

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Richard III 1592-1594

Shakespeare

Overview

Henry VI. By the completion of his *Henriad* trilogy, the sequence of studies of King Henry VI, Shakespeare has begun to achieve judicious popularity on the London stage, both as an actor and as a playwright. While Henry himself is something of a non-character, as far as concerns the manly arts of statesmanship, and while Henry in the end yields everything to his wife, Margaret, he serves admirably as a figurehead around whom to assemble a cogent picture of nascent early modern Britain, in the throes of reaching for some kind of constitutional order. In the end, of course, Henry is killed, and his lacklustre efforts, to promote a national sense of unity, are pretty much in vain, the power structure of his nation having slowly veered to the Tudor line, away from the House of Lancaster.

Tudors. The outcome, of the Lancastrian search for stable control, is that the House of York, in the person of King Edward IV, acquires the national power—always by actual hand to hand battle, significantly—and that the backdrop of the present play is established. Edward brings into prominence his two brothers, George, Duke of Clarence, and Richard, Duke of Gloucester, who is to become the Richard III of this play. The Elizabethan dramatist, in Shakespeare, cannot easily resist the fascinations of Gloucester (as Richard is called throughout the play), who will succeed his brother Edward, with the help of machinations so vile that from time to time even the sober critic must giggle at the extremity. It is these very machinations which make of Richard a fascinating character, Machiavellian, sinister, yet at the same time self-absorbed and with a horrible touch of irony about himself.

Characters

House of York

King Edward IV, King of England
Richard, Duke of Gloucester, Edward IV's brother, King Richard III
George, Duke of Clarence, Edward IV's brother
Duchess of York, mother of Edward, Richard, and George
Edward, Prince of Wales, Edward IV's eldest son

House of Lancaster

Queen Margaret, widow of King Henry VI
Ghost of King Henry VI
Ghost of Edward of Westminister, Prince of Wales, Henry VI's son
Lady Anne Neville, widow of Edward of Westminister, later wife of King Richard III

Woodville family

Queen Elizabeth, wife of King Edward IV
Earl Rivers, Elizabeth's brother
Marquis of Dorset, Elizabeth's son (from a previous marriage)
Lord Richard Grey, Elizabeth's son (from a previous marriage)
Lord Richard Grey, Elizabeth's son (from a previous marriage)

Richard III's group

Duke of Buckingham
Sir William Catesby

Duke of Norfolk

Earl of Surrey, Norfolk's son
 Sir Richard Ratcliffe
 Sir James Tyrrell, assassin
 Lord Lovel
 Two murderers

Earl of Richmond's group

Henry Tudor, Earl of Richmond, Henry VI's nephew, later King Henry VII
 Lord Stanley, Earl of Derby, Richmond's stepfather
 Earl of Oxford
 Sir Walter Herbert
 Sir James Blunt

Clergy

Archbishop of Canterbury
 Archbishop of York
 Bishop of Ely

Other characters

Lord Hastings, Lord Chamberlain under Edward IV
 Sir Robert Brackenbury, Lieutenant of the Tower
 Lord Mayor of London
 Keeper of the Tower

Story

Opening. The rich lines with which the play opens are pronounced by Richard himself, 'standing in a street':

'Now is the winter of our discontent
 Made glorious summer by this sun of York;
 And all the clouds that lour'd upon our house
 In the deep bosom of the ocean buried.'

The mock relief, at the accession to the throne of his Brother Edward IV, is gorgeous poetry florid with the aspiration to put himself at the center of the ruling kingdom.

The person. From appearance alone, without knowing the 'story,' we would know that Richard is up to no good, an ugly hunchback 'determined to prove a villain,' and though we will listen later as he sweet talks Lady Anne, his wife to be, we will never be taken in at talk's value by this dangerous character. That is, this most fascinating of Shakespeare's heroes will never settle for role filling, but, as he tells the audience in regular direct address, throughout the play, he has an attitude, a sinister one, and the audience had better watch out. As a true Macchiavellian—the *Prince* was translated into English in the 1480's, as was the high stakes ambience, of power politics succession, Elizabeth I no longer young – Richard was of a mindset his observers would be primed to see in action.

The Plans. Richard wastes no time prosecuting his plans to take over the kingship. The King himself is seriously ill, and Edward has himself appointed regent, a role he interprets as allowing him (for example) to house the King's young sons in the Tower, for 'their own protection.' While wooing Lady Anne Neville, the widow of Edward of Westminster, Richard is arranging the murder of his brother, Clarence, and, not much later than that bloody and slightly comical scene, in which one assassin finally pulls out, for pity, Richard has moved further to begin to plan the murder, in the Tower of London, of the two princes, the young sons of the by now deceased King Edward, for whom Richard was acting as regent. The bringing

together of these obstacle clearings is intended to position Richard for the throne, and for a fruitful marriage from which will emerge descendants (and powers) of his own.

The outcome. The audience will have known, from the direct address occasionally flung at them by Richard, from on stage, that such a compilation of evil designs is certain to end badly; in fact we may speculate that the audience, still keyed in to mediaeval theatrical dramaturgy, will have been attitudinally conspiring with Richard even as he discusses with them what a villain he is. Richard is in a sense an exemplar of evil, not a naturalistic creation, and as such, destined as of course he is to a terrible downfall, he is simply part of a dreadful morality play. His own death, at the hands of the army of Buckingham, his former ally in evil, comes appropriately just as he, Richard, is planning a marriage to Edward IV's daughter, Elizabeth, intended to make a single package of his ancestral existence. By his final loss on the battlefield, Richard opens himself to that world of nightmares and ghosts; they descend onto him from that demi world of the terribly wronged from whom Richard has everything to fear, having lived their hell in advance.

