

HISTORICISING RICHARD III

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Öz

Shakespeare'in tarihi oyunlarından biri olan Richard III deki kral Richard kötülüğün simgesi olarak yüzyıllardır hafızalarda yer almaktadır. Bu makalede tarihteki gerçek Richard III ile Shakespeare'in Richard III arasındaki farklılıklar tarihselcilik yöntemiyle vurgulanmaya çalışılmıştır.

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Richard III, kötülük, tragedya

Richard III'yi Tarihsel Olarak Konumlandırma

Abstract

One of the most important historical plays by Shakespeare, Richard III has continued to be a controversial fascinating figure in the minds of the readers. In this article, The differences between the Richard III in the play and the real king were emphasised by means of new historical approach.

Key Words

Richard III, evil- tragedy.

Prince: I do not like the Tower, of any place

Did Julius Ceasar build that place, my lord?

Buckingham: He did, my gracious lord, begin that place

Which since, succeeding ages, have re-edified.

Prince: Is it upon record ,or else reported

Successively from age to age, he built it.

Buckingham: Upon record, my gracious lord.

Prince: But say, my lord, it were not registered,

Methinks the truth should live from age to age

As 'twere retail'd to all posterity

Even to the general all-attending day (Richard III: III;68-78)

These questions the young prince Edward insists on asking in the play are about making a truly historical enquiry into the truth of historical writing. How are the events and characters written into history? Do historical records give us access to what was once a present event, a living person, an original moment in history? How truthful is history's transmission of knowledge? Is the past ever fully recoverable? How do we know that a certain event actually did take place?

For the young prince Edward , historical truth must lie not in what is written down, upon record, but in what lives from age to age. To find out when and whether an event took place it is necessary to know when and in what circumstances the event was recorded. Did someone, in Julius Ceasar's time, see the Tower being built, report that event, and was the eye-witness of report handed down generation after generation continuously over a millennium and a half until the present time? If it is upon record , how old is the document? Was

the event placed upon record then and there or has it been written down long after the time when it was supposed to have taken place?

It is interesting that Shakespeare tackles this rewriting of history in the speeches of Buckingham and Edward and he himself is writing about one of the controversial figures of history. Did Shakespeare write his historical play depending upon the records or did he add some unhistorical things as well? Was he under the influence of the Tudor rewriting of Richard was he objective?

The controversy surrounding Richard III still endures five hundred years after the end of his reign. The two sides of the debate offer very different portraits of Richard. Ricardians feel that Richard can best be described using his motto “ Loyualte me lie” (Loyalty binds me) . His supporters do acknowledge his faults and see him as having been thrust into a position of power that was far beyond his capabilities. Richard’s detractors paint a very different picture of the short-reigning monarch, far more in keeping with the Tudor’s image. How can two such differing images of the man coexist? Actually, a good historian by analyzing the public documents , correspondences, household accounts and other resources can piece a profile of this historical figure. This could have been a much easier task in 1496 , eleven years after Richard’s untimely death when some chronologists and historians wrote about his reign. But till the beginning of the eighteenth century, history was not an objective, neutral and scientific study . It was often used to teach moral lessons. Modern historical writers do endless research to capture the period about which they are writing as it really was. But Shakespeare who is by far the person most responsible for Richard’s reputation felt no compunction . Most people know Richard III more as the hunchback villain of Shakespeare’s play than the real Richard, who is rather good-looking with nice features. Shakespeare made use of non fiction historians as well such as Richard Grafton, Raphael Holinshed, Edward Halle and Thomas More. There are incredible similarities between Grafton and Holinshed although the former was published in 1543 and the latter in 1587.

“Richard duke of Gloucester, the third son of which we must now entreat, was in wit
and courage equal with the others, but in beauty and lineaments of nature for
underneath them both, for he was little of stature, ill featured of limbs, crook backed,
the left shoulder much higher than the right, hard favored of visage” (Grafton 1968)
“Richard , the third son whom we now entreat, was in wit and courage equal with
either of them , in body and prowess (moral good, probity) for under them both, little

of stature , ill featured of limbs, crook-backed, his left shoulder much higher than the right one..... Hard favored of visage “ (Holinshed,1968)

A lot of historians agree that Richard had thick shoulders but it should be remembered that Richard was a great soldier and had practiced from the time he was a small child . His handling sword much too heavy for him would cause excessive muscular development in his sword arm.

