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Richard III's Bestial Masculinity and the Rhetoric of Animality in Thomas More's *The History of*

King Richard III and *The True Tragedie of Richard the Third*

Due to more recent scholarship by feminist and queer theorists, the study of gender in the early modern period tends to shift its focus on the marginalized by allocating agency to those outside the apex of male-dominated power structures. Rather than analyzing those outside the center, I focus within the structure by exposing incongruities that existed inside male performances of masculinity in early modern patriarchy. More specifically, I aim to demonstrate how Richard III, through Tudor discourse, functions as a beast figure who disrupts order and traditional lines of succession due to his excessive masculine aggression and monstrous violence.

The literary accounts which follow the death and history of Richard Duke of Gloucester offer rich complexity to the evolving discourse on his reign and character. During the Tudor Era, he was examined in “ballads and beast fables, riddles and prophecies, chronicles and histories, verse complaints, paradoxes and plays in both Latin and English” (Schwyzer 173), featured most prominently as a bestial character, a boar personified, akin to the beast he used as his badge. For Tudor writers, much of what is written surrounding Richard III's reign colluded in the Tudor characterization of the fifteenth century monarch as the embodiment of war, bloodshed, and instability – a beast-fable figure who appears as a warning against masculine misrule. These characterizations feature most prominently in Thomas More's *History of King Richard III* and the anonymous *The True Tragedie of Richard the Third*. Philip Schwyzer denotes this significance: “From the 1510s, a definite historical vision of Richard's reign – one characterized by ruthless violence and rank hypocrisy, presided over by a morally and physically misshapen tyrant – took shape and gathered weight in manuscript histories and printed chronicles” (67).

Passages in More's *History*, c. 1515, are featured (or alluded to) throughout Ricardian history plays, and *True Tragedie* was the "first Ricardian play to reach a broad English-speaking audience both on stage and in print . . ." (198). Though Edward Hall's *Chronicle* is also included here, *True Tragedie* and More's *History* offer more substantial emphasis on displaying Richard III's deviation from societal values and his, as Schwyzer argues, "delight in violence for its own sake" (199).

This paper will examine the extent to which animal imagery operates in zoomorphizing Richard III with the intent to intensify his bestial misrule and victimization of "effeminacy" in those he wishes to eradicate. I argue that both *True Tragedie's* and More's characterizations of Richard III function as passionate denunciations of toxic masculinity by emphasizing his perverse destruction of "effeminate character" or feminine allegiance through a discourse of animality. Moreover, this reveals how the Earle of Richmond as Henry VII serves as Richard III's antithesis, a necessary means of reestablishing proper patriarchal order by his deference to filial loyalty and feminine subordination and, in turn, his "slaughter" of a singular, yet unstable threat to hegemonic ideologies epitomized in the form of Richard III.

As Ian Frederick Moulton and others have argued, "To focus on patriarchy's inability to control the masculine aggressivity it fosters is not to claim that unruly men are the primary victims of patriarchy but rather to point out an important structural incoherence in any society organized around the supremacy of aggressive masculinity" (253). This incoherence is heavily intimated through the illustrative and metaphoric use of beasts and monsters meant to emphasize Richard III's masculine aggression. According to Schwyzer, "Richard's victims generally owe their downfalls less to their moral failings than to their failure to interpret signs correctly, especially with regard to the animal imagery that pervades their tragedies" (186). These signs,

however, create areas of contradiction by both shaming and honoring displays of masculine violence; the boundary between “proper” violence and bestial violence – that which threatens the social order – is crossed as Richard perversely invalidates the support of women and denounces effeminate behavior in men or male children. Taking More’s and *True Tragedie*’s Richard III as my point of departure, the proceeding discussion demonstrates how the animal imagery and rhetoric surrounding Richard’s birth, his heraldic emblem, and his death functions as warnings, as cautionary emblems against excessive, lawless masculinity which refuses to conform to traditional class structures or boundaries.

