

## 'He's dead but he won't lie down!' Posthumous characterisation: the symbiosis of ghost and man, of spirit and flesh

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Cedric Watts:

**‘He’s dead but he won’t lie down!’:**

**Posthumous Characterisation: the Symbiosis of Ghost and Man, of Spirit and Flesh.**

Here’s a puzzle: where does a Shakespearian characterisation end? ‘At death’, you may say. But you would sometimes be wrong.

‘The rest is silence’, asserts Hamlet, dying; and, in his case, the rest indeed is. (Moreover, he has assured us that death is ‘that undiscovered country, from whose bourn / No traveller returns’. Admittedly, he has recently encountered just such a traveller and not a silent but a talkative one – or so he partly believes: but that’s a different puzzle.) Some Shakespearian characters, however, bring to mind Gracie Fields’ bawdy song, ‘He’s dead but he won’t lie down!’. They live on, upon this earth. What’s more, their characterisation changes and matures, posthumously. A common but lazy assumption of commentators is that by the time of a character’s death, we have accumulated all the information we need to assess that character. This assumption is, in certain cases, erroneous.

Take the case of Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar. Until his murder, he is an intriguing mixture of characteristics. He is proud, assertive, confident and courageous; yet vain and fallible, deaf in one ear, and subject to the falling sickness. The conspirators allege that he seeks to be a king, and imply that he may aspire to be a god. Caesar is bloodily dispatched and his mortality is emphasised: Mark Antony displays the bloodstained mantle and reveals the stabbed corpse. After Caesar’s death, there is continuing controversy about his nature: Brutus persuades the crowd that Caesar was ambitious, and justly slain by republican patriots; but Mark Antony depicts him as a philanthropic leader, a public benefactor and no craver for power; and thereby Mark Antony resolves the controversy in Caesar’s favour, at least where the Roman mob is concerned.

But the playwright goes further. Caesar, as ghost, appears to Brutus and warns him that Caesar will re-appear at Philippi. The ghost does indeed re-appear there, and Brutus and Cassius, in their defeat, feel that the continuing spirit of Caesar has brought about their downfall. ‘Caesar, thou

art revenged', says Cassius, dying; 'O Julius Caesar, thou art mighty yet', says Brutus, soon to die. By his posthumous presence, therefore, Caesar is exalted. He enjoys posthumous immortality; and he is given power to visit, haunt and ultimately destroy (or aid the destruction of) his enemies. He thereby gains powerful moral vindication. Any doubts about his merits are thus dispelled. Being an agent in a moral victory over his assassins, he thereby casts a retrospectively exalting light upon his character as it appeared before his assassination. The ghost projects charisma back in time to irradiate his flesh-and-blood progenitor: we witness an enhancive symbiosis of wraith and man. (Ha: 'This was lofty.')

Shakespeare's Rome is bizarrely paradoxical. It is both classical and Gothic, marmoreal and murky. It is the location of high civilisation, of eloquent rhetoric, of rational debate; and yet it is bombarded by supernatural apparitions: while a storm rages, burning men walk the streets, warriors fight in the sky, a lion visits the Capitol, an owl hoots at noon, and ghosts 'shriek and squeal'. The paradox is present within Caesar himself: he is not only a proudly rational leader who seeks to overcome superstition ('He is a dreamer: let us leave him', he says of the soothsayer), but also a ghost who, instead of shrieking and squealing, takes to his supernatural role with laconic aplomb. And Brutus's response is laconic, too: 'Well, I will see thee at Philippi then', he replies to the ghost, as if such a visitation were no great surprise but just another manifestation of the Roman paradox.

A subtler case is that of Richard II. The first two acts of *Richard II* give the clear impression that Richard is a nasty piece of work: he is hypocritical, callous, cynical, vain and foolish. He is a killer, responsible for the death of Woodstock, though he conceals the fact. He is appallingly callous when Gaunt is dying: 'Now put it, God, in the physician's mind / To help him to his grave immediately!'; and, when seizing Bullingbrooke's inheritance, he lets greed overcome common sense, for by thus abrogating the hereditary principle, he is undercutting the basis of his own claim to the throne. When faced with the increasing power of Bullingbrooke, Richard is variously defiant, petulant, self-pitying, childish and abject; in his downfall he becomes pathetic, and only in his final moments does he win our respect by displaying energetic courage.

