

## DARK SOVEREIGN: THE OWNER'S MANUAL

### INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

In 1983 I was the series producer of CBC Television's investigative weekly program, *the fifth estate*, a Canadian current affairs series roughly comparable to BBC's *Panorama* or CBS's *Sixty Minutes*.

Investigative television demands a high degree of factual accuracy. Taking a reasoned approach to current affairs presentation requires that producers acknowledge this axiom: 'Television too often distils until it distorts'. The medium distils in two ways—first, through normal editing and shortening; second, by selecting for action and sensation. Hence a term too frequently implied in television newsrooms: 'If it bleeds, it leads'. That 'modern' approach reflects equally well on William Shakespeare's mauling of King Richard III.

A worn paperback was circulating in our production unit in 1983. Written under the pen name Josephine Tey, *The Daughter of Time* tells a tale that acquits King Richard III of murdering his young nephews, the Princes in the Tower. Ms. Tey set her scene by putting her principal character, a police detective, in a hospital bed with nothing to do but solve the case. He does this, acquitting King Richard and restoring his name and reputation. The author's motive for writing her book would have been clearer had she used as her title the full adage: 'Truth is the daughter of time' (from Francis Bacon after Aulus Gellius). Published in 1951, *The Daughter of Time* has been an influential primer, attracting newcomers to Ricardian studies for six decades (and helping broadcast professionals to focus). Ms. Tey's verdict may be correct, but her choice of sources can be challenged and her chain of evidence seems naïve.

In 1983, before reading her book, I knew only the generally unchallenged view of most Britons about King Richard III: that he murdered his nephews, the little princes, in the Tower of London, then ruled for just two years. In short, he was a 'bad' king, guilty as rumoured.

#### 1983: KING RICHARD'S YEAR

News coverage was extensive in 1983. It marked the five hundredth anniversary of Richard's accession to the throne. Canadian newspapers printed features from the British press; and the Richard III Society went so far as to stage a mock coronation in Toronto's St. James Cathedral. Charles Ross, professor emeritus of history at the University of Bristol, whose book does not exonerate Richard, stated that Richard III was one of just two people who have been the subject of at least one major work in every generation

through the past five centuries. This was intriguing to a current affairs producer. How to discover the facts and set the record a little straighter after so much time?

#### THE WINNER WRITES HISTORY

Richard's body was barely cold before his reputation fell victim to the fact that the winner writes history. Richard, the last Plantagenet king, was defeated and killed in battle by troops under Henry Tudor (King Henry VII), whose tenuous claim to the throne made it essential that the memory of his defeated opponent be denigrated or obliterated. Even the fate of Richard's corpse was a mystery. When the victor took the throne as King Henry VII, he set about inflicting judicial murder on a number of people (I have read the figure nineteen) who had superior bloodlines to the crown.

The most damning assault on Richard III's character and reputation came a century later, when William Shakespeare wrote *The Tragedy of Richard the Third* for performance at the court of his patron, Henry Tudor's granddaughter, Queen Elizabeth I. In writing *Richard the Third*, Shakespeare distilled many scraps of Tudor propaganda, enshrined them and perpetuated a grotesque which has dominated the English-speaking world's perception of Richard Gloucester's life and reign through four centuries.

On a personal level I have no attachment to any given verdict. Was the last medieval king (or the first modern one) an ogre or a saint? He was neither; he was less than either. It is in the contradictions inherent to his very human nature that continuing interest in Richard Gloucester lies. The task I set myself in researching and writing *Dark Sovereign* was an intellectual challenge—to overturn a deeply-entrenched slice of received 'history' by substituting a more plausible version.

#### CHALLENGING PREJUDICE

My challenge was to overwhelm the prejudice built up and cemented through centuries. We find King Richard III's defenders emerging within twenty years of Queen Elizabeth's death. Several weighty biographies have countered Shakespeare's *Richard the Third*, but the public mind does not cleave to weighty biographies. The stigma remains. I came to realize that turning public opinion around demanded that a more accurate play be written in the English language as it had been available to the Bard and his contemporaries. Hence a steep-odds-against ambition: to write a play that would compete with Shakespeare's *Richard the Third* head-on, and do so in the English of the Renaissance.

