Humour, Humours, and Horror

Adapting the Violence of *Richard III*

[Trinity Look]

There exists a cut piece of dialogue hiding within the files and trailers for the game *Bloodborne*: "blood makes us human. Makes us more than human. Makes us human no more."[1] I lament this change somewhat. It so closely reflects the latent and often unspoken fascination we have with blood. It is one thing to have it– to *be* alive, and therefore: people– but it is in losing it that it captivates one's attention. In the context of art and depending upon its genre, seeing it can be terrible, cathartic, or even funny. Its presence can evoke a myriad of contradictory feelings, but one thing is certain: they are strong. Thus, it is of great importance that bloodloss (and by extension: violence) within a narrative be presented with clear intent. The 2024 Chicago Shakespeare Theatre's production of *Richard III* directed by Edward Hall prescribes unto its characters morbid fates of all kinds: often bloody, brutal, and medical, to both provide insight into Richard's psyche and create a dialogue between violence and similar types of systemic tyranny; each method of character death symbolically aligns with the victim's relationship to Richard and contributes to a wider commentary on the corruption of medical institutions and the exploitation of its patients set in the backdrop of the early 20th century.

Richard III's original text is William Shakespeare's adaptation of Richard of Gloucester's ascent to the throne and ensuing reign before being overthrown by Henry Tudor of Richmond. This artistic perspective on Richard's reign spends its first half focusing on his schemes to dispose of other prospective heirs to the crown, which includes no shortage of murder, manipulation, and most famous of

1 Miyazaki, Hidetaka, "Bloodborne: Complete Edition," Computer software, San Mateo, CA: Sony Computer Entertainment America LLC, 2015.

all: the imprisonment and (what Shakespeare presumes to be) killing of Edward V and his brother, the "princes in the tower" whose fates remain a popular mystery of British history to this day. The second half revolves around Richard's rule, which is characterized as tyrannical as his mental state declines. This culminates in an uprising led by the Tudors, and Richard is summarily deposed in battle by the Earl of Richmond. While there is no question that Richard is a villainous figure, Shakespeare takes care to also throw into relief Richard's complexities, making note of his disability referred to as "deformed" and gesturing towards social and systemic factors that might have motivated his desire for power.[2] As such, this particular production has taken care to centre both the violence of the text and a dichotomy of the abled and disabled, the living, and the dead.

It is difficult to bridge the gap between 15th century English monarchy and the modern day, so another institution was imposed on top of it to add an extra dimension and set the stage for the degree of brutality that would occur. The grand drapes traded in velvet for semi-clear plastic, thrones and beds were made into operating tables, walls were medical office partitions, and perhaps most strikingly: the ensemble was dressed in white lab coats and their faces were obscured with *Silent Hill*-esque bandage masks.[3] The hospital-themed set dominates the production and hangs over the audience and juxtaposes life and healing with the pungent odor of death, which both can be unsettling *or* comedic in its irony.

Being in a hospital also puts the representation of disability at the forefront. While Richard exploits the institution (be it the hierarchical structure of the monarchy *or* this representation of a hospital) for his own tyrannical means, it is also simultaneously the cause of his grief: opening up no space to him in the aftermath of battling against the Lancasters.[4] This draws a parallel between the usage of healthcare systems in the early 1920s (in which this production likely takes place) to silence or otherwise treat with indifference its marginalized patients and the similar flaws within the English governmental system as it stood contemporary to the 1480s.

Richard sees himself above the Duke of Clarence– his brother and first victim– for falling for his duplicity while also being caught up in the glee of knowing about his oncoming demise.[5] Clarence's death at the hands of the murderers Richard hires takes on a very comedic tone in this adaptation. The two are dressed up as mafia men, partaking in hijinks and slapstick shenanigans as they reconsider whether or not it would be wise to kill him while drenched in warm, bright light. It is in this setup and their delivery of such lines as "where is thy conscience now? / In the Duke of Cloucester's purse / So when he opens his purse to

2 Shakespeare, William, "Richard III," Essay, In *The Norton Shakespeare*, 3rd ed., 555–648, New York City, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2015.

