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FAILED MOTHERS, MONSTER SONS. READING SHAKESPEARE'S *RICHARD III* AS A FAIRY TALE

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Abstract*: The paper looks at Shakespeare's historical play* Richard III *and its fairy tale-like character given by the configuration of the main character as an arch-villain and the presence of motifs and patterns typically associated with the fairy tale genre. More specifically, it considers the mother-son relationship between the Duchess of York and Richard in the light of the motif of monstrous birth. It is not a coincidence that the emergence of such motifs coincides with the historical contexts of the early modern period. Reading* Richard III *in this key is related to the revisionist approach to chronicle plays.*

Keywords*: arch-villain, fairy tale, monster birth, queenship, revisionist reading.*

1. Introduction

When Richard Gloucester refers to "Our bruised arms hung up for monuments" in Act I scene 1 of Shakespeare's *Richard III*, the Elizabethan audience watching him might have still remembered that the last Plantagenet king had had a withered arm. Or at least this is what gossip fostered by Tudor historiography made the Elizabethans and many future generations believe. Richard III, despite his short reign of only twenty-six months, is, paradoxically, one of the most notorious English monarchs. The numerous international references to Richard today, most of them occasioned by Shakespeare's exaggerated portrayal, make him the perfect equivalent of a tabloid public person. And the recent discovery of his skeleton, in a car park in Leicester, brings him more in the spotlight than ever.

The paper attempts a double reading of Shakespeare's chronicle play, the last in his tetralogy dedicated to the Wars of the Roses, or the Cousins' War: on the one hand, it observes the dominant fairy tale pattern and investigates the connection between such motifs and the late medieval or early modern historical context; on the other hand, it subscribes to the revisionist readings which show how vulnerable to propaganda (and, consequently, susceptible to libel) Elizabethan histories were, *Richard III* being, probably, the best example.

Although the mystery surrounding his life and death–and his legacy–is today, after the identification of his remains, bigger than ever, the impression that his existence and rule was well known is conveyed by the large number of (almost) contemporary recordings, ranging from historical documents, literary biographies, diary entries, and plays. Shakespeare is surely the first author one can think of when it comes to the story of Richard III and he is, just as surely, the one responsible for the king's transformation into a legend. However, the last Yorkist is presented by a number of writings throughout the 15th and the 16th centuries. Polydore Vergil, Edward Hall, Raphael Holinshed, and Thomas More are only the most available examples. What they all have in common is the darkness of the portrayal they offer

a monarch who was decidedly controversial but perhaps too bad to be true. The revisionists' attempt to rehabilitate the youngest son of the White Rose finally came to fruition in August 2012 when, after many years of speculation, the skull and bones of a man who had died at least 500 years ago were dug out of the yard of Leicester's department of social services (Connor 2013). The man had been buried without a coffin and the superficial grave had been a bit too small for him. The back of his skull had been cut open by a bladed weapon and there were signs of numerous other wounds, sign of a violent death, but also of the fact that the body had suffered a series of post-mortem aggressions. The archaeological findings indicated that the place where the body was found had belonged to a medieval church. The historical documentation, forensic investigation, DNA testing, and radiocarbon dating, which lasted for half a year, proved, beyond any doubt, that the remains were King Richard III's (Owen 2013, Britten and Hough 2013). What was revealed about his life and death indicated with scientific precision what had eluded writers, visual artists, historians, and researchers for exactly 528 years, since the Battle of Bosworth in 1485, when Gloucester, after having been ready to give his kingdom for a horse, lost the war, the crown and his life to Henry Tudor. It showed what was accurate in the history of the last days of the Wars of the Roses as we inherited it from the Tudors and what was false in the afterlife of a slandered king.