MONSTROUS MISBIRTHS

The term *bestial*, as it is used here, is defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary Online* as “Like a beast in obeying and gratifying the animal instincts and sensual desires; debased, depraved, lustful, cruel, brutal, beastly, obscene” (“Bestial”). Bestial and monstrous figures for Tudor writers were often discussed, Brammall asserts, “because the topic was replete with rhetorical potential” (4). Though the relatively recent excavation of Richard III’s remains in 2012 revealed his “severe idiopathic adolescent-onset scoliosis” (536), a disability which may have caused uneven shoulders in his adult life, there is speculation as to the extent of his reputed physical deformities. There exist, affirms Schwyzer, literary works recounting Richard’s attributes which lack any mention of physical deformity or “supernatural wickedness” (181). However, as is evident from the examination of Richard III’s skeletal remains, his scoliosis *is* consistent with a considerable number of reports on his “abnormal” appearance. More’s *History* describes Richard, Duke of Gloucester, as “little of stature, ill-featured of limbs, crookbacked, his left shoulder much higher than his right,” and claims that during his birth, his mother “could not be delivered of him uncut, and that he came into the world with the feet forward . . . and (as

the fame runneth) also not untoothed . . .” (8). The characterizations appear rather excessive, as Richard Buckley and others discuss Richard III’s corpse as revealing that Richard “stood around 5ft 8in (1.73m) tall, above average height for a medieval man” if “unaffected by scoliosis,” and that there was an absence of evidence to suggest a withered arm (535-538); regardless of its merit, More’s tale of Richard’s bestial misbirth acts as an opportunity to shift the reader’s attention to the ill-fated repercussions of unprincipled behavior.

Although More’s passages on Richard III’s tyranny are laced with speculation, *True Tragedie*’s characterizations of Richard are much more overt. In response to “what maner of man was this Richard Duke of Glofter,” the audience is told, “A man ill shaped, crooked backed, lame armed, withall, / Valiantly minded, but tyrannous in authoritie” (sig. [A3^v]). Many Tudor monsters “suffered from some sort of physical deformity” (Brammall 6), and Richard’s bestial qualities are introduced as synonymous with his “tyrannous authoritie,” reflecting the significance and suspicion surrounding any “unnatural” deviation from the norm. For More, this deviation stems from a monstrous misbirth.

In *True Tragedie*, Richard’s unprincipled behavior is likewise intimated as stemming from a perverse physicality; his outward deformities define “what maner of man” he is, as his outward abnormalities markedly gather inward. His bestial masculinity is just as perverse once he begins to violently assert his authority against effeminacy: he laments, “Have I remoued such logs out of my sight . . . to suffer a child to shadow me,” venomously expressing his disgust with “the babes” that are “but a puffe of / Gun-pouder[,] a marke for the soldiers, food for fishes, / Or lining for beds” (sig. [B4^r]). As a means of exploitation, Richard himself obtains mastery over animalistic discourse; he reasons, “Shall law bridal *nature*, or authoritie hinder inheritance?” ([sig. B4^r]; emphasis added). His nephews become “food for fishes,” intimating his natural

superiority. Metaphorically, Richard characterizes himself as a Prince of beasts, and his nephews as lesser than the lowest within the animalistic chain of order. As a prince must learn, according to Machiavelli's *The Prince*, how to utilize characteristics of both men and beasts (48), Richard III, in proper Machiavellian fashion, expresses his disgust for fragile effeminacy which could easily be cast aside like "gun-powder" or "lining for beds." *True Tragedie*'s Richard becomes deformed both of body and mind.

