

DRAMATURG'S NOTE: *RICHARD III*

One of the most iconic characters in all of Shakespeare's plays, Richard III is seemingly cut from the same cloth as the Vice character in the medieval Morality plays sanctioned by the church in the Middle Ages. As a play, *Richard III* keeps this Morality play inflection – we can see this in its patterning of 'good' and 'bad' characters, the wheel of fortune device the play revolves around – and we have used this cyclical mirror-like Fate structure in our own production.

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Written at the start of Shakespeare's career, around 1592 or 1594, *Richard III* is Shakespeare in something akin to his Tarantino-mode, a style it shares with *Titus Andronicus*, and what we now call *Henry VI, Part II* and *Henry VI, Part III* – that is, they all share a ruthless narrative dramaturgy which keeps the story barrelling forwards; language which is lean, clear, and dangerous; and lots (and lots) of blood. For Shakespeare and his contemporaries – fellow playwrights like Christopher Marlowe, Thomas Kyd, Ben Jonson; as well as historical chroniclers like Raphael Holinshed, Edward Hall, and Thomas More – the concept of 'history' (i.e. the process of writing about past events) and the notion of writing 'History' (i.e. the genre) were entangled with the narrative of '*history*' (i.e. the societal progression of ideological strategies), in an age which still had one foot in its medieval past while it looked ahead via the Renaissance to the Early Modern Period (in which Shakespeare himself wrote). It is this view of history which gives us Shakespeare's own brand of 'History' – a gloriously unholy blend of recorded fact, fiction, embellishments, and wilful invention to suit a dramatist's dramaturgical needs as well as those of an audience.

For many people, *Richard III* is an example of the 'Tudor Myth.' Writing during the reign of Elizabeth I (granddaughter of Henry VII (Henry Tudor), Richmond in our play), Shakespeare was conforming to an widely-accepted age-old tradition which laid the blame for the violence and instability of the latter part of the Wars of the Roses squarely with Richard III, rather than with Henry VII (Elizabeth I's

grandfather) – this is why Shakespeare depicts Richard as a “crook-backed villain,” a dog, a “bottled spider,” an “abortive rooting hog,” a “poisonous bunch-backed toad;” all attempts to vilify and depict Richard in as unflattering a light as possible. Even the official portraits were doctored during the Tudor era to reinforce this view.

But there are problems with the ‘Tudor Myth’ reading of Shakespeare’s History plays, and *Richard III* in particular. We must be careful not to think of the Elizabethan age as a ‘golden era,’ despite what historians and popular image might want us to think. The England of Elizabeth was violent, harsh, somewhat religiously unstable (although this did settle throughout her reign), as well as being riddled with questions of Elizabeth’s succession, invasion from Spain, wars in Ireland and Scotland...

In *Richard III*, as in the Tudor Myth, we find a portrait of a country ripped apart by unrest, anxiety, a leader marching to his own drum. As Richard cuts his way through English history (and our popular imagination) across the course of the play, we need someone to stand up to him and halt his forward march; when Richmond enters towards the end of the play, we might be tempted to see him as a restorer of peace and justice. But for Shakespeare, as for us with our current knowledge of history over the centuries, is such a presence a relief or a perpetuation of the circular notion of Fate?

A NOTE ON THE TAROT DECK

Interested in exploring this circular idea of Fate, director Budi Miller and I discussed ways to bring this concept to the fore. Inspired by a literal reading of the line “Remember Margaret was a prophetess” [V.1.27], Miller wanted to link the cards in the Major Arcana suit from a standard Tarot deck to scenes in our play-text, envisioning the scenes themselves as Tarot cards, each with their unique purpose and (visual) identity.

Originating in the mid-fifteenth century (around the time the events in Shakespeare’s History plays were happening), the Tarot deck was originally used as playing cards. Sometime in the late

eighteenth century they began to be used as divination tools, and their predominant use as such continues today.

A Tarot deck has four suits: Batons (or Wands), Swords, Coins (or Pentacles), and Cups. Each suit has fourteen cards, numbered one (Ace) to ten, plus four 'face' cards – King, Queen, Knight, Knave (or Jack). There is also a 'trump' suit, known as the Major Arcana: this is a twenty-one card suit, which can additionally contain The Fool. Further, when used for divination purposes, each card in the Major Arcana has two meanings: a 'right' meaning, and an 'inverted' or 'reversed' meaning, depending if the card is shown right-way up or upside-down.

In our *Richard III*, we have mapped each one of the cards in the Major Arcana suit (including The Fool) to one of our twenty-one scenes, a kind of 'twenty-two scenes from an Elizabethan tarot' where Queen Margaret is our fortune-teller. The remaining card, The Emperor, is used to represent Richard in both its 'right' and 'reversed' meanings, and symbolises his ability to "seem a saint, when most [he plays] the devil." [I.3.339]

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