

The artfulness of historical playwriting in *Richard III*: Shakespeare and English Tacitism

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Abstract

Art seems to be especially fruitful as a starting point for a re-reading of Shakespeare's *Richard III* as an example of an English history play that is more commonly understood in terms of nature or politics. Richard's reputation for being unnatural, that is physically and morally deformed, certainly makes nature a productive line of enquiry. Politics is also immediately relevant to a play about Richard III, whose demise marked the rise of the Tudor dynasty. However, I have chosen to consider the artfulness of Richard III to show how Tacitism informed Shakespeare's approach to historical playwriting.

Keywords

William Shakespeare, *Richard III*, Tacitus, source studies, classical influence, history play

Résumé

L'art semble être un point de départ particulièrement fructueux pour une relecture de *Richard III*, de William Shakespeare, comme exemple d'une pièce historique anglaise plus souvent abordée sous l'angle de la nature ou de la politique. La réputation de Richard d'être contre nature, physiquement et moralement déformé, justifie assurément une approche basée sur la nature. La pertinence de la politique s'impose également pour une pièce sur Richard III, dont la disparition marque l'avènement de la dynastie Tudor. Toutefois, nous avons choisi de nous intéresser à l'art de Richard III, pour montrer comment le tacitisme a influencé la façon dont Shakespeare aborde l'écriture théâtrale historique.

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Mots clés

William Shakespeare, *Richard III*, Tacite, étude des sources, influence classique, pièce historique

It were a labour worth commendation, if some scholar,
 that hath skill and leisure, would confer Chaucer with those learned Authors,
 both Greek and Latin,
 from which he has drawn many excellent things and at large reported such histories,
 as in his works are very frequent, and many of them hard to be found;
 which would so grace this ancient poet,
 that whereas divers have thought him unlearned, and his writings mere trifles, ...
 he was a man of great readings and deep judgment.

Thomas Speght, 'To the Readers',
 in *The Workes of ... Geoffrey Chaucer* (1602)

The complaint against the tendency to underestimate the influence of the classics on early English authors, so eloquently expressed by Geoffrey Chaucer's early editor, Thomas Speght, in the front matter of his 1602 edition of the *Workes*, also affects our appreciation of how pervasive classical influences are in William Shakespeare's works that are not directly adapted from or inspired by a classical source, or, as Speght puts it, in works where classical influences are 'hard to be found'. Ben Jonson's notorious reference to Shakespeare's limited proficiency in the classical languages in the second of his dedicatory poems prefaced to the First Folio, according to which he knew 'little Latin, and less Greek' ($\pi A4^v$), initiated a critical tradition that has aligned Shakespeare's genius with *nature* rather than *art*. In the wake of the quatercentenary of the publication of the First Folio in 2023, we should reconsider the extent to which this iconic book has contributed to reinforce this tendency to understand Shakespeare (and, indirectly, other early English canonical authors) as more aligned with *nature* – and with a growing sense of national pride and literary prowess – than with *art* – and with the enduring influence of the classical tradition. The influence of classical works as primary sources is one of the most established and prolific sub-fields of Shakespearean criticism.¹ However, indirect influence, suggested by similarities in style and situation, subject matter and standpoint, rather than verbal borrowings, is harder to detect. Indirect classical influences in Shakespeare's English history plays have proven especially impervious to critical scrutiny because of his well-known reliance on English chronicle sources. The direct influence of these vernacular sources has deflected attention from the fact that the flourishing of historical playwriting in the late sixteenth century was heavily indebted to a revival of interest in classical historiography, which had in turn been triggered by an unprecedented number of English translations of classical historians.²

In this article, I am going to argue that, out of the three main topics of this special issue, *art* seems to be especially fruitful as a starting point for a re-reading of Shakespeare's

Richard III as an example of an English history play that is more commonly understood in terms of *nature* or *politics*. Richard's reputation for being *unnatural*, that is physically and morally deformed, certainly makes *nature* a productive line of enquiry. *Politics* is also immediately relevant to a play about Richard III, whose demise marked the rise of the Tudor dynasty. However, I have chosen to consider the *artfulness* of *Richard III* because I believe that thinking about *art* in its broader etymological sense as *artifice* and *artifact*, but also as *technique*, *craft*, or *method*, can help us appreciate how classically informed Shakespeare's approach to historical playwriting was, as he embarked on writing what we now believe to be his first single-authored English history play.

