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"Hell's black intelligencer": Hannah Arendt, Auschwitz, and Richard Gloucester

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The theatre of Shakespeare, the artist of the "invention of the human" (Bloom 1999), stands at the opposite side of the dehumanizing practices pursued by the Nazi perpetrators. In an often-quoted statement Arendt portrays Eichmann, one of the main criminal minds behind the 'Final Solution' as a petty bureaucrat, far from the devilish grandeur of Shakespere's Richard Gloucester, king Richard III. All the more so, since, unlike Richard, Eichmann was doubly subordinate to Himmler, and to Hitler. And yet, I argue, Shakespeare's dramatic experiments in English history can still contribute to our understanding of the radical extremity of the Shoah and of the Nazi leader. By developing the character of Richard Gloucester play after play, Shakespeare explores the experience of the evil king both as "hell's black intelligencer" and as a hystrionic orator, who artfully seduces his audience. The tragedy of the Shoah has retrospectively shed a new sinister light on Richard's perverting journey to the throne, witnessing to the shifting mutability of Shakespeare's theatre and to its enduring capacity to resonate with the evil of history.

Keywords: Post-Shoah Shakespeare, *Richard III*, Hannah Arendt, Tom Stoppard, Daniel Hecht

Il vecchio istrione è apparso alla ribalta
("Il discorso di Mussolini a Milano",
Libera Stampa di Lugano, 22 dic. 1944,
in Scurati 2025, 190).

I

Mapping the Westerbork transit camp in Eastern Holland, near the border with Germany, in a letter to "two sisters in The Hague" (end of December 1942), which would be clandestinely published by the Dutch Resistance, Hetty Hillesum contrasts the great tradition of the

Shakespearean stage with the sordid undertakings of the Nazi bureaucracy:

> There is a hall with a stage where, in the glorious past when the word "transport" had not yet been heard, a rather faltering Shakespeare production was put on. At the moment people sit at typewriters on the same stage (Hillesum 1996, 245).

Previously, in the same letter, with another Shakespearean touch, Hillesum had written: "The whole of Europe is gradually being turned into one great prison camp. The whole of Europe will undergo this same bitter experience" (243), echoing the exchange of sallies between Hamlet and his two false friends in *Hamlet*:

> Hamlet
> […] What have you, my good friends, deserved at the hands of Fortune that she sends you to prison hither?
> Guildenstern
> Prison, my lord?
> Hamlet
> Denmark's a prison.
> Rosencrantz
> Then is the world one.
> Hamlet
> A goodly one; in which there are many confines, wards, dungeons, Denmark being one of the worst.
> (*Hamlet*, II.ii.239-46)[1]

In September 1943 Hillesum disappeared in Auschwitz, together with her parents, another non-persona trapped in the extermination plans of the Third Reich.While writing inside Westerbork, or outside (at the beginning she was allowed a certain degree of freedom), Hillesum was not – could not be – aware of the genocidal nature of the Nazi death camps. The meanness of the German bureaucratic practices seemed to be her main concern, thus anticipating the image of the "banality of evil", suggested by Hannah Arendt in her well-known interpretation of the Nazi behaviour in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963).

1 This quotation is only in the 1623 folio edition of *Hamlet*. All the quotations are from Jenkins ed. 1982.

One wonders how Shakespeare, according to Harold Bloom, the artificer of "the invention of the human" (Bloom 1999, xviii), might be related to such a denial of human life and ethical values.

Undoubtedly, during WW2 Shakespeare was in England an active, inspiring, moral force, to be opposed to the Nazi dreams of a new Order, not only in Winston Churchill's passionate speeches in the House of Commons, but also in the comments of such an unconventional writer as George Orwell, who in a March 1942 BBC broadcast, after seeing a rare performance of *King John*, remarked:

> Recently I saw Shakespeare's *King John* acted […] When I had read it as a boy it seemed to me archaic, somethind dug out of a history book, and not having anyting to do with our own time. Well, when I saw it acted, what with its intrigues and doublecrossings, non-aggression pacts, quislings, people changing sides in the middle of a battle, and what-not, it seemed to me extraordinarily up to date (Orwell 1980, 239).

It is also true that Orwell ignored the poisonous fruits of the Shoah, already in full bloom, and this attitude was also re-affirmed after the end of the war. In 1944 his opinion on the immaturity of antisemism, outlined (although only in a note) by Michael Shelden (1991, 527), seems rather inadequate.

In the Postscript to the 1964 revised edition of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, originally written as a long report of the Jerusalem trial in 1961 for *The New Yorker*, Arendt explained her often debated definition of " the banality of evil", "pointing to a phenomenon which stared one in the face at the trial: Eichmann was not Iago and not Macbeth, and nothing would have been farther from his mind than to determine with Richard III 'to prove a villain'" (Arendt 1994b, 287). In her original report, after listing the contradictory and grotesque lies mouthed by Eichmann during his trial, Arendt had concluded: "Despite all the efforts of the prosecution, everybody could see that this man was not a 'monster', but it was difficult indeed not to suspect that he was a clown" (54).