*'History, at least in its state of ideal perfection,  
Is a compound of poetry and philosophy'.*

Lord Macaulay, 1828

## DETACHMENT AND EXAGGERATION

In 1766, the German dramatist Gotthold Lessing wrote an essay about a Greek statue depicting the Trojan priest of Apollo, Laocoön, and his sons, being torn apart by sea monsters. In *Laocoön, An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, Lessing describes how the sculptor toned down the agonies of the men, leaving them muted, their facial expressions seemingly detached from their predicament. Understatement gives free rein to the beholder's imagination, Lessing opined. It is that force of 'compelled imagination' which must interpret all art.

William Shakespeare's portrayal of King Richard III falls the other way. *Richard the Third* offers small room for conjecture, little doubt and few shades of grey. Shakespeare's skill enshrined the Tudors' origin myth and continues to perpetuate farce. It is this that *Dark Sovereign* sets out to challenge. It does so by presenting its catalogue of human frailties with a human—not a demonic—face.

*'Where History is vncertaine,  
reasonable coniecture must challenge precedency'.*  
Nathanael Carpenter, 1625

## CHALLENGE PRECEDENCY, YES, BUT...

'Challenge precedency' it does, but *Dark Sovereign* is not wildly revisionist. Taking many ancient and modern histories into account, the play seldom accords King Richard's character more benefit of the doubt than the median value dictated by its source materials. *Dark Sovereign* is an exercise in modern dramatized journalism, albeit, by virtue of its language, one that is unique. *Dark Sovereign* seeks to explain, not to exonerate; to define, not to denounce.

*'The English tongue is gorgeouslylie invested in rare ornaments'.*  
Francis Meres,  
*Palladis Tamia*, Wits treasury, 1598

## 'RARE ORNAMENTS' OR BAGGAGE?

Yes, English *is* 'gorgeouslylie invested in rare ornaments'. It is also invested with the ability to express precision, and the language of *Dark Sovereign* is precise. It is written in the vocabulary, idioms and syntax prevailing in the interval from about 1579 (Sir Philip Sidney's *Old Arcadia*) to precisely 1626, (a cutoff date dictated by technical reasons involving Francis Bacon). This interval of forty-seven years—in reference to *Dark Sovereign* I call it 'the Period'—marked the renaissance of English letters. Every word in *Dark Sovereign*, each syllable, word-sense, expression, verb ending, tense and function, as well as word order, metaphor and patterns of construction are present here only

because I managed to find precedents for them in written English before the year 1626.

*‘This period in our time seemeth to be the perfitest period in our English tongue  
... there is in our tongue great and sufficient stuff for Art’.*

Richard Mulcaster, in

*‘The first part of the elementarie which entreateth chefelie  
of the right writing of our English tongue’ — 1582*

As a boy I won a choral scholarship to Salisbury Cathedral School, the probable model for William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies* (1954). Golding taught and wrote at the school next door (and perhaps broke up fights across the common wall between the tribes). For my part, I learned survival skills while spending five years in the cathedral choir listening to, reading, chanting and singing the English of Cranmer’s *Book of Common Prayer* (1559), the *Psalter* (1580s) and the King James’ Bible (1611). The experience gave me an edge for this project, begun decades later. Even so, *Dark Sovereign* took about 9,300 hours to complete between 1984 and 1988. That’s forty-five hours a week on top of producing network television. No one who has read the final text in typescript during the past twenty years has demonstrated an error in my use of vocabulary or syntax. The etymological research—much of it directed to establishing precedents before 1626 for each word and expression in the final text—covers more than 4,000 foolscap/legal hand-written pages.

1626 became my linguistic cut-off year for several reasons, the major one being that it marks the death of Francis Bacon, sometimes called ‘the last great Tudor’. Bacon, an important prose author, ran up a large debt in his final years, resorting to rewriting and republishing much of his output to raise money. Only a specialist can tell what Bacon reworked in order to republish, and when he did so. Hence, choosing the year of his death as my linguistic cut-off gave me the freedom to use his full canon. (A lesser factor: Cyril Tourneur also died that year. Tourneur, or Middleton, wrote *The Revenger’s Tragedy*, an unusual Period play and a fount of ironic wit. It was hard to resist the influence of a play full of one-liners such as: ‘Virginity is Paradise lock’d up.’ II.i.)

