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Crowned Villainy - Shakespeare's Richard III

William Shakespeare was writing his Richard III in the age of a marked decline of the nobility. The evidence given by various scholars and historians¹ points out that the roots of such a state of affairs may be looked for not only in the rapid decadency of feudalism or the rise of capitalism, but as well in the preceding centuries - the period of civil wars among the English nobility. Shakespeare views the nobles in his plays through the prism of all the changes which occur in his own society, the society which existed in the period of tremendous national enthusiasm - the traces of this may be found in Henry V - yet, as well, the period of gradual devaluation of the traditional virtues of the old aristocratic code of honour. With the rise into power of the common people and the continual rise of the gentry, the point of reference for various matters altered, leaving the nobility with their long-established virtues and understanding of honour at a somewhat loose end. All those events had grave bearing upon the aristocracy - on their morals and position in the country and society - both political, social and moral.

In Shakespeare the nobility are involved in the whole artistic machinery based in its essence upon the renaissance idea of order and degree - this making an important point at which Shakespeare's protagonists differ from their historical equivalents. Save from the purely historical factors, interpersonal relations and socio-political conditions, Shakespeare's characters are entangled in a complex knot of moral facets pertaining to and bound with eternal laws of nature, degree and, most of all, order which was a prevailing notion in Shakespeare's days. The unity in heaven was in strict correspondence to the unity on the earth, both being the perfect

work of God. Consequently, any imperfection, any violation of order was the work of man himself. The order due to which different states from the smallest to the highest were observed on the earth, had its important implications in the common attitude to life. It was believed that any violation of the order, any reverse in the chain of being would bring disaster and havoc.²

Disorder, be it political or social, had grave impact on people, motivating them to further actions which, more often than not, brought new disorder and led to various complications. It is political disorder, for Shakespeare something mystical, that breeds social disorder among men, and becomes the source of a significant feedback between the aristocratic characters, who being at the steer of the state are the makers of the political order, and the political order itself which, created by people, is parallelly the spring and base of all their undertakings.

In Shakespeare's times, the aristocracy, due to their privileged position in the society, were looked upon by the Elizabethans as the pattern of honour and virtue - a well-tuned instrument which out of its principle had ever been destined to be the leading one among the rest of the entire orchestra - the well-ordered society and state. Shakespeare shows in his Chronicle plays - especially in Richard III - what happens if that instrument is played by corruption, hate, envy and treachery; if the aristocratic code of honour is disregarded, misunderstood or misinterpreted. What inevitably follows is the breach of loyalty, rebellion, villainy and violence.

Richard, Duke of Gloucester, may be seen as an antithesis of an ideal aristocrat and a virtuous man. He is constructed by Shakespeare in such a way so as to serve as a paragon of vice and villainy. The portrait of the last of the Yorks, as painted by Shakespeare, is used as a mirror to reflect the violation of all virtues of the aristocratic ethos.

If Prince Hal may be regarded as a pattern of a good nobleman, Richard, in turn, must be viewed as a living example of crime and evil. It is clear that Shakespeare wants to reinforce the ideal princely features of Hal and other noblemen of the Historical plays by contradicting them to the vices and murders committed by and characteristic of the Duke of Gloucester - among them the murder of the young Prince of Wales and his brother, which is a particularly cruel crime in Richard's entire collection. This he does by

making Richard a villain on principle and a villain of his own choice. Richard is also submitted, like Prince Hal, to a peculiar process of education. The education of treachery, evil and vile. He is his own supreme master and the most studious pupil. By way of contrast, Hal's education brings success preparing him for assuming the position of the ideal king, whereas Richard is doomed to inevitable ignoble end. What he derives from his education is exactly fitting his assumed villainy. The successive crimes mark, like milestones, Richard's way to the throne. Yet, the crown he obtains is but thoroughly soaked with blood of his numerous victims, and, first of all, proves too heavy a burden for its unworthy bearer - the honourless nobleman. Shakespeare shows here that the ungodly conduct and shameful deeds of the nobleman such as Richard virtually dishonour him as a member of the aristocratic class, and deprive him of his subjects' love. A nobleman who consciously violates all basic principles of the code of honour becomes a wretched parrot who utters grand words and lofty phrases entirely devoid of any reliability. Although Richard is as cunning as an old fox, his doings bear a clear stigma of pity and contempt for him as the wicked aristocrat. Whatever evil might be accepted in any commoners' doings, it is thoroughly out of place in a nobleman's conduct. This is the idea of Richard's villainy.

