VILLAINY REVEALED: OR, SEEING SHAKESPEARE WHOLE

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Shakespeare's perfect reader has yet to be born. When we read and teach his plays, all of us are aware of how much we still have to learn. If we make the assumption that Shakespeare wastes few opportunities, that seemingly irrelevant passages and characters usually turn out to be relevant, indeed essential -- if we make this assumption, we find over and over again that passages we once puzzled over suddenly come to life. And if we often have trouble understanding the full suggestiveness of Shakespeare's verse or have trouble grasping what a character is like (or why he is employed at all), how much more often must we fail as readers to notice more purely dramatic effects. When we read, character and language are immediately before us; dramatic effects, though implied by the text, may pass unnoticed. The remedy I propose is a simple one. We must always try to conjure up a rough model of the Elizabethan stage -- its thrust platform, its generalized background, its splendid costumes, its inner and upper acting areas. (Perhaps recalling Minneapolis's Guthrie Theater will do.) Once we have called forth this image, we should make sure that we "see" the plays we read. In this way, we can experience the whole of a Shakespeare play. Powerful dramatic effects that once were lost on us can regain their full force. The result will be a richer and more enjoyable experience, for us and for our students.

One example of such an effect comes immediately to mind. For a long time, perhaps influenced by the closeup in Olivier's movie, I pictured Hamlet walking out alone to utter his famous soliloquy, "To be, or not to be." I saw the audience's attention riveted on the melancholy prince, identifying with him, suffering with him alone. But one day I looked at the stage directions. I suddenly realized that Hamlet was not alone -- Ophelia had not left with her father and the King, she was on stage somewhere for the audience to see. The effect of her presence is hard to pin down. I don't think we are to assume that she overhears Hamlet's musings. But clearly she diverts some of the audience's attention from Hamlet and prevents the audience from being caught up completely in his words. Would an audience be more aware of the treachery she represents or of the expression of naive concern that might play on her face? I don't know. But I do know that whatever its effect, Shakespeare's scene is decidedly different from the one I had envisioned for so long.

A clearer case of what we may miss was pointed out by a student of mine. In the last scene of Richard II, Bolingbroke ties up the loose ends of the plot, acts both firmly and mercifully, repudiates Richard's murder, and proposes a trip to the

Holy Land. That Bolingbroke is triumphant is clear. But we also get the impression that his acts are weighing upon him, either in his conscience or in his fears for the future. This impression is much stronger when we visualize what is happening. Unnoticed by a hurried reader, Richard's coffin has been brought in. Characters refer to it twice -- the last words of the play are "this untimely bier"[1] -- but unless we are sensitive to matters other than speech and character we will not sense the full effect of its ominous presence. We cannot know for sure how the Lord Chamberlain's Men played this scene, but I think it is safe to assume that they did not drop the coffin on the sidelines but carried it to the center of the stage. It would thus have been inescapably present in the audience's sight, and their impression of Bolingbroke's triumph would have been correspondingly qualified.

In Richard III, which critics agree depends on simple and powerful effects, no audience can fail to note Richard's tremendous power and subsequent decline. His sentiments, his uniquely colloquial speech, and (of course) his actions make such an impression inevitable. But a reader may not be aware of other ways in which Shakespeare communicates Richard's rise and fall. A quick look at how Shakespeare's plays were staged may help us to understand more of Shakespeare's art. Bernard Beckerman in Shakespeare at the Globe distinguishes between actors' entrances made from the stage doors at the back corners of the stage and entrances made from behind the curtain in the center of the back of the stage. "In all likelihood," Beckerman concludes from a study of plays presented at the Globe, "actors regularly entered through the center curtain, and when they did, they could begin speaking immediately upon entrance. But when the entrances were made through a stage door, I suggest that conversation was held back for the several seconds needed by the actors to move into the acting area proper."[2] Beckerman goes on to talk about the "suddenness" of the unprepared center-curtain entrances, and I think we should recognize in such suddenness a way of forcing an audience to shift its attention quickly to a new speaker. If we look at the first six scenes of Richard III, we find that Richard begins the first with a soliloquy (a device which obviously centers the audience's eyes on him), does not appear in one (Clarence's death, I.iv), and enters in the middle of the other four. One of these four entrances (II. i) has a bit of the preparation which to Beckerman may typify an entrance from a stage door, but all the rest come as a complete surprise to the characters on stage and to the audience as well. Richard, blustering or "fairly bubbling" (as one critic has put it), begins speaking immediately. Even if Beckerman's speculations are wrong, I think it is clear that Shakespeare has given Richard a series of tremendously powerful entrances, a series which I believe to be unique in Shakespeare's work.