Richard, however, is not only a fallible mortal; he is also the Lord's Anointed, a legitimate monarch, God's deputy on earth. To kill him is, symbolically, to strike at God. His killer, Exton, feels remorse at the sacrilegious crime; and Bullingbrooke, evincing guilt, promises to make a penitential pilgrimage. But Bullingbrooke's taint of guilt will never be expunged, and will be inherited by his son, Henry V, who, on the eve of the Battle of Agincourt, begs God to forgive the murder of Richard.

Before his death, Richard and the Bishop of Carlisle had predicted that the act of usurpation against Richard would bring long years of bloody civil conflict to England. These predictions are fulfilled, and thereby Richard gains the retrospective mantle of prophet. And since the consequences of the regicide are so costly and long-lasting, the sacred dimension of Richard is given full validation. It is not simply that the shadow of Richard as a guiltily-remembered monarch looms large over the action of *Henry IV, Parts 1 and 2*: more than that, he is an active historical force, posthumously punishing his foes. That's how they see it; they register the fact.

Later, before that Battle of Agincourt, Henry V tells God that he has done much to atone for the death of Richard; but, he admits, all that he can do is 'nothing worth', since his penitence 'comes after all, / Imploring pardon'. If he were truly penitent he would abdicate, but he won't do that. Yet the battle results in a near-miraculous victory for the British, and Henry declares that God's arm was here: which does seem to be the case. Does this mean that God feels that Bullingbrooke and his son have been sufficiently punished for the usurpation and may now be forgiven? Perhaps so; that's that impression given by the depiction of the victory. But the play's concluding sonnet reminds us that Henry V's achievements in France were short-lived, and that soon, in the troubled rein of Henry VI, all those territorial gains would be lost and England would be riven by civil war.

The posthumous depiction of Richard II confirms, therefore, that he, when alive, was indeed the Lord's Anointed; that, for all his human faults, he was invested by the sacred and the sacrosanct: in his case, divinity does indeed hedge a king. Once again, the posthumous character projects

charisma back in time to irradiate his mortal progenitor. The past being is morally nourished by his spectral aftermath: another symbiosis of spirit and flesh. In some cases, then, character-shaping causal sequences operate in *reversed* chronological order. (That'll bear reflection. Commentators sometimes need to analyse backwards, employing *hysteron proteron* or welcoming the widdershins.)

Thus, judgement of Richard II is not complete until we reach the *Henry VI* trilogy, and perhaps not even then. So the spirit of the dead monarch lives on vengefully after death. Personally, I regret this mystification of monarchy, this superstitious glorification of a hereditary ruler. Didn't Tom Paine point out that people who proudly trace their ancestry to William the Conqueror were tracing it to 'the son of a prostitute, and the plunderer of the English nation'? Cunninghame Graham, an aristocrat with a claim to the British throne, shrewdly remarked that he would not trust his teeth to a hereditary dentist. Sceptics, then, may relish the glum declaration near the end of *King Lear*: 'He hates him, / That would upon the rack of this tough world / Stretch him out longer.' And surely, for most of us, Prospero told the truth when saying: 'Our little life / Is rounded with a sleep.'

That's my sceptical bias. But then, the posthumous Shakespeare blows a raspberry in my ear. The character of Shakespeare, too, is not complete until we take account of its posthumous existence. 'He was not of an age, but for all time', asserted Ben Jonson; and, as the centuries pass, the element of hyperbole in that assertion diminishes, the hyperbole gradually transmuting itself into an emergent possibility of the factual. As the living Richard was exalted by his posthumous manifestation, so the living Shakespeare is magnified by his postmortal reputation.

Consider these words of the sonnets:

'So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,  
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.'

And:

'Not marble, nor the gilded monuments  
Of princes shall outlive this powerful rhyme...'

In the course of the accumulating centuries of Shakespeare's fame, the *arrogance* of such declarations becomes progressively transmuted into *authority*. Events of this year, 2015, are enhancing the character of William Shakespeare, 1564-1616. However infinitesimally, even my words, *here*, are changing him, *then*: rendering him more magisterial. Let us hospitably admit such time-defying transformations.

To conclude. Some characterisations have no foreseeable termini.

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Cedric Watts, Emeritus Professor of English at Sussex University, is editor of the Wordsworth Classics' Shakespeare Series, and is author of *Shakespeare Puzzles*, 2014 (available on Amazon-Lulu and Kindle).