In a similar vein, More's Richard is characterized as "arrogant of heart, outwardly coumpinable where he inwardly hated" (9); through a discourse of animality, the young princes resemble "prey" in their "tender youth" (25) as Richard, under title of Protector, is transfigured into an apex predator: "[Richard] was made the only man chose and thought most meet to be protector of the king and his realm, so that (were it destiny or were it folly) the lamb was betaken to the wolf to keep" (25). Richard III's bestial anatomy is suggestive of an inward as well as outward conviction; as wolves have no natural predators, the animal imagery not only foreshadows his destruction of "slipper youth" (12) but also the apparent ease with which he does so; as there is no one to oppose him, his deformities only seem to heighten his control and resolve.

In like manner, *True Tragedie*'s Richard uses his deformity to legitimize his claim that the "accursed sorceresse the mother Queene hath bewitched [him], with assistance of that famous strumpet of [his] brothers, Shores wife" (sig. [D4^r]). His "withered arme" functions as a "sufficient testimony" against the effeminate Hastings, who identifies and associates with female "witches." Hastings's corruption lies in his effeminacy; Richard's physical corruption now lies with immoral women and, in turn, those loyal to them. Likewise in More's *History*, Richard declares to the counsel that the "sorceress and that other witch of her counsel, Shore's wife" have

“wasted [his] body” and reveals “a werish, withered arm and small (as it was never other)” (48); he succeeds in alienating the women and any displays of womanish behavior – i.e., *immoral* behavior – in men through his cries of treason against Lord Hastings, using Hastings’s subsequent arrest and beheading as an example against such indiscretions. More’s Richard utilizes a herald of arms to announce publicly how the Lord Hastings, “by his evil company” and “specially with Shore’s wife” with whom he “lay nightly,” conspired against him after Hastings indulged in “ungracious living” through association with women such as Shore’s wife (54); femininity becomes perverse through its infectious power to corrupt, as it causes “the vicious living and inordinate abusion of [Richard’s] body” and, in turn, Hastings’s body and behavior (54). As Richard freely admits to being influenced himself, to counter this, he resorts to rash violence: “And therewith, as in a great anger, he clapped his fist upon the board a great rap” and has his men in armor rush in and aggressively accost the council to disperse (49). Bestial aggressivity becomes a means of reestablishing his masculinity, as it performs in opposition to the “effeminate” deformities inherent within as well as outside of him.

Brammall notes this infectious view of physical monstrosity as the creation of a new type of English monster and discourse, defined by writers who “were fundamentally concerned by what they perceived as the laxity of morals and behavior of their readers and the country at large; they were aware that in order to succeed in their didactic purpose they required a language capable of terrifying sinners into repentance” (5). This new language and political engagement with a text through monsters and monstrous misbirths appears not only driven by the “language of monstrosity” (5) but also through a language of animality meant to criticize hypermasculinity which disrupts proper power structures. In *True Tragedie*, one such political impression, typified through bestial discourse, pertains to sentiments of war. Richard’s passion for male aggression is

epitomized through his experiences within a system which glorifies toxic masculinity and violence; he articulates how “the title of a King, is next vnder the degree of a God” made “worthie” by “his sword [that] winnes riches” comparable to his own “renowne [as] a souldier,” connecting his brutal strikes against effeminate corruption of manhood to kingly behavior (sig. [B4^r]). Once King, Richard’s lust for battle and violence remains apparent as his royal emblem, the monstrous boar, typified by its use during bloodshed, comes to represent the “laxity of morals” in Richard and, more specifically, society itself.

THE EMBLEMATIC DEATH OF KING RICHARD III

This wayward lawlessness in Richard from war is enhanced through animal imagery and discourse; there is a comparable effect in Edward Hall’s *Chronicle* when Richard is readying his men for battle at Bosworth field. He addresses his men, urging them to “fight together like lions, and fear not to die together like men” (159), as masculine behavior becomes interchangeable with animalistic aggression and violence. The connection between animals and masculinity continues: “the fearful hare never fled faster before the greedy greyhound, nor the silly lark before the sparrow hawk, nor the simple sheep before the ravenous wolf, than your proud bragging adversaries astounded and amazed with only the sight of your manly visages . . .” (159). The predatory animals become metonymic of “manly visages” made monstrous through violence. Richard’s crest, bearing the image of a predatory animal, would have served a similar purpose when displayed before battle. To further the didactic purpose of the works through bestial rhetoric, the emblematic White Boar, much like the literary attention to monsters and misbirths, evolves into a powerful instrument of Tudor propaganda. Richard III comes to embody the beastliness of his crest – a boar personified.

