

Wooing-Scenes in “Richard III”: A Parody of Courtliness?

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Abstract: In the famous opening soliloquy of Shakespeare’s *Richard III*, Richard mightily voices his repugnance to “fair well-spoken days” and their “idle pleasures”. He realizes his physical deformity and believes that it sets him apart from others. He openly admits that he is “not shaped for sportive tricks, nor made to court an amorous looking-glass”. Yet, his monstrosity constitutes more perhaps of his aggressive masculine exceptionality rather than of his deformity. Richard’s bullying masculinity manifests itself in his contempt for women. In the wooing scenes we clearly see his pugnacious pursuit of power over effeminate contentment by reducing women to mere objects. Additionally, those scenes are interesting from a psychological viewpoint as they brim over with conflicting emotions. Therefore, the paper explores two wooing encounters of the play, which belong the best examples of effective persuasion and also something we may refer to as ‘the power of eloquence’.

Keywords: Richard III, wooing scenes, suitor, marriage, the power of eloquence.

1. Introduction

“Human beings have conceived of language not just as a means of communication (...), but as an instrument of power” writes Rhodes (1992:3). In fact, words may become powerful in every way they are used. Some may wish to exercise power through double meaning and ambiguities; others may like it when the ambiguity falls to a minimum. Those, who can make themselves clear and concise, can be understood by others and therefore may become really unpredictable for their adversaries. Language, when appropriately used towards persons and situations, may be helpful in winning over one’s supporters and in achieving power. Not always though, yet exceedingly often, does power arouse negative emotions. However, it does not mean that language is solely an instrument of evil. The nature of language is treacherous and unreliable even in the hands of thoroughly positive people. Words may be empty and deceptive and, what is more, they have their own lives like people.

Human nature is a prerequisite to anything that man can turn into art in his life; and we are used to refer to extraordinary skills as an art. “Rhetoric is most commonly defined as the art of persuasion” states Rhodes (1992:8), and further he adds “its origins lie in the recognition of the power of the spoken word: the master of persuasive discourse is also the master of people”. The quality of rhetoric performed by one of the Shakespearean characters, Richard, is undoubtedly exceptional, and his words “I play the devil” (Act 1.3 line 337) point to a high degree of his awareness and assessment of his own deeds. Perhaps it is so that we are able to recognize what art is or what it is not, but we fail to realize the essence of human nature. In other words, “we know what we are, but know not what we may be” (McEacheran 2002:8).

In the most primitive way, eloquence may be associated with magic through a simple analogy of casting magic spells having causative power. “It [eloquence] is tyrannical and violent, concerned not with truth but with deceptions of belief” (Rhodes 1992:9). There are people who appreciate such possibilities created by language. They regard language as magical and irrational, as they feel helpless because of it. Intuition is not accurate enough and too changeable to offer a basis for judgement, and the reason fails to differentiate between right and wrong.

2. Women in “Richard III”

Women in the play seem to be distinguished by special intuition, sensitivity and alertness, but in the face of a camouflaged attack of words flowing smoothly, they often fall victim to such words by which they become blinded and fascinated. In *Richard III* some of the most suggestive examples are two interactions of effective persuasion, and interestingly, they both concern women, Lady Anne (Act 1.2) and Queen Elizabeth (Act 4.4). These examples belong to the longest dialogues in the play. Both wooing scenes are somehow unsatisfactory from a psychological point of view. Each time we see women in mourning and a man with a clear aim to conquer them. The relations between Richard and the women he set out to woo are made up of myriads of intense conflicting emotions. The use of words to persuade others is extremely important. Richard’s aim is to persuade Anne and Elizabeth that he speaks honestly and is not a trickster himself. That is a part of his game in which the two women are reduced to mere objects. How do they defend themselves? Are they able to control the situation and act on sensible calculation of pros and cons, or is this exclusively Richard’s monopoly? The encounters of Richard with each of the two ladies are in fact battles of two opponents. The two wooing scenes do not even resemble the fights, because they are fights, and the exchange of arguments is really an exchange of blows. Due to that fact alone, they deserve to be given a closer look.