2. Richard the Crookback, Richard the Ruler of the North

While all the above-mentioned historians have a lot to say about Richard's days after Edward IV's death, there is little–if any–information about the early years as the Duke of York's youngest son. Sean Cunningham (2003) tries to retrieve the figure of Richard Gloucester from secondary, indirect sources, such as diary entries, letters, charters, etc. As he argues (2003:7), "we accept Richard either as manipulated victim of Tudor propaganda, or as a scheming monster of Shakespeare's play, but by promoting these stereotypes, writers have moved away from who Richard was." He continues that, in this equation, Gloucester is no longer a 15th-century character, who occupies a specific place in a social, political and cultural environment, but the product of a modern, stylized refurbishing. Who and what he really was can be understood best in connection with his family, with the service he performed and the roles he played as a feudal public actor (Horrox 1999). He was the smallest of twelve children, born and raised in the northern territories, at Ludlow Castle, the son of Cecily Neville and Richard, Duke of York, heir presumptive to the throne of England when Richard was a child. He was too young to be involved in the first episodes of the civil war, but, by the time he was eight, he must have experienced all the pain, suffering and havoc brought about by the Wars of the Roses. He remained in his mother's care, together with his next brother, George, while his father and elder brothers lived in exile in Ireland. During the second phase of the war, when his father and eldest brother, Edmund Rutland, were killed, his mother sent him away to safety in the Low Countries. When his brother Edward ascended to the throne, he was taken in the household of Warwick "the Kingmaker," his mother's relative, where he received the elite education reserved to the nobility of the highest echelons–the conventional schooling of war, estate management, and politics. As a young adult, Richard Gloucester was already the uncontested ruler of the North, who enjoyed the loyalty of the Northern counties of England, being himself one of the most valuable vassals and allies of his brother the king, securing these remote territories for the crown and maintaining the solid border against the Scots.

As one of the most reliable supporters of Edward IV's claim to the throne during the third phase of the civil war, when Margaret of Anjou and her son Edward were defeated and Henry VI was killed in the Tower, it wasn't such a big surprise that, on his deathbed, "the sun in splendor" named Richard regent and protector of his minor sons. Peter Hancock (2011)

observes, as a reaction against the general impression that has been promoted by the Tudor chroniclers (that Gloucester had plotted to usurp the throne long before his brother's death and that he may be even responsible for Edward's demise), that, had Edward not died so unexpectedly young and had his sons been only a few years older, Richard would have spent his whole life in the North as a respected overlord and trustworthy royal ally and would have remained only a footnote in history. But as it happened, he came to London and, from that moment, he became a major player and a historical figure about whom all future generations had an opinion. Hancock makes another interesting point, noting that, just as the primary cause of the Cousins' War had been the frustration and discontent of a generation who was not given the chance to rule (referring to Edward III's sons and grandsons), Richard III's plight stems from his status as a youngest son. Being only "a spare," unprepared and insufficiently trained for the highest office, he was unconvincing, not legitimate enough in the eyes of his contemporaries and subjects. This drawback is also responsible for how easily he was deposed, a situation similar to the fate of Richard II, the second son of the son of a king, removed and executed by Henry Bolingbroke, future Henry IV.

Hall, Holinshed, Vergil, and More are remarkably unconcerned with Richard's background, being, instead, infinitely interested in making (inaccurate, since unsupported by facts) assumptions about his moral character and unsatisfying physique. The first chronicler to offer opinions about the last Plantagenet and support it with the help of fantastic data and rumours is John Rous who, already in the 1490s, during the early days of the Tudors, rushes to criticize Richard and to project his figure against a mythical background of villainy. He records that Richard was dubious from his fetal status, when he remained in his mother's womb for two years and was then born with teeth (in Knight and Lund 2013). This early reputation is quickly confirmed by Holinshed who, in *The Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland* (1577), depicts Gloucester as small, of body greatly deformed, his face narrow, his countenance cruel. Thomas More is even more enthusiastic about expanding on the king's misshapen body. He borrows the birth scene from Rous and has Richard come "into the world with the feet forward […] and also not untoothed," and finds inspiration about his looks in Holinshed, when he describes his "lowly countenance." (More 2013:5) But More is also the first to call Richard a crookback and to give him the discomfort of a withered arm, apparently voicing popular beliefs. Shakespeare (2006, I, 1) will make much of this deformity, interpreting it creatively and adding a limp and all imaginable "disproportion[s]".

