

'A HORSE, A HORSE, MY KINGDOM FOR A HORSE!'

UNSURPRISINGLY, given Richard's previous preference for diplomacy before blows, Catesby is amazed at the king's ferocity in battle against Richmond ('The king enacts more wonders than a man', V.iv.2). Richard then erupts onto stage with the most famous of lines: 'A horse, a horse, my kingdom for a horse' (V.iv.7). His horse cut from beneath him, he furiously rejects Catesby's offer to find one to ride to safety: 'Slave, I have set my life upon a cast / And I will stand the hazard of the die' (V.iv.13). Richard ends this striking and brief 13-line scene with the call again: 'A horse, a horse, my kingdom for a horse!'

The line is satisfying partly because of ambiguity about its minor words. Is 'a' the indefinite article (any horse will do at this point to get the job done, not the richly caparisoned horse which Richard was so careful about in V.iii.289), or is Richard calling 'à horse' (that is, 'To horse!'), a vigorous battle cry like 'To arms!)? 'For' is a similar workhorse of a word: does it indicate an active decision by Richard that, to win the present battle, he would swop anything at all for the necessary means (along the lines of the common hyperbole, 'I'd give my arm for a cup of tea'), or is it a disbelieving cry at the fact that the battle has

been lost at the point at which he lost his steed (and hence Catesby's offer)?

However, the sole variation in the line on the thrice-repeated iamb of 'a horse'—that is, 'my kingdom'—is worth pausing over also. The sources or analogues listed by Bullough, and commented on by the Arden 3 and New Cambridge editions, do not introduce this feature.¹ The king, in *The True Tragedy of Richard the Third* (undated) demands 'A horse, a horse, a fresh horse', before rejecting a page's entreaty to him to fly, declaring that the fates will determine the outcome of the battle. The Richard of Edward Hall's *Union of the Two Noble... Families of Lancaster & Yorke* (1548) turns away the same offer for slightly different reasons: he intends to make an end of things right now, one way or another, not hope for better times to come. George Peele's *Battell of Alcazar* (1594), appearing two years after Richard III was first played, has a fleeing character cry for 'A horse, a horse, villaine a horse'.

Though the three texts agree with Shakespeare's version in terms of the cry for a horse, the suggestion of fleeing (whether made by the servants of the central character or by himself), and (in two of the three) the willingness to see this battle as a cast of fortune, there is nothing in any of them about having strength beyond a man's, or about kingdoms. Where did these points come from?

The answer may lie in the play's debate about relying either on God's providence or on one's own strength.

The Book of Common Prayer requires that Psalm 33 be read on the sixth day of each month, at evening prayer. The 1576 Geneva bible's version of Psalm 33 verses 16–17 runs: 'The king is not saved by the multitude of an hoste, neither is the mightie man delivered by great strength. A horse is a vaine helpe, and shall not deliver any by his great strength'. The Authorized Version and the metrical psalms of Sternhold and Hopkins retain this

unusual collocation of kingdoms, giants, and horses. The former titles the page on which Psalm 33 appears as 'God's providence', which it also summarizes as the main topic of these particular verses. Geneva's note i to verse 13 ('The Lord looketh down from heaven, and beholdeth all the children of men') runs: 'al things are governed by Gods providence and not by fortune'. Its note l, to verse 16, says that 'Kings and the mightie of the world can not be saved by worldly means, but onely by Gods providence'.² Calvin's commentary on the verse speaks of how kings are intoxicated by their own ability, and so assume they will be able to escape if there is a problem. The horse here, he says, is a synecdoche of all forms of human assistance—and it is madness to rely on such means.³

Richmond is clear that his power comes from God, addressing himself to 'Thou, whose captain I account myself' (V.iii.108). Naseeb Shaheen points out the echo of Romans 13:4.⁴ By contrast, he shows, Richard parodies Proverbs 18:10 ('The name of the Lord is a strong tower') when he declares that 'The King's name is a tower of strength' (V.iii.12). However, Shaheen does not deal with the 'a horse' lines. I would argue that they, referring specifically to Psalm 33, verses 16–17, likewise point to where true strength lies: not in human means, not in the chance cast of fate, but in relying on the Lord. The very next thing heard, after Richard's departing demand, 'a horse', is Richmond's entry, on 'God and your arms be praised', so restoring the primacy of faith over human merit.

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¹ G. Bullough, *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare* (London, 1966), III, 298, 341; *King Richard III*, ed. J. R. Siemon (London, 2009); *King Richard III*, ed. J. Lull (Cambridge, 2009).

² *The Bible and the Holy Scriptures Contained in the Olde and New Testament* (London, 1576), 225.

³ *Calvin's Commentaries*, trans. and ed. J. Haroutunian and L. P. Smith (London, 1958), 262–4.

⁴ N. Shaheen, *Biblical References in Shakespeare's Plays* (Newark, DE, 1999), 357.