Richard III as a Fop: A Foolish Myth

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One frivolous and almost unbelievable myth constructed about Richard III is that he was a fop or dandy, who took more than the usual interest in clothes and display. The myth has an amusing historiography – and it has had an effect on views of Richard's morals and life style. After a brief and bright twinkle in Shakespeare's eye in the early 1590s, it became a steady glow in the work of popular historians from the later eighteenth century and continued into the late twentieth century. It will be resurrected, no doubt, by someone in the twenty-first century. It has a number of contributory strands: the dramatic tradition of Shakespeare feeding into that of the popular and academic historians; the lack of sound knowledge and appreciation of the dress of the past again feeding into the work of historians; and thirdly, the tendency of some writers to despise the past, both for its dress and its morals. So, how did Richard III come to be called a fop?   It all derives ultimately from Shakespeare's visualisation of the amazed reaction of a deformed Richard when he succeeds in persuading a woman to marry him.

> I'll be at charges for a looking-glass,
> And entertain a score or two of tailors,
> To study fashions to adorn my body:
> Since I am crept in favour with myself,
> I will maintain it at some little cost.[1]

It is a moment most brilliantly evoked on stage (1944) and film (1954) in Laurence Olivier's impersonation of Richard III, who from that moment was decked in extravagant fashions. Olivier's creation used many of the theatrical devices of earlier actors, including those described by admirers of Edmund Kean. It was probably also Kean's rendition that fired the imagination of the other man who embedded this notion of foppishness in the historic tradition of Richard III, Sharon Turner.

Sharon Turner was an attorney by profession,[2] who spent his free time researching in the British Museum. From 1799 he began to publish volumes of a history of England from the time of the Anglo-Saxons – on whom his work was pioneering – to the end of the Tudors. His chapters on Richard III were to some degree innovative – perhaps unusual might be a better term – but they were not the product of real insight into the fifteenth century, although he had access to Harleian Manuscript 433 as well as the work of George Buck and the Crowland Chronicle. Turner's view of the middle ages was saturated with his knowledge of Shakespeare, comparisons to Hotspur and Falstaff as types flowing naturally from his pen. He acknowledged that 'our Shakespeare has fixed a gloomy celebrity … upon' Richard.[3] Turner wanted to emulate and to correct Shakespeare: he hoped that his own masterpiece would be an epic poem on Richard. Conceived in 1792, when he was twenty-four, during tea at Cerne Abbey while on his way to see King George III relaxing at Weymouth, the work was intended to 'contribute to support the moral interest of society' and encourage younger poets. Turner discredited all the more lurid crimes attributed to the king, but did not doubt that he had murdered his nephews, and wished to present him as the product of a violent age that existed before the emergence of a true morality of behaviour. He spent fifty years of his life polishing his poem. It was a dangerous enterprise – to take on Shakespeare – and it was not a success.[4]

Turner had the opportunity to see one of the most famous interpretations of Shakespeare's Richard, that by Edmund Kean, whose first performance was given in London on 12 February 1812 and at Drury Lane on 23 July 1821: 'feline – terrible but beautiful' according to G.H. Lewes. Byron apparently had Kean's

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[1] *Richard III*, Act I Scene 3, lines 257-61.

[2] Sharon Turner (1768-1847) wrote on copyright; he was a friend of Izaac D'Israeli and godfather of Benjamin. For his work on the Anglo-Saxons and their literature he was made a fellow of the Society of Antiquaries (1800) and was later acknowledged by Walter Scott, *Ivanhoe* (1819). Later volumes of his History of England continued to 1603 but were not so admired, although they were popular and went into many editions. He died in 1847 at his son's house in Red Lion Square, London. *Oxford DNB*.

[3] Turner, *The History of England During the Middle Ages*, 3 vols, quarto edition, London 1823, vol. 3, e.g. pp. 393, 481, 559.