3 Shakespeare, William, "Richard III," February 21, 2024.

4 Shakespeare, "Richard III," 1.1.10-14.

5 Shakespeare, "Richard III," 1.1.118-120.

give us our reward, thy conscience flies out" as witty banter that all prior seriousness has been thrown out.[6] This staging also juxtaposes itself against Clarence's monologue to Tower of London constable Sir Brackenbury, which is performed in extremely limited sterile light that highlights (literally) his sickness from worry. The levity presented by the murderers captures Richard's excitement at his bid for the crown and allows for an opportunity for the audience to join in on his schemes– laughing along at what is to come and completely disregarding the despair that occurred just prior to it.

Clarence's method of death being restrained, lobotomized, and drowned is significant in maintaining the theme of similarity in violence throughout different institutions. His restraint by the orderlies exemplifies how Richard utilized the system within which he operates (in this case, the institution of medicine standing in for the institution of the English bureaucracy) to effectively eliminate his brother. Clarence being sent into isolation and its consequential paranoia being met with indifference (and later death) from the professional meant to take care of him parallels the way in which mental health treatment often historically functioned throughout the early 20th century. The framing of his monologue as a talk-therapy session and his lobotomy solidifies this, recontextualizing his terror surrounding a system that treats his struggle with apathy as judicial *and* pathological at the same time.

Richard's interaction with the two young princes– the direct heirs for the throne after Clarence– is veiled in kindness as he attempts to gain their trust through his rank and prescribed responsibility to watch over them. He appeals to them by positioning himself as someone bestowing advice, claiming that "those uncles which you want were dangerous / Your grace attended to their sugared words / But looked not on the poison of their hearts."[7] Of course, this is all a ruse to keep up appearances and sow seeds of distrust within them towards their other relatives. With regard to their deaths, in the text, their murderer: James Tyrrel, gets a monologue wherein he recounts the method by which the Princes were killed to Richard, stating that "when Dighton thus told on – 'We smotherèd / The most replenishèd sweet work of nature / That from the prime creation e'er she framed.'"[8] But all his dialogue is conspicuously missing from the Chicago production. Despite its absence, the methodology of murder remains true, and the lack of voice lent to the experience of the Princes contributes to their characterization as silent mouthpieces.

The Princes themselves are puppets, physical representations of their lack of agency. Though they maintain their lines, they are voiced and puppeteered by the actors playing the murderers who have been double cast. They have been killed by Richard at this point of the play completely unexpectedly, perhaps par-

6 Shakespeare, "Richard III," 1.4.116-117.
7 Shakespeare, "Richard III," 3.1.12-14.
8 Shakespeare, "Richard III," 4.3.17-18.

alleling their own misguided trust in Richard prior to death. As for Tyrrel, he is genderbent to be a completely silent WWI-era nurse (Jane Tyrrel), complete with medical mask, bloody apron, and chatelaine. She is sent to the tower to be the Princes' caretaker and it is implied she suffocates them with a pillow. This aesthetic change to a woman whose vocation is built on trust and gentleness furthers the parallels between the modus operandi and Richard's dynamic with his victims. And once again, this murder is carried out through a manipulation of the institution in which Richard resides– as it is in part due to his position as Lord Protector that allows him to recommend they stay in the tower. As such, Jane being represented as a nurse continues that throughline of commentating on institutional exploitation in both the monarchical sense and in the realm of medicine.

The next victim of note is Lady Anne, who is introduced as a widow and one of the first to see through Richard's schemes.[9] However, she marries him despite this, and their interactions remain cold and loveless for the rest of the play. There is a lot of freedom for the method by which she meets her fate. It's never explicitly stated in the text how she dies. Richard only orders for a rumour to be spread of Anne being sickly, making a passing remark after her death: "Anne my wife hath bid this world good night."[10] Thus, the inclusion of an on-stage end at all is of note. In the Chicago production, she is directly killed by Richard, who chokes her out on stage and– while her hand is in rigor mortis– breaks it to wrench the ring off of her finger (and cutting it off in the process). This plays on the coldness of their relationship. From the outset, he has no intent of being close to Anne and intends to discard her when the time comes, going so far as to say "I'll have her, but I will not keep her long."[11] Her death embodies their marriage's sheer lack of ardor– being bereft of blood. It is also not until she is already dead that the macabre is truly embraced. The real shock is in the breakage of her hand, as it is blocked to be invisible to the audience and relying on the foley effects of her breaking bones to imply Richard's actions. It emphasizes the purpose for her killing– which was not related to attachment (either personally or to the crown) but rather to the cutting off of his connection to her.

