

7th June 2021

Shrift

**"GLOUCESTER: Off with his head! Now, by Saint Paul I swear,
I will not dine until I see the same.**

**RATCLIFF: Dispatch, my lord [Hastings]; the duke would be at dinner:
Make a short shrift; he longs to see your head."**

William Shakespeare, Richard III

The phrase, "to give short shrift" came up in a discussion group recently. It means, of course, "to give little and unsympathetic time to" or to be cursory in dealing with something. I don't think I've heard "shrift" apart from this expression. Have *you* come across a shift that isn't short? So where on earth does it originate?

Centuries ago, a priest hearing the confession of a dying person would "shrive" (absolve) him or her by imposing a penance called a "shrift" to provide absolution. To "give short shrift", therefore, was to do so quickly or cursorily because time was short. The nearest we get to it is in "Shrove Tuesday" (Pancake Day) before Lent. This was a day for "shriving", when people were "shriven" or "shrove" in penitential rites.

"Short shrift" was also used as an expression denoting very little time between condemnation and punishment. In the 17th century, criminals were sent to the scaffold immediately after sentencing and only had time for a cursory "short shrift" before they were hanged.

Following the death of Edward IV in 1483, the Duke of Gloucester was appointed Lord Protector of England. He accused Lord Hastings of plotting against him and arranged for him to be executed. As Gloucester was anxious to get his dinner, Hastings was allowed only "a short shrift". An account of this story was printed almost a hundred years later by the English writer Raphael Holinshed in *The Chronicles of England* in 1577. Shakespeare had clearly read the Chronicles before he wrote Richard III.

So, when *we* use the expression "short shrift" now, perhaps it's worth stopping to think whether someone or something deserves more than that. We can be guilty of believing that *our* rush to dinner is more important than due consideration of a person's feelings, or our attitude of condemnation, or a more careful deliberation on an important task. It might be useful to give "short shrift" more than a short shrift today ...

A prayer for today

I'm sorry for rushing, Lord! So I'll stop and give you more than my usual short shift! Amen.

An original reflection by @ Tom Gordon Also available at <https://swallowsnestnet.wordpress.com>