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“O monstrous fault, to harbor such a thought!”: Physiognomy, Deformity, and Ethics in Literary, Artistic and Screen Depictions of Richard III

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In the fall of 2012, a team of scientists discovered what they soon determined were the remains of Richard III under a parking lot. Aside from the long-assumed curved spine, they also discovered that he had been anally crucified and was buried with his hands tied behind his back. Although Richard was king for just over two years, he has become the stuff of legend, in large part because of William Shakespeare’s famous depiction of him as a deformed, Machiavellian sociopath who manipulates and murders his way to becoming king of England near the conclusion of the War of the Roses. Richard’s deformity, legend has it, was the outward manifestation of a psychopathology unequalled among English royalty. Following ancient precedent, the early moderns referred to this physical reflection of psychological qualities as physiognomy.

Critics have addressed Richard’s deformity from gendered, physiognomic, and disability perspectives. Ian Frederick Moulton argues that Shakespeare’s depiction of Richard’s deformity both critiques and celebrates excessive masculinity and highlights early modern masculinity’s “incoherence.”¹ Michael Torrey argues that Richard’s deceptive machinations reflect early modern uncertainties about physiognomy, and as a “deformed deceiver,” Shakespeare’s depiction of Richard ambivalently engages with physiognomic discourse.² Through the perspective of disability studies, Katherine Williams argues that critical study of Richard’s deformity in Shakespeare’s play has cemented Richard’s position in a “trans-historical narrative of disability” while simultaneously limiting claims concerning early modern disability, which means that Richard’s disability representing “bodily impairment” instead of a more sophisticated relationship between the reader and audience and Richard’s body.³ Moulton, Torrey, and Williams thus have found Richard’s physical deformities to be a source of questions instead of answers.

In addition to examining Shakespeare’s play, this essay addresses depictions of Richard in Tudor and Stuart chronicles, portraiture, and

screen depictions to argue that physiognomy has played a role in all depictions of Richard. Recent archaeological evidence suggests that the physiognomic depictions of Richard have been based on some truth, and this essay will attempt to understand the ethical implications of encounters with Richard in addition to the Machiavellian behavior presented in Shakespeare's depiction. Depictions of Richard, therefore, have travelled from Shakespeare's famous depiction of the infamous, Machiavellian anti-hero to the present day to create the mythos of a bloodthirsty ruler with whom the reader or audience member cannot help but sympathize. Like Satan in *Paradise Lost*, anyone confronted with a depiction of Richard is surprised by sin, and, consequently, comes face-to-face with one of the darkest, most manipulative characters in Shakespeare. Shakespeare thus worked within a tradition that predated him and that characterized Richard physiognomically, a tradition that continued into screen adaptations of Shakespeare's play.

Western physiognomy had become a well-established practice as early as the fourth century B.C.E.⁴ Four ancient texts about physiognomy have survived: the Pseudo-Aristotelian *Physiognomics*, Platonist Polemon's treatise from the second century C.E., Adamantius the Sophist's text from the fourth century C.E., and an anonymous Latin text likely from the third or fourth century C. E.⁵ An extension of ancient psychological theory, physiognomy posits a universal psychology with an ethos based solely on the body and how physical appearance reflects emotion and personality that generally incorporated three types of bodies: animal, emotional, and ethnic.⁶ For the ancients, physiognomy was a legitimate intellectual tradition in which many strongly believed. According to classicist Maud Gleason, the physiognomist himself also exhibits patterns of thought equal to a "forest of eyes" in the ancient Mediterranean face-to-face society, in which the educated scrutinized faces as a necessary skill for survival.⁷

Physiognomy remained relevant into the middle ages, when changes in the conception of nobility and the rise in physiognomic thought highlighted the belief that nobility followed from ethical values and not birth, which means that ethics ultimately could coopt physiognomy to promote Christian ethical behavior in the secular realm.⁸ Physiognomy survived into the early modern period by way of Arabic translations from the ninth century, and most Elizabethan men believed physiognomy to be

valid and worthy of consideration.⁹ Although physiognomy assumes that a person's emotions and character manifest in their appearance, its focus on the face differs from prevailing early modern art theories.¹⁰ While the physiognomist must have the knowledge base to make judgments about a person based on physical characteristics, the process is essentially a phenomenological one, a sensory experience snap judgement.

