also be explained in specific ideological terms as well.

Alan Sinfield and Jonathan Dollimore, in their cultural materialist reading of Shakespeare's *Henry V* have mentioned how ideological forces operating in a society utilize religious support as means to justify the ends of what appears to be the interest of a nation, but is significantly the sole interest of the ruling class. Such religious justifications also appear in this play as Richard, in the first part of the play becomes God's instrument as he perishes those who have formerly wronged and committed crimes including his own brother, Clarence and Hastings (1).

Shakespeare's contemporary, Christopher Marlowe, both employs and manipulates medieval morality plays and such combination of genres can also be detected in the works of Shakespeare. Marlow's famous Dr. Faustus transcends beyond the capacity of human knowledge, hence and overreacher,

Ramin and Asadi

and finally pays the price by being dragged to hell. But what draws our attention is the fact that Marlow foregrounds Faustus's overreaching attempt, almost diminishing the traditional medieval moral formula behind the play. The same applies to Richard, as Shakespeare foregrounds his overreaching abilities, especially in the first part of the play, almost diminishes the immorality of his actions by justifying them through depicting the self-centeredness of the characters he manages to improvise.

Shakespeare's play, Johnson declares, is heavily influenced by the Machiavellian hero; *The Prince*. The ruler should use power effectively to guarantee his own survival; and to exercise power skillfully to weaken his enemy, "the end justifies the means". In other words, the only thing that matters is the political survival of the ruler, no matter the cost or the means. The Machiavellian hero places his individual desires and interests above others. Richard, Johnson maintains, is obviously a Machiavellian figure while at the same time, the world of the play is embedded within the world of mediaeval morality play.

The play is structurally based on the Christian doctrines; Richard is both agent of God's justice and is himself punished by God for his misbehaviors; he is acceptable as long as he punishes criminals- as in the instances of Clarence and Hastings, in other words becoming the instrument of ideological forces of his society with a religious justification for his deeds, but must be silenced by the very same ideology when the authority of that ideology, in this case the Tudor reign, is itself at stake.

3. Ambiguity of Character: Villain or Redeemer?

As Marjorie Graber observes, two significant paintings of King Richard III of England, dating back to 1505 can serve as interesting starting points for our consideration of the character of Richard in Shakespeare's play.

The two paintings of Richard vary significantly; one, presently in the Society of Antiquaries of London, painted at about 1505, illustrates Richard with straight shoulders while an earlier painting reveals a very controversial issue. While x-ray examinations have shown an original straight shoulder, yet the same painting has been painted over later, to illustrate a slightly raised right shoulder, which is the one so often copied by later portraitists (2).

In her essay *Descanting on Deformity: Richard III and the Shape of History*, Graber comes somewhat close to my discussion when she states

"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" (Graber 68). Returning to the two paintings, what draws our attention is the fact that we can never rely on historical records as absolute facts. The paintings of King Richard III explicitly reflect the deformity that could have been employed to the very portrait of Richard and hence his physical deformity; "Richard's deformity is a figment of rhetoric, a figure of abuse, a catachresis masquerading as a metaphor" (Graber 69). Graber deals with Richard's character under the light of Freudian and psychoanalytical analogies and attempts to link his deformity with history in general.

For Graber, Richard's deformity is a locus "where distortions of body can stand for the distortions of writing and history" (Graber 62). The point I wish to come to is that Richard's deformity is made villainous to conform to his character and personality hence the reason for Shakespeare's inclusion of Richard's soliloquy on his deformed body.

The play starts out with this significant soliloquy by Richard to the audience. At the very beginning, we learn that Richard is obsessed with his deformity and attempts to establish intimate relations with the audience, foreshadowing the reasons for his later action:

Why, I in this weak piping time of peace
Have no delight to pass away the time,
Unless to spy my shadow in the sun
And descant on mine own deformity.
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 pleasure of these days. (Act I, scene i, 33-40)

Many critics attempt to read Richard's personality, his actions and his deeds as the result of a deformed body. Rene Girard, Graber mentions, has demonstrated how "Richard's deformed body is a mirror for the self-confessed ugliness in his soul" (Watt 64). Yet merely to perceive Richard as the true villain, overthrowing his own brothers and family to gain power over others would leave intact many significant facts about Richard and the apparently minor individuals in the play.

