

To what extent has the concept of ‘deformity’ affected

Richard III’s image and character?

Shakespeare’s portrayal of Richard III as the evil ‘crook back’ has dominated his image for centuries.¹ A villainous king supposedly responsible for the death of his young nephews, Richard III was the embodiment of an evil and malformed soul beneath. As the eleventh child of Richard Duke of York, he was ‘very little’ unlike the powerful and domineering build of previous Plantagenet’s, including his elder brother Edward IV, but whether he possessed any form of physical disfigurement has been subject to question, and until very recently, dismissed.² The confirmation of the skeleton, found at Greyfriars in Leicestershire, as Richard III in February 2013, adds an interesting dimension to the contention that surrounds his deformity.³ Concrete evidence that Richard III had a curvature of the spine and the seeming significance of this leads, naturally to the question of why this mattered. This essay will adopt a chronological approach in an attempt to assess when, how, and why the concept of ‘deformity’ or disfigurement became so integral to the central argument surrounding Ricardian historiography, and whether Richard was a ‘good’ or ‘bad’ king.

Exploring the king’s appearance becomes challenging when few contemporary accounts, and no contemporary portraiture survives. Early surviving accounts do not mention a deformity, although the body and appearance of Richard III was commented upon. The earliest documentary evidence was written before he was eight in Richard Duke of York’s lifetime and states no more than ‘Richard liveth yet.’⁴ This has often been interpreted to mean that Richard was a sickly child, which is supported by John Rous’ description of ‘a small

¹ Martin (2006), p. 181.

² Ellis (1968), pp. 183-184; Ross (1999), pp. 138-139; Potter (1983), pp. 9-141; Hicks (1991), p. 49; Kendall (1955), p. 500; Rhodes (1977), pp. 1650-1652.

³ Dockray & Hammond (2013), p. 3.

⁴ Halsted (1844), p. 409; Peter, Hammond & Weeks (1985), p. 5.

body... weak in strength'. As the chronicler of the Earls of Warwick and Chaplain at the Chapel of Guys Cliff, he would have almost certainly have met him.⁵ Further accounts of his 'smallness' can be seen in 'Archibald Whitelaw's Address to Richard III' where 'never before has nature dared to encase in a smaller body such spirit,' and 'in his small body the greatest valour held sway.'⁶ Further description is offered by Nicholas von Poppelau, a Silesian nobleman, who was acquainted with Richard in 1484 and held a private audience with the king on the 1st of May.⁷ Von Poppelau does not comment on a deformity but provides similar allusions to a 'smallness' of physique in that Richard was described as 'slimmer' and possessing 'delicate arms and legs.'⁸ This absence of comment on any form of deformity is apparent in the two authoritative works from the period, Dominic Mancini and the Croyland Chronicle, whereby we only learn of Richard's appearance from the Croyland Chronicle's depiction of a lean face and pale complexion.⁹

The first mention of any noteworthy physical anomaly is in the form of a striking monstrous birth and is depicted in John Rous' account following the accession of Henry VII. In marked contrast to Rous' previously mentioned description in the 'Rous Roll,' his *History of the Kings of England* described Richard as 'retained within his mother's womb for two years... emerging with teeth and hair to the shoulders.'¹⁰ Whilst the only significant post-natal physical difference presented by Rous at this later date is that of 'unequal shoulders, the right higher than the other' it is notable that Rous used Richard's physicality as one way of reverting his previous commendations of Richard prior to Henry VII's accession.¹¹ The earliest surviving portraits of Richard similarly provide a visual representation of the transformation found in Rous' two descriptions. The earlier Society of Antiquaries portrait

⁵ Rous (1745), p. 218; Peter et al (1985), p. 5; Walpole (1768), p. 107.

⁶ Pollard (1996), pp. 193-195.

⁷ Peter et al (1985), p. 5; Potter (1983), pp. 138-139; Ross (1999), p. 141; Armstrong (1989), pp. 136-138.

⁸ Ibid. pp. 136-138.

⁹ Hammond & Weeks (1985), p. 5; Potter (1983), p. 137.

¹⁰ Hammond & Weeks (1985), p. 5; Dockray & Hammond (2013), pp. 9-10.