Delaying my cut-off year to 1626 made a difference. For example, Shakespeare seems to have used the neuter possessive pronoun ‘its’ just once, in his final play, *Henry VIII*, (1613). ‘Its’ was in wider circulation by 1626. (See the footnote at 1.1.154.) It is often the case in *Dark Sovereign* that the shorter any given word the more work went into establishing precedents valid in every respect. The odds against achieving the ring of authenticity in an antique tongue are enormous. Ben Jonson, commenting on Edmund Spenser’s attempt to emulate Chaucer in *The Faerie Queene*, suggested that ‘Spenser, in affecting the ancients, writ no language’. Hence the rigorous limits imposed on the

language of *Dark Sovereign*.

#### WRESTLING WITH ENGLISH

In practical terms, the primary tool making this project possible was the optical reduction of the *Oxford English Dictionary*'s 16,000 pages into a two-volume set, published in the 1970s. (Had I started a few years later I might have used the CD-ROM.) *OED* sets out the evolution of the English language 'on historical principles', making it possible—although work-intensive and time-consuming—to establish: 1/ whether a given word existed or was being used in a particular sense before 1626; and 2/ the specific prepositions, conjunctions, verb endings, constructions or other baggage attached to that word during the Period. For example, the verb 'to look' always took an adverb, hence Shakespeare's 'The sky looks grimly', a usage that finds a place in *Dark Sovereign* as 'thou look'st too purely' (5.9.8). One did not refer to the 'foot' of a bed before 1626, but the 'feet', thus: 'And has the abbot's bed a piebald lozeng'd tapestry above it still? / and martlets on the written coffer at the feet?' (3.6.137). It's *the* feet', you notice, not 'its feet', because, per my comment above, the possessive pronoun 'its' was just emerging into general use. Archbishop Cranmer is sometimes credited with the first use of 'its' as a neuter possessive pronoun.

Common or abstruse nouns (spawnling) presented fewer problems than the multiple shades of meaning inhering in such words as 'as' and 'so'. Furthermore, about half the nouns we use today took different prepositions—by, to, for, of, in, with—prior to 1626.

#### SHAKESPEARE'S BORROWINGS

Figures of speech were often difficult to research. Both words in the phrase 'salt tears' date from Anglo-Saxon. But had those words combined in that phrase before 1626? I left a blank in the manuscript for months before finding 'salt tears' in a translation by John de Trevisa, circa 1385. (Months later it leapt from the text of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.) The 1380s also bring the first cited reference, by the dean of St Andrews, to 'Lend me your ears', one expression among many incorrectly attributed to Shakespeare. This raised another problem: Since 'lend me your ears' was common currency in English for two centuries before Shakespeare, I could have used it legitimately in *Dark Sovereign*: it would have fit perfectly in two places. But since that expression is generally considered to be the essence of 'Shakespeare' I left it out.

#### AUTHORS AND EDITORS

Other expressions confuse even scholars. Shakespeare uses the phrase 'shrewd turn' in *Henry VIII*. A scholar whose name attaches to an edition of Shakespeare explains the phrase as 'to do one a favour'. It means no such thing. It actually means 'to do one a grievous injury' or 'to play a dirty trick'. The scholar's definition is plausible in the

context of the sentence in which the phrase falls—if Shakespeare intended irony—but makes no sense in the larger context of the scene as a whole. The *OED* supports my conclusion, citing an example from the 1520s.

#### VERBS, A SPECIAL CHALLENGE

Verbs posed a special challenge. The third person singular has two forms—has/hath, reposes/reposeth. The Northern ‘-s’ form eventually replaced the Southern ‘-eth’, but not all ‘-s’ endings moved south at the same speed. Verbs common in trade and conversation displaced ‘-eth’ as early as the fifteenth century. But the more conservative discourse of law and religion preserved the Southern ending beyond 1626. Thus, ‘No right reposeth in’t; no wrong...’ (4.1.85). Since much of *Dark Sovereign* is written in ragged iambic metre, the difference imposed by a single syllable (*gives* vs. *giveth*) is critical. Sometimes both forms coexist, but even here Period writers used them differently. For example, *hath* is employed for weak stress points and *has* for strong, especially at the end of a sentence. Thus Shakespeare’s ‘The earth *hath* bubbles as the water *has*’. (There are exceptions: ‘Elizabeth *has*’ trips off an actor’s tongue more smoothly than ‘Elizabeth *hath*’.) But, to finish my main point: In some cases passages in *Dark Sovereign* did not take final form for months until I had established whether ‘-s’ had replaced ‘-eth’ in a given verb before 1626.

