

Richard is undoubtedly a protagonist who could be interpreted as either magnificent despite his flaws, or pathetic because of them. Though throughout the play we see him act in a manner that could be easily described as magnificent such as his poetic language or regal appearance, however his inability to retain the crown and his self-centred reaction to his deposition are argued by some to outweigh this and as such these critics cannot see him as magnificent.

Richard can be argued to be magnificent as he holds his enemies to account for all of their wrongdoings, making explicit his disdain for their actions. In places like act 4 scene 1 he repeatedly brings up the wrongs done against him such as the “dangerous treason” Bullingbrook commits by returning to England. Here Shakespeare has not only highlighted the crime of “treason”, he has also used the word “dangerous” to imply that Richard is threatening Bullingbrook despite his lack of ability to actually pose any danger to him. This is again brought up when he addresses Northumberland as “Pilates” who “cannot wash away your [Northumberland’s] sin” as Richard is told to read out all of his crimes. Shakespeare utilises this direct biblical reference to one who was responsible for Jesus’ crucifixion to show Richard’s view of Northumberland as a true sinner who knows of his guilt and as such tries to “wash away” his own treason against the crown. To a Shakespearian audience this insult would have held a lot of weight as they were part of a largely Christian culture, and a comparison to a person who harmed Jesus would have been a very harsh criticism to make. This means that an audience of that time would have instinctively respected how outspoken Richard was about his deposition even in his new position as a powerless subject, and that effect is seen by some to hold true today. Richard can be seen as magnificent because of this constant will to make his enemies aware of their wrongs.

That said, this can be interpreted in an alternative manner when we look at how Richard views his own wrongdoings earlier in the play; an example of this being his theft of Bullingbrook’s inheritance. Richard is warned by York that what he is doing will “pluck a thousand dangers” on himself, and even then he decides to continue with the seizing of Gaunt’s possessions. At no point does Richard seem to doubt his decision, nor show any remorse as seen in his statement “why uncle, what’s the matter?” which he says to York when he first speaks of his feelings towards Richard. Richard is simply unable to comprehend that he can do any wrong and as such he asks this simple child-like question; this point is exaggerated by the fact that Shakespeare used this short sentence directly after a long segment of speech by York. Richard does however challenge the actions of all other characters whilst expecting to remain unchallenged himself, even going so far as to insult his dying uncle calling him a “lean-witted fool” which (as it’s an exclamation) shows us as an audience how quickly and viciously Richard will point out the faults of others. When we consider this, Richard’s actions in act 4 scene 1 appear more petty and pathetic than majestic, as he is insulting people for the same behaviour he had displayed.

Richard could be seen as majestic in his poetic mastery of language which grows as the play continues. In the first scene of the play Shakespeare has Richard use sarcasm and metaphors to degrade the people around him, such as the line “How high a pitch his [Bullingbrook’s] resolution soars!” which in giving the word “resolution” the ability to soar, Richard is implying that Bullingbrook’s will is climbing above where it would naturally be and as such Bullingbrook needs to rectify this. Richard has poetic skill here, but it is unrefined as his tone is that of childish mockery. In act 3 scene 2 where Richard speaks of his kingdom, he first personifies the earth as his “child” and then orders it to help protect him using very vivid imagery of “heavy gaited toads” and “a lurking adder”, creatures which are striking in appearance and potentially deadly in action. Shakespeare has made Richard use this language to symbolise the development of his poetic ability. Richard here layers his poetic techniques, creating a much stronger effect than his previous statement. The

ultimate example of Richard's poetic ability is in act 5 scene 5. He toys with language in a way that only a master on the edge of insanity could, building himself a world full of "A generation of still-breeding thoughts;" within 10 lines of the scene, and this paired with the sheer length of his speech in this scene shows us how far he has come from witty one-liners. He uses similes such as "my finger, like a dial's point" and metaphors like "my heart, which is the bell" to craft himself into something new rather than just insulting and desiring things. This can be compared to growth from childhood to adulthood, from a state of infantile cruelty through one of adolescent angry pleading and finally coming to rest on a more internally focused adult state of mind. We can see Richard as ultimately magnificent as the poetry which symbolises his growth has reached magnificence.

Be that as it may, it could be argued that Richard having spent so long in the more childish self-pitying stages of development as a character prevents us from seeing Richard as an and ultimately magnificent character. Richard even in later scenes such as act 3 scene 2, Richard sits in a static position "upon the ground" and tells stories. This childish response to trouble makes it difficult for us to respect Richard as a man, much less as a monarch.

In summation I am more swayed to see Richard as an ultimately magnificent protagonist rather than a pathetic one, despite all of his flaws. Richard without doubt has provoked his own downfall, however in keeping Richard's pride, poetic nature and sense of self worth steadfast even when his birthright couldn't be Shakespeare has kept these pathetic aspects of Richard's character from becoming his defining attributes.