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Richard III and Herod

SCOTT COLLEY

IT IS WELL KNOWN THAT SHAKESPEARE'S RICHARD III derives not only from the actual historical figure and the English historians who wrote about his reign, but also from a great variety of literary sources, including writings of Seneca, Lyly, Kyd, Spenser, Marlowe, and other sometimes surprising inspirations.¹ Even the Richard of history books sprang in part from literary models. More's *History of Richard III*, which formed the basis for Halle's and Holinshed's later historical accounts, was greatly influenced by the writings of Tacitus, Suetonius, and Plutarch.² The Richard we encounter in Shakespeare's play thus owes his genesis as much to ancient history and the literary tradition as to accounts of the actual man who lived and reigned just over a century before Shakespeare wrote the play that bears his name. I would argue that one figure in Richard's complex background is the Biblical Herod, hardly an obvious model for the tyrant, but one whose presence haunts the shadows of Shakespeare's play.

Herod is remembered in English literature as a ranter and a braggart, a "robustious" figure who could "tear a passion to totters, to very rags," as Hamlet puts it when he warns the players about an acting style that "out-Herods Herod" (III.ii.9–10; 14).³ Chaucer's Miller mentions that Absalom, "Somtyme, to shewe his lightnesse and maistryre, / . . . pleyeth Herodes upon a scaffold hye" (ll. 3383–84). This reference to Absalom's performance is certainly an ironic comment upon the Miller's notion of a light touch, for Chaucer describes the Miller as a man who bellows in "Pilates voys" (l. 3124).⁴

The literary Herod sprang to life from brief references in the second chapter of Matthew in which the Magi trick the monarch who fears the child born to be King of the Jews. Herod orders the slaughter of all male infants under two years, but misses his prey when an angel warns Joseph and Mary to flee. The historian Josephus recounts at some length the story of King Herod, who then enters the European literary tradition through the writings of the Church Fathers and continental mystery plays of the Feast of the Epiphany. Josephus writes that for his execution of Jewish patriots, Herod was punished by a series of disgusting diseases, including fevers, itches, and running sores. This vivid clin-

¹ For instance, see Harold F. Brooks, "Richard III: Antecedents of Clarence's Dream," *Shakespeare Survey*, 32 (1979), 145–50 and "Richard III, Unhistorical Amplifications: The Women's Scenes and Seneca," *Modern Language Review*, 75 (1980), 721–37. The best summary of Shakespeare's use of sources is Antony Hammond's Introduction to his Arden edition of *Richard III* (London: Methuen, 1981), pp. 73–96. All further references to *Richard III* will be to Hammond's edition.

² See Richard S. Sylvester's Introduction to his edition of More's *The History of King Richard the Thirde* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1963), pp. lxxxvi–xcvii.

³ The *Hamlet* reference is to G. Blakemore Evans's edition of *The Riverside Shakespeare* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974).

⁴ F. N. Robinson, *Chaucer's Works* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957), Vol. I.

ical description affected later portrayals of the literary Herod, whose physical ailments were considered punishments for his slaughter of the innocents, and fit emblems of his violent personality and behavior.⁵

Herod the Great was sometimes confused with his son, Herod Antipas, who ordered the execution of John the Baptist and mocked Christ (see Matthew 14: 1–11; Luke 13: 31–32; 23: 8–12). He was also mistaken for his grandson Herod Agrippa, who killed Saint James Major, imprisoned St. Peter, and died of a terrible disease inflicted by an angel while Agrippa was soliciting the worship rightfully due only to God.⁶ Shakespeare himself seems to have confused the first two of these Herods in *Antony and Cleopatra* when he refers to Herod the Great's murder of the infants (I.ii.29–30) and to the beheading of John the Baptist ordered by Herod Antipas (III.iii.3–6). In both cases, Shakespeare simply calls him "Herod of Jewry."⁷ Shakespeare knew about Herod from the Bible, from sermons, and from Corpus Christi plays which he either witnessed in his youth or knew by reputation: Hamlet apparently refers to the Herod of the cycle plays. (Chaucer's Absalom certainly presented his Herod in fourteenth-century Corpus Christi performances.) It is in the cycle dramas, some of which survived into the mid- to late-sixteenth century, that the Herod of Josephus and of the medieval epiphany plays took on an English form.

