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Classical and Early Modern Paradoxes in England

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A Feast of Strange Opinions: Classical and Early Modern Paradoxes on the English Renaissance Stage

Edited by Marco Duranti
and Emanuel Stelzer

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CEMP - Classical and Early Modern Paradoxes in England

The series of CEMP volumes offers studies and fully annotated scholarly editions related to the CEMP open-access digital archive. This archive includes texts pertaining to the genres of the paradox, of the paradoxical fiction, and of the problem, which were published in England in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, and which are currently unavailable online and/or not open access (https://dh.dlls.univr.it/bib-arc/cemp). Our digital archive features diplomatic, semidiplomatic, and modernised editions of selected works, furnished with critical apparatuses and editorial notes, alongside related documentary materials, which, in turn, are relevant to poetic and dramatic texts of the English Renaissance. These texts provide fundamental testimony of the early modern episteme, functioning as a hinge joining widespread forms of the paradoxical discourse in different genres and texts and within the development of sceptical thinking.

The project is part of the Skenè Centre as well as of the Project of Excellence Digital humanities applied to foreign languages and literatures (2018-2022) Department of Foreign Languages and Literature at the University of Verona (https://dh.dlls.univr.it/en/).

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“Indiscreet chroniclers and witty play-makers”: William Cornwallis and the Fiction of Richard III

Francesco Dall’Olio

Abstract

This essay explores the relationship between William Cornwallis’ paradoxical “Praise of King Richard the Third” (printed 1616) and the English Renaissance literary tradition on Richard III. It underlines how Cornwallis’ text stands out as part of the development of such a tradition, and, in particular, how its reversal of the traditional negative judgment about this figure represented a pivotal point in the evolution of historical thinking about King Richard. In particular, it will be demonstrated that by comparing Cornwallis’ paradox, on the one hand, to Thomas More’s *History of Richard III*, and on the other, to William Shakespeare’s *Henry VI Part 3* and *Richard III*, it is possible to trace an evolution of Renaissance literary tradition about Richard III that, starting from the officially negative portrait of his figure offered by More, and passing through the more complex depiction presented by Shakespeare, comes to a breaking point in Cornwallis’ paradox. In that text the author for the first time openly declares that what previous historical tradition had presented as ‘history’ actually was a very prejudicial, if not ideological, ‘fiction’, reflecting more the habits and views of his readers than the truth of historical events. In this way, Cornwallis’ paradox laid the ground for the subsequent historical revaluations of King Richard III.

Keywords: William Cornwallis; Thomas More; *Richard III*; tyranny; historiography

1. Premise

First printed in 1616, in the collection *Of Certain Paradoxes*, but probably written in the 1590s,[1] William Cornwallis the Younger’s

1 There are ten extant manuscripts of the text, some written by the author himself: see Medori in Cornwallis 2018-2019, 9.

"Praise of King Richard the Third" is the first attempt to rehabilitate the most eminent tyrant figure in medieval English history. As the title of the collection in which it appears suggests, it is not a genuine work of historical revision aimed at restoring the truth of the sovereign's action, but rather an ironic inversion of the assessment of his reign, based on the mechanism of reversal of opinion typical of the literary genre of paradoxes. Cornwallis himself concluded the piece with the notation "Yet for all this know, I hold this but a paradox" (Cornwallis 2018-2019, 66), as if to invite the reader to consider his work as a mere literary game. Given the subsequent history of the reception of the text, one could say that Cornwallis succeeded beyond his wildest expectations: the "Praise" was largely ignored by scholars until 1977, the date of its first modern edition edited by Arthur Kincaid, and even then it received a harsh welcome. Alison Hanham, reviewing Kincaid's edition, dismissed the "Praise" as a text of little literary merit, the work of an author who "wrote for effect, not out of concern for historical fact or justice" (Hanham 1978, 26). This view was recently reiterated by Lesley Boatwright on a page of the *Richard III Society* website. "With Cornwallis as advocate, we might think, who needs a prosecution?", Boatwright wonders, expressing outrage at the way in which Cornwallis, instead of proving that Richard III did not commit the crimes of which he was accused, merely maintains that these crimes were in fact committed for the good of the country. Such a unanimously negative critical view has nipped in the bud any deeper investigation of the relationship between Cornwallis' paradox and the English Renaissance literary tradition on Richard III.

This essay is a first attempt to bridge that gap. In order to do so, it is good, in my opinion, to start at the beginning, with the text that laid the ground for the birth of this same tradition, Sir Thomas More's *History of Richard III*. In the first part of the essay, I offer a (necessarily brief) analysis of this text, underlining the reasons why More's description of Richard encountered such immediate and wide success among contemporary readers, and showing which features of his work ended up laying the foundations for the subsequent literary depiction of Richard as a tyrant. I will also show, however, how More's text also presents a more ambiguous side in his depiction of Richard, one that went largely unnoticed

by Renaissance readers, but that has been identified and studied by recent scholarship. In particular, I highlight how More's seemingly positive assessment of other historical figures such as Edward IV is not as positive as it seems, and how the way he handles some of the most traditional features of Humanist historiography (the genre to which the *History* belongs) seems to reveal a pessimistic vision of politics and history as conceived in Humanist traditional thinking. More's *History* will thus be shown as a complex text which presents at the same time the nuclei for the traditional negative depiction and those for questioning this same tradition. Part 2 of the essay will be devoted to the second most prominent text of the time regarding Richard III, William Shakespeare's play of the same name (first printed in 1597), as well as *Henry VI Part 3* (first printed in 1595).[2] In this section, I shall argue that the consistent differences between Richard's characterisation in Shakespeare's history plays and that of earlier plays on the sovereign (Thomas Legge's *Richardus Tertius* and the anonymous *True Tragedy of King Richard the Third*) present a more nuanced and intricate exploration of the traditional narrative about the sovereign, which exploits some of More's previously mentioned ambiguities and in some ways anticipates Cornwallis' critique. In particular, I suggest that the emphasis Shakespeare puts, on the one hand, on the relationship between Richard's usurpation and the War of the Roses, and, on the other, on the 'theatricality' of Richard III's crimes (even going so far as to depict Richard as a sort of Vice-like figure, capable of talking directly to the audience), can be seen as a conscious attempt to show how 'fictional' the traditional representation of King Richard actually was, how it was based on an assumption that what it was told about him was true. In this sense, it could be said that Shakespeare's plays represent a sort of 'middle phase' in the history of King Richard's depiction, one that still retains the framework established by More, while at the same time exploiting its ambiguities, thus anticipating some

2 I give here the dates of the first printings of both texts: an octavo edition of *Henry VI Part 3* (entitled *The True Tragedy of Richard Duke of York*) and a quarto edition (Q1) of *Richard III*. Both works were later reprinted several times separately before being included in the 1623 First Folio. For a comparison of these texts, see Shakespeare 2009, 417-60 and Shakespeare 2019, 148-76. My quotations from Shakespeare refer to these editions.

notable aspects of Cornwallis' paradox. In Part 3, I finally address that text, clarifying its connection to More and Shakespeare, as well as showing how Cornwallis' paradoxical re-evaluation echoes more general cultural changes in European Humanism involving the writing of history and the description of the good king. My aim will be to show how Cornwallis' text, despite his openly paradoxical nature, lays the ground for subsequent historical revaluations of King Richard's figure by being the first text denouncing the 'fictitiousness' of previous historical tradition about him, i.e. denouncing how it was the result of a reliance on a prejudicial view of him by his contemporaries as well as founded on (according to Cornwallis) mistaken ideological assumptions about the nature of good kingship. I will also show how, in doing so, Cornwallis reprises and expands on aspects of the traditional depiction of Richard which were left unsaid, or implicitly present, in More and Shakespeare. As a result, the "Praise of King Richard the Third" will emerge as a text testifying to a period of transition in the history of Richard III, one that deserves more attention and consideration.

2. Crafting the Fiction: Thomas More

Probably written between 1513 and 1516 in two versions, English and Latin, and left unfinished, Thomas More's *History of Richard III* was never published during the author's lifetime.[3] After extensive manuscript circulation, it was first printed in English in 1543, as an addition to a reprint of John Hardyng's fifteenth-century chronicle (ending with the reign of Edward IV). In 1557, it received its first official printing as part of the general edition of More's English corpus, edited by his nephew, the publisher William Rastell (the Latin text would be first printed in 1565, in the first comprehensive edition of More's Latin corpus, also edited by Rastell). However, in 1548, the *History* had already been entirely incorporated into Edward Hall's *The Union of the Two Noble and Illustre Families of Lancaster and York*, in a version heavily edited by the editor of that text, Richard

3 I take the chronological data on the writing and publication of More's work from John M. Logan's introduction in More 2005, xxi-xxiii, liii-xlv. All my quotations from More's text refer to this edition.

Grafton (see Womersley 1993). The same thing would happen in 1587, when More's text would once again be included in another historical work, Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicle*. This incorporation of the text in some of the most important early modern English historical works, even before its first official printing, is a testament to its immediate success among early modern English readers, also proved by the eighteen reprinted editions of the work in the last half of the sixteenth century (which make the *History of King Richard III* emerge as the most reprinted historical work of the time).

The reasons for this success are several, and not all as obvious as they might seem. The first, and most evident, is the combination of the high intellectual prestige of the author himself and the uniqueness of the work. As John M. Logan noted (More 2005, xlv), throughout the sixteenth century, the *History* remained one of the two notable English Renaissance historical texts written in the style and form of Humanist historiography (the other being Polydore Vergil's *Anglica Historia*, first printed in Basel in 1534), and by far the most admired of the two, well before its publication, as evidenced by the prefatory letter to Roger Ascham's *Report of Affairs and State of Germany* (1553). After providing a description of the ideal historian, Ascham states that the only English author who comes close to this ideal is "Sir Thomas More, in that pamphlet of Richard the Third", who "doth in most part . . . of all these points so content all men, as, if the rest of our story of England were so done, we might well compare with France, Italy, or Germany on that behalf" (Ascham 1965, 6). With early modern English historiography still being written according to the patterns and forms of the medieval chronicle throughout the century, More's *History* stood as a one-of-a-kind exemplar of an 'alternative' type of historical literature, more akin to the cultural aspirations and tastes of the Elizabethan intellectual elite, educated according to Humanist values and fashions.[4]

4 The next early modern English historical text written in a different style from that of the medieval chronicles would be Francis Bacon's *History of the Reign of King Henry the Seventh* (1622). Ironically, it is a work that can be seen in some ways as a continuation of More's *History*, not only because it tells the story of Richard III's successor, but because More himself hints in the *History* at his intention to write a similar work: "we shall . . . heareafter . . . write the time of the late noble prince . . . King Henry the Seventh" (More 2005, 97).