Such a personal point of view – even more personal because made absolute by the sentence starting with the utterance "everybody could see" – was strongly challenged, among others, by Eichmann's biographers. Thus, David Cesarani objected that Arendt was influenced by her previous work on *The Origins of Totalitarism* (I. ed. 1950) and by her picture of the totalitarian bureaucrat – both

German and Russian – as a petty individual, not ideologically motivated. Cesarani quoted the philosopher Gershom Scholem, one of the first critics of Arendt's theories, according to whom Eichmann was "a man of extraordinary driving power, master in the arts of cunning and deception, intelligent and competent in his passion to make Europe 'free of Jews'" (Cesarani 2004, 349). Even the scholars who praise the psychological acuteness of the concept of the "banality of evil" in relation to the gregariousness of the average Nazi perpetrator, admit that Arendt was wrong about Eichmann: "The interpretive model she had drawn from him perfectly applies to this army of perpetrators, but not necessarily to the one who, in her eyes, had been its ideal incarnation" (Traverso 2004, 75; translation mine). Yet, recently, Arendt's concept has been revalued as a clever contribution on Eichmann's and the Nazi and Soviet administrative top brass's lack of moral consciousness (Ascherson 2025, 8). *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, written sixteen years after the end of the war, dealt with far-reaching historical perspectives and contemporary preoccupations, questioning the role of the newly-formed state of Israel. On the oher hand, the anguished pathos of the essays written by Arendt at the very end of the war was an emotional reaction to the awesome news coming from the newly-liberated death camps. Together with other German exiles in the U.S.A., Arendt was doubtful on the possibility of adequately representing the actual, not only metaphysical, darkness of the Shoah: "Human history has known no story more difficult to tell".

She adds:

> They all died together… like cattle, like matter, like things that had neither body nor soul, nor even a physiognomy upon which death could stamp its seal. It is in this monstrous equality without fraternity or humanity – an equality in which cats and dogs could have shared, that we see, as though mirrored, the image of hell (Arendt 1994a, 198).

Here in Arendt's language is a Shakespearean intensity that reminds us of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth: for both of them the surrounding world has become a living hell. Yet their anguished consciousness does not have much in common with the cynical stolidity of the Nazi leaders. Switching from Arendt's 1945 essay to the 1961 report, we might say that, in the attempt at coping with the impact of the ex-

tremity of the Shoah[2] on a contemporary sensibility, Arendt moved from the apocalytical and tortured version of evil in *Macbeth* to the grotesque rendering of it in the second and third play of *Henry VI* and in *Richard III*[3].

As Traverso points out, we should distinguish three different stages of Arendt's thought:

> During the first phase, between 1944 and 1946, the Jewish German exile viewed in the 'factories of death' the tragic epilogue of the hellish Nazi alliance between anti-Semitism and modern technology. During the second, between the end of the war and the Fifties, she adopted the notion of totalitarianism shifting her focus from the genocide of the Jews to the concentration universe [..]. The third phase started ten years later in concomitance with Eichmann's trial in Jerusalem (2004, 76; translation mine).

However, at the end of the war Arendt had targeted another, much more clever and articulate Nazi leader involved in the extermination of the Jews, Heinrich Himmler, the SS commander-in-chief of the Reich Police: "His character exhibited two essential German qualities, quite dissociated from each other: brutality, and a romantic streak" (Kogon 2006, 5). As a matter of fact, in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Eichmann, a faithful and efficient subordinate, is mentioned only once, obviously in connection with Himmler, to whose "special Gestapo department

2 I agree with the scholars who consider "Shoah" a more effective term than "Holocaust", employed in the Anglo-American post WW2 culture in many different contexts (see "Nuclear Holocaust") and charged with misleadingly religious implications. See Garber 2022: "The modern Hebrew term for the European Jewish genocide, 'Shoah' has no religious or sacrificial overtones. It is a powerful term which comes into modern Hebrew from biblical Hebrew and means devastation, desolation, or ruin that affect, man, nature, and land". "Holocaust" deals with a broader historical perspective: "'Holocaust' […] refers to the genocide of the Jews, which by no means excludes an understanding that other groups – notably Romanies and Slavs – were victims of genocide. Indeed […] the murder of the Jews, although a project in its own right, cannot be properly historically situated without understanding the 'Nazi empire' with its grandiose demographic plans" (Dan Stone 2010, 2-3).

3 Expanding on the developments of Arendt's philosophy with reference to Shakespeare's works is outside the scope of my essay. For an example of the extensive scholarship on Arendt and Shakespeare, see Lupton 2011 and Deasy 2019, specifically on Arendt and *Hamlet*.

for the liquidation (not merely the study) of the Jewish question, which was headed by Eichmann […] the treasures from looted European collections" were sent (Arendt 2017, 526). Himmler is one of the arch-villains of Arendt's political treatise, a ruthless executioner of Hitler's orders, the head of the Nazi police (compared with their Soviet counterpart), or, even more than that, the subtle mind not prosecuting actual crimes against the Führer (or the Leader, as Hitler and Stalin are joined in the same category), but preventing possible crimes against him:

> Totalitarianism's central assumption that everything is possible thus leads through consistent elimination of all factual restraints to the absurd and terrible consequence that every crime the rulers can conceive of must be punished, regardless of whether or not it has been commited (Arendt 2017, 559).

