“If You Fight Against God’s Enemy:”

Representations of Good and Evil in Richard III and Henry V

Perhaps the two best-known of Shakespeare’s historical dramas, Richard III and Henry V—each holding the final position in one of Shakespeare’s historically-inspired tetralogies—present drastically different narrative arcs; Richard follows the violent ascent and downfall of a manipulative tyrant, while Henry relates the divinely-granted victory of a righteous and praiseworthy king. However, despite these differences, the central figures in the two works also hold a fair amount in common. The actions of both Richard and Henry are motivated, to large degree, by pride and ambition, and many of the decisions made by each character are morally questionable. However, by positioning his two lead characters in relation to divine will—Richard as a representative of evil, and Henry as a representative of good—Shakespeare sets up a clear dichotomy between the characters that puts them into rhetorical opposition. Taken together, the works suggest the overarching narrative of a cosmic struggle for power that historical audiences would likely have seen as a foundational force in shaping the society in which the dramas were originally performed.

From the very beginnings of the two plays, the lead characters are established as standing in stark contrast to each other. The opening scene of Henry V consists of his close advisors affirming Henry’s morality, calling him “full of grace and fair regard” and “a true lover of the holy Church” (I.i.22-23). Richard III, on the other hand, opens with a dissatisfied monologue from Richard, who declares himself “determinéd to prove a villain” (I.i.30). These differences only become more pronounced over the courses of the plays, as Henry takes on an increasingly pious affect and Richard becomes more and more a “[f]oul devil” (Richard III I.ii.50).
Significantly, each play also includes an early scene in which the central character openly demonstrates their regard (or disregard) for Biblical authority. Henry, for his part, converses with the Archbishop of Canterbury to alleviate his concern that a war against France can be “justly and religiously” carried out (I.ii.10). Richard, by contrast, distorts scripture for his own means, claiming to “clothe my naked villany / With old odd ends stolen out of holy writ; / And seem a saint, when most I play the devil” (I.iii.335-337).

By grounding these differences in religion and emphasizing them to the significant degree that he does, Shakespeare essentially allows each character to become an agent of God (in Henry’s case) or the devil (in Richard’s). Henry’s invasion of France is framed as a proper attempt to reclaim a divinely-granted right based on a Biblical interpretation of doctrines related to the order of inheritance. In Canterbury’s early exchange with Henry, he discredits the validity of the French law, explaining that it is in violation of a scripture “in the Book of Numbers” commanding that “[w]hen the man dies, let the inheritance / Descend unto the daughter” (I.ii.98-100). Canterbury’s observation is particularly important within the context of the play, because it helps to lay a foundational understanding of France as a sinful nation that has run afoul of God’s will. This view gives Henry and England the moral high ground in the disagreement and provide the justification for their future actions. As a result, Henry’s invasion can be interpreted as a punishment against France for their rejection of God’s commandment, creating the perception that he is functioning under a divine mandate, an development which works to push Henry’s actions into the realm of ethical unquestionability.

The character of Richard is afforded no such justification. Instead, Shakespeare implies that his very existence presents a rebellion against propriety. The character is physically
damaged, “Cheated of feature by dissembling nature / Deformed, unfinished,” and out of conformity with normal human appearance (I.i.19-20). Even his abnormal birth—at which he was “scarce half made up” and which was “grievous burden” to his mother—points to a subversion of the natural order (I.i.21, IV.iv.68). Richard’s ambitious ascent to the throne can subsequently be interpreted as an attempt to alter his God-given place within the Great Chain of Being, a hierarchical understanding of social and religious authority common at the time of the play’s initial performances, and it is likely that there are intentionally-implied parallels between Richard’s rebellion against this order and the Biblical account of Satan’s rebellion against God. Certainly, the play itself makes no qualms against personifying Richard as a representative of Hell, with Queen Margaret observing early on that “Sin death and hell have set their marks on him / And all their ministers attend on him” and Richard’s own mother eventually coming to believe that he “cam’st on earth to make the earth my hell” (I.iii.292-293, IV.iv.167).

It is interesting to note that, while Richard and Henry are characterized so differently, some of their actions are remarkably similar. Both plays include instances in which the central characters make professions of love and, in doing so, display remarkable (and perhaps shrewdly calculated) levels of vulnerability that bring about turning points in their scenes. In Richard, Lady Anne’s resolve begins to falter when Richard presents her with the opportunity to kill him, offering her a dagger and telling her to “take up the sword again, or take up me” (I.ii.183). In Henry, a more subtle moment of vulnerability comes when the English king attempts to speak French for the first time, showing a willingness to embarrass himself in front of Katherine, after which he surmises that he “shall never move thee in French, unless it be to laugh at me” (V.ii.192-194). The core mechanics of the character interactions in the two scenes are not terribly
dissimilar; it is primarily setting, tone, and background that Shakespeare uses to create the stark contrast between the two, allowing Henry’s to function as a moment of levity after the tension of war has been resolved and Richard’s to function as a deeply unsettling moment of manipulation.