As Hanan Yoran (2001, 524-5) recalls, in the Humanist conception of history, what mattered was not just the accurate recounting of events per se, but their rhetorical reinvention, the purpose of which was to explain "the actions of historical figures through credible psychological descriptions of their personalities and . . . the causal relationship between events and their possible implications" (524). More's work is a perfect realisation of this ideal. The story begins with the famous psycho-physical description of Richard not only as hunchbacked and crooked, but also, and more importantly, as "close and secret, a deep dissimuler . . . outwardly comparable where he inwardly hated . . . dispiteous and cruel, not for evil will alway, but often for ambition" (More 2005, 10-12). The subsequent detailed account of the intrigues by which Richard and his accomplices (especially the Duke of Buckingham) succeed in placing him on the throne is thus interpreted as demonstrating the 'truth' of such a character, through the use of many typical narrative patterns and scenes involving tyrants and bad sovereigns. This also includes numerous imitations of passages from classical authors (also a typical feature of Humanist historiography), especially Sallust and Tacitus (on whom cf. Logan in More 2005, xxxiv-xl),[5] which were for his early readers an additional motive for admiration. As Logan points out, both More and his readers "uninhibitedly embraced the rhetorical doctrine of imitation, which decreed that assiduous imitation of the best literary models was . . . if done properly, a principal distinction of the accomplished writer" (More 2005, xxxiiii). More had recounted a capital event in English history according to the lofty model of the ancient writers, thereby creating a narrative that was both compelling as a work of literature and credible as an account of historical events.

A peculiar aspect of More's work should be highlighted: the absence of any citation of written sources, and in contrast the oft-stated reliance on eyewitnesses. We see here a felicitous coincidence between fact and literary convention. It is highly unlikely that More was aware of the other written sources of the time relating

5 Even Richard's description as a dissembler is heavily influenced by Tacitus' description of Tiberius: see Logan in More 2005, 90-4, 125-6; Siemon in Shakespeare 2009, 54-5.

to Richard's usurpation, such as Friar Domenico Mancini's account *De Occupatione Regni Anglie per Riccardum Tercium* (1485), or the so-called Second Continuation of the Crowland Abbey Chronicle. Neither text enjoyed a wide circulation in sixteenth-century England (their first printed edition dates to the twentieth century), and one of them (Mancini's text) was eventually lost to be rediscovered only in 1934 at the Municipal Library of Lille, in France.[6] Nor has it been possible to conclusively trace passages where More's text directly mirrors official documents relating to Richard's accession to the throne.[7] Even if he consulted such texts, however, quoting written sources (unless they were famous authors) was not part of the literary conventions of Humanist historiography. Consequently, the main authority on which More based his account of King Richard's crimes are unnamed witnesses, if not actual rumours. "Some wise men" claim that he plotted against his brother George, Duke of Clarence (More 2005, 12), just as "men say all the time" that he murdered Henry VI in the Tower. Similarly, the story of the murder of the princes in the Tower is told "after [the] way that [More] . . . heard by such men and by such means as methinketh it were hard, but it should be true" (97). At the heart of his *History* is the implicit assumption that what is reported in the work is a faithful reworking of what Richard III's contemporaries thought of him. As people who personally witnessed his usurpation, it is suggested, they are the best witnesses to the truth of that king's person and actions.[8]

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6 It is all the more interesting and significant then that More's account and that of these two sources are substantially similar: see Hanham 1975 for a more detailed analysis.

7 The only partial exception is a speech by the Duke of Buckingham, recalling a petition presented to Richard in 1483 inviting him to ascend the throne: see Hanham 1975, 45-8; Logan in More 80-90, 129-31.

8 And to be fair, there is some truth to be found in this statement. More was born in 1478, five years before King Richard's ascension, and seven before his death at the battle of Bosworth, and it is far from unlikely that he is reporting opinions and rumours he personally heard. In fact, it has been suggested that among the unnamed oral sources he quotes are his father, John More, and the Bishop of Ely, John Morton, in whose house More served in his youth: see More 2005, xxiv-v.

It is therefore significant that, as Kincaid (1972, 237-41) notes, from about halfway through the text (starting with the plot against Hastings) More insists that Richard's dissimulations actually fooled no one. Even the members of the Privy Council, when they see Richard accuse Hastings of plotting to kill him with magic, bringing as evidence his arm that had supposedly been shrunk by an evil spell, "well perceiv[ed] that this matter was but a quarrel . . . no one was present, but well knew that his arm had always been so from birth" (More 2005, 56). Later, the people of London notice that there is something strange about the proclamation regarding Hastings' hasty execution: it was "so curiously indited, and so fair written in parchment in so well set hand . . . that any child might well perceive that it had been prepared before" (63). From this moment on, every one of Richard's deceptions, devised to lend a veneer of legitimacy to his accession, fails to convince those present. Dr Shaa's speech, which is supposed to lead to a popular acclamation in favour of Richard, falls on deaf ears, as does Buckingham's subsequent speech to the Mayor of London. Finally, Buckingham and Richard's charade, where the former apparently persuades him to accept the throne against his will for the good of the country, is immediately perceived as such: "there was not a man so dull that heard them, but he perceived well enough that all the matter was made between them" (94). Richard's 'play' deceives neither his contemporaries nor More's readers, who, through the story he tells, are able to see the reality of things: the great simulating tyrant is thus condemned, even before his actual punishment, by the very fact that his deceptions have been revealed and consigned to history (cf. Kincaid 1972, 230-1).[9]

This aspect of the work is directly related to another one, equally important. While it was typical of the Humanist conception of history that historical works should serve an educational purpose

9 This tension between Richard's plots and their unmasking is only one aspect of the 'theatrical' nature of More's *History*, as explained by Kincaid: "On one level, the reader is the audience, viewing the 'story' of the tyrant . . . from the standpoint of the *contemptus mundi* tradition . . . On the other level, Richard is an actor being watched by an audience within the play in which he is the leading actor . . . The subtle shifts in the audience's attitude towards Richard determine his gradual decline" (1972, 231-2).

(providing great examples of virtues to be imitated or vices to be avoided), it was far less common for such works to take an overtly moralistic tone. The *History* is one of the few exceptions. From the outset, More declares his intention to condemn, through the account of King Richard's rise and fall, the "vile desire of sovereignty" (8), the "pestilential . . . ambition and desire of vanity and sovereignty" (16). It is this unnatural lust for power, according to More, that drove Richard to usurp the throne of his nephews and manipulate his subjects. In this regard, Richard III was the antithesis of the 'good sovereign' Edward IV,[10] who was instead "so kind, courteous and familiar" (7) that he invited the Lord Mayor of London and his aldermen to dine and hunt with him simply for the pleasure of their company. In contrast to this paradigm of harmonious relations between the Crown and its subjects, the condemnation of those who, like King Richard, voluntarily choose to evade it, is even more striking. His end was him falling prey to his own troubled conscience: "After this abominable deed [the murder of the princes in the Tower] he never had peace of mind, he never thought himself safe . . . He did not rest well at night, lay long awake and pondering . . . slumbering rather than sleeping, troubled with fearful dreams" (102).[11]

This moral message at the heart of More's *History* had a particular appeal for the readers of the first edition of the text (1557). One year earlier, Mary Tudor's death marked not only the end of the persecutions against the Protestants, but also the apparent end of a period in the cultural history of the English Renaissance marked by the contrast between the authoritarian tendencies of the monarchs (who sought to keep the political discussion of the country under

10 More's text is not the only one of the time to offer a good representation of Edward; on the contrary, as evidenced by Edward Whittle (2017), Edward IV was a highly respected and admired figure at the time. As we shall see below, however, More's attitude towards him is not as positive as his description at the beginning of the *History* would make us think.

11 We find here a typical feature of the Renaissance literary and political description of the tyrant: having alienated himself from his subjects, he lives as a prey to fear and anxiety, as well as to the ghosts of his conscience. For a more detailed account, see the essays collected in the special issue of *Comparative Drama* (Bigliazzi 2017-2018) dedicated to this particular aspect of the figure of the tyrant in both antiquity and the Renaissance.

their control by suppressing any dissent) and the increasingly sophisticated political consciousness of the new political elite, educated according to the Humanist model. The peak of the clash was represented by the texts of the so-called 'resistance literature', written by Protestant authors exiled during Mary's reign (John Ponet, Christopher Goodman, John Knox), which were published in the same years as the *History* (1556-1558). These texts explicitly stated for the first time in English political thinking that the true source of the sovereign's power is the will of the community, and if the sovereign abuses his or her power, then either the people themselves or their representatives have the right/duty to remove them. The same idea, although expressed in less overtly rebellious tones, is at the centre of the political reflection of the first Protestant intellectual circle in early modern England, which gathered at the University of Cambridge.[12] The ideals of this movement found full expression a few years after the printing of the *History*, in the treatise *De Republica Anglorum* by Sir Thomas Smith (published posthumously in 1583 but written in 1562-1565). This work opens by postulating a distinction between the good sovereign and the tyrant, where the former is identified by his adherence to the established law, and the latter by its breaking:

> Where one person beareth the rule they define that to be the estate of a king, who by succession or election commeth with the good will of the people to that gouernement, and doth administer the common wealth by the lawes of the same and by equitie, and doth seeke the profit of the people as much as his owne. A tyraunt they name him, who by force commeth to the Monarchy against the will of the people, breaketh lawes alreadie made at his pleasure, maketh others without the aduise and consent of the people, and regardeth not the wealth of his communes but the aduancement of him selfe, his faction, & kindred. (Smith 1583, 6)

More's *History*, with its condemnation of an ambitious tyrant who seized a power to which he had no right, was a text that the people developing this political doctrine (which was going to become

12 For a more in-depth presentation of this circle (of which Roger Ascham was a member), see McDiarmid 2007.

the official ideology of the Elizabethan political elite during the following years) would undoubtedly find appealing.[13]

To sum up, the success of Thomas More's *History of King Richard the Third* can be attributed (aside from its high literary quality) to three significant factors: its unique literary status as the the most famous Humanist historical work of the English Renaissance; the truthfulness of its account of the events involving Richard as based on the opinions of direct witnesses; the moralistic interpretation of these events, leading to the condemnation of the tyrannical sovereign who disregards the laws of the country and imposes his will on the subjects out of personal ambition.[14] It is then not surprising that such success led to the creation of the traditional figure of Richard III which ended up overshadowing the presence of some ambiguous aspects in More's text as regards both Richard's portrayal and More's handling of Humanist conceptions of history. These aspects have recently been recognised and deserve to

13 It also did not hurt that More was an intellectual executed by another 'tyrant', Henry VIII, for daring speak against his intention to break the laws of his country.