Richard III is especially caught up in the political and social exigencies which are inseparably tied up with his personal life. As a Machiavellian schemer - the archetype of Machiavellism - Richard falls to serve Shakespeare as a vehicle to reveal the complex nature of the dominating sins of the play: sins of perjury and murder; sins against the moral order. It is those two grave sins that brand Richard a villain, a sinner against the aristocratic ethos and the divinely sanctioned chain of order. It is them which doom Richard to divine vengeance. But to be able to carry all the villainy and Machiavellism, Richard must have been depicted as a strong personality. To bring out the idea embodied in the play, he must have been the "cause and most accursed effect" of all evil and misfortune in the play. Richard's strong personality and will is best shown in the scene wooing Anne. By taking her in the climax of her pain and hatred toward him, the murderer of her husband and father-in-law, Richard is viewed as an embodiment of mighty force and diabolic strength of character. He inverts

the moral order of things, and then desperately tries to maintain it in its upside-down form.

Richard is perhaps best characterized in the last speech of King Henry VI.⁵ In the king's enunciation, Richard is revealed as a monstrous prince; a man whose lot was determined from his very birth, whose destination was to be bad, cruel and selfish. The man of evil action and ignoble end.

Yet, Shakespeare furnishes the play with clear evidence of all Richard's motives, and sketches the psychological layer of his treble doings. Thus, after Richard's father's death, he complains about being alone, with nobody to love him or praise his bravery as he used to be his father's boy.⁶ The complex of a deserted son developed in the Duke of Gloucester and was enhanced by the complex of inferiority into which he was driven by nature and his fellow-aristocrat, and from which he suffered for all his life. The deformity and physical ugliness, so often cast to his teeth, makes him look for consolation and his self-realization in some other sphere than courtly love or silent approval of his lot.

Richard becomes a villain, an artist in villainy. Shakespeare makes that explicit in Richard's first soliloquy. In villainy he wants to find exile from his lack of adaptation to this hostile world. But in all this superficial evil manifested in his deeds and dealings with the nobility, Richard is still human, still himself.⁷ It is in his "asides" that Shakespeare manages to save Richard from falling into an artificial scheme of evil-doing; a scheme rather false and improbable from a psychological point of view. Richard does what he does, and promises himself more pleasure in winning than in possessing the crown.⁸ He just plays with evil, and with people, too.

Richard has his own code by which he lives. It is not a code of value but of vice - the code of an ideal villain to which he aspires. Following this particular code of evil, he departs from the code of aristocratic virtues, and as a king he is worse in his doings than any other monarch in the historical plays. Richard's sins are so numerous, so excessive that he escapes any traditional evaluation. He is an embodiment of crime; a Machiavel-
liant tyrant for power and self-aggrandisement. For his motto, which may also be taken for leitmotif of the play, may be regarded the bitter words uttered by Buckingham on the eve of his execution:
Wrong hath but wrong, and blame the due of blame.⁸

The means Shakespeare adopts to cast Richard in such villainous mould are significant and worth special attention. There are at least fifty six negative terms and invectives in the play by which Richard is described or referred to. What is also important is that the invectives may be divided into two groups: these relating to his physical appearance, and those concerning his deeds and behaviour. It is not only Richard's adversaries who abuse or vituperate him, but he calls himself bad names also describing his foul person in equally foul words. Richard's disfigurement is often the laughing-stock of the whole company. His deformity is closely related to his vile dealings, and de facto becomes the symbol of Richard's bad will and treacherous nature.

In Richard's opening soliloquy one may find no less than twelve expressions concerning himself. Out of those, there are nine phrases describing his physical appearance. He is therefore, "rudely stamp'd", "reform'd", "unfinished" and "scarce half-made", "lame and unfashionable", "not shaped for sportive tricks", "cherched of features by dissembling nature", and, last but not least, "curtail'd of this fair proportion".⁹