These paranoical precautions feature prominently in Shakespeare: immediately after rising to the throne, Macbeth is eager to destroy Banquo and eradicate Banquo's seed, while Richard III cannot stand the existence of his two young nephews, who might reclaim the English crown he had usurped.

In *Origins of Totalitarianism*, although she was not completely aware of its ideological, maybe existential, implications, Arendt mentioned in a footnote (Arendt 2017, 561) Himmler's speech to the upper level of his SS officers, held in October 1943 in Posen, "in which he, in this select public, transgressively discloses, this one time, the secret of extreme transgression that constitutes, for insiders, the glory of the Nazi genocide" (La Capra 2001, 136). After explicitly mentioning "the annihilation of the Jewish people", Himmler brutally faces the radical choices of such a policy:

> Most of you know what it means to see a hundred corpses lie side by side, or five hundred, or a thousand. Tohave stuck this out, and – excepting causes of human weakness – to have kept our integrity, that is what made us hard. In our history this is an unwritten, never-to-be-written page of glory, for we know how difficult we would have made it for ourselves if today – amid the bombing raids, the hardships and the deprivations of war – we still had the Jews in every city as secret saboteurs, agitators, and demagogues (in La Capra 2001, 137-38).

The imagined consequences of a wrong, tender-hearted leniency towards the Jews, targeted as the quintessential evil enemies of the

Third Reich, justify the extremity of the extermination practices, even their 'moral' necessity.

As La Capra (2001, 135) underlines, we must take into account "the role of a negative sublime related to a fascination with excess or extreme transgression. In these respect figures such as Hitler or Himmler and Eichmann or Hoess – despite their difference – might have shared important characteristics" (135). "Extreme transgression" is a feature which we may also find in Shakespeare's evil rulers. In fact, Shakespeare's Machiavellan rulers, motivated by personal ambition and visionary fantasies of power, herald what we might call less a coherent ideology, than the perverted nightmare of total annihilation. The question is: can the Shakespearean invention of the human be reversed into the imagination of the non-human?

II

I believe that the creation of a character such as the Duke of Gloucester, king Richard III, is a good starting point to deal with such an issue, because, in this case, Shakespeare forges the progress of his villain from an early stage, in which he acts as a young warrior, physically deformed but totally coherent with the values and goals of his family and his father, Duke of York, pretender to the crown of England, to his triumph as acunningpolitician, who employs a refined strategy of power based on the denial of his family ties (the early motivation of his personality) and of all the religious-ethical burdens inherited from the past. Although Richard Gloucester harbours royal blood, his repulsive, twisted body makes him an outsider, a misfit both biologically and socially. At the beginning he is a figure of fun for his enemies, then, increasingly, he plays the role of a malignant creature of merciless destruction. In the *King Henry VI* trilogy[4], one of the first outcomes of Shakespeare's theatrical experience, the still largely unknown playwright engineers, for his historical character, a subtle double level of development: Richard grows on stage, fills

4 I find Michael Hattaway's reconstruction of the genesis of the *Henry VI* trilogy utterly convincing and his Introduction to the 1990 New Cambridge Shakespeare *1Henry VI* he edited, a landmark in the critical revaluation of this once neglected great historical sequence. All the quotations I make use of come from Hattaway's (1991; 1993) New Cambridge Shakespeare editions of *2Henry VI* and *3Henry VI*).

more and more space, eventually requiring the interpretation of a great actor, and, at the same time, invades the political sphere of a crumbling kingdom, enwrapped in civil war. He breaks down the opposition of Margaret, the Amazonian Lancaster queen, kills her son and her husband, takes advantage of the casualties suffered by his own side (mainly the killing of his beloved father), employs a web of fake news, a systematic double standard, by rewarding his friends and crushing his enemies, and by courting the favour of the Londoners and of the Church.

In a modern theatre, and thanks to the skill of an outstanding director, the historical times, revisited by Shakespeare, in which young Richard moved his first steps, might recall the chaos and agony of the Weimar Republic, the well-meaning efforts of its politicians to reinforce its democratic foundations, gradually demolished under the ignition of *coups* and counter-*coups*, from which an obscure anti-semitic, visionary, Austrian demagogue would rise with his faithful cohorts, ruthlessly destroying enemies and former friends, to forge the foundations of a German New Order. In the 1989 production of *Richard III* directed by Richard Eyre for the National Theatre, Ian McKellen in the title role does act as an unscrupolous general attempting a *coup-d'état* in the thirties, and moving "steadily towards the throne through a succession of uniforms, from First World War overcoat, to formal dinner dress, to fascist blackshirt, to Elizabethan doublet and hose at his coronation" (Lull 2009, 36).

