The case of King Richard III

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Abstract

In this short essay we will discuss the possible diseases of King Richard III according to the descriptions in Shakespeare's plays King Richard III and Henry VI. Furthermore, it is shown that the description of the defeated enemy as physically and mentally deformed is part of a long tradition which has its roots in Ancient Greece.

Keywords: Shakespeare, Richard III, history of medicine

'He had delicate arms and legs, also a great heart'.[1] This is the description of Richard given by the German traveller Nikolaus von Poppelau, who in May 1484 spent 10 days at the royal court. If this were the only notice of Richard left to posterity, he would now be among the large number of long-forgotten English kings, such as Richard II or Henry III. But thanks to Shakespeare, he continues as one of the most evil men in literature: a deformed monster, who murders his whole family in order to reach the throne and does not hesitate to have his young nephews killed.

> The son of Clarence have I pent up close;
> His daughter meanly have I match'd in marriage;
> The sons of Edward sleep in Abraham's bosom,
>
> And Anne my wife hath bid the world good night. (Richard III, IV, 3)[2]

Richard's reign was of very short duration. It lasted for only two years, from 1483 to 1485. He fell in the battle of Bosworth on 22 August 1485. The victor, Henry Tudor, became the new king: Henry VII. Immediately Henry's partisans started the glorification of the new dynasty. If it is true that after Richard's death at least 29 people had a better claim to the throne than Henry Tudor,[3] the need to justify the establishment of the new dynasty is evident. Shakespeare's play of 1593 was only the final link in a long chain of descriptions of the events. At the very beginning we find the 'Historia regum Angliae' of a certain John Rous. Rous was most likely the first one who claimed that Richard passed two years in his mother's womb, that he was born with teeth and long hair down to his shoulders, and that he had a hunchback.[4]

None other than Thomas Moore, the famous author of 'Utopia', who was canonized in 1935, repeated all these descriptions in his 'History of King Richard III' of 1513 and, furthermore, added some details of Richard's evil character:

> Little of stature, ill fetured of limmes, croke backed, his left shoulder much higher then his right, hard fauoured of visage /.../ he was malicious, wrathfull, enuious /.../ that the Duches his mother had so muche a doe in her trauaile, that shee coulde not bee deliuered of hym uncutte: and that hee came into the worlde with the feete forwarde /.../ also not vntothed.[5]

However, the accounts on the life of Richard III were published in print, a form particularly apt to be spread among a broad public, no earlier than 1514. Consequently, these reports described the events from the victor's point of view: had there been many eyewitnesses alive, the publication of such a misrepresenting account could have been easily recognized as propaganda and hence would have produced an opposite effect.

When Shakespeare in the famous monologue at the beginning of the first act makes Richard reflect on his own deformity, it is just a link in a chain of tradition that had already lasted for decades. The question, whether Morus' work, the 'Chronicles' by Raphael Holinshed (as others claim), or the play 'The true tragedie of Richard III' by an anonymous was Shakespeare's direct guideline,[3] is rather unimportant after all.

Shakespeare's description of Richard's deformities has, in the past, challenged a lot of clinicians to try to make a diagnosis. All essential points can be found in 'King Richard III'. The third part of 'Henry VI' specifies some symptoms.

> I, that am rudely stamp'd /.../ I, that am curtail'd of this fair proportion /.../
> Deform'd, unfinish'd, sent before my time
> Into this breathing world, scarce half made up,
> And that so lamely and unfashionable
> That dogs bark at me, as I halt by them; (I, 1)
> The day will come that thou shalt wish for me
> To help thee curse this poisonous bunch-back'd toad (I, 3; IV, 4)
> Why strew'st thou sugar on that bottled spider (I, 3)
> So long a-groing and so leisurely /.../ (II, 4)
> That he could gnaw a crust at two hours old (II, 4)
> Behold mine arm
> Is like a blasted sapling, wither'd up (III, 4)

That dog, that had his teeth before his eyes (IV, 4)
A grievous burden was thy birth to me (IV, 4)
... this foul swine (V, 2)
To shrink mine arm up like a withered shrub,
To make an envious mountain on my back /.../
To shape my legs of an unequal size (3 Henry III, 2)
I came into the world with my legs forward /.../
O, Jesus bless us, he is born with teeth (3 Henry V, 6)