2.1. The wooing of Lady Anne

Right from the start, the second scene of Act One invites an ominous air. We see Lady Anne who follows the coffin with Henry VI’s body being taken for burial. She is in mourning for her husband, Edward, and his father, Henry VI. Anne is the first to give vent to her feelings. She begins with a venomous soliloquy fraught with curses addressed to Richard for being the cause of their deaths: “Cursed be the hand that made these fatal holes, / Cursed be the heart that had the heart to do it.” (lines 14-15). Then she hurls a shower of insults at Richard calling him “dreadful minister of hell” (line 44), “[f]oul devil” (line 48), “lump of foul deformity” (line 55), “[v]illain” (line 68), “diffused infection of a man” (line 76), “devilish slave” (line 87), “hedgehog” (line 100), “homicide” (line 123), “toad” (line 145), and “dissembler” (line 170). She is so inventive in her hatred of Richard that we might even be led to suspect her of revelling in her victimisation. When the hearse is set down, Anne elaborates on her fulminations: “More direful hap betide that hated wretch / That makes us wretched by the death of thee / Than I can wish to adders, spiders, toads, / Or any creeping venom’d thing that lives. / If he ever have child, abortive be it, / Prodigious, and untimely brought to light, / Whose ugly and unnatural aspect / May fright the hopeful mother at the view.” (lines 16-23). Then, she adds that “[i]f ever he have wife, let her be made / As miserable by the death of him / As I am made by my poor lord and thee.” (lines 24-26) apparently not realising that she has cursed herself. The irony here is cruel. Her words sound particularly sinister from the later perspective of the events to come as she was doomed to become Richard’s wife. She castigates him as a butcher who commits deeds that are “inhuman and unnatural” (line 58). The devilish imagery of Richard created by Anne is reinforced by “cold and empty veins where no blood dwells” (line 57).

Richard admits that he killed her husband and her father-in-law. Yet the reason for doing so, as well as his conclusive argument of defence, is his love for her. He loves Anne and wishes to marry her. By saying “[t]hat hand which for thy love did kill thy love” (line 175), he tries to make her a shared partner, an accomplice in crime. For her he would be ready to bring the death to the whole world „[s]o might he live one hour in her sweet bosom” (line 122). What’s more, her beauty was in fact the real cause that brought about the tragic consequences. Richard says: “Your beauty, which haunts me in my sleep” (line 120) to which Anne retorts: “If I thought that, I tell thee, homicide, / These nails should rend that beauty from my cheeks.” (lines 123-124). Their talk is engrossing, because Richard’s task to persuade her seems impossible. To reach his aim, he needs to overcome Anne’s hatred, expressed in her impulsive lamentations and curses. Initially, his attempts at sweetening her by words do not work, but Richard is relentless and continues to woo her. In return for Anne’s insults he offers her sweet words of flattery. At first Anne is seething with scorn and disgust. She spits on him wishing “it were a mortal poison for his sake” (line 143), but his answer: “Never came poison from so sweet a

place" (line 144) only proves his determination and domination. He perfectly controls the situation, otherwise he would have never knelt and presented her with his sword, laying his breast naked to "the deadly stroke" (line 163). Now Anne has a unique chance to revenge Henry's and Edward's deaths by killing him, but she finds herself unable to be his "executioner" (line 171). In doing so Richard is arrogant. He knows that if she cannot kill him, he is the winner. He masterfully limits her choice by telling her to take the sword and kill him or, otherwise, take him. In fact Anne faces a choice only between two things, and when Richard gives her opportunity to revenge, she cannot take it. Then Gloucester gives her a ring as a token of his devotion and implores her for favour so that he could offer her his 'faithful services' as her "poor devoted suppliant" (line 192). As he continues to woo her, she gradually gives up her resistance. Anne denies the symbolic significance of the action which brings to mind the matrimonial ceremony. By responding "[t]o take is not to give" (line 188), in fact Anne admits to having the ring forced on her, because she is being made an offer she cannot refuse. Nevertheless, the scene with the ring is a symbol of their betrothal. Now the couple are committed to one another.

Anne is gradually taken in. She is glad to observe this remorseful change in him and leaves the stage well disposed towards her artful wooer. Upon her leaving she says: "With all my heart, and much it joys me too / To see you are become so penitent" (lines 205-206). She seems to at least half believe his words. By putting on a repentant posture, Richard deprives Anne of the moral background to judge him. Indeed, Clemen (1968:35) rightly observes the actual moment of conversion marked by Anne's words: "I would I knew thy heart" (line 178) which he describes as "a psychologically convincing and genuinely human utterance".