Richard is a successful improviser on stage. But the paradox of his character is that although we observe him complaining of his deformity, we

Ramin and Asadi

later see how active and productive he is regarding his stratagems and intentions of gaining the throne and maintaining it. His physical deformities go against his verbal and intellectual ability.

The scene of Richard wooing Anne is an appealing instance which depicts Richard's power of eloquence and his ability to overpower others, despite his deformity. This important scene, which Anthony Hammond in his introduction to the play asserts, was one of the four scenes not mentioned in any of the historical sources (Hall, Holinshed and More) that Shakespeare had access to (3), and which can be drawn to have been specifically included by Shakespeare to portray the powerful improvisational power of Richard over others in the play. From this scenes we learn how Richard manages to win Anne because he is aware of her weak point; the very significance of this scene is thus to show how he succeeds a seemingly impossible situation and his following soliloquy, addressed to the audience after Anne has left, is to confide to the audience his power and superiority;

Rich. Was ever woman in this humour woo'd?
 was ever woman in this humor won?
 I'll have her, but not keep her long.
 What, I that kill'd her husband and his father:
 To take her in her heart's extremest hate,
 Which curses in her mouth, tears in her eyes,
 the bleeding witness of her hatred by,
 Having God, her conscience, and these bars against me-
 And I, no friend to back y suit at all
 But the plain devil and dissembling looks-
 And yet to win her, all the world to nothing! (I.III. 231-242)

Richard's description differs markedly as we move in history. One such example is uncovered by Graber as she exposes the difference between the way Charles Ross portrays Richard in his *Richard III* (1981) and Thomas More's description in *History of Richard III*. While More's description is more rhetorical, emphasizing the imbalance of his left and right shoulder, Ross's description, Graber declares, is more realistic or as she mentions, "fact-oriented"(Graber65)in other words, it seems, as Alison Hanham argues, as if More was more interested in displaying his "own cleverness rather than his command of fact" (Graber74).

The notion of Richard's deformity is put into question also by another critic; Peter Saccio, who refers to Richard's act of stripping down to the waist for his coronation as proof for his not being ashamed to show any existing deformity:

As myth, the Tudor Richard indestructible...As history, however, the Tudor Richard is unacceptable. Some of the legend is incredible, some is known to be false, and much is uncertain or unapproved. The physical deformity, for example, is quite unlikely. No contemporary portrait or document attest to it and the fact that he permitted himself to be stripped to the waist for anointing at his own coronation suggests that his torso could bear public inspection. (Garber 68)

The relevance of these contingencies regarding Richard's deformity is to expose the very requirement and necessity by Shakespeare to highlight this deformity for more political intentions. To contaminate subversion, it required to be shown as unpleasant as possible. In a play like *Macbeth* we sympathize with Macbeth's destruction, though we are aware he has also in one sense or other violated the law by usurping the throne. But in Richard, to show what had already happened in history was reasonable and moral; Richard must be shown as evil and abhorrent as possible. His deformity is consequently highlighted and brought to the foreground as means to compensate for his ability to improvise those around him.

Another associated instance that can be included here concerning Shakespeare's controversial handling of History is Pauline Kiernan's discussion. Kiernan cites an interesting dialogue between Prince Edward and Buckingham prior to the Prince's confinement into the Tower of London;

Prince. I do not like the Tower; of any place.
 Did Julius Caesar build that place, my lord?
 Buckingham. He did, my gracious lord, begin that place,
 When since, succeeding ages have re-edified.
 Prince. Is it upon record, or else reported
 Successively from age to age, he built it?
 Buckingham. Upon record, my gracious lord.
 Prince. But say, my lord, it were not register'd,
 Methinks the truth should live from age to age,
 As 'twere retail'd to all posterity,
 Even to the general al-ending day. (III.i. 68-78)

Ramin and Asadi

This puts into question the validity of historical truth. When did the historical document come into existence? Can it be trusted as real and fact-oriented or not? The play itself, Kiernan suggests, seems to be dealing with this matter of truth or falsity of historical records.