The progressive consolidation of Richard's character and of his bid for absolute power can be perceived as an experiment in the representation of the perverse machinery, leading an individual to tyranny, through the re-definition of the traditional political arena, and the erosion of strong family ties, sexual conventions and the merciless crushing down of innocent youth. This is not simply a power game, but the already mentioned "fascination for the excess", that Shakespeare mirrors not only in the deformed body of Richard, as perceived both by himself and by other characters, but in the awareness of his more-than-historical (meta-historical) nature declared by Richard himself in his soliloquies.

Before examining a few steps in the progress of Richard Gloucester towards the crown and beyond, I would like to mention Harold Bloom's interpretation of the play, a "cumbersone and overwritten

drama", but one in which Shakespeare introduced "the hero-villain's startingly intimate relationship with the audience. We are on unnervingly confidential terms with him" (Bloom 1999, 70). The complicity of the audience is actively sought for by Richard, when he decides to erase his family ties and to stand alone on the royal stage. While Macbeth is willing to speak only with his wife and his more faithful accomplices, on more than one occasion Richard cultivates a visible image, and elicits the genuine sympathy of the listeners, who will be deceived and become puppets in his hands. He is excellent as a public relations man, differently from the ever brooding Macbeth. A double standard is essential to his workings, as he shows himself both as a passionate lover and a manipulative suitor, a friendly uncle and a new Herod, the holy defender of the English land and the barbaric warrior fighting for his own supremacy. The fact that Bloom considers him as a harbinger of Iago shows that the role of the Machiavellan player king can be transferred to other, less socially important, but similarly devilish, characters in a sort of democratic extension of the evil ruler (Bloom 1999, 73).

At the very beginning of Richard's theatrical life, things were very different, yet we cannot forget that, in the ironical twists of the plot of *2Henry VI*, Richard's strikingly unimpressive appearance comes to light after the popular rebellion led by Jack Cade, another monstruous creature generated by the Duke of York in order to "stir up in England some black storm" (2*HVI*.III.i.349):

> And, for a minister of my intent,
> I have seduced a headstrong Kentishman,
> Jack Cade of Ashford,
> To make commotion, as full well as he can,
> Under the title of John Mortimer.
> […]
> This devil here shall be my substitute;
> For that John Mortimer, which now is dead,
> In face, in gait, in speech, he doth resemble.
> (2*HVI*, III.i.354-59; 371-73)

Faithfully followed by his ragtag army, although everyone knows his claim to the crown as a resurrected Mortimer is false, Cade is a charlatan and a trickster, a true Lord of Misrule, the self-appointed con-

queror of London where he will start a new golden age, beheading the aristocrats and the educated laymen. After his fall, in the empty space in which a discredited king sits alone on the throne, Richard of York intrudes together with his loving sons. When Somerset tries to arrest him, he appeals to them:

> Sirrah, call in my sonsto be my bail.
> I know, ere they will have me go to ward,
> They'll pawn their swords for my enfranchisement
> (2*HVI*, V.i.111-13).

In the ensuing quarrell between the two factions and their strongmen, "the bastard boys of York" (in Queen Margaret's words, V.i.115) Edward, the eldest, and Richard, the third one, are ready to stand for their father with their words (Edward), and, if words are not enough, with "our weapons" (Richard). Clifford, the Lancastrian champion, compares them to bears, and is challenged by Richard in his first speech: Clifford is "a hot o'erweening cur", crushed by "the bear's fell paw" (V.i.151; 153). The struggle between bear and dogs was, of course, an exciting familiar sight for the Elizabethan theatre-goers, while the bear imagery is skilfully exploited by Queen Margaret, as she stresses the formless body of the human cub, licked into a shape, according to a widespread belief, by his mother:

> Hence, heap of wrath, foul indigested lump,
> As crooked in thy manners as thy shape.
> (V.i.157-58)

The artist, a sort of creative mother himself to his characters, will work on and perfect this "foul indigested lump", making him not only a war-machine, but also an evil force spreading its wings all over England. "The foul stigmatic", as young Clifford defines him (V.i.215) makes an ironic use of religious quotations: Young Clifford will "sup with Jesus Christ tonight" (V.i.214), or rather, to turn Luke's Gospel upside down, "If not in heaven, you'll surely sup in hell" (V.i.216). This blasphemous rhetoric will be reinforced by young Richard's deeds at the end of 2*HenryVI*, during the first battle of St. Albans where he fights valiantly for his father, and saves three times from death old Salisbury, one of the main Yorkist leaders and another

father-figure. Before this event, Richard is rewarded by Shakespeare with his first soliloquy, after killing Somerset under the sign of the inn "The Castle of Saint Albans". Although his words are not memorable, they brutally justify a plan of total extermination:

> Sword, hold thy temper; heart, be wrathful still,
> Priests pray for enemies, but princes kill.
> (2*HVI*, V.ii.70-71)

In the first scene of *3HenryVI* Somerset's death is reshaped into a macabre show for the victorious Yorkist party, when Richard exhibits Somerset's severed head, and his father praises him: "Richard has best deserved of all my sons" (3*HVI*, I.i.17). Richard, the butcher, will grow and grow throughout the final play of the *Henry VI* trilogy, despite the attempt of Queen Margaret to circumscribe him to the ineffectual role of "Dickie, your boy":

> An where that valiant crook-back prodigy,
> Dickie your boy, that with his grumbling voice
> Was wont to cheer his dad in mutinies?
> (3*HenryVI*, I.iv.75-77).

