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Individual and Collective Memory in Shakespeare's First Tetralogy, Between Myth and National Identity

Abstract: In *Richard III*, Act 3, young Prince Edward's insistent questions about the origins of the Tower of London bring the issue of historical transmission to the foreground. Furthermore, the survival of truth across time is thematised throughout the first tetralogy. References to fame recur obsessively in the three parts of *Henry VI*, while in *Richard III*, Shakespeare subtly plays with a historical and historiographical tradition that is much indebted to memorial transmission. In this play, historical distortion is materialised in the deformed body of its protagonist, who becomes the emblem of a past reinterpreted and rewritten in the light of present interests. The article will show how, on the one hand, the dramatist goes beyond what already was a "vituperative history" and brings the so-called Tudor myth to its apex while, on the other hand, undermining this same myth.

Keywords: Shakespeare; Sources; History; Collective Memory; National Identity; *Richard III*; *Henry VI*.

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I n *King Richard III*, Act 3, young Prince Edward's insistent questions about the origins of the Tower of London bring the issue of historical transmission into the foreground:

> PRINCE: I do not like the Tower, of any place.
> – Did Julius Caesar 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 retailed to all posterity,
> Even to the general all-ending day.
> RICHARD: [*aside*] So wise so young, they say, do never live long[1].

For the Prince, "truth *should* live" through the ages. The use of the conditional, however, insinuates that this is not actually the case. The problem would seem not to arise for the origins of the Tower of London, which, according to Buckingham, are attested by a written source (a "record"). This apparently definitive assertion nevertheless conceals a deception, since, as we learn from the Elizabethan historian John Stow, the data still refers to a *report*, and its veracity is far from certain: "it hath beene the common opinion: and some haue written (but of none assured ground) that Iulius Cæsar, the first conquerour of the Brytains, was the originall Authour and founder aswell thereof, as also of many other Towers, Castels, and great buildings within this Realme"[2].

Richard's ironic (and irritated) comment on the wisdom of his young nephew adds emphasis to what has just been said, thus thematising the problematic nature of the way in which we can learn about what is far from us in time. Be it *report* or *record*, what we can know about the past is in no way the same as the truth. Indeed, beyond the fact that a written account (a record) is a *text* and, as such, it has been filtered by the conscience of the writer[3], it can also happen, as in the case of the Tower of London, that the record had originated from a report passed on through an act of memory, either individual or collective. Further emphasis on the exchange is given by the fact that this disquisition on the reliability of historical transmission centres on the Tower, which, as Giovanna Mochi observes, constitutes the symbolic space *par excellence* of *Richard III*, as it is mentioned twenty-seven times in this play, compared to the four times in *Richard II*, the three in

King John and the nine in the First Part of *Henry VI*[4].

This problematisation of historical sources appears in the play that concludes the first tetralogy and reflects back onto the entire sequence. The survival of truth across time is thematised throughout the first tetralogy, as we can see from the obsessively recurring references to fame. They open and close, for example, the Second Part of *King Henry VI*. In the first scene of the play, we find Gloucester deploring the marriage of Henry VI to Margaret of Anjou, which risks depriving the English nobles of the fame they have earned on the French battlefields and erasing them from the history books:

> GLOUCESTER: O peers of England, shameful is this league,
> Fatal this marriage, cancelling your fame,
> Blotting your names from books of memory,
> Razing the characters of your renown,
> Defacing monuments of conquer'd France,
> Undoing all, as all had never been[5]!

The conclusion of the play returns to the eternalising power of fame, predicting, this time, that the battle of St Albans will go down in history: "Saint Albans battle won by famous York / Shall be eternized in all age to come"[6]. The references to fame are repeated in the Third Part of *King Henry VI*, always in contexts where the power of the "renown" to ensure the survival of the brave over time is emphasised:

> YORK: But this I know, they have demeaned themselves
> Like men born to renown by life or death[7].

RICHARD: Richard, I bear thy name; I'll venge thy death,
Or die renowned by attempting it[8].

WARWICK: Stay we no longer, dreaming of renown,
But sound the trumpets, and about our task[9].

Appeals to fame, however, can be found above all in the First Part of *King Henry VI*, the last of the three works focused on this sovereign to have been composed, and therefore the one chronologically closest to *King Richard III*[10]. In *Henry VI, Part 1*, references to Lord Talbot's fame abound. The French fear and admire him, as we are informed by a Messenger, who arrives to tell him that the Countess of Auvergne wants to meet the man "whose glory fills the world with loud report". Actually, the lady is planning to capture Talbot to earn the recognition of her compatriots and become, in turn, famous:

The plot is laid. If all things fall out right,
I shall as famous be by this exploit
As Scythian Tomyris by Cyrus' death.
Great is the rumour of this dreadful knight,
And his achievements of no less account.
Fain would mine eyes be witness with mine ears,
To give their censure of these rare reports[11].

It is Talbot himself, on the verge of death, who declares that fame will certainly confer him and his son, who have gloriously fallen on the battlefield, immortality:

Thou antic death, which laugh'st us here to scorn,
Anon from thy insulting tyranny,
Coupled in bonds of perpetuity,
Two Talbots winged through the lither sky,
In thy despite shall scape mortality[12].

