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RICHARD III'S PAULINE OATH :  
Shakespeare's Response to Thomas More

Charles Wordsworth was the first to notice that in Shakespeare's *Richard III* Richard swears repeatedly by Saint Paul, an oath not found elsewhere in the Shakespearean canon. The occasions are as follows :

Now by [Saint Paul], that news is bad indeed! (I. i. 138)

Villains, set down the corse, or, by Saint Paul,  
I'll make a corse of him that disobeys. (I. ii. 36-37)

Advance thy halberd higher than my breast,  
Or by Saint Paul I'll strike thee to my foot,  
And spurn upon thee, beggar, for the boldness. (I. ii. 40-42)

By holy Paul, they love his Grace but lightly  
That fill his ears with such dissentious rumours. (I. iii. 45-46)

Off with his head! Now by Saint Paul I swear  
I will not dine until I see the same. (III. iv. 76-77)

By the apostle Paul, shadows to-night  
Have strook more terror to the soul of Richard  
Than can the substance of ten thousand soldiers  
Armed in proof and led by shallow Richmond. (V. iii. 216-219)<sup>1</sup>

The critics' estimates of the oath vary from Dover Wilson's view that it reinforces Richard's "mock-Puritan piety" to Geoffrey Carnall's argument that it shows Richard "positively impersonating, with mischievous exhilaration, the unscrupulous Apostle of the Gentiles."<sup>2</sup> Accurate as the comments may be, none adequately explains the significance of the oath and its function in the play. Only John B. Harcourt, for example, has identified the thematic concern to which it is related : he notes in passing that "The word *grace* reverberates from beginning to end, to a degree equalled only by *Henry VIII* in the Shakespearean canon."<sup>3</sup> The need remains, however, to assess the contribution of the Pauline oath to the development of this theme, and also to appraise Richard's

character in terms of it. Neither can be done until Shakespeare's debt to Thomas More's *The History of King Richard III* is recognized.

Shakespeare took his cue from the single dramatic occasion in the *History* when More has Richard swear by Saint Paul. This occurs when the Protector, having contrived a shamelessly trumped-up charge against Hastings during the council in the Tower, orders his immediate execution and swears he will not dine until it is done: "Then were they al quickly bestowed in diuerse chambres, except y<sup>c</sup> lorde Chamberlen, whom the protectour bade spede & shryue hym a pace, for by saynt Poule (quod he) I wil not to dinner til I se thy hed of."<sup>4</sup> In this passage both the oath and the sentiment are designed to stimulate the reader's memory of scripture. More typically adumbrates classical and scriptural allusions or echoes within the texture of his narrative in order to illuminate the significance of what is taking place. One need only think of the hints of the *pater noster* in the common prayer of the Utopians,<sup>5</sup> or of the allusion to Judas in More's statement that Richard III was "close and secrete, a deepe dissimuler, lowlye of counteynaunce, arrogant of heart, outwardly coumpinable where he inwardely hated, not letting to kisse whome hee thoughte to kyll."<sup>6</sup> The effect of such adumbrations is to present the occasions as archetypal. In the council-chamber episode, different levels of allusion make for an unusual degree of complexity. As Sylvester notes in the Yale edition, More had in mind a parallel between Richard's execution of Hastings and Tiberius' summary execution of Sabinus as recounted by Tacitus in the *Annals*.<sup>7</sup> There is also a parallel between Richard's refusal to dine until Hastings is dead and the Jews of Acts 23 : 12, who "banded together, and bound themselves under a curse, saying that they would neither eat nor drink till they had killed Paul."<sup>8</sup> But what chiefly impressed Shakespeare -- to the extent that he reiterated it six times -- was Richard's adjuration by Saint Paul; by considering what the oath means in More's text, one can see how it may have registered on Shakespeare's imagination.

