

## MURDER MOST FOUL



Shakespeare's play *Richard III* has been staged countless times since it was written *circa* 1591. It has also been the subject of films since 1912. Perhaps the most famous film version is the 1955 one starring Sir Laurence Olivier, while the most recent one, made in 1995, relocates the tale to a fictional 1930s fascist England. Shakespeare's Richard, in all versions, is "monstrous and magnetic." He is a Machiavellian figure, ruthless in his pursuit of power, who eliminates everyone standing in the way of his becoming King of England. An especially heinous crime charged to him is the killing of his two nephews, "the Little Princes," to remove them as contenders to the throne. The definitive depiction of Richard III for over 400 years, Shakespeare's play makes Richard a synonym for wickedness, and murders Richard's reputation each and every time it is performed.

An ugly hunchback, Shakespeare's Richard is "rudely stamp'd," "deformed, unfinish'd." Tormented by his ugliness he feels himself an outcast, and declares: "I am determined to prove a villain." But was Richard III really

ugly and deformed? Or is Shakespeare's representation of him merely a device to "prove" his moral corruption? The physical deformity intended as evidence of an evil character?

The portrait of Richard III that hangs in The National Portrait Gallery in London offers a decidedly different picture of Richard than that provided by Shakespeare. This portrait, painted in the late fifteenth century by an anonymous artist, is central to Josephine Tey's *The Daughter of Time*, a novel that seeks to overturn Shakespeare's conviction of Richard as the murderer of his nephews. Tey's title comes from Brecht's play *Life of Galileo*. Condemned as a heretic, Brecht's Galileo declares, "Truth is the daughter of time," thus forecasting his own redemption.

In Tey's book, set in the 1950s, Scotland Yard Detective Alan Grant is in hospital, bedridden and bored to tears, recovering from injuries sustained while in pursuit of a criminal. A friend brings Grant an odd assortment of intriguing pictures of people to help occupy his mind. Among the pictures is the fifteenth century portrait of Richard III. The portrait fascinates Grant, a man who prides himself on being able to "read people." To Grant, Richard has a noble and sensitive face, one that reveals "the indescribable look of suffering" that ill health in childhood leaves behind. Consulting with one of his doctors, Grant speculates that Richard may have had polio when he was young, which would account for his "withered arm." Whether Richard was a hunchback is more difficult to ascertain from his portrait since artists often "prettified" their paintings of royals by ignoring certain physical flaws.

Grant, who sees no villainy in Richard's face, wonders why everyone seems so sure that Richard was a cruel and monstrous murderer. With the aid of friends, the British Museum library, and a visiting scholar working as his assistant, he leads an investigation into one of history's most famous and vicious crimes from his hospital bed. He examines the historical evidence, looking carefully at all aspects of the mystery of the murder of the two princes, including whether it was "in fact" possible for Richard to engineer the killing of his two nephews, and who, besides Richard, had both the opportunity and a motive to commit the crime. Grant concludes that the case against Richard for the murder of his nephews, which is the vehicle for the murder of Richard's reputation in Shakespeare's play, is "not proven."

One of the best mystery books I've ever read, Tey's *Daughter of Time* is enormously persuasive. But will "truth," the daughter of time, win in the end? Beware the great poet who casts you as the villain in a magnificent play.