Shakespeare might have wished to be accurate but his sources would not have allowed him to do so. Especially Thomas More's *The History of King Richard III* was the forerunner of Halle, Holinshed and Grafton. The lack of quotation marks shows that More intended his passages to be read as conversations. Seward (1997) argues that More's work has a lot of phrases such as “wise men say”, “it is for truth reported” , and they are the signals to the reader that what is to follow is not at all likely to be true. Moreover, he only describes the period between spring and fall of 1483.

One of More's chief sources , Polydore Vergil (1968: 23), not supportive of Richard III's rise to the throne, is more of a contemporary of Richard. He was the paid chronicler of Richard's successor, Henry VII. Vergil , like More, gives the details of Richard's appearance “was lyttle of stature, deformyd of body, thone showlder higher than thither, a short and soure countenance, which semyed to savor of mischief , and utter evidently craft and deceyt”. What is noteworthy is Vergil reserves his description for the final paragraph of his book. As Renaissance belief dictated, the deformed soul must accompany the deformed body, but to Vergil , it seems to be a trifling matter.

John Rous , another contemporary of Richard and a chantry priest wrote two histories of Richard, one in English and one in Latin. The Latin version presents him as the monster and was circulated after the defeat in Bosworth, most probably to please Henry VII.

Another contemporary, Dominic Mancini, admits he does not know how he ruled England because he left directly after the coronation. However, his knowledge of the coronation was lacking according to Beth Kasir (www.r3.org). He neglected to mention a custom which was common at that time. English kings and their consorts were being anointed during that period in the French fashion , naked from the waist up. If Richard had been hiding the deformities, he would have disbanded the practice as his successor had done. Maybe it was Henry VII who had something to hide. Mancini makes no observations about Richard's supposed deformities. He finds the queen and her faction to blame in the matter of Clarence's death, accusing Richard of seeking to avenge Clarence's death. It is from Clarence's having been drowned in a butt of Malmsey wine which caused him to seek an avenge. If Richard indeed helped with Clarence's

death and when Edward IV repented his decision, blame would have been laid at the doorstep of Richard. Edward showed his trust in Richard by naming his second son after him and naming him protector of his heir.

Sir Clements Markham (1968), a late nineteenth century revisionist, deals so vaguely with Richard's involvement in the execution of Clarence. He suggests that the Tudors, in an effort to blacken all aspects of Richard's character seek to malign his exterior aspects since the Middle Ages equated beauty of the body with purity of the soul.

Some historians including James Gardner writes of the ruthlessness of York and believes the tyranny of Richard but he acquits him of the murder of George, the Duke of Clarence. Besides, all Yorkists were dead in the reign of Henry VII. As is seen, even the historians do not agree with each other about his supposed crimes.

As to Shakespeare's play Richard III, it is so clear that Shakespeare has a soft spot for him since he has managed to create a loveable evil in his incarnate. Maligned as he has been, he is alive and well in the hearts and minds of people. He is evil and comical, hypocritical and candid, demonic and human. Maybe he has some doubts about the historicity of the play –that is why he inserted such a conversation between Buckingham and Prince Edward quoted at the beginning of this paper- George Churchill holds that no truly historical Richard existed in the English mind by the end of the sixteenth century when the history play began to evolve. All the sources were published after Richard's death: Thomas More's *The History of King Richard III* (1513-1522), Polydore Vergil's *Anglica History* (1534-1570), Richard Grafton's *Continuation of Hardyng's Chronicle* (1543) and *A Chronicle at large* (1568-69), Edward Hall's *The Union of Two Noble and Illustrious families of Lancaster and York* (1548), Raphael Holinshed's *The Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland* (1587).

Shakespeare's play is more than a history of Richard III. The character emerges not only from the history but also from the dramatic tradition including Senecan's tyrant, the stage Machiavel and vice-figure of the English morality plays. The conventional Elizabethan stage villain, according to James Moore, is the character with an aspiring mind who seeks political sovereignty. He appears in Senecan plays with intellectual rather than popular appeal. Second, he appears the moral order by being atheistic and satanic, defying the power of Fortuna. Third, his moral monstrosity is represented by some unnatural quality such as the hunchback. Fourth, his career follows a pyramidal contour of the rise, the triumph and the fall. The comic mode Richard displays is from the *Morality Vice* (Spivack, 1958)

Vice is often a figure of much energy and fun, the source of all sorts of naughty suggestions and various tricks and deceptions designed to get Everyman

to succumb to temptations. The Vice figure would commonly establish a close rapport with the audience, letting them in on his plans, insisting them, scaring them and not inviting to his dwelling place.

