

Truth, fiction, and *The Daughter of Time*

GERALDINE BARNES

Agatha Christie (1890-1976) is widely regarded as the architect and supreme exponent of the English “clue-puzzle” detective story, in which a trail of genuine clues and red herrings tests the deductive powers of investigator and reader in the solving of a crime which has been committed in a small community from within a limited group of suspects,¹ but it was *The Daughter of Time* (1951), a clue-puzzle story by Christie’s less prolific contemporary Josephine Tey,² that the British Crime Writers’ Association voted as the top crime fiction novel of all time in 1990. Although it continues to be acknowledged as a classic of the genre,³ *The Daughter of Time*, which investigates the suspicious disappearance of the two young sons of Edward IV from the Tower of London, shortly before Edward’s brother succeeded to the throne as Richard III, takes the detective story into the domain of “wild history”—the ingenious tying of history’s loose ends—and one of its common themes, the Secret Survival.⁴

“Did he kill his nephews? Or did they *outlive* him?” asks the backcover blurb of the Penguin Classic Crime edition, which touts *The Daughter of Time* as “one of the most original pieces of historical detection ever written.” “New light on the murder of the ‘Princes in the Tower’,” claims the 1971 Penguin reprint. “Inspector Grant ... does intensive reading on the subject of Richard’s purported crimes, and ultimately ... proves him not guilty,” according to George N. Dove;⁵ and Christina Martin has recently argued that “*The Daughter of Time* ... used the [detective fiction] form inventively and controversially to launch a serious attack on contemporary research methods in history” (Martin 193). The novel uses the conventions of detective fiction indisputably to great effect in order to construct an ingenious solution to a fifteenth-century case of regicide, but is it really a “textbook study of how misrepresentation occurs and is perpetuated” (Martin 195). Does it prove its claim that “small facts” are superior to

“history”? Or are we merely seduced by the framing of “wild history” in police procedural format and misled by anachronistic demystification of the medieval?

The rehabilitation of the wrongly accused or unjustly maligned is of prime concern throughout this writer’s work.⁶ Along with the eight detective novels of Josephine Tey, Elizabeth Mackintosh wrote a number of historical plays under the name of Gordon Daviot, the most successful of which was a sympathetic portrayal of the ill-fated Richard II in *Richard of Bordeaux* (1933). These three focuses of Daviot/Tey’s interest – history, detection, vindication – converge in *The Daughter of Time*. The novel’s “wrongly accused”, Richard III (r. 1483-85), succeeded Edward IV after Edward’s sons, thirteen-year-old Edward, Prince of Wales, and ten-year-old Richard, Duke of York, were declared illegitimate by an Act of Parliament on the grounds of the alleged invalidity of Edward’s marriage to their mother, Elizabeth Woodville. The princes were last seen in the royal quarters of the Tower of London, in July 1483. Their subsequent disappearance is generally presumed to be a case of murder engineered by their power-hungry uncle,⁷ whose short reign ended two years later at the Battle of Bosworth Field. Richard III was not, however, accused of regicide in the posthumous charges brought against him by the parliament of his successor, Henry Tudor (Henry VII), and owes his subsequent notoriety principally to a work entitled *The History of King Richard III* (ca. 1513), written early in the sixteenth century by Sir Thomas More. More, Henry VIII’s Lord Chancellor from 1529 to 1532, was executed for high treason in 1535, after refusing to impugn the spiritual authority of the Pope, and canonized four hundred years later.

More’s *History*, Shakespeare’s ultimate source for *The Tragedy of Richard III*, itself reads more like script than chronicle. Its high proportion of dialogue and “requisite stage-properties” have, since the 1930s, inspired arguments that the work is “a species of dramatic art”⁸ and elicited specific generic attribution to medieval morality plays and satiric drama (Donno 405-06). Elizabeth Story Donno has recently offered a

persuasive reading of *The History* as an exercise in the classical rhetorical figure of *vituperatio* (“denunciation”: Donno 404). The rhetoric of the Middle Ages also exerts its influence on the work. When More paints his subject as a deformed monster, both physically and morally,

little of stature, ill-featured of limbs, crook-backed, his left shoulder much higher than his right, hard-favoured of visage ... He was malicious, wrathful, envious ... He was close and secret, a deep dissembler ... where his advantage grew, he spared no man’s death whose life withstood his purpose ... ⁹