Well-known and well-documented is Shakespeare's reliance on English chronicle sources for the plot of *Richard III*, on Senecan tragedy and the complaint tradition for its style and register, and on the old moralities for Richard's characterisation as a Vice-like figure. What I think is bizarrely discounted or overlooked is the extent to which Shakespeare built on his sources by infusing *Richard III* with a specific brand of philological and ethical scepticism, which is characteristic of classical and humanist historiography, but is especially associated with Tacitus, a classical historian whose work was first translated into English just as Shakespeare must have started to plan or compose *Richard III*. It is hard to imagine how Shakespeare, who was collaboratively composing the first two instalments of the first tetralogy³ and would shortly write *Richard III* in or around 1592, might have missed a major event in the context of the London book trade,⁴ namely the publication of Henry Savile's *The End of Nero and Beginning of Galba* with his translation of the *Fower Bookes of the Histories of Cornelius Tacitus* and *The Life of Agricola* in 1591 (STC 23642). In fact, close parallels between the entry of 'a SON that hath killed his father' at 2.5.54 in *3 Henry VI*⁵ and the inadvertent parricide similarly perpetrated by a remorseful son in Book III of *The Histories* show that Shakespeare probably read Savile's translation shortly after its publication in mid-1591.⁶ Savile's translation did not only accelerate the rate at which the work of other classical historians was first made available in English but it also brought to completion the first full run of 'vernacular versions of authoritative accounts of ... Roman history from the foundation of the city to Trajan'.⁷ Even more crucially, Savile's translation is believed to have 'shaped the character of [English Tacitism] in England much in a manner that Justus Lipsius fashioned the reception of Tacitus on the Continent'.⁸ The significance of Savile's translation has however been registered mostly by political historians or by literary critics interested in the impact of political ideas associated with Tacitism, including the secularisation of political and historical thought and republicanism, on early Stuart writers.⁹ Even scholars who resist the tendency to assess the significance of Savile's translation 'proleptically'¹⁰ have nevertheless focused on how it encouraged late Elizabethan writers to think critically about the political context within which they operated.¹¹ My interest lies instead in how Savile's Tacitus may have inspired Shakespeare as he was writing, or preparing to write, *Richard III*. If it did, as this essay posits, it seems to have served as a model of historical (play)writing, rather than as a direct source. Despite the absence of verbal borrowings,¹² I am going to show how its influence, or the influence of Tacitism, can be detected in Shakespeare's dramatisation of *Richard III* as a history play.¹³

Tacitism in *Richard III*

The subject matter of *The Histories* – an account of the civil wars that tore apart the Roman Empire during the so-called ‘Year of the Four Emperors’ (69 CE) – must have appealed to Shakespeare, since he was himself deeply invested in dramatising the English civil wars, otherwise known as the Wars of the Roses (1455–1487), when Savile’s translation was first published in 1591. The style of *The Histories* must have attracted Shakespeare too: the breakneck rise and fall of four emperors – Galba, Otho, Vitellius, and Vespasian – and the bids for power of their associates are sketched by Tacitus by means of reported speech and rapid brushstrokes that capture the distinctive psychological traits of his main characters and animate his narrative, making it highly dramatic. In the words of a recent Tacitean scholar, *The Histories* are ‘marked by a keen eye for “true” causes and motivations of people (notably self-interest) and the paradoxes of power’.¹⁴

Once drawn in by Tacitus’ subject matter and style, Shakespeare must have discovered, or rediscovered,¹⁵ an approach to historical writing that seems especially well-suited to the dialogical affordances of early modern drama. While earlier generations of Tacitean scholars tended to associate the rediscovery of Tacitus in the early modern period with the rise of a thoroughly secular and amoral understanding of politics and a new political practice, generally known as the ‘reason of state’,¹⁶ others have more recently pointed out how ‘Tacitus’s writings were often used to extend and subtly refashion pre-existing ideas about the ethical dimensions of political life’.¹⁷ More specifically, Tacitus is believed to have inspired Shakespeare’s contemporaries to ‘add a layer of psychological complexity to conventional ideas about the opposition between noble virtues, like courage and integrity, and selfish vices, such as greed, envy, and jealousy’.¹⁸ Even more crucially, this interest in the ‘often-hidden motivations that drove political behaviour’ encouraged ‘complex forms of ethical analysis’ and a ‘relativist perspective’ that became ‘central to early modern understandings of politics’.¹⁹