If this is compared with the graceful figures of Prince Hal, Hotspur or even Richard II, it may be seen how ugly and ignoble Richard must have appeared to the Elizabethan audience. His very physical looks make for a contradiction to the traditional image of a gentleman's outward appearance. Richard himself appears to be somewhat taken aback after he has managed to woo Anne "in her heart's extremest hate"¹⁰ towards him. He is truly perplexed with that not even, perhaps, as a worderous prince, but as a mere man, a male - by no means handsome - who is conscious of all his physical shortcomings, and who succeeded in winning a woman. This even makes him, maybe for the first time in his life, to have a closer look at his "halt and unshapen"¹¹ person. He wants to "be at charges for a looking glass"¹² as though he desired to find in it some confirmation of his manliness, so often mocked at him. His wish to "entertain some score or two of tailors/to study fashions to adorn //his// body"¹³ reflects Richard's inward desire to make up for his deformity, and to help him overcome the complex of physical inferiority. The curses relating to his body, thrown at Richard by others - especially by Queen Margaret - are by far the more malicious and exquisite. They stress Richard's villainy and enormity of his offence against humanity and his own social class effected by his departure from the code of honour.

Henoe, he is called: "Tump of foul deformity"¹⁴, "the slave of nature"¹⁵, "loathed issue of //his// father's loins"¹⁶, "bottled spider"¹⁷, "poisonous bunch-backed toad"¹⁸, followed by "foul bunch-backed toad"¹⁹, to finish up the list. No trace of grace, let alone of pure sympathy, can be found in those descriptions. They are so augmented and so full of fire and brimstone, that the figure of Richard emerging from them, after the smoke of any human intensity has gone down, appears to be a negation of any human soul, not to mention an aristocrat who by eternal assumption should be better than others. The purpose upon which the dramatist employed such invectives served its end. By physical appearance, Richard takes more after that "evilish-mark'd, abortive rooting hog"²⁰ than a self-respecting aristocrat. No wonder than that Shakespeare makes him an antithesis of an aristocrat. Richard is treated in the play as a man who not only violates the aristocratic moral code, but, foremost, the general moral code of all human beings. The invectives pertaining to the violation of the code of honour - he is called respectively: "false, treacherous, murderous villain, rag of honour, grand tyrant and usurping boar" - are interwoven in the text with those concerning his appearance and deeds. By the total departure from the ethos, Shakespeare makes it explicit that Richard does not by any means possess the necessary capacities for being a nobleman, let alone a king. He is not fitted to rule the country, for he completely lacks the virtues of justice and honour which are indispensable for a monarch to the proper execution of his royal prerogatives and power.

The way Richard is referred to in the light of his deeds is equally explicit. The duke of the kingdom, at loggerheads with all the remaining nobility - the number of whom he consistently reduces - and, moreover, who has nothing the ethos, must have been accordingly described. It is all his murders which evoke so strong a sense of disgust and anger, the more so because he is a nobleman - an appointed guard of order /which he nevertheless takes delight in violating from start to end/.

Then, the successive noble mouths throw the successive curses and rebukes at Richard showing with increasing emphasis how wretched and ignoble he is. In his own words, Richard is "false"²¹ and "treacherous"²². In Margaret's evaluation he is, respectively: "devil"²³, "wordrons villain"²⁴, "cacoemon"²⁵, "dog"²⁶, "the troubler of the poor world's peace"²⁷, "the rag of honour"²⁸, "hell-bound"²⁹, "foul defacer of God's handiwork"³⁰, "carnal cur"³¹, and "the excel-

lent grand tyrant of the earth"³². Anne, although eventually won by Richard, firstly gives him his due share of abuse, as well. She calls him bad names indeed, starting with "foul devil"³³, "defused infection of a man"³⁴, "devilish slave"³⁵, followed by "murderous falchion smoking in blood"³⁶, all this nicely rounded out with "wedge-hog"³⁷, "foul toad"³⁸, and "dissembler"³⁹.

More fire is added to the description of a base Richard by his own mother, the Duchess, who addresses him as a "cacatrice"⁴⁰ with "unavoided murderous eye"⁴¹. This condemnation of the Duke by his mother is used symbolically enough contrasting Richard to Aumerle. The latter, who wronged much and plotted against the king, is nonetheless defended by his mother who begs Henry IV to pardon her son. Aumerle is thus viewed by Shakespeare as a nobleman who, having trodden the path of evil, has still chances to repent and live up to his social position. He is shown in his crime as the man who erred, but who, nevertheless, is likely to make up for his wrongdoing. And indeed, Aumerle distinguishes himself at Agincourt, and dies a glorious death in the battle-field in the prime of his knightly dignity. Contrarily, Richard is given no chance to become better a man. He is obvious from beginning to finish to blunder, to err, to commit murders, to be villainous and defective; also to be so to his allies in evil. All odds are against him!