Many Tudor authors associate Richard III's psychology and, most notably, his death at Bosworth and the subsequent removal of his corpse as essentially boarlike. This could, in part, be attributed to the rise in interest for crests and coats of arms during Richard's rule; according to Schwyzer, Richard granted charters to the College of Arms during the first year of his reign (129-30). Mark Noble notes how "None of our monarchs was a greater benefactor to the heraldic body than Richard III" (51) as Richard favored emblematic richness, particularly during his coronation in York. Richard enhanced his royal image with "three coats of arms beaten with fine gold for his own person . . . four standards of sarsenet with boars; thirty thousand quynsans of fustian with boars" (Noble 51). Schwyzer also suggests how Richard's interest in crests and heraldry "may have sprung from his undoubted concern with purity of descent . . . and in his determination to demonstrate the bastardy of his nephews" (130). Regardless of his motives, his keenness for crests and coats of arms seems the likely inspiration for the public's perversion of his heraldic badge, as "the derogatory identification of the King with his crest was a tradition already established in his reign . . ." (Schwyzer 174). The image of the boar became integral to the fifteenth-century monarch who cherished it.

As a visual sign, the White Boar enters literary tradition as a cautionary symbol of Richard's inherently bestial qualities and lust for war and bloodshed. For More, it is Lord Stanley who warns Lord Hastings of impending danger after having a dream in which "a boar with his tusks so razed them both by the heads that the blood ran about both their shoulders" (50). The image of a bloody, rampaging boar makes a "fearful impression" on Lord Stanley as "the protector gave the boar for his cognisaunce" (50). More's *History* utilizes this prophetic, animalistic language to describe the Duke of Gloucester's aggression as well as the "fearful impression" of weaknesses implicit within systemic violence. Conscious of the connection

between Richard's intentions and his masculine aggressivity, Dan Breen asserts that once Richard starts to "allow his ambition to govern every aspect of his behavior – dating back to his days on the battlefield as the Duke of Gloucester – he imbricates himself within a politics that rewards his overwhelming ambition" (486). His violent masculinity is rewarded, yet ultimately leads to his own self-destruction and violent death.

This is further intimated in Hall's *Chronicle* as Richmond, Richard's adversary, admonishes the weaknesses of men who fight for violence's sake or for fear of effeminacy in nonviolent behavior: "I assure you that there be yonder in that great battle men brought thither for fear and not for love, soldiers by force compelled and not with good will assembled" (161). Richmond follows his criticism with a rhetoric of animality, urging his men to "fight like invincible giants and set on [their] enemies like fearless Tigers, and banish all fear like ramping lions" (163). Here, for Richmond and his men, the nature of the animalistic aggression stems from "good courage" (163), whereas Richard's and his soldiers' aggression stems from "fear and force" (163). Though Richmond's violence is expressed as "good" in contradistinction to Richard's "evil," the behavior itself is altogether animalistic in nature. In this way, Richmond and Richard coincide; both men utilize bestial rhetoric as a means to bolster their men into battle. However, the distinction made here stems from Richard's dishonor, as he "never preferred fame or honesty before ambition, tyranny, and mischief" (167); the mischief, it seems, refers to his "outrageous malice" (164) against masculine weakness – hence, his boarlike status where Richmond remains "an angelic creature" (160), a Tudor symbol of "proper patriarchal proportion" (Moulton 255). Indeed, the passage in Hall's *Chronicle* follows with the belief that "if he had continued still Protector and suffered his nephews to have lived and reigned, no doubt but the realm had prospered and he [would have been] much praised and beloved as he is now

abhorred and vilified” (167). That is, if Richard had allowed the innocence of effeminate youth to exist, this respect for femininity and its agency would have made him culturally “beloved.” As it were, More’s Richard instead uses the Duke of Buckingham, as a well-versed speaker, to stress to the masses how the office of King “is no child’s office” and that a child-King would bring chaos to the realm (76). Tudor writers often refer to the innocence and fragility of the nephews and Richard’s subsequent death to legitimize their use of Richard’s heraldic boar as a means of dehumanizing the monarch who wielded it.