Herod belongs to an unholy troika of Biblical villains which includes Lucifer and Pontius Pilate. The three are often associated. Indeed, G. R. Owst cites a medieval English sermon in which "Pylat" is called Herod's "lefetenant, undyr hym, of all his lond of Jury."⁸ Isadore provides another comparison: "Herod, who instigated the slaughter of the Innocents, represents the Devil or those people who, desiring to abolish the name of Christ from the world, wrathfully bring about the death of martyrs."⁹ In the medieval tradition, Herod is crafty and double-dealing. The *glossa ordinaria* relates that "Herod promises devotion, but sharpens his sword; covering up the malice of his heart with the colour of humility. He feigns in words and means to worship Him Whom he secretly intends to kill. His person is represented by the hypocrites who pretend to seek God and never desire to find Him."¹⁰

General parallels to Richard III are clear enough: promising friendship and loyalty, Richard sharpens his sword; he covers the malice of his heart with false humility, and he merely pretends to honor those he secretly intends to kill. Richard's relationships to his brother Clarence, to the family of Queen Elizabeth, and to the heirs of Edward IV are marked by an apparent loyalty

⁵ E. H. Gombrich summarizes the emergence of Herod as a diseased and violent literary figure in "The Evidence of Images," in *Interpretation: Theory and Practice*, ed. Charles Singleton (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1969), pp. 82–83. (Christine Hasenmueller Colley pointed out the Gombrich essay to me and stimulated my thinking about Richard III and Herod.) Robert Weimann includes an eight-page discussion of Herod in his *Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition in the Theater*, ed. Robert Schwartz (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1978), pp. 64–72, but mentions *Richard III* only in passing. For a discussion of Herod and Macbeth, see Emrys Jones, *The Origins of Shakespeare* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), pp. 80–83.

⁶ See Penelope B. R. Doob, *Nebuchadnezzar's Children: Conventions of Madness in Middle English Literature* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1974), pp. 96–97, and S. S. Hussey, "How Many Herods in the Middle English Drama?" *Neophilologus*, 48 (1964), 252–59.

⁷ Richmond Noble, *Shakespeare's Biblical Knowledge* (New York: Macmillan, 1935), pp. 267–68.

⁸ *Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1933), p. 116.

⁹ Translation from Jeffrey Helterman, *Symbolic Action in the Plays of the Wakefield Master* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1981), pp. 115–16.

¹⁰ Translation by Gombrich, p. 84.

and piety that mask treachery. There are more than general parallels, however, that link Shakespeare's Richard to the Biblical and literary Herod.

Shakespeare refers more than a dozen times in *Richard III* to the murder of babes and children as well as to the slaughter of innocents. These references are manipulated in complex ways by Shakespeare and do not constitute a simple pattern of equivalence between Richard as child-murderer and Herod as child-murderer. Indeed, the initial reference to the slaughter of an innocent is directed toward Queen Margaret, who is reminded by Richard that she had earlier murdered his brother Rutland:

Rich. And God, not we, hath plagu'd thy bloody deed.
Eliz. So just is God, to right the innocent.
Hast. O, 'twas the foulest deed to slay that babe,
 And the most merciless, that e'er was heard of.
 (I.iii.181–84)

Rutland was no babe; in fact he was older than Richard himself, but both Shakespeare and his chronicle sources refer to Rutland and other adult male victims as "babes" in order to heighten the pathos of their deaths. George Stanley, a married man, is described (V.iii.96) as if he were a child in Richard's clutches.

Clarence seems to compare himself to certain Biblical victims when he says to his assassins: "Are you drawn forth among a world of men / To slay the innocent?" (I.iv.170–71). After the murder of Clarence, the second murderer remarks, "How fain, like Pilate, would I wash my hands / Of this most grievous murder" (I.iv.262–63). The reference to Pilate naturally brings to mind the execution of Christ, as well as other episodes of tyranny and bloodshed in the story of Christ's infancy and manhood. Clarence is hardly an innocent, as he recognizes in his famous dream, but he is a victim nevertheless. So too are his children, termed "Incapable and shallow innocents" (II.ii.18) by their grandmother. (In actual history, the Tudors completed the dirty work done to Clarence's innocent offspring that Richard had barely begun.)