Comment. Richard II (1377-1399) and Henry VI (1427-1461) are historical figures of the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. Shakespeare's plays, about these two kings, were written in 1590-92 (*Henry VI*) and 1595 (*Richard II*). For his own reasons Shakespeare decided to make the *Henriad* his launching point for a depiction of British history, perhaps because the material of the play defines the very rough and contentious initial stages of the formation of an organized premodern British state, which was struggling to refine political processes which were still part of the late feudal mediaeval hierarchical world. On that theory Richard II would be a natural continuation of the Shakespearean query into how government takes place: Richard II, doomed like Henry VI to introspection and indecision, will through his deepening introspection lead us toward the dramaturgy of high character (eventually, Hamlet, Lear, Othello) with which Shakespeare will crown his quest to make temporal conditions the stuff of growth and crucial mystery out of the narrative enterprise.

Themes

Self-awareness From the outset of the play Richard is boisterously self-aware, inviting the audience, yes indeed, to observe his misshapen body, and haphazard dressing. Aware of himself, Richard invites his audience or reader to be aware of him/her self. This invitation is heightened by the bold manner in which this protagonist turns to the audience, from the stage, and calls their attention to what they are seeing.

The grotesque Richard displays himself as grotesque—so much stress on the hump in his back, and on his shortness—and refers often to that condition. The evil of the character is manifestly represented by his physical deformity, which in turn reinforces his self-mocking mindset.

The shocking Shakespeare is of course the master rogue, playing with our feelings—what, *killed* the twins? *married* the lady whose father and husband he had *killed*? *Hired hit men to knock off his brother*? One shock seems worse than the preceding. But what really gets us is the guy's cool indifference to his atrocities.

Macchiavelianism. An understatement to speak of Richard's Macchiavellianism, and a bit of an insult to Niccolo, who prescribed the neatest possible strategies of trickery, false feints, carefully constructed ways of undermining the enemy, etc.! But there we are, Richard is sure trying, to use local brutality to shape the world after his vision. He's doing his best, or is it worst?

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Richard III

Character Richard III is very much the main character, the first to speak, the initiator of plots, the mad ghost-haunted loser in the end, and at times, as when wooing Lady Anne, quite the charmer for all his deformities. He has the sense of self, perhaps even of humor, required for presenting himself as Richard, in asides to the audience, and fortunately for him he has no qualms about planning his future 'political' career.

Parallels Montaigne comes to mind, for the boldness with which he recommends self-knowledge, that Socratic maxim which made itself a commonplace in the Renaissance. Richard has no illusions about himself; hence the Macchiavellian moves he makes are part of a daringly bold self-critique. Richard is of course part of that real-life self-seeking dictator tradition we have seen in our own time: Hitler (perhaps of a kind), Mobutu, Amin, Stalin, perhaps Mao; with these figures Richard shares an absolute devotion to his own self-advancement. It is Shakespeare's genius, to have known how to characterize the weaknesses of the would-be masters, and to train us in the early stage observation of their lethal morphs.

Illustrative moments

Villainous. Richard (Gloucester) opens the play with the statement that he was born to be a villain. He makes this proud statement after having promenaded, before the audience, his deformed and hunch backed body.

Plotting. We first see Richard's plotting as he conspires with Lord Hastings to get rid of Clarence, Richard's brother. It is the first glimpse we get, of the enormity of Richard's schemes.

Hypocritical. In order to impress Lady Anne with the sincerity of his affection for her, Richard insists that he must hasten to pay proper attention to the funeral rites of his father Edward—whose death he earnestly longed for.

Cunning. Down to the last detail, Richard plots and abuses. He advises the hired assassins of Clarence, in the Tower, to beware of the prisoner's suave tricks, which he may use to escape from them. And Clarence is the brother of Richard!

Dissembling. Richard is regularly eager to impress, on such as Lady Anne whom he is wooing, that he is an upstanding virtuous man. Listen:

'Tis death to me to be at enmity:
I hate it and desire all good men's love.'

Discussion questions

In the section of 'comment,' above, at the end of our synopsis of the present story, we speculated on the reasons for Shakespeare's launching his series of historical plays in the sequence he chose, beginning with the *Henriad*. Our underlying query was why Shakespeare had written only later—after the *Henriad*—about the characters of Henry IV and V, who lived 'earlier in history' than the Henry VI of the *Henriad*. The real question was why Shakespeare chose to change the historical record for the literary record he chose. What did the actual sequence of historical events have to do with the sequence of the plays Shakespeare wrote about those historical events?

Richard III is generally classified as a 'tragedy.' Does that seem correct? Is this play also an 'historical play? Of what value is it to try fitting the works of a great writer into categories? Do those categories align with discrete mindsets, or specific imaginative gestures in the making mind? I may be a born writer, but can I be a born tragedian or a born writer of historical dramas?

Mediaeval English drama, which still conserved many elements of liturgy, featured stylized figures representing the diversity of vices and virtues. Has Richard III something stylized, of that mediaeval sort, about him? Does he stand forth as primarily a 'representative' rather than as a full bodied, 'natural human figure' as perhaps Sir John Falstaff will later appear to be, in Shakespeare's *Henry IV, Part One*?