

I was struck by this line of Harold Goddard's on *Richard III*: "The world is forever catching up to Shakespeare—only to fall behind him again." Goddard wrote it in 1951, as the world groaned in recovery from World War II. He considered the play a "biography of the tyrannical" – another nifty turn of phrase, subtly distinct from a more predictable 'biography of a tyrant'. It's the principle, not the man, that wants more light. Episodes of tyranny are never truly about just one man –expanding circles of people and circumstances coalesce for tyranny to live or die.

Not that I want to in any way underestimate Richard – he's very, very good at what he does. He's brilliant, funny, effective, and could charm the socks off an octopus, all while being quite helpfully underestimated. Born with obvious physical challenges in a world that will therefore cruelly exclude him from much, he becomes a precise observer of people and their various social systems. Back in 3.2 of the last play, *Henry VI, Part 3*, he invents himself– this play's Richard. He declares to us (and nobody else) that 'Love forswore [him] in [his] mother's womb' as he rejects his family, embracing the notion that he was born to 'bite the world'. And so the bottled spider starts spinning webs to pluck the crown for himself.

But even a supremely talented warrior-politician can't get there on his own. If characters in this play have misgivings about Richard or the unsettling incidents that occur, they tend to dismiss them until it's rather too late. Brakenbury, Lieutenant of the Tower, when ordered to surrender George to a couple of dodgy fellows, replies:

I will not reason what is meant hereby,  
Because I will be guiltless of the meaning.

Brakenbury is not alone in this response, though he's the only one to utter it aloud. Disquiet roams the court in this 'glorious summer' of peace – quite literally in the case of the defeated Queen Margaret. But even among allies who together run the kingdom, factions huddle, wooed young widows wonder at their lot, lords share foreboding dreams, and even hired toughs debate the ethics of their course of action. It's a rare person that turns a subtle funny feeling that something is wrong into confrontation, though— especially with their positions and lives on the line. All these people who go along to get along as long as they can are good people, too, with excellent arguments for their choices. And so the frog of England slowly boils in a pot whose temperature it underestimated.

Misjudging the strength of the discarded, of those perceived as weak for whatever socially agreed reasons, is a mistake, every time. For a reminder, you can visit Richard's bones, only laid to proper rest in 2016 after spending five centuries of anonymity under a car park.

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