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Humoring the Body Politic: Kings and Humors

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Humoring the Body Politic: Kings and Humors

In 1607, Susanna Shakespeare married a local physician named, John Hall. But William Shakespeare's interest in health and wellness predates his eldest daughter's marriage by many years. The display that we have at Marian right now, *The World of Shakespeare's Humors*, explores the way Shakespeare uses particular medical practices and Renaissance beliefs about the workings of the human body, including the humors, to bring his characters to life. Kaara Peterson writes that in Renaissance medicine there was a push to try to understand "the natural state of the human body in seeking to dissect it and analyze its intricate inner workings."¹ The "inner workings" found in this display are the *humors* which Dr. Prenatt discussed, and while the examples of Ophelia (*Hamlet*), Shylock (*Merchant*), and Kate (*Shrew*) in the display have strong resonance with the emotional and psychological state of *individual characters* and their own *domestic* and *personal* lives, I'd like to talk tonight about how a character's health and humors can have a broader impact beyond the personal realm. For instance, how would the humors of a king and his health affect how he governs?

Marjorie Garber argues that "Disease in Shakespeare's plays is almost always a metaphor, a sign of some moral failing in the society, the state, or the individual."² If Garber is right, and I think she is, then the most interesting question in *my* mind regarding medical Shakespeare studies is this: What are the implications for a *nation* if it is led by a sick, diseased, or mentally ill king? I would argue that the relationship between the king and his nation is not just *symbolic*, but for Shakespeare is also *symbiotic*. The king and the nation are so intimately connected with one another that the health of one affects the health of the other, whether to their mutual advantage or not.

In Shakespeare's political plays, a king's illnesses, which in the Renaissance would be believed to be caused by an imbalance of humors, leads to a variety of *national* implications, among them, rebellion and war. In the British history plays concerning the Lancaster family and York family, written in the last decade or so of the 16th century, we see chaos ebb and flow as different men (and women) do their Machiavellian best to increase or maintain their power and authority. Like medicinal treatment of one's humors, which seeks to restore balance to the body, Shakespeare's political narratives drive toward a restoration of balance in the civic realm. Reestablishing order and keeping chaos at bay is supposed to be a goal for "good" kings. But Shakespeare shows us that some kings thrive on disorder and use it to fulfill their own self-interests, often at the cost of the nation's health and wellness.

The plays I would like to discuss cover the historic years 1399-1485 and were written in tetralogies – groups of four – with the final king in each tetralogy (Henry V and Henry VII) creating a restoration of order. Some summary will be necessary for those of you who haven't read medieval British history for a while. In the tetralogy covering the years 1399-1422, also known as "The Henriad," Henry IV usurps the throne from his first cousin, Richard II, (in a play titled *Richard II*) and is ultimately responsible for Richard's murder (at least, in Shakespeare's version of events). After Richard II is deposed, he is imprisoned and one of Henry's loyal knights, Sir Piers Exton, murders him in order to, "rid [Henry] of this living fear" (*Richard II* 5.4.2) that Richard represents. Yet Richard's death, instead of solving problems, creates new ones. First Richard II's death overwhelms Henry with melancholy and anxiety. He says, "I protest my soul is full of woe / That blood should sprinkle me to make me grow" (*Richard II* 5.6.45-6). During his reign, (shown in Shakespeare's *Henry IV, Parts 1 and 2*) Henry's excess of the melancholy humor ends up having a strong negative impact from which he never recovers. Henry complains that he is "wan with care" (*1 Henry IV* 1.1.1), and his attempt to be an absolute

monarch ends up alienating the people that help him become king, namely the Percy family. Rebellions break out, and even though they are defeated by Henry's sons, the fighting affects Henry's health. He becomes more anxious. He stops sleeping. (Insomnia afflicts most kings in Shakespeare's works.) By the second full play about his reign, Falstaff reports that the King is in a state of "lethargy... a kind of sleeping in the blood... It hath its original [that is, its origin] from much grief, from study, and perturbation of the brain" (*2 Henry IV*, 1.2.101, 102, 105). Falstaff's description of Henry's illness also reflects the condition of the *nation*, which is fraught with upheaval. During a rebellion in *2 Henry IV*, one of the ringleaders, the Archbishop of York, offers the following explanation for the uprising:

Wherefore do I this? So the question stands.
 Briefly, to this end: *we are all diseased*
 And with our surfeiting and wanton hours
 Have brought ourselves into a burning fever,
 And we must bleed for it; of which disease
 Our late King, Richard, being infected, died. (4.1.53-58)

The Archbishop argues that Henry's indulgent and unjust behavior since taking the throne has put the *nation* out of balance and *infected* it. Not just the king, but *all* are diseased. The only remedy is to bleed – that is, to go to war, but also bleeding metaphorically connects to medical treatments of the time that sought to remove excess blood from the body, which was believed to cause illnesses like fevers. Thus in the Archbishop's brief description, we can see that the king's humoral imbalance figuratively infects the nation like a contagious disease and makes the body politic ripe for bloodletting.

Continuous rebellion is not Henry's goal when he usurps the throne. In Henry's mind, and the minds of his allies at the time, his usurpation was meant to be *curative*, almost a surgical

restoration of order. But like any surgery, there can be complications, and contrary to expectations, under Henry IV, the nation becomes not balanced and healthy, but rather, even more sick and divided against itself. In parallel with the nation, Henry becomes increasingly sick, anxious, melancholy, and sleepless. Nothing improves his condition. Upon hearing of his son's final victory over the rebels, Henry says:

And wherefore should these good news make me sick?

Will fortune never come with both hands full,

But write her fair words still in foulest letters?

She either gives a stomach and no food;

Such are the poor, in health; or else a feast

And takes away the stomach; such are the rich,

That have abundance and enjoy it not.

I *should* rejoice now at this happy news;

And now my sight fails, and my brain is giddy:

O me! come near me; now I am much ill. (2 *Henry IV* 4.3.102-111)

Henry observes profound ironies in this speech – that good news does not relieve his guilty conscience, that his luck (fortune) makes him feel that it is impossible to be balanced and self-assured, and that *no one*, rich or poor, can *ever* have what they need, nor can they appreciate what they have. It is quite depressing. Even as all starts to seem well, Henry falls into his final illness. His careworn, melancholy body gives out on him at an early age – he is forty-six years old when he dies.

The national sickness caused by Henry's usurpation and murder of Richard II goes, essentially, into remission for nine years, during the reign of Henry's heir, his son, Henry V, about which Shakespeare writes the play *Henry V*. Indeed, Henry V's reign provides the

restoration of political order that England seeks for a long time. It's a *very complicated* moment of stability, however, in *many* ways, and unfortunately I don't have time tonight to dig in to why that is. (But I'm writing a book about all this, so stay tuned!) For now, I'll just say that Henry V makes war with France in order to engage the disparate parts of the British Isles and unify them against a common, foreign enemy. Henry V's invasion of France is his attempt both to gain more power for England (and himself), and to cure the nation of its previous, divisive sickness. Cutting a sharp contrast to his father, Henry V is "increasingly dissociated from [his father's] moral causation of disease;" as Robert L. Reid notes, and "repeatedly he promotes the cure of England's greedy surfeit through 'bleeding.'"³ Yet no "cure" lasts long in these plays. Despite his many victories and success in the unification of the nobility, Henry V dies of dysentery at the age of 32, leaving his infant son, Henry VI, as King.

Shakespeare wrote another tetralogy about Henry VI's unfortunate reign and the aftermath of his death in a group of plays that present-day Shakespeareans call the "Wars of the Roses" plays. They consist of *Henry VI Parts 1, 2, and 3*, and the final play of the series *Richard III*. The character, Richard III, is my primary interest in these plays; he appears in three of the four in this set. Shakespeare collapses at about 60 years into the three-part *Henry VI* plays. When Henry V dies and leaves the kingdom to his infant son, the nation suffers under the mismanagement of the child-king's uncles. Eventually, Richard of York (Richard III's father) learns of his superior claim to the throne and demands that Henry VI (now a young adult) surrender his authority. Henry VI, a Lancaster, and Richard of York, a York obviously, split into two factions, symbolized by a red rose (the Lancasters) and a white rose (the Yorks). The fighting between these two families for the crown is where we get the term "Wars of the Roses," and the plays Shakespeare writes about this period cover the historic years 1422-1485, from the

death of Henry V to the defeat of Richard III, and the ascension of the first Tudor king, Henry VII.