The true innocents of this tragedy, of course, are the young sons of Edward IV, the Prince of Wales and his younger brother, the Duke of York. Of the several dozen significant characters in Shakespeare's sprawling play, these boys are among the few who do not carry the burdening guilt of past violence and crimes. Indeed, it is Richard's insistence upon the slaughter of such innocents that drives Buckingham into rebellion and marks the beginning of Richard's downward slide. These boys are characterized as "tender babes" for whom the prison walls become a "Rough cradle for such little pretty ones" (IV.i.98–100). The ruthless Tyrrel, in reporting their deaths, says,

The tyrannous and bloodie act is done;
 The most arch deed of piteous massacre
 That ever yet this land was guilty of.
 (IV.iii.1–3)

This is no ordinary murder. Richard's first assault upon a family member moves a killer to recall Pilate; this next assault moves Tyrrel and his accomplices to imagine the butchery of two archetypes of innocence. (See IV.iii.10–20 for elaboration.)

Parallels between episodes in various Corpus Christi "Slaughter of the Innocents" plays and Shakespeare's tragedy demonstrate the persistence of the

Herod narrative in the English literary and dramatic traditions. These parallels do not necessarily indicate that Shakespeare directly borrowed details from the earlier drama, although there are in the cycle plays certain striking analogues to Shakespeare's tragedy. In the medieval English Herod plays, for instance, the cruel king always sends from two to four soldiers out to murder the innocent children, and the soldiers encounter an equal number of grieving mothers. As in *Richard III*, the Towneley version juxtaposes three murderers and three mothers who speak in words that parallel the sad laments of Shakespeare's wailing ladies of Act IV:

Alas, my bab, myn innocent, my fleshly get! For sorow
That God me derly sent, of bales who may me borow?
Thy body is all to-rent! I cry, both euen and morow,
Veniance for thi blod thus spent. . . .¹¹

And yet in Shakespeare's play as in the story of Herod, the tyrant's true rival is already in the safety of another country. Richmond remains in France, and others slip out of England to join him. Early in Act IV, Elizabeth tells Dorset to join those in exile:

Thy mother's name is ominous to children.
If thou wilt outstrip death, go, cross the seas
And live with Richmond, from the reach of hell.
Go: hie thee, hie thee from this slaughter-house. . . .
(IV.i.40–43)

Herod is alerted to the birth of his rival by the sudden appearance of the Magi and the confirming Biblical prophecies which his court scholars reveal to him. A high-comic scene in most of the cycle versions of the story shows Herod dumbfounded at the revelations of the ancient texts. The raging king vows to turn such prophecies back upon themselves.¹² Richard is also troubled by a prophecy:

I do remember me, Henry the Sixth
Did prophesy that Richmond should be King,
When Richmond was a little peevish boy.
A king . . . perhaps. . . .
(IV.ii.94–97)

The Quarto text expands upon Richard's musings: "How chance the prophet could not, at that time, / Have told me—I being by—that I should kill him?" (IV.ii.98–99). It is only moments after Richard's introspection upon prophecies that Tyrrel enters to report the deaths of the two princes. Here, juxtaposed, are two instances of Richard as the murderer of children: once in his thoughts and once in actuality. Richard's momentary self-assurance at the slaughter of his nephews is mocked, of course, because the most dangerous rival to his throne is well beyond his grasp. Richmond, the "peevish boy," has grown to maturity and now menaces Richard's power. Richard soon learns that Buckingham has fled, that Richmond's navy rides the western coast, and that "every hour more competitors / Flock to the rebels" (IV.iv.504–5).

¹¹ "Magnus Herodes," *The Wakefield Pageants in the Towneley Cycle*, ed. A. C. Cawley (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 1958), ll. 388–91.

¹² For instance, see "Magnus Herodes," ll. 209–45 in Cawley.

When Herod hears news about the insecurity of his reign, he rants and raves, threatens to beat his messengers, and nervously calls for wine:

This boye doth mee soe greatly anoye
That I waxe dull and pure drye.
Have done and fill the wyne in hye;
I dye but I have drinke!
Fill fast and lett the cuppes flye. . . .¹³

Richard similarly strikes a messenger in IV.iv, and later says "Give me a bowl of wine. / I have not that alacrity of spirit / Nor cheer of mind that I was wont to have" (V.iii.73–75). In the N-Town Herod play, the king is amazed that he is challenged by an innocent:

How should a bairn wax so bold
By beastes if he born be?
He is young and I am old,
An hardy King of high degree.¹⁴

Richard in a similar mood bellows, "Is the chair empty? Is the sword unsway'd? / Is the King dead? . . . / What heir of York is there alive but we?" (IV.iv.469–71). And like the Herods of the cycles, Richard is amazed that a "paltry fellow," "a milksop" (V.iii.324; 326) would dare challenge so experienced and seasoned a commander as himself.