Shakespeare's evil has some reverberations with Machiavelli (1469-1527) whose fame rests on the fact that his work "Prince" is on political advice to the ruler. Machiavelli strongly believes that the ruler should forget about traditional notions of virtue and morality. The essential quality of a ruler is the effective use of power to guarantee his own survival. The ruler should skillfully use whatever sources are available to maximize his own power and to reduce the power of his enemies. The Machiavellian view "The end justifies the means" and the end he has in mind is the continuing political survival of the ruler. If, to stay in office, one needs to lie, cheat, deceive or kill, that is all part of what the ruler must do without some scruple. He is a person who believes that the assertion of his individual desires is more important than observing any traditional ways of dealing with people and who is prepared to do whatever takes to achieve his personal desires. He is a self-interested individualist with no traditional scruples about communal responsibilities and morality. To achieve his aims, he becomes a fine actor, a consummate hypocrite who can adjust his looks and talk to meet any situation, a great manipulator with practical intelligence, being able to assess people and situations. To his advantage, and he uses people's credulity, stupidity, fear, ambition and weakness to his own advantage. Shakespeare's **Richard III** has something about the Machiavel figure, evil becomes a product, not of extraordinary passionate heroes or Devil figure, but of the all-too-common actions of the man or woman next door. In Shakespeare's Richard, we witness another aspect: the manifestation of the moral weaknesses of others, they fail to recognize what they are confronted with, even when they do sense what Richard is doing. In the example of wooing Lady Anne (in real life Richard and Anne were childhood friends and she found her out as a servant even when Clarence hid her at the mansion). She has every reason to recognize Richard for what he truly is. After all, he has murdered her father-in-law and her husband. She has given into Richard's flattery and perhaps sex appeal. There is no force involved here, other than the force of Richard's personality. But he judges her weakness superbly and brings her, not simply to the edge of an emotional collapse, but also to be his betrothed. Shakespeare has created such an unhistorical scene which helps the bard to show a profound psychological confrontation. Anne is innocent, yes, but she is weak. In a world which contains evil in the form of Richard, it is not enough to be innocent. One has to keep one's guard up, to be careful of one's own feelings, because evil succeeds, not just because other people are weak or stupid or afraid. The pattern of moral evasion is repeated in the case of the young princess, the Archbishop has the power to prevent Richard from sending them to the Tower, and he denies the young prince the Church's protection.

Although Shakespeare's Richard has peculiarities of a monster, he is not hated at all. He retains his larger-than-life feature. Had the Yorkists prevailed at

Bosworth, Richard would not have been portrayed in this way. In order to survive, Henry VII has to justify the kingship and destroy lingering nostalgia for his predecessor. Fearing reprisals, no one dares to write on his behalf. A notable exception, however, appears in the city of York council minutes which proclaim “ King Richard late mercifully reigning upon us was through grete treason..... Piteously slane and murdered to the grete hevynesse of this cite (Seward.1997, 175)

At that time in Southern England, people from the North were still considered barbarians and were regarded with fear and mistrust, almost amounting to hatred. There are no extant Northern chronicles to balance the bias, contradictions and inadequacies of the Southern.

Although he is not popular in the South, he tries to equalize all the places and gets concerned with legal remedies for all subjects and founded a college at York. He is a reformer as well. He invents the system of the bail. He does not think it appropriate for offenders of small crimes to be detained of their liberty. He legislates that the law of the land must be in the language of land. It is a Ricardian measure that had the law translated and posted in public market places for all to see and read. He also standardizes the system of weights and measures. With standardization, he abolishes the system of benevolences. It is his belief that the best man should be presented with the job most suited to his talents.

Shakespeare draws upon literary works apart from the chroniclers and diaries. He probably read the *Mirror for magistrates* printed in 1559. Set in verse, the book consists of moralistic examples. He embellishes the Richard myth, holding that Richard is the actual murderer who attempts with his own hands to strangle Clarence and he fails and then drowns him with his assistance in a butt of malmsey.