#### DIALECTS: MUMMERSSET, NORTHERN AND POSH

Exceptions to the above include parts for Gloucester (Richard III) and his consort, Anne Neville, which are written with a Northern bias, the better to be played in the accent of Yorkshire’s North Riding. (Richard remains one of the few kings of England since Saxon times to have a Northern—as distinct from a Scottish—power base. Hence his inability to master the levers of Southern power in time to avoid disaster.) Thus, Richard uses ‘wakeman’ (Co. Durham dialect), instead of ‘watchman’, ‘mine alone’ (Yorks) instead of ‘being alone’. One detects the difference between Northern and Southern style suddenly, in Act 1.1, where Anne, having not seen Gloucester for years, addresses him in ‘Court English’ until he, never deviating from Yorkshire, challenges her to revert to ‘a Neville’s Northern tongue’.

Then there’s ‘Mummerset’, the ancestral form of South Western dialects spoken notably in Somerset, Dorset and Devon. Mummerset was common in Tudor farce. Shakespeare had a rare go at writing it in *King Lear*. (See notes at 3.6.106.) To my surprise, it was more difficult to write monosyllabic prose for low-life characters (Will, Kate, Ned and servants in *Dark Sovereign*), than to emulate the polished oratory of nobles, such as John of Gaunt’s ‘sceptred isle’ address in *Richard II*.

## SOURCES

I wrote that the *OED* was my primary reference. Perhaps I should have said that it was my *primus inter pares* source for validating each syllable and construction used in *Dark Sovereign*. Reviewing Scene 4.1, I counted precedents there deriving from 115 authors writing during the Period. Sources included such exotica as a vast volume of letters by Queen Elizabeth I. In fact, etymological research revealed deficiencies in the *OED*. For example, Francis Bacon uses ‘voidance’ to mean verbal evasion, a sense not cited by *OED*. And *OED* finds the first use of ‘spawnling’ in the 1690s. However, that citation turned out to be an unattributed theft from an earlier writer, Skelton, of 1612. Had I relied on *OED* I would have had no valid precedent for using ‘spawnling’. Discovering its earlier source in 1612 allowed me to use it. *Dark Sovereign* contains thirteen words that the *OED* either missed or misplaced. The glossary gives these with their valid precedents.

## STRANGE BYWAYS

Students of King Richard’s reign have undertaken curious studies to support their researches, such as attempting to grow ripe strawberries in Holborn by mid-June. No need to explain that here: the ‘cause-why’ waits in the footnote at 4.3.34. However, such examples explain the diversions and sidetracks researchers confront.

## EDITORS (GOOD, BAD, EXECRABLE), BOWDLERY AND WOODWORM

At first glance the text of *Dark Sovereign* may seem older than that of plays actually written during the Period. That is because almost every play written during Tudor or early Stuart times has been subject to extensive editing through four centuries by editors of greater or lesser competence or fluency in the English of the Period. (I cite editors’ changes at 1.3.180 and 4.5.98.) *OED* offers the same opinion in more guarded language, with such comments as: ‘... much altered by editors ignorant of its history’. Self-imposed limitations have prevented that happening to *Dark Sovereign*.

On the other hand, many of the better-known texts from the Period—especially works by the major dramatists—have benefited from more or less continuous written and directorial interpretations through four centuries. Other traditions may be brief, but influential: In 1944, Laurence Olivier introduced the ‘modern’ persona of Richard III as a power-mad Quasimodo. Olivier enshrined the ephemeral of performance into the permanence of cinema ten years later.

By contrast, *Dark Sovereign* has no history of interpretation (unless one counts a two-day reading at the Stratford (Ontario) Festival. That is why my play is so extensively annotated. This edition offers guidance in footnotes (some are miniature essays) at every point.

## METAPHORS

These were among many linguistic and technical challenges posed in recreating a language that has not been written since the ‘Golden Age’ of Renaissance literature. Other challenges included choices of metaphor. For example, a century and a half after the work of Darwin and Wallace on natural selection, it is not easy to imagine Elizabethan concepts of Nature. Here is one: ‘The crying puss cat is, as ’twere, th’imperfect work of Nature making lions’ (3.4.26).