But let's focus on Richard III.

Richard III is famous for many reasons, but if you know only one fact about him, it might be that he had physical abnormalities. Shakespeare describes him as a crookback, whose legs were not the same length, and who had a withered left arm. Richard says of himself that he is “deformed, unfinished ... and *that* so lamely and unfashionable that dogs bark at me as I halt by them” (*Richard III* 1.1.20, 22-3, emphasis added). Very recently, scholars have been able to uncover just how accurate Shakespeare's physical descriptions were. The site of the historic Richard III's burial was discovered only five years ago, in 2012 (527 years after his death), and after excavating the remains, scientists learned that Shakespeare's portrayal of Richard was somewhat exaggerated.⁴ (It's historic fiction – what do we expect?) The historic Richard had scoliosis, which would likely have made his right shoulder higher than his left. Mary Ann Lund writes that Richard's likely treatment for his scoliosis would have been to use axial traction in which “the patient's spine should be stretched with ropes attached to levers or wooden rollers at the patient's head and feet, while any protrusion was pushed down.”⁵ (This technique is actually very similar to the medieval torture known as racking.) Richard likely would have worn a metal back support on a regular basis. In day-to-day life, Lund suggests that tailored clothing “probably kept the signs of his scoliosis hidden to spectators outside the royal household of attendants, servants and medical staff who dressed, bathed and tended to the monarch's body.”⁶ When Richard died in the Battle of Bosworth Field against Henry Tudor, however, whatever secrets his body held were revealed. A history source called *The Great Chronicle* described the handling of Richard's body:

The last Plantagenet monarch was despoiled to the skin and naught being left about him, so much as would cover his privy member; he was trussed behind a pursuivant called Norrey as a hog or another vile beast, and so all too besprung (sprinkled) with mire and filth was brought to a church in Leicester for all men to wonder upon and there lastly irreverently buried.⁷

Richard lay naked at the church for two days before he was buried. The treatment of Richard's body shows the medieval appetite for barbaric spectacle, but the exhibition of Richard's body likely was a public shock, since, as Lund writes, "The stripping of Richard's corpse at Bosworth made his physical shape noticeable to many hundreds of witnesses, perhaps for the first time."⁸ The significant curvature of Richard's spine would certainly have been evident to all who could bear to look at the defiled monarch.

These historic discoveries add to the imaginative picture Shakespeare paints of Richard a little over a hundred years later. Shakespeare's source material, primarily Sir Thomas More's 1513 biography *The History of Richard III*, exaggerates Richard's physical abnormalities, in order to enhance the king's already dark reputation. That reputation comes, in part, from superstitions surrounding deformities in the Renaissance. A representative view comes from the Italian physiognomer Bartolomeo della Rocca (1467–1504), who believed that "crookbacks... were rather traitorous, and very wicked in their actions."⁹ Sir Francis Bacon's short essay titled "Of Deformity" (originally published in 1612) agrees with Rocca's opinion: "Deformed persons," he writes, "are commonly even with nature, *for as nature hath done ill by them, so do they by nature*; being for the most part ... *void of natural affection*."¹⁰ Having no love in their beings, Bacon states, the character of a deformed individual is choleric and fixed on the quest for revenge. In their efforts to advance their agendas, however, Bacon states, the deformed have a

surprising advantage over their physically typical peers – that is, people like Richard are always underestimated.

Shakespeare's version of Richard has all of the qualities Rocca and Bacon mention – he is traitorous, wicked, void of affection, *and* underestimated. Richard's family and enemies alike underestimate his military prowess and ambition. Richard seeks fulfillment in power, since because of his deformity, he feels that the typical pleasures of other young men, including love, are unavailable to him –even the love of his family. Instead, Richard is a textbook narcissist. He cares only for himself and his own desires. We see his extreme egoistic individualism in the many soliloquys that he addresses to the audience throughout *3 Henry VI* and *Richard III*. He reveals his desire to be king, but in order to fulfill that goal, he must turn covertly against his family and he has no qualms about doing just that. He says:

I have no brother, I am like no brother;

And this word “love,” which graybeards call divine,

Be resident in men *like one another*

And not in me: *I am myself alone.* (*3 Henry VI* 5.6.80-83, emphasis added)

The significance of Richard's lack of loyalty and love for his family is that it reveals the wicked soul of the wars between the Yorks and the Lancasters, telling us something about the health of the nation in which the conflict broils. After decades of civil war, the nation is so contaminated, so unbalanced, and so twisted that brothers will kill brothers in the quest for power with as little remorse as a surgeon might feel removing a mole. An example of the depravity in the war is shown in the Battle of Towton, act 2, scene 5, of *3 Henry VI*. In this scene a father kills his son and a son kills his father. These tragic deaths expose how deeply diseased the nation has become from chronic civil war. It stands to reason that Richard's dissociation with love, and even remorse, comes not only from Shakespeare's use of Renaissance superstitions

about physical abnormalities, but also, as a result of living his entire life in an infectious national environment in which families are already killing each other. The nation's multigenerational wars have corrupted Richard's psyche.

Shakespeare reveals the complexity of Richard's humors throughout the three plays in which he has a role, and unlike Henry IV, he cannot easily be described as *merely* choleric or *simply* melancholic. As a psychological subject, Richard is difficult to pin down in terms of *humors*. We do know from the cold-blooded killing of Henry VI that Richard is a paradigmatic sociopath. As he stabs Henry, he says, "If any spark of life be yet remaining, / Down, down to hell, and say I sent thee thither, / I that have neither pity, love, nor fear" (*3 Henry VI* 5.6.66-8). But to say that Richard's humoral imbalance is solely responsible for his murderous plans neglects the possibility that perhaps Shakespeare harnesses Richard's pathology to illustrate the effects of war on the people in this society. Richard symbolizes how devastatingly cruel, immoral, and debased monarchical society can be when self-interest outweighs the good of the people. While Henry IV was certainly self-interested, he contrasts with Richard in that he continuously sought to restore order to the kingdom. Henry *wanted* peace and his failure to achieve it caused him to weaken and succumb to melancholy. Richard, on the other hand, is driven to seize the crown like Henry did, but he does not have a plan that *imagines beyond* its attainment. Richard does not view the crown as a means by which to create *balance* or restore *order*. With his entire life sculpted by war, the crown means something different to Richard than it does to Henry IV. For Richard, the crown is not an instrument of order, but an instrument of chaos, and Richard thrives in chaos.

So it's no wonder that Richard is brooding at the beginning of the play *Richard III* – chaos is on hold, and Richard is not exactly thrilled about it. He says,

... I, in this weak piping time of peace,

Have no delight to pass away the time,
 Unless to spy my shadow in the sun
 And descant on mine own deformity.
 And therefore, since I cannot prove a lover
 To entertain these fair well-spoken days,
 I am determinèd to prove a villain. (1.1.24-7)

Villainy is fairly useful in medieval wartime, if you use that choler toward your enemies, but in peace, we prefer people to be more civilized. Richard will not have it. And yet it was Richard himself who ended the war decisively, having killed both Henry VI and his son, removing all direct Lancastrian claimants to the throne. After Henry dies, Edward (Richard's brother) becomes king of England, and it seems as though order has been restored. But not so fast. Richard promises the audience in soliloquy to be a Judas to his brother and any offspring he might have, so it's clear that more chaos is to come. Richard is aided by the fact that his brother, Edward IV, is not a particularly popular king. Edward starts alienating his nobles as soon as he becomes king. He marries a woman outside his class, a widowed commoner named Elizabeth Woodville. He makes favorites of her family members, raising them beyond their desert. All the while, Richard pretends to be loyal, but from the start of the play, he has a murderous plan to take over. Richard tricks his brothers by spreading a ruse prophecy that someone whose name starts with the letter "G" is plotting to murder the king. Edward, stupidly, has his brother George arrested, when really it's Richard, also known as the Duke of "Gloucester," who wants him dead. Richard makes sure George is executed, and Edward dies soon after from the melancholy George's death inspires. Richard orchestrates his usurpation with the assistance of his nobleman goons Buckingham and Catesby. The deaths of Richard's brothers are just the beginning. In all, Richard is responsible for about ten murders in the play that bears his name.