–he is drawing on the medieval idea that ugliness of form mirrors the state of the soul. The murder of the princes in *The History* is troped as medieval hagiography, in which, typically after imprisonment and many tortures, the saint happily disengages from the insults perpetrated upon his or her mortal body to join God. Not so much royally accommodated as imprisoned in the Tower of London and then murdered in their beds, the children abandon their bodies to the hands of their executioners and ascend into heaven:

within a while, smothered and stifled, their breath failing, they gave up to God their innocent souls into the joys of heaven, leaving to the tormentors their bodies dead in the bed (105).

Just as the mortal remains of the child martyr in Chaucer’s Prioress’s Tale are defiled by being thrown into a sewer, murder and excrement are linked in *The History*: as Richard hatches his plot to kill the princes he is, More remarks, “sitting on the stool – a fitting carpet for such a counsel” (104).

Despite the assumption of Richard’s guilt by the majority of modern historians, writers over the last three centuries have from time to time embraced the notion of Richard as the victim of a Tudor conspiracy of vilification, the best known of a number of attempts at vindication in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries being Horace Walpole’s *Historic Doubts on the Life and Reign of Richard III* (1768). Ideologically, *The Daughter of Time* follows in this tradition of rehabilitation;

structurally, it subscribes to the pattern of the “police procedural”; rhetorically, it interrogates the process of historical investigation by opposing the ostensibly objective gathering of “small facts”, observation, and intuition to the subjective construction of “myth” and “legend”. Lined up on opposite sides in this inquisitorial contest are two sixteenth-century sources: a painting (ca. 1590-1600) of Richard III by an unknown artist, which hangs in the National Portrait Gallery in London, and More’s *History*.

The *History* becomes the principal quarry of an investigation in which clues are entirely textual, and values and judgments are themselves slanted and shaped by various forms of textuality. Lengthy passages attributed to a non-existent historical novel about Richard’s mother, *The Rose of Raby*, serve as positive character witness through their idealized portrayal of family life in the household of his parents, the Duke and Duchess of York. Historical fiction of this kind is, Grant would have us believe, a more “illuminating” guide to character than the “statistics” of constitutional history.¹⁰ The first of two instances in which Tey indulges in self-referential textual allusion is Grant’s citation of the play *Richard of Bordeaux* as the implicitly reliable source of his knowledge of Richard II: “He knew all about that because he had in his youth seen *Richard of Bordeaux* at the New Theatre; four times he had seen it” (43). The second, archly couched in the topos of authorial modesty, serves the dual purpose of reminding readers of Tey’s credentials as an historian and directing them to read *The Daughter of Time* as history rather than fiction, when the actor, Marta Hallard, complains that her friend, Madeline March, is postponing the composition of a play for her in order to write “one of her awful little detective stories” (101). The proposed tangible outcome of the investigation is itself a textual one: Grant’s assistant, Brent Carradine, vows to give up his study of the Peasants’ Revolt and to write a book entitled *History is Bunk*.

The Daughter of Time deviates from the investigative pattern of the classic police procedural, where the crime is solved by

teamwork (Dove 36-7), towards the direction of the “Great Policeman” tradition of Edgar Allan Poe and Arthur Conan Doyle, in which the detective works either on his own or with a single associate. Like Poe’s August Dupin and Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes, Grant is a man of sensitivity, superior imagination, and intuition. Among his intuitive capabilities is an ability, which he has demonstrated in Tey’s earlier detective novels, to read faces. That talent is initially employed in *The Daughter of Time* to provide him with opportunity, while confined to a hospital bed and impatiently recuperating from injuries sustained during the apprehension of a criminal, to keep his professional hand in. Presented with a collection of historical portraits, all of them of people associated with unsolved mysteries, Grant’s interest is drawn to that of a man in his mid-thirties, richly attired in the fashion of the late fifteenth-century. He attempts a professional and personal assessment:

A judge? A soldier? A prince? Someone used to great responsibility, and responsible in his authority. Someone too-conscientious. A worrier; perhaps a perfectionist. A man at ease in a large design, but anxious over details (26).