I believe that, while Shakespeare toed the Tudor party-line in dramatising Richard III as the arch-villain that emerges from his chronicle sources, he was also deeply affected by his encounter with *The Histories*. As a result, while Richard III as a character replicates, or even inflates, features that denote physical and moral deformity in earlier accounts, *Richard III* as a play experiments with a mode of historical playwriting that encourages critical distance from its subject matter. This Tacitean stance towards its source materials sets *Richard III* apart from other contemporary retellings of Richard’s reign. Most prominent among them are the Queen’s Men’s anonymous play *The True Tragedy of Richard the Third* (ca. 1588–1591) and the various ‘Parts’ of the *Mirror for Magistrates* that either focus on or concern the rise and fall of Richard (1559–1578). The propaganda-like emphasis on historical truth in the former and the homiletic emphasis on moral truth in the latter contrast most starkly with the critical distance, what I refer to above as a specific brand of philological and ethical scepticism, that Shakespeare built into his dramatic retelling of Richard’s reign.

The Tacitean qualities of *Richard III* emerge most clearly in sequences that have no counterpart in Shakespeare’s chronicle sources. For reasons of space, I am going to

focus primarily on how Shakespeare constructs 1.3, a pivotal scene where the layering of the performance space through staggered entrances, eavesdropping, and asides reflects a similar fracturing of the moral and political ‘field of vision’ as conjured before the audience by its main political players. The whole scene and its main purpose are best summed up by Richard’s lines, ‘Let me put in your minds, if you forget, / What you have been ere now, and what you are’ (1.3.130–1).²⁰ These lines capture the way in which members of Edward IV’s fractious court compete with each other to impose on others their own sense of who they have been and who they are; the end result is a whirlwind of multiple perspectives that complicates the historical memories that Shakespeare’s early audiences must have had of Richard’s rise to power and/or the expectations produced by earlier retellings.

Modern audiences assume duplicitousness only on Richard’s part when, having admitted in an ‘aside’ in 1.1 to setting up his brother Clarence, who is currently being held prisoner in the Tower for treason, he then accuses Queen Elizabeth and her party in 1.3 of poisoning the dying King’s mind against him and against Clarence. However, Richard also reminds the Queen, her brother Rivers, and her two sons from her first marriage, Dorset and Grey, of their lowly social status and their sudden elevation through Elizabeth’s royal match. That match had transformed Elizabeth Grey, née Woodville, from destitute widow of the late Lancastrian Sir John Grey to Yorkist Queen. All chronicles confirm that the bestowing of titles on the relatives and allies of the Queen had alienated the older nobility, including Clarence, from the King. Richard’s attack against the Queen and her party may therefore have reminded Shakespeare’s audiences of earlier accounts of Clarence’s fall.

Neither the Continuator of the Croyland Chronicle²¹ nor the City chronicler Robert Fabyan²² even mentions Richard in connection with Clarence’s fall. In Edward Hall’s *The Union of the Two Noble Families of Lancaster and York* (STC 12722), the ‘sparcle of privy malice’ between the king and his brother Clarence is reported to have sprung from ‘olde grudges before time passed, ... newly kyndeled ... by the Quene, or ... by Clarence’s desire to reign after his brother’.²³ Last, but not least, in a contemporary account by fifteenth-century cleric Dominic Mancini, Richard is not only not responsible for Clarence’s death but he is also devastated by the news of his execution: ‘[a]t that time Richard duke of Gloucester was so overcome with grief for his brother, that he could not dissimulate so well, but that he was overheard to say that he would one day avenge his brother’s death’.²⁴ Although Mancini’s eyewitness account was only discovered in 1936 in the Municipal Library at Lille, the events dramatised by Shakespeare in *Richard III* were, according to Philip Schwyzer’s study of the legacy of his reign in Shakespeare’s time, still within ‘the horizon of what is variously termed “active” or “communicative memory”, the period of 90–120 years in which memories may be transmitted over three or four generations’.²⁵ We cannot therefore rule out the possibility that orally transmitted versions of Mancini’s account were still available to Shakespeare’s contemporaries. Even in more recent accounts where Richard is implicated in Clarence’s murder, he is just a pawn or at most an associate of his brother, King Edward. *True Tragedy* casts him in the role of executioner of his brother’s orders: ‘George the duke of *Clarēce*, / Who was attected in King Edwards raigne, / Falsly of Treason to his royaltie, / Imprisoned in the

Tower was most unnaturally, / By his owne brother, shame to parents stocke, / By *Glosters* Duke drowned in a but of wine' (B3r). In *The Mirror for Magistrates*, Edward and Richard conspire together against Clarence, and their intentions are public knowledge: 'at the last they did my death conspire. / And though my truth sore troubled their desire, / For all the world did know mine innocence, / Yet they agreed to charge me with offence' (F4r).