14 Some would add a fourth factor, the proximity of the *History* to the so-called 'Tudor myth', i.e. the view of late medieval English history which saw the deposition of Henry VI by Edward IV, resulting from the War of the Roses, as the delayed punishment for the deposition of Richard II by Henry IV of Lancaster (Henry VI's grandfather). In turn, Richard III's usurpation was seen as the punishment for the House of York, marking the culmination of this story of punishments and revenge, ultimately concluding with the ascent to the throne of Henry VII Tudor, legitimate heir to both houses and therefore the man chosen by God as the new rightful ruler. This interpretation was first proposed within Polydore Vergil's *Anglica Historia*, and would go on to become dominant during the reign of the subsequent Tudor sovereigns, up to Elizabeth. We do have evidence that More's work was being used to sustain this ideological construction: as David Womersley has shown, Richard Grafton, the editor who incorporated More's work into his 1548 edition of Edward Hall's *Union* (see above), did change the texts in a few places in order to underline both Richard's evil nature and the 'providentiality' of Tudor government (see Womersley 1993, 280-8). However, recent scholarship tends to distance More's *History* from the 'Tudor myth': More's disdain for Henry VII is well-known (see Logan in More 2005, xxi, 96-7) and the *History* cannot be appreciated as a vehicle of propaganda: see Siemon in Shakespeare 2009, 53.

be briefly mentioned, if only because some of them will later be reprised by both Shakespeare and Cornwallis.

We can begin by focusing on an already mentioned important point of More's text: the reaction of the people of London to Buckingham 'convincing' Richard to accept the throne. While the deception is immediately recognised as such, not only does this recognition not undermine the success of the plan, but, on the contrary, some of the people see nothing wrong in what happened:

> Some excused that again, and said all must be done in good order, though. And men must sometimes for the manner sake not be aknowen what they know. For at the consecration of a bishop, every man wotteth well, by the paying for his bulls, that he purposeth to be one, and though he pay for nothing else. And yet must he be twice asked whether he will be bishop or not, and he must twice say nay, and at the third take it as compelled thereunto by his own will. And in a stage play all the people know right well that he that playeth the sowdaine is percause a sowter. Yet if one should can so little good to show out of season what acquaintance he hath with him, and call him by his own name while he standeth in his majesty, one of his tormentors might hap to break his head, and worthy, for marring the play. And so they said that these matters be kings" games, as it were stage plays, and for the more part played upon scaffolds. In which poor men be but the lookers-on. And they that wise be, will meddle no farther. For they that sometimes step up and play with them, when they cannot play their parts, they disorder the play, and do themself no good. (More 2005, 94-5)

The use of the theatrical metaphor (much loved by More)[15] here is ambiguous. The comparison that the people make between the deception by which Richard obtains the crown, the normal

15 Suffice it to mention its use in *Utopia*, where More uses it to reproach Raphael Hythlodaeus for his refusal to advise a sovereign. There, More states that all that is needed to give good advice to the sovereign is the counsellor's ability (and willingness) to play his part well according to the interlocutor's mood: "Quaecumque fabula in manu est, eam age quam potes optime, neque ideo totam perturbes quod tibi in mentem venit alterius quae sit lepidior" ("Go through with the drama in hand as best as you can, and don't spoil it all just because you happen to think of a play by someone else that might be more elegant"). I quote the text and translation from More 1995, 96-7.

ritual for the election of a bishop, and a theatrical performance suggests a perception of the whole of political life as "essentially theatrical, in the sense that there is no other 'objective' reality beyond or beneath the social conventions and fictions" (Yoran 2001, 529). Such a conclusion radically challenges a cornerstone of Humanist historiography, namely the historian's ability to arrive at the 'truth' by reinventing events so as to reveal the 'reality' of the characters. Through the commentary of the people of London, More shows how such a hope could well prove to be just a delusion: the only conclusion the people of London draw from observing and understanding Richard's 'performance' is that any political ceremony is inherently false, and that it is better not to meddle in matters that do not concern them, because true knowledge in such matters is impossible to achieve. The Humanist faith in history's ability to recognise an order behind the facts of history is thus radically challenged.

It is then probably no coincidence that, in the *History*, the reinvention of reality through rhetoric is presented as a tool for deception (cf. Yoran 2001, 530-4). Richard, Buckingham and their accomplices are shown as able to formulate excellent speeches, which succeed perfectly in their purpose (be it to deny the young Duke of York, Richard, the right of sanctuary, to kill Hastings on charges of treason or to have Richard declared king). The fact that the truth of their hidden intentions remains clear ends up underlining even more how easily these individuals were able to exploit the fragilities of a system whose conception of political activity was "inherently interpretive and performative" (Yoran 2001, 530). Nor is this condemnation reserved only for Richard; on the contrary, at times More seems implicitly to suggest that all the characters in his history are as guilty as he is of ambition and desire for power (see Yoran 2001, 519-22). Perhaps the most glaring example is the 'good king' Edward IV, whose presentation becomes increasingly ambiguous as the narrative progresses. Already his initial description contains ironic traits, such as the emphasis on his love for the pleasures of the table ("in his latter days with over-liberal diet somewhat corpulent and burly", More 2005, 5) and sex ("he was . . . greatly given to flesh wantonness"); in the latter case More, in order not to incur the reader's moral condemnation, even

has to specify that Edward satisfied himself "without violence", and that in any case he "in his latter days lessed and well left" this "fault". Edward's two subsequent appearances only further diminish his initial 'ideal' description. First, when More recounts how Richard, Duke of York, claimed the crown, his three sons – Edward, George and Richard – are all described, indistinctly, as "greedy and ambitious of authority" (9), without the 'virtuous' Edward being in any way separated from his brothers. Finally, during the great sequence of Edward IV's courtship of young widow Elizabeth Woodville (later his Queen, and mother of the princes Richard kills), on the one hand More suggests that the woman manipulated Edward's desire to exploit his favours ("she . . . denied him . . . so wisely, and with such good manner, and words so well set, that she rather kindled his desire", 71), and on the other hand Edward is shown to impose his own decision on the kingdom without caring about the good of the state, nor the counsel of friends ("he . . . asked the counsel of his other friends . . . in such manner as they might eath perceive it booted not greatly to say nay", 72). The ideal king of the beginning emerges here as a character in fact rather similar to his 'tyrannical' brother: both are ambitious, both desire power, both are ready to simulate and pretend in order to get what they want. These aspects undermine the apparent almost schematic simplicity of More's narrative, eventually suggesting that, however morally condemnable Richard may be, nevertheless his action "was in large part a product of a badly flawed system" (Breen 2010, 486; cf. Siemon in Shakespeare 2009, 57).

In this sense, More's text emerges (and has been recognised) as a complex work. While we do not need to think that More is lying about his or his contemporaries' opinion of Richard III, his awareness of the 'theatricality' of politics ultimately leads him to present an ultimately pessimistic picture of politics (and perhaps of history) as a den of ambition, falsehood and hypocrisy, where perhaps no real moral distinction can be traced among its participants.[16] In

16 So much so that, as Dan Breen (2010) notes, it is only when someone comes out of it that they become credible as a positive character. This is what happens to Edward IV who, on his deathbed, denounces the "pestilent serpent [of] ambition and desire of vainglory and sovereignty" (More 2005, 16) as the

this sense, we could say that *The History of King Richard the Third* contains within itself the awareness of its own 'fiction', that is, of being a relation of precise historical events whose truth, however, is perhaps not as certain as it would seem at first sight, and whose evaluation, though grounded on universal moral rules, still does not cover the whole story. The same ambiguity, forty years later, is at the heart of William Shakespeare's theatrical depiction of the sovereign in *Henry VI Part 3* and *Richard III*.[17]

3. Showing the Fiction: William Shakespeare

William Shakespeare's history play was the third theatrical adaptation of Richard III in Elizabethan England, following Thomas Legge's Latin tragedy *Richard Tertius* and the anonymous *The True Tragedy of Richard III*. These three theatrical adaptations of Richard's history have often been compared to one another many times in several studies, for the most part with the purpose to ascertain whether an influence from Legge and *The True Tragedy* can be recognised in Shakespeare's depiction of Richard. I do not have here the space to offer, in the following pages, a detailed comparison of the three plays and their characterisation of the sovereign (for which I refer to Majumder 2019, 139-56). What I will do it is to point out, in what shall be a necessarily brief survey, the main differences of Shakespeare's characterisation of Richard in comparison to the two previous texts, which gives his treatment of the character and his 'fiction' a quite peculiar flair. It is my opinion that those differences do represent a development of the Renaissance literary

cause of the ruin of states (the moral of More's text). "The tragedy of the *History* is that Edward can learn this only after he has begun the transformation from earthly king to divine subject, and his courtiers, stuck in the moral mire of royal politics, cannot but ignore his advice" (Breen 2010, 491-2).

