

Richard III summary analysis.

Richard III is one of William Shakespeare's earliest history plays, and the first history play where we see his full maturity as a playwright emerging in his depiction of the central character's downfall. Although Richard III shows the marked influence of Christopher Marlowe on Shakespeare, we also see signs of Shakespeare overcoming his contemporary's influence and becoming a distinctive voice in English theatre.

Before we offer some words of analysis about this early history play, it might be worth recapping the plot of Richard III (and 'plots' of Richard III the man).

Richard III: short plot summary

After the various battles and power struggles documented in the three Henry VI plays, this 'winter of discontent' has given way to a 'glorious summer' with Edward, of the royal house of York, ruling securely as King of England. However, one man isn't happy: Edward's brother, Richard, Duke of Gloucester. Deformed and ugly, and spurned by women at court, Richard realises that the only pleasure he will get from life is through gaining power – and, ultimately, the throne.

With this ambition in mind, Richard sets about wooing Anne, the widow of a man Richard has himself murdered. Richard also tells King Edward, his brother, that their brother Clarence is plotting against Edward; while Clarence is being imprisoned in the Tower of London, Richard sends men to drown Clarence in a butt of Malmsey wine. Richard then tells Edward that Clarence is dead and makes Edward feel guilty over their brother's death; since Edward is already sick and dying, his guilt accelerates his decline and he dies soon afterwards.

After Edward's death, the two immediate heirs to the throne are his two sons: Edward (Prince of Wales) and Richard (Duke of York). With the two boys out the way, Richard (older Richard) would be King. He sets about spreading rumours that the boys are illegitimate, and then has their supporters killed.

Richard is thus crowned King, much to the horror of the various queens (Elizabeth, the widow of Edward IV; Anne, the widow of the man Richard had murdered; and Margaret, the widow of Henry VI, also murdered by Richard in 3 Henry VI) who call out Richard's abhorrent behaviour.

Then, finally, Richard sends a hired killer, James Tyrell, to the Tower of London, where he has imprisoned the two princes, and has them both killed. To achieve all this, Richard has the support of the Duke of Buckingham.

However, Richard reneges on his promise to give Buckingham a better title or dukedom, and in his anger, Buckingham deserts Richard and starts a revolt against him. He joins the Earl of Richmond, a descendant of the other royal house, the House of Lancaster, who has been raising an army in France.

On the night before the battle where the two armies, Richard's and Richmond's, will meet, Richard III sees visions of all of the people he has had killed. At the Battle of Bosworth Field the following day, Richard III's supporters desert him and Richmond kills him, taking the throne as King Henry VII. He marries Queen Elizabeth, the widow of King Edward IV, uniting the houses of Lancaster and York under the new House of Tudor.

Richard III: analysis

Richard III shows Shakespeare's development as a playwright and maturing in his handling of characterisation and language after the early, rougher works comprising the three Henry VI plays.

Richard III was written as the conclusion of that first tetralogy (Shakespeare would go on to write a second tetralogy, a sort of Elizabethan prequel comprising Richard II, the two Henry IV plays, and Henry V), and shows how Richard's Machiavellian power-grab for the English throne paved the way for his defeat on the Battle of Bosworth Field and the subsequent crowning of Henry VII as the first Tudor king, marking the end of three decades of dynastic wars between the Houses of Lancaster and York known (thanks to Sir Walter Scott) as the 'Wars of the Roses'.

Of course, the monarch on the throne when Shakespeare wrote Richard III, Queen Elizabeth I, was the granddaughter of Henry VII, the king who had initiated the Tudor dynasty. Elizabeth, childless and in her late fifties when Richard III was first staged, would be the last of the Tudor line. Who would succeed her to the English throne? Would her death usher in another power-grab, another set of dynastic wars much like the Wars of the Roses of the previous century?

This uncertainty over royal succession is an important context for Shakespeare's play, and is a reminder that history plays are always as much about the times in which they are written as they are about the times in which they are set.

In many ways, then, Richard III is a sort of dry run for the later, more artistically successful tragedy, Macbeth. Both plays are about a character who is possessed by a 'vaulting ambition' to be King, an ambition which will prove to be their downfall once they have gained the throne.

Both characters are 'haunted' by visions of the people they have had murdered to clear their path to the throne. However, Richard is far more straightforwardly monstrous than Macbeth, who is a more subtle character in being more hesitant in his ambitions than his wife. If Richard III is

positively psychopathic in his determination to become King, Macbeth is far more guilt-ridden and conscience-stricken.

As Harold Bloom observes in his analysis of Richard III in his *Shakespeare: The Invention Of The Human*, the least successful poetry in the play is when Shakespeare is trying to depict Richard's sudden pricking of conscience on the eve of the battle, and trying to create an inner life for Richard. But he didn't have a model for how to do that (nothing in Marlowe could really point the way for him), and hadn't yet learned to do it himself.

Nevertheless, what makes the character of Richard III a triumph of characterisation is his beguiling and seductive way with language: he is a performer, even if he has no inner life that we can access. When he is trying to seduce the widowed Anne (before her late husband, murdered by Richard, has even been buried), he is persuasive but also sinister. You can see Laurence Olivier's unnerving performance of this scene [here](#).

He is a canny manipulator and can charm people (after a fashion), even people who find him detestable and monstrous. He is, in a sense, the stage manager and dramatist of his own play, and a forerunner to Iago, who presides over and controls the action of *Othello* in much the same way.