The reverse of the portrait reveals that its subject is Richard III. So begins the reopening of the case. The novel’s demystification of the medieval, whereby fifteenth-century royal intrigue is expressed in terms of twentieth-century middle class suburban rivalry, begins with Grant’s debunking of Marta Hallard’s romantic view of Mary Queen of Scots (“Her tragedy was that she was born a Queen with the outlook of a suburban housewife. Scoring off Mrs Tudor in the next street is harmless and amusing; it may lead you into unwarrantable indulgence in hire-purchase” [16]) and Nurse Ingham’s heroic image of Richard I (“an intolerable bounder ... A hyperthyroid type ... Rocketing to and fro about the earth like a badly made firework” [31]). The brutal and momentous events of late fifteenth-century English history are unthreateningly contained in Grant’s hospital room, which serves the reader as a comfortingly secure and familiar filter through which to experience the last years of the Wars of the Roses. More’s

horrific account of the murder of the princes, for example, is relayed in abbreviated form, and infanticide is trivialized by being subordinated to and subsumed by the regime of the nursery:

Richard had suggested to Robert Brackenbury, Constable of the Tower, that it might be a good thing if the Princes disappeared, but Brackenbury would have no part in such an act. Richard therefore waited until he was at Warwick, during his progress through England after his coronation, and then sent Tyrrel to London with orders that he was to receive the keys of the Tower for one night. During that night two ruffians, Dighton and Forrest, one a groom and one a warder, smothered the two boys.

At this point The Midget came in with his lunch and removed the book from his grasp ... (64-5)

As the *New York Times* crime fiction reviewer, Marilyn Stasio, remarked a few years ago in an article entitled “Crimes Against Children: The Trend in Mysteries”,¹¹ the lack of moral ambiguity in such offences vitiates any possibility of compassion for the perpetrator. Curiously, however, the reverse prevails in *The Daughter of Time*, where the sympathies of investigator and audience are transferred throughout the novel from the princes to their alleged murderer. Marta Hallard assumes a theatrically callous attitude towards childhood by sketching this possible scenario for the murder of Prince Edward:

Perhaps the brat was unbearable, and Richard longed to “larn” him. Isn’t it odd how we never think of victims as anything but white innocents ... I’m sure he was a quite intolerable young man, actually, and long overdue for that pushing into the pit. Perhaps young Edward was just sitting up and begging to be quietly put down (76).

Nurse Darroll’s expressions of sympathy for the children are robbed of force by an excess of sentimentality and subjectivity:

“Ah, those poor lambs!” she said, her great cow’s-eyes soft with pity ... “Those two precious little boys. It used to be my nightmare when I was a kiddy. That someone would come and put a pillow over my face when I was asleep” (41).

References to childhood and to childhood suffering, uncoloured by the heavy humour of the above passages, nevertheless permeate the novel. Grant’s investigation starts with a school history book owned by Nurse Darroll (“There was something curiously touching in the fact that The Amazon should treasure this childish literature” [32]). Extracts from the private correspondence of the Paston family of Norfolk, in the years 1440-1486, printed in a constitutional history of England which Grant reads as part of his preliminary investigation, refer to Richard and his brother George, Duke of Clarence, as “the two little York boys” (47), who become fixed in his mind as “the babies of the York family” (48). In *The Rose of Raby*, Richard’s most prominent characteristics are loyalty and youthfulness:

Edward still had Richard’s allegiance; his heart-whole and worshipping allegiance.

Nor in after years was that allegiance—an adult allegiance of recognition and acceptance—ever less than heart-whole (60).

