

Comedy & Tyranny in *Richard III* Stephen W. Smith

Greatness knows itself.
—Shakespeare, *Henry the Fourth, Part One*

I. Introduction

The moment is terrible, infamous, tyrannical—and more than slightly ludicrous. King Richard, having hewn his way at last to the throne of England through a terrible drama of fraud, malice, and violence (one wonders where he would fit in Dante's *Inferno*?), turns to consider one pesky item of business that remains: the fate of his two nephews, the young Princes imprisoned in the Tower of London following the famous Sanctuary scene. Chillingly and simply, More tells us first how Richard gave the order that the Constable of the Tower kill the young princes "in any way" he fashions fit, and then how the tyrant became most vexed at learning that the Constable "would never put them to death, even if he had to die" himself (75). That very night, Richard complains to a trusty "secret page" about this matter and sighs like a betrayed parent: "Ah, whom shall a man trust?" (75). The page responds by recommending Sir James Tyrell, a man of ready "strength and wit"—though something imperfect in truth and good will—for that infamous office. After narrating this dark exchange, More suddenly reveals one of the strangest details into the history: "For upon this page's words King Richard arose (for this communication had he sitting on the stool, an appropriate court for such a council) and came out into his bed chambers..." (76; emphasis added). All the court Richard has left, apparently, is the humble commode, a solitary and merciless throne. Suddenly, the terrible tyrant shrinks in stature and seems to become—one of us—but a man. After this brief moment where the narrator invites us to participate in a surprising even shocking chuckle, the *History* of Richard's tyranny grinds on, and the two Princes are promptly relieved of their lives.

Far from being an odd exception, or isolated perversity in an otherwise serious tragical history, this strange jest is in fact the last of many conspicuous moments of comedy in More's *History of Richard the Third*. As George Logan has pointed out in his introduction to the work, More's main classical models, specifically Tacitus and Sallust, differ from More in one important respect: they are seldom humorous in tone, save in a ponderous ironic way, and they lack the strange and "brilliant lightning" of More's comic wit (xxxix). Like the perplexing errors and dissimulations marking the manner of More's text, the presence of subtle—and not so subtle—comedy throughout the *History* challenges equations of More's writing with the classical authors, and raises the question of whether More's artful comic

wit makes or mars the *History of Richard the Third*. This essay will explore the comic moments in More's writing with an eye to discerning how provoking unexpected laughter may be seen as part of More's larger strategy in the work to provide conscientious readers with a "ministry of defense" against the "tragic games" of tyrants past and present—and perhaps against the inner tyranny that is the common struggle of all. How More's use of comedy helps the reader to see better through the spectacles of tyranny—and especially helps us to confront the "blindness of our mortal nature" at its most painful and tragic moments—is the present business of this essay.

II. Tragedy and Comedy in *The History of Richard the Third*

A reader may readily see, I think, how the *History* is tragical, deadly and dark, but the same reader may be perplexed by the presence of comedy and laughter throughout the tale, of mirth amidst the madness, often at crucial moments of decision and turns of plot. While I believe More's comic wit and temperament colors the whole tale of *Richard the Third*,¹ it may nevertheless be initially observed that the history divides into two parts. The first part—from the opening portrait of Edward and the "heaviness" of his death to the "painted process" and "gay matter" of the Sanctuary scene—is *more apparently serious and tragic*, while the second part remains serious but is now *more obviously marked by comic* touches and surprising laughter, which become increasingly palpable after Richard gains control of the Princes. After this key triumph, as the narrator notes, Richard "open[s] himself more boldly" to his aristocratic lackeys (36) and reveals the various tyrannical inventions and devices that will become as obvious as the hunch on his back throughout the rest of the *History*, though Richard hardly cloaks himself with lingo-cunning earlier. Whereas in the earlier part of the *History*, the "wise" perceive Richard's nature and malicious devices better than others do (19, 34), in the second half More's comic art serves to foster just such wisdom, or mother wit, in readers who may have missed the subtler ironies in the first part on first reading because of a lack of "wise mistrust" of apparent greatness, or a failure to recognize the laughable littleness of most men in the work (38). Let's now make a short survey of the strange moments of comedy in the second part of the *History*, and explore More's use of comedy.

III. Strawberries, Sorceresses, a Sore Shriveled Arm—and Hastings Beheaded

After the imprisonment of the princes and on Friday the thirteenth of June, Richard continues to push his tyranny forward by orchestrating the fall of the vainly sure Hastings. Having made his famous and seemingly innocuous request for strawberries from Morton's garden, Richard leaves the council chamber, then returns dramatically altered, "frowning and frothing and gnawing on his lips" and all the brutal violence of his soul apparent (40). Out of nowhere, he promptly accuses

¹ For example, with the whole *History* in mind, the opening portrait of Edward is clearly, though subtly, ridiculous. His deathbed atonement would be laughable, if it weren't so fatal. This is the first of many moments of laughter-and-tears in the *History*.

the Queen and others with her of plotting his destruction. Though plotting the destruction of others is hardly an unusual form of neighborly affection in *The History of Richard the Third*, Richard's explanation of the plot against his tender person is magnificently and transparently ridiculous, and the reader feels the first urge to laugh at the ludicrous devices of tyranny, indeed at the tyrant himself, when Richard presents himself as a *most unlikely* victim of *most unlikely* duo of witches.