Richard's devious manipulation and deception of others is peppered with prompts, like the accusation he levels at the Queen and her party at the beginning of 1.3, which, by referencing widely available accounts of his rise to power, encouraged early modern audiences to be alert to the fact that 'Richard the arch-villain' was also the product of the palpable manipulation of the historical record. Historical time itself is significantly compressed – Clarence was executed on 18 February 1478, while King Edward fell ill and suddenly died five years later, on 9 April 1483. While some editors and critics of *Richard III* argue that Shakespeare's Richard is even more grotesque and villainous than earlier Tudor versions of their historical counterpart,²⁶ they routinely fail to register the fact that Shakespeare's twisting of the historical record and his compression of historical time must have been self-evident to early modern audiences and that Shakespeare himself made sure that it would not go unnoticed. Shakespeare distorts the historical record even further to accommodate another character, Margaret of Anjou, former queen and wife of the Lancastrian king, Henry VI, who, by the time of the events dramatised in 1.3, had not only returned to France eight years earlier but had also been dead for about a year.

Margaret's anachronistic presence in 1.3 layers the performance space, as she lurks unseen by the other characters in the margins of Edward's court and the outer (or upper) recesses of the Elizabethan stage for about 50 lines before she steps forward to join the others. The main purpose of her seven asides *ad spectatores* seems to be to systematically contradict what the other characters are saying about themselves and each other. When Queen Elizabeth says to Richard, 'Small joy have I in being England's queen', Margaret retorts, 'And lessened be that small, God I beseech Him. / Thy honour, state and seat is due to me' (1.3.110–12). When Richard says to the Queen, 'To royalize his blood [Edward's blood], I spent mine own', Margaret points out, 'Ay, and much better blood than his, or thine' (1.3.125–6), thereby claiming that the blood of a Lancastrian king is better than either Richard's or the Queen's. When Richard speaks the lines I have already quoted above, 'Let me put to your minds, if you forget, / What you have been ere this and what you are', adding 'Withal, what I have been, and what I am', Margaret challenges Richard's postured superiority by adding 'A murderous villain, and so still thou art' (1.3.112). This last statement would seem to boil down to an undisputable truism. Richard *is* a murderous villain in Shakespeare's play. Yet this exchange as whole, which does not advance the plot but rather stalls it, creating the second longest scene in the play, has the precise opposite effect of unsettling what these characters believe themselves to have been and what they believe they are.

The audience is invited to entertain the same relativist stance towards Margaret, when she steps forward and openly accuses Richard of usurping what was rightly hers – her husband, slain by Richard in the Tower, her son, killed at Tewkesbury, and her title as

England's Queen. It is then Richard's turn to retort that it was God, not him, who has avenged Margaret's bloody deeds:

The curse my noble father laid on thee
 When thou didst crown his warlike brows with paper,
 And with thy scorns drew'st rivers from his eyes,
 And then, to dry them, gav'st the Duke a clout
 Steeped in the faultless blood of pretty Rutland –
 His curses then, from bitterness of soul
 Denounced against thee, are all fall'n upon thee,
 And God, not we, hath plagued thy bloody deed. (1.3.171–7)

Richard is here referring to the Battle of Wakefield, when Margaret mocked his father, Richard Duke of York, by crowning 'his warlike brows with paper' and by offering him a 'clout' or 'cloth' that had been steeped in the 'blood of pretty Rutland', his son, who was probably about 17 years old at the time of his death. Margaret's attempt at self-defence is deeply flawed:

Did York's dread curse prevail so much with heaven
 That Henry's death, my lovely Edward's death,
 Their kingdom's loss, my woeful banishment,
 Should all but answer for that peevish brat? (1.3.188–91)

These lines invite critical distancing even in modern audiences: how is the life of 'pretty Rutland' less valuable than that of Margaret's 'lovely Edward'? Early modern audiences would have been even more alert to the partisanship and self-interest underlying competitive claims to legitimacy and lineal right to the throne of England that were put forward by the warring factions involved in the Wars of the Roses. The quick succession of conflicting views and accounts of past events foregrounded by the peculiar dialogical structure used by Shakespeare in the central section of 1.3 would have also alerted early audiences to the aptness of Richard's reminder, aimed at the Queen and her party, about their Lancastrian past:

In all which time you and your husband Gray
 Were factious for the house of Lancaster. –
 And, Rivers, so were you. – Was not your husband
 In Margaret's battle at Saint Albans slain? (1.3.126–9)

Rivers's line of defence, like Margaret's, proves problematic:

My Lord of Gloucester, in those busy days
 Which here you urge to prove us enemies,
 We followed then our lord, our lawful king
 So should we you, if you should be our king. (1.3.144–7)

Rivers's argument proves not only the viability of Richard's point but also the relative quality of allegiance, which is fundamentally opportunistic and not a reflection of a higher moral and political authority to whom it is ethically owed.

If Tacitus did serve as a source of inspiration for this and other moments in the play that combine multiple perspectives to encourage a relativist stance towards the dramatised events, it provided Shakespeare with examples of similarly qualified, contingent, and plural viewpoints on history and its key players rather than with parallel episodes. For instance, when Tacitus reports how 'not only the populace and the ignorant mob, but many of the knights and senators as well', duped by rumours that Otho had been killed, lured Galba out of safety, he notes that '[n]obody knew, [but] everybody pontificated' and that '[a]t last, for lack of the truth, Galba yielded to the consensus of error' (23). Of Galba himself, Tacitus remarks that 'his distinguished origin and the perils of the time disguised his apathy, which passed as prudence' (31), thus undermining the very notion that virtues and good qualities – or vices and shortcomings – exist independently of context and circumstance. Even when he mentions his sources, Tacitus openly admits that, 'though beneath the dignity of my task to collect fictions and fables, ... there are certain popular traditions which I cannot venture to contradict' (87), leaving the reliability of his account of the past open to question. On other occasions, Tacitus links moral relativism specifically to the devastating impact of civil war: '[i]n some famous authorities [about earlier civil wars], I find evidence which shows how wickedly careless were the victorious army of all considerations of right and wrong'; he then exemplifies this point by reporting 'how a trooper had killed his brother in the last battle, and demanded a reward'. Tacitus stresses how '[c]ommon morality forbade them to remunerate such a murder, but in the interests of civil war they dared not punish it'. Instead, he concludes, '[t]hey put him off with the plea that they could not at the moment reward his service adequately' (147). This episode neatly brings us back to the relative quality of allegiance as understood by Rivers, which also informs both personal and power relations in 1.3 and in the play as a whole.

Tacitism in the sources of *Richard III*

This relativist, quintessentially Tacitean stance towards any given perspective (or claim to power) that emerges from a close analysis of 1.3 represents a distinctive quality of Shakespeare's approach to historical playwriting in *Richard III*, which I believe is often discounted and overlooked by critics and editors of the play who, like Clarence and Hastings, fall prey to *Richard the character* as gaze-attracting basilisk. *Richard III the play* is in fact built around moments like 1.3, which embed Richard and the other characters in a dramatic context that encourages a sceptical reappraisal of any paradigm pedalled as 'true' in other accounts, both historical and literary. With Richard, Shakespeare created a mesmerising character that paradoxically occludes from view recurrent prompts to consider multiple perspectives, which would have been more accessible to early modern audiences, and collectively encourage a critical response that resembles the radical form of philological and ethical scepticism

associated with Tacitean historiography. In the last section of my article, I'd like to explore one other important way in which Shakespeare's most likely encounter (or acquaintance)²⁷ with Tacitus via Savile's translation of *The Histories* gave him a keener appreciation of Tacitean influences already at work in the more classically informed of the chronicle sources, namely, Thomas More's *The History of King Richard* (1513), and (via More) Polydore Vergil's *Anglica Historia* (1513). A quick look at how these two classically trained humanists reported Clarence's fall and how they characterise Richard at key moments in their narrative will suffice to show how they also, like Shakespeare, encourage a relativist stance towards the historical materials they re-present to their readers.