His universally recognised fame should thus allow him to endure through the centuries[13]. Ironically enough, the dramatic Lord Talbot suffers a clear distortion dying two years earlier than his historical counterpart, and showing how unreliable the "report" can be. In that same battle in which Talbot falls, we also find the famous Joan of Arc, whose death has instead been postponed by twenty years (from 1431 to 1451) in an even more brazen play on the shared collective memory.

The explicit problematisation of historical sources highlighted at the beginning, however, especially concerns *King Richard III*, where the dramatist subtly plays with a historical and historiographical tradition that is much indebted to memorial transmission. David Scott Kastan does not hesitate to call *all* of Shakespeare's historical plays "meta-historical", as they not only deliberately transform history into patriotic myth, but thematise reconstruction and historical transmission[14]. However, although all historical plays deal, fundamentally, with the difficulty of preserving the past, in *King Richard III* the operation of historical distortion materialises precisely in the deformed body – "Deformed, unfinished, [...] scarce half made up"[15] – of its protagonist, who becomes the emblem of a past reinterpreted and rewritten in the light of present interests. As Marjorie Garber notes, "Richard is made villainous

in appearance to match the desired villainy of his reputation, and then is given a personality warped and bent to compensate for his physical shape"[16].

Given the centrality of the issue, before proceeding with this discussion, it is appropriate to list the sources – both historical and literary – of the plays that make up the first Shakespearean tetralogy, written in the years 1590-1592. The question of the sources Shakespeare used when writing his historical plays is very complex and widely debated, not least because the chronicles of the time are very similar to each other. In fact, in the Tudor period, historical writing was not based on research, but on tradition, which had in itself a legitimising value. This necessarily produced (declared) conformity to an approved prototype and relative uniformity[17]. Shakespeare's major historical source for all four plays was Edward Hall's *The Vnion of the Two Noble and Illustre Famelies of Lancastre and Yorke*, first published in 1548. This main source was complemented by others, to which Shakespeare turned for specific episodes and character traits. For *Henry VI, Part 1*, for instance, he used the second edition of Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland* (1587), Robert Fabyan's *New Chronicles of England and France* (1516) and Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain*. For *Henry VI, Part 2*, Hall was flanked by John Foxe's *The Actes and Monuments* (1563) – popularly known as *Foxe's Book of Martyrs* – and John Stow's *Chronicles of England* (1580). As far as *Henry VI, Part 3* is concerned, the only secondary source that Shakespeare seems to have used, in addition to the chronicles of Hall and Holinshed, is the *Mirror for Magistrates*,

where almost all the characters of the play appear, as tragic *exempla*. The *Mirror* had been published for the first time in 1559 and had reached its fifth, expanded, edition by 1587.

Different is the case for *King Richard III*, even though the process, apparently, would seem to be similar: Shakespeare used, again, Hall and Holinshed, and, for this play too, we find as a literary source the *Mirror for Magistrates*. However, both Hall and Holinshed embedded two slightly different versions of Sir Thomas More's unfinished *History of King Richard III*[18], which they supplemented with the *Anglica Historia*, written in Latin by Henry VII's Court Historian, Polydore Vergil, and first published in 1534. The circumstance that, in this case, all the sources originated in More's account makes *King Richard III* unique. In fact, although More also used Vergil and, to a lesser extent, Fabyan, it is not a negligible detail that he, as a boy, had spent two years as a page with John Morton, at the time Lord Chancellor of England and Archbishop of Canterbury, then, from 1493, a Cardinal. It was he who, sensing the young More's intellectual abilities, initiated him into classical studies at Oxford. The admiration that More had for Morton throughout his life is demonstrated by the fact that, in his most famous work, *Utopia*, he included a discussion that took place in Morton's home. However, even more relevant with regard to our discussion is the presence of Morton among the protagonists of the events narrated in *The History of King Richard III*, where he appears as a declared enemy of Richard. It is precisely on Morton – whom More calls "my lord Morton" and defines as "a man of great naturall wit, verie well

learned, and honorable in behauior, lacking no wise waies to win fauour"[19] – and on the conspiracy against Richard hatched by him and the Duke of Buckingham that the narrative closes. Although critics have long discarded the hypothesis that the account found among More's papers was the work of Morton himself, it is nevertheless plausible that he had been a memorial source for the events More narrated[20]. Especially so since, at the time of the author's stay in the Lord Chancellor's house, those events had just occurred: More was in fact his guest from 1490 to 1492, while the Battle of Bosworth – which saw the defeat and death of Richard III, and decreed the end of the Wars of the Roses – had been fought in 1485. An act of individual memory, then, is at the origin of what is the main text for the events related to the last York king. An act of *individual memory* that was orally transmitted, transcribed and then incorporated into all subsequent chronicles and transformed into *shared*, *collective memory*, contributing substantially to the creation of what is commonly known as the "Tudor myth".