The image of a sleeping child comes to Grant’s mind in the painting’s delineation of Richard’s “slight fullness of the lower eyelid, like a child that has slept too heavily” (27). Grant, moreover, discerns in the portrait “that incommunicable, that indescribable look that childhood suffering leaves behind it” (26). His surgeon sees the painting as a projection of illness rather than villainy: “It’s the look one sees on the face of a cripple child” (28). Grant is himself infantilised: incarcerated in a hospital bed, stripped of his professional dignity, and vulnerable to adult figures like the bossy and patronising Nurses Ingham and Darroll, his situation absurdly parallels that of the doomed young princes.

As they visit his hospital room, a number of people are “interviewed” about the case by Grant. Unequivocal assertions of Richard’s guilt tend to come from the lower ranks of the

professional and social hierarchy. Nurse Ingham, for instance, is firm in her conviction:

A murdering brute wasn't he? ... Did away with his two little nephews, poor brats. Had them smothered ... Smothered with pillows ... (37).

Grant's cleaning lady, Mrs Tinker, who has a taste for royal occasion and tabloid murder reports, is firmly and ungrammatically opinionated:

Everyone's 'eard of the Princes in the Tower ... He put a pillow on their faces when they was asleep. Who did? Their wicked uncle, Richard the Third. You didn't ought to think of things like that when you're poorly (49).

The hospital porter admires the accused's audacity: Richard, he says, was "the first multiple murderer ... Murdered his brother, and his cousin, and the poor old King in the Tower [Henry VI], and then finished off with his little nephews. A wholesale performer" (121). On the other hand, the portrait prompts Grant's surgeon to think of illness, probably infantile paralysis, rather than villainy (28-29); Sergeant Williams, "a fellow policeman" (39), takes its subject possibly for a judge; the hospital matron sees suffering as the painting's predominant characteristic: "Villains don't suffer, and that face is full of the most dreadful pain" (45). Marta Hallard's considered assessment is that it is "really quite a gentle face" (74).

The discrepancy between the apparent mildness of the portrait and the monster of More's *History* inspires Grant to apply modern methods of policing to test assumptions of Richard's guilt against fifteenth-century evidence. The unearthing of "small facts" rather than the florid constructions of "history" is likely, he anticipates, to reveal motive, opportunity, means, and the identity of the greatest beneficiary of the princes' death. His assistant, Brent Carradine, a youthful American for whom research in the British Museum into the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 provides a convenient alibi ("I had to think of something that I could do only in London" [79]) for the pursuit of an actress of whom his father disapproves, is not the

sort of professional historian who is derided throughout the novel. Avowedly uninterested in the “historical” – that is, subjective – interpretation of source material (“You’re the investigator. I’m only the looker-upper” [97]; “I’m only a research worker” [104]; “I know it isn’t my business to think or draw deductions – I’m just the Research Worker” [114]), Carradine undertakes, “whether we can deduce their intentions or not” (97), he says, to discover the identities and movements of anyone with a vested interest in the princes’ fate.

Beginning with Edward IV’s death, on 9 April 1483, Grant charts the day-by-day movements of the principals in the case through Carradine’s tracking of detail from late-fifteenth-century sources, in particular a French chronicle, the *Mémoires* of Philippe de Commines. Richard, Grant deduces, would not be the chief beneficiary of the princes’ deaths, because, even he had got rid of them, there would have been multiple other possible claimants. He concludes that the children were alive and well when Henry VII became king in 1485 and that Henry, who married their sister, Elizabeth, and repealed the Act which declared the children of Edward IV illegitimate, in order to ensure that his own wife was born in wedlock, had the clearest motive for killing them. Grant’s hypothesis is that it was Henry VII who needed to have the princes out of the way, because their reinstatement to legitimacy gave them a prior claim on the throne.

Constructed as hostile witness, the *History* is subjected to the scrutiny of modern police procedure and discredited as an accessory after the fact. By treating the work as if it purports to be the eyewitness deposition of Thomas More, Grant can condemn More as an unreliable witness and his “testimony” as hearsay. Thomas More

had been only eight when Richard died at Bosworth.
Everything in that history had been hearsay.

And if there was one word that a policeman loathed more than another it was hearsay. Especially when applied to evidence (71).