The sixteenth century's interest in physiognomy reveals a wish to delineate a complicated relationship between substance and surface, and this interest stemmed from trade, travel, and social unrest, all of which created an uncertain environment that invited the use of physiognomy to assess character.¹¹ People used physiognomy not only to evaluate other people, however, as its self-reflective nature served as a mirror for vice and virtue to provide self-improvement and salvation.¹² Because physiognomy often relies on comparison of people with animals, it shared an affinity with Reformation propaganda, such as the use of the cow or ass as an anti-clerical image.¹³

The most famous modern physiognomist is Johann Kaspar Lavater (1741-1801), whose *Essays on Physiognomy Designed to Promote the Knowledge and the Love of Mankind* and *Physiognomic Fragments* appeared in the 1770's. Lavater largely based his theories on the writings of Italian humanist Giambattista Della Porta (1535-1615), who emphasizes physiognomy's usefulness in aiding what Katherine MacDonald refers to as "self-correction," which implies that while some parts of appearance are innocuous, people can consciously change facial countenance. This suggests Della Porta believed in physiognomy's prescriptive function as a tool to correct one's moral self.¹⁴

In the opening monologue of Shakespeare's *Richard III*, Richard immediately mentions his own physical and moral deformity (1.1.14-31):

And that so lamely and unfashionable
That dogs bark at me as I halt by them;
Why, I, in this weak piping time of peace,
Have no delight to pass away the time,
Unless to spy my shadow in the sun
And descant on mine own deformity:
And therefore, since I cannot prove a lover,
To entertain these fair well-spoken days,
I am determined to prove a villain

And hate the idle pleasures of these days.¹⁵

Richard previously had bemoaned his deformity in *3 Henry VI*:

Why, Love forswore me in my mother's womb:

And, for I should not deal in her soft laws,

She did corrupt frail Nature with some bribe,

To shrink mine arm up like a withered shrub;

To make an envious mountain on my back,

Where sits deformity to mock my body;

To shape my legs of an unequal size;

160 To disproportion me in every part,

Like to a chaos, or an unlicked bear-whelp

That carries no impression like the dam.

And am I then a man to be beloved?

O monstrous fault, to harbour such a thought!¹⁶

In *2 Henry VI*, Clifford expresses a quintessential physiognomical attitude in reference to Richard: "Hence, heap of wrath, foul indigested lump, / As crooked in thy manners as thy shape!" (5.1.157-8).¹⁷ Shakespeare, therefore, depicts Richard physiognomically throughout the *Henry VI-Richard III* tetralogy.

Shakespeare was familiar with John Florio's (1553-1625) English translation (1603) of Michel de Montaigne's (1533-1592) *Essais* (1580 to 1588), and In "Of the monstrous child," Montaigne writes about conjoined twins, one of whom suffered a broken arm at birth: "They were joyned face to face, and as if a lesser childe would embrace another somewhat bigger."¹⁸ Montaigne uses this as a metaphor for the body politic: "This double body, and these different members, having reference to one onely head, might serve for a favorable prognostication to our King, to maintaine the factions and differing parties of this our kingdome under an unities of the lawes."¹⁹ Montaigne's comments seem to describe the War of the Roses. In the more well-known essay, "Of physiognomie," Montaigne writes that "There is nothing more truly-semblable, as the conformity or relation betweene the body and the minde."²⁰ For Montaigne, deformity and physiognomy require adherence to regal mandate through conformity.

For his depiction of Richard, Shakespeare largely relied upon Thomas More's unfinished *History of Richard the Third* for the basis of the titular villain of his play. More wrote both an English and Latin version of his history (1513-1518), and the two are not identical and end abruptly

in different places. More likely wrote the English version for unsophisticated British readers.²¹ In both versions, More immediately describes Richard in physical terms, claiming he was of

little of stature, ill-featured of limbs, crook-backed, his left shoulder much higher than his right, hard-favored of visage, and such as is in states called warly, in other men otherwise. He was malicious, wrathful, envious, and, from afore his birth, ever froward.

More also writes that Richard was a breach baby born with teeth:

It is for truth reported that the duchess his mother had so much ado in her travail that she could not be delivered of him uncut, and that he came into the world with the feet forward (as men be borne outward) and, as the fame runneth, also not untoothed.