Then said the Protector: 'You shall all see in what way that sorceress and that other witch of her counsel, Shore's wife, with their affinity, have by their sorcery and witchcraft wasted my body.' And therewith, he plucked up his doublet sleeve to his elbow upon his left arm, where he showed a shriveled, withered arm—as if it were ever otherwise. And thereupon every man's mind sore misgave them, well perceiving that this matter was but a quarrel, for well they knew the Queen was too wise to go about any such folly. And also if she would, yet would she of all folk least make Shore's wife of council, whom of all women she most hated, as that concubine whom the King her husband had most loved. And also no man was there present but well knew that the Protector's arm was ever such since his birth. (41-42, emphasis added)

What fascinates me here is the obvious, laughable quality of Richard's ploys—the witchcraft of his wits, which the first part of the *History* invites us to consider as deep and so difficult to resist, here seems a comic sham that invites immediate mistrust. Each man in the council knows that what he proposes is patently false; each man is perhaps even tempted to laugh at such folly and gamesmanship; and yet Richard seems to dare men to do anything more, from this point on, than privately chuckle at his tyranny even as they passively participate in it and countenance his madly multiplying lies. Like Hastings before his beheading, every honorable man in the *History* seems "easy to beguile" in this strange comic-tragic way.

After the beheading of Hastings, Richard decides to "set some color on the matter" for the sake of the eyes of other men. Like the accusation of witchcraft and sorcery, the appearance of Richard and Hastings in old ill-faring armor presents another transparent tyrannical sham (45-46), and Richard seems like a man whose actions threaten to mar the serious drama he is trying to direct. Again, however, no "substantial man" complains of the obviously ill drama unfolding, but each rather "answered [Richard] fair, as though no man mistrusted the matter, which of truth no man believed" (46). At present it's safe to suggest that at least one function of the comic touches in *The History of Richard the Third* is to throw into terrible relief these moments of sheer weakness, frailty, folly and fear—the text frequently turns from laughter to sudden sad spectacle of men compromising themselves, and participating in the bad comedy of tyranny by failing to act in a way consistent with their clear knowledge of the truth.

The pattern continues with the more than suspect proclamation circulated after Hastings' execution. In this case, however, More's focus shifts to the people's response to Richard's hocus pocus. As in the case of the ill fitting armor and the unlikely accusations of witchery, the neatly and curiously composed proclamation, on nice parchment, fools no one—"every child," More tells us, "might well perceive that it was prepared beforehand" (47). Moreover, the schoolmaster's famous diagnosis, "Here is a gay goodly cast, foul cast away for haste" calls attention

to the increasing hastiness of Richard's devices and inventions, and their patent, laughable duplicity. As in the earlier cases, the response here to clear perception is merry—a merchant waggishly suggest that the proclamation was composed via prophecy—yet again decidedly muted. The gay, goodly cast of *Richard the Third*, it seems, from high to low, instantly perceive Richard's malice and lame art throughout the remainder of the text, but in each case resistance is limited to private knowledge and laughter—and essentially public compliance, with varying degrees of culpability. The play of Richard's plot and art reads like a dark farce of folly, or an *opera buffa*, which provokes smiles and scorn and silence.

The final comic touch in this section of the *History* comes with Richard's final ridiculous accusations against Shore's wife, which this time provoke outright laughter from onlookers. Unable to find so much as a pointy nose or hat or even an old broomstick in support of his earlier accusations of witchcraft against Shore, Richard boldly tries his hand at truth for a change:

...he laid heinously to her charge the thing that she herself could not deny, that all the world knew was true, and that nevertheless every man laughed at to hear it then so suddenly so highly taken, that she was wicked with her body. And for this cause (as a goodly continent prince, clean and faultless of himself, sent out of heaven into this vicious world for the amendment of men's manners), he caused the Bishop of London to put her to open penance.... (47-48)

Here More elicits laughter both through Richard's plotting and especially through the truly absurd image of Richard himself, hunchbacked and shriveled, descending to earth to mend it like a second son of God. Like his brother Edward, who so dubiously arranged an ineffectual "atonement" before his death after a life of sheer willfulness and voluptuous pleasure. Needless to say, but Richard is obviously anything but a saviour in *Richard the Third*, neither for himself, nor friends, nor people, nor country. [Digression: Edward on charity? "Love one another"—like I love my three concubines!] Despite the ludicrousness of Richard, the Bishop of London supports him, and the sense becomes quite strong that neither the lords, nor the Church, nor the people are willing to mar Richard's play, his regal tragicomedy or "tragic games," despite their better knowledge.