Grant declares, “It’s a damned piece of hearsay and a swindle” (73) and concludes “From the police point of view there is no case against Richard at all” (134). Whereas *The History* is demonized as the embodiment of Sir Thomas More (“the sainted More”), a tall poppy viciously cut down to size by the determinedly unimpressed Grant (“The fact that Sir Thomas was a martyr and a Great Mind did not cut any ice at all with him, Alan Grant” [72]), sources less overtly hostile to Richard retain their inanimate status. The *Mémoires* of Commines, for example, remains very much a written text, a material product of the printing process rather than the living expression of its author’s prejudices: “I haven’t,” says Carradine, “been able to get hold of a copy so far. But someone has promised to let me see a copy of Madrot’s 1901 printing of it tomorrow” (107).

As clue-puzzle mystery, *The Daughter of Time* is compelling on a first reading. As historical investigation, it flies in the face of the evidence;¹² and as police investigation, it is highly questionable. Take, for example, its selective use of fact. Tey draws on the Commines *Mémoires* to provide details of the Bishop of Bath’s pronouncement to Parliament of the invalidity of Edward IV’s marriage (111-12) but omits the statement elsewhere in the *Mémoires* that: “The duke had his two nephews murdered and himself made king.” The damning rumour reported in another fifteenth-century chronicle, written at Croyland Abbey, that the princes were put to death during Richard’s reign, is coolly treated by Grant as inconvenient but easily disposable allegation (“He had been too often, in his professional life, faced with a fact that apparently destroyed his whole case to be dismayed now” [141]) which can be shrugged off as the malicious work of John Morton, Archbishop of Canterbury in the reign of Henry VII and More’s main source for the *History*.

The Daughter of Time puts the case of the Little Princes into the hands of a policeman with a record, established in four earlier novels,¹³ of honesty and integrity. It assumes an ostensibly objective viewpoint by making him insist upon the evidence of contemporary state documents and chronicle as the

basis of his investigation. On the other hand, Grant's aggressively plain-man, anti-historian approach to the case is, on the strength of the subjective testimony of a portrait and a novel, biased in favour of the accused from the beginning. When he finally makes notes on his two principal suspects, Richard III and Henry VII, the form of presentation is objective (172-4), but the matter is not. The case, he states, is: "Disappearance of two boys (Edward, Prince of Wales; Richard, Duke of York), from the Tower of London, 1485, or thereabouts." Under "Previous Record" the entry for Richard III goes thus: "Good. Has excellent record in public service, and good reputation in private life. Salient characteristic as indicated by his actions: good sense": in other words, "not the criminal type." Henry VII's "Previous Record" is slanted differently: "An adventurer, living at foreign courts. Son of an ambitious mother. Nothing known against his private life. No public office or employment. Salient characteristic as indicated by his actions: subtlety." Henry, we are led to deduce, is devious, lazy, and unEnglish.

Historical fact is further manipulated by anachronistic shifts of cultural register. Grant imposes twentieth-century sensibilities and conventions of criminal investigation on fifteenth-century royal politics to interpret the conduct of Edward IV's widow to Richard's advantage: "In a police investigation," he says, "you look for any abnormalities in behaviour among the suspects in a crime:"

'If your two sons had been murdered by your brother-in-law, would you take a handsome pension from him? ... Of course I'm only a policeman,' Grant said. 'Perhaps I never moved in the right circles. It may be that I've met only nice people. Where would one have to go to meet a woman who became matey with the murderer of her two boys?' (137)

The translation "into modern terms" of a letter in which, with avuncular indulgence, Richard gives his consent to the marriage of his Solicitor-General and Edward IV's former mistress ("Do, my dear Bishop, send for him and see if you can talk some sense into his silly head. If you can't, and if there is no bar to

their marriage from the Church's point of view, then I agree to it" [117]) serves as another device to shape Richard in benevolent terms which strike a chord with the modern reader. By contrast, a reference in a speech by the Chancellor of France during Richard's reign to the "massacre" of the princes is ridiculed by being measured according to the political rhetoric of Capitol Hill. The Chancellor sounds, says Carradine, like an American senator decrying "someone who had brought in a measure his own people back home wouldn't like ... It's a Congressman scoring a point" (143-4). *The History* is disparaged by means of the same technique, when—if we accept Donno's argument—late medieval *vituperatio* is equated with "Sunday-paper accounts of hysterical scenes and wild accusations" (122).