¹¹ Ibid. p. xix.

ring-tree, dated c.1516-22, is free from the allusion of the hunched back found in the portrait in the Royal Collection. However, an x-ray of the Royal Collection portrait for the special exhibition of 1973 revealed that the 'hunch-back' was an over-painting, and the original shoulder line was straight.¹² This disfiguring alteration, which also included a narrowed eye shape, has been carried through by all subsequent editions.¹³ The editing process undergone by the two most overt allusions to physical abnormality relates to the 'monster making' effect ascribed to history by Jeffrey Cohen whereby the figure of the 'real' Richard III has been distorted by posthumous accounts and culture.¹⁴ The only other written account prior to the sixteenth century which includes deformity is found in an incident at York in the early 1490s, where Richard was accused of being a 'hypocrite, a crookback.'¹⁵ Although deemed unreliable by Charles Ross, the source is valuable for it shows the apparent need for John Payntour to deny these claims and therefore correspondingly suggests the contemporary negative connotations that surround the use of the term 'crookback.'¹⁶ Rous, portraiture and the brawl at York suggest the possible negative connotation for which disability could be utilised, yet based on near-contemporary evidence alone, the notion of Richard actually possessing any deformity is ambiguous.¹⁷

The sixteenth-century authorship of Thomas More and Polydore Vergil erased any form of ambiguity surrounding the body of Richard.¹⁸ Vergil describes a king 'deformed of body, the one shoulder being higher than the other' and Thomas More suggests a man of 'ill-featured... limbs, crook-backed, his left shoulder much higher than his right.'¹⁹ The works of More and Vergil have been viewed collectively by historians as pioneering a century's worth

¹² Ross (1999), p. 139; Potter (1983), p. 262; Tudor-Craig (1977), pp. 80-93.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Cohen (1996), p. 9.

¹⁵ Dockray & Hammond (2013), p. 5; Ross (1999), p. 139; Tudor-Craig (1977), p. 80; Hammond & Weeks (1985), p. 5; Potter (1983), p. 140.

¹⁶ Raine (1978), pp. 71-73.

¹⁷ Potter (1983), p. 136; Ross (1999), p. 139.

¹⁸ Ross (1986), pp. 139; Myers (1954), pp. 511-21.

¹⁹ More (2005), p. 7; Ellis (1968), p. 227.

of elaborate historical writing termed the ‘Tudor Myth.’²⁰ Vergil’s work has often been viewed with more historical merit as a more subtle account for it contains admiration for a king of ‘sharp wit... courage also high and fierce...rather yieldeth [death] to take with the sword, than by foul flight to prolong his life.’²¹ More’s work has received more criticism however, Polydore Vergil likewise claims to state the truth when a component of his purpose was to present the Tudor dynasty favourably.²² Yet, these writers are not *inventing* a so-called myth.²³ Their ‘histories’ were not just a construction for Tudor propaganda but it is significant that both More and Vergil utilise the ‘monstrous’ references to Richard’s appearance which were markedly fewer and did not appear in the contemporary accounts. It has been argued by Ross and R. Sylvester that the value of the Tudor works rests in their representation of the current and popular view of the time.²⁴ This begs the question of how contemporaries would have perceived this ‘deformed’ image and why Shakespeare likewise exploited Richard III’s ‘lump of foul deformity’ as central to his evil character.²⁵

Irina Metzler has cautioned the medieval and later-medieval connection between deformity and sin to have often received sweeping misinformed and generalised statements.²⁶ Henri-Jacques Stiker likewise states ‘for the middle ages as a whole physical aberrancy was a ‘normal anomaly’... there was neither revulsion, nor terror.’²⁷ Yet Richard was a king, not a ‘normal anomaly,’ and the conflicting and transforming accounts of his physical appearance fits more into the context of sixteenth-century physiognomy as opposed to contemporary reactions to physical difference. At the beginning of Thomas More’s account Richard’s physical malformations and negative appearance is juxtaposed next to a description of his

²⁰ Ross (1999), p. xxxiv; Kendall (1955), p. 500.

²¹ Ross (1999), p. xxxvii; Hipshon (2011), p. 213; Ellis (1968), pp. 226-227.

²² Ross (1999), p. xxxvii; Hipshon (2011), p. 216; Potter (1983), pp. 110-111; Kendall (1955), p. 500; Hanham (1975), pp. 194-195; Hay (1952), p. 154.

²³ Ross (1999), p. xlv; Kendall (1955), p. 504.

²⁴ Ross (1999), pp. xxv and xlv; Sylvester (1963), p. lxxviii.

²⁵ Hammond (1981), pp. 139 and 163-164.

²⁶ Metzler (2006), p. 5.

