Richard III: An Outer Deformity Defines Inner Self-Perception

Catherine Felt
catfelt20@gmail.com

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Richard III: An Outer Deformity Defines Inner Self-Perception

In a recent production of the Grassroots Shakespeare’s Richard III, the ending fight scene between Richmond and Richard is somewhat pathetic because Richard is only fighting with one hand. His other arm, hanging limp throughout the entire play doesn’t serve him, and he stays in the same spot due to his leg brace. Richmond, however, possesses full use of all limbs and spars with Richard almost for fun. Richmond towers over the “villain” in a role-reversal of David and Goliath. Suddenly this fearsome villain should be pitied instead of dreaded. The audience doesn’t sense this, however, and cheers Richmond on towards the fatal jab, a similar reaction the Renaissance audience would have given.

Not much seems to have changed since the Renaissance concerning the way Richard III is viewed. Audiences still see Richard as an incurably evil villain, and his physical deformities are just an outer manifestation of his inner distortion. Not only has Richard been portrayed as historically inaccurate, but also he is fictionally misunderstood. His evil actions are tied to his disfigurement to emphasize the importance of being socially acceptable in Renaissance society. Because Richard has a physical defect, he is immediately classified as unable to fulfill social ideals. Shakespeare’s Richard III reveals his villain as a victim of the social constructs within Renaissance society. His deformity is a gateway for assuming false conclusions about his character, judgments that ultimately change Richard’s perception of self.
The fault for Richard’s dramatic transformation from regular ruler to deformed dictator lies in Sir Thomas More’s “A History of King Richard III,” a source full of errors and misreporting, sometimes drastically so. Dan Breen researched More’s work and found it to be “a deeply unstable text” with “frequent narrative disruptions; noticeable inconsistencies in More’s descriptions of his characters . . . and a chronology that is almost never correct” (466). Apparently More wrote his work as a sarcastic “parody” which portrays the monarch in an overly exaggerated evil light (Potter). More did not have serious literary plans for his tome, seeing as he never published either of the two versions he wrote. Nevertheless, his writings were eventually published after his death, and the deformed, malicious characterization of Richard stuck.

More’s work became the source Shakespeare used when writing Richard III, and enhanced the evil characteristics in his villain through means of a deformity. Charles Boyce notes that "a hunched back is nowhere evident in contemporary portraits or accounts of [Richard]. It appears to be a malicious fiction, although Shakespeare surely believed it to be true” (542). Although some may recognize Richard’s victimization through misrepresentation today, most modern audiences will never know the historical truth behind Shakespeare’s malevolent villain, failing to understand the social impact which led to Richard’s actions. Richard Marius, a biographer of More’s life, suggested that perhaps the “real villain in this story is Thomas More, who slandered Richard and made him a caricature of tyranny” (98). It is here where Shakespeare’s cultural capital backfires, as modern readers take Shakespeare’s word as fact and pigeonhole Richard as a dastardly villain instead of realizing Shakespeare’s character is based on an erroneous source.
Shakespeare, of course, was not concerned with historical accuracy, but rather making his villain as abhorrent as possible. Richard plays the part of the villain delightfully well, murdering anyone in the way of his quest for kingship. Throughout the play he manages to draw repulsion and hatred through his crimes, each more horrible than the last. Perhaps most repugnant is Richard’s order to murder his young nephews imprisoned helplessly in the Tower of London. These events all happen tremendously fast; indeed Shakespeare seems to be following More’s inaccurate chronology of Richard. In reality, the actual Richard did not unleash the bloodbath as portrayed in Shakespeare’s play. Boyce clarified that “historical Richard was a very different man, innocent of most, if not all, of the crimes imputed to him” (542). Richard has been victimized historically and fictionally.