The discovery in the improvised grave at Leicester sent a shiver down everybody's spine since the skeleton belonged to a man who suffered from scoliosis, in other words, someone whose back was curved and had one shoulder appear higher than the other. This is indeed proof of a spinal deformation, though the hunchback–technically, kyphosis–is out of the question. The explanation ventured by critics (Knight and Lund 2013) can be found in the different interpretation of the crookback offered by the early modern clinical expertise and by Richard's chroniclers. While a medical practitioner like Ambroise Paré would diagnose a dislocated vertebra as a crookback, More and Shakespeare make use of a narrower meaning of the term and burden Richard with a deformation which, in theory, wouldn't have been visible. Modern medicine could also add that such a disease starts to manifest itself only later in life, usually during adolescence, so it would have been impossible to identify it in the body of infant Richard and lament his monstrous shape. The other fact revealed by the archaeological discovery was that the man buried in Leicester, in Greyfriars' Church, later dissolved by the newly Protestant Henry VIII, had very fine bones and a spare, almost feminine physique (Connor 2013). Portraying the king as "small," which most chroniclers did, seems, then, accurate: an effeminate body might have been cause of displeasure in beholders accustomed with more solid frames, which could have more successfully proved manly qualities expected in a warrior king.

3. The Proud Cis, Duchess of York

Cecily, nicknamed the York Matriarch, was as formidable a woman as Eleanor of Aquitaine several centuries before her, although she did not enjoy the fame and reputation of the latter. Mother of two kings, great-grandmother of the Tudors, her twelve children and their numerous offspring are proof of how successful she was as a consort of the Duke of York. She played an important role in family matters and decision-making in the administration of northern territories, managing the estate at Ludlow Castle on her own for years and raising an army on a yearly basis for her husband's military campaigns in the South, during the Cousins' War. Known as the "Proud Cis," the Duchess earned this reputation with her pride and temper, her determination and single-mindedness in defending the Yorkist cause, putting up with the loss of her husband and first-born son with the courage and reserve of the most experienced male warrior. As a landowner, she remained an independent manager even during her family's exile. Her most notable exploit was the trip she undertook to London, while in disgrace during the comeback of the Lancastrians, to plead her husband's and sons' cause in front of Parliament.

Quite strikingly, Shakespeare chooses to present her, in *Richard III*, in the company of her grandchildren, Clarence's orphaned children, to offer a powerful family picture. A widow and mourning mother, she redirects her energy, spent on administration and warfare so far, joining the wailing queens. Although rivals initially, Queen Margaret (of Anjou), Queen Elizabeth (Woodville) and the Duchess are one and the same voice towards the end of the play, when they predict the usurper's demise and Richmond's messianic arrival. In the play, previous rivalries are forgotten between all the consorts, as the only competition consists of who displays grief and mourning more powerfully. The new female rival, briefly mentioned in the play, but clearly profiled in history, is Margaret Beaufort, Countess Richmond, Henry Tudor's mother, who plotted for decades against the Plantagenets and in favour of her son's ascension to the throne. Though the son is the rescuer, the mother is evoked maliciously by Queen Elizabeth in the early scenes of the play.

Accurate facts about Richard's relationship with his mother are unknown. It can be assumed, as Sean Cunningham did (2003), that the Proud Cis, a mother and consort of outstanding career with her twelve births and five sons who survived to adulthood, must have been protective of her children. As her youngest – and therefore the most vulnerable – offspring, Duchess Cecily kept George and Richard safe both in the North and when she sent them away on the Continent, during the numerous crises of the Cousins' War. One of the most striking details in Shakespeare's play, where the Duchess is given a surprisingly important role (for a woman in a historical play and a female who was not a queen), is her relationship with Gloucester. Apart from the monstrous birth motif, this distant, unemotional, politically embittered kinship is the aspect which brings *Richard III* closest to the fairy tale realm, where mothers who deliver abnormal children are never concerned with the babes' plight, but with their own reputation and credibility.