Once on stage, Richard continues to impress us with his tremendous force. Beckerman thinks that Elizabethan staging was conventional and ceremonial, the actors often arranging themselves more or less symmetrically about a high-ranking figure.[3] Though

Beckerman's view may be too schematic, it is obvious that each scene that Richard intrudes upon has already built up a natural focus. Anne and the corpse (I. ii), Queen Elizabeth flanked by four lords (I. iii), the sick King Edward (II. i), the Queen and the Duchess of York (II. ii)-- all may be supposed to hold the center of the stage in such a way as would be appropriate to such a formal play as Richard III and as would seem proper and orderly to an Elizabethan audience. But whenever Richard rushes in, he immediately takes at least part of the center of the stage, thus usurping the dominant position in the ceremoniously ordered group in a way which would visually suggest what the outcome of his plans will be. For example, in Act II, Scene i, the Queen has talked with concern and restraint to the four lords who now probably stand two on each side of her. Richard enters at top voice ("They do me wrong, and I will not endure it") and immediately goes (strides? lumbers?) to the center of the group (line 42). He complains loudly, and then either points at or moves back asking each one (at least of the Queen's friends) in turn:

> When have I injured thee? when done thee wrong?
> Or thee? or thee? or any of your factions?
> A plague upon you all!
>
> (56-58)

We should remember too that Richard gets the last or penultimate word in all of these early scenes. He is alone on stage to utter tremendous soliloquies at the end of the first two scenes in which he appears (I. i,ii) and is apparently with no more than one other speaking character in the next three (I. iii, II. i, ii).

Shakespeare evidently is losing no chance of impressing Richard upon us. Perhaps he uses such simple devices, not only so that we feel Richard's power, but so that we become aware at the back of our mind that this power seems mainly based on theatrics, not on the solid virtues and popular support that Richmond possesses. At any rate, Richard does fall, and in the process Shakespeare slowly takes away most of the dramatic devices we have examined. Other characters begin to be dominant: in Act I, Queen Margaret steals some attention from Richard as she wails behind his back; Buckingham begins to do the dirty work; citizens begin to worry; rumors of Richmond's landing become stronger and stronger. And in the later acts of the play, Richard's entrances and exits are shorn of most of their earlier effect. He is allowed one more blustering mid-scene entrance (his second appearance in III. iv when he pronounces Hasting's doom), but no more.

A further dramatic effect remains, perhaps the most powerful of all and thus appropriate to the play's first scene. The play opens with Richard's famous soliloquy in which he comes to tell us that he has been plotting against Clarence. Suddenly Clarence appears. Richard shifts his tone to one of gay and ironic sympathy, and Clarence is led away to the Tower. Richard is left

alone for an ironic comment or two before Hastings enters to tell how sick the King is. Richard ends the scene as it began with a long and vigorous soliloquy. The effect of the scene is, I think, to bring the audience close to Richard and thereby to make the audience see Clarence and Hastings almost through Richard's eyes. He begins the scene, perhaps standing far forward on the stage, confides in us, and then turns to talk, with a hypocrisy which is perfectly obvious to us, to Clarence, who appears as if on cue to illustrate Richard's lecture. Richard is again alone until Hastings appears to give him just the information he needs to begin his villainous course. Here at the beginning of the play we are given the impression that we are almost alone with Richard, that he stands between us and the story which is about to unfold and which he is about to enter.