Having repeatedly rendered visible the ridiculous spectacle of Richard's tyrannical art—and raised uncomfortable questions about craven responses to that art, More continues to employ humor for quite serious ends, but now through his amusing yet distressing digression on King Edward the Fourth's character and desires—and frailties.

The portrait of Edward's trusty concubines and the narrative of his marriage decision are presented both merrily and disturbingly, in a manner oddly reminiscent of More's presentation of Richard's tyrannizing. Obviously, these details about Edward's character are of great consequence for our reading of the *History*, as they come to us through the narrator and collaborate at least in part Buckingham's pointed complaints about Edward later. Like Richard's tyrannical devices, Edward's fleshiness and willfulness are obvious to all onlookers, including Edward himself. Indeed, More strangely shows us how Edward is in the habit of laughing at his own evil in the same way onlookers laughed at Richard's games. Like those same onlookers, too, Edward does nothing but laugh—and the consequences

are not unfunny.

Regarding his need for a fleet of concubines, Edward jests that he has “three concubines in whom three diverse qualities differently excelled: one the merriest; another the williest; the third the holiest harlot in the realm, as one whom no man could get out of church [cf. Sanctuary!] lightly to any place, but it were to his bed” (49). While Edward makes light over the very lecherous habits Richard will later exploit in his quest for the crown, it is intriguing to note that we glimpse in Edward’s three harlots an image of virtues usually separate in the *History*—merriment, wit and wisdom, and holiness. Here More uses an odd jest to both point out the problem with Edward, and perhaps to suggest one reason for the near universal collapse of character in *Richard the Third*—division.

In Edward’s questionable decision to marry Elizabeth Grey, we see another questionable plot whose truth is only too apparent: though Edward tries to dress the decision up, he is in fact hastily pursuing fulfillment of his powerful appetites. As More famously observes, Edward follows the “counsel of his desire” and presses for the marriage in “all possible haste.” Not surprisingly given the other moments like this in the *History*, Edward’s friends are then asked to support his ridiculous plan: “then asked [Edward] counsel of his other friends, and in such manner, as they might easily perceive it remedied not greatly to say nay” (54). There is in this case, however, one voice of resistance, the Queen, who critiques Edward for “a little wanton dotage” on Elizabeth and his obvious lack of “wisdom” in wildly pursuing “an improper thing” and a “very blemish” and “high disparagement to the sacred majesty of a prince” (55). In response to the Queen’s bald diagnosis of Edward’s littleness and folly, Edward evasively answers “part in earnest, part in play merrily,” since the narrator tells us, “he knew himself out of her rule.” [cf More’s poem, who can rule a king?] While he first tries to “satisfy her” soberly, he concludes by merrily revealing the key fault of his character—he will not, he says, act “against his appetite,” that is, he will not give up the unlimited liberty of choosing according to the counsels of his desire regardless of wisdom [Interestingly, if one looked at the soul as a kind of court, the counselor usurps the king]. Though the truth of the King’s guiding principle, his appetite, is clearly revealed here, Edward attempts to color over the unpleasant truth with a final jest [he remarks that a minimum they will not be childless, since she is a widow and has children, while he is a bachelor and has some too], which, though humorous, “nothing appeases” the Queen, who nevertheless remains unable to resist Edward’s plot to marry Elizabeth Grey.

After this curious digression on Edward, we return to the darkly humorous narrative of Richard’s tyranny at the point where he “pretend[s] that King Edward and his children are bastards. Though the narrator characterizes Richard’s pretext as yet another case of “simple” invention, he now tells us a bit more on why it succeeds. First, he tells us that Richard’s simple inventions please those “to whom it sufficed to have so mething to say, while they were sure to be compelled to no larger proof than they themselves pleased to make” (58). Such inventions, in other words, provide just “enough” rationale, howsoever obviously questionable it may be, to win the support of men like John Shaa, who seconds Richard’s invention with his shameful sermon delivered at St. Paul’s Cross. Like a number of Richard’s other accomplices, Shaa is presented at first as having “no scrupulous conscience,” and of being a man of “more learning than virtue” and “more fame than learning.” Moreover, like some of the farcical and ridiculous villainy earlier, Shaa’s sermon on

the text, “bastard slips shall never take root” (Wisdom 4:3) is not only suspect, but this time the performance is actually marred by haste, delay, and miscues on the part of Richard and the Doctor, and the invention fails, though not without a last comic attempt to save appearances that simply completes his folly.