Kiernan observes this conversation, written at the end of the century as representing the debate of the new Protestantism, leading to new ways of investigating history and the past, the debate regarding the old and the new way of approaching history. Buckingham's reply, Kiernan observes, aligns him with those mediaeval chronicle writers, with firm confidence and belief in what was written.

The issue Edward brings up, she maintains, is that "if it were possible to find a contemporary text recording the building of the original Tower, or to establish that a contemporary eye-witness report had been handed down in a precise and accurate repetition successively from that day to this, how can we be sure these 'original transmitters' were telling –or writing–the truth (Kiernan 131)?

Kiernan concludes what we are left with here is "an awareness of temporality itself, and its effects on the transmission of historical knowledge. Instead of being asked to choose between two kinds of transmission- the textual and the oral- we are being made to question the veracity of both written record and oral report. What is the basis of our knowledge about events which took place in the past if we cannot determine the truth of what is happening in the present (Kiernan 132)?

As a history play, Shakespeare had a predesigned story; that Richard was to usurp the throne by murdering his brothers and those who were a potential threat to his throne, and was finally defeated by Richmond, Elizabeth's grandfather. But he does not make it appear so simple. The twist he gives to the play, which can in fact be observed as a twist to history, is two dimensional. On one hand he must intensify, exaggerate Richard's evil nature to show how unjustly he usurped the throne. On the other, he must show his power, the way he exercises it over others and becomes superior to them an example of successful subversion of power and authority. It is this that he distorts and hence by basing the plot of the play on a historical event, twists and poses questions to the very nature of the truth of the story and the very nature of truth.

Richard's nightmares at the end of the play, and the apparition of the souls of those he had killed seems, at first sight, incompatible with the

character of Richard we have been introduced to in the play, as a person who is not loved by anyone, hence is incapable of love. But according to the present discussion regarding Richard's character, this scene and the invocation of Richard's conscience is necessary for the teleological ending the play must come to; the death of Richard as totally expected, accepted and deserved. He was an oppositional figure who has had enough time and space, given a chance to upturn and usurp the throne but for his actions to lose their threat, there must be a halt and this must come as naturally as possible. To present him as suffering because of the death of those whom he was responsible for, this scene is quite compatible with the political implications of the play., serving as the teleological explanation for illegitimate power, propounded by ideological appeals of the play.

In this play, Donald Watson mentions, "Shakespeare concentrates upon acting, deceit, and politics as performance... the playwright entangles his spectators in their own responses, encouraging and prohibiting their seeing the acting as political melodrama" (Watson 100).

Watson rejects those critics who call Richard's character as "consummate" and "impenetrable". The reason for this, he claims, is that through the very act of confiding in the audience his intentions and deeds, he reveals and discloses his power, thus destroying the very idea of "consummate" and "impenetrable" king. Unlike other critics, he claims Richard as unsuccessful in his simulations and pretensions.

By providing examples from the play, Watson attempts to show that all those whom Richard has an ill-intention for, are to some extent aware of his evil intentions. He wishes to prove none are merely deceived by him. In each instance it is his power or what he calls "nerve" not "consummate" acting which transcends them all.

the volley of words, the exchanges of insults and compliments and then of witticism, the histrionics of sword and ring, dramatize a battle of wills not a strategy of deception. Richard wins because he is stronger not because he is a better actor: stronger because he is more daring, has more nerve, is a man in a male-dominated world, and especially because he is a York, brother to the king, and a duke. The young widow of a Lancastrian prince has nothing on her side except her wit... if Anne is deceived at all by Richard's hyperboles of love; her suspension of disbelief is willed. (Watson 105)

It is this very power to suspend disbelief which threatens the Tudor Monarchy, one which Shakespeare is also in a sense upholding. This is all the

Ramin and Asadi

positive side, what Foucault referred to as the productive aspect of power; that Richard, through suspending disbelief and through exercising power, mostly through verbal speech, that he manages to succeed. And this is intimidating to the Tudor monarchy.