Although Anne makes an apt judgement by openly calling Richard the devil for what he did, his verbal effort in the form of lies is not wasted, particularly when she says "O wonderful when devils tell the truth!" (line 71). In fact, her statement is a contradiction in terms as well as the evidence of how far the evil may go. The greatest evil always acts under the pretence of good and in the mask of the truth. When Anne leaves the stage, Richard revels in his brilliance and resumes his playful dismissive tone. He admits that he is not worth of even half of Edward whom he killed when he flew into a rage three months earlier. He is pleased at the thought that Anne will soon yield to his suggestions, despite the crimes committed on her father and husband, and despite all her rancour toward him. Gloucester says: "Having God, her conscience, and these bars against me, / And nothing I to back my suit at all / But the plain devil and dissembling looks, / And yet to win her, all the world to nothing? Ha?" (1.2.236-240). Richard's victory in wooing is a trifle mingled with surprise at her reaction. Perhaps he has even been taken in just as Anne has. Apparently Richard is startled to win the prey so smoothly. Half-suspiciously he asks: "Was ever woman in this humour wooed? / Was ever woman in this humour won?" (line 215). But he does not need to make any in-depth analysis of Anne's motives in view of his plans, and cuts his reflections short: "I'll have her, but will not keep her long" (line 215). Either way, it would be difficult to disagree that it is indeed miraculous that Richard has won Anne's heart.

And what about Anne? How does the stranded woman handle the situation? Even though Richard repels and frightens her, she is attracted to him unable to maintain a consistent hostility. She knows that she should not be taken in, but she is. Richard is clearly affected by sexual desire. During their encounter he is the driving force of the course of the action. Yet, we cannot fail to notice some of the sexual attraction that lures Anne to him. He may have flattered her. She might have believed his compliments. What at first seemed an impossible task, now is reality. Has Richard done the impossible? Or, has the successful wooing of Anne only been due to her survival instinct? Anne wants to live. She lost her husband, and there is no one to protect her now. Apparently, by giving in to Richard she would like to retain some of the advantages of her status and that is why she has allowed herself to be won over swiftly by false words. It is like making a pact with the devil. Describing this scene, Clemen (1968: 22) writes that Anne's function was to spurn Richard to reveal his character. Given the chance to meet Anne, Richard can show off not only the intellectual superiority but also his mysterious personal charisma. Richard's ability to persuade the grieving Anne to accept him as a suitor proves his unique skills in playing on people's emotions. Richard is lying but the eyes of his victim are unable to detect that. In the end Anne beholds not a liar but a penitent suitor.

2.2. The (vicarious) wooing of Elizabeth's daughter

Alone with Queen Elizabeth, yet again perfectly, Richard plays the devil whose main role is leading into temptation. In this so-called 'second wooing scene' (cf. Clemen 1968:190), he pleads Elizabeth for the hand of her daughter. Now Richard needs to marry her in order to preserve power. The young Elizabeth is the daughter of Edward IV, the last king. Richard's intention is to use her lineage to secure his own claims to power. Here we see not so much of a seduction, but rather his attempts to make friends with Elizabeth. Their dialogue is different from that with Lady Anne. Elizabeth seems to be more mature and experienced by life. She is in pain after the loss of her two sons, put to death by order of Richard. It can be only assumed that the loss of children is a greater tragedy for a mother than the loss of a husband for a wife. With children one loses some part of future, and the death of one's spouse cuts off the access to their shared past. Therefore, the tone of this scene seems to be far more rational. Elizabeth is a mother concerned with her daughter's future. She is an intermediary and in that position it is much easier for her, than it was for Anne, to withstand the verbal clash with Richard. The power and expression of the dialogue between Richard and Elizabeth consists of swift and short exchange of statements. Their talk is dynamic. Their words sensibly express genuine pain and terror of a woman, and unquenchable ambition and determination of a man. Here we see two royal family members who, in their own way, struggle for survival. She lost her sons, and now is thinking only how to protect herself and her daughter, whereas he is concentrated solely on feeding the ambitions connected with seizing the power. When Elizabeth asks, more herself than Richard, "Shall I be tempted of the devil thus?", he answers swiftly "Ay, if the devil tempt thee to do good" (line 420). Richard knows how to riposte and not to leave his interlocutor even a second for reflection. "The well-weighted words which are supposedly the hallmark of true eloquence, are in fact a stratagem of plays a deceit" (Rhodes 1992: 200). Richard knows he plays the devil but Elizabeth, although she calls him so, shows wavering. In that moment of hesitation, Richard's words aroused faith in her. It is the faith that is contrary to her apt judgement. Elizabeth tries to collect her thoughts, but actually she does not even realize how tight is the circle of Richard's words that has twisted around her. At last Elizabeth says that she will go to her daughter and tell her about the proposal of marriage from Richard. This is what she is doing and saying, but is this really what she is thinking? Perhaps it is Richard who has just been deceived.

