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## History as a Detective Story

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***History as a Detective Story***

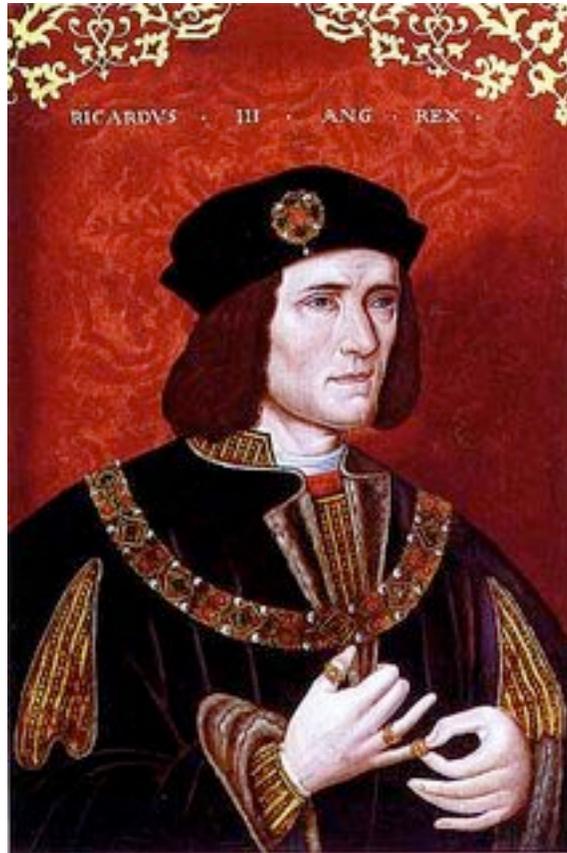
Josephine Tey (*nom de plume* of Elizabeth MacKintosh). *The Daughter of Time*, with Introduction by Robert Barnard (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995; original copyright 1951 by Elizabeth MacKintosh). 206 pages. \$14.00.

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What can a British, mid-twentieth century, mystery novel teach students about medieval and early modern studies? Perhaps more than one would think at first glance.

The gist of the story revolves around the curiosity of Inspector Grant of Scotland Yard who is bored while recuperating in a hospital. Trying to lift his spirits, his friend Marta suggests he “could do some academic investigating . . . . Finding a solution to an unsolved problem.” Grant prides himself on his ability “to characterise faces,” an ability that has helped him solve crimes over the years. So Marta brings him several pictures of historical figures to scrutinize. Among them is “A man dressed in the velvet cap and slashed doublet of the late fifteenth-century. A man about thirty-five or thirty-six years old, lean and clean-shaven.” Grant is taken with the portrait and ponders whether this person was “A judge? A soldier? A prince? Someone used to great responsibility, and responsible in his authority. Someone too conscientious.”

When he turns the portrait over he discovers that the figure is King Richard III: “Crouchback. The monster of nursery stories. The destroyer of innocence. A synonym for villainy.”



*Posthumous Portrait of Richard III, referred to in Daughter of Time as spurring on Grant's investigations into the death of the princes in the Tower National Portrait Gallery*

Unable to accept the notion that his ability to judge a person's character by looking at a person's face might be mistaken, Grant begins to question the truth of the story of Richard III as passed down through the centuries by scholars and school-book histories. How could a face in which Grant sees the qualities of

sensitivity, nobility, and conscientiousness be that of the evil monster who slaughtered his own brother and innocent nephews to gain the crown of England? Was Richard III truly the “bottled spider” whose image Shakespeare painted so indelibly in the English-speaking world’s historical memory? Or was Richard III the victim of “character assassination” perpetrated by slanders spread by the Tudor king and his followers who overthrew him?

From his hospital bed, and with the help of Brent Carradine, an American graduate student who is studying in England, Inspector Grant collects, sifts, re-examines and analyzes the evidence in this 400-year old “cold case” to discover if the “real” Richard III matches the “received” tradition, and, if not, who then really had the best opportunity, and most importantly *motive*, to engineer the murder of the famous “Little Princes in the Tower.” What unfolds as the book progresses is that Grant, Carradine (and through them the reader) discover that what has been an “accepted” narrative about a subject learned in school may be flawed, misleading, slanted, and sometimes just plain wrong.