The specific staging of her murder in this production also symbolizes a degree of estrangement between her and Richard. The most similar method of death to Anne is the killing of the murderers, whose necks are snapped by Richard himself in a nonchalant fashion. It is possible this similarity lends to the idea that she lacks uniqueness or closeness to Richard, and was always a means to an end. Due to being strangled by with his bare hands, medical prop usage in her death is forgone entirely, indicating that Richard has accrued so much power that he is no longer bound by the rules and practices of the institution he is a part of to enact his will. It is at this point that his nigh complete control over his world has

9 Shakespeare, "Richard III," 1.2.145-148.
10 Shakespeare, "Richard III," 4.2.29-50; 4.3.39.
11 Shakespeare, "Richard III," 1.2.215-216.

truly come to fruition, and the absence of subtlety and scheming in his conduct is being made known to foreshadow his imminent downfall.

The Duke of Buckingham is an advisor almost as ruthlessly opportunistic as Richard, taking his vying for power in stride and confidently aligning himself with him for a vast majority of the play. Yet in the face of these parallels, he is killed for his reticence to kill the princes, which Richard immediately regards with disdain in this aside: "the deep-revolving witty Buckingham / No more shall be the neighbor to my counsels. / Hath he so long held out with me, untired, / And now he stops for breath? Well, be it so."[12] This culminates in his eventual full-blown betrayal of Richard, fleeing to Wales to seek out Richmond, and subsequent execution for his treason.

Though the Duke's death is not necessarily described or directed in any specific way, it is implied he is beheaded due to his own entreatment of the guards to lead him to "the block of shame."[13] The Chicago production takes it many steps further, however, having him be disemboweled with a scythe and his intestines dropped into a tin bucket with a resounding thud. One could say he hadn't the *guts* to stay on Richard's side, and his reluctance to go far enough in his ambitions is what ultimately led to his undoing. The nature of this capital punishment is so up-front and memorable as one of the late deaths of the play, and this may be because it was the closest connection that Richard had to let go of. Being killed with a scythe was also striking– being one of the few instances of a non-medical instrument being used to kill within the production. The scythe is sometimes representative of justice, and with that understanding of its symbolism, it could represent what Richard sees as vindication for treason. Alternatively, the scythe and its relation to wheat (and therefore industry) could be representative of how Buckingham was motivated by the assurance of greater fortune through land and entitlement– and such a desire was turned against him in a form of contrapasso.

Finally, the life of Richard himself is ended rather unceremoniously, as he is shot in the chest and falls limp on the stage. The only gunshot that is fired throughout the entire show is done by the Earl of Richmond to deal a final blow to him, who– in the loss of his horse (represented by his mobility aid) crawls across the stage before his demise. No blood, no gore, no medicine. This last bout of violence being so removed from how it was previously characterized indicates a complete paradigm shift.

The gun signifies a sense of dignity in this situation by being so quick to put Richard out of his misery. However, the gunshot echoes across the entire theatre. Its loudness signals a new era, but perhaps this era will not be one wherein peace is perpetual. This is corroborated by Richmond's lines afterwards, wherein he turns to the remaining soldiers and calls upon them to hail him as king with a shout. That could contribute to a more ambiguous tone to the fate of the kingdom

12 Shakespeare, "Richard III," 4.2.42-45.
13 Shakespeare, "Richard III," 5.1.28-29.

as a whole. “What traitor hears me and says not amen?” the last line called out, suggests a coarseness in character.[14] Richmond assumes himself to be gracious by having spared those who defected to his side from Richard’s, but his line is delivered with an unwarranted force that contradicts his intent and calls into question how long this unity shall last– and if much about the institution shall change at all.

Viscera is, well… visceral. And whichever feeling it stirs to the mind is powerful when put in the right place at the right time: in an instant, it disconcerts enough to make one gasp, to look away, to pity, or to laugh. Edward Hall’s vision of *Richard III* calls attention to the gorey details. In doing so, it adds depth in theme by superimposing its violence atop medical imagery: allowing for critique of the exploitation of two networks of power at once, and depth in character: choosing symbolic execution methods that further characterize its victims and their relationships with its perpetrator. Its display of bloodshed was just enough to add nuanced perspectives to the adaptation, and just “enough to make a man sick.”[15]

14 Shakespeare, “Richard III,” 5.5.22.
15 Miyazaki, “Bloodborne”.