To reconstruct an accurate sixteenth century mindset one must understand the theory of imprinting infants’ brains that commanded the human intellect from before the writing of Genesis (Chapter 30) to Jean-Baptiste Lamarck (d. 1829). Queen Elizabeth Woodville’s decision to raise her sons at Ludlow, far from London, was a serious concern to her adversaries, the ‘Old Nobility’ party. They (Buckingham, Gloucester, Hastings, Howard *et al.*) would have seen her move as an attempt to mind-wash the twelve year old, future Edward V—‘The boy attends no instance foreign from our only cause, but ours alone’ (1.3.162)—making both factions determined to possess the actual person of the young Edward V. This point must have been a major irritant between Queen Elizabeth Woodville’s large family and favorites (the Queen’s Party), and the Old Nobility. Hence the angry debate pressed on the Royal Council by Hastings and Howard: ‘The common weal—moreover, the weal of our prince’s soul— / hath nobler interest than that the king thereof / should wait on his kinsmen’s trough!’ (2.4.139). The struggle to possess the person of the boy-king Edward V triggered Gloucester’s initial—and, I believe, reluctant—*coup d’état*.

## PRUNING, EITHER JUDICIOUSLY OR ‘CUT TO HECUBA’

Writing *Dark Sovereign* involved many unprecedented experiments running simultaneously through four years of work. One major unintended consequence is that *Dark Sovereign* may be one quarter again as long as *Hamlet*, making it by far the longest single-part play to have come to us in the English of the ‘Golden Age’. *Hamlet* is seldom performed in full: the lapsed phrase ‘Cut to Hecuba’ refers specifically to chopping the stuffing out of its first and second acts.

Take it from the author, *Dark Sovereign* must also be energetically pruned for the stage. I publish it in its entirety because every syllable in this, the complete text, conforms to the same standard of precision, so that the play as a whole can be used as a teaching tool. (Even now there may be lines missing.) As an aid to editing, consulting the scene by scene synopsis may help. I made a start (several starts, actually) on essential editing: marks running down left-hand margins indicate a first generation of easy cuts. I invite directors to grab a machete and roll up their sleeves. Reading *Dark Sovereign* and its glossary will suggest many points and resolve a few. Beyond that, I welcome discussion.

I should apologize/apologise for my idiosyncrasies in modern English. When writing copy for business clients I'm fastidious about using Canadian, British or American forms and spelling. My personal projects tend to be freestyle, combining North American spellings with British punctuation, getting the better of both worlds.

#### DID A RATIONAL MIND WRITE DARK SOVEREIGN?

Yes, more or less. My research and reason in/spired (breathed life into) this work to a large degree. But exhaustion also played a major creative role. Exhaustion became the catalyst, the synergy that supported, sustained and invented creativity.

Philosophers, prophets and religious figures of every stripe have taken to wild places or induced starvation and deprivation to induce guidance visions or spiritual experiences: among them Jesus, John the Baptist, Siddhartha Gautama (Buddha), Mohamed and Merlin, to name a few. One can add countless anchorites, aboriginal peoples of the Americas (i.e. Black Elk), Australia, shamans from Siberia and northern Canada and southern Africa's Bushmen. Members of ancient Animist cultures have always understood a human's homing instinct to wild places for solitude and the intuitive insights it brings. Here is Igjugarjuk, a shaman of the Caribou (Willow-folk) Inuit from Canada's Barren Lands, west of Hudson's Bay: 'The only true wisdom lives far from mankind, out in the great loneliness', he told the explorer Knut Rasmussen, 'and it can be reached only through suffering. Privation and suffering alone can open the mind of a man to all that is hidden to others.' There is truth in that. So where did *Dark Sovereign* come from?

#### CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS

*Dark Sovereign* emerged from many hundreds of fourteen to sixteen hour days of work, many of them sandwiched between my regular job in television production. Curiously, the first six to eight hours of writing sometimes produced little. Then exhaustion set in. At that point my conscious brain retired, bone-weary, from the fray. It let down its guard. When that happened, instead of repelling strange and alien words and concepts, it let them in. A larger, intuitive spirit kicked in—a shamanic state of consciousness—and I found my ink drying on words that appeared, and suited, and stayed under my hand. Yes, I wrote most of *Dark Sovereign*. But, as the Inuit and other shamanic peoples know, I had helper spirits, too. (*Spirit in Health* is my book on that subject.)

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