In his *History of King Richard III*, More hints at the possibility that Richard might have played a role in orchestrating Clarence's fall because he was already aiming at the throne. According to More, '[S]ome wise men ... ween [think] that his drift [scheming], covertly conveyed, lacked not in helping forth his brother Clarence to his death, which he resisted [denied] openly, howbeit somewhat (as men deemed) more faintly than he that were heartily minded to his wealth [Clarence's welfare]'. Ultimately, though, More abstains from apportioning responsibility for Clarence's death: 'But of all this point is there no certainty, and whoso [*sic*] divineth upon conjectures may as well shoot too far as too short'.²⁸ The reader is left grappling with scant evidence and with the reminder that the evidence itself consists of 'conjectures' rather than incontrovertible proof. Similarly in *Anglica Historia*, although happy to speculate on the reasons that may have incensed Edward against Clarence, Vergil refrains from offering any definitive account of his fall: 'touching the cause of [Clarence's] death, though I have enqueryd of many, who wer not of least authority emongest the kinges cownsaylle at that time, yeat have I no certaintie therof to leave in memory'.²⁹ Both More and Vergil are often willing to acknowledge the partial quality, or the partiality, of the evidence they report, as exemplified by their reports of the circumstances that led to Clarence's demise.

Also worth noting is how both More and Vergil are prepared to offer conflicting views of central historical figures, including Richard. They both, for example, provide a notorious and much-quoted account of Richard's deformities: Vergil tells his readers that Richard was of 'lyttle stature, deformyd of body, the one shoulder being higher than the other, [and] short and sour countenance';³⁰ More's description repeats Vergil's almost verbatim, stating that Richard was 'little of stature, ill-featured of limbs, crook-backed, his left shoulder much higher than his right, [and] hard favored of visage'.³¹ Generally overlooked, though, is the fact that they also provide qualifying statements about Richard and the quality and origin of the physical and moral deformities they themselves report, which invites their readers to question any simplistic understanding of Richard as a unique and absolute paradigm of evil. Richard's description in More is followed by an important proviso, introduced by the qualifying 'It is *for truth* reported' (my emphasis); then More continues by warning his readers that he cannot tell 'whether men of hatred report above the truth, or else that nature changed her course in his beginning, which in the course of his life many things unnaturally committed'.³² Similarly in Vergil, when Richard is reported as the likely killer of King Henry VI, while the latter was being

held in the Tower of London following the defeat of the Lancastrian forces at the Battle of Tewkesbury on 4 May 1471, the qualifying statement ‘But who so ever wer the killer of that holy man [Henry VI]’ is followed by an equanimous assessment of the collective responsibility of (and inevitable retribution visited upon) the Yorkist faction, rather than Richard alone:

[I]t is apparant ynoughe, that as well the murtherer as the procurers therof sufferyd punysshement for ther offences, who, whan as afterward they had none enemyes uppon whom to satisfy and satiate ther crueltie, exercysyd the same uppon themselves ... and embrewyd ther hands in ther own bloode.³³

Even when Richard becomes further steeped in blood does Vergil remind his readers that Richard is no different from those who lose their moral compass, allowing their greed to take over:

And so Richerd from thencefurth determynyd to assay his purposyd spytefull practyse by subtyltie and sleight, which yf by that meane shold not faule owt so fortunately as he hopyd, than lastelye, with malice apert, to attempt the same; not myndyng, miserable man, that he could offend therin without extreme detriment of the commonwealth, and thutter subversion of his howse. Surely so yt happeneth to graceless people, that who seketh to overthrow an other, his owne frawd, wicked and mischievous intent, his owne desperate boldness, maketh him frantkye and mad.³⁴

Far from being set apart from other characters, Richard is fallen through a lack of ‘grace’; in this respect, in fact, Richard is in very good company, as Vergil shows how members of both warring factions similarly lose their way and themselves to greed and vaulting ambition.

Overall, whether Shakespeare developed Tacitean qualities that he found in More’s classically informed *History* because his interest in a Tacitean approach to historical writing had been piqued by Savile’s translation, or because a Tacitean approach to historical writing lent itself more naturally to Shakespeare’s own interrogative and multi-perspectival approach to playwriting, remains open to question. What matters is that we start registering these qualities as a distinctive, *artful* feature of *Richard III*. Reconstructing the directions towards which and from whence influence travels is always a challenging task, even when authors and their works are closer to us in time than Shakespeare and his predecessors are, whether early modern or classical. But detecting influence can help us re-read a very familiar play, like *Richard III*, with fresh eyes – or with older eyes, if there is any strength in my argument according to which the Tacitean qualities of this play have become hard for modern readers and audiences alike to detect, because the prompts that Shakespeare wove into the play have become all but invisible.

