


David Livingstone* 

Naked Villany: The Fatal Attraction of Richard III and Donald Trump

Abstract: Although no longer American President, Donald Trump still manages to upstage the current administration. An explanation for his “sinister aesthetics”, to use Joel Elliot Slotkin’s concept, can be seemingly found in developing a comparison with the eponymous king of Shakespeare’s Richard III, who masterfully employs soliloquies and asides to draw the audience and reader into his evil plots and dealings. Donald Trump also managed something similar by means of Twitter, constantly tweeting out vicious comments and insults, which kept both his followers and opponents engaged. This theatrical skill is also compared to the ‘heat’ generated by villains in professional wrestling, whose popularity is marked by how much hatred they can produce.

Keywords: William Shakespeare, Richard III, Donald Trump, Soliloquies, Asides, Twitter.

Introduction

I am undoubtedly not the only one who secretly experiences nostalgia at times for the days when I could look up with perverse glee the news concerning Trump’s latest tweets and speeches and the consequent reactions from late night comedians. Trump-related memes flourished and, despite the avouched disdain for the man and his family, the Trump-product was the best-selling item around in the media. We, or at least I, found pleasure in his absurd bombasticity, cheekiness and bravado. How could he openly utter statements such as “I could stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot somebody, okay, and I wouldn’t lose any voters, okay?” (Vitali) and get away with it? Now, with “that bottled spider” (*Richard III*, 1:3:238)¹ finally silenced, why is it so hard to let him go? Why is there still this continued unhealthy interest in his person? I would like to

* Palacký University Olomouc, Czech Republic. livingstone@seznam.cz

¹ References to Shakespeare’s works are from *The Norton Shakespeare*.

argue that this vicarious pleasure shares affinities with the theatrical experience of listening to the asides and soliloquies by Shakespeare's villains. Although parallels are apparent with characters in almost all of the history plays and beyond, the most obvious example is *Richard III*.

There are Trumpian parallels in many places in Shakespeare. We have Trump as a clown, garbling his words like Lancelot in *The Merchant of Venice* or Dogberry in *Much Ado About Nothing*. Trump reminds us of ridiculous buffoons like Malvolio in his cross-gartered yellow stockings in *Twelfth Night*, failing to recognize his own absurdity. He shares affinities with Macbeth holed up in Dunsinane, while everything crumbles all around him. The renowned theatre critic Michael Billington, writing for *the Guardian*, has discussed a recent Trumpian version of *Julius Caesar* and argues forcibly for a closer parallel with the slimy, unscrupulous Parolles in *All's Well That Ends Well* (Billington).

The history plays, specifically, provide even more suitable material. Like Trump's Ivana, Richard II's first wife, Anne of Bohemia, was also from the Czech Lands and the "caterpillars of the commonwealth," (*Richard II*, 2:3:165), who encourage the folly and greed, which leads to his eventual downfall, sound very much topical. Trump's ill-fated encouragement of the attack by his mob on the Capitol find parallels in the often absurd character of the rebel leader Jack Cade in *2 Henry VI*, voicing contradictory promises (mixing rhetoric reminiscent of Communism with royalist rhetoric) within one sentence, which are swallowed whole of course by his gullible followers: "all the realm shall be in common, and in Cheapside shall my palfrey go to grass; and when I am king, as king I will be,--" (*2 Henry IV*, 4:2:63-65). Trump's retreat to the White House, on the same occasion, while his followers did the dirty work, also recalls the craven "crafty-sick" (*2 Henry IV*, Induction: 37) behaviour of Northumberland in the *Henry IV* plays, allowing his son and brother to face the troops of the King and the Prince while he keeps his feet warm, awaiting the outcome. Finally, Henry IV's deathbed scolding of his son Hal, the future Henry V, seems very much pertinent to the reign of Trump.

Harry the Fifth is crown'd: up, vanity!
Down, royal state! all you sage counsellors, hence!
And to the English court assemble now,
From every region, apes of idleness! (*2 Henry IV*, 4:3:249-252)

When it comes to connections, however, between Trump and Shakespeare's Richard III character, the parallels are remarkable if not spooky. The arguably most interesting parallel is their ability to charm and detest (occasionally both at once) both their friends and enemies, often through the use of asides and soliloquies by Richard's case or by means of tweets and bombastic speeches in

the case of Trump. There is something truly fascinating about their chutzpah, bravado and complete lack of shame. Richard has a number of lines when you wonder how the actor can keep a straight face. After having been instrumental in the imprisonment of his brother Clarence, he feigns ignorance and innocently declares “I am too childish-foolish for this world.” (*Richard III*, 1.3:142). In a very Trumpian self-congratulatory manner, he utters the classic line “I thank my God for my humility” (*Richard III*, 2.1.70), right before, of course, revealing the death of Clarence to the members of the court. This has affinities with Trump’s own assessment of himself as “a very stable genius” (January 6, 2018)² or his countless, obviously outlandish, self-aggrandizing statements such as “Nobody has done more for the black community” (October 17, 2020).