If nothing else, this is one lesson comes through loud and clear to a student reader. After reading *The Daughter of Time*, several of my students over the years, whether or not they agreed with Grant’s (Tey’s) conclusions, have vowed never again will they accept the interpretations, assumptions and conclusions presented in an history book at face value. Even though names, events, and authors’ names may be unfamiliar to American students, Tey, through the vehicle of Grant’s investigation, demonstrates some of the pitfalls of scholarship. One is the tendency to perpetuate a “master-narrative,” or “consensus” interpretation. Using the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century historians Cuthbert Oliphant and James Gairdner as examples, *The Daughter of Time* shows that despite clear indications in their books that their own investigations of sources produces, in the earlier pages, a more favorable, almost sympathetic, portrayal of Richard III, they later abandon their own conclusions when summarizing his life and “place” within the roll of English monarchs. In the end they return to the “master-narrative,” the

“consensus” of their predecessor historians that Richard was a consummate “villain,” who, as Shakespeare so portrayed him, plotted all along to seize the throne.

Perhaps Tey’s best example of how an historical master-narrative, or consensus, can be perpetuated is shown near the end of the novel. As Grant is packing up his books preparing to leave the hospital he glances through one of the schoolbooks lent to him by a nurse. It condemns Richard III for his “murders” of opponents and “the elimination of two nephews,” and states that “his name was a synonym for evil,” but it credits the “shrewd and far-seeing monarch” Henry VII with a “settled and considered policy of the Tudors to rid themselves of all rivals to the throne, more especially those heirs of York who remained alive on the succession of Henry VII.” Not as obvious to the uninitiated, but still implied in Grant’s investigation is the issue of historiography. Tey shows there can be two (and by implication more than two) sides to historical events and interpretations, and that historical narratives can, and do, shift their conclusions over time.

Closely tied to Grant’s (Tey’s) discoveries regarding secondary sources is the realization that so-called “primary” sources also need be examined closely. The most obvious example in the book is Sir Thomas More’s *History of Richard III*. Grant becomes aware that this much-cited source must be nothing but “hearsay evidence,” since More himself was only five years old when Richard succeeded to the throne and eight when Richard was killed at Bosworth Field. Further, Grant discovers, More had served as a page-boy in the household of Richard’s bitter enemy, John Morton, Henry VII’s Archbishop of Canterbury. Grant concludes, therefore, that More’s history is nothing more than Morton’s propaganda. Similar conclusions are reached about other oft-used sources when it is discovered that virtually all the “primary” sources about Richard III are after-the-fact, most written during the reigns of his Tudor successors. In short, *The Daughter of Time* makes it clear that even so-called primary sources must not be taken at face value but questioned using such criteria as immediacy, validity, and potential bias.

I will grant that for typical, American, college students an instructor will need to take some class time, and entertain students' questions, to explain the historical context of the "mystery" Tey is exploring, especially if it is used (as I do) in a freshman world history survey. Also, one can find other books discussing the same issues—for instance *Royal Blood: Richard III and the Mystery of the Princes* by Bertram Fields, a Hollywood lawyer to entertainers like Madonna and John Travolta (New York: Regan Books, 2000, 352 pages). But while that book takes each accusation against Richard and examines the evidence, and credibility of sources, for and against those accusations from the perspective of presenting the case in a court of law, *Royal Blood* does not have the sense of solving the "mystery" to drive the reader along (laying aside the fact that students would rather read a 206 page *story* than 352 pages of legal/historical analysis). Because Tey is implying that a scholar really is a sort of detective, or investigator, she is turning the reader (in my case the student-reader) into one of those scholar-detectives. Some of them even decide to read further on Richard III and the Wars of the Roses.