[4] S. Turner, *Richard III: A Poem*, London 1845, Preface, pp. i-xx, esp. pp. iv, xx. And see also his comments on 'the age' quoted below from his *History*. His usual publisher, John Murray, rejected the poem and it was taken by Longman. It was called 'a dismally long and half-hearted kind of apology' by the original *DNB*. The poem is cast in books which each cover a different subject, for example Jane Shore: strangely, although Turner knew Harleian MS 433, and therefore presumably the letter Richard wrote concerning her, his rendering of her story is that of Thomas More and Richard's role solely that of a tyrant.

performance in mind when he created his *Corsair* (ll. 223-26), and this is a reminder that this was at the height of the popularity for such glittering 'Byronic' heroes.[5] Reading Sharon Turner, there can be little doubt that this was what lay behind all he wrote on Richard III, whether consciously or not.

Turner's work is written from a moral and firmly Protestant, post Reformation, standpoint. He could describe Edward IV as 'the most accomplished royal gentleman then in Europe'.[6] In his reign he found a 'new cultivation of the intellect, and emerging moral sense' that was ruined by 'bodily gratifications', with Edward 'qualifying himself rather to be the companion of Falstaff'; it was an age 'that was emerging into light and civilised life'.[7] He deplored that 'No part of our history has been more disfigured by passion, prejudice, injustice and inaccuracy, than the reigns of Edward IV and Richard III', and acknowledged that it was George Buck and Horace Walpole who had first tried to counteract this prejudice, but he found the latter had been too 'partisan' and 'rather aroused attention than satisfied the judgement'.[8] Despite his awareness of this prejudice, Turner was convinced that the fifteenth century was a terrible one and that all the protagonists were affected by their times to their disadvantage; they all acted according to the spirit of their age.[9]

The fop took life from Turner's reading of one letter in particular in the Harleian Manuscript 433, which emanated from Richard III's signet office, and of several sections of the accounts of the Great Wardrobe of 9 April 1483 to 2 February 1484, which mainly deal with the expenses of the coronation of Richard and his queen, as partially published by Francis Grose and Thomas Astle in *The Antiquarian Repertory* in 1775, reprinted 1807-09. Horace Walpole had used the accounts before any section was edited, and his own misreading and misunderstanding of this innocent record had landed him in controversy while Turner was still an infant. The sources in question were the letter of 31 August 1483 which requisitioned clothes for the creation of the prince of Wales at York from the Great Wardrobe and the actual list of the goods as supplied by the Wardrobe.[10] Turner assumed that the letter had been composed and the list of goods drawn up by Richard III himself:

> he specifies these with an exactness and descriptive detail, as if they were as minutely registered in his manly memory, as in that of his queen's mistress of the robes. The abundance and variety of what he sends for, imply a solicitude for his personal exhibition, which we should rather look for from the fop that annoyed Hotspur, than from the stern and warlike Richard III. But it was a foible of his heart; …[11]

This image was further expanded by Turner's analysis of Richard's quarrel with Buckingham, heavily dependant on Thomas More's description of the duke's jealousy. He decided that the latter's grievances had begun at the coronation when

> The king's splendour necessarily outshone the duke's; and from Richard's peculiar taste, was ostentatiously displayed. ... The ducal fop was transcended by the royal coxcomb; and could only see his master's superiority with a malign envy .... Richard enjoyed his own pomp with too much self-complacency to think of the duke's feelings, on this subject, unless to be secretly gratified with his own superiority.[12]

Turner did not understand the norms of a medieval court and its splendours and completely failed to appreciate the dress of the fifteenth century aristocracy. He made a fundamental error and concluded that 'the fastidious use and display of his regal state, revealed too large a personal vanity, to create attachment', and went on to cite Richard's gift of fine cloth to his queen and two licences for the import of jewels with the condition that the king have first refusal, also taken from the accounts of the Great Wardobe and the Harleian Manuscript 433.[13] Turner did not resurrect his notion of Richard as a fop in his epic poem, however;

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[5] Edmund Kean, *Oxford DNB*.