For while the Protector delayed along the way lest he should arrive before those words, and while the Doctor, fearing that the Protector should come before his sermon would come to those words, hastened his matter thereto, the preacher came to them and past them and entered into other matters before the Protector came. When the Doctor beheld his coming, he suddenly left the matter with which he was in hand, and without any deduction thereunto, out of all order, out of all frame, began to repeat those words again. (60)

As the narrator remarks, the people were very far from crying out “King Richard!” at this point, for “they had been turned into stone, for wonder of this shameful sermon” (60). Here Shaa and Richard’s devices are clearly no laughing matter—though Shaa hides away like the proverbially wise owl afterwards, he has been shown to be a fool for all the world to see, and though he seeks to evade the testimony of his “conscience,” which “well showed him” the truth of his foolish conduct, a friend tells him the unwelcome truth (rather rare in *Richard the Third*) and he withers up and dies.

At this point in the *History*, it becomes much clearer that participating in Richard’s tyranny, while it may provoke some comic laughter among onlookers or readers, costs the actual performers their honesty...drives them into fatal ridiculousness and folly...leads them to silence or betray their own conscience...and having given them the lie destroys their integrity and their lives. Indeed, after Shaa’s strange death, the narrative turns from comedy to tragedy with terrible swiftness.

The final moment I’d like to consider is similar to the Bastard slips sermon—namely, Buckingham’s ridiculous “performance” at Guildhall. Buckingham—perhaps the Mark Antony of *Richard the Third*—is both obviously well-spoken and “not unlearned” in the least. Like Shaa too, Buckingham does not hesitate to make a mockery of himself, in the manner of Richard’s other concubines, by performing a key role in the final act of Richard’s tyranny. In this case, Buckingham “rehearses” Richard’s case for the throne in front of the people. While brilliant and witty, Buckingham’s words become patently ridiculous as he explains Richard’s pretexts and inventions, but also as he presents a woefully ludicrous image of Richard as wise man. After he speaks at length with all his art, he shamefully receives no response from the people—silence was in the Guildhall, something the masterful speaker Buckingham is unaccustomed to. The narrator again invites laughter at this ridiculous moment through the brief exchange between Buckingham and the Mayor:

“What means this that this people be so still?”
“Sir,” said the Mayor, “perchance they perceive you not well.”

Following this humorous whispering, Buckingham ridiculously attempts to mend his speech a little by rehearsing it again “somewhat louder,” so mething that only

increases the incomparable folly of his speech: “every man much marveled that heard him, and thought that they never had in their lives heard so evil a tale so well told” (67). Not exactly the rhetorical triumph Buckingham imagined for himself, and yet intensely memorable. After this perception, we again encounter the moment of truth—how will the crowd react after seeing through a gifted man’s nonsense? What is best to do?

After more silence, the Mayor asks the Recorder to present Buckingham’s case yet again a third time. Careful to distance himself from the Buckingham’s opinions, the Recorder “tempers the tale” and repeats it, but still “marvelous obstinate silence” reigns in the Guildhall and Buckingham is moved to force the moment to its crisis by demanding that they give an answer. While whispering strangely amongst themselves like a “swarm of bees,” perhaps a sign of wisdom, the people are suddenly betrayed “an ambush of the Duke’s servants and of Nesfield’s, and others belonging to the Protector” who cry out absurdly, “King Richard! King Richard!”. Still the people remain silent, yet Buckingham and the Mayor seize the opportunity for one last lame invention: “they turned it to their purpose and said it was a goodly cry and a joyful to hear, every man with one voice, no man saying nay.” Buckingham claims a transparently ridiculous victory, though the narrator again darkly hints at the cost of all who participate in the folly of Richard’s tyranny:

And therewith, the lords came down, and the company dissolved and departed, the most part all sad, some with glad semblance who were not very merry, and some of those who came thither with the Duke not able to hide their sorrow, were glad, at his back, to turn their face to the wall while the sadness of their hearts burst out of their eyes. (69)

It would be impossible at this point to conclude that here comedy has suddenly become tragedy, the last of many such memorable images in the *History of Richard the Third*. Well, not quite the last. After the “mockish election” and the coronation, More leaves us with a surprising, final image of Richard. Having achieved at last the fruition of an earthly crown, having killed or corrupted through his devices and inventions his fellow countrymen, Richard attempts to make a kind of atonement through a final ridiculous device:

He made an open proclamation that he did put out of his mind all enmities, and he there did openly pardon all offenses committed against him. And to the intent that he might show a proof thereof, he commanded that one Fogge, whom he had long deadly hated should be brought then before him. Who, being brought out of the sanctuary nearby (for thither had he fled for fear of him) in the sight of the people, he took him by the hand. Which thing the common people rejoiced at and praised, but the wise men took it for a vanity. In his return homeward, whomsoever he met, he saluted. For a mind that knows itself guilty is in a manner dejected to servile flattery.

The man who would be king, then, has become a slave—and knows it.