Few people understand the depths to which Richard will go to obtain power, until it is too late. However, the previous queen Margaret knows Richard is evil, and curses him in front of the entire court in act 1, scene 3, but since she was the wife and mother of men Richard killed in war, it's easy for the York-loyalists to write her off as an unbalanced victim of melancholy. But Margaret correctly diagnoses the entire Yorkist assembly when speaking to Elizabeth, the queen: "Why strew'st thou sugar on that bottled spider / Whose deadly web ensnareth thee about? / Fool, fool, thou whet'st a knife to kill thyself" (1.3.240-42). In a sense, Margaret parallels Cassandra from the Trojan War. Like Cassandra, Margaret prophesies, but no one believes her. She foresees the downfall of the assembly at the hands of Richard, and yet Lord Hastings stands up to her, saying, "False-boding woman, end thy frantic curse, / Lest to thy harm thou move our patience" (*Richard III* 1.3.243-244). Richard uses Margaret's outburst to his advantage, putting on a mask of remorse and acting as though he empathizes with the destroyed former queen. He says, "I cannot blame her. By God's holy mother, / She hath had too much wrong, and I repent / My part thereof that I have done" (1.3.302-4). Like a good sociopath, Richard is a brilliant actor, and the dramatic irony is ripe in his repentance, as Richard tells the audience near the end of that same scene that he can "seem a saint when most [he] play[s] the devil" (1.3.334).

Richard becomes king through manipulating the nobles into electing him their ruler, but he worries that he will not be able to stay king for long if he allows his nephews to live. He makes his way to the throne by having Edward's heirs declared bastards. Then he pretends not to want to be king when the nobles approach him, saying,

Alas, why would you heap these cares on me?

I am unfit for state and dignity.

I do beseech you, take it not amiss:

I cannot, nor I will not, yield to you. (3.7.182-5)

But all this is an act that Buckingham helps him coordinate. He, of course, relents and takes the crown. Once Richard is king, he asks Buckingham, “shall we wear these honors for a day, / Or shall they last and we rejoice in them?” (4.2.4-5). He means that he wants his nephews dead. They are the rightful heirs to the throne, after all. What’s to stop them from rebelling, just as many rebelled against Henry IV in the past? The boys are being held in the Tower of London and there, they will be killed. Buckingham breaks with Richard as a result of this ghastly plot. When Richard plots the death of these children, it becomes clear what a terrible ruler he will be. Shakespeare does not show Richard trying to govern or do anything for the people. In real history, Richard sensed that he was fairly unpopular, and according to John Julius Norwich, Richard felt so uneasy about having killed Henry VI, Prince Edward, and his own nephews that he paid Yorkshire priests “vast sums of money” to say masses for the dead. In 1484, Norwich reports that Richard

did everything possible to improve his image – making progresses through the country, performing ostentatious acts of generosity, publishing high-minded and sanctimonious declarations of intent, bestowing privileges, distributing offices and estates with a lavish hand...¹¹

But Richard’s tour of the country and his promises to make England great again were useless. In Shakespeare’s play, his obsession with power cannot be slacked by the fact that he is king. What Richard experiences here is a shift in his humors. Like Henry IV when he became king, Richard becomes melancholic, and riddled with anxiety, thinking about *his safety* and *power* above everything else. In addition to killing his nephews, he has his wife killed and plans to marry his niece, the next heir to the throne, in order to solidify his rights. Yet with the killing of the two princes in the Tower, he makes a mistake. Their deaths open a vein that will not stop bleeding. Richard’s narcissistic pursuit of power shows he has no interest in the health of the nation. With

his own body mangled and his life lived in chaos, Richard's critical insight into himself is that he is not normal, but since he knows no other way to live, he carries on.