[6] *Richard III: A Poem*, preface, p. iv.

[7] Turner, *History*, vol. 3, pp. 392-93, 556.

[8] Turner, *History*, vol. 3, p. 397.

[9] Turner, *History*, vol. 3, pp. 399, 417-18.

[10] These can be read in modern editions: the letter, *British Library Harleian Manuscript 433*, ed. R. Horrox and P.W. Hammond, 4 vols, Upminster and London 1979-83, vol. 2, p. 42; the list, *The Coronation of Richard III*, ed. A.F. Sutton and P.W. Hammond, Gloucester 1983 (which includes a complete edition of the 1483-84 Great Wardrobe accounts), pp. 176-78, and see pp. 80-81.

[11] Turner, *History*, vol. 3, pp. 479-81, quotation, p. 481.

[12] Turner, *History*, vol. 3, p. 499.

[13] Turner, *History,* vol. 3, p. 569.

there, he merely had Richard revile the pomp of the coronation after it was over.[14] The poem was not published until 1845, and he had been firmly taken to task for his errors in 1830.

There was really no excuse for Turner's interpretation of Richard as a fop. The substantial portion of the Great Wardrobe accounts which had been in print since 1775 had confronted historians and antiquarians with the sumptuous clothes and robes worn by a fifteenth-century king, and they should have taken these in their stride for the exotic silks and velvets worn by the nobility in the eighteenth century were not that far in the past, and men still worn the finest embroideries on their waistcoats well into the 1800s. Turner was put right by Sir Nicholas Harris Nicolas in his 1830 edition of the accounts of Edward IV's Great Wardrobe for 1480. He too found it a matter of comment that the accounts were so detailed, but he recognised that the detail was that of the careful accountants and was not unusual in any way, and that such records should be used only to describe the habits of the past. He emphasised that 'It is as requisite for an Historian to be intimately acquainted with the customs of the age of which he writes, as for a traveller to reside some time in a country before he attempts to describe the inhabitants, lest he may consider peculiarities in dress or conduct, which arise from personal caprice, as part of the national character'. This he considered was

> fully exemplified in the instance of a learned historian of the present day, who, in treating of the character of Richard the Third, ascribes to him a love of splendid clothes and a taste for pomp, which in fact belonged to the age and not to the individual.

He quoted Sharon Turner in detail, to show his

> mistaken estimate of the evidence ... they prove the necessity of an historian not merely using research, but of being able to attach a proper value to his materials.

Nicolas's statement that 'there is not a single circumstance connected with Richard which justifies the opinion that he was more fond of splendour and parade than his predecessors, much less that he was either a "fop" or "coxcomb"', has not always been heeded.[15] Of Richard III's later biographers, Caroline Halstead steered clear as did James Gairdner, while Clements Markham and Paul Murray Kendall recognised Turner's good and bad points.[16] The legend was revivified in 1981, when Charles Ross, scholar and learned editor of medieval accounts, asserted in his biography of Richard III, that Richard's coronation contained '*deliberately* elaborate and expensive ceremonies' -- ceremonies which were exactly the same for any English king, medieval or later -- and that the wardrobe accounts may reveal 'a personal proclivity for finery'.[17]

Let us now turn to the general lack of accurate knowledge of the dress of the past displayed by most historians. This ignorance was complete until the later eighteenth century. The first useful study in Engand was that of a young engraver, Joseph Strutt who published his *Regal and Ecclesiastical Antiquities of England, containing the Representation of all the English Monarchs …* in 1773 just two years before the first edition of the Great Wardrobe Accounts of 1483-84. He intended to portray famous figures of English history from authentic sources, mostly those in the British Museum which by then housed the ancient library of the kings of England. Among the books once owned by Edward IV from which Strutt chose to copy was The Chronicles of England by Wavrin. In its presentation miniature Strutt identified Edward IV, the kneeling author, Jean de Wavrin, and 'The figure on the left hand, with the insignia of the garter, *may perhaps* be intended for Richard duke of Gloucester, the king's brother' (see drawing).[18] Of course, all these figures by a Flemish illuminator of the 1470s had no likeness to any historical persons, they were stock figures, whether of a king, a kneeling author, or a man standing in profile with his back to the reader, as was the figure Strutt tentatively identified as Richard. This particular stock-figure has served artists as a model for the Third King, an executioner, a soldier, a courtier and the knave of cards.[19] Strutt's *Antiquities* went through several more

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[14] Turner, *Richard III: A Poem*, pp. 186-87.