Going back to the tetralogy, although the sources, certain or probable, that Shakespeare used were many, it was from Hall that the playwright borrowed, for all the plays, the symbolic-ideological design, which was already evident in the title of the chronicle itself (*The Vnion of the Two Noble and Illustre Famelies of Lancastre and Yorke*). The historical path the dramatist staged was intended to represent, through a long chain of crimes and punishments, the affirmation of unity over division and of order over chaos. In the play that closes the tetralogy, the deformed body of the last York king, Richard III, becomes, once again, the tangible image of this chaos and the allegory of a power achieved through manipulation, abuse and murder. In his ascent to the throne, the fratricidal hatred that has bloodied England for thirty years reaches its peak, and Henry Richmond, founder of the new Tudor dynasty with the name of Henry VII, is the hero called by Providence to restore union and order. This is how the symbolic-ideological design assumes an evident political value in legitimising the dynasty on the throne when both the chronicle and the plays were composed.

From Vergil to More (which Hall and Holinshed incorporated), to Shakespeare, Richard of Gloucester underwent a progressive demonisation, so much so that voices were raised in defence of this reviled character. Among the first of these, we find Sir George Buck in *Life and Reign of Richard III* (1646) and Horace Walpole in *Historic Doubts on the Life and Reign of King Richard III* (1768). In 1956 a "Richard III Society" was even founded with the aim of rehabilitating the memory of this monarch, according to his supporters, unjustly slandered[21]. But how did Shakespeare increase the character's villainy over and above his sources? If we leave aside the physical appearance – he also underwent a progressive disfigurement – and focus exclusively on the actions that are ascribed to him, we see that, over the years, Richard appears increasingly involved in the deaths that open his way to the throne[22]. In Polydore Vergil's *Anglica Historia*, Richard is the devoted supporter of his brother Edward: he has no aspiration for the crown prior to his death, and it is only in Edward's interest that he kills Henry VI. Even his responsibility for the murder, however, might only

be a rumour: "The contynuall report is, that Richerd duke of Glocester killyd him with a swoord, whereby his brother might be delyveryd from all feare of hostylytie". Vergil does not even seem to give much credit to this "report", as we can see, immediately after, from a comment in which he also insinuates that the murder may have had instigators ("procurers"): "But *who so ever wer the killer of that holy man*, yt is apparant ynoughe, that as well the murtherer as the procurers therof sufferyd punysshement for ther offences"[23]. The *Mirror for Magistrates* is even less direct and makes no mention of Richard, simply speaking of a "brother" of Edward: "And shortly I my selfe to stynt al furder strife / Stabbed with his brothers bluddy blade in prison lost my life"[24].

In stark contrast with such vagueness, we find that More, on the other hand, leaves no doubt about Richard's responsibility, and vigorously denies that Edward may have been the instigator. The Duke of Gloucester would be the sole conceiver and architect of the murder:

> [Richard duke of Gloucester] slewe in the towre kyng Henry the. vi. saiyng, "Nowe is there no heyre male of kyng Edward the thyrde, but we of the house of Yorke"; whiche murder was done without kynge Edwardes assent, whiche would haue appoynted that bocherlye office to some other rather then to his owne brother[25].

Shakespeare goes even further and, in the last of the plays on Henry VI, we see that the spirit of loyalty to the York family (which in More still found voice in Richard's words) is also completely absent. In Shakespeare, Richard acts solely out of

self-interest. In fact, during the soliloquy that follows the killing (which was entirely his initiative), he declares: "I have no brother, I am like no brother; … I am myself alone"[26]. After all, he has already informed the audience that what has guided his choice to remain faithful to Edward when his other brother, George, Duke of Clarence, betrayed him was only his desire to reach the crown, his unbridled *libido coronae*: "my thoughts aim at a further matter. / I stay not for the love of Edward, but the crown"[27]. Actually, as Richard's soliloquy in Act 3, Scene 2 and his asides during Edward's coronation make clear[28], he is full of hatred for the new king.

As for Clarence's death, according to Vergil this took place exclusively on the orders of the king. The author also reports several hypotheses regarding the motivation for the deed, without subscribing to any: he has consulted authoritative people, but he has not reached any certainty. One of the conjectures Vergil presents is that the king was intimidated by a prophecy. However, this would only be a "report" circulating among the people:

> [King Edward] fell into a fact most horryble, commandyng rashly and uppon the suddane his brother George duke of Clarence to be apprehendyd and put to death, who was drowned (as they say) in a butte of malmesey; the woorst example that ever man cowld remember. And as touching the cause of his death, thowgh I have enqueryd of many, who wer not of leest authorytie emongest the kinges cownsaylle at that time, yeat have I no certaintie therof to leave in memory. A report was eaven then spred emongest

the common people, that the king was afeard, by reason of a soothsayers prophecy, and so became incensyd agaynst his broother George, […]. Others lay an other cause of his death, which ys in this sort. That abowt the same time thold hatryd renewing betwixt the two brothers, […]. But yt ys very lykly that king Edward right soone repentyd that dede; for (as men say) whan so ever any sewyd for saving a mans lyfe, he was woont to cry owt in a rage, "O infortunate broother, for whose lyfe no man in this world wold once make request;" affirming in that manyfestly, that he was cast away by envy of the nobylytie[29].