Richard succeeds because he manages to hold "...control of the situation, a control which depends more upon nerve, pure power, and the moral weaknesses of the victims than upon the actor's powers. (Watson 105)

Through taking power in his hands and becoming the superior part, Richard manages to display an instance through which power can be taken advantage of by an individual who may not formerly have had the privilege of occupying a superior position. Verbal power can be a substitute for his physical deformity, and hence subversion occurs in his hands. He becomes the master rather than the slave, the self who fashions those around him as occupying the position of the "Other".

To account for Richard's success in manipulation and improvisation, Watson points to the significance of the relation between Richard and other individual characters. Due to their own self-centeredness and moral weakness, the characters in the play become the cause of their own destruction and the reason for Richard's success.

The ambivalent stance taken here by Shakespeare is simultaneously a desire to reveal the way power operates in the hands of Richard, exemplifying a subversive potential, yet at the same time the need to conceal such ominous possibilities.

It was perhaps for this conscious act of concealment that the role of Queen Margaret, who Hammond mentions has an unhistorical appearance in *Richard III* (Shakespeare 81) and whose role is mainly omitted in performance, was crucial to the playwright's ultimate intention. The role of Queen Margaret and her dialogue is to remind the audience of the very justness of those who have been killed by the hands of Richard; thus her paradoxical role; at once cursing Richard for his evil deeds, at the same time reminding us of the justness of those he kills during the play:

Marg. bear with me: I am hungry for revenge,
And now I cloy me with beholding it.
Thy Edward he is dead, that kill'd my Edward;
Thy other Edward dead, to quit my Edward;
Young York, he is but boot, because both they
Match'd not the high perfection of my loss.

The politics of ambiguity

Thy Clarence he is dead, that stabb'd my Edward;
 And the beholders of this frantic play,
 Th'adulterate Hastings, Rivers, Vaughan, Grey,
 Untimely smother'd in their dusky graves. (IV. iv. 61-70)

In the final scenes of the play, divine justice at play is heavily stressed. As Buckingham is led to being executed, he is reminded of the promise he gave to Edward before his death, to stand by his children and his wife, and accepts his own fate as only being just punishment and the workings of divine justice;

Buck. This, this All-Soul's day to my fearful soul
 Is the determin'd respite of my wrongs:
 That high All-seer which I dallied with
 Hath turn'd my feigned prayer on my head,
 And given in earnest what I begg'd in jest.
 Thus doth He force the swords of wicked men
 To turn their own points in their masters' bosoms. (V. i. 17-23)

Thus the notion of moral justice is what anticipates the destruction of Richard's unjust reign, directing the movement of the plot towards the just outcomes of the will of God.

Whereas the lust for power characterized Richard's rise to the throne, the principle of justice is now evoked as Richmond's army are provoked to rise against and challenge Richard's wrongful rule. The last scene of the play comes as a just result; Richard's awareness of his evil deeds, and for the first time, he is truly terrified of himself;

k.Rich. give me another horse! Bind up my wounds!
 Have mercy, Jesu!-Soft, I did but dream.
 O coward conscience, how dost thou afflict me!
 The lights burn blue; it is now dead midnight.
 Cold fearful drops stand on my trembling flesh.
 What do I fear? Myself? there's none else by;
 Richard loves Richard, that is, I and 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? (Act v, iii, 178-189)

Ramin and Asadi

The significance of the dream and the apparition of the ghosts of those he has killed are to justify Richard's fate. He must pay for his evil deeds (he must pay for his subversive conduct and actions) the significance of the last scenes is to juxtapose, apparently, Richard and Richmond; the false and the true rulers. The objective of these scenes is to portray Richard as hating himself for his deeds, and to portray Richmond as the rightful ruler; accounting for the dream which is a nightmare to Richard but a sweet dream to Richmond.