All of these aspects of Richard etiology's, according to More, suggest that "the full confluence of these qualities, with the defects of fauour and amiable proportion, gaue prooffe to this rule of physiognomie: *Distortum vultum sequitur distorsio morum*."²² The Latin here literally means, "a distorted face follows distorted behavior." More, therefore, characterizes Richard as a weak, pathetic, little man who by manipulation and murder becomes king for only a very short time only to lose power because of his incompetence and delusional ambition based merely on his noble birth. George Logan argues that More felt the need to be "coy" in his depiction of tyranny but not in his depiction of Richard, whom virtually all of More's contemporaries believed was a quintessential tyrant.²³ More's description of Richard's physical deformity would serve as the model for most subsequent historical treatments of Richard.

For example, in his *Anglica Historia* (1534), Italian humanist Polydore Vergil (1470-1555) similarly describes Richard as deformed:

He was lyttle of stature, deformyd of body, thone showlder being higher than thother, a short and sowre cowntenance, which semyd to savor of mischief, and utter evydently craft and deceyt. The whyle he was thinking of any matter, he dyd contynually byte his nether lyppe, as thowgh that crewell nature of his did so rage agaynst yt self in that lyttle carkase.

Richard also displayed a movement disorder: "he was woont to be ever with his right hand pulling out of the sheath to the myddest, and putting in agane, the dagger which he did alway were." Nevertheless, Richard was a very capable man in some respects:

Trewly he had a sharp witt, provydent and subtyle, apt both to counterfayt and dissemble; his corage also liault and fearce, which faylyd him not in the very death, which, whan his men forsooke him, he rather yealded to take with the sword, than by fowle flyght to prolong his lyfe, uncertane what death perchance soon after by sicknes or other vyolence to suffer.²⁴

Edward Hall's (1497–1547) *The Union of the Two Noble and Illustre Families of Lancastre and Yorke* (1548/1550) makes the same kind of characterization:

As he was small and little of stature so was he of body greatly deformed, the one shoulder. higher then the other, his face small but his cotenance was cruel, and such, that a man at the first aspect would iudge it to sauor and smel of malice, fraude, and deceite: when he stode musing he would byte and chaw besely his nether lippe, as who sayd, that his fyerce nature in his cruell body alwaies chafed, sturred and was euer vnquiete:

Hall also mentions Richard's wit and movement disorder:

the dagger that he ware he would when he studied with his hand plucke vp and downe in the shethe to the middes, neuer drawing it fully out, his wit was prenaunt, quicke and redy, wyly to fayne and apte to dissimule, he had a proud mynde and an arrogat stomacke.²⁵

The similarities in language in these accounts suggest a tradition of building upon previous historiography to perpetuate Richard's legendary appearance and behavior.

In the early modern period, physiognomic texts often promoted the relationship between humans and animals.²⁶ More than twelve references to Aesop's fables appear in Shakespeare's plays, and there was a long tradition of English and Latin versions of the fables known to the Elizabethans.²⁷ Shakespeare used the fables as an integral way to interpret human motivations and depict human characters in a manner akin to physiognomy.²⁸ Harold Bloom believes that Richard's naturalism transforms everybody into beasts, while in his edition of More's *Richard III*, George Logan characterizes More's Richard as "more fox than lion" in reference to the Aesopian fable "The Fox and the Lion," in which a fox becomes increasingly more comfortable approaching a lion.²⁹

Richard's heraldic badge, however, was a white boar, and Shakespeare's tragedy makes several references to the boar. In Act 3, for

instance, a messenger tells Hastings that Stanley “dreamt the boar had razed off his helm” (3.2.10), i.e., Richard had decapitated Stanley. Hastings then tells the messenger,

To fly the boar before the boar pursues
 Were to incense the boar to follow us
 And make pursuit where he did mean no chase.
 Go, bid thy master rise and come to me
 And we will both together to the Tower,
 Where he shall see the boar will use us kindly. (3.2.27-32)

After Stanley enters, Hastings asks him, “Come on, come on, where is your boar spear, man? / Fear you the boar, and go so unprovided?” (3.2.71.72). In Act 4, Stanley refers to the “sty of this most bloody boar” where George is under arrest (4.5.2). After Richard has taken the crown, Richmond delivers a tirade against Richard:

The wretched, bloody, and usurping boar,
 That spoiled your summer fields and fruitful vines,
 Swills your warm blood like wash, and makes his trough
 In your emboweled bosoms, this foul swine
 Is now even in the center of this isle,
 Near to the town of Leicester, as we learn. (5.2.7.12)

Richard’s heraldic emblem, therefore, becomes both his personal symbol and the target of derision about his machinations to become king.