It is however Richmond, the future Henry VII, who completes the list of evil speaking toward Richard. Richmond triumphantly enters the stage at the very close of the play, only to utter concluding words upon the bloody reign of Richard, and prophesize peace and order under his rule. Richard, the "wretched, bloody and usurping boar"⁴² will have an end due to his cruelty and violence. "A bloody tyrant"⁴³ will die by the hand of the founder of a new dynasty - the Tudors. Significant and very symbolic is Richard's death. Different from Hotspur's eloquent end; discrepant from violent and dramatic assassination of Richard III; completely various from John of Gaunt's dignified departure; unlike Henry IV's long extinction; dissimilar to the sudden and insidious decease of Henry VI, whom Richard himself launched to the valley of shadows.

Richard dies wordless and horseless in the battle. He is put to death by Richmond, the man, who by way of contrast, kills an embodiment of villainy and vice personified by Richard. Their fight, fatal to Richard - historically untrue, for he is reported to have fallen

In the thick of the fighting, pierced with many wounds - acquires a special connotation. It should have been Richmond, "a courageous Richmond" who relieves the world of a "foul swine" Richard. Richard's death signifies the end of a rioter, the aristocrat whose villainous doings revealed the secret of treachery, perfidy and murder: all embraced in one man.

In the convention of the play, Richard's death denotes the fall of the unhallowed code of vice, and simultaneously, the rise of a new era of peace and restoration of the principles of the truly respected code of honour.

Yet, bad as he is, Richard dies in a nobler way than he led all his unfortunate life. His death - the death of a knight - blows some air of dignity into the soul of his "hell's black intelligencer."

Richard's fall may be regarded in at least three categories. First, as the fall of a nobleman, a king, someone who having rejected and departed from the traditional princely ethos finds himself with no positive code to live by. The new, his own substitute for it - and devised by himself - the code of vice, proves inadequate in the long run. Not so much to the way of life he leads, but rather to his conscience which falls him in the hour of trial. Divine Justice inevitably reaches him as an effect of his illicit life.

Then comes the fall of a Machiavellian prince, the adherent to the methods advocated by the Great Florentine and a careful follower of his counsel. But, perfidious as he is, Richard appears not to have accorded his mode of procedure with the needs of the time. He makes a fatal mistake of trusting his fortune and Good Luck too much, and thus submits himself to the tragic lot brought about by his fame and Divine Justice.

Eventually, one may look into Richard's failure as the fall of a man, a mere human being. Psychologically isolated from others, alone and disappointed, loved by no creature and pitted by no one after his death, Richard III, in spite of all his villainy, evokes some sense of sympathy and even sorrow. The crippled unfortunate king is by all means a truly tragic hero of his lot, and, foremost, of Shakespeare's Great artistic imagination.

There is evidence that King Richard, historically speaking, was by far a better monarch than an aristocrat. Historical records have it that having become the king, Richard set out to promote justice in the nation; he took pains to purge courts of law of inequality

and injustice. He also took an especial interest in the extension of commerce and the encouragement of arts. Richard gave special help to the universities of Cambridge and Oxford. He took the new art of printing under his protection, so that it increased considerably so much so that the books hitherto accessible only to the top, privileged classes now came within the reach of all those who felt the need and impulse to read. The king was fond of music and did much to popularize this art among his subjects. He proved his military skill, administrative leadership, both as the prince and the king. His unfortunate reign and his person, dramatized by William Shakespeare, is accordingly shown in the play in much augmented light.

Poetic licence enabled Shakespeare to contrive Richard in the frame of disorder, in keeping with the artistic assumption to show the king as a "tragic villain" whose doings are influenced and based on the Machiavellian theory of the end which justifies the means. What happens if the means are discordant to the aristocratic ethos and the moral order, Shakespeare has so expressively depicted in Richard III - the play about a noble villain.

NOTES

All texts referred to throughout are those in The Complete Works of William Shakespeare, ed. by W.J. Craig, Oxford University Press, 1962.