The first part based on people and events from English history is Thomas Legge's Latin text of *Richardus Tertius*, which may have been composed in 1573. Legge recognized the potential of the chronicles, gave up the tradition of using Greek and Latin classics for inspiration. Then Legge's play was imitated by **the True Tragedie of Richard the Third** which was written around in 1589 of which authorship has never been established. The Tragedie combines selected scenes from the history chronicles with the conventions of a Senecan revenge play. (The main peculiarities of Senecan play :

- Five-act division
- Highly stylized speech and line-for-line verbal fencing matches
- Use of soliloquy
- Narrative reports especially of horrors recited by messengers
- Sensational themes involving “blood and lust” or unnatural crimes
- Cycles of revenge and retribution

A Chorus for comment on the action
(Stock characters such as a ghost and cruel tyrant)

Sure, Shakespeare does not mention any of his reforms, he even has some chronological errors and historical inaccuracies, which might also be an indicator that he has not intended to write the happenings of the historical figure accurately. Maybe he especially distorts the historical fact to raise doubts in the minds of the playgoers. First, he condenses 14 years from 1471 to 1485 into less than a month of which eleven days are portrayed on the stage. There are some dissimilarities between what Shakespeare writes and what the real history is regarding the life of Richard: Henry VI dies in 1471, Richard and Anne get married in 1472. Clarence dies in 1478 and Edward IV dies in 1483. In the dream sequence Clarence mentions the crossing to Burgundy, which happens when he is 9 and Richard 7. Queen Margaret, who dies in exile in France before Edward's death, is resurrected to serve in the Senecan chorus.

In Act II, Shakespeare does not adhere to the geographical scattering at the time of Edward's death. Buckingham is in Wales, Prince Edward and Rivers are at Ludlow, Richard is in the North, Hastings is in London. It is only through Hastings that Richard learns of Edward's death and his appointment as Protector.

In Act IV, Richard imprisons Clarence's son and meanly matches Clarence's daughter in marriage. Henry VII is responsible and later executes the boy on a trumped-up treason charge. Henry VII executes Clarence's daughter when she is in her 60s to destroy the last of the Plantagenets.

In Act V Richmond generously proclaims a pardon to the soldier that fled but in real life a lot of soldiers fighting for Richard are captured and executed and imprisoned. Henry dates his reign from the day before the battle in order to issue a bill of attainder against all the men who fight for Richard and thereby confiscate their properties.

Richard is shown as sterile throughout the play. Shakespeare omits all mention of Richard's legitimate and illegitimate children. He has Edward (1473-84), Earl of Salisbury (1478) and Duke of Cornwall (1483) by Anne. He has two illegitimate children as well.

In Henry VI, Part II he is called "as crooked in his manners as in shape" but he has the prowess to slay Somerset at the battle of Bosworth. This is another anachronism. The combat occurred when he was 2 ½.

In Shakespeare's play we do not see his ruling side but only his personality "..... I am that he is determined to prove a villain" (I.i.30) Actually, his many endowments indicate that he is a man of Renaissance tastes, a patron of literature, music, architecture and education. He finances the chapel at King's College, Cambridge University and secures licenses to found many

more collegiate churches. He is also responsible for founding the College of Arms, which, for the first time, records and issues the heraldic coat of arms and family antecedents of the nobility in the Kingdom- a medieval Office of Vital Statistics.

He is a keen student of law and insists on equity before the law and justice without delay. He formally creates the institution of the Court of Request, whose duty is to hear the bills, requests, and supplications of poor persons. He even establishes the practice of bail for prisoners awaiting trial, while prohibiting the seizure of their property before they have been judged by due process of law. He outlaws benevolences, the practice of exhorting money by the King from his nobles and successfully reorganizes the system of governmental finance. However, after having put down an extremely dangerous rebellion by Buckingham who is beheaded, who he wisely decides not to see in the trials since his son later confesses that Buckingham is planning to kill him, he starts to sow dragon's teeth to Keith Dockray (1997:181). First by confiscating southern estates on a scale which has not been seen for centuries. Moreover, he does not wait for such formalities as Acts of Attainder and confiscates them illegally. Second, by giving the estates of to northern henchmen like Scrope, Assheton, and Ratcliff-whose loyalty would always be dubious, he alienates other regions as well by his obvious preference for the North. Richard shows ineptitude by giving all Buckingham's land and office to Lord Stanley whose wife is Margaret Beaufort, mother of Henry Tudor Henry VII, a principal architect of the conspiracy. The earl of Northumberland is given Buckingham's great office, that of Lord Great Chamberlain of England. These people turn out to be treacherous later in the war of Bosfield.