17 An influence of More on Shakespeare's Richard III has often been suggested. According to Logan, "[Shakespeare's] is the Richard of More's *History* . . . Shakespeare took the wit and caustic irony of More's narrator and transferred them to Richard' (More 2005, xlvii-viii). James Siemon is less sure but acknowledges that "the effect of More's entertaining verbal insinuations constitutes a rough analogue for the effect of Shakespeare's master of ceremonies" (Shakespeare 2009, 60).

and historical consideration of Richard III that stands as a sort of 'middle ground' between More and Cornwallis, one where the negative interpretation of the character is still in place, but it is possible to see the first cracks opening. In order to do so, however, I do have to start with a brief description of the two plays preceding Shakespeare's, starting with Legge's *Richardus Tertius.*

Performed at St John's College, Cambridge around 1579,[18] and never printed during Shakespeare's time (in fact, not until the nineteenth century), the work enjoyed nonetheless a widespread circulation in manuscript form. Undoubtedly, this was due to the high prestige of his author, one of the first eminent tragedians of Elizabethan theatre, so renowned that, twenty years later, Francis Meres still cited him in his *Palladis Tamia* (1598), among the great tragic authors of English theatre. Rather than a single play, the work consists of three plays in five acts concerning three different phases of the story of Richard III, rewritten and reworked through the use of a linguistic style and dramatic patterns inspired by the tragedies of Seneca.[19] As for the actual plot, Legge follows quite closely, for the most part, the accounts given by Thomas More (in regard to the usurpation) and Edward Hall (for the part about Richard's death) (cf. Lordi in Legge 1979, vii). There are some exceptions and one is rather interesting. Part III of *Richardus Tertius* features a scene where Richard woos Princess Elizabeth, Edward IV's daughter, in order to persuade her to become his wife, thus strengthening his right to the crown. Robert Joseph Lordi noted that this scene presents similar aspects to the famous scene in Shakespeare's play showing Richard wooing Lady Anne (cf. Lordi in Legge 1979, 22-3). This is not the only similarity between Legge and Shakespeare's tragedies; on the contrary, as Siemon notes, "Legge and Shakespeare emphasize female roles and provide two major wooing scenes unparalleled in *True Tragedy*" (Shakespeare 2009, 75).

However, this is where their similarities end. In all other aspects,

18 I take information on the staging of the text from Legge 1979, v-vi, to which I also refer for my quotations of the Latin text and its parallel English translation.

19 "Bloody tyrant, stichomythic dialogue, choric observers, *nuntius* figures and animating supernatural spirits", as Siemon summarises them (Shakespeare 2019, 76).

as the majority of the scholars have noticed, the two plays could not be more different. This is especially true when it comes to Legge's depiction of Richard, who, in some ways, could be seen as the stark opposite of Shakespeare's. While the Shakespearean tyrant is a magnetic figure, a histrionic and entertaining performer by whom the audience is captivated and whose will, in a sense, shapes the play he is in, Legge's figure emerges as a complex figure who is only a part of a much larger political landscape. Instead of focusing on Richard's evil nature, Legge, especially in the first two parts of his tragedy, gives greater prominence to Richard's accomplices, who occasionally emerge as the real force behind Richard's plot for usurpation.[20] Legge also diminishes some of the more 'demonic' traits of Richard's traditional depiction. His deformity is never mentioned, while some space is given to some more 'tender' sides of Richard's character usually ignored by Elizabethan writers, such as the grief his son's death – the sentiment he expresses at the start of his first soliloquy in the play (3.3.1). However, as Dojeeta Majumder has shown (2019, 142-8), this does not mean that this Richard is not also a dissembler; on the contrary, throughout all the play, Richard's actions can be interpreted as a successful deception of his own accomplices, "manipulate[d] . . . into articulating the plan that he would never bring himself to speak" (144-5). The same soliloquy which opens with the expression of grief over his son ends up with him affirming that he will now pretend to have all the virtues of a sovereign in order for the people to love him ("Jam mitis, humanus, pius / et liberalis civibus meis ero", 3.3.1.66-7;" I will now become mild, humane, pious and liberal to my citizens"). Such a choice depicts Richard as a cunning, strategic dissembler, capable of manipulating people around him and aware of the way one has to behave in order to rule successfully and in peace. In this sense, we can say that Legge represents the most accurate theatrical rendition of the Ricardian 'legend' in its original features, the one devised

20 This is true especially for the character of Catesby, who is depicted as being more ruthless than Richard himself: he persuades Buckingham to help Richard (*Richard Tertius* 2.5.1), devises the plan to disgrace and kill Hastings, exploiting his relationship with Jane Shore (2.5.4), and convinces Richard then to woo Elizabeth, in an attempt to disrupt her proposed marriage with the Earl of Richmond (3.3.4).

by Thomas More: like him, Legge depicts the events surrounding Richard's usurpation as a game of "countless manipulations" (Majumder 2019, 143), and Richard himself as a sophisticated and consummate dissembler, even able to pass for innocent.

Things are much different in the second Elizabethan adaptation of Richard's 'legend', the anonymous *The True Tragedy of King Richard the Third.* Printed in 1594 in a quarto edition, the text represents the first adaptation we know of Richard III's story for the Elizabethan audience of the playhouses and the public theatre. On the title page, the tragedy is said to have been "playd by the Queenes Maiesties Players",[21] the main theatrical company of the time, and one which had already successfully staged some dramatic renditions of English history.[22] As several studies have stated (see McMillin-Maclean 1998 16, 28; Majumder 2019, 146), the company's relationship with the Queen made them vehicles of Tudor propaganda on the stage. It should then not come as a surprise that the depiction of Richard in this place is heavily influenced by the so-called 'Tudor-myth' (see above, n14), whose original purpose was to justify Henry VII's right to the crown. As a result, the tragedy not only follows closely the plot of More's *History*, but also changes it in order to highlight Richard's role as the villain. His deformity, ignored by Legge, is pointed out by the allegorical character of Truth at the beginning of the play ("A man ill shaped, crooked backed, lame armed", 1.57). Then, in his first soliloquy, Richard openly utters his desire to be king against all odds: "To be baser than a King I disdain . . . / No death nor hell shall not withhold me, but as I rule I will reign" (4.353, 374).[23] His actions are in stark contrast with that of Edward IV, whose last attempt to reconcile his warring nobles in order to secure a future for his sons opens the play. *The True Tragedy* thus re-proposes the contrast between the good king and the tyrant

21 My quotations from this text refer to An. 2005.

22 In the 1580s, the company had staged for example *The Famous Victories of Henry V* (first printed in 1598). See Walsh 2010, 57-67 for more details.

23 He has already started on his path to the crown, by "remov[ing] such logs . . . as my brother Clarence / And King Henry the Sixth" (369-70). This is a notable change from previous versions of the story, including that of More, which only stated that there were rumours that that Richard had committed those crimes.

which opened More's *History*, albeit in a version which takes away any ambiguity. The play then proceeds by readapting many of the major scenes in More's *History* (the plot against the Queen's family, Lord Hastings' demise, Richard's ascension to the throne, the killing of the princes and his fall into fear and confusion after that murder: "My conscience, witness of the blood I spilt, / Accuseth me as guilty", 14.1409-10) albeit in a way that exalts Richard's evil while downplaying that of his accomplices, such as Buckingham and Catesby, reduced to mere satellites of his will. Richard emerges here as someone endowed with "vehement single-mindedness, directness, and enthusiastic – if crude – agency" (Majumder 2019, 143) at the centre of the entire action of the play.

In regard to its form and style, *The True Tragedy* presents several features connecting it to the morality plays. The play starts with a dialogue between two allegorical characters, Poetry and Truth, who form a temporary alliance in order to tell the audience the 'true' story of Richard's usurpation.[24] Prominent among the characters is a Page of Richard, who, during the first half of the play, acts in a way similar to that of the Vice of early modern morality plays: like him, he talks to the audience commenting on Richard's actions (4.475-89, 10.893-917), while also actively helping carry them out. Most notably, it is he who, after leading Richard to admit he wishes for the death of his nephews ("I would have my two nephews . . . secretly murdered. Zounds, villain, 'tis out!", 10.992-4), finds the man to do it, James Tyrell. The Page's loyalty extends even after Richard's death. In the final scene of the play, as he recounts what happened at Bosworth to Report (another allegorical character), he keeps describing his master as "worthy Richard" (18.2028), exalting his valour even when his ultimate fate allows the other characters of the play to condemn his memory as that of a tyrant.[25] The play then ends with a celebration of the entire Tudor dynasty up to Elizabeth, where any negative aspects of sovereigns such as Mary

24 I refer to Walsh 2010, 76-84, for a more detailed analysis of this scene and the way it introduces into the play a topic regarding the relationship between fiction and truth in a history play.

25 Cfr. Walsh 2010, 88-9, for what this means in regard to the aforementioned theme of the relationship between fiction and truth in *The True Tragedy*.

Tudor or even Henry VIII are conveniently forgotten in order to convey the final message of a restoration of order after Richard's tyranny (cf. Walsh 2010, 99-100). Such an ending, which recalls the ending of many early modern English interludes or morality plays, which often featured a homage to particular patrons and a prayer for the Queen, confirms the status of *The True Tragedy* as the most overtly propagandistic amongst the three theatrical adaptations of Richard III's story.

In a sense, Shakespeare's rewriting of the Richard III 'legend' in his plays could be seen as a mixture between the two approaches of the previous plays. Like the plot of *The True Tragedy*, that of *Richard III* revolves around Richard's action as an evil, ambitious character ready to do anything to ascend to the throne. Some of the scenes in the central part of *Richard III* are even written by Shakespeare in a way that seems reminiscent of the earlier play,[26] including the finale, which also ends with a long celebratory speech by Henry VII on the prosperous future awaiting England. Both plays also present a character breaking the fourth wall and speaking to the audience, commenting on the action of the play (Richard's Page and Richard himself respectively). At the same time, Shakespeare's *Richard III* shares with Legge's *Richardus Tertius* the tendency to put Richard's action in context, by setting it up into a larger political horizon. While Richard is without question the villain, the play takes nonetheless great pains to highlight how he acts and talks in the context of a deeply fractured Court. In the first scene of *Richard III,* Clarence and Hastings both agree with Richard that Clarence's disgrace is to be blamed on the Queen's kinsmen (1.1.71-5, 126-33). And if for

26 As is the case of Richard's plot to murder his nephews. In both *Richard III* and *The True Tragedy*, the plan is hatched in a scene where Richard first hints at his intention while speaking with his primary accomplice (Buckingham and the Page respectively), then openly declaring it as they either do not understand him or pretend not to: "Shall I be plain? I wish the bastards dead, / And I would have suddenly performed it" (4.2.17-8; see above for the correspondent line in *The True Tragedy*). Immediately after, in Shakespeare, a Page of Richard mentions Tyrell to him and introduces him to the king, just like his counterpart in *The True Tragedy*. It would not be implausible to regard this scene as Shakespeare reprising and expanding a scene from that earlier play.