1. Cf. Stone, L., The Crisis of the Aristocracy 1558-1641, Oxford, 1965.
2. The problem of the violation of the order is discussed at length by Lily B. Campbell in Shakespeare's Tragic Heroes, Methuen and Co., Ltd., p. 3ff.
3. Campbell, L.B., Shakespeare's Histories, Methuen and Co., Ltd., 1970, p. 308.
4. Richard III, I,11,121.
5. Henry VI Part Three, V,vi,35-56.
6. Cf. Palmer, J., Political Characters of Shakespeare, Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1948, p. 219.
7. Cf. Ibidem, p. 72.
8. Richard III, V,1,29.
9. Ibid., I,1,1-41.
10. Ibid., I,11,235.
11. Ibid., I,11,252.
12. Ibid., I,11,225.
13. Ibid., I,11,258-259.
14. Ibid., I,11,57.
15. Ibid., I,111,230.
16. Ibid., I,111,232.
17. Ibid., I,111,242.
18. Ibid., I,111,246.
19. Ibid., IV,111,81.
20. Ibid., I,111,228.
21. Ibid., I,1,37.
22. Ibid., I,1,37.
23. Ibid., I,111,289.
24. Ibid., I,111,194.
25. Ibid., I,111,112.
26. Ibid., I,111,216.
27. Ibid., I,111,221.
28. Ibid., I,111,232.

29. Ibid., IV,111,48.
30. Ibid., IV,11,51.
31. Ibid., IV,111,56.
32. Ibid., IV,111,52.
33. Ibid., I,11,50.
34. Ibid., I,11,78.
35. Ibid., I,11,88.
36. Ibid., II,11,94.
37. Ibid., I,11,103.
38. Ibid., I,11,148.
39. Ibid., I,11,185.
40. Ibid., IV,1,54.
41. Ibid., IV,1,55.
42. Ibid., IV,11,7.
43. Ibid., V,111,247.
44. Ibid., V,1V,15.
45. Ibid., V,11,10.
46. Ibid., IV,111,70.
47. Ibid., V,111,178-207.
48. Rogers, W.H., Shakespeare and English History, Littlefield, Adams and Co., 1966, p. 123.

Streszczenie

Szekspirowski Ryszard III powstał w okresie stopniowego przekształcania norm tradycyjnego etosu rycerskiego. Przejmując ten proces, jak i ogólnego osłabienia pozycji arystokracji angielskiej przełomu XVI i XVII w., można szukać zarówno w zachodzących wówczas przemianach systemu ekonomiczno-politycznego /przechodzenie od feudalizmu do kapitalizmu/ oraz wroście znaczenia klas średnich i drobnej szlachty, jak i wpiływie jaki wywarł na arystokrację okres wojen domowych ubiegłych stuleci. Zmieniające się punkty odniesienia w wielu problemach natury społecznej, moralnej i politycznej, spowodowały, że arystokracja angielska zaczęła w swym postępowaniu odchodzić od starzych, a jej właściwych, norm życia społecznego.

Na kanwie tych zjawisk Szekspir zbudował postać idealnego - choć i zarazem tragicznego - kotra-arystokracji. Ryszard III jest kotrem z własnego wyboru i woli i dąży do tego, by wznieść się na wyżyny zaideactwa i obywatelstwa co czyni na swej drodze do tronu. Ukazując Ryszarda na tle innych możnowładców - i poprzez ich stosunek do niego - Szekspir stworzył postać anty-arystokracji - swoisty archetyp maklawelowskiego Księcia. Treśka jaką składowuje jego sylwetkę jest jednak na tyle subtelna, by można było się dopatrzeć w krotostwie Ryszarda motywów postępowania innych niż tylko chęć zdobycia władzy. Szekspir daje obraz pobudek psychologicznych /kompleks niższości wywołany ułomnością, ostrycyzm środowiska, osamotnienie/ niedopasowania Ryszarda i swolitego samospełnienia w zbrodni i wiarołomstwie. Jaką księżę, a później król, Ryszard posługuje się w swym krotostwie własnym kodeksem występku i przecherstwa, który jak się okazuje jest zawodny i prowadzi go do zguby i hańby.

Klęskę Ryszarda można rozpatrywać w trzech kategoriach: jako upadek arystokracji i władzy pozbawionego poczucia honoru i sprawiedliwości, a zatem dwóch najważniejszych cech członka klasy panującej; dalej jako praktykanta metod Maklawela, który jednak pomylił się w swych rachubach i zbytnio zaufał swemu szczęściu, co przyniosło mu ostateczną Klęskę; wreszcie jako przegraną zwykłego człowieka pozbawionego zrozumienia i uczucia.

JĘZYKOZNAWSTWO