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Shakespeare: Then and Now

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*Richard III* and *Macbeth*: An Analysis of Kingship in the Plays

Shakespeare’s plays often delve into human nature and explore the concepts of ‘good’ and ‘evil’ and morality. *Macbeth* and *Richard III* are no exceptions to this. In these two plays, Shakespeare explores what it means to be a righteous or evil King. Within the two plays, there are a lot of parallels between the ruling or Duncan and Edward IV and between Macbeth and Richard. Edward and Duncan, though very different characters, are both portrayed as the good king, while Richard and Macbeth, being much more similar, are portrayed as the evil kings. Shakespeare uses these contrasts in kingship to really show audiences what it means to be a good or evil ruler.

In *Macbeth*, King Duncan is a good, righteous and noble king. He’s really shown as the embodiment of what a good king should be. Everything about him from his orderliness in commanding his army from off the battlefield to the way he speaks and acts. Duncan is a proud king who is not afraid to admit to his mistakes. He honors those who support him and reward their loyalty.

“No more that thane of Cawdor shall deceive  
 Our bosom interest: go pronounce his present death,  
 And with his former title greet Macbeth.”

*Macbeth* (I. ii. 72-74)

This comes from directly after Macbeth helps Duncan defeat MacDonwald, who betrayed Duncan. Duncan rewards Macbeth by giving him MacDonwald’s former title, the Thane of Cawdor. Since Macbeth helped to defeat MacDonwald, Duncan thought his former title would be appropriate for the one who defeated him. This is very different from the good king that Edward is portrayed as in *Richard III*. In *Richard III*, Edward is a king who is kind, naïve, and carefree. Unlike Duncan, he doesn’t seem to keep his kingdom in quite the orderly fashion. Edward is king right after the War of the Roses, and therefore is doing what he can to mend a broken kingdom. Edward has the goal of re-establishing peace among the houses of York and Lancaster.

“Madam, yourself is not exempt from this, —

Nor you, son Dorset, —Buckingham, nor you.

You have been factious one against the other. —

Wife, love Lord Hastings. Let him kiss your hand,

And what you do, do it unfeignedly.”

*Richard* *III* (II. i. 18-22)

In this quote, Edward is speaking to members of the house of York. After the War of the Roses, there’s conflict within the house that Edward would like to end. Here, he’s getting everyone in the room to kind of shake hands and apologize for what they’ve all done. This is a very simple act, and it will eventually lead Edward to pass away believing that he restored peace within the house of York. These two kings are those portrayed as the good kings in the plays, those who will eventually be murdered by Macbeth and Richard respectively.

After the murder of king Duncan, Macbeth becomes the king of Scotland. While King Duncan was the embodiment of everything that it means to be a good king, Macbeth is quite the opposite. After murdering Duncan, and arguably even before, simply while contemplating it, he unsurprisingly begins to go mad. He begins to take on the role of being that more stereotypical villain, which is a big contrast to the beginning of the play when Lady Macbeth needed to give a push to actually do anything. He starts taking matters into his own hands and begins murdering anyone he believes could try and get him off the Scottish throne. This includes Banquo, and Macduff’s family.

“Ride you this afternoon? […]

Is’t far you ride? […]

Goes Fleance with you?”

*Macbeth* (III. i. 21-39)

These are three questions asked by Macbeth to Banquo before the banquet at Macbeth’s castle. Macbeth plans on murdering Banquo, so he’s trying to figure out if sending out murders while he’s riding will be a good plan. He’s trying to disguise his evil intentions with good natured conversation, trying to make Banquo think he’s just showing interest in Banquo’s life. In reality, Banquo is already suspicious of Macbeth and has lost a good deal of trust for him, so Macbeth sees him as being a threat to him. This is similar to how Richard deceives those who he wants to kill in *Richard III.* Richard’s closest ally throughout the play is Buckingham. Buckingham helps Richard ascend to the throne and is the only one who knows all that Richard has done. He gets close to Richard and throughout the play, Richard asks a lot of him.

Richard -

“Cousin, thou wast not wont to be so dull.

Shall I be plain? I wish the bastards dead,

And I would have it suddenly performed.

What sayst thou now? Speak suddenly. Be brief.”

Buckingham

“Your Grace may do your pleasure.”

Richard

“Tut, tut, thou art all ice; thy kindness freezes.

Say, have I thy consent that they shall die?”

*Richard III* (IV. ii. 19-25)

However, when Richard wants to murder the two princes, the children who are rightfully the next in line for the throne, Buckingham hesitates. After this, Richard is immediately cold to him. He becomes angry and refuses to give Buckingham the land he promised him when Buckingham helped him become king. His coldness towards Buckingham never ends, and it results in Buckingham fleeing to Wales where he masses an army against Richard. Although Richard never directly murdered Buckingham as he does to others, it’s a good example of his evil intentions because he simply uses Buckingham throughout the whole play, and then disposes of him the instant that Buckingham does not want to follow Richard’s plan. He does the same thing to Hastings, who he tricks into getting him to doubt him in front of everybody else, then cries out that Hastings is a traitor, and has him murdered. Richard uses these deception tactics throughout the entire play to be able to get away with all of his murders.

Shakespeare uses the preceding kings, Duncan and Edward IV as contrasts to Macbeth and Richard. In *Macbeth*, Duncan’s character is made to create a huge contrast between the ‘good’ and ‘evil’ king. While Duncan is loyal, honest and just, Macbeth is the total opposite. After helping Duncan defeat MacDonwald and the Norwegians, Duncan sees it appropriate to give Macbeth the title of Thane of Cawdor. “go pronounce his present death, / And with his former title greet Macbeth.” (I. ii. 72-74). This is appropriate, because Duncan is rewarding Macbeth for helping him in the battle, but it’s also done in a way that’s kind of a slap in the face for Cawdor’s supporters. More importantly however, it’s a way for Shakespeare to foreshadow the fact that Macbeth will eventually betray him. Having Duncan give Macbeth the title of a traitor marks him for betrayal later in the play. While there isn’t any foreshadowing for Richard to become King, he simply straight up tell us in the beginning, Edward is still placed in the play as a naïve king for Richard to take advantage of. In *Richard III*, Richard deceives and uses Edward to be able to kill his brother Clarence. He tricks him by creating a false prophecy making Edward think that he’ll be killed by his brother George.

“This day should Clarence closely be mewed up

About a prophecy which says that “G”

Of Edward’s heirs the murderer shall be.”

*Richard III* (I. i. 38-40)

In this opening soliloquy from Richard, we learn a lot about what the play is going to be about. Here, Richard is talking about his plans for becoming king. He wants to get Clarence locked away by making King Edward believe that Clarence will murder him, which is ironic because we know that it will in fact be Richard who plans on killing him. In the end, he died from illness, but Richard used him as a shield to hide behind to commit at least one murder, that of Clarence. This kind of goes around full circle here because Richard plans on using Edward to lock away Clarence, then murder Clarence and have Edward die because he knows he’s Ill. It’s a perfect scheme thought up by Richard, and a perfect example of his cunning and wit contrasting to Edwards ignorance and unsuspecting nature.

In conclusion, Shakespeare uses *Macbeth* and *Richard III* as a way to explore what it means to be a ‘good’ or ‘evil’ king. There are a lot of parallels in the two plays, from the characters themselves, to the way that the plots unravel. With the starting kings who are the epitome of righteousness and nobility, who are followed up by those who are deceptive, tyrannical and psychopathic, the epitome of evil.