The fictional Richard parallels the same unkind treatment historical Richard faced. Audiences only see Richard as a villain just as the historical Richard is thought of as tremendously disfigured. Shakespeare’s continuation of More’s caricature may seem harmless, but the consequence of his decision is realized in context with Elizabeth Comber’s comment that “is quite likely that medieval people made no distinction between physical impairment and social disability” (184). This lack of distinction illuminates Richard’s position in Renaissance society as lesser, malevolent, with no possibility for improvement. Shakespeare’s use of this technique draws the connection between deformities and evil within strongly in the minds of Renaissance people, although his text reveals Richard’s actions are a result of society’s judgments of him. These stereotypes color Richard’s view of self, as he adapts to fit the mold society has already picked for him.

The long history of Richard’s cruel treatment centers on Shakespeare’s choice to link his downfall with his deformity. As the play opens, Richard explains succinctly his reasons for
villainy: “Deform'd, unfinish'd, sent before my time . . . And therefore,—since I cannot prove a lover . . . I am determined to prove a villain” (1. 2. 20, 28, 30). Although this conclusion appears to have been made quickly, his decision could culminate years of anguished wrestling with his disfigured form. At any rate, Richard has limited his options to villainy. This play contrasts starkly with Shakespeare’s other works, which develop characters gradually and divulge motivations progressively. Richard, however, declares his intentions with no buildup, no previous acts or scenes that would trigger or explain his behavior. He isn’t given to deep musings about his state in life or why God would shape him so deformed. Richard isn’t deeply intellectual, and he doesn’t need to be since society has already determined his fate as one of failure. Shakespeare didn’t need to include the acts preceding Richard’s decision, because audiences would have seen from the beginning his broken body and immediately linked it with failure. In truth, he has been socially destroyed. He is useless in battle, a physically underwhelming monarch, with no social standing among women. Seemingly all values that Renaissance people held as important, Richard failed. Critic Linda Charnes explains that Richard has been “cheated not by Nature but by textual history” and pondered the fate of a man “who is barred from being anything other than a monster because his conception, gestation, birth, and body bear the mark of a villainy” (278). No matter what Richard tries to accomplish, he can’t be anything other than what society has already decided he is based on his appearance. He has no way to overcome pre-existing suppositions.

Richard’s physical impairment immediately equates with social disability; however, throughout the course of the play Richard disproves this supposed social impairment. He successfully woos the grieving Lady Anne, contradicting his earlier assessment of his inability to “prove a lover.” The incredulous Richard realizes his actions are superhuman and declares: “Was
ever woman in this humour wooed? Was ever woman in this humour won?” (1.2. 236-7). No indeed, Richard is not as socially crippled as he appears, but can achieve social heights previously denied him. It is important to note, though, that only after Richard has given up a good life in favor of a bad one does he successfully woo Anne. Nothing has changed, however, except for Richard’s view of himself. He gives up a potential good future because he automatically sees himself as socially bankrupt, and seeks after evil pursuits as a way to compensate. Richard’s abilities to woo a woman are not dependent on his deformity, but since society made an outward judgment about Richard’s inner self his perception of self changes to adhere with societal codes. Society sees him as socially incapable, Richard mirrors this belief and thinks of himself as socially inept, but his actions prove this assumption wrong.

Despite this private success, Richard is still seen as a societal failure through his deformities both in the play and in a meta-theatrical way. Within the play, characters eschew him as a “bunchback’d toad,” almost always describing him within the context of his deformities (1.3. 247). He is referred to as a dog at least five times, lastly when Richmond triumphantly declares that “the bloody dog is dead” (5.5. 369). Others keep Richard stuck in his social stereotype, a role Richard accepts and determines to carry out. Richard is a product of his society; the characters make him what he is through their dialogue. In a critical examination of Richard III, Charnes writes:

Richard’s identity is inseparable from his physical ‘difference.’ So long as this identity is perceived by others within the play as corresponding to that of Tudor legend, so long as his body is regarded as ‘evidence’ of his identity, he can have no ‘legitimate’ authority (273).
Although Richard has decided to pursue a course of villainy devoid of social success, built into his actions are desires for social acceptance. Richard’s underlying desire is success. In society it is vitally important to be successful at whatever you do. Richard cannot succeed at being the hero because he is crippled, so he will succeed at being a villain instead. Charnes relates that “his entire course of action can be seen as directed toward gaining control over the social construction, perception, and manipulation of bodily signifiers” (274). Society has decided his fate because of his “bodily signifiers,” but Richard still fights to overcome these perceptions throughout the play. He never achieves his goal of equal social standing or even being seen as human. Though some may argue this outcome is Richard’s fault because of his inhumane deeds, from Richard’s point of view he was only trying to provide a strong example of leadership as a ruler, a lack of skill that he constantly felt.