Invincible and merciless in the field, Richard is a respected counsellor to his father. His speech in 3*HVI*, I.ii.22-33, denouncing the formal agreement between Henry VI and the Duke of York (who will be king only after Henry's death) is legally flawless, but chiefly focuses on his father's – and his own – strong, almost erotic, fascination for the crown, a prize whose achievement cannot be postponed, and culminates in a vision of blood and slaughter:

> Why do we linger thus? I cannot rest
> Until the white rose that I wear be dyed
> Even in the lukewarm blood of Henry's heart.
> (3*HVI*, I.ii.32-34).

After the Duke of York's death, a new generation of Yorkist rulers comes to age, while young Richard's character undergoes a full dramatic metamorphosis, heralding the figure of the evil king in *Richard III*. After the battle of Wakefield in which the Duke of York is slaughtered, revenge seems to be his main goal, while he has to share

the stage with Edward, the eldest brother and the future king. But something has changed in the dynamics of the new royal family. In fact, Richard's attitude towards Edward is less than respectful, as he mockingly hints at the lasciviousness of his brother (3*HVI*. II.i.41-42).

Family ties weaken, as a bitter consequence of the civil war, allies and foes change quickly, the best warriors fall, and Richard reinforces his status as the bloodthirsty executioner of the Lancaster house. While the amorous Edward courts Lady Grey, and Clarence plays second fiddle to Richard, now duke of Gloucester, "Dickie" is ready to share with the audience his fully developed new identity. Richard's two great soliloquies sustaining the architecture of the second half of 3*Henry VI* imply that a new dramatic identity will mark and define the creature born as "chaos and an unlicked bear-whelp" (3*HVI*. III.ii.162). Richard's physical deformities are not only fully acknowleged, but are re-shaped as the causes of an unbridled ambition. After all, monsters are the true inhabitants of a world in which traditional values have been uprooted. From ancient mythology and 'historical' events narrated by Homer to the very contemporary example of "murderous Machiavel", the whole progress of humanity is re-written as a long story of deceptions and betrayals, but what is even more important is that the crook-back will press the seal of his actorial skill to the new order embodied by his own misshapen form:

> Why, I can smile, and murder whiles I smile,
> And cry 'Content!' to that which greve my heart,
> And wet my cheeks with artificial tears,
> And frame my face to all occasions.
> (3*HVI*, III.ii.182-84)

Such a political program requires an audience[5]. And it requires also the re-fashioning of the conception itself of the 'character' Richard, the utter denial of the past, the building up of a composite identity, in which the old supernatural devilish villain, a snarling and biting

5 Among the Italian scholars focusing on Shakespeare's Richard III, I would like to mention Laura Di Michele, who examines Richard Glouchester as "the player-seducer *par excellence* […]. He tests "his histrionic skills", relying on "inferior actors (Buckingham) and extras (the Mayor of London). Their backing will validate his play-acting" (1988, 279; 282).

hell-hound, is combined with the mettle of all-powerful Renaissance hero. It is fit that this monstruous creature arises on the slaughtered body of Henry VI, the former king slain by Richard in the Tower:

> Then, since the heavens have shaped my body so,
> Let hell make crook'd my mind to answer it.
> I had no father, I am like no father;
> I have no brother, I am like no brother;
> And this word 'love', which greybeards call divine,
> Be resident in men like one another
> And not in me: I am myself alone
> (3*HVI*, V.vi.78-84)

He is not alone, but shares his political program with the audience, making them complicit in his evil deeds. They will travel with him through time, from stage to stage, from historical chronicle to an ever-shifting present.

In a sense, Richard's soliloquy opening *Richard III* sums up and makes the previous soliloquies more pregnant. The master chess-player must now translate his program into action, he needs a sustained and convincing outcome:

> Plots have I laid, inductions dangerous,
> By drunken prophecies, libels and dreams
> To set my brother Clarence and the king
> In deadly hate the one against the other.
> (*RIII*, 1.1.32-35)[6]

Yet, the first deceptive performance in *Richard III*, which Gloucester himself self-complacency and narcissisticly praises, deals with an inflamed declaration of love and the seduction of Lady Anne, the widow of Prince Edward, Henry VI's son and his legittimate successor. He will try to double the trick in 4.4. by convincing Queen Elizabeth, Edward IV's widow, whose relatives he exterminated, to persuade her daughter Elizabeth to marry him. Beyond the political scheming, the extremity of eros is a coherent side of Richard's will for power. Likewise, the repetead breaking of family ties is