It is in More's *History* that we first see Richard implicated in the death of his brother Clarence, although the author reports his involvement only as a rumour and is emphatic in asserting that there is no evidence for it. The passage is also interesting because it informs us of how this *conjecture* has then risen to *truth*:

Some wise men also wene [that] hys [Richard's] drift lacked not in helpyng forth his owne brother of Clarence to his death, whiche thyng in all apparaunce he resisted, although he inwardly mynded it. […] But of these poyntes there is no certentie, and whosoeuer deuyneth or coniectureth maye as well shote to ferre as to shorte; but this coniecture afterward toke place (as fewe dooe) as you shall perceaue here after[30].

This is also the version that we find in Hall, who takes up from More the events related to the reigns of Edward V and (in part) of Richard III[31]. Curiously enough, Richard is not even mentioned in the narrative of Clarence's death that Hall inserted in the account of Edward IV's reign, which appears very similar to Vergil's version. There, the historian explicitly suspends judgement and limits himself to presenting various hypotheses about the hostility between the king and his brother[32].

In the *Mirror for Magistrates*, in the lament of the Duke of Clarence we see how the character is imprisoned in the Tower on the orders of the king, who acts following the impulse of the moment, but it is then Richard who takes advantage of the situation for his personal gain, and feeds Edward's wrath with slander ("forged tales"). The two brothers plot together to have Clarence convicted, although it is Richard who materially organises the clandestine execution:

This feat atchieved, yet could they not for shame
Cause me be kilde by any common way,
But like a wulfe the tirant Richard came,
(My brother, nay my butcher I may say)
Vnto the tower, when all men wer away.
Save such as wer provided for the feate:
Who in this wise did straungely me entreate.

His purpose was, with a prepared string
To strangle me, but I bestird me so,
That by no force they could me therto bring,

Which caused him that purpose to forgo.
Howbeit they bound me whether I would or no.
And in a butte of Malmesey standing by,
Newe Christned me, because I should not crie[33].

Shakespeare, however, goes further again and, differently from *The Mirror for Magistrates*, shows how the repentant king tries to have the sentence revoked. Moreover, with regard to the prophecy that so frightens Edward, neither Vergil nor the *Mirror for Magistrates* identify Richard as its creator and disseminator. Once again, it is Shakespeare who introduces this detail and shows, therefore, how Richard does not limit himself to taking advantage of a disagreement between the two brothers, but has concocted a real plan to destroy Clarence and thus approach the crown.

An explicit reference to such a project already appears in *King Henry VI, Part 3,* in Richard's soliloquy following the king's murder:

Clarence, beware; thou kep'st me from the light –
But I will sort a pitchy day for thee.
For I will buzz abroad such prophecies
That Edward shall be fearful of his life,
And then, to purge his fear, I'll be thy death[34].

Premeditation, it goes without saying, adds to the villainy of a character who, like a diabolical strategist, manipulates from the beginning people and situations to his advantage:

Plots have I laid, inductions dangerous,
By drunken prophecies, libels, and dreams,
To set my brother Clarence and the King
In deadly hate, the one against the other;
And if King Edward be as true and just
As I am subtle, false and treacherous,
This day should Clarence closely be mewed up
About a prophecy, which says that 'G'
Of Edward's heirs the murderer shall be[35].

Shakespeare's image of Richard will be the one that will survive through the centuries, thanks to the effect of reality the theatre necessarily confers. As Paola Pugliatti points out, "It is […] the representation itself that sanctions the event and that furthers its claim to be kept in the audience's memory. What the staging of an event produces is, therefore, a strong, though implicit, sanction of the truth of the acts performed before our eyes"[36].

Shakespeare's vilification of Richard with respect to his sources is preceded by that of his father, Richard of York, who in the second part of *Henry VI* appears as a true Machiavellian schemer, much more villainous than in the sources. The metaphor – repeatedly used for Richard of Gloucester – of the spider who meticulously weaves its web to trap its naïve victims[37], is already used by Shakespeare for his father, whose mental ability to devise plots is described as such: "My brain, more busy than the labouring spider, / Weaves tedious snares to trap mine enemies"[38]. In Hall, York is similarly a rebel who sows hatred

and, in order to achieve his goals, foments the Kent insurrection led by "Ihon" (Jack) Cade[39]. However, in doing that, he is driven by the awareness of his hereditary right to the throne, and is sincerely concerned for the good of his country, which is jeopardised by a weak sovereign who is unfit to govern. Shakespeare, instead, increases York's dissimulating will and his hypocrisy, two features that will be dominant in his son Richard:

> I am far better born than is the King,
> More like a king, more kingly in my thoughts;
> But I must make fair weather yet a while,
> Till Henry be more weak and I more strong[40].

The Machiavellian cunning that Richard of York displays in his soliloquies in the second play of the tetralogy anticipates the villainy of his son, Richard of Gloucester. The same is true for York's unbridled *libido coronae*, which is expressed in words that closely resemble those that his son will pronounce in *King Henry VI, Part 3*:

> A day will come when York shall claim his own,
> And therefore I will take the Nevilles' parts,
> And make a show of love to proud Duke Humphrey,
> And, when I spy advantage, claim the crown,
> For that's the golden mark I seek to hit.
> Nor shall proud Lancaster usurp my right,
> Nor hold the sceptre in his childish fist,

> Nor wear the diadem upon his head
> Whose church-like humours fits not for a crown.
> Then, York, be still a while till time do serve[41].