The oath's prime function is to supply an ironic perspective on Richard's character and actions. A typological parallel is estab-

lished not between Richard and the zealous, indefatigable, and prevailing apostle of the Gentiles that Paul later became, but between Richard and the pre-conversion Saul -- the antichristian scourge of the church. The allusion to Acts 23 : 12 strengthens this irony by framing Richard in an inversion of the original situation: not only is he refusing to imitate the regenerate Paul, but he has wilfully taken over the malice and strategy of the Jews who planned to destroy Paul. Ironically, he is actively resisting the pattern of experience that More's text implies he should imitate. A significant variant in one of the Latin texts of the *History* suggests that More was highly conscious of the inverted typological link he was making between Richard and Paul, and took considerable pains to find the most effective way of drawing attention to it. The Latin of the text preserved uniquely in the Arundel MS 43 of the College of Arms<sup>9</sup> includes a phrase that More cancelled -- judging from the Louvain edition; it is omitted from his English version as well. Whereas the Louvain text reads "nam ita diuum, inquit, Paulum propitium habeam, vt non ante cibi quicquam gustaturus sim quam tibi caput amputatum videam",<sup>10</sup> the Arundel MS has the following elaboration: "Nam ita diuum inquit paulum *cui me peculiariter seruio* propitium habeam vt non ante cibi quicquam gustabo quam tibi caput amputatum videam."<sup>11</sup> This variant attests to the considerable importance of the Richard-Paul association in More's own mind during the process of composition; in cancelling the reference to Richard's special devotion to Paul, he apparently felt later that in context the oath was sufficient in itself to mark the basic irony he was aiming at.

The thematic concerns in More's other writings also persuade one that the associations he evoked through the Richard-Paul link were not merely incidental. One of his major tasks in the controversial works was to convince Englishmen of a continuous calling providentially inherent in all experience,<sup>12</sup> and of their freedom of will, initiated and sustained by grace, to respond positively to it.<sup>13</sup> In the council-chamber scene in the *History*,

the oath and scriptural allusion are designed to sharpen in the reader a sense that men "vndowtedly thorow theyr own defaute fall from the grace wyllyngly, that holpe them whyle they resysted,"<sup>14</sup> and that Richard is doing precisely that. Richard's situation is mirrored in *A Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation*, where, referring again to Paul, More states explicitly what is implicit in the *History*. After Anthony has explained to Vincent that "in this world in which his [God's] high mercye giveth men space to be better / the pvnishment by trybulacion that he sendith, servith ordinarily for a meane of amendment," he adds: "Saynt paule was hym selfe sore agaynst crist, till Crist gave hym a great fall / and threw hym to the grownd & streke hym sterke blynd / And with that tribulacion he turnid to hym at the first word / and god was his phisicion & helyd hym sone after 'both' in body and sowle / by his mynister Ananias / & made hym his blessid apostle."<sup>15</sup> In the *History* More emphasizes Richard's personal affliction: "litttle of stature, ill fetured of limmes, croke backed, his left shoulder much higher then his right, hard fauoured of visage"<sup>16</sup>, but unlike Paul, Richard cynically repudiates providence so that his outward deformity, instead of being an occasion for regeneration, merely becomes emblematic of inner distortion. This is the point that Shakespeare understood, seized upon, and elaborated as a central theme in his own dramatic treatment of Richard III.

More's account of the council-chamber episode evidently stimulated a whole range of Pauline and related theological associations in Shakespeare's imagination -- the components of the "curiously Pauline atmosphere" noted by Harcourt.<sup>17</sup> I suggest that the particular collocation of ideas and allusions he found in More's *History* formed the basis of Shakespeare's conception of Richard in much the same way that the language of Barnabe Rich's preface to "Of Apolonius and Silla" suggested the main thematic motifs of *Twelfth Night*.<sup>18</sup> Certainly the oath in *Richard III* cannot be understood divorced from the Richard / Paul / grace collocation that is recurrent through the whole play.