In the end, Grant's "solution" to the mystery has less to do with the probabilities of history than with the manipulation of evidence to produce a neat tying up of loose ends and the revelation that, in the best clue-puzzle tradition, the person least likely is the culprit. The novel "solves" the murder of the princes in terms of its own logic, but that logic is predicated upon the unswerving assumption that the prime suspect is innocent. Unashamedly *parti pris*, Grant tailors the interpretation of every piece of evidence to fit a pre-existing judgement. "Truth" may, as the proverb has it, be the daughter of time, but Tey's manipulation of the evidence has more in common with the rhetorical flights of *The History* than with the facts of history. Tey counters Tudor propaganda with Scotland Yard literalism to produce an accomplished exercise in anti-*vituperatio*. An authority on portraits from the Victoria and Albert Museum is reported to have remarked that the painting of Richard is "the face of a saint" (74), and by the end of the novel, the scornfully tagged martyr to principle, "the sainted Sir Thomas", has been ousted from the ranks of the blessed by the implicitly canonized Richard, martyr to history. The pragmatic world of the police procedural has been invaded by the unsubstantiated claims of wild history, and the ostensibly objective process of investigation transformed into an unashamed piece of advocacy. The measure of Tey's skill is

that the story is compelling and we want to be convinced; the fatal flaw in her method is to stretch the boundaries of detective fiction beyond their naturalistic limits to the point where Richard III is, simply, too good to be true.

¹ See Stephen Knight, *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction* (London and Basingstoke, 1980), Chapter 4.

² Josephine Tey was one of two pseudonyms used by the Scottish writer, Elizabeth Mackintosh (1896-1952). For an extended discussion of her life and works, see Nancy Ellen Talburt, "Josephine Tey", in *10 Women of Mystery*, ed. Earl F. Bargainnier (Bowling Green, Ohio, 1981), 41-76.

³ See, for example, Christina Martin, "Josephine Tey: Scottish Detective Novelist," *Studies in Scottish Literature* 29 (1996), 193.

⁴ On this subject, see Charles Paul Freund, "The death of mystery", *Good Weekend*, 8 July 2000, 51.

⁵ George N. Dove, *The Police Procedural* (Bowling Green, Ohio, 1982), 37.

⁶ See Talburt, "Josephine Tey", *10 Women of Mystery*, 49-50.

⁷ Bones were found under a staircase in the White Tower in 1674, during the reign of Charles II, and were buried as those of the princes four years later in Westminster Abbey. When exhumed in 1933, they were identified as the skeletons of two boys, aged about 10 and 12.5 years. See further, Alison Weir, *The Princes in the Tower* (London, 1992), 249-58.

⁸ A.F. Pollard, "The Making of Sir Thomas More's Richard III," *Historical Essays in Honour of James Tait* (Manchester, 1933); cited Elizabeth Story Donno, "Thomas More and *Richard III*," *Renaissance Quarterly* 35 (1982), 404.

⁹ *Sir Thomas More's History of King Richard III*, in *Richard III. The Great Debate*, ed. Paul Murray Kendall (New York and London, 1965), 8. Subsequent references are to this edition.

¹⁰ *The Daughter of Time* (1951; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1954; repr. 1971), 53. Subsequent references are to this edition.

¹¹ *The New York Times Book Review*, 8 October 1995, 27.

¹² For a critique of the novel's historicity, see Ralph Stewart, "Richard III, Josephine Tey, and Some Uses of Rhetoric", *Clues* 12/1 (1991), 91-99.

¹³ *The Man in the Queue* (1929); *A Shilling for Candles* (1936); *The Franchise Affair* (1938); *To Love and Be Wise* (1950).

GERALDINE BARNES teaches medieval literature in the Department of English at the University of Sydney.