In *The History of Animals*, Aristotle characterizes (1.1.15) the wild boar as “violent, passionate, and intractable.”³⁰ Aristotle also characterizes boars by their sexual behavior:

The females become savage when their young are produced, the males at the season of coition; for horses bite each other and drive about and pursue their riders. The wild boars are very savage at this season, although coition renders them weak.³¹

Aristotle additionally notes (6.18) the wild boar’s fighting style, as boars are

extremely fierce, and fight one another in an amazing manner: they put on their defensive armour, viz., they deliberately thicken their hide as much as they possibly can be rubbing against trees, and by repeatedly wallowing in the mud and then letting themselves dry off. They start the fight by driving each other away from their

feeding-places, and the duels are so furious that often both combatants are killed.³²

Through its association with pigs, the boar connotes gluttony, sloth, incest, vicious and sensual greed, baseness, and lechery.³³ Like the chroniclers' description of Richard, Aristotle describes wild boars in ethical terms. More's physiognomic depiction of Richard was intended for the Tudors, and Shakespeare followed suit in pandering to a Tudor monarch.

Characters in the second tetralogy also refer to Richard as a toad. In *3 Henry VI*, Queen Margaret (2.2.135) warns Edward about Richard:

But thou art neither like thy sire nor dam;
But like a foul mis-shapen stigmatic,
Marked by the destinies to be avoided,
As venom toads, or lizards' dreadful stings.³⁴

When Richard woos Anne after the death of the king, Anne says, "Never hung poison on a fouler toad. / Out of my sight! Thou dost infect my eyes" (1.2.150-151). In the following scene, Margaret refers to him as a "poisonous bunchbacked toad" (1.3.245). Elizabeth refers to him as a "bottled spider, that foul bunch-backed toad!" (4.4.81). Characterizing Richard as "bunch backed" of course refers to Richard's alleged hunched back, which at one point was thought to have resulted from adolescent-onset scoliosis.

The earliest known painting of Richard (Figure 1) indeed depicts one shoulder higher than the other.



Figure 1: King Richard III by Unknown artist, oil on panel, c. 1510–40, London, Society of Antiquaries of London

Portraits of Richard from the later sixteenth century (Figures 2 and 3) continue to depict Richard with a raised shoulder, although some are a mirror image of the original anonymous painting.



Figure 2: King Richard III by Unknown artist, oil on panel, late 16th century, London, National Portrait Gallery 148



Figure 3: King Richard III by Unknown artist, oil on panel, 1597-1618, London, National Portrait Gallery 4980(12)

In Figure 1, Richard fiddles with a ring on his ring finger, while in Figures 2 and 3 he plays with a ring on his pinky, reflecting the movement disorder mentioned by the chroniclers. The famous “broken sword” painting of Richard from the mid-sixteenth century (Figure 4), however, shows Richard with an extended middle finger and a ring on his index finger.



Figure 4: Richard III with the Broken Sword, mid-sixteenth century, London, Society of Antiquaries of London

His raised shoulder is on the right as in the first anonymous painting. The broken sword evokes several metaphors, such as sexual and political impotence and the death of Yorkish power.

Famous screen depictions of Richard, such as Laurence Olivier's (Figure 5), Ian McKellen's, and Al Pacino's (Figure 6), returned to depicting Richard with the hunched back because they were based on Shakespeare's play and not on the evolving historical characterization of Richard in portraiture.



Figure 5: *Richard III*. Directed by Laurence Olivier. London Films, 1955.



Figure 6: *Looking for Richard*. Directed by Al Pacino. 20th Century Fox, 1996.

Some stage productions have depicted Richard as disabled, with some productions casting physically disabled actors in the titular role. Richard Dreyfus plays Richard with the hunched back in the play-within-a-movie in Ray Stark's 1977 film, *The Goodbye Girl*.

