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Lethbridge Undergraduate Research Journal
ISSN 1718-8482

The Apocalyptic Identity of Richard III

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Citation:

Eve M. Hunter: The Apocalyptic Identity of Richard III. *Lethbridge Undergraduate Research Journal*. 2007. Volume 2 Number 1.

There has been much debate amongst scholars recently as to whether the nature of apocalyptic literature is secular or sacred, or whether it is both. Since both secular and sacred aspects affect the apocalyptic identity of Richard III, this study will not be limited to one or the other, but will focus on the effects of both. One of the major differences in this case, however, is that most of the current studies on apocalyptic literature have been focused largely on more recent literature (modern and postmodern) rather than on older works. One modern apocalyptic scholar asserts that:

It is commonplace to talk about our historical situation as uniquely terrible and in a way privileged, a cardinal point of time. But can it really be so? It seems doubtful that our crisis, our relation to the future and to the past, is one of the important differences between us and our predecessors. Many of them felt as we do. If the evidence looks good to us, so it did to them. (Kermode, p 95).

This lends credence to the idea that apocalypse is not a term to be applied simply to modern literature but to older works as well. No doubt the audiences of Shakespeare's day felt that they were just as close to the apocalyptic end of the world as we feel we are today. It's all a matter of perspective. It is, after all, the nature of humankind to think in terms of relativity. This being the case, it is not unreasonable to suggest that elements of the apocalyptic can be detected in Shakespeare's *Richard III*, both within the main character's identity, and

therefore within the play itself.

The focus then, is on the identity of Richard, and how various modes of apocalypse, prophecy and revelation in this instance, affect his identity and the subsequent outcome of the entire play. The theory is that Richard III has an apocalyptic identity which, when examined in juxtaposition to the aforementioned modes of apocalypse, allows the reader to realize the greater ramifications within the context of the play. Prophecy and revelation work both externally and internally on the character of Richard III, highlighting the apocalyptic nature both of the individual and the play. The traditional religious sense of apocalypse is that of a sort of waiting period before an inevitable end. Using this as the background for the more secularized expression of apocalypse within the context of Shakespeare's play, we will be examining the manner in which prophecy and revelation affect the "end" of Richard III. While apocalypse can mean the end of the world, and the subsequent coming of Christ, it can also mean (in a more secular fashion) the end of a world (in this case, Richard's) and the coming of change (a new monarch). This secular definition is very easily applied both to Richard as a character, and to the play as a whole. This is not to say that the sacred is not relevant, simply that it is subject to the secular interpretation. The result of this examination is a better understanding of Richard's identity, and therefore of the play, and a possible reason for the universality that makes Shakespeare's plays relevant, even generations later.

Prophecy is an important component to consider, as it plays a large part in allowing the reader to comprehend the apocalyptic tendencies of the play. In the very first of act of the play, Richard refers to himself as "Cheated of feature by dissembling nature, / Deformed, unfinished, sent before my time..." (Shakespeare, 1.1. 19-20), suggesting that he believes that his deformed physical self is the reason for his deformed spiritual self. He is basically implying that he has been cheated of any chance at a good life because his physical appearance has rendered him essentially evil. A few lines later he even goes so far as to say "I am determined to prove a villain." (Shakespeare, 1.1. 30) and "[...] I am subtle, false, and treacherous" (Shakespeare, 1.1. 37.) What is interesting here is that by establishing to the reader that he is deformed (both physically and spiritually) and is determined to be evil, he has essentially formed an apocalyptic prophecy that entirely concerns himself. He admits he is going to be a villain, and he admits he is already evil because of a deformed body and a deformed spirit. There can be no questioning that this is a fact. Hardly ever is it evident that he questions whether it is right for him to be evil, he simply accepts that he is and functions as such.

Apart from identifying Richard as a prophetic element, this also emphasizes the possibility of predestination. If it is clear from the beginning that Richard is going to be evil, is there any point in thinking that he may eventually end up the opposite? This predestination or fate fits in with apocalyptic theory because literary apocalypse (in its secular sense) has to do with endings; in this case it

is the end of Richard's world as he knows it that we are being forewarned of. What is left to us is to figure out what will come after the inevitable end. Later it becomes clear that the forthcoming change can be recognized in the figure of the Earl of Richmond, who will eventually replace Richard as king. Regardless, the presence of the prophetic in the form of Richard as an individual adds weight to the idea that Richard can be viewed as having an apocalyptic identity.