Like the characters, audiences feel no differently when it comes to Richard’s deformities. Because Richard defines himself as a villain, viewers immediately assign him that role, a role that fits well since he looks the part. Instead of questioning the reasons behind why a failure to “prove a lover” would result in such a life-destroying choice, audiences only too quickly grasp his appearance and decision to be the bad guy. Renaissance audiences in particular failed to understand the deeper psychology propelling Richard. Mackenzie gives an added perspective to Richard’s position, saying that in Medieval times “the dice were loaded appallingly against the afflicted, even kings, as their handicaps were seen as a punishment from the almighty for sins present or past.” Not only is Richard fighting the stigma of having a “spiritual” disability, but also he carries the weight of being a failure as a royal figure. Recognizing that Richard’s treatment is harsh and unfair is lost within the play as well as in the theater tradition.
This has been compounded as Richard’s victimization has failed to translate throughout Richard III’s performance history. Performances of Richard III perpetuate the archaic ideas that Richard’s deformities are socially malignant. Instead of viewing Richard as a victim, he transcends his limits and stereotypes and becomes a threatening presence, something to be feared, and a manipulative tyrant. Laurence Olivier first played Richard III in a 1955 movie, a performance that inspired Professor Richard Harrison to remark that “it’s hard to find a more malodorous fellow than Richard III . . . most of us who think of that king at all instantly see the slit-eyed, snaky, deformed embodiment of evil” (Harrison). This landmark film forever set the standards by which Richard should be played: as a man with evil qualities intrinsically tied to his deformity. Most performances emphasize Richard’s villainy without accounting for his deformities. Interpretations of Richard III attempt to supplant the cripple with an enormous evil persona. Superimposing a villain on top of the hunchbacked man leaves no room to interpret his deformities as anything other than evil.

Modern audiences should be alarmed they react much the same way archaic audiences would since we supposedly have a more open, understanding social perspective than Renaissance people would have had. Unfortunately, this reveals that our society also judges people on criteria similar to the Renaissance. Though we might not equate a deformity with social incongruence, society uses the same outward judgments to determine social worth. Davey Morrison Dillard took on the role of Richard in the Grassroots production, and shared a similar view of Richard’s sad fate by noting the social effects Richard suffered under, saying “there's some real anguish there . . . [Richard] feels cut off from and scorned by society and so he does everything he can to prove that he is better than they are, that they should love him and fear him” (Dillard). On a haphazard crash-course to gain social capital and royal prestige he should have
already enjoyed, Richard sees himself on a quest for a role in society he shouldn’t have to earn. Mackenzie noted that in today’s world “Richard's very considerable achievements should attract almost heroic acclaim if it turns out that he was handicapped in anything like the way Shakespeare depicts” (Mackenzie). Perhaps that is the most hopeful note, that Richard’s social failures would be seen differently in today’s society. Given that reactions from audiences (modern and medieval alike) are similar, this is not likely to be the case. When Richard, a royal figure who should have been seen as a valuable member of society, is discriminated against on account of his body, his only viable option left is an underhanded way of achieving these important social roles.

After an examination of Richard III, his deformity is seen in the context of social rejection, and not as evidence of deeper evil. Historical Richard’s false portrayal should be an indication of fictional Richard’s inaccurate characterization. Shakespeare’s play uncovers the criteria with which society values humans, which is based on holding a high position or having romantic prowess. Despite these ideas stemming from archaic roots, a comparison between Renaissance and modern reactions to the play reveal that the two respective societies haven’t evolved much. Society still measures worth based on exterior judgments, a measure that is as ridiculous as equating deformities with social incongruence. Since Richard sees himself as worthless in society, he enacts deeds equal to his pre-determined standing.
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