4. Monsters and their Mothers

Cultural historians like Jo Eldridge Carney (2012) notice a coincidence between the development of the literary fairy tale and the influence of queenship (queen consorts and queens in their own right) in the politics of early modern states, especially England. While traditional scholarship on the fairy tale gave a romanticized view, of an oral, peasant manifestation, whose main, though not exclusive, public were the children, recent research, such as that of Robert Darnton (2000) focuses more on the direct relationship between politics

and the fairy tale genre, acknowledging its historical insertion. Thus, although abstract character construction and plot development, as described by structuralists and formalists, is undeniable, this abstraction is no longer considered incompatible with history and fact. Actually, as Jack Zipes (qtd. in Eldridge Carney 2012:2) proves, early modern fairy tales presented the reality without disguising the violence and cruelty of daily life, living and dying conditions that were so overwhelming that they needed to be accommodated by means of abstractions. Also, fairy tales mirror the concerns and customs of the educated elite and court affairs, which is why so many stories feature monarchs, princes, and the higher ranks of the aristocracy. As a reflection of this, queens, with their joys and sorrows, are central figures in most early modern fairy tales.

A look at early modern queenship reveals complexity and variety. The English consorts of the 15th century seem to have had a remarkable ability to exert political influence and exploit their positions. Margaret of Anjou earns the nickname of a "she-wolf of France," in Shakespeare's *Henry VI*, Part 3 (I, 4) because she renounces the submissive, discreet role of intercession allotted to medieval queens. Elizabeth Woodville is a "painted queen" and "a queen in jest" (*Richard III*, IV, 4) because, a commoner herself, she used her influence at court to secure top positions for all members of her numerous family (Okerlund 2006). In the 16th century, the scandal around Henry VIII's too many wives, the crisis of succession at the death of Edward VI, who dies without an issue and is followed by three women, brings queenship to the forefront and increases the controversy about it. The rivalry between Elizabeth I and Mary Stuart, consort of France and Scotland, with an ambition to become queen of England in her own right, indicates that the struggle for power was as natural in women as it had always been in men. Other queen consorts, however, follow the pattern of devoted wives and mothers, who observe the prescriptions of the Church and society. Elizabeth of York, wife to Henry VII Tudor, is such an example: married to secure the legitimacy of the Tudors' claim to the throne, she led a life of little public influence, though she was daughter, sister, niece, mother and grandmother of kings and queens of England and Scotland (Okerlund 2011). Katherine of Aragon is another example of a consort whose tragic destiny was influenced by the exclusive role of royal vessel that, as a princess and woman, was assigned to her. It was her inability to produce a healthy male heir that decided the course of history throughout the 16th century and, probably, much later. And English consorts are only the examples at hand, while such illustrations could be found in the early modern histories of Spain or France as well.

In fairy tales, this diversity of biography is well reflected. Beyond being good or bad queens, natural or step mothers to princes and princesses, royal women show desire and ability to rule in their own right, they survive libel, punishment, sometimes even death sentences, are viable substitutes for husbands and sons, and frequently flout social rules. A constant form of subversion (which is reported as deliberate but turns out to be involuntary by the end of the story) is the miscarriage or the delivery of abnormal babies, monsters, and animals.

During the early modernity, the concern with the monstrous escalated. This is an important period for defining ethnic, religious, sexual, and other identities (Lunger Knoppers and Landes 2004) so the narratives of monstrosities are abundant, trapped between fable and a form of (fictitious, pseudo-scientific) comparative anatomy. Monsters embody otherness better than anything or anyone else, in a time when Europeanness strived to build itself a new identity, which should reflect the political, religious, and colonial transformations. According to Michel Foucault (2000), monstrous bodies are reflections of social aberration more than of medical pathology, but the attempt to tame – and, sometimes, punish – them for what they are or for the negative value they represent reflects the birth of a principle of correction, so successful in the age of Reason. The medieval monster, with echoes in the 15th and the 16th

centuries, is a portent, a divine sign, as defined by St. Augustine and Christian thought (Lunger Knoppers and Landes 2004:13). When the monster emerges from a royal family, the link between individual body and the body politic is even more dramatically enforced.