As well as focusing on prophecy and its effect on Richard as an individual, it is wise to observe the various forms prophecy takes in regards to external characters. One of the best examples of prophetic presence, outside of Richard, can be found in the character of Margaret. Throughout the play she barrages Richard with any number of nasty curses. Some admittedly backfire (Richard occasionally twists her words and aims them back at her) but she persists nonetheless. The reason for asserting that these curses are somewhat prophetic can be derived from the previous argument that she is basically just reiterating something that we already know. She continually curses him because he is evil, she knows that he knows he is, and yet she continues to do so, in part because she wants everyone else to know of his dastardly nature, but also because it plays into the idea of predestination. She continually curses him because it reinforces the fact that he *is* evil and he *will* meet some sort of evil end. This further supports the supposition that there are apocalyptic elements acting upon Richard and therefore upon the play itself.

Revelation is another element that is essential to apocalyptic literature. Its presence indicates a realization by both the main character in question and by the audience of the imminence of the ending. It is crucial therefore to examine how revelation is employed in this particular play. Due to the nature of the medium (obviously a play is meant to be seen, not necessarily read) we are unable to "hear" as it were Richard's realization of his ending, but we are witness to his revelation when we hear his famous cry "A horse, a horse! My kingdom for a horse!" (Shakespeare, 5.6. 13.). His desperation, and the fact that he would at that precise moment give up everything that he has killed, and manipulated for, even though it would mean starting all over again, indicates that he is aware that his end has come. Why would you work so hard, only to offer to give it all up, unless you had realized that it was already completely unattainable anyway? The strength of his desperation, which could only be magnified in live performance, convinces the audience that he has finally realized that he is finished, and that his world has apocalyptically come to an end.

However, revelation is not effected only through Richard. Once again, the apocalyptic tendencies inherent in Richard's identity cause a sort of ripple effect, and as a result, traces of revelation can be detected in other characters throughout the play. It is inescapable that at some point the Earl of Richmond would fully realize that Richard has at last come to his own end. What is unusual in this instance is that his revelation basically occurs at the exact same

moment as Richard's. Although the death of Richard at the hands of the Earl is realization enough, the Earl of Richmond almost certainly would have surely realized that Richard's desperate cry for a horse was little more than one of the last spasms of his final death throes. In the case of revelation, it is also felt by the audience, as we are somewhat omniscient, and we also experience the revelation, or complete understanding at the same point as Richard and the Earl. This makes Shakespeare's play rather unique in terms of apocalyptic literature, as it is unusual for almost everyone involved to have the same experience, never mind having at the same time.

There is a recurring motif then, wherein prophecy and revelation are the catalysts that indicate the presence of apocalyptic tendencies. Prophecy and revelation are more easily detected in Richard as an individual, thus they become secondary in the play itself. Essentially, because Richard is identifiable as being apocalyptic, it is reasonable to assume that while the play certainly qualifies as apocalyptic, the true source of the apocalyptic tendencies must be derived from Richard himself, simply because the other characters and the audience are reacting wholly to what Richard says and does.

By viewing Richard as a character with an apocalyptic identity we are better able to understand him as a person. Also we are given further insight, not only into his motivations, but into the motivations of the author who embellished upon the real-life man. If Richard is evil right from the start and there is no chance for him because it is all predestined, as is suggested by the aforementioned ways in which prophecy and revelation function within the play, that says a lot about how Shakespeare intended this character to be perceived. It is not surprising that Shakespeare would wish to portray Richard in a less-than-stellar manner because of his Elizabethan audience, but it is sad that this portrayal of Richard is the most famous and enduring one.

While apocalyptic literature is generally thought to be more modern in derivation, it is obvious that elements of it can be found in earlier pieces of work. Again, this is not so surprising when we consider that the major debate about apocalypse at the present time is whether it is secular or sacred. The reason that it is so easy to find apocalyptic tendencies in an older work such as this is because the debate over secular and sacred was still active, it was simply focused more on the individual than on the entire work itself. Thus it is possible to better understand how Shakespeare's plays still have relevance: the argument persists, it just takes different forms.

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ISSN 1718-8482