Other variations with respect to the sources, which are perhaps less evident, but no less significant, contribute to Shakespeare's demonisation of Richard of Gloucester. Actually, the historical compressions and, most importantly, the historical dislocations are not always linked to the needs of dramatic transcoding, requiring an acceleration of events that have taken place over a very long time period. Often, such dislocations denote important dramaturgical choices and, in giving events an idea of purpose, serve to highlight a design in history. This purpose is evident in the case of the events connected with Richard of Gloucester, for whom the historical datum is blatantly and brazenly manipulated. This is already true in the Second and Third Parts of *Henry VI*, where the character is progressively built. In the last act of *Henry VI, Part 2*, for instance, we see him fight valiantly in the Battle of St Albans, where he ruthlessly rages on slain enemies. According to his father, Richard is even the son who has most distinguished himself: "Richard hath best deserved of all my sons", he proudly declares[42]. The battle of St Albans, however, took place in 1455, when the historical Richard was only three years old. In the Third Part of *Henry VI* too, the character participates in battles from which he had been historically absent. For example, at the Battle of Towton, fought on 29 March 1461, Shakespeare's fearless Richard pursues and wounds Lord Clifford[43]. This, in spite of the fact that the

historical Richard at the time was only nine years old and in February had been sent by his mother (with his brother George) to Utrecht, from where he would not return until April[44].

The ubiquitous, blatant, anachronisms found in the first tetralogy, however, should not be surprising, since it is evident that Shakespeare's "historical" plays are in no way to be understood as historically accurate works, but, in the first instance, as works of entertainment[45]. In staging English history, the playwright pursues various objectives. In *King Richard III*, through the story of a cruel and ambitious king and his downfall, Shakespeare describes the human thirst for power and the unhealthy consequences of an unbridled desire for revenge, just as he will do years later when writing *Macbeth*. Richard's villainy is emphasised and made an archetype also to increase the dramatic effect. It is no coincidence that Macbeth and Richard were often dealt with together in the so-called "character criticism"[46].

As has already been widely discussed, it should not be forgotten that Shakespeare, in constructing the character of Richard, made use of a rich earlier literature. His play – as other contemporary tragedies similarly attempted to do[47] – gave body and voice to the usurping tyrant that his audience expected to see on the stage. In other words, in outlining his character, Shakespeare drew on the shared cultural memory of the Tudor period, since the last York king had been portrayed as the vilest scoundrel in English history by numerous authors before him[48]. As Alexander Reginald Myers notes, "By the end of the 16th century the facts of his real appearance, character, and deeds had been buried under

a great mound of tradition. He had become the archetypal tyrant-king, incarnate evil enthroned"[49]. The reigning monarch at the time was the granddaughter of Henry VII, the king who had defeated and killed the last Plantagenet king and begun the Tudor dynasty, and that obviously contributed to the extreme vilification of Richard in Elizabethan times. In his plays, Shakespeare could not but offer the version of history approved by the Tudor-Lancasters, painting their opponents in dark colours and exalting their ancestors, as in the case of the play devoted to the Lancastrian Henry V. Moreover, the events presented in the first tetralogy were relatively recent and, given the authorities' strict control over the theatre, staging them could have proven risky. Thus, the playwright's possibility to depart from accredited accounts was limited. The version of the events related to the Wars of the Roses that prevailed in later times was, as we would say today, the story of the victors, and that version of the national past (the so-called "Tudor myth") was crucial to the consolidation of English national identity. As Christopher Ivic points out, "if the Wars of the Roses existed in collective memory as a history lesson, they, paradoxically, served as an instance for forging a unified sense of Englishness"[50].

It has been shown, however, that Shakespeare went *beyond* what already was a "vituperative […] *History*"[51]. The playwright's relationship with the cultural memory of the Tudor era was dialectical: his Richard was, of course, a product of it, but, at the same time, Shakespeare gave a new shape to a well-established tradition. As has already been noticed, *hearsay* reigns supreme in Shakespeare's sources. Information is conveyed while, at the same

time, the uncertainty on which such information is founded is emphasised. Emblematic, from this point of view, is the final section of More's *History* as it appears in Holinshed's chronicle. In the account of the death of the Princes, the declarations of doubt follow one another at a fast pace:

> [Richard's innocent nephues'] death and finall infortune hath naitheless comen so farre in question, that some remaine yet in doubt, whether they were in his daies destroyed or no. [...] all things were in late daies so couertlie demeaned, one thing pretended, and an other meant.
> Insomuch that there was nothing so plaine and openlie prooued, but that yet for the common custome of close and couert dealing, men had it euer inwardlie suspect; as manie well counterfaited iewels make the true mistrusted. [...] But in the meane time, for this present matter, I shall rehearse you the dolorous end of those babes, not after euerie waie that I haue heard, but after that waie that I haue so heard by such men and by such meanes, as me thinketh it were hard but it should be true[52].