To be sure, one can fault Tey herself for a lack of "up-to-date" research. Most of Grant's (Tey's) reasoning and arguments are drawn from the 1906 work by historian Sir Clements Markham<sup>1</sup>—hardly "recent research" by 1951. Nor does Tey mention the 1936 translation of Dominic Mancini's first-hand account of events in 1483 leading up to Richard's seizure of power.<sup>2</sup> This work, when first published, was said to "prove" Richard's guilt in the murder of his nephews. Yet Tey was, after all, a novelist, not an academic historian. And whether or not one accepts Grant's—Tey's—Markham's conclusions about Richard's character, motives and actions, the fact still remains that *The*

<sup>1</sup> Clements Markham, *Richard III: His Life and Character, Reviewed in the Light of Recent Research* (London: Smith and Elder, 1906).

<sup>2</sup> C. A. J. Armstrong, TR. *The Usurpation of Richard the Third* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1936)

*Daughter of Time* involves most students in detective and reflective scholarship in a way no academic book could do.

*The Daughter of Time* also could serve well to inform students in courses dealing with medieval and early modern philosophy, literature, or art history; for many of the same issues of questioning the provenance and possible bias of original sources, and a tendency by modern scholars to build upon an established “master-narrative,” are the same. For instance, many of the writings of Jean Gerson (Chancellor of the University of Paris at the time of Joan of Arc), along with other university scholars of the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, were shorter treatises dealing with contemporary issues, controversies, and ideas. They were not the theological “commentaries” typical of the age of St. Thomas Aquinas. Therefore, in order to fit these “schoolmen” into their master-narrative, historians of Scholasticism have dismissed their efforts as examples of the decline of Scholasticism and creative theological ideas. On the other hand, other historians have removed Gerson and his contemporaries from *that* master-narrative only to place them in *another*. These historians have labeled Gerson and his contemporaries as precursors of Humanism and/or the Reformation. The category to which Gerson *et al.* were assigned depends upon whether the master-narrative was that of the traditional historian of ideas who emphasized the medieval world, or that of one who emphasized the era of the “Renaissance” and Reformation.<sup>3</sup> To offer another example: despite the emergence of new avenues of literary criticism in the late twentieth

<sup>3</sup> Daniel Hobbins, “The Schoolman as Public Intellectual: Jean Gerson and the Late Medieval Tract,” *The American Historical Review*, 108 (2003), 1308-10, 1324-34. Hobbins’ main thrust is to argue that it is a timeworn master-narrative that characterizes Gerson and his contemporaries as a “vulgarization” of scholastic theology.” Instead, he writes, “we should recognize the historical shift that was occurring here.” Gerson and his fellow University schoolmen worked within a different intellectual milieu. They turned their attentions from writing theological commentaries to writing tracts concerning contemporary issues and concerns, as Hobbins puts it, they made “increasing application of magisterial learning to real-world cases.”

century—feminist, post-modernist, Marxist, to name a few—some practitioners of these new forms of criticism still frame their newer insights about Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* within the preconceptions arising from the master-narratives of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century literary critics, many of whom labeled *Romeo and Juliet* as a "problem," or "flawed," tragedy, because the play lacks some elements necessary to what they perceived necessary to an Aristotelian formula for "true" tragedy.<sup>4</sup>

Every student of medieval and early modern culture has to be a kind of detective. All such studies face the problems of incomplete, sometimes contradictory, primary sources and artifacts, the sometimes contradictory and confusing interpretations scholars have drawn from those sources, and the weight of interpretations in the past that, unconsciously, cause those preconceptions to shape newer scholarship. *The Daughter of Time* introduces students to such issues in a way that brings them face to face with the notion that it can be dangerous to trust someone else's data and conclusions blindly, and does so in a way that leads students to share in those processes of questioning and reasoning that scholars must use.

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<sup>4</sup> James H. Forse, "Arden of Feversham and *Romeo and Juliet*: Two Elizabethan Experiments in the Genre of 'Comedy-Suspense,'" *Journal of Popular Culture*, 29 (1995), 85-7.