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November 26, 2016

Shakespeare: Then and Now

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TITLE

In William Shakespeare’s Macbeth and Richard III, Shakespeare explores a lot of different themes revolving around the ideas of good versus evil. In particular, he explores a lot the idea of what it means to be an evil king. King Edward IV and King Duncan are used in both plays to show how a ‘good king’ should be. Though the two are drastically different, they are both still portrayed as the good guy. They’re also highly used to make a contrast with Richard III and Macbeth respectively since they both enter the scene as the ‘evil king’.

In Richard III, King Edward IV was the king in the beginning of the play. Edward was a good king, he was kind, honest, and respectable. One of his goals as king was to re-establish peace between the houses of York and Lancaster, and he passed away believing that he had done it.

“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, King Edward is surrounded by members of both houses. He’s trying to mend the peace by getting everybody to shake hands with each other and apologize individually for what they’ve all done. While Edward was naïve to think that he had actually established the peace through this simple act, and this quickly, it was his goal to end the strife in England, and so believed he had done so. Duncan, though very different from King Edward, was also portrayed as the good king in Macbeth. Duncan is very different from King Edward in the sense that he doesn’t have the naivety that Edward does. Duncan is noble, righteous and loyal to those who support him. Duncan will provide aid for those that do the same for him. In the beginning of Macbeth, Macbeth becomes a hero to Scotland by helping to defeat the thane of Cawdor, who has betrayed king Duncan.

“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 quote is after Duncan hears about Macbeth’s effort in the war against MacDonwald, the current Thane of Cawdor, and Sweno, the Norwegian King. MacDonwald has betrayed the Scottish throne in an attempt to overthrow it and once he and the Norwegians lose the war against the Scottish, Duncan presents Macbeth with this new title of Thane of Cawdor. Since Macbeth helped defeat him, Duncan thought it was appropriate to give that title to him. Giving Macbeth this title is also a way to foreshadow that Macbeth will eventually turn around and betray Duncan.