One would naturally expect Shakespeare to continue to use these dramatic devices in his later plays, especially when he came to draw other villains. Curiously, Iago is not given nearly such powerful staging. He clearly manipulates much of the action, and his soliloquies often end a scene, but he is usually seen with someone else, he never completely dominates a scene as Richard dominates one (I. i), and he is never given a powerful mid-scene entrance. The closest thing in the tragedies to the treatment given Richard III appears in King Lear. One of the most startling moments in all of Shakespeare must be the beginning of the second scene of that play.[4] Edmund has been introduced only briefly, and the audience has had time to forget him during the long scene between Lear and his daughters, when the stage is cleared and Edmund appears again, this time speaking incisively and wittily, "Now, gods, stand up for bastards!" (I. ii,22). This entrance is as powerful as some of Richard's and the scene develops in a way very similar to the opening scene of the earlier play. In both, a villain describes himself frankly and forcefully to his audience: in both, he talks hypocritically to two other characters, speaks briefly in the short interval between the conversations, and closes the scene with a soliloquy. Edmund is even given a powerful stage device that Richard does not quite possess. If in the scene from Richard III characters seem to enter and exit to suit Richard's convenience, Edmund has extended this power to the point that he appears only to have to wish for an encounter and that encounter is provided. Gloucester enters at a most convenient time for Edmund to get down to the business of his trickery. Later, Edmund begins to think he can summon characters almost like an author of plays. "Tut," he says, "I should have been that I am, had the maidenliest star in the firmament twinkled on my bastardizing. Edgar--" he begins, but breaks off as Edgar himself enters, probably at a stage door-- "and pat he comes like the catastrophe of the old comedy. . ." (I. ii, 141-145). Perhaps Edmund here is somewhat amused at his author-like powers. He uses them with more assurance later on when he must get Edgar to run away:

> briefness and fortune, work!
> Brother, a word; descend: brother, I say!
> Enter Edgar.

My father watches; O sir, fly this place. . .
(II. i,20-22)

Edmund, giddy in his power, calls hyperbolically for Edgar to descend supposedly by means of a stage machine. And Edgar enters. The result of these devices is partly to create a somewhat comic tone in these scenes; Maynard Mack notes that Edmund's reference to the catastrophe "sterilize [s] its power to annoy."[5] But, as in Richard III, the devices also set Edmund up as a character of real, if somewhat unusual, power.

The question remains as to why Edmund is given such strong dramatic treatment, while Iago, who is if anything more villainous, is not. Part of the answer lies, I think, in the difference between the two plays. King Lear is the story of an old man, slowly learning that he is not ague-proof, that the gods will not heed his commands, that man is in one way a "poor, bare forked animal" (III. iv 112), that mortality smells, and finally that such knowledge is a necessary prelude to the deep and consoling love he finds briefly with Cordelia. Something, the play implies, can come of nothing. Though his attitude is different from Lear's, Edmund represents a pessimistic view of man and the gods much like what Lear must come to on the heath. Because ideas like his are so important a part of Lear's spiritual progress, their representative is given heavy dramatic emphasis. On the other hand, one can hardly speak in the same way of Othello's spiritual progress. It is more accurate to call his jealousy (mistrust may be a better word) a disease from which no good can possibly come. As a result, I think we react to the two plays differently. In Lear, Edmund and his point of view are presented powerfully so that the audience will be taken through what Lear himself must undergo. In Othello, Iago is not emphasized so strongly because the audience is not asked so much to suffer with Othello as to look on in horror as he is moved to smother his wife. To these differing purposes, Shakespeare's dramatic devices are perfectly appropriate.

Nobody should be surprised to find that Shakespeare's art is complicated or that he utilizes all the resources at his command. But in order to realize how fully he communicates with his audience, we must do more than explicate his verse and discuss his characters. We must try to recapture his superbly theatrical effects and to see how they contribute to the plays in which they appear. In short, we must try to see these plays performed in the theater of our mind.

FOOTNOTES

1. Act V, Scene vi, Line 52. References to Shakespeare will be to the Complete Works, ed. Hardin Craig (Chicago, 1961).

2. (New York, 1962), p. 180. That Richard III could not have been written for the Globe should not keep us from speculating that something like later theatrical practice existed a few years before that theater was built.

3. Beckerman, p. 171.

4. It is startling even if one knows Lear well. Edmund's speech contrasts sharply to the domestic discussion which has gone before. Moreover, I think even the most self-consciously analytical student of Shakespeare becomes caught up in watching the great scenes of his plays so that the effect on him will be much like the effect on an uninitiated playgoer.

5. "Engagement and Detachment in Shakespeare's Plays," in Essays on Shakespeare and Elizabethan Drama in Honor of Hardin Craig, ed. Richard Mosley (Columbia, Missouri, 1962), p. 281.

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