The crippled arm, of course, immediately makes one think of obstetrical complications. That would be in perfect harmony with the account of the complicated delivery. Due to a pull at the arm, the brachial plexus could have been hurt which subsequently caused Erb's or Klumpke's palsy.[6] On the other hand, an abdominal delivery as described by Morus rules out such a complication. It is rather unlikely that Morus meant 'episiotomy' when he wrote 'not bee deliuered of hym uncutte', since episiotomy became common practice not earlier than the 18th century.[6] The deformed arm could also be explained by a cerebral palsy, a complication not uncommon with breech presentation,[7] and Richard was indeed born 'the feet forward.' The toad-like appearance and the presence of teeth at the time of delivery are hints for a genetic defect: patients with Klippel–Feil syndrome[6] have a short neck and a low hairline. The syndrome is often combined with Sprengel's deformity which causes an elevation of the scapula. The Ellis-van Crefeld syndrome is characterized by prenatal eruption of the teeth and dwarfism.[8] The latter can also be caused endocrinologically: due to lack of oxygen during delivery, the pituitary gland could have been damaged.[9] Thus, as well as growth, the libido could also have been affected (And therefore, since I cannot prove a lover, To entertain these fair well-spoken days (I, 1)). Maldigestion, e.g. as a symptom of coeliac disease, is another explanation for delayed growth. 'Bottled spider', then, would refer to the swollen belly and the thin limbs, 'foul' to the smell.[7] A 'hunchback' is a skoliosis, perhaps caused by a spastic hemiparalysis[10] or idiopathically. Indeed, on both paintings of the king, his right shoulder is higher than the left one. However, according to Morus the left shoulder should be the higher one. It is perhaps relevant that both pictures were painted after Richard's death.[6] Apart from the fact that the man portrayed (Figure 1) can't be called ugly, an X-ray examination performed in 1973 revealed that the elevated shoulder is a painting-over by a later hand[3] – possibly inspired by Shakespeare's play or by one of the reports mentioned above? Or the alteration may have been inspired by a tradition which is common in medieval literature and has its roots in ancient Greece: ugliness and physical deformation being indicators of the morally corrupt social outsider,[11,12] an inversion of the principle of Καλοκαγαθια (*kalokagathia*), the identity of mental and physical beauty. Some Greek tyrants were allegedly with teeth and long hair.[13] Sexual intercourse with the deceased and the eating of newborn children are part of their typical behaviour.[14] A famous example is the case of Herod the Great: According to the Gospel of St Matthew, he gave the order to kill all infants in Bethlehem. But St Matthew is the only one who tells this story. Neither the other gospelists nor the Jewish historian Josephus, who gives a very detailed account of Herod's reign,[15] mention the deed. And earlier, in the 'Iliad', it is the ugliest of the Greeks – Thersites – who is the most cowardly.[16]

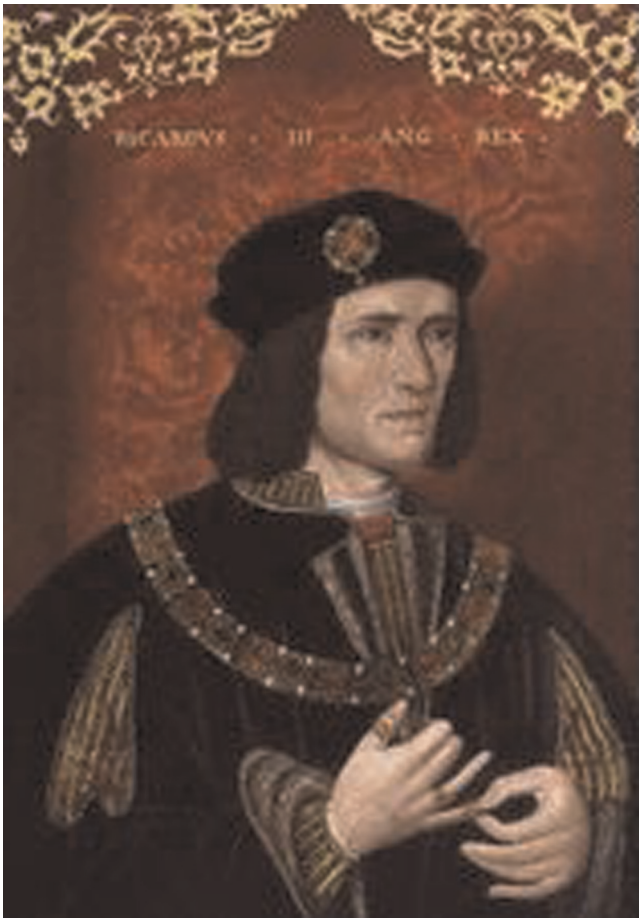

Figure 1 King Richard III by Unknown artist. Oil on panel, late 16th century (late 15th century)

From the 12th century onwards, the allegoric function of ugliness became more and more common in medieval literature, be it novels, chronicles or travelogues.[17,18] Dante, for example, describes an abbot, who in his opinion had been illegally appointed, as physically and mentally deformed ('mal del corpo intero e de la mente peggio').[19] The pope-donkey (Papstesel, Figure 2) by Luther and Melanchton[20] and other flysheets during the Reformation are a part of this tradition, too, and mark the beginning of the political caricature. Also, the cinema makes use of this tradition, such as when villains like Darth Vader appear dressed in black; and so does the theatre: Hamlet is dressed in black due to grief for his father ('Tis not alone my inky cloak, good-mother, nor customary suits of solemn black' [Hamlet I, 2]). But whether Richard wears black cannot be deduced from Shakespeare's play, for there is no hint to Richard's clothes in it.

Figure 2 The 'Pope-Donkey'. The text means: explication of the ugly figure of the pope-donkey, found in Rome, by Mr Philip Melanchton

It would be most exceptional if skilled humanistic authors like Morus and his successors had not used this *topos*. In any case, there is no record of Richard's deformation during his lifetime. On the other hand, Nikolaus von Poppelau was noted for his immense strength, a probably squat, barrel-shaped fellow.[1] If he calls the King's limbs 'delicate', this could mean that Richard, compared with him, in reality was of normal stature. But let us be honest: from an artistic point of view a normal Richard would be rather boring.

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