Watson claims the last two acts are more ambivalent than they have been interpreted by critics. It is the very ambivalence which exists in the second part of the play which doubts the conservative view that

were the audience simply to rejoice with Henry VII in his defeat of "God's enemy" and praise Divine Providence for its wisdom in restoring the nation to peace, prosperity, and moral government, the politics of *Richard III* could be confined to the conservative mythologizing of the Tudor myth. But central to the play's treatment of the history of the villain-king is its insistence upon the paradox that Richard himself and not God has cast himself in the role of the Vice, Machiavel, Devil, Anti-Christ, tyrant and villain. Richard assigns himself the part as God's enemy and imposes that dramatic design upon history (121-2).

In other words, Shakespeare's rabbit-duck dichotomy and ambivalence creates the possibility of evaluating the play as a real human figure, who can intentionally take the role of a rebellion, gain power and proceed. If it was just a matter of providence, it would be a very conservative matter. But because it lacks this element, and because of the power of Richard as a mortal being, the play depicts the possibility of subversion and the need for suppression.

Unlike Tillyard, Watson does not observe divine intrusion as justification for Richard's destruction and Richmond's ascendance to the throne. Shakespeare has consciously put this in doubt to question the very notion of divine justification and support for the ultimate ending. Shakespeare has employed history but he has not relied on mere historical facts. He has posed many questions within the play, one of which is exactly the matter of divine justification so much favored by the Elizabethans and employed by conservative critics like Tillyard in describing the Elizabethan world picture.

In his essay on Richard's character, *Angel with Horns*, A.P. Rossiter observes the dual nature of Richard as both angel and devil, dual role of both savior and devil. He identifies the paradox within the context of the play:

Shakespeare in the Histories always leaves us with relatives, ambiguities, irony, a process thoroughly dialectical. Had he entirely accepted the Tudor myth, the

frame and pattern of order, his way would have led, I suppose, towards writing *moral* history (which is what Dr. Tillyard and Dr. Dover Wilson and Professor Duthie have made out of him). Instead, his way led him towards writing *comic* history. The former would never have taken him to tragedy: the latter (paradoxically) did. (74)

He observes this paradox as central to creating the play's unity; that Shakespeare's intention in *Richard III* has been to invert the very notion of a just, merciful Christian God to a vengeful God and thus to capsize the audience's earlier beliefs. Hence Rossiter believes the existence of a unity at the end, which is the very reason for Shakespeare's employment of paradox.

Yet at the same time, his remark that Shakespeare never attempted to 'prove' or 'disapprove', of anything regarding the Tudor myth in the play, unsettles his entire discussion and complies with the notion of Shakespeare's ambiguity regarding the play's structure and Richard's character as resisting final unity. It remains uncertain which side Shakespeare is upholding or 'proving' and which side he is rejecting or 'disapproving'; hence the political intellectuality of Shakespeare as playwright. He is thus perhaps more closer to Shakespeare's impartiality as he states in another essay *Ambivalence: The Dialectic of the Histories* that "Shakespeare's intuitive way of thinking about History (which we cannot formulate as an abstracted notional system) is dialectical. The old eristic-argumentative system which he used is static, changeless; but his thought is dynamic, alterative, not tied to its age" (Anthology 114).

4. Conclusion

In his famous essay, 'Invisible Bullets', Greenblatt maintains that in *Henry V*, we observe, in the character of the King, on a superficial level, the harmonious application of the operation of a just, Christian God (4). Closer studies have revealed an opposite and conflicting perspective of the king as Machiavellian and a hypocrite.

In *Richard III*, we observe the contrary; an evil king, obsessed with evil deeds. But closer observations do also find positive aspects and even come to the point of finding Richard as the object of God as redeemer of the nation. So it seems as if Shakespeare dovetails with this duality which is the very nature of existence.

Ramin and Asadi

Greenblatt observes that "Shakespeare's plays are centrally and repeatedly concerned with the production and contamination of subversion and disorder" (McDonald 443). Greenblatt asserts his intention in reading *Henry V* as not "an ideal image of the potentialities of the English character" but "to observe that such an ideal image involves as its positive condition the constant production of its own radical subversion and the powerful containment of that subversion" (McDonald 444).