The comments inducing doubts as to what is being related are also scattered in the following pages, with which More's narrative – left unfinished – draws to its end: "(as some saie)"; "(as I haue heard)"; "whervpon they saie, that ...."; "(as I haue learned of them that much knew, and little cause had to lie)"; "for I haue heard by credible report of such as were secret with his chamberleine, that…"; "the occasion [...] is of diuerse folke in diuerse wise

pretended"; "(as I haue for certeine beene informed)"; "the occasion of their variance is of diuerse men diuerselie reported. Some haue I heard say, that…"; "and they sayd that…"; "But suerlie some right secret at that daie denie this: and manie right wise men thinke it vnlikelie"; "and verelie, men thinke, that…"; "so that I haue heard of some that say they saw it"; "but men say, that…"[53]. Thus, it is the "report" – with various degrees of reliability – the dominant note in this section of More's account. However, such a feast of – more or less declared – uncertainty is far from surprising because, as we learn from the Elizabethan poet Philip Sidney, it was the work of the Tudor historian itself that was founded on hearsay and rumour: "[The historian], loaden with old mouse-eaten records, authorising himself (for the most part) upon other histories, whose greatest authorities are built upon the notable foundation of hearsay, ha[s] much ado to accord differing writers, and to pick truth out of partiality"[54]. The record would therefore always originate from a report, and this is precisely the historiographical practice on which the exchange quoted at the beginning of this article calls us to reflect.

The elusiveness and the peculiar mixture of assertions and skepticism that we find in the sources disappear in Shakespeare. This is obviously related to the dramatic medium. Theater is ostensive and – except for the limited use of its surrogates in prologues, epilogues and choirs – must statutorily do without a narrator. However, beyond this apparent certainty, as the above discussion has suggested, Shakespeare finds other ways, more subtle and hidden, to insinuate doubt about what he presents on stage. In the first tetralogy – especially in

King Richard III – thanks to the problematisation of historical transmission, the rigid scheme in Hall celebrating the triumph of divine justice in human affairs seems to crack. As Garber, again, notes, "*Richard III* anatomises the dangers of re-membering, of history as an artifact of memory"[55].

It is not surprising that so-called disability studies have identified in the character of Richard a privileged field of investigation, and this is thanks to the portrait of the last York king the sources and Shakespeare have handed down to us. As Katherine Schaap Williams argues, "The account of Richard III in Thomas More's *Workes* is a remarkable piece of character assassination that focusses obsessively on his body"[56]. It is evident that Richard's external and internal monstrosity – which Shakespeare found in his sources and emphasised – served the interests of the present, to the extent that it contributed to legitimising the Tudor dynasty and strengthening national identity, shaken by thirty years of civil conflict. However, the question cannot be resolved so easily, precisely because of the problematic nature of historical transmission on which the play invites reflection. As Kastan declares, "if Shakespeare's history plays will not serve as accurate representations of the English past, they do serve as provocative explorations of the nature of history and of history writing"[57]. In *King Richard III*, Shakespeare offers a version of events that is highly unfavourable to his protagonist, but, at the same time, he also provides the tools to discredit this version, inserting elements that reveal how biased the demonisation of Richard may be. The key to such an unmasking lies in the figure of Cardinal Morton, portrayed in the play as Richard's bitter enemy, but also – together with Vergil's and, to a lesser extent, Fabyan's chronicles – the memorial source of the events related in More's *History of King Richard III*.

If, on the one hand, the playwright brought the Tudor myth to its apex, on the other, he undermined its foundations, and Elizabethan spectators, passionate readers of historical accounts[58], were invited to detect this subtle device. The Prince's questions and reflections on the origins of the Tower of London, which explicitly put historiographical transmission under a problematic light, draw attention to this skillful stratagem. This is a further example of the ambiguous attitude towards state power that is often discernible in Shakespeare's plays, especially his *history* plays[59].

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NOTES

1. William Shakespeare, *King Richard III*, James R. Siemon (ed.), London, Methuen, 2009, 3.1.68-79.

2. John Stow, "Of Towers and Castels', in C. L. Kingsford (ed.), *A Survey of London. Reprinted from the Text of 1603*, Oxford, Oxford UP, 1908, pp. 44-71.

3. This appears even truer when we approach Renaissance historians, who, in the wake of classical tradition, unscrupulously inserted fictional details to give shape to their materials. As Alexander Reginald Myers explains, "the 16th century did not distinguish clearly between 'history' in our sense and history in the meaning of 'story' or 'drama'" ("Richard III and Historical Tradition", in *History*, vol. 53, n. 178, 1968, p. 184).

4. Cfr. Anna Maria Bernini, Giovanna Mochi and Marcella Quadri, *Nel laboratorio di Shakespeare. Dalle fonti ai drammi*, vol. 2, "La prima tetralogia", Parma, Pratiche Editrice, 1988, p. 305.

5. William Shakespeare, "2 Henry VI", 1.1.95-100, in *The Oxford Shakespeare. The Complete Works, 2nd ed.*, Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (ed.), Oxford, Oxford UP, 2005.

6. *Ibidem*, 5.5.36-37.