Clarence it could be said that this is due to Richard lying about it to cover his own tracks (he did admit, in his previous soliloquy, to have laid plots "to set . . . Clarence and the King / In deadly hate", 34-5), no such excuse stands for Hastings, whom Richard is never shown deceiving, and who shall later reiterate his hatred for the Queen's kinsmen, as he is informed they are to be beheaded ("I am no mourner for that news, / Because they still have been my adversaries", 3.2.50-1). A similar reasoning can be made about Buckingham: since there is not a scene in *Richard III* where we see Richard persuading him to aid him, we are left to conclude that he too is helping Richard out of his own interest (indeed, he is the real mastermind behind the demise of the Queen's kinsmen: "I'll sort occasion . . . / To part the Queen's proud kindred from the Prince", 2.2.148, 150). We can then conclude that Shakespeare's plays combine a wider political horizon similar to that of Legge's play with the depiction of Richard as a damnable, ambitious villain reminiscent of the character's portrayal in *The True Tragedy*.

In both cases, Shakespeare puts his own spin on both features, expanding what his predecessors did in a way that ends up adding new aspects to the 'legend' of Richard III. This is also due to the fact that, unlike the two previous texts, *Richard III* is not a separate work, but the fourth part of a historical tetralogy staging the whole War of the Roses.[27] This fact immediately changes Richard's story, giving it a meaning that it did not have in any of the previous texts, including More's *History*: that of the last act of a social and political crisis involving the entire kingdom. This link is reinforced within the text by the numerous cross-references to the events of the previous play in the cycle, *Henry VI Part 3*, which closely link the events of the two works in a way that is at the same time historical (it highlights how Richard's usurpation is the last act of the civil war) and theatrical (it relies on the audience's memory of the previous play; cf. Walsh 2010, 145-8). These references are both scenic (such as the body of Henry VI on stage during the scene

27 As Mary Thomas Crane (1985) pointed out, this dramatic construction is unique in its period: although Elizabethan audiences were used to seeing dramas divided into several parts, we have no other examples of 'tetralogies' of dramas, historical or otherwise.

of Richard's courtship of Lady Anne which bleeds in the presence of his murderer: 1.2.55-63; the murder had been staged in *Henry VI Part 3* 5.6) and verbal, like Queen Margaret's curses on the members of the York family (1.3.195-213, 299-300) as punishment either for the usurpation of the throne or for the murder of her son, Prince Edward (staged in *Henry VI Part 3* 5.5.38-40),[28] or Clarence's dream before being killed, when he sees Warwick and Edward of Lancaster reminding him of his betrayal (1.4.48-57).[29] This continual evocation of previous events suggests that Richard's usurpation is hardly the isolated action of a particularly ambitious and evil man leading a peaceful kingdom to ruin to satisfy his own ambition. On the contrary, it represents the continuation of a cycle of death and revenge engulfing the late medieval history of the English kingdom as depicted in the three parts of *Henry VI*. This also helps explaining some notable choices made by Shakespeare in regard to which events to stage in *Richard III*. Neither Legge nor the author of *True Tragedy* included Clarence's death or Richard's marriage to Lady Anne in their play, and Shakespeare only briefly mentions Jane Shore and discards the complex deception against the Queen's kinsmen present in both his predecessors, only having a Messenger saying to Elizabeth that they were arrested off-scene (2.4.43-9). The impression is that Shakespeare intends to focus more on characters who can be linked to previous events, rather than giving space to those whose fate is solely concerned with Richard.

The constant cross-references serve the purpose to emphasise that, as cruel, ambitious and deceitful as Richard is, his victims, before they become such, were no better. Margaret's curses against those who wronged her remind the audience of the cruel acts of violence perpetrated by the Yorkists, as well of the fact that Edward IV's power derives from usurpation and deceit. Clarence's dream highlights his previous betrayals of both his brother and his father-in-law, motivated by nothing but ambition. And, as already

28 Her words will be then recalled by most of the people she had addressed when they are fulfilled: see 3.3.14-6 (for the Queen's kinsmen); 3.4.92-3 (Hastings); 4.1.44-6 and 4.4.79-81 (Queen Elizabeth); 5.1.25-9 (Buckingham).

29 In the same scene, the murderers sent by Richard recall the same betrayal as a justification for rejecting his pleas to be spared: 1.4.202-9.

mentioned, Shakespeare depicts Edward's court as fractured in factions fighting for power independently from Richard's action. This last point could also be seen as a continuation of a discourse begun in *Henry VI Part 3*. In that play, there was virtually no difference between Richard and the other characters: they were all shown by Shakespeare as driven by ambition, desire for revenge and cruelty, embedded in a cycle of vendettas and counter-vendettas eventually resulting in the dissolution of every social and familiar bond (cf. Hattaway in Shakespeare 2009, 10; Heavey 2016). Richard's bombastic outbursts about the hardness of his heart in the first two acts of the play ("I cannot weep, for all my body's moisture / Scarce serves sto quench my furnace-burning heart", 2.1.79-80) were not enough to make him stand out, since similar expressions could be found in the mouths of other characters. Even after Richard declared, in his first soliloquy (3.2.124-95), his decision to become king, it was only at the end of the play, with his killing of Henry VI, that he had started to act autonomously. One wonders at this point whether the famous antithesis presented by Richard in his soliloquy at the start of *Richard III* between the "glorious summer" created by the "son of York" (1.1.2) and his condition as a hunchback, which makes it impossible for him to enjoy it ("I cannot prove a lover / To entertain these fair well-spoken days") and therefore induces him "to prove a villain" (28-9), should not be read as Richard's decision to remain tied to the atmosphere of the previous trilogy, and in doing so forcing the other characters as well as the audience to come to terms with the hidden truth of Edward's apparently 'peaceful' victory. This is reminiscent of Legge's treatment of Richard's action, in *Richardus Tertius*, as the focal point of a complex power game where Richard was far from being the only one guilty of dissimulation. This time, however, the historical and theatrical horizon has been expanded to include events prior to the 'legend', thus showing how that peaceful kingdom apparently postulated by More at the beginning of the *History* never existed in the first place: instead of being the monster ruining everything out of personal desire, Richard is but the last link of a blood-stained chain of events.

And speaking of Richard's villainy, there are two noticeable features about the way Shakespeare depicts it. Once again, we are talking about traits which could already be traced in *True*

Tragedy but which Shakespeare develops in a significantly different way. The first is the well-known, marked insistence on Richard's 'theatricality', on his abilities as a 'performer', about which the character proudly boasts already in his first soliloquy:

> Why, I can smile, and murder while I smile,
> And cry "Content!" to that which grieves my heart,
> And wet my cheeks with artificial tears,
> And frame my face to all occasions.
> I'll drown more sailors than the mermaid shall,
> I'll slay more gazers than the basilisk,
> I'll play the orator as well as Nestor,
> Deceive more slyly than Ulysses could,
> And, like a Sinon, take another Troy.
> I can add colours to the chameleon,
> Change shapes with Proteus for advantages,
> And set the murderous Machiavel to school.
> (*Henry VI Part* 3 3.2.181-95)

The evocation of various literary, mythological and even 'contemporary' (Machiavellian – albeit in a way that is more reminiscent of the stage figure of the 'Machiavellian' than the actual political theories of the Florentine thinker)[30] models of different figures of deceivers (or at least orators, as in the case of Nestor) underlines Richard's capacity for 'metamorphosis', his ability to wear various masks like a consummate actor. It is the beginning of a

30 Much has been written about the relationship of Shakespeare's portrayal of Richard in connection with either Machiavelli's thought, or the stage character of the 'Machiavellian' as conceived and performed on Elizabethan stage (see Siemon in Shakespeare 2009, 8-10). It should be noted that, even if officially Elizabethan culture condemned Machiavelli as a damnable teacher of iniquity, his works were translated and read in England (see Petrina 2009), and influenced the work of other contemporary dramatists such as Christopher Marlowe (see Ribner 1954, 354-6). Anne McGrail has particularly studied the relationship between *Richard III* and Machiavelli's political theories, suggesting that the play represent "a Shakespearean comment on whether it is possible for a man to be completely evil to further his own ends" (2001, 49). She highlights how Richard's final failure to shut down his remorse declares him as an imperfect student of Machiavelli's theories (2001, 57-60).

leitmotif that continues in the character's subsequent appearances. At the end of *Henry VI Part 3*, the titular character asks Richard who has come to kill him: "What scene of death hath Roscius now to act?" (5.6.10), comparing him to the celebrated Roman actor. *Richard III* opens with the aforementioned decision of Richard, in his opening soliloquy, to play the 'role' of the villain, and it then presents a series of scenes where Richard shows his ability to play different roles according to the different situations he is in: a lover in the courtship scene of Lady Anne (1.2), a righteous courtier offended in his honour in front of the Queen's kinsmen (1.3, 2.1), a devoted uncle to the young King Edward V (3.1). The sequence reaches its climax in the central scenes of the play, where, as Richard and Buckingham manipulate the citizens of London into proclaiming Richard king, the metaphor of the theatre reappears in full force. "I can counterfeit the deep tragedian", says Buckingham (3.5.5) as he and Richard, dressed in old armour, prepare to deceive the mayor about the truth of Hastings' death (an episode that Shakespeare takes directly from More). Two scenes later, Buckingham suggests that Richard "play the maid's part: still answer nay, and take it" (3.7.50) as the two stage the final deception whereby Richard obtains the throne. In addition to this insistent use of a theatrical imagery to indicate the action of the usurper, Richard often delivers soliloquies, in which he informs the audience of his plans and comments on his actions. This is a stylistic feature that, as noted in many studies on the character, connects Shakespeare's character to the Vice of the morality plays,[31] in a way that recalls what the author of *The True Tragedy* had already done with the character of Richard's Page. Once again, however, Shakespeare's reprisal of this feature shows a wider, deeper use of it. In *The True Tragedy*, the Page was an accomplice of Richard, a secondary character involved in the action, but not its main focus. The Page became thus a sort of chorus figure commenting on an action developing in front of his eyes as well as those of the audience. In Shakespeare, this convention is applied to Richard himself, thus

31 See Spivack (1958) on the influence of the Vice on a specific type of Shakespearean villain: besides Richard III, also Iago and Don Juan in *Much Ado About Nothing*. Richard himself remarks: "Like the formal Vice, Iniquity, / I moralize two meanings in one world" (3.1.81-2).

strengthening the impression of a play dominated by the will of his main character, depicted as a consummate actor putting on a show the audience is called to witness.