Though Richard’s influence in the death of his nephews remains in question, the literary comparisons of Richard III’s death and removal of his corpse to that of a slain animal appears to have some merit. The arrangement of Richard’s remains discovered in 2012 suggests that Richard was buried in haste: “the casual position of the body – legs slightly apart, shoulders expanded, arms flexed – certainly suggests the absence of a tight shroud, and perhaps the absence of any burial wrapping at all” (Buckley et al. 533); additionally, “The hands were crossed at the wrists, most likely right over left, and placed above the pelvis . . . It is therefore possible that Richard III was buried with his hands bound” (535). The demeaning position of the skeleton substantiates the claims of Richard appearing animalistic as he is “trussed behind a pursuivant of arms” known as the “White Boar” or Blanch Senglier (Hall 166). More’s *History* recalls Richard III as “harried on horse-back dead, his hair in despite torn and tugged like a cur dog” (89). Echoing More’s account of the scene, *True Tragedie*’s Richard is carried through Leicester “starke naked on a Colliers horfe” (sig. [I1^v]), resembling, according to Hall’s *Chronicle*, “a hog or calf, the head and arms hanging on the one side of the horse, and the legs on the other side” (166). Due to his positioning within the hastily-cut grave, it is likely these descriptions are approximate, though clearly embellished with animalistic imagery and rhetoric;

During this key moment in literary history, the relation between Richard III and his emblem becomes more markedly established. The various depictions of the removal of Richard's corpse bear witness to a society in which bestial behavior allocates perversion and lawlessness – behavior that must inevitably be eradicated. For More and *True Tragedie*, such embellishments to descriptions of Richard III are not meant to solely characterize his inherent madness or animalistic qualities, but rather to consider how the development of an unstable masculine aggressivity culminates into tyranny that is established and enhanced, unencumbered, by hegemonic society.

Moreover, Richmond as Henry VII serves as a virtuous character who ultimately rules by divine right and through his deference for proper feminine allegiance – a stark contrast to the devilish, animalistic Richard who he must conquer. Establishing this distinction, Hall's Richard considers "all the means and ways that he could invent how to defile and *carnally* know his own niece under the pretense of a cloaked matrimony . . ." (162; emphasis added). Richmond, meanwhile, has "sworn and promised to take to [his] mate and wife" Lady Elizabeth, indicating how Richmond's pure blood and proper masculine behavior function as centrally reformatory. A similar impression is shown in More's *History* as he stresses the "infinite benefit to the realm by the conjunction of those two bloods in one" (93), referring to the marriage of Henry VII to Elizabeth of York, a marital union of the houses of York and Lancaster. Through Richmond, More stresses the importance of traditional gender hierarchies and its power to eradicate bestial masculinity which threatens the balance of patriarchal order.

Thus, in *True Tragedie* and More's *History*, Richard III's boarlike usurpation comes to a bloody end as he is slain in battle against Richmond. In Hall's *Chronicle*, Richard's death culminates in emblematic eradication: "The proud bragging white boar. . . was completely razed

and plucked down from every sign and place where it might be espied, so ill was his life that men wished the memory of him to be buried with his carrion corpse” (166). The animalistic imagery and language, utilized in both *True Tragedie* and More’s *History*, succeed in emphasizing Richard III’s bestial, violent tendencies and function as a critique of the instabilities inherent within a society that is structurally dependent on masculine aggression and violence.

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