The Corpus Christi Herods are marked by bombastic self-assurance and narcissism that hardly hide their physical and moral weaknesses. The N-Town Herod characteristically states "There is no lord of land in lordship to me like, / None lovelier, none lovesommer, everlasting is my lay" (Davies, p. 176). One of the captivating elements of Richard's character is his matter-of-fact delight in his own cleverness: "Was ever woman in this humour woo'd? / Was ever woman in this humour won?" (I.ii.232–33):

I'll be at charges for a looking-glass,
And entertain a score or two of tailors
To study fashions to adorn my body:
Since I am crept in favour with myself,
I will maintain it with some little cost.
(I.ii.260–64)

Richard's praise of his body is ironic, naturally, but his self-satisfaction is straightforward. He can never forget, however, what he really looks like: "Deform'd, unfinish'd, sent before my time" (I.i.20). He even exploits his physical deformities when he charges Hastings with treason and claims that Queen Elizabeth and the strumpet Shore have bewitched him: "Behold, mine arm / Is like a blasted sapling wither'd up!" (III.iv.68–69). Herod was traditionally imag-

¹³ "The Magi," *The Chester Mystery Cycle*, eds. R. M. Lumiansky and David Mills (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1974), ll. 414–18. For Herod's beating of messengers who bring bad news, see "Magnus Herodes," ll. 148–55 in Cawley. This motif also appears in "Herod and The Magi," in *York Mystery Plays*, eds. Richard Beadle and Pamela M. King (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), ll. 131–35.

¹⁴ "Herod and the Three Kings," *The Corpus Christi Play in the English Middle Ages*, ed. R. T. Davies (London: Faber and Faber, 1972), p. 182. For a parallel example, see also "The Magi" in Lumiansky, ll. 201–4.

ined as suffering from a variety of ills, particularly in the Chester plays in which his diseases are contrasted with Christ's healing powers (see Doob, p. 121):

My legges roten and my armes;
that nowe I see of feindes swarmes—
I have donne so many harmes—
from hell comminge after mee.¹⁵

A crippled Herod appears in a number of manuscript illuminations, stained glass windows, and roof bosses that show the tyrant in twisted, contorted postures. In a description of a thirteenth-century English psalter, Meyer Schapiro notes this odd, cross-legged pose of Herod that he thinks is characteristic of tyrants generally in such illustrations.¹⁶ Patrick Collins also notices Herod's contorted pose in the *Queen Mary's Psalter*: "Herod's verbal gymnastics in the drama match his weird anatomical positions in art. The . . . Latin psalter . . . show[s] Herod [holding] his hands in such a way that the joints bend back on themselves in all directions. A bare leg juts from the drapery folds and crosses the covered legs. . . . The anger and arrogance of Herod . . . are expressed pictorially through the iconography of physical disorientation."¹⁷ Collins observes similar examples of disjointed Herods on the narrative frieze on the capitals of Saint Trophime at Arles, on the sequence of roof bosses in the transepts of Norwich Cathedral, and in the miniatures of the East Anglican *Hokham Bible Picture Book* (Collins, p. 37). In *Drama and Imagery in English Medieval Churches*,¹⁸ M. D. Anderson reproduces photographs of as many as four of the Norwich transept roof bosses in which Herod appears in a contorted or twisted posture. While the posture may be a stylized depiction of a raging tyrant, it is remarkable how closely the morally and physically twisted Herod suggests the crippled, withered tyrant Richard III.