The closeness that is thus created between Richard and the audience could be a dangerous one, as part of the audience in Shakespeare's time knew well. We know from Alan Somerset (1997-1998) that some churchmen ended up protesting and criticising the success the Vices had on the audience of morality plays: their gags and their speeches obscured the moral intent of the play, creating in the audience a dangerous sense of sympathy and admiration for what technically was the incarnation of evil in the play. The same has been said about Shakespeare's Richard III's effect on audiences of any time, even modern ones, as proven by the multiple attempts to 'humanise' him, to go beyond the monster and find a more complex character behind it (see Siemon in Shakespeare 2009, 79-123, for a detailed history). By fascinating the audience to assist to and enjoy the 'play' of his own evil, Richard strikes a pact of complicity with the audience, which is based on a particular 'perversion' of the implicit pact between audience and actors at the heart of theatre of any time – that of accepting as truthful what is shown on stage. Except, in this case, this pact also highlights how 'fictional' Richard's depravity is. From *Henry VI Part 3* we know that the world in which Richard operates is not as black-and-white as Richard would have us believe: Edward is far from being "as true and just / As [Richard is] subtle, false and treacherous" (1.1.36-7); Clarence was an ambitious backstabber; Hastings lies to his king as he swears to abandon his hatred for the Queen's kinsmen; all of the members of York family were once bloody murderers and accomplices in the deposition of Henry VI and the extermination of his family. Richard may pretend to be a devil, but it is only a pose; in reality, his evil is really nothing new.

This is highlighted by the way Shakespeare insists on the presumed relationship between Richard's wickedness and his deformity. This traditional datum, virtually absent in Legge and only mentioned in *The True Tragedy*, is ubiquitous in Shakespeare's texts, especially in the character's first three soliloquies. Richard draws a cause-and-effect connection between his physical deformity and his choice for evil:

Then, since this earth affords no joy to me
But to command, to check, to o'erbear such
As are of better person than myself,
I'll make my heaven to dream upon the crown
And, whiles I live t'account this world but hell,
Until my misshaped trunk that bears this head
Be round impaled with a glorious crown.
(*Henry VI Part* 3 3.2.165-71)

For I have often heard my mother say
I came into the world with my legs forward.
Had I not reason, think ye, to make haste,
And seek their ruin that usurped our right?
The midwife wondered and the women cried,
'O, Jesus bless us, he is born with teeth!'
And so I was, which plainly signified
That I should snarl, and bite and play the dog.
(5.6.70-7)

I, that am not shaped for sportive tricks,
Nor made to court an amorous looking-glass;
I, that am rudely stamped, and want love's majesty
To strut before a wanton ambling nymph;
I, that am curtailed of this fair proportion,
Cheated of feature by dissembling Nature,
Deformed, unfinished, sent before my time
Into this breathing world . . .
I am determined to prove a villain.
(*Richard III* 1.1.14-21, 30).

At the beginning of the twentieth century, passages like these led Sigmund Freud to use Richard III as an exemplary manifestation of the psychoanalytic typology of the 'exception', that is, of the sick man who believes to be beyond the law because of his atypical traits. As is well known, many studies took up Freud's suggestion and directly applied it to Shakespeare's Richard (see Siemon in Shakespeare 2009, 5; Cox and Rasmussen in Shakespeare 2019, 75-81). I would like to suggest another interpretation; one that, in my opinion, fits more into the original literary tradition about Richard.

We could say that here Richard is repeating, in the intimacy of his conscience, that path from physical deformity to moral deformity that, years earlier, had opened More's *History*. In that text, the description of Richard's deformity acted as a prelude to that of his usurpation; now, this mechanism is taken up and reinterpreted as an internal movement within the character's psychology. The assumption of the villain's 'role' is presented as the result of a process of observation and interpretation of certain facts about him – almost as if Richard had decided to write his own history, reinterpreting his entire past in order to justify his present choices.

And yet, this connection between deformity and wickedness established by Richard has no objective counterpart. In *Henry VI Part 3*, it is only members of the Lancastrian faction that harp upon Richard's deformity in terms of scorn, such as Margaret (1.4.75-7) or Clifford (2.2.96). No member of the Yorkist faction even slightly notices it or comment upon it. In *Richard III*, it is only after Richard's usurpation of the throne that other characters begin to make the connection between Richard's villainy and his deformity, retroactively interpreting it as an early sign of his brutal nature (such as the Duchess of York, his mother, at 4.4.166-70).[32] Before that, even those who suspect that Richard hates them, like Elizabeth, never seem to make that connection. The final impression is that the relationship of cause-and-effect between Richard's body and his mind is actually the result of a collectively accepted fiction, which, however, is not based on concrete evidence. Significant, from this point of view, is a passage noted by Brian Walsh (2010, 148-9), where the young Duke of York recalls that Richard was born with teeth (one of the traditional omens around Richard's birth, present in More and already mentioned by Richard himself in his second and last soliloquy in *Henry VI Part 3*; see above). When asked who told him this, York replies that it was Richard's nurse; however, his grandmother (the Duchess of York) replies that this is impossible: the woman died before the duke was born. "I cannot tell who told me" (2.4.34), admits then the young man. In this passage, knowledge derived only from an oral account, from a rumour (the

32 The only exception is Margaret, who, however, as the widow of Henry VI, is of the Lancastrian faction.

basis of More's *History*), is indicated as potentially false.[33] In this way, Shakespeare manages to undermine the same 'fiction' he is staging without breaking it: while Richard is evil, the assumption that his wickedness is 'natural' (i.e. declared even by his birth) is shown to be a retroactive interpretation of events not based on the reality of what we see on scene.

In my opinion, this balance between the respect of Richard's 'fiction' and its questioning is at the heart of Shakespeare's depiction of the character. Shakespeare put together all the basic elements of the story of Richard as presented by his predecessors, from More's description of Richard as a dissembler, to Legge's political context, to the reprise of some stylistic features inspired to the morality plays already present in the *True Tragedy*.[34] In doing so, he also rewrote them, in a way that ends up showing the fundamental contradiction at the heart of Richard III's 'fiction'. The continuous evocation of the War of the Roses diminishes the distance between Richard and his supposed victims, reminding the audience that the very people killed and deceived by the tyrant were, one time, just as ambitious and cruel as he was. His much-boasted choice of playing the 'villain', highlighted by Shakespeare's decision to apply to Richard some features typical of the Vice figure ends up highlighting by contrast how much this stance of his is merely a role, a fiction Richard shares with a 'complicit' audience. The emphasis he puts on his deformity as evidence of his evil nature is also proved to be a retroactive interpretation of events, based on rumours and conventions rather than on a documented 'truth'. As a result, Shakespeare foregrounds and expands on the ambiguity that was lurking underneath More's *History*. In his hands, the 'legend' of

33 In this, perhaps, Shakespeare is following the anonymous author of *The True Tragedy*. As Walsh points out, the relationship between historical data and their interpretation is central to that tragedy, an aspect that is foregrounded both at the beginning of the play (which begins with a dialogue between Poetry and Truth, which ends up emphasising how history is, in itself, fiction) and at the end (where Richard's Page refuses to lend himself to denigrating his fallen master at Bosworth): see Walsh 2010, 76-81, 88-94.

34 In doing so, Shakespeare also manages to craft the work which is the fullest account of this same literary tradition, whose continuous success will keep it alive even beyond his original literary and cultural context.

Richard III is shown to be an ideological construct, a 'fiction' whose relationship with reality and history is at the most a simplification of historical events that were actually much more complex and that would require a more attentive look to be thoroughly, rightly understood – which is exactly what, a few years later, William Cornwallis would write in his paradox.

4. Dispersing the Fiction: William Cornwallis

Little is known about William Cornwallis the Younger, but the scant information we have enables us to place him in a precise social, cultural and political environment. Born in 1576, William was the scion of an important family. His father, Sir Charles Cornwallis, was a well-known diplomat at the court of James I: he was the English ambassador to Spain in 1604-1607, and then treasurer to Henry, Prince of Wales, from 1610 to 1612. His uncle, William Cornwallis the Elder, was related by marriage to the Cecil family, and enjoyed the support and protection of Robert Cecil himself, even though this support did not help him establish a career at court (on the contrary, he had to withdraw twice to avoid the wrath of Elizabeth, possibly because of his alleged Catholicism). William Cornwallis the Younger received an excellent education, possibly at Oxford, and was knighted during the Earl of Essex's expedition to Ireland in 1599. He evidently tried to imitate his father and uncle in pursuing a political career by occupying some government posts (he was also a Member of Parliament twice). However, these attempts do not seem to have been successful. On the contrary, William seems to have been best known for his large extravagant expenses, which he could only afford thanks to the financial help (not always given heartily) of his father and uncle. This help was, however, lacking in the latter part of his life, so much so that William died almost destitute in 1614. However, he seemed to enjoy some fame as a literary author. Some of his paradoxes and essays were published already during his lifetime (*Essayes Part I*, 1600; *Part II*, 1601), while others (including the "Praise of King Richard the Third"), which found their way to publication after his death, enjoyed a wide circulation in manuscript. In more than a few respects, Cornwallis'

biography seemingly retraces some steps as that of the other great English paradoxical author of these years, John Donne (and he and Cornwallis were friends). Like him, Cornwallis descended from a wealthy recusant family, tried to secure this position in various ways, such as a military career first and a literary career later, and would go on to become an admired model for later English literature (in this case, for paradoxes). His surviving literary works shows an undeniable display of a great literary culture, which is even more evident if we consider that it proves to have not a few links with some of the most advanced peaks of literary and political culture on the European continent.