Trump and Richard also share a tendency to turn on their allies and former ministers. Buckingham’s privileged position and the promises of wealth and bounty he has received from Richard all go up in smoke, of course, when he expresses reluctance to execute the princes in the tower. This turnaround culminates with an outburst on the part of the freshly crowned King Richard, “...like a Jack thou keep’st the stroke / Betwixt they begging and my meditation. / I am not in the giving vein today.” (*Richard III*, 4:2:114-116). Buckingham ends up on the executioner’s block soon after. Richard’s paranoia, mistrust and betrayal of his friends is once again parallel with Trump’s constant turning on his former advisers, his veiled threats to Vice-President Pence on the final days of his presidency, and the numerous references to other ‘traitors’. Trump’s tweets frequently denounce former cabinet members who have disappointed him for various reasons. His first Secretary of State, for example, did not remain in his good favours long: “Rex Tillerson, didn’t have the mental capacity needed. He was dumb as a rock and I couldn’t get rid of him fast enough. He was lazy as hell.” (Dec. 7, 2018). Trump’s fourth National Security Advisor fared no better: Perhaps, this should be a block quote. These two examples are only, of course, the tip of the iceberg.

On a related note, both politicians have a fondness for uttering pithy statements or ‘catch phrases’ demonstrating their decisiveness in relation to their enemies or victims. Richard is, of course, notorious for various variations on chop or off with someone’s head, most famously in relation to Lord Hastings in 2:4 who is reluctant to support Richard’s claim to the throne and who is entrapped into ‘treason’ and condemned to the scaffold. Trump is, in contrast, renowned for his “you’re fired” statement, made popular on his reality show *The Apprentice* which ran on television from 2004 to 2017 when he assumed

² All of the tweets cited here come from the official Trump archive available online spanning 2009 up to January 2021 when he was finally silenced, <https://www.thetrumparchive.com/>

the presidency. Both utterances share a gleeful sadism wherein the person in power publicly humiliates and eliminates the victim. The audience (either in the theatre or on the television set) is also encouraged to join in the fun and relish in the destruction of yet another ‘loser’ who does not meet the approval or the standards of the bully in power.

Richard’s “rudely stamped” (*Richard III*, 1:1:16) deformity and attempts to show his figure to the best advantage after his successful seduction of Lady Anne, “I’ll be at charges for a looking-glass, / And entertain some score or two of tailors, / To study fashions to adorn my body.” (*Richard III*, 1:2:241-243) also ring true of Trump, with his ill-fitting clothes vainly trying to disguise his obesity, along with his legendary hair and surreal orange make-up. Both Richard and Trump seem to be driven by insecurity, in the former case understandably due to his physical handicaps while in the latter’s case in relation to his supposed small hands, “Look at those hands, are they small hands?” Trump asked on the debate stage. And [Rubio] referred to my hands: ‘If they’re small, something else must be small.’ I guarantee you there’s no problem. I guarantee.” (Moye).

Despite their physical challenges, both politicians seem to have an inexplicable sex appeal. As referenced earlier, Richard succeeds in breaking down Anne’s understandable antipathy to him in the second scene of the play, only to confide to the audience in a gleeful aside that “I’ll have her, but I will not keep her long.” (*Richard III*, 1:2:216). Trump’s image has been wrapped up, from the very beginning, with his supposed sexual appeal, manifested in his three wives, sexual conquests and his involvement in the beauty pageant business. Just as the audience wonders how Richard can win over Anne and later seemingly Queen Elizabeth when pursuing her daughter in marriage, there has been an ongoing fascination with the way Melania would swat away Trump’s hand in public, to say nothing of his creepy incestuous behavior with his daughter Ivana embodied best in his statement “I’ve said if Ivanka weren’t my daughter, perhaps I’d be dating her.” (Withnall).