[15] N. Harris Nicolas, ed., *The Privy Purse Expenses of Elizabeth of York: The Wardrobe Accounts of Edward IV*, London 1830, pp. iv-vii for all above quotations. Nicolas had also edited accounts for Henry VIII in 1827 and went on to do the same for Princess Mary Tudor in 1831.

[16] C. Markham, *Richard III: His Life and Character*, London 1906, p. 181. P.M. Kendall, *Richard III*, London 1955, pp. 428-29.

[17] C. Ross, *Richard III*, London 1981, pp. 95, 140-41; my italics.

[18] J. Strutt, *Regal and Ecclesiastical Antiquities*, London 1773, pl. xlvi (my italics). The later editions of Strutt in 1777, 1793 (with a supplement) and the new and improved edition by J.R. Planché of 1842, all have the same statement regarding Gloucester.

[19] A.F. Sutton and L. Visser-Fuchs, 'Richard III and the knave of cards: an illuminator's model in manuscript and print, 1440s to 1990s', *The Antiquaries Journal,* vol. 79 (1999), pp. 257-99, which also sets Strutt in his background and records his indebtedness to Horace Walpole, pp. 257-63.

editions, some of which claimed to be 'improved'. His work was much copied, both the *Antiquities* and his two volume *A Complete View of the Dress and Habits of the People of England* (1796-99), and plagiarised, and in particular as regards the so-called image of Richard of Gloucester. F.W. Fairholt reused it, and many of Strutt's other engravings, in the first edition of his *Costume in England* published in 1846 with an extensive text:

> The Duke of Gloucester is in the most fashionable dress of the day; his hat has a gold band and jewelled button to secure the stem of a feather ... which bends gracefully over the head. His crimson jacket ... is exceedingly short, and gathered in close folds behind; the sleeves being as extremely long. He wears the garter ... and he has the fashionable long-pointed shoe and clog or patten. The face *certainly resembles that of Richard III, in the rooms of the Society of Antiquaries;* but this, of course, is the younger man. His dandyism is also an historic fact.[20]

Fairholt entirely accepted Strutt's identification and omitted his 'probably'. He also accepted without question what Sharon Turner had told him. He had read Caroline Halsted's restrained biography but he preferred the drama of Turner:

> It may surprise some of my readers to be told that Richard was remarkable for his love of splendid dresses, and that his favourite Buckingham was no whit behind him. I cannot here print the inventory of the king's dresses that exist among the Harleian MSS, No. 433, and must content myself with a mere reference to a list, which, as Mr Sharon Turner justly remarks, we should rather look for from the fop that annoyed Hotspur, than from the stern and warlike Richard III.[21]

Fairholt ignored or did not know the comments of the sounder historian, Sir Nicholas Harris Nicolas. For good measure he added his own halfpennyworth, with a reference to the portrait of Richard III known as the Paston portrait of Richard acquired by the Antiquaries in 1828, which gave a spurious authenticity to his remarks.[22] His foolhardiness in comparing the two faces and seeing a likeness, and his ignorance concerning the myth of Richard III as a fop, would have passed his average reader by. Fairholt had apparently not read, and certainly not understood, the texts of the Great Wardrobe accounts of 1480 and 1483-84. He did not grasp how the contemporary words explained the visual evidence.