Conclusion

In respect of its Tacitean qualities, *Richard III* anticipates later historical tragedies, like *Julius Caesar* or *Hamlet*. If *Hamlet* can be summed up as being about the way in which ‘there is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so’ (2.2.239–40),³⁵ and, paraphrasing *Hamlet*, *Julius Caesar* as being about the way in which ‘there is nothing either good or bad but *telling* makes it so’, *Richard III* can be best appreciated as a tour de force that exemplifies how ‘there is nothing either good or bad but *wanting* it makes it so’. In this respect, *Richard III* does not fit the category of ‘early work’. Most recently, Colin Burrow has, for example, reinforced the notion that it was Shakespeare’s reading of Florio’s translation of Montaigne’s *Essays*, a seminal work also steeped in classical and humanist learning, that allowed Shakespeare to display ‘learned thinking in process’.³⁶ By suggesting that Shakespeare most likely read Savile’s Tacitus shortly after it was published in 1591, or that he was influenced by the intellectual climate that this translation contributed to create at the time, I would also like to propose that we rise above the category of ‘early’ or ‘late’ Shakespeare when they prevent us from (re)discovering the *artfulness* of early plays like *Richard III*.

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Notes

1. See, for example, Jonathan Bate, *Shakespeare and Ovid* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986); Robert Miola, *Shakespeare’s Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); and *Shakespeare’s Reading* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), and Charles Martindale (ed.), *Shakespeare and the Classics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).
2. As Paulina Kewes notes, ‘until the final decade of the sixteenth century, ... England had been poorly served with translations of classical historiography. ... The highlights of the earlier period had been Arthur Golding’s rendering of Caesar (1565), William Barker’s of Appian

- (1578), and Thomas North's of Plutarch (1579). ... By contrast, in the 1590s translations and original accounts of Roman history rapidly proliferated. Savile's translation of Tacitus' *Historiae* and *Agricola* (1591) was followed by Richard Grenway's of the *Annales* and *Germania* (1598) and Philemon Holland's of Livy's *Ab urbe condita* (1600). In 'Henry Savile's Tacitus and the politics of Roman history in late Elizabethan England', *The Huntington Library Quarterly*, 74, 2011, pp. 515–51, 518–19.
3. *The First Part of the Contention of the Two Famous Houses of York and Lancaster* (c. 1590–1) and *The True Tragedy of Richard, Duke of York* (c. 1591), better known by the titles of the longer versions first published in folio in 1623 as *The Second* and *The Third Part of King Henry VI*.
 4. Richard Field, London stationer and Stratford friend of Shakespeare's, was shortly going to publish the first edition of *Venus and Adonis* and biographers of Shakespeare have sensibly speculated on the likelihood of a close connection between Shakespeare and Field; see, for example, Katherine Duncan-Jones, *Ungentle Shakespeare* (London: Arden Shakespeare, 2001).
 5. All quotations from *3 Henry VI* are from Michael Hattaway (ed.), *The Third Part of Henry VI*, The New Cambridge Shakespeare (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).
 6. David J. Womersley in *3 Henry VI* ('*3 Henry VI*: Shakespeare, Tacitus and parricide', in *Notes and Queries*, 32, 1985, pp. 468–73).
 7. Kewes, p. 519.
 8. Mordechai Feingold, 'Scholarship and politics: Henry Savile's Tacitus and the Essex connection', in *The Review of English Studies*, New Series, 67, 2016, pp. 855–74, 858.
 9. See, for example, Daniel Woolf, *The Idea of History in Early Stuart England: Erudition, Ideology, and "The Light of Truth" from the Accession of James I to the Civil War* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), or H. M. Salmon, 'Seneca and Tacitus in Jacobean England', in *The Mental World of the Jacobean Court*, ed. Linda Levy Peck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).
 10. Kewes, p. 516.
 11. Feingold has recently noted that, while taking earlier scholars to task for failing to realise how 'in its moment of composition and publication [Savile's translation] served first and foremost to articulate the pressing preoccupation with the dangers, which the Crown allegedly failed to address, from Spain, Catholicism, and the unsettled succession', Kewes also confines her analysis to how Savile's work contributed to the development of political thought in the period ('Scholarship and politics', p. 857. Issues 1–2 of volume 6 of *Erudition and the Republic of Letters*, ed. Feingold (Leiden: Brill, 2021), go some way towards addressing this imbalance (<https://brill.com/view/journals/erl/6/1-2/erl.6.issue-1-2.xml>).
 12. Verbal borrowings cannot definitely be ruled out until a systematic collation of Saville's translation and Shakespeare's play is carried out. Alternatively, Shakespeare may have accessed *The Histories* via Latin or French translations, chiefly among them Justus Lipsius's seminal Latin edition of 1574, *Historiarum et annalium libri qui exstant ... Liber de moribus Germanorum. Iulii Agricolaë via. Incerti Scriptoris dialogus de oratoribus sui temporis*, published in Antwerp by Christopher Plantin, and Claude Fauchet and Étienne de la Planche's French edition of 1582, *Les Œuvres de C. Cornelius Tacitus*, published in Paris by Abel l'Angelier. For reissues of the French edition, and further details about other vernacular translations published on the Continent in the sixteenth century, see Saül Martínez Bermejo, *Translating Tacitus: The Reception of Tacitus's Works in the Vernacular Languages of Europe, 16th-17th Centuries* (Pisa: Pisa University Press, 2010), esp. pp. 20–5.