Also in Norwich is a stained glass window at St. Peter Mancroft which shows the massacre of innocents in which Herod is seen skewering his young victims on the end of his short curved sword or falchion. In the Coventry Smiths' accounts of 1490, there is mention of funds expended for the repair of "a fawchon [and] sceptur for Herod," clearly for a Corpus Christi performance. Anderson relates that the same type of weapon is shown in Herod's hand in some alabasters as well as in a wall painting at Corby in Lincolnshire (Anderson, p. 156). Herod was thus imagined both in Corpus Christi plays and in some religious art as an Eastern potentate with falchion in hand. Lady Anne, in speaking of the death of her "husband" at Richard's hands, links Richard to the same weapon:

Queen Margaret saw
Thy murd'rous falchion smoking in his blood,
The which thou once didst bend against her breast,
But that thy brothers beat aside the point.
(I.ii.95-98)

¹⁵ Lumiansky, "The Slaughter of the Innocents," *The Chester Mystery Cycle*, II. 422-25.

¹⁶ Meyer Schapiro, "An Illuminated English Psalter of the Early Thirteenth Century," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 23 (1960), 183.

¹⁷ Patrick Collins, *The N-Town Plays and Medieval Picture Cycles* (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1979), p. 37.

¹⁸ (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1963), figs. 11 a-d.

Richard has already used his falchion to good purpose, and has threatened to use it yet again. This falchion might have been a weapon appropriate to any tyrant, though possibly Shakespeare recalled Herod when he placed the falchion in Richard's hand.

One of Richard's most notorious deceptions recalls another of the Herod stories. This is his surprising arrest and execution of the innocent Hastings. Richard blithely requests a gift of strawberries from the Bishop of Ely before suddenly claiming he has been bewitched and crippled by Queen Elizabeth and Hastings's Mistress Shore:

Thou art a traitor:
Off with his head! Now by Saint Paul I swear
I will not dine until I see the same.
(III.iv.75–77)

When Hastings delays a moment, the impatient Ratcliffe insists, "Come, come, dispatch: the Duke would be at dinner; / Make a short shrift: he longs to see your head" (III.iv.94–95).

Several scholars have surmised that Richard's oath by Saint Paul to see the head before dinner recalls a similar oath recounted in Acts 23: 12–15 in which a group of Jews swear they will neither eat nor drink until they have killed St. Paul.¹⁹ Shakespeare's possible recollection of the threat against St. Paul may have been reinforced by his simultaneous memory of the feast at which Herodias's daughter Salome dances before Herod Antipas, so pleasing him that she can demand the head of John the Baptist. This second Herod had determined to marry Herodias, his brother's wife, and thus had brought on the wrath of John the Baptist. The story is well known: Herod grants Salome's wish and the head is brought to the banquet table on a platter. Shakespeare probably conflated the several Biblical stories of murder and a severed head when he wrote the Hastings scene. Moreover, Richard III is the only Shakespearean character to swear by Saint Paul, and in the Folio text (I.i.138) he also swears by St. John. Richard himself is a character who pursues a forbidden marriage (the incestuous nature of which is brought to his attention by his intended bride's mother). The figure of Herod Antipas might well have stimulated Shakespeare's imagination when he composed the scene in which the incestuous Richard demands the head of his enemy before he dines.

In *Richard III*, Shakespeare demonstrably had in mind Pilate and the death of Christ, the slaughter of innocents, the grief of their mothers, and the reign of a crippled, incestuous tyrant whose twisted physical appearance mirrors his diseased moral sensibility. Outwardly contemptuous of his adversary, but inwardly fearful of certain prophecies about him, Richard embarks upon the slaughter of all "infants" and "babes" who stand in his path to the throne. He slays one rival with a falchion, and sends assassins to murder the others. An amalgam of historical figure, Roman despot, tragic villain, and Biblical archetype, Richard of Gloucester is a character who illustrates many dimensions of his crowded family tree. The particular figure of Herod is only one element of a mosaic that results in a portrait of Richard III, but the many analogues between the

¹⁹ John B. Harcourt, "'Odde Old Ends, Stolne . . .': King Richard and Saint Paul," *Shakespeare Studies*, 7 (1974), 90; Alistair Fox, "Richard III's Pauline Oath: Shakespeare's Response to Thomas More," *Moreana*, 15 (1978), 14.

Biblical and English tyrants are too striking to be ignored. Shakespeare's early stage villain is recognized as a surprisingly complex figure, and part of this complexity grows out of the dramatist's recollections of his reading and play-going.²⁰

²⁰ An earlier version of this essay was read at the Southeastern Renaissance Conference, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia, 12 April 1985.