As regards Richard III, the substance was repeated for the next generation in the 1860 edition and the later reprints of Fairholt, and in H.A. Dillon's extended edition of Fairholt in 1885. 1876 saw the publication of the sumptuous *A Cyclopaedia of Costume or Dictionary of Dress* by J.R. Planché, of which volume one flaunted a colour plate of the by now famous presentation scene entitled simply 'Edward IV and Richard Duke of Gloucester', the latter in fashionable pink![23] Mrs Charles Ashdown repeated the substance of the myth in her *History of Costume in Britain* of 1911 (reprinted 1950s). She couched this as a scientific analysis of the small changes of dress over the decades and tried to work out the structure of the garments (she made versions of them for photographic plates), but she once more relied heavily on Strutt's engravings and text. She adopted the identification of Richard in the engraving by Strutt and described his short gown as 'fashionable' and all the details of his dress as fashionable in the manner of Fairholt.

We come to the last strand of this myth, the tendency to moralise about the past. Fairholt in particular disliked the dress of the fifteenth century and attributed what he counted as its defects to the civil war.

> The English nobility and gentry sought relief in the invention of all that was absurd in apparel as a counter-excitement to the feverish spirit engendered by civil war. All that was monstrous in the past was resurrected, and its ugliness added to by the invention of the day, until ladies and gentlemen appear to be mere caricatures of humanity.[24]

Male fashion of the time was, to his mind, 'grotesque' and 'cannot fail to produce a smile, or raise a wonder that such things could be seriously delineated', and the ladies' headdresses were 'abominable', and

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[20] Fairholt, *Costume in England. A History of Dress* ..., London 1846, p 195; this work went through several editions, Sutton and Visser-Fuchs, 'Richard III and the knave of cards', p. 263.

[21] Fairholt, *Costume in England,* pp. 208, 209.

[22] For Fairholt's other commentary on this portrait and other known representations of Richard III, see his *Costume in England,* pp. 207-09

[23] J.R. Planché, *A Cyclopaedia of Costume or Dictionary of Dress,* 2 vols, London 1876, vol. 1, pl. 5 opp. p. 310.

[24] Fairholt, p. 184-85.

'monstrous'.[25] He did note, however, that women tended to wear small caps in Richard's reign. He rounded on the dress of Henry VII's day – a king he flattered as little as Richard III, describing him as 'mean, crafty and rapacious' – and asserted that 'feminine taste reigned among the lords of creation' for they wore 'stomachers' and 'petticottes' and so 'we may indeed begin to doubt the sex of the wearers'.[26] This was essentially a childish embarrassment at a fashion of the past simply because words had survived into his own day to describe items by then worn by the opposite sex. Men did indeed wear stomachers in the late fifteenth century, the same word being applied to similar items worn by women in the eighteenth century. The use of the word neither made the men 'feminine' nor the women 'masculine', but Fairholt's sensibility got the better of him. This naïve reaction to the fashions of the past and its unfortunate moralising tone continued to circulate with the later editions of Fairholt's work.

Moral outrage at the dress of a past age, as exhibited by Fairholt, has an effect on the readers' attitude to the people wearing the dress. That Richard III was a fop endorsed a critical view of him – it was another flaw in his many-flawed character. It was also manna for the actor who chose to pick up on it, as did Laurence Olivier and his costumier: it was a comic motif capable of infinite development. As regards the historical Richard III, it is, however, merely a myth: the king wore the dress appropriate to his station, and his enjoyment of it is undiscoverable.[27]

Drawing of the supposed Richard III as a fop from Wavrin's Chronicles of England as engraved by Joseph Strutt.

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[25] Fairholt, pp. 197, 203, 181.

[26] Fairholt, pp. 230, 231.

[27] For comparison: we know that John Carpenter, common clerk of London 1417-38, took enjoyment in fine clothes for he took himself to task in his will: 'my furred gowns and other sumptuous vestments, which, God forgive me, I have many times abused in superfluous and useless observances'. Cited by T. Brewer, *Memoir of the Life and Times of John Carpenter, Town Clerk of London …*, London 1856, p. 56.