Shakespeare prepared for this portrayal of Richard by

developing a psychologically complex motivation for him -- on the basis of his Morean source material -- in *3 Henry VI*. In his first major soliloquy, Richard reveals an inability to come to terms with his physical deformity; he cannot accept the circumstances of his birth:

Why, love forswore me in my mother's womb;  
 And for I should not deal in her soft laws,  
 She did corrupt frail nature with some bribe,  
 To shrink mine arm up like a wither'd shrub,  
 To make an envious mountain on my back,  
 Where sits deformity to mock my body;  
 To shape my legs of an unequal size,  
 To disproportion me in every part,  
 Like to a chaos, or unlick'd bear-whelp  
 That carries no impression like the dam.  
 And am I then a man to be belov'd?  
 O monstrous fault to harbor such a thought! (*3 Henry VI*, III.  
 ii. 153-164)

Richard's excessive self-pity prevents him from loving himself and consequently from loving his neighbour, and the course of evil he sets about is a direct response to this feeling of being excluded from love. He feels the impulse to find some cure for his emotional tribulation, but looks for it in the wrong place:

And I -- like one lost in a thorny wood,  
 That rents the thorns, and is rent with the thorns,  
 Seeking a way, and straying from the way,  
 Not knowing how to find the open air,  
 But toiling desperately to find it out --  
 Torment myself to catch the English crown. (III. ii. 174-179)

Richard's decision to usurp the throne is the product of a perverted and vengeful hubris: "Then since the heavens have shap'd my body so, / Let hell make crook'd my mind to answer it" (V. vi. 78-79). The tragic irony of Richard's chosen response is that it is self-destructive; as the next play in the first tetralogy shows, it leads him inevitably into despair.

The first thing Shakespeare does in *Richard III* is to remind the audience of the psychological foundations for Richard's

character, laid down in *3 Henry VI*. He then begins to exploit the Pauline oath as a device for underlining the parodic nature of the path Richard has opted for. In all cases except the last, the oath is used when Richard is either advancing his cause by a diabolical act, or else sees the possibility of doing so. At I. i. 138 he sees the chance to exploit Edward's expected premature death; at I. ii. 36 and I. ii. 41 he plans to win Anne without delay against all her natural impulses; at I. iii. 45 he prepares for the removal of the queen's kindred by falsely insinuating their duplicity; and at III. iv. 76 he is acutely aware that he is succeeding in having Hastings beheaded as a result of patently false charges. The two adjurations in Act One, Scene Two are reinforced by another Pauline reference. When Richard encounters Anne, she is accompanying Henry VI's body as the "holy load" is being "taken from Paul's" (I. ii. 30). Within this church was a widely known fresco depicting the Dance of Death,<sup>19</sup> and the removal of Henry's corpse thus serves powerfully as a *memento mori*, which Richard refuses to recognize as one of the four last things depicted inside. In this instance, the oath and the reference to the Cathedral work together to emphasize Richard's perversity.

Throughout the play, Richard is the butt of irony in that he himself is aware of the need to imitate his saint, but only performs this as a maliciously insincere affectation:

But then I sigh, and, with a piece of scripture,  
Tell them that God bids us do good for evil:  
And thus I clothe my naked villainy  
With odd old ends stol'n forth of holy writ,  
And seem a saint, when most I play the devil. (I. iii. 333-337)

We learn progressively that this hollow, grotesque imitation of a saint needed to be genuine; instead, like the early Saul, who "made havock of the church" (Acts 8:3), Richard makes "the happy earth [his] hell" (I. ii. 51). Unlike Saul, he persists in kicking against the pricks of grace.