English and French fairy tales abound in plots involving abnormal births: miscarriages, stillborns, moles, monkeys, and puppies. While pregnancy is a frequent wish motif, reflecting the reality of pressure on consorts to produce healthy, preferably male, heirs, the disappointing outcome of conception and gestation is just as recurrent. This fact reflected, on the one hand, the popular obsession with monster births in medical treatises, folklore, sermons, and wonder books, but also the anxiety of society (and patriarchy) to secure viable succession from the top echelons to the most humble communities. Whatever the reason for this occurrence, such preoccupations also place the responsibility for producing fully developed babies in the maternal body. In fairy-tales, just like in scientific texts and wonder books, the opposite event is not interpreted as a natural accident or misfortune, but as a result of the woman's misbehavior. According to Jo Eldridge Carney (2012:50), stories of abnormal births are to be read as cautionary tales in the emerging Protestant tradition and can be regarded as instruments of the reforming mission taken on by the new church. Stories about women who give birth to animals reflect a cultural anxiety about reproduction, insufficiently known medically and thus uncontrollable. Another important observation made by Eldridge Carney (2012:52) is that monstrous births usually imply an erased paternity: the kings and princes of fairy tales cannot forgive their consorts for the offence of a baby whose body does not follow the standards of beauty and health. While taking the credit for good children, the misshapen offspring is rejected as not their own flesh and blood. What is more, in fairy tales, husbands never check the (usually slanderous) rumours about the queens' delivery of a mole or cat, simply deciding to keep the event as secret as possible and have the failed mothers suffer the consequence of their inefficiency or, worse, transgression. Last but not least, fairy tales may focus extensively on the queen's misfortune, but the concern for the baby's state is usually inconsequential. Mothers deplore their own disgrace but give little thought to the sons and daughters they gave birth to.

It is no coincidence that such stories start circulating in an age when the lives of royalties were not exempt from the motif of monstrous births. The two most notorious English cases are Anne Boleyn and Mary Tudor. The former, though not beheaded for the inability to bear a son (after she gave birth to a healthy baby girl, Elizabeth), is ultimately punished publicly for her several miscarriages, which are attributed to unruly sexual behavior, disobedience, and intervention against the will of her husband. This has to be seen in the context of Henry VIII's obsession with his reputation as man and monarch: his public condemnation of his wife is the result of his plan to prove it impossible that the delivery of a deformed fetus might have had anything to do with him. The latter, though queen regnant, is also vulnerable when her pregnancies – no longer a private business, since the pregnant body also corresponded to the body politic of England – turn out to have been imaginary and the rumours suggest the delivery of a mole which had then to be disposed of, like in fairy tales, to save the royal family from public shame. The mole, though reminiscent of fairy tales, was an ambiguous, polysemous term, reflecting both animal imagery and a medical term, borrowed from Latin, *mola uteri*, describing a lump of flesh, or a tumour (Eldridge Carney 2012:62).

5. The Toad's Mother

In *Richard III*, a play abundant in fairy tale elements, the mother-son relationship seems to have been inspired by Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy's *Babiole* or by Straparola's *Ancilloto* (about queens and monkey- or dog-babies) rather than by the *Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland*. It is true that Thomas More's *History of Richard III* is as

generous in proving the last Plantagenet's monstrosity as Shakespeare's play. However, the Bard is far more imaginative in projecting an exaggerated image of the arch-villain. The Elizabethan playwright is also creative in offering a story of the mother-son relationship which had no historical grounding, but must have borne a resemblance with the fairy tale realm.

In this play, all female characters, collectively referred to as the "wailing queens," are brought together as allies, despite former divergences, against a common danger – Richard. This alliance works well especially at a rhetorical level, with curses and calling names directed against a common enemy. Anne Neville sees her husband as a hedgehog, Queen Margaret calls him a dog, a worm, a cur, a hell-hound, a hog, and a "poisonous bunchback's toad" (I, 3), while his own mother voices her despair at his ugly looks:

> Duchess: I have bewept a worthy husband's death
> And lived by looking on his images:
> But now two mirrors of his princely semblance
> Are crack'd in pieces by malignant death,
> And I for comfort have but one false glass. (II, 2)