Both plays also include execution scenes, and these likewise differ greatly in their tone. When Henry discovers that three close acquaintances have attempted to betray him, he orders them executed. Throughout the scene, the focus is allowed to remain on Henry and the righteousness of his actions. The discovery of the men's treachery is attributed to God, and the condemned reflect on the justice of their punishment, with Scroop acknowledging that his “purposes God justly hath discover’d” and Cambridge exclaiming “God be thanked for prevention” (II.ii.151,158). When Richard orders an execution, by contrast, the focus often shifts away from him, inclining audience sympathy toward the person being executed. One example of this occurs near the end of the play, when Richard, who has ascended to the throne, executes Buckingham, who has been apprehended after running away from the court. The execution occurs in a scene where Richard is entirely absent, and Buckingham’s reflection before his punishment is much more ambiguous. He acknowledges God in his admission that the “high All-seer which I dallied with / hath turned my feignéd prayer upon my head,” but also implies that he is not singularly guilty, implicating Richard in his claim that “[w]rong hath but wrong, and blame the due of blame” (Richard III V.ii.20-21, 30-31).

When the two plays are placed in the order of their chronological settings—Henry V first, followed by Richard III—the deliberate contrast that Shakespeare sets up between the two central characters works to create a sort of grand cosmic narrative that plays out through several generations of English monarchy, with Henry and Richard taking on two of the key roles.
Beneath the surface actions of the plays, a spiritual struggle for power is taking place; if Henry establishes that God’s will is to subdue France and bestow favor on Henry’s branch of the Plantagenet dynasty, then Richard can be seen to represent an attempt by the devil to overthrow this order. While the closing text of Henry V, written after Richard III, hints at the dark things to come in the Chorus’ affirmation that Henry’s descendants would “[make] his England bleed,” the story arc ultimately depicts a victory for the forces of good (V.Epilogue.12).

In his framing of Richard’s defeat at the hands of Richmond, Shakespeare allows the saga to close with a reaffirmation of divine will. Numerous parallels are drawn between Richmond and Henry, perhaps most notably in their depiction as pious, God-fearing warriors. Richard’s memorable dream sequence features apparitions of several of his victims, who pray for God’s blessing to fall on Richmond. When Richmond addresses his troops, he reminds them that their battle is against “[o]ne that hath ever been God’s enemy,” presenting the conflict as a justified one on the same terms that Henry used to legitimize his invasion of France (Richard III V.III. 253). Richmond also assumes a similar sort of divine mandate for his attack, promising his men that “if you fight against God’s enemy / God will in justice ward you as his soldiers” (Richard III V.III.254-255). This larger narrative—structured as an ascension, a fall, and a return to glory—may have been familiar to Shakespeare’s early audiences, as it parallels the Biblical narrative of the fall and redemption of man. In applying this background trajectory to his history plays, Shakespeare seems to be suggesting that a similar sort of divine redemption has taken place within the English government.

It is certainly possible that one of Shakespeare’s major motivations in portraying Henry and Richard as, respectively, good and evil was both intentional and political in nature. Because
Queen Elizabeth I, the reigning monarch during much of Shakespeare’s career, could trace her lineage back to the historical Henry V, it may have presented a political risk to characterize the stage version of Henry as anything but a hero. Richard III, on the other hand, was from another, competing branch of the royal family, so there would likely have been royal approval of material characterizing him as a usurper and a villain. Allowing the history plays to construct an overarching narrative in terms of religion may have been an intentional attempt to instill a belief in audiences at the time of the original performances that their current monarch was one that God himself had put into place. In this context, the downfall of Richard III might have served as a sort of cautionary tale against challenging the established order of things.

While a modern interpretive lens makes it easier to analyze the similarities, complexities, and complications within the motivations and actions of both Richard and Henry, it remains evident that Shakespeare very deliberately characterized them as hero and villain, and that he did so in explicitly religious terms. Whether his primary intention was to create the sort of overarching narrative suggested here, to provide political support for the social systems of his day, to simply entertain his audiences, or—perhaps most likely—some combination of the three, he seems to have succeeded on all fronts with Richard III and Henry V. The works stand today as windows into the periods in which they were composed, entertainments for both historical and contemporary audiences, and moving explorations of nature, both human and divine.
Works Cited