A complex of words having theological overtones establishes a doctrinal perspective of Richard's actions. When he attempts to woo Anne, for example, she exclaims: "What black magician

conjures up this fiend / To stop devoted charitable deeds?" (I. ii. 34-35). Richard playfully counters this charge that he obstructs charity by accusing Anne herself of lacking it: "Lady, you know no rules of charity, / Which renders good for bad, blessings for curses" (I. ii. 68-69).<sup>20</sup> The irony in these lines is not only that Richard abuses the idea of charity by invoking it for purpose of seduction, but also that his statement applies most pertinently to himself. Perhaps Shakespeare also counted on his audience recalling the words of the saint whom Richard swears by:<sup>21</sup> "Though I speak with the tongues of men and angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal" (1 Cor 13:1). Another example of ironic implication occurs when Anne invites Richard to hang himself. He replies: "By such despair I should accuse myself" (I. ii. 85). Richard objectively understands what despair is, to the extent that he can invoke the notion, in sport, to reinforce his argument; he does not see, however, the reality of it, nor that he will be a victim of despair.

The doctrinal perspective on Richard is most explicitly stated in the scene of his wooing of Elizabeth. Here Richard tries to excuse his crimes, as he does on a number of other occasions,<sup>22</sup> on the grounds of predestined inevitability: "All unavowed is the doom of destiny" (IV. iv. 218). Elizabeth's reply asserts another view: "True -- when avoided grace makes destiny" (I. 219). The theological and Pauline context of the play puts this issue beyond the merely dialectical; the entire figuring forth of *Richard III* shows Elizabeth to be right. Richard's own agonies of conscience in the later scenes betray his awareness that he was free to act in a different way and is judged and condemned because he chose not to:

My conscience hath a thousand several tongues,  
And every tongue brings in a several tale,  
And every tale condemns me for a villain.  
Perjury in the highest degree;  
Murder, stern murder, in the direst degree;  
All several sins, all us'd in each degree,  
Throng to the bar, crying all, "Guilty! Guilty!" (V. ii. 193-199)

Richard's next words illustrate the tragic futility of his chosen path :

I shall despair ; there is no creature loves me,  
And if I die no soul will pity me.  
Nay, wherefore should they, since that I myself  
Find in myself no pity to myself ? (V. iii. 200-203)

In recalling Richard's bitterly self-deprecating question in 3 *Henry VI*, "And am I then a man to be belov'd ? / O monstrous fault to harbor such a thought!" (III. ii. 163-164), these lines show that his path has led him full circle to no avail whatsoever. Everything Richard has done has been an attempt to find "the open air", but by refusing to believe that he is within the compass of love -- human as well as divine -- he has placed himself beyond the reach of either. At the end, Richard realizes this, and the realization drives him into despair. His final utterance of the oath "by Saint Paul", significantly intensified for the occasion, reminds the audience of the Pauline, theological context of this despair :

By the apostle Paul, shadows to-night  
Have strook more terror to the soul of Richard  
Than can the substance of ten thousand soldiers  
Armed in proof and led by shallow Richmond. (V. iii. 216-

219)

It is Paul the apostle that Richard's mind registers at this moment; perhaps he realizes for the first time that he remains, metaphorically speaking, in the fallen situation of Saul on the road to Damascus. Richard's first words on starting up from his dream are "Give me another horse! Bind up my wounds!" (V. iii. 177). Apart from being proleptic of Richard's plight on Bosworth field, this line may, as Harcourt has argued, link Richard with the iconographic tradition that depicted Paul as thrown from his horse.<sup>23</sup> Unlike Paul, Richard remains fallen. His fundamental mistake is glossed elsewhere by Hastings, as he reflects upon his own fault : "O momentary grace of mortal men, / Which we more hunt for than the grace of God!" (III. iv. 96-97).

Shakespeare's treatment of Richmond in the final scenes of *Richard III* confirms the central importance of the theme of

grace in its Pauline context. Richmond counterpoints and illuminates Richard's avoidance of grace in that he is presented specifically as an example of grace sought and accepted. Here Shakespeare stepped in -- following Holinshed -- where More had feared to tread. Not only does Richmond march "in God's name" with "true hope" (V. ii. 22-23), but he also actively appeals for the assistance of grace : "O Thou whose captain I account myself, / Look on my forces with a gracious eye" (V. iii. 108-109). Richmond is precisely the positive type whom Richard negatively mirrors.

