

#### 'MY KINGDOM FOR A HORSE'

IT has been constantly repeated that the famous line by Richard III 'A Horse, a Horse, my Kingdom for a Horse' (V.iv.11), echoes another line from George Peele's play *The Battle of Alcazar* of 1594: 'A horse, a horse, villain a horse! That I may take the river straight and fly!', or perhaps from the anonymous play *The Tragedie of Richard III* also from about 1594.<sup>1</sup> The first one to point out the similarity with Peele's play was Steevens in his Shakespeare edition of 1793, and his suggestion has been recorded and often discussed by virtually all subsequent editors including the most recent ones.<sup>2</sup> However not everyone accepts it, mainly because no other parallels between the two works exist. But even if we disregard the philological difficulties, there is at least one other reason to question the analogy. What makes it rather weak is that

<sup>1</sup> For these and other possible sources – quite important among them is Edward Hall's *Union of Two Noble families*, where a mention is made of Richard III calling for a swift and light horse in order to escape the battle of Bosworth Field – see *A New Variorum Edition of Shakespeare – The Tragedy of Richard the Third: with the Landing of Earle Richmond, and The Battelle at Bosworth Field*, 3rd edn, ed. Horace Howard Furness Jr (Philadelphia, 1908), 421ff.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example the more recent Arden, *Richard III*, ed. by Tomy Hammond, 82–3.

<sup>3</sup> *Cyropedia*, VIII.3.25–6.

power of the human mind? The rarity of the exchange of a kingdom for a horse makes a strong case in favour of the former hypothesis, and it even effaces, to some extent, the main difference between the two episodes: Richard III offers *his own* kingdom for *any* horse, whereas Cyrus offers just *a* kingdom for *that particular* horse. A supporting argument would come from the certainty that Shakespeare read Xenophon; but although there are some indications that he did,<sup>5</sup> none of them points to the *Cyropedia*. Yet, could not the similarity among the above passages hint that Shakespeare read it? I am aware that this kind of *petitio principii* contains a critical vice; on the other hand, to assume that Shakespeare did not read the most popular of Xenophon's works on the grounds that he never mentions it nor seems to derive any material from it constitutes a fairly weak counter-argument since Shakespeare, like any other author, must have read many more works than he quoted. Probably the best approach is to bring the similarity to the attention of specialists: they may disregard it as a pure coincidence, or broaden their enquiry if they consider it to be a plausible indication of a source. For the time being, it is likely that if Shakespeare found in Xenophon the image of an exchange of a kingdom for a horse he would have taken it as a sort of exaggerated hyperbole, almost a conceit, and his genius would have had little difficulty in adapting it to King Richard, to emphasize his desperate plea.

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<sup>5</sup> For some indication about this possibility, see Carol Gesner, *Shakespeare and the Greek Romance: A Study in Origins* (Lexington, 1970), *passim*, presents the hypothesis that Shakespeare used Xenophon's *Ephesiaca* for *Cymbeline*; Sherman Hawkins, 'Virtue, Blood, and Kingship in Shakespeare's Histories', in *Shakespeare Newsletter*, xxiii (1973), 57, talks about a general influence of Xenophon, among other Greek authors, on Shakespeare's idea of a hero; Mary Renault, 'Shakespeare and Xenophon' in *Times Literary Supplement*, 12 July 1974, 749, suggests that Shakespeare read the *Anabasis*.