Richard, like Trump, despises women on the whole, while at the same time needing them for social status. They are also, however, very much intimidated by strong women who, in contrast to the young Anne, stand up to them. Ian Fredrick Moulton argues forcibly that, “Indeed, one of Richard’s greatest errors is to assume that all women conform to gender stereotypes to the same extent as Anne.” (Moulton 267-268). The most obvious example of this during Trump’s presidency was his painfully obvious discomfort with influential women like Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, Hillary Clinton or Elizabeth Warren. A study of his tweets reveals that he made reference to “Crooked Hillary” 366 times, “crazy Nancy Pelosi” 54 times and Elizabeth “Pocahontas” Warren 40 times. Richard’s nasty comment on Elizabeth after seemingly convincing her to allow him to marry her daughter is very much in a similar

Trumpian vein, “Relenting fool, and shallow, changing woman!” (*Richard III*, 4:4:347). Richard is ironically guilty of the very same ‘weakness’ several lines later when changing his orders to Ratcliff: “My mind is changed, sir, my mind is changed.” (*Richard III*, 4:4:269).

Both figures also feign religious devotion in order to gain political support. Buckingham, Richard’s closest henchman for most of the play, choreographs the scene to impress the Mayor of London and his colleagues: “And look you get a prayer-book in your hand, / And stand betwixt two churchmen, good my lord” (*Richard III*, 3:7:41-42). This is eerily similar to Trump’s awkward posed picture with a Bible outside of St. John’s Church in Washington³ or the equally disturbing photo-op with various Evangelical preachers placing their hands on him in blessing in 2017. Richard’s classic, revealing soliloquy, after stirring up turmoil and animosity amongst his rival nobles, could very much apply to Trump.

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 villany
With old odd ends stolen out of holy writ;
And seem a saint, when most I play the devil. (*Richard III*, 1:3:330-334)

Adding to the parallel, Trump (unlike his predecessors in the office of American President, who at least went through the motions of embracing Christianity) actually makes little effort to conceal his brazen cynicism in relation to the so-called ‘religious right’ and the Church in general. Despite this lack of respect or reverence on his part, he is still embraced wholeheartedly by the majority of his conservative evangelical supporters and this despite being from New York City, having been involved in the gambling business in Atlantic City and having been married three times and divorced twice, to say nothing of his other philandering on the side and incidents such as his celebrated “Grab them by the pussy” statement.

Finally, both Richard and Trump share certain family dynamics and a possible variation of fratricide. Mary L. Trump’s best-selling book on her uncle *Too Much and Never Enough* relates of, amongst many other things, the strange dynamic the future President had with his older brother Fred. Jr., the initial heir apparent to the Trump business. Younger Donald, at least according to Mary, contributed to his brother’s fall from grace, culminating in Fred Jr.’s death at the age of 43 and clearing the way for Donald to ascend the family throne. Fred Jr.’s children were eventually, according to Mary, even cut out of

³ This took place during the Black Lives Matters protests on June 1, 2020.

Fred Sr.'s will, with the future President pulling the strings (Trump, Mary. L.). This is clearly anticipated by Richard's plotting, culminating in death, of the arrest of the middle brother Clarence and his machinations to remove other family members standing in his way. Richard seems to view fraternal love and support as a weakness:

I have no brother, I am like no brother;
 And this word 'love', which graybeards call divine,
 Be resident in men like one another
 And not in me: I am myself alone." (3 *Henry VI*, 5:6:80-83)

Although there have been a number of attempts to define Richard's peculiar grip on the audience and the reader, I found Joel Elliot Slotkin's concept of "sinister aesthetics" (Slotkin 5) particularly useful in understanding the seemingly illogical charm of both Richard and Trump. He argues that "the play encourages audiences to appreciate Richard because of his evil, not in spite of it" (Slotkin 5). He further eloquently demonstrates how the characters in the play also 'succumb' to the dark charms of Richard, thereby contributing to their own eventual downfall. Richard is defeated and killed in the end, but "the sinister itself proves the dominant aesthetic in the world of the play." (Slotkin 26). Slotkin's argument could, at least in my mind, be easily applied to the Trump phenomenon wherein so many of his followers have fallen into the trap of his cult of personality and lived to regret it. It also serves to help explain Trump's ongoing power over the American and world imagination.

Another variation on the appeal of the sinister, in relation to Trump and Richard, can be seen in the attributes of the so-called 'heel' in professional wrestling, someone people love to hate and who generates 'heat'. The villain or heel usually feeds off the boos and insults of the crowd and brazenly breaks the rules. This 'heat' could be perceived as another version of what Richard and Trump cultivate through their taunting of the 'good guys' or liberals in Trump's case. Mike Edison has actually written on this wrestling topic in an attempt to understand Trump's remarkable resiliency.

I couldn't understand why even his most ardent supporters didn't leave him in droves. Surely, that was 'bad heat'—the kind even heels don't want because it means the marks legitimately do not like the person playing the role. Even as an ardent connoisseur of cartoon villainry, I was appalled. But I kept clicking and clicking. And, admit it: you did, too. Then suddenly, the fog of kayfabe was lifted, and somehow Trump was the last man standing. He was going to star in the main event. (Edison)

Trump has, of course, flirted with wrestling not only as a promoter, but as a direct participant in a highly publicized 'feud' with the WWW wrestling

magnate and kindred spirit Vince McMahon.⁴ The wrestling connection goes deeper, however, specifically in the way both Richard and Trump actually attract their audience by refusing to hide their depravity.