6 All quotations are from The New Cambridge Shakespeare *King Richard III.* 2009, ed. Janis Lull.

not simply a way for him to make short shrift of his rivals to the throne, but the ideological sign that his new order does not rely on old blood relationships or traditional friends. After the seduction of Anne, Richard Gloucester sends Clarence to the Tower spreading fake news about a conspiracy his brother is involved in against Edward IV, rewards two murderers who will kill him, takes advantage of Edward's death, is appointed Lord Protector, and, by abusing his authority, obliterates his youngest relatives, and his somewhat reluctant allies (Hastings, Buckingham). "Thou cam'st to earth to make the earth my hell" (IV.iv.167), thus says his mother, the Duchess of York, speaking also for Queen Margaret, while Queen Elizabeth bitterly scolds him. But Richard seems to tolerate, even to enjoy, the cursing of a feminine trinity whose political influence has been broken down.

On the other hand, despite his secret manoeuvering, Richard tries to make his tricks effective in public, as Shakespeare needs to test the reaction of an audience in order to be sure of the effectiveness of *his* plot. Thus, in *Richard III*, public official events are carefully staged: in his meeting with the two royal princes, Edward's sons, Gloucester is eager to play the affectionate uncle, ready to bear their sarcasm on his grotesque – bear-like indeed – body:

> PRINCE EDWARD
> My lord of York will still be cross in talk.
> Uncle, your grace knows how to bear with him.
> YORK
> You mean to bear me, not to bear with me.
> Uncle, my brother mocks both you and me:
> Because that I am little, like an ape,
> He thinks that you should bear me on your shoulders.
> (*RIII*, III.i.128-31)

Later (III.iv.), in the Council held in the Tower, in which the day of Prince Edward's coronation should be decided, Richard suddenly charges his former ally Hastings with witchcraft, through the spectacular exhibition of his withered arm in front of the frightened lords. He becomes "the physical representation not only of a monster, but of a deformed body politic" (Besnault and Bitot 2002, 110). In the following long scene (III.vii.), set in and around Baynard's Castle,

he disguises himself as a deeply religious man, in pious conversation with two bishops, indifferent to the crown offered to him by his stooge Buckingham, who has the difficult task to raise the enthusiasm of the overcautious Londoners. About Richard's fake devout behavior, Greenblatt astutely remarks: "Some [among the audience] might have still recalled that Queen Elizabeth kissed a Bible during her coronation procession" (2010, 77).

"A hell-hound that does hunt us all to death" (IV.iv.48),"hell's black intelligencer" (IV.iv.71), in Queen Margaret's words, echoed by Queen Elizabeth's curses ("That bottled spider, that foul bunch-backed toad" [IV.iv.81]), and yet a staunch defender of the holiness of the crown he has desecrated, Richard produces his best performance before the battle of Bosworth, when, in his speech to his dwindling army, he lucidly exposes the dangers of a foreign invasion:

> Remember whom you are to cope withal:
> A sort of vagabonds, rascals, and runaways,
> A scum of Bretons and base lackey peasants,
> Whom their o'ercloyèd country vomits forth
> To desperate adventures an assured destruction.
> You sleeping safe, they bring you to unrest;
> You having lands, and blest by beautous wives,
> They would restrain the one, distain the other.
> (*RIII*, V.iii.317-24)

Pity that his evil behaviour was the first cause of this unfortunate outcome. Richard's oration reminds us of the slogans poured down by Goebbels's Nazi information sources while a revengeful Red Army annihilated Berlin's final defense, in search of Hitler's underground bunker (Mari 2021). After his speech Richard reverts to the brutal origins of a primeval warrior. I don't agree with Lull on this point: "Shaken by the ghosts of his victims, Richard recovers the bravery he showed in *3HenryVI* and dies fighting fiercely" (2002, 97). During the battle of Bosworth Richard does not deserve a great speech like the one uttered by Macbeth, before the ultimate duel with Malcolm. Richard's obsession with horses reminds us of the brave, foolish, Percy Hotspur in *1Henry IV*, but we should also remember that no horses were allowed on the Elizabethan scene. Ironically, Richard's last words are utterly useless, even comical:

> A horse, a horse, my kingdom for a horse!
> […]
> A horse, a horse, my kingdom for a horse!
> (*RIII*, V.iv.7; 13)

A deadly shadow in the nightmare haunting Clarence before his murder, a boar whose dream should awaken Hastings to the dangers of his cautiousness, in the final act of *Richard III*, the former crookback prodigy himself is visited by the ghosts of his victims before the battle of Bosworth. The same victims will bless Richmond, his rival. But not even the allegorical medieval frame built by Shakespeare as another experiment in dramatic History, can encompass or cage such a polimorphic creature, firmly grounded in our imagination. The reincarnations of Richard's grinning mask have achieved a cultural relevance, that some of the best modern actors on the stage or in the movies have retrieved. In 1979 the British historian J. H. Plumb wrote about Hitler:

> [In 1979] the trauma of Hitler stretched over fifteen years for my generation, breaking lives, destroying those one loved, wrecking my country […] Even now when I recall that face and hear that terrifying, hysterical, screeching voice, they create a sense of approaching doom, disaster and death (Harris 1994, 198)