What contribution do the oath, the related Pauline tonality to which it gives rise, and the Morean view of grace which it highlights ultimately make to *Richard III* and the first tetralogy as a whole ? One must conclude that they substantially modify some of the commonly asserted appraisals of Shakespeare's sense of history. In the light of the meaning with which Shakespeare imbues Richard's experience, it is surely too simple to assert, as Cairncross does, that Shakespeare merely accepted "a predestinarian interpretation already imposed on the events" that he found ready to hand in Hall.<sup>24</sup> If the historical and structural patterns of all four plays in the tetralogy are traced through from beginning to end -- and this still awaits an adequate study -- Richard III will be seen to be merely the worst manifestation of something that the three earlier plays show had been taking place to an increasingly destructive degree ever since the death of Henry V. Richard's response to tribulation mirrors, in personal terms, the political response of Englishmen to the Wars of the Roses ; he is at once the product and scourge of it, and his chastisement partakes of theirs in that it is largely self-inflicted.

I would, finally, suggest that when Shakespeare encountered Thomas More's narration of the council-chamber scene in the *History*, he was stimulated imaginatively to reformulate, in more doctrinally resonant terms, what he had already depicted. The result was, thematically and aesthetically, a positive gain.

## NOTES

1. All quotations are from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans and others (Boston : Houghton Mifflin, 1974). Herschel Baker, editor of the *Richard III*, gives the Folio reading of "Saint John" for l. i. 138 as against the "Saint Paul" of the Quartos -- hence the square brackets.
2. John Dover Wilson (ed.), *Richard III* (London : Cambridge University Press, 1954), p. xx ; Geoffrey Carnall, "Shakespeare's Richard III and Saint Paul", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, XIV (1963), 188 ; see also Charles Wordsworth, *On Shakespeare's Knowledge and Use of the Bible* (London, 1864), p. 85 ; P.A. Daniel, Introduction to *Richard the Third by William Shakespeare. The First Quarto, 1597, a Facsimile in Photo-Lithography* (London : W. Griggs, 1886), p. xiv ; and G. Wilson Knight, *The Sovereign Flower : On Shakespeare as the Poet of Royalism* (London : Methuen, 1958), p. 21.
3. John B. Harcourt, "'Odde Old Ends, Stolne...': King Richard and Saint Paul," *Shakespeare Studies*, VII (1974), 89.
4. *The Complete Works of St. Thomas More*, Vol. 2 : *The History of King Richard III*, ed. R.S. Sylvester (New Haven : Yale University Press, 1963), p. 49. This edition is hereafter cited as *CW*.
5. *CW 4 : Utopia*, ed. E.L. Surtz and J.H. Hexter (New Haven : Yale University Press, 1965), 236-237.
6. *CW 2*, 8. Shakespeare imitates this passage in *3 Henry VI*, V. vii. 33-34.
7. *CW 2*, xciv-xcv.
8. All biblical quotations in English are from the Authorized Version. More revised his first Latin version of the council-chamber scene to make the parallel with Acts 23 : 12 more explicit. In the Vulgate the Jews "deuoverunt se dicentes, neque bibituros donec occiderent Paulum" ; then at 23 : 14 they say : "Deuotione devovimus nos nihil gustaturos, donec occidamus Paulum." In his earlier Arundel version More has Richard exclaim : "non ante cibi quicquam gustabo" (*CW 2*, 127). For the later Louvain version More changed this to "non ante cibi quicquam gustaturus sim" (*CW 2*, 49), thus adjusting the simple future form "gustabo" to the future participle found in the original Vulgate passage he is echoing.
9. For a detailed discussion of Arundel MS 43, see R.S. Sylvester's editorial commentary in *CW 2*, xxxiii.
10. *CW 2*, 49/12-14.
11. *Ibid.*, 127/31-33. The *deuoui* variant written above *seruio* is superior in that it construes well with *me* : *deuoui* also may echo the verb in Acts 23 : 12, 14.
12. See, for example, *CW 8 : The Confutation of Tyndale's Answer*, ed. Louis A. Schuster and others (New Haven : Yale University Press, 1973), 521/2-5, where More asserts that God "doth... call ordynarily vppon them bothe [i.e., elects and reprobates] of hys lyke mercy styl, as longe as they lyue in thys worlde here, and wolde yf they wolde assente therto them selfe and obaye, be as gladdes to fynde them agayne".
13. See my article, "Thomas More's Controversial Writings and His View of the Renaissance," *Parergon*, no. 11 (April, 1975), 41-48, for the influence of these beliefs on More's view of history.
14. *CW 8*, 453/6-8.
15. *CW 12 : A Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation*, ed. Louis L. Martz and Frank Manley (New Haven : Yale University Press, 1976), 17/18-26.
16. *CW 2*, 7/19-2.
17. Harcourt, *op. cit.*, p. 89.
18. See Geoffrey Bullough (ed.), *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, Vol. II (London : Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958), 345.
19. More refers to the fresco in *The Four Last Things (English Works)*, ed. William Rastell (London, 1557), p. 77 D ; see also K.J. Wilson, "More and Holbein : The Imagination of Death," *Sixteenth Century Journal*, VII (April, 1976), 51-58.
20. Shakespeare's preference for "charity" rather than the "love" of the Tyndale, Geneva, and Great Bible translations points to the Bishops' Revised New Testament of 1572 as one likely influence on him. He may even have known directly the original More-Tyndale dispute over the meaning of "agape" (see *CW 8*, 199-203) to which this revision looked back. For an assessment, see R. Noble, *Shakespeare's Biblical Knowledge and Use of the Book of Common Prayer* (New York : Octagon, 1970), pp. 10-12.
21. This passage occurs in *The Book of Common Prayer* as the Epistle for Quinquagesima Sunday.
22. See *3 Henry VI*, V. vi. 58, V. ii. 23-24 ; and *Richard III*, I. iii. 180.
23. Harcourt, *op. cit.*, pp. 94-95.
24. Andrew S. Cairncross (ed.), *The Second Part of King Henry VI* (London : Methuen, 1969), p. 1.