13. I have written elsewhere about Tacitean influences on Shakespeare's dramatisation of Richard III as a character. See Sonia Massai, 'Introduction', in Sonia Massai (ed.), *Richard III*, Arden 4 series (London: Bloomsbury, forthcoming).
14. Jan Waszink, 'Your Tacitism or mine? Modern and early-modern conceptions of Tacitus and Tacitism', in *History of European Ideas*, 36(4), 2010, 375–85; accessed 15 May 2024 at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1016/j.histeuroideas.2010.06.003>.
15. Womersley has argued that '[i]t is unlikely that Shakespeare would have come across the original text in school' (471) but admits the slight possibility that Shakespeare may have read Tacitus in Latin, while Benario believes that this is unlikely' (Herbert W. Benario, 'Shakespearean debt to Tacitus' *Histories*', in *Notes & Queries*, 55, 2008, pp. 202–6, 204).
16. See, for example, Peter Burke, 'Tacitism, scepticism, and reason of state', in J. H. Burn (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Political Thought, 1450–1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 479–98, or Richard Tuck, *Philosophy and Government, 1572–1651* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).
17. R. Malcolm Smuts, 'Varieties of Tacitism', in *The Huntington Library Quarterly*, 83(3), 2020, pp. 441–65, 457.
18. Smuts, p. 457.
19. Smuts, p. 465; Waszink, 'Your Tacitism'.
20. All quotations are from my Arden 4 edition of *Richard III* (forthcoming).
21. *Ingulph's Chronicle of the Abbey of Croyland with the Continuations of Peter of Blois and Anonymous Writers*, trans. with notes by Henry T. Riley (London, 1854).
22. *The New Chronicles of England and France*, ed. Henry Ellis (London, 1811).
23. 'Edward IV', fol. Cxxxix^v.
24. Dominic Mancini, *The Usurpation of Richard III*, trans. C. A. J. Armstrong (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 63.
25. Philip Schwyzer, *Shakespeare and the Remains of Richard III* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 71.
26. John Jowett, for example, points out how 'Shakespeare played up to the image of a villainous and deformed Richard. The "facts" of the play are uglier than those of his sources ...'. Jowett however does sense that Richard III the character and *Richard III* the play elicit different responses from the audience: '*Richard III* takes us into a theatre of showmanship and seduction; but that is Richard's project. The play as a whole instructs in the necessity of resistance'; in John Jowett (ed.), *The Oxford Shakespeare Richard III* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 19, 3.
27. See footnote 10.
28. In Thomas More, *The History of King Richard III*, ed. Richard S. Sylvester (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1976), p. 9.
29. In *Three Books of Polydore Vergil's English History*, ed. Henry Ellis (London, 1844), p. 167.
30. *Three Books of Polydore Vergil*, p. 226.
31. More, *The History*, p. 8. More increases Richard's deformity by adding 'crook-backed' (or 'kyphosis') to Vergil's and earlier accounts of Richard's shoulder as being uneven (thus denoting a condition now generally described as 'scoliosis').
32. More, *The History*, p. 8.
33. *Three Books of Polydore Vergil*, p. 156.
34. *Three Books of Polydore Vergil*, p. 174.
35. Philip Edwards, (ed.), *Hamlet*, New Cambridge Series (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019 [1985]).

36. Colin Burrow, 'Montaignian moments: Shakespeare and the *Essays*', in Neil Kenny, Richard Scholar, and Wes Williams (eds), *Montaigne in Transit: Essays in Honour of Ian Maclean* (Oxford: Legenda MHRA, 2016), Oxford, pp. 239–52, 243. See also Robert Ellrodt, *Montaigne and Shakespeare: The Emergence of Modern Self-Consciousness* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015).

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