²⁷ *Ibid.*; Stiker (1999), p. 66.

character as ‘close and secret, a deep dissimuler... outwardly companionable where he inwardly hated’, he was ‘dispitious and cruel.’²⁸ Whilst perhaps More only hints at a possible link between the two, William Holinshed in *The Third Volume of Chronicles beginning at Duke William the Norman* published in 1587 asserted ‘that the full confluence of these qualities, with the defects of favour and amiable proportion, ague prooffe to this rule of physiognomie.’²⁹ Anthony Hammond argues that Shakespeare had read and was aware of the 1587 edition of Holinshed’s work which contains not only the idea of Richard’s deformity, but also alludes to this so-called ‘science’ of physiognomy.³⁰

Physiognomy was founded in classical antiquity but it peaked in popularity in the sixteenth century and was based on the value that the physical body and soul are reflective of each other.³¹ Shakespeare’s deformed character of Richard III demonstrates this physiognomical notion that a malformed outer appearance automatically represents that of an inner evil soul: ‘Why, I... Have no delight to pass away the time, Unless to see my shadow in the sun/ And descant on mine own deformity.’³² His soul is not only warped but his actions are pre-determined in a form of ‘moral logic’ that his body presents.³³ The contextual focus on appearance and character may have caused Shakespeare, More and Vergil, even Rous, to create an appropriate body according to these physiognomical ‘rules’ and their interpretation of Richard as ‘evil.’ This intertwined relationship between the body and soul is not an isolated phenomenon with physiognomical references to a hunched back found in the seventeenth-century work of James Ferrand whom based on the ‘sympathy... betwixt the body and the mind... seldom saw any person, being crooke backed, which were of a good

²⁸ More (2005), p. 7.

²⁹ Torrey (2000), pp. 124-125.

³⁰ Hammond (1981), p. 79.

³¹ Metzler (2006), pp. 54-55.

³² Hammond (1981), pp. 126-127.

³³ Williams (2009).

nature.³⁴ In terms of Richard III, physiognomy persists beyond these later accounts and the relationship between appearance and character has made its mark on the subsequent historiography.

The effect of deformity on Richard III's character can perhaps be best seen following the end of the Tudor dynasty where the defence of Richard emerged alongside the traditional image in what could almost be described as a 'battle' for his reputation.³⁵ Sir George Buck's *The History of the life and reign of Richard the Third*, written in the early seventeenth century and published in 1646, was the first attempt to deconstruct the traditional image.³⁶ An Elizabethan and Jacobean courtier, Buck's comprehensive account defends the king against all his charges, including that of his 'pretended deformity.'³⁷ Questioning the physiognomical concept that 'a man of blemish' is unable to have a 'wise, valiant... liberall and religious soule', Richard is proportioned and 'decently compacted' and therefore a victim of the 'harsh... most nobly' furnished fabrications of previous commentators.³⁸ Yet this was soon met with criticism from Thomas Fuller in 1655 who accused Buck of not only 'eveneth his shoulders' and 'smootheth his back' but 'proceeding from his naturals to his morals, maketh him as virtuous as handsome.'³⁹ Although not necessarily intentional Buck and Fuller, despite their differences in opinion, were seemingly unable to separate the question of the king's physical appearance and his character.

Fuller's more traditional stance trickled into the early eighteenth century where Paul Rapin de Thoyras' two publications on a history of England between 1723 and 1725 not so cautiously painted Richard as 'surnamed Crook-back'd because he was so in reality.'⁴⁰ However, the defence of Richard was gathering pace, most especially in Horace Walpole's

³⁴ Ferrand (1640), sig. L4v, sigs. X8v-Y I.

³⁵ Hipshon (2011), p. 218.

³⁶ Ibid. p. 217; Myers (1968), p. 187.

³⁷ Myers (1968), p. 187; Buck (1647), p. 79.

³⁸ Buck (1647), pp. 79-80.

³⁹ Fuller (1847), p. 528.

