

Shakespeare's Greatest Psychopath

Is character destiny, as the ancient Greeks thought, or is it the other way round? Are people made, or do they make themselves? About this question there is still no universal agreement: it is the heart of our mystery, that I believe shall never be plucked out, as Hamlet put it.

Richard III is Shakespeare's greatest psychopath. He seems to be that disconcerting character, the natural born criminal, who delights in evil. In Act IV, scene IV, his mother, the Duchess of York, says to him:

*Thou camst't on earth to make the earth my hell.
Tetchy and wayward was thy infancy,
Thy schooldays frightful, desp'rate, wild and furious;
Thy prime of manhood daring, bold, and venturous;
Thy age confirm'd, proud, subtle, sly, and bloody:
More mild, but yet more harmful, kind in hatred.*

This is the perfect encapsulation of the career of the intelligent psychopath; to the end, Richard remains what he has always been, and therefore true (if that is quite the word) to type:

*Conscience is but a word that cowards use,
Devis'd at first to keep the strong in awe.*

This sounds distinctly Nietzschean, as does the following chilling line:

Our strong arms be our conscience, swords our law.

Nearly four hundred years before the so-called Me-Decade,

Richard exclaims:

Richard loves Richard, that is, I and I.

Richard tells us that 'All unavowed is the doom of destiny,' yet his very opening speech suggests that he has choice in the matter of how to live. Of course, he cannot help that he was born:

*Deform'd, unfinish'd, sent before my time
Into this breathing world scarce half made up –
And that so lamely and unfashionable
That dogs bark at me, as I halt by them –*

But yet his villainy is freely chosen:

*And therefore, since I cannot prove a lover
To entertain these fair well-spoken days,
I am determined to prove a villain,
And hate the idle pleasures of these days.*

Well, you might say, that is only too understandable in his circumstances; and yet, in the play, Richard, despite the fact that he has:

*No delight to pass away the time,
Unless to spy my shadow in the sun,
And descant on mine own deformity...*

...he proves, in fact, an ardent and successful wooer of women. He seduces not one, but two, women whose husbands or children he has killed. After he has seduced Anne, he exults with all the pride of his evil:

*Was ever woman in this humour wooed?
Was ever woman in this humour won?*

Before dismissing this as preposterous caricature, it is worth recalling that serial killers of woman seldom lack for declarations of love or offers of marriage immediately afterwards. The same is not true of serial burglars.

Shakespeare gets an astonishing number of things right, but some things change nevertheless, for example forensic science. When Richard is in the presence of the corpse of Henry VI, whom he stabbed to death, the wounds open up and begin to bleed anew, indicating that the murderer is near. Now, of course, we have DNA, to say nothing of the polygraph machine. Richard III wouldn't get away with it today – or would he?

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