The "Praise of King Richard the Third", in this respect, is probably Cornwallis' masterpiece. Its model and inspiration is probably the "Neronis Encomium" by the Milanese philosopher and mathematician Girolamo Cardano (written in Latin and first published in Basel in 1562, together with other works of the same author), directly quoted in the "Praise": "*Culpatur factum, non ob aliud, quam exitum*: they approve, or disprove all things by the event" (Cornwallis 2018-2019, 38). Even without postulating a direct influence, however, it is impossible not to notice that the two texts share many points of contact.[35] Both texts are encomiums of two of the most eminent tyrant figures of European/English culture, aimed at showing that they were, in fact, good rulers. Both emphasise how historical sources regarding the figure of reference are unreliable, as they are prejudiced against those sovereigns. Both offer a provocative reinterpretation of the ideal of the good ruler, inspired by Machiavelli's political theories, in order to prove that the actions of their tyrant were actually those of a truly good ruler according to the 'reality' of sovereignty (in doing so, they also accuse the traditional model of good sovereign to be either faulty or downright false).[36] Finally, both affirm the importance, for the reader, of not judging the character's actions by themselves, but contextualising

35 I repeat here, in a shorter form, what I have already said at greater length in Dall'Olio 2022, 238-43, on the main features of Cardano's text and its similarities to Cornwallis'.

36 See Di Branco in Cardano 2005, 19-25 for a closer consideration of Machiavelli's influence on Cardano's political thought.

them in the historical and political setting of their time. The most relevant difference between the two texts lies, perhaps, in the fact that while the "Neronis Encomium" seems to have the ambition to stand as a critique of the entire Humanist political culture (so much so that Cardano does not invite readers to see his text as a pure literary game, unlike Cornwallis), the "Praise of King Richard the Third" limits itself to a simpler discussion of a specific case of the literary and political tradition. In doing so, however, Cornwallis nonetheless emerges as a careful reader of this same tradition, capable of overturning point by point all the basic data that had been established since the writing of Thomas More's *History*,[37] and seemingly reaffirmed in Shakespeare's plays.

First of all, Cornwallis demolishes More's reliance on the opinion and/or hearsay of the author's contemporaries. He retorts that these testimonies cannot be trusted: the people of that era were "so light-headed, so foolish, so irreligious, as their opinion . . . made them break their oath to their Prince [Henry VI] . . . only because he was too good" (Cornwallis 2018-2019, 24). Further on, Cornwallis directly attacks the folly of relying on the authors of the chronicles of the time, "whose greatest authorities . . . are built upon the notable foundation of hear-say" (34); shortly afterwards, he addresses the same criticism to his own contemporaries, who prefer to believe "the partial writings of indiscreet chroniclers and witty play-makers, than his laws and actions" (40). We find here the same insistence on historical context that, in Shakespeare's plays, already undermined the presentation of Richard's victims as innocent. This time, however, Cornwallis takes the argument to its logical conclusion: by explicitly stating that Richard's action took place in a historical context marked by the conclusion of a civil war, Cornwallis is basically denying that his action displayed any evident differences from that of other historical characters of that period. To that, Cornwallis adds that, aside from his usurpation, no other news of Richard's negative traits as a character

37 On this point, it worth noticing that Cornwallis structures his text in a way that recalls More's *History*: he begins with a physical description of the character, then moves on to an account of how his father and brother obtained the crown, before providing an account of Richard's usurpation of the throne up until his death; see Medori in Cornwallis 2018-2019, 22n2.

has survived, unlike with Edward IV. Of him, Cornwallis said that he "obtained the crown . . . rather fortunately then wisely, were not all wisdom thought folly, to which Fortune lends not success" (24-5)[38], and immediately afterwards jeopardised his conquests with a marriage (with Elizabeth Woodville) born of purely carnal desire.[39] On the contrary, Richard "was neither luxurious, nor an *epicure* [sic], not given to any riot, nor to excess, neither in apparel, nor play: for had he been touched with any of these vices, doubtless they which object to lesser crimes would not have omitted these" (37). We have here a complete reversal of More's comparison of Richard and Edward as emblems of bad and good sovereignty: this time, it is Richard that emerges as the king respecting his subjects, and Edward as the one abusing of his power.

This detail opens up one of the most important elements of Cornwallis' defence of Richard, namely the absence in his behaviour of any action typical of a tyrant according to the morals of the time. This point is further expanded through reference to the laws enacted by Richard, defined by Cornwallis as "the most innocent and impartial witnesses" (40) of the sovereign's actions. This insistence on written laws reflects the profound change in the very conception of history that occurred in the second half of the sixteenth century. It began with the work of authors such as François Baudouin (*De institutione historiae universae*, 1561) and Jean Bodin (*Methodus ad facilem historiarum cognitionem*, 1566), whose texts (which transferred to the field of history methods and perspectives that had originated in the field of law) proposed a new model of historiographical writing based upon the critical reading of sources in their original context in order to better understand their meaning (cf. Grafton 2007, 68-9). The typically Humanist focus on the rhetorical reworking of historical events as a narrative is thus discarded in favour of a more 'accurate' reconstruction, which restricts the field of historical narrative to the mere exposition of the factual 'reality' traceable from the comparison

38 Ironically, this is a conclusion that would have pleased More, whose appreciation of irony and love for paradoxes was well-known, as well as his vision of the world based on the *contemptus mundi* tradition.

39 These words could aptly describe Shakespeare's depiction of Edward IV in *Henry VI Part 3* as a hot-headed, impulsive, luxurious character: see Whittle 2017, 245-56.

of materials. This also means that, during the second half of the sixteenth century, "the value of written documents as the evidentiary basis of knowledge about past events grew . . . Indeed, critical judgment denigrating the value of oral histories began to be expressed" (Walsh 2010, 141).[40] The criticism that Cornwallis (whose text presents no trace of either speeches or 'dramatic' reconstructions of historical facts) makes of the political and literary tradition on Richard easily falls within this theoretical framework. He uses references to the laws published under Richard's reign to prove that nothing there denounces the presence of a tyrannical attitude in his actions: "he was no taxer of the people, nor oppressor of the commons . . . no suppressor of his subjects, to satisfy either licentious humours, or to enrich light-headed flatterers" (37, 39). In other words, nothing in Richard's actions outside the literary tradition about his name (based on hearsay and rumour, not on concrete evidence) shows that he ever behaved like a tyrant, i.e. as a bad ruler who governs for himself by oppressing his own people and enriching himself by trampling on the rights of his subjects.[41] The only basis on which the traditional accusation of tyranny rests are his crimes to obtain the crown; and even these, Cornwallis argues, need to be properly understood and put into context.

Here we enter the most openly paradoxical part of Cornwallis' text, the one where he, rather than simply denying that Richard committed the crimes attributed to him,[42] takes pains to show how these were either necessary actions for his personal safety, or deeds he committed for the good of the country. This logic does not even

40 Walsh suggests that this change in cultural tradition about history is reflected also in Act 3 of Shakespeare's *Richard III*, where, however, Shakespeare seemingly criticises both sides of the question by showing how both oral witnesses and written documents can be manipulated: see Walsh 2010, 141-3.

41 Cornwallis was not the first one to make this point. As Boatwright (2023) notes, in 1523, the Mayor of London appealed to a law published by Richard to oppose an attempt of Wolsey to impose a tax on the city; in doing so, he declared that, although Richard was a tyrant, that was a good law.

42 However, Cornwallis, like More, does not hesitate to acknowledge that for some of these crimes, such as the murder of Henry VI or the complicity of Richard in the fall of Clarence, there is no concrete evidence.

spare the assassination of the Princes, openly praised as a work of policy typical of princes of all times and countries: "in policy, Princes never account competitors . . . innocent, since the least colour of right provokes innovating humours to stir up sedition" (44). The mention of the word 'policy', traditionally linked in Elizabethan political parlance to Machiavelli's political theories (cf. Bawcutt 1971), allows us to recognise the influence of a pivotal principle of that thought: the "crudelitas opportuna" (as Cardano defines it; cf. Dall'Olio 2020, 239-40), i.e. the crimes a prince commits to better ensure his power. Those crimes, Machiavelli said in the famous Chapter 15 of *The Prince*, were something a prince had to do out of necessity, and should be kept distinct from those he may commit out of pure cruelty, which, according to Machiavelli, should be absolutely avoided. In fact, Machiavelli openly invited the prince not to indulge in any vices that could endanger his relationship with the subjects and thus make them question his power over them. Moving from that principle, Cardano had already proved in the "Neronis Encomium" that every crime Nero committed could be interpreted along those lines: he either killed people that were threatening his life, or people whose existence was dangerous to the peace of the kingdom. Cornwallis (in this showing a knowledge of Machiavelli's thought that goes beyond the literary stereotypes of the time, present in Shakespeare) repeats the same pattern with Richard, insisting that his actions may have been unethical, but they were nevertheless appropriate for a ruler. As such, it cannot be regarded as cruelty, i.e. as an act of excessive violence performed without reason (typical of the Renaissance tyrant), but as a political choice, which every sovereign implements to solidify his power, and which in this case even benefited the country. He even expands on this idea in another passage of the text, where he affirms that "what is meet, expedient in a Prince, in a lower fortune is utterly unmeet, unexpedient" (46). That is, sovereigns move in a particular zone of human existence, different from that of their subjects, and their actions cannot be judged by the same standards as those of ordinary men.