The intention of the present paper in reading *Richard III* is the polar opposite of what Greenblatt has observed in his reading of *Henry V*; to scrutinize, within the negative and imperfect portrayal of Richard's physical and moral character, a powerful instance of the possibility of subversion.

Whereas Greenblatt tries to find in the apparently perfect image of the king and his kingship signs of contingencies and hints at subversive voices finally silenced by a powerful, contaminating and oppressing power, the present reading reveals instance of a powerful subversion, yet one in which Shakespeare had to give an imperfect image, to account for its final destruction and contamination.

In *Henry V*, subversion is given voice only to justify more intensely the rightness and justness of the Tudor myth and the right to the throne of the monarchy. This subversion takes on a stronger and more powerful aspect, yet a similar ideological activist can be observed in this case; to justify the rightness of monarchy, Richard has to be portrayed as more evil and as physically disabled as possible to account for the reason why he was successful in the first place.

In fact, the major reason for the employment of the term ambiguity in the title of the present paper rather than ambivalence, regarding the two major aspects of the play discussed above are due to the very difference regarding the two terms. Ambiguity, as Eagleton implies in his book *Literary Theory*, in the works of William Empson, represents an open-endedness "understanding it involves grasping the general contexts in which words are socially used, rather than simply tracing patterns of internal verbal coherence, and such contexts are always likely to be indeterminate" (Eagleton 52).

Conversely, ambivalence incorporates a sense of "fusion of two opposite but complementary meanings." (Eagleton 52) It is the Empsonian notion of ambiguity that seems to be more appropriate to the case of *Richard III*, since the rabbit-duck reading which Norman King identified in Shakespeare's *Henry V* (5), can also be observed in the play considered in the present paper,

as the play embodies both aspects, redeemer and villain, history and tragedy, never attempting to pin down or highlight one of the two sides over the other.

Shakespeare was writing at a time when the threat to the Tudor monarchy was great and needed to be oppressed. The best way any thought of such actions could be effectively suppressed, as new historicists like Greenblatt have mentioned, was through the power of theatricality;

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 provokes. There are moments in Shakespeare's career- *King Lear* is the greatest example- in which the process of containment is strained to the breaking point, but the histories consistently pull back from such extreme pressure (McDonald 455).

The major aim of the present paper has been to demonstrate how Richard is created as a figure who carries out subversion with success and manages to disturb the apparently natural harmony of monarchy, which should have passed down to the next *truthful* heir to the throne. Yet the very representation of such a character had to be evil and this also explains the reason for Richard's deformity and Shakespeare's divergent from historical facts. He had to embody the worst aspect of human capacity, evil, vice and villainy, in order to make this subversion appear as immoral as possible and to make his final death and restoration of the throne to its seemingly *legal* owner as right as possible. Yet the very power and authority Richard achieves and employs, especially exercising it on those who had formerly committed ill actions, puts into doubt the absolute evilness of the character of Richard and hence intensifies Shakespeare's employment of ambiguity as an asset to his impartial political intentions "if any reductive generalization about Shakespeare's relation his culture seems dubious, it is because his plays offer no single timeless affirmation or denial of legitimate authority and no central, unwavering authorial presence" (Greenblatt 254).

Notes

1. In their essay "History and Ideology: The instance of *Henry V*" Sinfield and Dollimore declare that the strategy of ideology is to legitimate inequality, by showing it as either decreed by God or natural. In the Elizabethan era, they maintain, ideological appeal to God was a prevalent means through which ideology would justify its ends. In the case of

Ramin and Asadi

Henry V, the ideology employed was to legitimize the war between England and France by provoking the nationalistic instincts of the nation, and reminding them of the significant role they had in upholding their country's unity, as remarked in the famous honey bee speech, each individual functioning as a bee to achieve ultimate unity, foregrounding their duty to their country.