It is a critical commonplace to insist on the fact that Richard Gloucester, as a dramatic character, lacks the psychological depth of Macbeth's tormented language:

> MACBETH
> Strange things I have in hand that will to hand,
> Which mut be acted before they are scanned.
> […]
> Come, we'll to sleep. My strange and self-abuse
> Is the initiate fear that wants hard use;
> We are but young in deed.
> (*Macbeth*, III.iv.138-39; 141-43)[7]

7 The quotation is from Braunmuller's 1997 New Cambridge Shakespeare edition of *Macbeth*.

What Macbeth perceives as a harrowing erasure of moral conscience, an uncanny, dehumanizing process leading him towards the unknown territory of hell, is to Richard a natural, predatory sequence of feral deeds.

With the nocturnal soliloquy in V.iii, Richard locks the door of his conscience to any kind of redemption, fully acknowledging his historically established role as arch-villain:

> What? Do I fear myself? There's none else by.
> Richard loves Richard, that is, I am I.
> Is there a murderer here? No, Yes, I am.
> Then fly. What, from myself? Great reason why.
> (*RIII*, V.iii.185-88)

We detect here a sort of meta-theatrical device. The playwright admits he is not ready to probe into an evil creature's psychological abyss. We must satisfy ourselves with the monstrosity of Richard's body, as a cause for his loneliness, his ambition, although Gloucester is from the beginning one of the strongest warriors in the circus of civil war and, at least in *Richard III*, a self-confident seducer[8].

On the other hand, can Hitler's biographers – or Himmler's, or Eichmann's – effectively dig into the psychology of their subject? Does a family or a socialbackground, the careful survey of the younger years, of peculiar relationships or ideological influences, fully account for the fanatical mind of the Nazi leaders more than Richard's deformity and greed for power?

As stressed by Phyllis Rackin, "Shakespeare's audience knows from the beginning that this is a providential universe and that Richard will fall. The audience came into the theater knowing Richard's history and they came to see a play called *The Tragedy of Richard III*" (1990, 64). And yet, the fact remains that the theatrical medium employed by Shakespeare to revisit the historical past of England challenged a coherent ideological or religious pattern (Rackin 1990, 27). In his experiments the Elizabethan playwright is as tricky as his devilish character.

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8 In *A Life of the Mind* Hannah Arendt mentions Richard's soliloquy as the perfect example of a dialogue with oneself "when your soul is not in harmony, but at war with itself" (Arendt 1971, 189).

III

No comforting supernatural frame helps us justify the tragedy of a whole people, the mass-murder disciplined procedures followed by the Einsatzgruppen in the Eastern front, the advanced technology tested in the gas chambers.

According to Alvin H. Rosenfeld (1980, 22-23) no literary text written before the Final Solution was implemented could imagine the obliteration of the moral conscience inflicted by the perpetrators, although E. A. Poe's "The Pit and the Pendulum" and Frank Kafka's "In the penal colony" and *Metamorphoses* did move towards the perception of a senseless and indiscriminate slaughter. Yet Rosenfeld ignored the transformative power of a dramatic text: at the end of the performance the dead arise on the stage – the villains as well as the good characters – ready to re-enact the same story in a different historical or cultural context.

Thus, Shakespeare's tragic language captures the abyss of grief and incredulity in which a father plunges, realizing that a human being, his daughter, is not worth more – as Arendt wrote, as we have seen, immediately after the war – than the life of a dog or a cat:

> LEAR
> And my poor fool is hanged. No, no, no life!
> Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life
> And thou no breath at all? O thou'll come no more.
> Never, never, never, never.
> (*KL*, V.i.304-07)[9]

But what about the prolonged agony of the Final Solution, a collective process in which millions of innocent individuals were tortured and lost their life? We do know that the real witnesses could not report – as Primo Levi memorably wrote in *I sommersi e i salvati* (1986) – their terminal experience of life in a gas chamber or under the fire of the death squads. The ghost of Hamlet's father denies his son the terrifying knowledge of the afterlife, "But this eternal blazon must not be/ To ears of flesh and blood" (*Hamlet*, I.v.21-22), although, in order to achieve revenge, he is willing to inform him about his murder.