As with the broken sword and scepter in some of the portraits, Richard's alleged deformity has been associated with the defeat of the Plantagenet family line. The British medical community, however, has suggested Richard did not have a visible physical deformity. In a 1977 article in the *British Medical Journal*, Philip Rhodes suggested scoliosis and Erb's palsy as causes for Richard's supposed hunched back and withered arm, respectively, but concludes that he probably did not have any kind of physical deformity.³⁵ In a 2009 article published in the *Journal of the Royal Medical Society*, Isabel Tulloch argued that it was post-natal trauma that caused Richard's famous deformity and not a congenital condition. Tulloch cites evidence from an X-Ray examination of the anonymous sixteenth-century portrait that appears to show alteration to add the now-famous heightened shoulder, and like Rhodes, she concludes that he probably did not have a significant visible deformity.³⁶ In his treatment of the 2012 discovery of Richard's remains, Philip Schwyzer argues that Shakespeare's play depicts the "body as historical actor, as agent and determining force."³⁷ Schwyzer believes that Shakespeare's depiction of Richard is simultaneously "body and no-body," as it and represents the body's power with the "stubbornly irreducible corporeality to shape history," while also representing a "triumph over the body" in a reduction of corporeal physicality to nothing.³⁸ In other words, history trumps medical reality.

Shakespeare's depiction of Richard has influenced psychoanalytical readings of the play as well. In "Some Character-Types Met with in Psycho-Analytic Work," Freud argued that Shakespeare uses Richard's deformity to garner sympathy for Richard, so Richard's opening soliloquy merely hints at what follows because Richard magnifies our own "demand [for] reparation for early wounds to our narcissism, our self-love."³⁹ Building on Freud's reading, psychologist Aisling Hearn characterizes Richard as a psychopath who has regressed to Jacques Lacan's "mirror stage," the moment at which the infant realizes he or she is a separate entity from the mother.⁴⁰ Stephen Greenblatt agrees, characterizing Richard as having "limitless self-regard" in his transgressions and his delight in causing pain

to serve his “compulsive desire to dominate.”⁴¹ Greenblatt continues by characterizing him as extremely arrogant and narcissistic and having a “grotesque sense of entitlement” while doing whatever he wants, including barking orders and expecting unwavering loyalty without showing gratitude because others’ feelings mean nothing to him and because he lacks natural grace, shared humanity, and decency.⁴² Although he acknowledges that Shakespeare allows his audience to believe in physiognomic reflections of Richard’s inner evil, Greenblatt also suggests that Shakespeare posits society’s reaction to Richard’s deformity as the true cause for Richard’s psychopathology.⁴³ Greenblatt also credits Richard as having the “uncanny” ability to invade the minds of others, which provides him with a means to exist.⁴⁴ Greenblatt’s comments are an intriguing change of course from his previous dismissal of psychoanalytical readings of early modern culture.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, a reputation for being a narcissist and psychopath from the perspective of psychologists undoubtedly suggests a trans-historical and even trans-disciplinary misunderstanding of the difference between literary depiction and historical reality.

Founded in 1924, the Richard III Society has sought to establish a more historically accurate understanding of Richard, and according to their website, there is no evidence that Richard had any noticeable physical ailments.⁴⁶ Madame Tussaud’s statue of Richard in the London museum does not have the hunched back but does depict him fiddling with his fingers as in the anonymous fifteenth-century portrait. More’s depiction of Richard was indeed Tudor propaganda, and it appears as if the early portraits were as well. The fact that he was buried with his hands tied behind his back after having been anally crucified like Edward II suggests a greater posthumous humiliation than the textual and visual perpetuation of his alleged deformity.⁴⁷ The prevalence of the broken scepter and sword in the portraits also suggests that Richard died in emasculated disgrace and humiliation. Perhaps his posthumous reputation and depiction merely followed the nature of his death and merely served to prop up the Tudor regime that ruled England through the end of the Elizabethan period. According to Rosemary Horrox, there is no evidence that Richard sought to capture the crown before the death of Edward and no evidence that he sadistically enjoyed violence.⁴⁸ Winners write history, however, and perhaps in his afterlife Richard is giving the lie (and as in the broken sword

portrait, the finger) to those who may have exaggerated or completely fabricated the mythos of Richard of Gloucester.

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