7. William Shakespeare, "3 Henry VI", 1.4.7-8, in *Oxford Shakespeare. Complete Works*.

8. *Ibidem*, 2.1.87-88.

9. *Ibidem*, 2.1.199-200.

10. Most recent criticism agrees that this play, which was staged in 1592, was written after the other two parts, which were performed, presumably, in 1590-91 and whose quarto editions – published in 1594 and 1595 – bear the titles: *The First Part of the Contention of the Two Famous Houses of York and Lancaster with the Death of the Good Duke Humphrey* and *The True Tragedy of Richard Duke of York and the Good King Henry the Sixth*.

11. William Shakespeare, "1 Henry VI", 2.3.4-10, in *Oxford Shakespeare. Complete Works*.

12. *Ibidem*, 4.7.18-22.

13. As we understand from the incipit to Hall's *Chronicle*, the strenuous struggle between oblivion and fame was at the time considered the foundation of the historiographical operation: "Oblivion [is] the cancard enemie to Fame and renoune the suckyng serpent of auncient memory, the dedly darte to the glory of princes, and the defacer of all conquestes and notable actes" (Edward Hall, *The Vnion of the Two Noble and Illustre Fameliës of Lancastre and Yorke*, George Woodfall (ed.), London, J. Johnson, F.C. and J. Rivington, 1809 (1548), p. 5).

14. Cfr. David Scott Kastan, "Shakespeare and English History", in Margreta De Grazia and Stanley Wells (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 2001, pp. 177 and 180.

15. Shakespeare, *King Richard III*, 1.1.20-21.

16. Marjorie Garber, *Shakespeare's Ghost Writers. Literature as Uncanny Causality*, New York and London, Routledge, 2010, p. 48. On Richard's deformity, cfr. Nicoletta Caputo, "A 'Marketplace Prince': The Hybridity of the Character of King Richard III and Its Popular Roots in the Vice," in Carla Dente and Jesús Tronch (ed.), *Offstage and Onstage. Liminal Forms of Theatre and Their Enactments in Early Modern English Drama to the Licensing Act (1737)*, Pisa, ETS, 2015, pp. 145-163. On the vivid interest in deformity in the early modern period, cfr. Julie Crawford, *Marvelous Protestantism: Monstrous Births in Post-Reformation England*, Baltimore, MD, The Johns Hopkins UP, 2005; Alan W. Bates, *Emblematic Monsters: Unnatural Conceptions and Deformed Births in Early Modern Europe*, New York, Rodopi, 2005; Luca Baratta, *"A Marvellous and Strange Event." Racconti di nascite*

mostruose nell'Inghilterra della prima età moderna, Firenze, Firenze UP, 2016, and, by the same author, *The Age of Monsters. Nascite prodigiose nell'Inghilterra della prima età moderna: storia, testi, immagini (1550-1715)*, Roma, Aracne, 2017.

17. Cfr. Paola Pugliatti, *Shakespeare the Historian*, London, Macmillan, 1996, pp. 32-35.

18. Hall used the version that Richard Grafton had inserted in his *Continuation* to John Hardyng's *Chronicle*, printed in 1543, while Holinshed incorporated the one that More's nephew, William Rastell, had published in 1557.

19. Raphael Holinshed, *Holinshed's Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland*, vol. 3, Henry Ellis (ed.), London, J. Johnson *et al.*, 1808 (1587), p. 405.

20. On the hypothesis that Morton was the author of the *History* and on its absurdity, cfr. Alison Hanham, *Richard III and His Early Historians*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1975, pp. 163-74.

21. On the early stages of the controversy around the historical Richard III, cfr. Nicoletta Caputo, *Richard III as a Romantic Icon. Textual, Cultural and Theatrical Appropriations*, Bern, Peter Lang, 2018, pp. 27-65.

22. The progressive physical disfigurement of Richard III also affected portraiture. Exemplary, from this point of view, is a painting in the Royal Collection from between 1504 and 1520, which bears the signs, visible with the naked eye, of an alteration aimed at exaggerating (or even creating) an unevenness in the shoulders (cfr. "Richard III, Portrait with Overpaint, c. 1504-20").

23. Polydore Vergil, *Three Books of Polydore Vergil's English History, Comprising the Reigns of Henry VI., Edward IV., and Richard III*, Henry Ellis (ed.), London, Camden Society, 1844, p. 156, my italics.

24. William Baldwin, *The Mirror for Magistrates*, Lily B. Campbell (ed.), New York, Barnes and Noble, 1960 (1559), p. 218.

25. Richard Grafton, *The Chronicle of Iohn Hardyng. […] Together with the Continuation by Richard Grafton, to the thirty fourth year of King Henry the Eighth*, Henty Ellis (ed.), London, F. C. and J. Rivington *et al.*, 1812 (1943), p. 469. I have preferred here Grafton's version of More's *History* to the one Rastell published in 1557 (and Richard Sylvester followed for his 1963 edition of More's *Complete Works*). As already pointed out (n. 18), it was this version (the first to be published) that passed in Hall. In Holinshed (who used Rastell's version) we do not find Richard's words, "Nowe is there no heyre male of kyng Edward the thyrde, but we of the house of Yorke" (cfr. *Holinshed's Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland*, p. 362).