Indeed, it may be argued that Elizabeth pretends to yield in order to gain time. At the moment when it looks as if she has lost everything, Elizabeth turns the tables on Richard. Her rejoinders are reasoned and logical. Unlike Anne, she does not fall into incoherent lamentations and she is consciously misunderstanding Richard. Elizabeth seems to be more authentic not to have been utterly taken in by Richard's rhetoric. The transient hesitation occurs rather due to her state of emotional confusion and the attempt to collect her thoughts rather than any sign of pity or understanding of Richard's arguments. She knows she cannot trust her brother-in-law and still in Act Four she finds in herself enough strength to confront Richard. Their encounter causes him much more trouble and discomfort than that with Anne. Richard's adroit use of language has not changed from what it was in the first wooing scene of Anne but the object he has chosen to conquer is completely different now. Elizabeth turns out to be a tough opponent for Richard offering him clever rejoinders which he did not hear from Anne's mouths. Clearly, his plan has not come off as he intended. Anne succumbed to Richard completely, but with Elizabeth the success is only partial.

3. Conclusion

The two wooing scenes in *Richard III* have "the diabolical undertones, the sharp brilliance, and the breathtaking impetus of Richard himself" (Clemen 1968:42). The similarities between them are to be found in grieving women who are wooed by the murderer of their nearest relatives. In both scenes we see them in pain at their loss and plunged with odium of the criminal suitor. Also in each case Richard does not even try to conceal his guilt. He overtly confesses his deeds but each time forcibly stressing the complicity of the women. He woos them but he does not seem to be able to offer them love; he solicits it only to bend it to his own purposes.

Richard wins the battles of words, one after another. He is unscrupulous in falsehood and intrigues. He does not care about the truth and does not try to uncover it, because perhaps he feels that this could weaken his determination in evil. Socrates argues that “the orator need have no knowledge of the truth, but merely a knack of being able to speak persuasively” (Rhodes 1992:10); that argument stands in opposition to the views of Cicero, Quintilian and Petrarch who claim that only a good man can be a good orator (Rhodes 1992:14). In the light of the two above examples of exerting persuasion, Socrates’ views seem to be less naive and definitely closer to the truth. In the person of Richard there is an excellent orator, clever strategist and a gifted psychologist. So what then that he has a plan to strengthen his power in the way deserving the utmost condemnation? Although it would be hard to approve his voracious ambition, one cannot fail to acknowledge his resolution and effectiveness he managed to achieve.

Thus the power of eloquence is not based unconditionally on the truth, but rather on the style of setting out one’s arguments. Indeed, it is a great feat to convince someone to something, particularly someone who earlier had an antagonistic attitude. Yet, in order to bring that to perfection, one needs to aptly evaluate the power of words as well as the receptivity of listeners to their influence. Best of all is to select the words in such a way as to make them be perceived as deeds.

Words need to be sown like seed. No matter how tiny a seed may be, when it lands in the right sort of ground it unfolds its strength and from being minute expands and grows to a massive size. Reason does the same (...). Although the words spoken are few, if the mind has taken them in as it should they gather strength and shoot upwards. (Seneca/ Campbell 2004: 82)

Even though his own nature, not fully realized by Richard, destroys him, it is the fact that he compares himself with the devil that makes him a conscious villain. Are we meant to believe him? Even if we know that something is a lie, yet acted out masterfully, we are rather ready to become enchanted by the effectiveness of such a technique and devote much less attention to its ethical assessment.

4. References

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