Yet another kindred reading of their twisted appeal is provided by Jean E. Howard and Phyllis Rankin in their influential feminist text on the history plays *Engendering a Nation*:

Each scene is punctuated by soliloquies in which Richard addresses the audience, predicting the action to come, responding to the action just past, flaunting his witty wickedness, gloating at the other characters' weakness and ignorance, and seducing the fascinated auditors into complicity with his diabolical schemes. (Howard and Rankin 110)

This description could very much be referring to a sadistic wrestling heel taunting the audience and his inept opponent in the ring.

There are, of course, a number of vivid differences between the two personages. Unlike Trump, there is no doubt about Richard's bravery and aptness for war as depicted both in the last two *Henry VI* plays and at the Battle of Bosworth. Richard is eloquent and a master manipulator who uses language to disguise his true intentions. Trump's vocabulary, in contrast, is limited as a glimpse at his Twitter history makes more than apparent.⁵ This apparent weakness, however, seems to have actually amounted to a strength, increasing his appeal with his followers and supporters. Most significantly, Trump is still very much alive, along with his children and followers, unlike Richard whose only son died as a child and whose illegitimate children faded into oblivion.

Conclusion

Richard III ends with the triumph of Richmond, the future Henry VII, and the death of the universally despised Richard. Trump also experienced a death of sorts with the closing down of his Twitter and Facebook accounts at the beginning of 2021, preventing him from communicating both to his friends and enemies. Their sinister shadows loom large, however. One could argue that both sides of the political spectrum have been impacted: Trump's followers obviously, but also we 'good' liberals who could not take our eyes or ears off him. Christopher Beha, editor of *Harper's Magazine* puts it very well in the

⁴ This feud was entitled "The Battle of the Billionaires" and culminated with Trump shaving McMahon's head in the ring at WrestleMania 23 in 2007.

⁵ His twitter history includes, for example, 158 uses of the word loser, 83 of dummy, 39 of dope and 110 of lightweight.

conclusion to a series of articles on *Life After Trump*. His contribution is called simply, “Trump after Trump”.

And if we’re being completely honest, our Trump watching—even among those who hate him the most—has always contained an element of glee. We were delighted when he declared himself a ‘very stable genius,’ when he bragged about ‘acing’ a test of basic cognitive functioning, when his ridiculous hair blew up to reveal the contours of his slathered-on tan. ... But all the while we were giving Trump exactly what he wanted. For it is an ironclad rule of publicity that it doesn’t matter *why* people watch. A hate follow is as good as any other. (Beha)

As mentioned earlier in this paper, I am admittedly ‘guilty’ of just this kind of complicity and I am far from being alone.

Perhaps it is only those who are disengaged from the whole process, who can see things the most clearly, along the lines of the child in Hans Christian Anderson’s “The Emperor’s New Clothes” who is the only one to comment on the nakedness of the Emperor. In *Richard III*, the young princes in their seeming innocence are arguably the only ones who see their uncle for what he really is (although it does not do them much good in the end). Prior to their imprisonment and murder, the two princes meet with their uncle and have the following prickly exchange.

Richard: What would you have my weapon, little lord?

York: I would, that I might thank you as you call me.

Richard: How?

York: Little. (*Richard III*, 3.1:122-125)

York’s childish innocence, both here and elsewhere, actually packs a punch, something which Richard is very much aware of and which contributes to his decision to rid himself of his nephews. A short throw-away scene or episode,⁶ involving a nameless scrivener who has dutifully copied the charges proclaimed against Hastings, also cuts to the quick of the matter: “Here’s a good world the while! Why who’s so gross, / That seeth not this palpable device? / Yet who’s so blind, but says he sees it not?” (*Richard III*, 3.6:10-12). This anonymous character, merely doing his job, states the obvious and seems able to maintain a certain objectivity.

⁶ I have discussed elsewhere the importance of throw-away scenes (my own formulation) in the history plays, specifically how they enable alternative readings of the plays, see David Livingstone, “Subversive Characters and Techniques in Shakespeare’s History Plays,” PhD diss., (Palacký University, 2011).

Objectivity, of course, is something sorely lacking in these days of ‘fake news’, misinformation and social media. Both Trump and Richard are very much aware of this, in their own fashion, and are highly capable of taking advantage of this. Their fatal attraction lives on, for better or for worse, for many of the rest of us.

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