9 The quotation is from Foakes's 1997 Arden Shakespeare edition of *King Lear*.

We do know that *Hamlet* was among the books brought to Theresienstast, the model concentration camp deceptively established by the Nazi in Czechoslovakia in 1941, where a certain amount of freedom was allowed to outstanding Jewish individuals and their families, before they were dutifully dispatched to a death camp. One of the surviving prisoners, Charlotte Guthmann Opfermann, has written on this precious legacy and its survival: "[…] in the summer of 1945, the still remaining clothes and the large supply of books were made available to us as part of our return luggage, provided generously by the liquidating team of the Red Cross workers and inmate volunteers". Also the collected works of Shakespeare, Goethe, Schiller, and other great auhors were among them (Guthmann Opfermann 2001, 205). Thus, in a sense, Shakespeare himself had to be rescued and had to adapt himself to the new post-Holocaust age. What we cannot doubt is that the perusal of and the admiration for Shakespeare as well as for the German literary masterpieces could go hand in hand with the extermination job: "We know now that a man can read Goethe or Rilke in the evening, that he can play Bach and Schubert, and go to his day's work at Auschwitz in the morning" (Steiner 1967, ix). We must accept Shakespeare's inadequacy, or rather the historical burden of a new perverted vision of human life, poisonously flowering from the Nazi ideology, with its advanced technological instruments of death and the widespread approval of the so-called "Hitler's people" (Evans 2025). In our days, while the word "genocide" is so easily misused by self-appointed moralists, it is fair, even necessary, for everybody to remebember the different forms of evil that Twentieth century historical and ideological processes have generated, among them the Shoah. To-day, in the clouds over his head, a Hamlet, belonging to my generation, would detect not the shape of funny animals, but the mile-long column of the atomic mushroom or the ash-grey vapours hovering over an Auschwitz crematorium.

In "'More Light, More Light!'", published in the collection of poems *The Hard Hours* (1967), dedicated to Heinrich Bluecher and Hannah Arendt, Anthony Hecht compares two different episodes of torture and cruelty. In the first scene the reader finds himself in a Medieval, or maybe Elizabethan, London Tower, where a victim, uttering his innocence and imploring God's mercy, is burnt alive:

> Nor was he forsaken of courage, but the death was horrible,
> […]
> And that was but one, and by no means one of the worst;
> Permitted at least his pitiful dignity;
> And such as were by made prayers in the name of Christ,
> That shall judge all men, for his soul's tranquillity.
> (Hecht 1990, 64)

"We move now to outside a German wood". Here a SS perpetrator who, with no visible identity except for the Luger gun he handles, sadistically enjoys the despair and terror of two Jews and one Pole, who will be buried alive in a grotesque dehumanizing game in which they exchange place and help digging their graves. At the end, the Pole "was shot in the belly and in three hours bled to death":

> No prayers or incense rose up in those hours
> Which grew to be years, and every day came mute
> Ghosts from the ovens, lifting through crisp air,
> And settled upon his eyes in a black soot.
> (Hecht 1990, 65).

The voice of the poet, the invisible witness in the German wood, cannot be silenced.

At the end of the XX century novels and narratives on the Shoah in many visual media were granted a popular reception at least in the American world, and Shakespeare was part of the picture, for instance, in Leslie Epstein's controversial *King of the Jews* (1979), where an ambitious and unscrupolous Jewish leader is compared to Macbeth (Schwartz 1999, 278-79). "There is an infinite number of stories to be told about the Holocaust" (Franklin 2011, 19), and Shakespeare is a key player in the crucible of post-WW2 dehumanizing history. When his characters step on a stage, new meanings will be forged. One word is enough, and the Shoah implodes into our minds, no matter how willing we are to forget, or to ignore the past.

On 15 Juanuary 2020 Wyndham's Theatre in London produced *Leopolstadt*, written by Tom Stoppard, possibly the contemporary English playwright more deeply concerned with reworking Shakespearean plots and characters. Spanning more than half a century, *Leopoldstadt* focuses on ten episodes involving a wealthy, large, middle-class Jewish family, living in Vienna, in a tolerant and intellec-

tually stimulating milieu where old and young ones happily share the same expectations. The opening scene is set in 1899. When three survivors, Rosa and her two nephews, meet in 1955, what is left from the past is a paper reconstructing their family tree:

> Rosa
> Emilia died in her own bed.
> Leo
> Hermann, suicide.
> Rosa
> Passover, 1939.
> Leo
> Gretl?
> Rosa
> Braintumour. December 1938.
> Leo
> Jacob.
> Rosa
> Suicide, 1946.
> Leo
> Eva.
> Rosa
> She died on the transport, 1943.
> Leo
> Ludwig.
> Rosa
> Steinhof, 1941.
> Leo
> Pauli.
> Rosa
> Verdun, 1916.
> Leo
> Nellie. The Blitz. Aaron. Artillery fire, Vienna. Wilma.
> Rosa (*correcting*)
> Vilma. She died.
> Leo
> Ernst.
> Rosa
> Auschwitz.
> Leo
> Hanna.
> Rosa
> Auschwitz.

LEO
Kurt.
ROSA
Dachau, 1938.
LEO
Zacharia.
NATHAN
Death march. Nowhere.
LEO
Sally.
ROSA
Auschwitz.
LEO
Mimi.
ROSA
Auschwitz.
LEO
Bella.
ROSA
Auschwitz.
LEO
Hermine.
ROSA
Auschwitz.
LEO
Heini.
ROSA
Auschwitz.
Pause.
Leo folds the paper
[…]
The scene fades out
(Stoppard 2020, 104-05).

1483-1485: Richard III's reign.
27 January 1945: The Liberation of the Auschwitz-Birkenau Extermination camp.
2025: Today

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