⁴⁰ Myers (1968), p. 190.

appropriately titled *Historic Doubts on the Life and Reign of Richard the Third*. Describing the previous centuries as having ‘transmitted... ignorance and misrepresentation’ Walpole clears Richard of all his charges in a similar manner to Buck.⁴¹ Richard once again is pictured as a ‘correctly’ formed king ‘who was slender, and not tall.’⁴² He does however accept that he may have ‘had one shoulder a little higher than the other’ but as ‘with regard to the person of Richard, it appears to have been as much misinterpreted as his actions.’⁴³ Yet, like Buck and Fuller, Walpole still finds the apparent relationship between appearance and character imperative in his analysis by dismissing the ‘amplification’ of his deformity through tradition with the question: ‘cannot a foul soul inhabit a fair body?’⁴⁴ By this mid-eighteenth century period only one historical account stood out against the general pattern of defence and that was David Hume’s *History of England* published in 1761 a few years prior to Walpole’s. Hume depicted a king who fitted his own opinion on the Middle Ages, the ‘barbarous’ era prior to ‘the dawn of civility and science.’⁴⁵ Richard III’s ‘hump-back’ physique had come full circle for Hume was adamant that ‘his body was in every particular no less deformed than his mind.’⁴⁶

At the turn of the twentieth century the historiography of Richard III has maintained a polarisation of opinion in terms of the traditional Tudor image and his defence.⁴⁷ Two approaches are adopted when addressing the question of Richard’s possible deformity, complete reform or a process of ‘explaining away.’ The Richard III Society was established in 1924 and was ‘dedicated to reclaiming the reputation of a king of England who died over 500 years ago.’⁴⁸ Integral to this defence of Richard was the desire to disprove any form of

⁴¹ Hipshon (2011), p. 219; Walpole (1768), p. iii.

⁴² Walpole (1768), pp. 102-103.

⁴³ Ibid. pp. 102-103.

⁴⁴ Ibid. pp. 102-103.

⁴⁵ Hume (1767), p. 311; Myers (1954), pp. 190-191.

⁴⁶ Hume (1767), p. 311; Potter (1983), p. 185.

⁴⁷ Myers (1954), p. 199; Hipshon (2011), pp. 226-227.

⁴⁸ <http://www.richardiii.net/aboutus.php>.

deformity as ‘merely inventions of those trying to blacken his image.’⁴⁹ To use Jeremy Potter’s words, this ‘obsessively personalised’ aspect of Ricardian studies has gone to much effort to reform the bodily appearance of this misinterpreted king.⁵⁰ Personal identification or justification to slight physical difference as ‘normal’ is one method. It is not just found in Paul Murray Kendall’s defence but also on assessment it is in the earlier works of Horace Walpole and Sir George Buck whose modern biographer, Arthur Kincaid, felt obliged to argue that it was not a ‘heated emotional defence.’⁵¹ Focusing on the unreliability of More and a lack of contemporary evidence, they firmly disprove any monstrous physicality. However, even in the twentieth century, the reasoning behind this need to disprove deformity is evident in Potter’s conclusion which juxtaposes character and appearance: ‘ambitious to do well and good, Richard was far from abnormal.’⁵²

The other approach has been to provide explanation. Paul Murray Kendall does this when ‘reforming’ the appearance of Richard by providing a rational reason for an uneven shoulder height. As a result of ‘rigorous training’ Richard’s right shoulder became more muscular than the left, and Potter provides consensus to this theory by stating that more modern cavalry regiments provide evidence of this imbalanced physique.⁵³ This explanatory method highlights the seeming need for historians to address the contention surrounding Richard’s ‘deformity’ but it also leads to conclusions more inclined to admit mild physical difference as a possibility. Michael Hicks determines that he was a king of ‘uneven shoulders as those who knew him said, but was certainly neither a cripple nor incapable of bearing arms.’⁵⁴ Similarly, Charles Ross addresses Richard’s appearance and concludes the likelihood

⁴⁹ <http://www.richardiii.net/aboutus.php>.

⁵⁰ Potter (1983), pp. 141-142.

⁵¹ Walpole (1768), pp. 103-107; Kendall (1955), pp. 47-48 and 458-459; Kincaid (1979), pp. cxxviii & cii-cxxx.

⁵² Potter (1983), p. 144; Kendall (1955), p. 500.

⁵³ Kendall (1955), pp. 47-48; Potter (1983), pp. 141-142.