This is also why, says Cornwallis, subjects should not rush to judge the actions of sovereigns: "our knowledge extends to things equal or inferior . . . in terrene matters (surpassing our estates) they are only snatched at by supposition" (47). Two different cultural

traditions come together here: on the one hand, the aforementioned influence of Machiavellian thought and its consideration of politics as a particular field of human experience endowed with its own rules; on the other, the conception of sovereignty proposed by the official Elizabethan ideology as that of a sacred institution, whose value surpasses the character of the person who embodies it.[43] However, a third element can also be identified, which links Cornwallis' text to More's *History*. We have seen how, in that text, the comment of the London people on the 'theatricality' of Richard's politics and actions concluded with the affirmation of the futility for the people to stand in judgement of the actions of sovereigns. It is not impossible to hypothesise that here Cornwallis is deliberately taking up and extending the ambiguity of More's passage, thus making explicit the subtext on the impossibility of true reliability of historical narratives. Indeed, Cornwallis seems to suggest that, due to the subjects' 'ignorance' of what a king's status really entailed, any judgement on a sovereign's activities that is not based on an observation of impartial testimonies (such as his laws) is fundamentally flawed. The Humanist faith in the ability of the rhetorical reinvention of history to explain the course of events through a credible reconstruction of the psychology of characters (of which More was somewhat sceptical, and which Shakespeare, in a sense, already questioned in his historical plays precisely by highlighting how 'fictional' the traditional character of Richard III was) is here openly denied by Cornwallis. Subjects, he says, do not really know what it means to be a king: their knowledge is imperfect and therefore cannot be taken as a reliable source of historical judgment.

Moving towards the conclusion, it only remains to consider what is perhaps Cornwallis' most direct and explicit attack on the tradition of Richard III: his reassessment of ambition, the human vice whose condemnation was at the heart of More's text, as well as a cornerstone of the traditional negativity of the 'legend' about the king. Cornwallis' paradox opens with a veritable reversal of this position, presenting ambition as a quality proper to kings: "princes

43 That is, the famous "two-body" theory of the king, transferred by English jurists from the ecclesiastical to the political sphere.

are naturally ambitious . . . ambition makes them to effect their desires . . . princes err against nature, if they aspire not" (21). Later, Cornwallis reiterates this point by stating that Richard "was not ambitious enough" (40), since he did not wage any wars and merely governed his kingdom in peace. The vice so heavily condemned by More, the tyrant's most grievous fault according to Elizabethan political doctrine (that of desiring more than he was entitled to), is here changed into a positive quality. Far from causing the ruin of a kingdom, it drives a king to do good for his people, to seek glory and valour, to enrich himself and his land so as to display his magnificence. In this exaltation, Cornwallis' paradox presents a significant point of contact with another 'heretical' text from the 1590s, Christopher Marlowe's tragedy *Tamburlaine* (1587-1588), whose main character (the first real tyrant of the Elizabethan tragic theatre) was delineated as an alternative figure of a good ruler. During the events of that tragedy, Tamburlaine is shown successfully building an empire through a calculated alternation of virtues typical of the good ruler (sincere friendship towards his vassals, love for his bride Zenocrates) and some of the crimes usually attributed to the tyrant (cruelty).[44] In this way, Tamburlaine managed to overcome the obstacle of his own low-class birth ("I am a lord, for so my deeds shall prove, / And yet a shepherd by my parentage", *Tamb.* 1.2.34-5)[45] and to prove that he was indeed worthy of the throne he so openly wishes for. For him, ambition is not shown as a condemnable quality, but rather as a positive desire for glory and fame, leading him not only to desire kingship, but also to the desire of being worthy of it. This is proved by the end of Part One, where he, in his only soliloquy in the entire play (5.2.72-127), decides to listen to Zenocrates' pleas and spare her father's life, deciding it is proper for a warrior and a king to be conquered by love (see Rhodes 2013, 209-10; Dall'Olio 2022, 235). With this decision, Tamburlaine does indeed show that his desire for glory is sincere, and that he is indeed, in spite of his cruelties, an honourable man, worthy of a throne 'because' he has the right qualities for it. Cornwallis in his paradox affirms that the same positive quality

44 On this interpretation of Tamburlaine, see Dall'Olio 2022, 232-8; 246-7.
45 I quote the text from Marlowe 2011.

has to be assigned to Richard, whose choice to usurp the throne is motivated with a love of glory, typical of "a true heroic spirit, whose affect is aspiring" (30).

On that note, Cornwallis' words can remind us of a passage in Shakespeare. At the beginning of *Henry VI Part 3*, as he encourages his father (Richard of York) to once again revolt against Henry VI and occupy the throne, Richard reminds him "how sweet a thing it is to wear a crown, / Within those circuits is Elysium / And all that poets feign of bliss and joy" (1.2.28-30). Those words are an echo of Marlowe's Tamburlaine, who in *Tamburlaine Part 1* does indeed define "the sweet fruition of an earthly crown" as "the ripest fruit of all . . . / That perfect bliss and sole felicity" (2.7.28-9), as he prepares to make the first steps to obtain it. This verbal repetition has two results. On the one hand, it implicitly equates Richard and Tamburlaine as two characters driven by ambition, thus anticipating the later decision by Richard to pursue a crown for himself (and he too, like Tamburlaine, sees power as the happiest state of bliss he can obtain). From that point of view, it is telling that several studies have noticed how Shakespeare's depiction of Richard echoes Marlovian characters such as Tamburlaine and Barabas, the protagonist of *The Jew of Malta*: dissemblers and manipulators, ready to commit any crimes to satisfy their desires.[46] On the other, though, it is also telling that, in that scene, Richard is not talking to himself, but to his father, and that the opinion he is expressing is not just his own, but that of his brother Edward (the future Edward IV). Once again, Richard is shown to be just one of many ambitious and power-hungry characters, for whom the pursuit of a crown is seen as a worthy reward of personal value in spite of established laws and norms. The logic they operate upon is the same one as that of Cornwallis as he justifies Richard's crimes as the fruit of a desire for glory and power which, according to him, is the mark of the true greatness of a prince – albeit with the important difference

46 The comparison is explicitly striking with Barabas. Like Richard, he too speaks to the audience about the evil plans he is going to commit and affirms to be inspired by Machiavelli's teachings; they also both displays traces of religious hypocrisy, while also revealing faults in other characters through their action (see Siemon in Shakespeare 2009, 10).

that Shakespeare, unlike Cornwallis, also highlights how this same logic leads eventually to the ruin of an entire kingdom (but then again, Shakespeare is not writing a paradox).

To sum up, the "Praise of King Richard the Third" represents a complex text whose link with the Elizabethan literary tradition on Richard is both oppositional and continuous. On the one hand, Cornwallis openly questions the foundations of this tradition in the name of a profound change both in the conception of historical writing (with the increasingly greater importance attributed to critical analysis of written sources over reliance on oral tradition) and in that of what constitutes a good king, who is recognised (in the wake of Machiavelli) as having the right/duty to assume 'tyrannical' traits in order to make his own governmental action successful. On the other, this same critique takes up and develops ambiguous traits present in that same tradition, already present in More's *History* and Shakespeare's plays, so that we could say that, in a sense, Cornwallis is destroying the literary tradition about Richard from within. The result is that, through the instruments of paradox, Cornwallis ends up denouncing the traditional image of Richard for what it is: a literary and political fiction, ideologically determined and linked to the culture of a precise historical period. This is a fundamental operation, which is a prelude to the real historical rehabilitation of the character which shall begin only three years after the publication of Cornwallis' paradox with the publication of George Buck's *History of King Richard III* (1619). It is at least debatable, however, whether this rehabilitation would have even begun if Cornwallis had not laid the ground for it by saying for the first time, out loud, what everyone (including More and Shakespeare) either knew or suspected – that the traditional image of Richard III, while not strictly false, was not precisely the truth.

5. Conclusion

Modern defenders of Richard should be more grateful to Cornwallis. True, we may say that he did not really try to defend Richard against the charges of tyranny, and he only intended to write a paradox in which he had fun reversing the traditional negative

assessment of this figure, with no pretence of actually changing the way in which he was seen by his contemporaries. And yet, with his "Praise" the author performed an important, I would say fundamental, operation, that would prepare and anticipate a more open historical rehabilitation of the character. Cornwallis' text re-examines the basis on which the traditional image of the character had been formed starting with Thomas More's *History of King Richard the Third* before reaching his fullest and most famous literary adaptation in Shakespeare's *Henry VI Part 3* and *Richard III.* Cornwallis underlines how groundless and unreliable this tradition actually was. The word of Richard's contemporaries (More's only declared source, and the basis for the 'reality' of his account) is pointed out as prejudicial and insufficient; the political background of the War of the Roses, unobserved by More, is highlighted again in order to show how Richard was in a sense 'forced' to act as he did; the ideal of a good sovereign underlying Richard's condemnation is revealed as an erroneous notion and revised in the light of a new political theory influenced by Machiavelli's thought. As a result, Cornwallis' "Praise" can be seen as the first explicit declaration of the historical invalidity of the traditional image of the character, the first text to emphasise how the description of Richard III is the result of a particular interpretation of historical facts, ideologically determined according to the values of a definite historical and literary context. Cornwallis' "Praise" thus performs the preliminary action to a 'serious' historical re-evaluation of Richard, the refutation of the traditional image.

This essay has also showed how, in doing so, Cornwallis exploited an ambiguity that had always lurked, in a sense, underneath the literary tradition of Richard III. In spite of its apparently simple moral, Thomas More already hinted at a less black-and-white interpretation of Richard's history, based on a more pessimistic view of politics as a parade of lies and deceit. Later Shakespeare, while on the surface respecting the traditional interpretation of the sources, adapted Richard's story in a way that emphasised some of its more problematic sides. On the one hand, he showed how his story was only a part of a much larger political crisis, dominated by several figures of power-hungry and ambitious people, not so different from Richard himself. On the other, Shakespeare also

highlighted how Richard's traditional villainy was an eminently literary construction by having him behave and act in a way reminiscent of the Vice of early English theatre, as well as by having Richard represent the traditional connection between his physical deformity and his evil nature in a way that, however, does not seem to be really supported by the dramatic action. Richard may say that his deformity demonstrates that he was born evil, but no other character in the play makes that connection until the end of *Richard III*, and in a couple of scenes this traditional datum is even questioned. In this way, Shakespeare exploits the traditional literary imagery of Richard to emphasise his 'fictitiousness'. Cornwallis' paradox reprises this ambiguity and makes it the cornerstone for a reversal of the tradition of Richard, dissolving the ambiguity and affirming, once and for all, that that tradition had been unfounded all along. In this sense, Cornwallis' text is both a continuation of the English Renaissance historical depiction of Richard III while also being a prelude to more serious historical revaluations of the character that followed a few years later. For this reason, it occupies an important place in the history of the reception of Richard III's figure and deserves to be better known.

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