26. Shakespeare, "3 Henry VI", 5.6.81 and 84.

27. *Ibidem*, 4.1.122-23.

28. Cfr. *ibidem*, 5.7.

29. Polydore Vergil, *Op. cit.*, pp. 167-68.

30. Richard Grafton, *Op. cit.*, p. 469.

31. Hall, *Vnion of the Two Noble and Illustre Famelies*, p. 343. Holinshed adds to the comment "which he resisted openlie", the words "howbeit somewhat (as men deemed) more faintlie than he that were hartilie minded to his wealth". In addition, he omits the remark on how conjectures can become truth (cfr. *Holinshed's Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland*, pp. 362-63).

32. Cfr. Edward Hall, *Op. cit.* p. 326.

33. Richard Baldwin, *Op. cit.*, p. 233.

34. Shakespeare, "3 Henry VI", 5.6.85-89.

35. Shakespeare, *King Richard III*, 1.1.32-40

36. Paola Pugliatti, *Shakespeare the Historian*, London, Macmillan, 1996, p. 61.

37. Cfr. Shakespeare, *King Richard III*, 1.2.19-20, 1.3.241-42 and 4.4.81.

38. Shakespeare, "2 Henry VI", 3.1.339-40.

39. Cfr. Edward Hall, *Op. cit.*, pp. 219-20.

40. Shakespeare, "2 Henry VI", 5.1.28-31.

41. *Ibidem*, 1.1.239-48. For Richard's words, cfr. Shakespeare, "3 Henry VI", 3.2.134-95.

42. *Ibidem*, 1.1.17.

43. Cfr. *Ibidem*, 2.3, 2.4 and 2.6.

44. Cfr. Richard Hall, *Op. cit.*, p. 253.

45. For the First Part of *Henry VI*, for example, Geoffrey Bullough states: "*1 Henty VI* is not so much a Chronicle play as a fantasia on historical themes", cfr. Geoffrey Bullough (ed.), *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960, vol. 3, p. 25. In fact, in this play we see Henry VI taking the floor during a sitting of Parliament when historically he would have been only five years old.

46. Character criticism was a critical current that emerged in the last quarter of the 18th century in the wake of the sentimentalist movement and focused on the psychological investigation of Shakespeare's characters, whose motivations behind their actions were investigated as if they were real people. On character criticism, cfr. Caputo, *Richard III as a Romantic Icon*, pp. 89-106.

47. I am referring here to Thomas Legge's Latin drama *Richardus Tertius*, performed at the University of Cambridge in 1579, and to the anonymous *True Tragedy of Richard III*, staged by the Queen's Majesty's Players and entered into the Stationers' Register on 19 June 1594.

48. As Astrid Errll observes, "Societies do not remember literally; but much of what is done to reconstruct a shared past bears some resemblance to the processes of individual memory, such as the selectivity and perspectivity inherent in the creation of versions of the past according to present knowledge and needs", cfr. Astrid Errll and Ansgar Nünning (ed.), *Cultural Memory Studies. An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, Berlin and New York, Walter de Gruyter, 2008, p. 5).

49. Alexander Reginald Myers, "Richard III and Historical Tradition", in *History*, vol. 53, n. 178, 1968, p. 184.

50. Christopher Ivic, *Shakespeare and National Identity: A Dictionary*, London, Bloomsbury, 2017, p. 239.

51. Shakespeare, *King Richard III*, p. 52.

52. *Holinshed's Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland*, pp. 400-401.

53. *Ibidem,* pp. 402-404.

54. Philip Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry*, Forrest G. Robinson (ed.), Indianapolis, Bobbs-Merrill, 1970 (1595), p. 24. The centrality of oral transmission in 16th-century English historiographical practice is investigated by Daniel R. Woolf, who argues that "Leland and his successors relied to a great extent not only on manuscript and archaeological material, but also on a variety of oral sources ranging from popular traditions to the personal recollections of the aged" (Daniel R. Woolf, "The 'Common Voice': History, Folklore and Oral Tradition in Early Modern England", in *Past & Present*, n. 120, 1988, p. 26). According to Woolf, however, not only Richard's *detractors*, but also his *defenders* relied on memorial sources: "Sir George Buck, whose dogged attempt to rescue the character of Richard III from a century of Tudor vilification was published only several years after his death, […] based his case not only on scrupulous scholarship but on traditions. Much of his information came orally from the octagenarian John Stow, who had himself spoken in the mid-16th century with old men who recalled Richard in a favourable light" (*ibidem*, p. 37).

55. Marjorie Garber, *Op. cit.*, p. 59.

56. Katherine Schaap Williams, "Richard III and the staging of disability", 2016.

57. David Scott Kastan, *Op. cit.*, p. 178.

58. On the Elizabethans' passion for history, cfr. *ibidem*, pp. 167-73.

59. The argument I propose in this essay could be considered as another aspect of Shakespeare's peculiar doubleness of vision that Michael Hattaway (in his introduction to the Cambridge UP edition of *The Second Part of King Henry VI*) and Paola Pugliatti (*Op. cit.*, pp. 42-59) call "perspectivism".