*POETRY AND PROPHECY: Reflections on the Word*, by Mario A. Di Cesare, published for the Friends of the Amherst College Library, 1977.

Delivered April 9, 1976 as a Robert Frost Library Lecture, this slim volume is a collection of coherent statements about the relationship between poetry and prophecy. The aim of the book is not "a technical study or a poetics of prophecy" ; rather, it is to show the poetic nature of the prophetic writings of the Old Testament.

In this search for common ground, the poets mentioned are treated as analogous to the prophets.

The author begins with a short section on "the well of language defiled", for it is in observing the perverse uses of the written word that we see its importance and impact. As opposed to the confusing language of politicians and bureaucrats, the poetic prophet -- or, as the case might be, the prophetic poet -- speaks as an incisive, though detached, critic and teacher of his society. Di Cesare places More and Erasmus alongside the likes of Yeats, Blake, and Shelley in the list of prophetic writers.

The essential qualities of the prophet make it impossible to judge him against the world's yardstick : he is "a sign of contradiction" to society's built-in complacencies. Standing outside the accepted, "normal" order, the prophet relies solely upon his word. The Word, however, is powerful : God describes Himself to Moses in the simplest and yet most disturbing terms : I AM THAT I AM (*Exodus* 3 : 14). Following the root of the ancient Hebrew word for prophet, *nabi* (which means, among other things, "the one sent" and "the one made to speak"), the author outlines the "juncture of poetry and prophecy" :

the realized power of the word ;  
 inspiration felt as the compelling urge to speak ;  
 vision and imagination ;  
 the quarrel within.

There is no suggestion of equating poetry with prophecy ; but both the poet and the prophet are compelled by their vision, by the awful burden of inspiration (which can be -- and often is -- personally destructive), to sing. Both teach us that "respect for the word is fundamentally respect for life itself".