Then Richard summons the Parliament on 23 January, 1484. Even in his history of Henry VII Sir Francis Bacon says that the King is a good lawmaker for the ease and solace of the common people. Dockray (1997:180) believes that the excellent statutes of the Parliament of 1484 are directly sponsored by Richard.

Till that time Queen and her daughters are in sanctuary at Westminster. The Croyland writer tells that Queen Elizabeth sends her daughters to King Richard, after having been strongly entreated in March 1484. She does it so after he has sworn a solemn act on March 1. The behavior might show that either the Princes are still alive or else it is Buckingham who has killed them.

Meanwhile a personal tragedy strikes. Richard's son expires on April 9, a year to the day after Edward IV. In that age, this eerie coincidence seems that this is regarded as God's punishment on Richard by anti Ricardeans. Since his mother is apparently consumptive, the ten-year-old Prince may have suffered from the same disease.

After his son's death Richard III tries to be efficient by negotiating peaces with Scotland, Brittany, dealing with Irish affairs, employing a

professional intelligence service. However, he is completely taken by surprise at the Earl of Richmond's choice of landing place- despite all his precautions he has not received news of his landing for four days. Richard's fatal incapacity to judge other men proves right everywhere he goes. It is astonishing how many Englishmen prefer to stay in their homes. At Towton in 1461 they give 50000 men but in 1485 no more than 25000 men are to fight. Thirty-three noblemen join Richard's coronation but only a dozen is with him at Bosworth and two are traitors. Even the city of York sends a force of 80 men, who do not arrive in time. Richard trusts the Stanleys, one of whom is the step father of the Earl of Richmond. Apart from this fatal misjudgment he has a secret enemy, the Earl of Northumberland.

No proper eye-witness report has survived. A Spanish soldier of fortune who is actually present, Juan de Salazar, recounts his experiences in a letter but it is too brief and confused to be of much value though he confirms how Richard meets his end. Nevertheless, careful analysis of the information supplied by the Croyland writer by Vergil, by the compiler of the Greek Chronicle of London, and by the authors of the ballads "Bosworth Field" and "The Most Pleasant Song of the Lady Bessey" make possible an approximate recreation of one of the most dramatic conflicts in English history.

Both contemporary sources and tradition suggest that the King is unable to sleep. There is a legend of later date that he goes round to camp in the dark and catching a sentry dozing at the post, stabs him to death.

The King, to Seward (1997:246), emerges from his pavilion and he tells his friends that he had terrible dreams (it is an age which takes dreaming seriously) Still more ominous, no chaplains are found in the camp to say Mass. Nobody has prepared breakfast for him. Even the hostile "Song of Lady Bessey" admits that Richard III arrays himself for battle like a true monarch.

Give me my battleaxe in my hand
And set my crown on my head so high
For by him that made both Sun and Moon
King of England this day I will die.

When the battle starts, the Duke of Norfolk's unexpected death (when he hacks off his chippiece, a stray arrow hits the old man in the throat) and Northumberland's refusal to bring his troops into action and the Stanleys' keeping 8000 men outside the battlefield overwhelm the King. His horse is killed, a fresh horse is brought but he cannot mount it. He falls in the field like a brave and valiant Prince, pierced with numerous and deadly wounds to Croyland Chronicles. Even Vergil (1968) states that King Richard alone is killed fighting manfully. The battle is over as early as 8 o'clock.

The Croyland chronicler is revolted by the bestial way in which Richard's corpse is treated. After it has been hacked and hewed, harried on horseback, a halter is strung round his neck.

Maybe the only similarity between the real Richard III and Shakespeare's Richard III is his end and his last cry "treason, treason". Whatever the differences are between the play and the history, one thing is certain: after centuries Richard goes on being a controversial figure and fascinating all the readers and theatre goers, and drawing all the attention of the historians, playwrights and literary critics alike and it goes on leaving the traces of question mark in everybody's mind about who the real Richard is.

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