Here, she compares her elder sons with mirrors. (We must remember the "amorous looking glass" Richard himself evokes in I, 1, as a reference to the "sun in splendour," his handsome brother Edward IV, who can enjoy the time of peace banqueting and flirting, while Gloucester suffers from a lack of popularity and, hence, a complex of inferiority.) According to the Duchess, the elder brothers (only two of whom are presented in Shakespeare's play) are the living image of their defunct father, the Duke of York, while Richard is only a "false" copy. The implication is clear: like the fairy tale motif, like Henry VIII's reaction at Anne Boleyn's miscarriages, the son who does not live up to the expectations and standards of his genitor is discarded. Duchess Cecily takes the shame onto herself, deploring the life of humiliation and displeasure she has lived ever since her last child's conception:

> Duchess: A grievous burthen was thy birth to me;
> Tetchy and wayward was thy infancy;
> Thy school-days frightful, desperate, wild, and furious,
> Thy prime of manhood daring, bold, and venturous,
> Thy age confirm'd, proud, subdued, bloody, treacherous. (IV, 4)

Queen Margaret confirms the accusation, when addressing the King as "slander of thy mother's heavy womb" (I, 3). However, historically, the slander about Duchess Cecily's sexual transgression focuses on Edward IV, not on Richard (Hancock 2011). Edward, fair, tall, and massive was very different from his father and brothers, who were dark and slim. Historians contemporary to Richard even comment on the resemblance between the Duke of York and the new Ruler of the North, Gloucester: a German diplomat writes a rare description of Richard during the late 15th century which seems one of the very few objective reports about the king's figure and personality (in Knight and Lund 2013). Nicolas von Poppelau uses Richard's physical description to prove the allegations about Edward IV's illegitimacy. It is true that, during the Cousins' War, it was a common strategy in both camps to cast doubt about the ruling monarch's credibility and claim by spreading rumours about their mothers' unfaithfulness. Henry VI's only son, Edward, and Margaret of Anjou were the targets of such slander, and so were Edward IV's children by Elizabeth Woodville. Duchess Cecily was, therefore, no exception, although, in Shakespeare's play, the slander is not targeted at the Yorkists' leader, Edward, but at Richard.

The Duchess adopts the fairy tale, superficial personality of the consorts who often try to get rid of their monstrous children in order to avoid their husbands' wrath and the public

opprobrium. One of the most shocking interventions is her hypothetical reference to infanticide, uttered with the eloquence of an early Lady Macbeth:

> Duchess: She that might have intercepted thee,
> By strangling thee in her accursed womb
> From all the slaughters, wretch, that thou hast done! (IV, 4)

6. Conclusion

The accusation that Richard's chroniclers were unfair to him may be, in its turn, unfair. After all, Tudor historiographers may have been bound to tell facts as they were, but poets were not. And the portrait of absolute, but undoubtedly charismatic villainy Shakespeare offers is the direct result of history's metamorphosis into literature. In order to animate a chronicle, in order to dramatize a historical account, stylistic artifices must be allowed for. Still, it is impossible not to observe that, indeed, Richard Plantagenet seems to have been one of the most maligned monarchs in English history. At the end of Thomas More's, Hall's, Polydore Vergil's, or Holinshed's chronicles, the readers are left with Richard's body, stripped naked and thrown over the back of a horse, a description of abject death compared with the funeral ceremonies of Plantagenet rulers before him. At the end of Shakespeare's play, though, we are left with nothing. There is the body politic of the last warrior king who vanishes, to be replaced by early modern dynasties; there is the physical body of a man we cannot forget, but whose final demise we are not allowed to witness. Only half a millennium after the events at Bosworth Field are readers finally given a way out of their dilemma. Richard's body, which was not deformed as much as to make the handicap visible, was indeed carried to Leicester, where it was buried in a grave too small for him. But, since fairy tales always have a happy ending, even when they are about monstrous births, because children grow up to be healthy and admired adults, such a final moment is also deserved by Richard's story. And the recent events of 2013 AD have offered it: his remains were laid in a grave inside Leicester Cathedral with the pump and ceremony reserved to royalty, be they generous or wicked, handsome or misshapen.

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