

A HORSE FOR RICHARD III

IN a recent article, Maurice Pope discussed the eponymous king's famous and repeated cry in *Richard III*: 'A horse! A horse! My kingdom for a horse!'¹ Mr Pope considered that the repetition of the line was a result of faulty textual transmission, and that either its first or its second occurrence should be cut, as 'Anything else involves self-contradiction and absurdity.'² It is the aim of this note to show that, whatever the merits of the argument about the transmission of the text may be when adduced from other points put forward by Mr Pope, the

¹ M. Pope, 'My Kingdom for a Horse,' *N&Q*, cccxxx (1994), 472-7.

² Pope, 476.

repeated lines as they stand are consistent, intelligible, and explicable.

The following quotation places the lines in context:

Catesby. Rescue, my lord of Norfolk, rescue, rescue!
The King enacts more wonders than a man,
Daring an opposite to every danger.
His horse is slain, and all on foot he fights,
Seeking for Richmond in the throat of death,
Rescue, fair lord, or else the day is lost!
Alarums. Enter [KING] RICHARD.
K. Rich. A horse, a horse! my kingdom for a horse!
Cate. Withdraw, my lord, I'll help you to a horse.
K. Rich. Slave, I have set my life upon a cast,
And I will stand the hazard of the die,
I think there be six Richmonds in the field;
'Tis not my health, 'tis not my safety,
I have I slain today instead of him,
A horse, a horse! my kingdom for a horse! [*Exeunt*]
(*V.iv.1-13*)³

As the scene opens, on a part of Bosworth battlefield, Catesby is requesting help from Norfolk. Mr Pope considered that as Norfolk is addressed twice, and does not answer, some part of the text is missing. But later in the act, the audience learns that Norfolk is dead, so it seems reasonable to suggest that he does not reply to Catesby because he is hard-pressed, about to die, or already dead. In between making his appeals, Catesby describes Richard's conduct in the battle; Richard started the battle mounted, but his horse has since been killed, and he continues to fight on foot.

When Richard arrives, he does so uttering his famous line. Mr Pope wonders whom he is addressing; the answer, it might well be suggested, is anyone and everyone within earshot. What is he requesting, and what significance does it have in the form of words he uses?

Richard wants a horse, but not one on which to escape. Rather, he wants a warhorse. He wants an animal resembling the modern Shire horse, a breed 'known in mediaeval times as the great Horse used in battle when riders with armour could weigh as much as 30 st. [190.5 kg]'.⁴ He wishes, quite naturally, as an armoured knight accustomed to fighting from horseback, to remount if possible. He is willing to continue the battle on foot, if he has to, until the issue is solved, but he would obviously prefer to be

mounted. He is trying, as his subsequent speech makes clear, to find his enemy Richmond; he has already slain five men whom he has mistaken for him. Obviously, a horse would be an advantage to Richard, in finding and fighting Richmond. So what Richard wants is not any kind of horse, but one of a particular type – a warhorse – and one which is available there and then, on the battlefield. He is asking if anyone has hold of a horse which has lost its rider, or if any mounted man might pass his steed on to him.

'My kingdom for a horse' can be interpreted as meaning 'right now, I would give anything or everything I have for a horse to be available'; it might also contain the implication 'I will richly reward anyone who can provide me with a horse here and now'. (Of course, the sense that 'for want of a horse, I may lose my kingdom' is also present: Richard's cry is heroic, but there is no reason why it cannot also be poignant.) When Catesby hears Richard's cry, he misinterprets it, as expressing a desire for a horse on which to escape. As Norfolk has not succoured him, this misinterpretation is not surprising; Catesby should now be thinking not of rescue, but of survival by escaping. Catesby offers Richard a horse, but not the kind that the King wants. Catesby does not have a warhorse immediately available on the battlefield; what he suggests is that Richard should withdraw from the battle, to a place beyond it, where he knows he can procure a horse – presumably one bred for speed rather than war. This would be a type of horse corresponding to the one that Mr Pope notes was offered to Richard in Shakespeare's source, Hall and Holinshed, 'a swift and a light horse'.⁵ (These epithets show that the chroniclers understood the distinction between warhorses and horses to escape on.) So Richard is offered the wrong kind of horse, and it is available only at a distance and in the future. Richard explains to Catesby that he intends to stay and fight, and then leaves him, as he is clearly unable to supply what is needed. As he departs for another part of the battlefield (leaving the stage altogether, and for the last time in the play), he calls ahead of him, for a spare warhorse, repeating the words with which he entered.

If this explanation is accepted, it will be seen

that these lines contain nothing that is contradictory or absurd. They only cause a problem for commentators who do not understand medieval warfare, or that horses come in different types, and are bred for different purposes.

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³ Quoted from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blake-Edwards (Boston, 1974).

⁴ *Summerhays' Encyclopaedia for Horsemen*, comp. R. S. Summerhays, rev. Stella A. Walker (London, 1952; rev. edn 1975), 291.

⁵ Quoted in Pope, 473.