2. The information was taken from the information provided by Pamela Tudor-Craig, *Richard III* (1973); cited by Graber in her essay *Descanting on Deformity: Richard III and the Shape of History* – p 68.
3. The other three scenes Hammond refers to are; Clarence's dream (I. iv), the scenes of the wailing Queens (II. ii and IV. iv) and the second wooing scene (IV. iv).
4. This essay was taken from the collection of essays on Shakespeare from *Shakespeare: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory 1945-2000*, edited by Russ McDonald (2005).
5. According to Norman Rabkin, in his essay *Rabbits, Ducks, and Henry V*, the King in the play *Henry V* can be observed as reflecting two simultaneously acceptable and paradoxical aspects; an ideal Christian monarch and a Machiavellian hypocritical militarist. To Rabkin, it is this very power of the play to draw the audience to two opposing directions, quoting from Gombrich the familiar rabbit-duck drawing, where we can observe two pictures in one, the same applies to the two readings in one play. Rabkin believes it to be reductive to choose between one of the two opposing readings; to see the play as either an ideal Christian monarch or a perfect Machiavellian Prince, for in selecting one, too much of the other will be lost. He observes the root of such ambiguity as existing deep within Shakespeare's vision, his multivalent concept of reality. Shakespeare himself has observed the operation of such struggle within real world and attempts to share his conflict with us. The same, I believe, applies to *Richard III*, which can be read as another rabbit-duck story with two opposite poles acting as two centripetal forces, drawing asunder the reader's desire regarding ultimate meaning.

References

- Brannigan, J. (1989). *New historicism and cultural materialism*. London: Macmillan.
- Bretons, H. (2001). *Literary theory: The basics*. London: Routledge.
- Cohen, S. (2007). *Shakespeare and Historical Formalism*. Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing, Ltd.
- Dollimore, J., & Sinfield, A. (1994). *Political Shakespeare: Essays in cultural materialism*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Eagleton, T. (1989). *Literary theory: An introduction*. Oxford: T.J.Press Ltd.
- Graber, Marjorie (2002) *Descanting on deformity: Richard III and the shape of history*. In R. J. C. Watt (Ed.), *Shakespeare's history plays* (pp. 60-75). London: Longman.
- Greenblatt, S. (1984). *Renaissance self fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*. Chicago: University of Chicago.
- Guerin, W. (2005). *A handbook of critical approaches to literature* (5th ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Holderness, G. (2000). *Shakespeare: The histories*. London: Macmillan Press.
- Johnson, I. (1999). *Shakespeare's Transformation of medieval tragedy and an introduction to Richard III*. Malaspina University College.
- Kiernan, P. (1988). *Shakespeare's theory of drama*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- McDonald, R. (2005). *Shakespeare; An anthology of criticism and theory 1945-2000*. Carlton: Blackwell Publishing.
- Mills, S. (2005). *Michel Foucault*. London: Routledge: London.
- Rossiter, A. P., & Storey, G. (Eds.) (1989). *Angel with horns: Fifteen lectures on Shakespeare*. London: Longman.
- Shakespeare, W. (1988). *King Richard III: The ardent Shakespeare*. Edited by Anthony Hammond. London: Routledge.
- Taylor, N., & Loughery, B. (1990). *Shakespeare's early tragedies: Richard III, Titus Andronicus, Romeo and Juliet*. London: Macmillan.

Ramin and Asadi

- Tillyard, E.M.W. (1962). *Shakespeare's history plays*. Middlesex: Penguin Books.
- Tillyard, E.M.W. (1943). *The Elizabethan world picture*. Middlesex: Penguin Books.
- Watson, G. D. (1990). *Shakespeare's early history plays; Politics at play on the Elizabethan stage*. London: Macmillan.
- Watt, R.J.C. (2002). *Shakespeare's History Plays*. London: Longman.
- Wells, S. (2003). *Shakespeare survey*. London: Cambridge University Press.
- Wells, S., & Margreta, D. G. (2001). *The Cambridge companion to Shakespeare*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wolfreys, J. (2001). *Introducing literary theories: A guide and glossary*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.