The cure for Richard's monarchical malpractice comes in the form of a prodigal son returning from a 14-year exile in the British territories of France. Henry Tudor, Earl of Richmond, did not grow up in the chaos of the Wars of the Roses and does not suffer from the blight that Richard has endured. Henry returns to England, healthy and sanguine, marching to meet Richard in battle. When he addresses his men, Henry says that English subjects have been "bruised underneath the yoke of tyranny..."; that they must march to "the bowels of the land..." and find "the wretched, bloody, usurping boar" (Richard, he means), who "swills your warm blood like wash [pig fodder], and makes his trough in your embowelèd bosoms" (5.2.2, 3, 7, 9-10). Henry's vivid imagery rhetorically positions the upcoming battle as a metaphoric medical procedural that will allow the surgical extraction of the cancer that Richard has become within the English body politic. Barbara Howard Traister writes that doctors in Shakespeare's plays "are characters whom the audience can trust as observers and reporters, and thus they serve as disinterested professionals who can authenticate illness or dishonorable behavior."¹² While Henry is not a doctor, his diagnosis of England's troubles is certainly just as perceptive, and people flock to him as if he were a divinely inspired healer. Putting them side by side, Richard III and Henry Tudor strike a contrast between "the king who murders his subjects" and "the king who heals his subjects," at least potentially.¹³ With Henry's famous triumph over Richard at Bosworth Field, England turns away from the hostile past of war and rebellion and sets about healing the nation.

Many gifted people have written about Shakespeare's interest in and use of medical information in his plays. To me, what Shakespeare teaches us about medicine goes beyond the individual plays and well beyond the individual characters. In looking at the two historical

tetralogies tonight and the characters Henry IV and Richard III, what we see is that a king (or a leader's) health and wellness, perhaps especially mental health and wellness, will impact all of us and will impact the health, wellness, and even the reputation of the nation. The problem I see with these two characters isn't *just* that Henry IV was well-meaning but melancholy, or that Richard III was choleric and self-interested. To me, there's a larger problem with the people responsible for making them kings. These noblemen were so focused on their own gain from the ascension of these two usurpers that they lost sight of how fragile their nation was without an ethical monarch at the helm. So distracted were they by their own interests, the nobles let the nation down.

In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare says that theatre "holds ... the mirror up to nature." What that means is that theatre, and I would argue *all the arts*, show us who we are, warts and all. What the Humanities has in common with medicine is that professionals in both fields care very deeply not *just* about "who" we are, but also "how" we are. It would be nice if we could pay more attention to *how we are*, how we're doing individually, how we're doing as a nation – not just economically, not just in terms of material goods, but in terms of our health, our wellness, our ethics, our sense of balance. How do we do this? I'm not sure. But for me, a healthy dose of Shakespeare always helps.

Notes:

¹ Peterson, Kaara L., and Stephanie Moss. 2004. "Introduction" in *Disease, Diagnosis and Cure on the Early Modern Stage*, edited by Kaara L. Peterson and Stephanie Moss (New York: Routledge), xi.

² Garber, Marjorie B. 1980. "The Healer in Shakespeare" in *Medicine and Literature* (New York: Watson, 1980), 103.

³ Reid, "Humoral," 486.

⁴ See Bryony Jones, "Five things we've learned about Richard III since he was found" <http://www.cnn.com/2015/03/22/europe/richard-iii-burial-5-things/index.html>

⁵ Lund, Mary Ann. 2015. "Richard's Back: Death, Scoliosis and Myth Making." *Medical Humanities* 41 (2): 92. doi:10.1136/medhum-2014-010647.

⁶ Ibid., 91

⁷ Ibid. 89.

⁸ Ibid. 89.

⁹ Ibid., 91.

¹⁰ Sir Francis Bacon, "XLIV. Of Deformity," *The Essays of Sir Francis Bacon*, ed. Mary Augusta Scott (New York: Scribner, 1908), 200. Emphasis added.

¹¹ John Julius Norwich, *Shakespeare's Kings: The Great plays and the History of England in the Middle Ages 1337-1485* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999), 344.

¹² Barbara Howard Traister. 2004. "' Note Her a Little Farther ': Doctors and Healers in the Drama of Shakespeare." *In Disease, Diagnosis and Cure on the Early Modern Stage*, edited by Kaara L. Peterson and Stephanie Moss, 2nd ed., 42–53. New York: Routledge, 48.

¹³ Traister uses this phrasing to compare and contrast Macbeth and Malcolm. I borrow it here because it is equally applicable to Richard and Henry Tudor.