⁵⁴ Hicks (1991), p. 49.

that he ‘had no great deal of bodily deformity.’⁵⁵ Philip Rhodes in the *British Medical Journal* provides the most focused modern analysis on Richard III’s deformity where in a similar manner he suggests that Richard had no great degree of physical abnormality.⁵⁶ Proposing that the nerve lesion caused by Klumpke’s paralysis or Erb’s palsy was unlikely, Rhodes concludes that Richard may have suffered from a minor degree of Sprengel’s deformity for the best medical hypothesis is that he showed a ‘normal though unusually raised shoulder.’⁵⁷ More interestingly, Rhodes dismisses the hypothesis that Richard could have suffered from kyphoscoliosis on the basis that contemporary description, ignoring later Tudor works, does not mention a severe enough abnormality of this kind. Hammond and Weeks likewise in their study of the king’s deformity follow the same logical pattern in the belief that any arguments of scoliosis or a more severe disfigurement would require an over reliance on the image that Shakespeare presents.⁵⁸ The explanations to Richard’s deformity in these works are brief, less symbolic and more significantly are not in conjunction with character or kingship.

However, the discovery and later confirmation of a skeleton with a spinal curvature, the seemingly improbable scoliosis, brought Richard’s appearance back to the fore.⁵⁹ The response of Ricardians is best portrayed in Philippa Langley’s reaction of disbelief in the television documentary ‘Richard III: The King in the Car Park.’ The repetition of ‘no’ and her request to sit down highlights the impact of such a discovery by those who had gone to great efforts to revert this opinion of Richard.⁶⁰ The argument that Tudor propaganda was not merely invention could be applied with new confidence to Richard’s physical appearance because the curvature was likely to have caused one of Richard’s shoulders to have been

⁵⁵ Ross (1999), p. 139.

⁵⁶ Rhodes (1977), p. 1652.

⁵⁷ Ibid. p. 1652.

⁵⁸ Rhodes (1977), p. 1651; Hammond & Weeks (1985), pp. 5-9.

⁵⁹ <http://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/blog/2014/feb/04/richard-iii-researchers-stories-discovery-anniversary>.

⁶⁰ <http://www.channel4.com/programmes/richard-iii-the-king-in-the-car-park/4od>

higher than the other.⁶¹ What is more alarming is that, even with a modern perception, subsequent studies saw this new evidence as an opportunity ‘to re-evaluate his personality, especially in light of what we now know about his physical condition.’⁶² The newly discovered physical anomaly though was not the hunchback, limping or withered arm of Shakespeare but it could fit Vergil’s description of ‘deformed of body, the one shoulder being higher than the other’ and More’s ‘ill-featured... his left shoulder much higher than his right.’⁶³ However, it is important to note Metzler’s application of the modern disability studies model to the medieval period arguing that the Middle Ages would have perceived ‘impairment’ as opposed to ‘disability.’⁶⁴ Richard did not have a ‘disability’ in its modern sense but his skeleton almost certainly reveals some form of physical ‘impairment.’⁶⁵

The discovery of Richard III’s skeleton potentially raises more questions than answers. What can be definitely ascertained is that the curvature would not have created the debilitating hunch-back ascribed by Shakespeare.⁶⁶ Yet the real significance of the discovery is its absence among the contemporary accounts. It could be possible that Richard was able to literally “clothe [his] naked villainy” as stated in Shakespeare and hide his mild deformity from view.⁶⁷ However, this explanation does not answer for the silence following his defeat at Bosworth, especially if we are to believe the accounts of Jean de Molinet, the Great Chronicle of London and Polydore Vergil that he was ‘displayed to the people... without any clothing,’ the opportune moment to discredit him.⁶⁸ Richard III provides the prime example of the ‘monster-making’ effect of history coined by Jeffrey Cohen.⁶⁹ Despite its contemporary obscurity, historical argument regarding Richard III’s character has rarely been

⁶¹ http://www.richardiii.net/2_4_0_riii_appearance.php#intro

⁶² <http://www.le.ac.uk/richardiii/science/psychology.html>

⁶³ More (2005), p. 7; Ellis (1968), p. 227.

⁶⁴ Metzler (2006), p. 5.

⁶⁵ Oliver (1990).

⁶⁶ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-leicestershire-21282241>

⁶⁷ Hipshon (2011), p. 169.

⁶⁸ Bennett (1985), p. 161; Thomas & Thornley (1983), pp. 237-238; Ellis (1968), pp. 223-236; Dockray & Hammond (2013), p. 3.

⁶⁹ Cohen (1996), p. 9.

without a reference, albeit if only in passing, to his physicality. Whilst history may have shifted in the later twentieth century to a less subjective approach, the discovery of the skeleton was enough to show that in the eyes of the popular imagination it had not come very far. A curvature of the spine, even if only in the first aftershock moment, remained inextricably bound to the character of a man who was ‘determined to prove a villain.’⁷⁰

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⁷⁰ Hipshon (2011), p. 127.

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