

Explore the view that, despite his tragic flaws, Richard is 'ultimately magnificent'. [25 marks]

It is understandable that some audiences may find Richard 'ultimately magnificent' even after taking into account his various tragic flaws. We cannot deny that the way in which Richard upholds his belief in his own greatness is remarkably impressive. It can also be said that his magnificence can be defined by the development of his language and imagery throughout the play, making him somewhat admirable. However, we simply cannot ignore the many tragic flaws he presents that make us struggle to view Richard as magnificent. His tendency to neglect the best interests of his people and his lack of a sense of responsibility may leave us with no option but to perceive him as feeble. Many characters are highly critical of Richard. As a result of their influence, we may begin to empathise with their idea of him as a "most degenerate king".

There is something magnificent about Richard's unwavering belief in his own greatness. Richard insists that Mowbray and Bullingbrook must "purge this choler without letting blood" rather than duelling to preserve their reputations in a way that society would have expected them to. It is possible that Shakespeare used this defiance of a medieval feudal custom that was so deeply ingrained in society to present Richard as magnificent through his confidence in his ability to push social boundaries. Although Richard is aware that he is facing death, he refuses to succumb to the prospect of no longer being king. In his last proclamation, he tells Exton that his "hand hath with the king's blood stained the king's own land." This suggests that he believes – as did much of Medieval England – his divine right as ruler of England can never be broken. Richard approaches leadership in a corrupt and authoritarian way because he can; since God's ways are inscrutable, he is above earthly criticism. The audience may perceive his delusional and absurd belief that he is invincible as admirable and magnificent. Nevertheless, there is a stark contrast between Richard's actions and his words. He abruptly halts the much-anticipated duel after he "hath thrown his warder down". This contradicts his previous wish, implying he is indecisive and impulsive and therefore an inadequate king, making it rather impossible to view Richard as ultimately magnificent. Richard's unwavering belief in his own greatness may even be a fault of his, leading him to bad decisions. He disregards York's plea to not deprive Bullingbrook of his inheritance by demanding that he will take "into our hands his plate, his goods, his money and his lands". His use of a rhyming couplet conveys this statement as a single complete thought that he will not be persuaded from, reflecting his immature and stubborn character. Further to this, his brazen listing of items displays his greed and narcissism. Richard destroys his potential for magnificence here through his callous qualities.

While Richard does have many flaws, it can be argued that his magnificence increases as he gains poetic skill and insight. The development of his intellect enables us to glorify him in a way that we would not have been able to if he continued to speak childishly until the end of the play. However, Richard employs classical and sophisticated metaphors with deeper meaning following his downfall. As a result of this, we may be willing to explore the proposal of critic Tim Spiekerman – that Richard is a better poet than a politician, as his language is replete with dazzling images and metaphors. This is best exemplified by his use of images of the sun as a symbol of kingship. What begins as a simple reference to the "sun" in the early stages of the play develops into an intricate and deliberated metaphor. He tells Northumberland that he will descend to the base court "like glistening Phaeton wanting the manage of unruly Jades." Phaeton is the son of Greek Sun-God Helios, who stole his father's chariot and could not control it, ultimately leading to his death. It is possible that Shakespeare uses this to represent how Richard could not be a great king like his father the Black Prince. Alternatively, it could signify that, like Phaeton, he could not control what he had and will in due course meet a fatal end. Richard's metaphors of water also evolve to be more complex and thought provoking. He initially claims to Aumerle that he shall "make foul weather with despised

tears” before he later tells Bullingbrook that “the golden crown” is “like a deep well”. The former is quite easily comprehensible whilst the latter requires more careful consideration. Shakespeare utilizes the water in this “deep well” to symbolise the exchange of tears, or indeed the weight of sadness, from Bullingbrook to Richard, as water is exchanged between buckets in a well. Richard demonstrates a show of elaborate articulation as his demise draws nearer, evoking an admiration amongst the audience, which can easily be deemed as magnificent.

Some audiences consider Richard pathetic, due to his self-pity and his inaction, rather than magnificent. They may feel frustration for a man who simply desponds in the face of adversity. After Richard was informed by Aumerle of Bullingbrook’s return, he begins a contemplation of human mortality and invites his peers to “sit upon the ground and tell sad stories of the death of kings”. The way in which he physically lowers himself could have been created by Shakespeare as a symbol of denouncing status as though he has forsaken kingship with the refusal to rise to a challenge. We perceive him to be nihilistic, cowardly and insufficient as a ruler, making it impossible for us to see him as magnificent in this sense. He also tells himself that he is “enforced to farm our royal realm” owing to his “liberal largesse”, a seemingly obvious show of feckless character. This lack of serious concern for a crucial financial issue conveys his immediate unwillingness for responsibility and simultaneously demonstrates his selfish perspective of kingship. The verb “enforced” implies that he has no alternative, but as an audience, we are aware of his truthfully poor decision-making. It then becomes unfeasible to view him as ‘ultimately magnificent’ because we are angered by his lack of conscientiousness. It is viable that Richard’s overwhelming tragic flaws conquer his potential for magnificence.

It is difficult to view Richard as magnificent when so many other characters are so openly critical of him. After their return from the “Irish wars”, Aumerle informs Richard that even “distaff-women manage [...] against thy seat”. Subsequently, we gather that he is so awful that even those who are normally occupied elsewhere are compelled to fight against him. This creates a sense of absolute and complete revolt, making us wonder how he could possibly be magnificent if all of these people are against him. Gaunt is not reticent in his disapproval of Richard either. Before his death, Gaunt criticises that due to Richard’s insufferable reign “this other Eden, demi-paradise” is “now leased out”. Shakespeare uses the lexical field of rarity and value followed by imagery of ruin, in a reversal of images, to highlight the destructive effect Richard has had on Medieval England. The evident lack of punctuation throughout this passionate lament generates a story-like feel that Gaunt believes Richard will abruptly end. In Tim Carroll’s rendition, Gaunt addresses the audience directly, adding to his patriotic vigour as the audience represent the people affected by Richard’s actions. Consequently, we may empathise with Gaunt’s grief and simultaneously doubt Richard’s magnificence.

To a certain extent, Richard can be labelled as ‘ultimately magnificent’. It is quite incontestable that the greatest form of magnificence he possesses is his linguistic skill. Bullingbrook reminds us of, and perhaps even admires, the great power in “the breath of kings” after Richard casually changes the terms of his banishment. Understandably, some viewer’s find it entirely impossible to consider him magnificent because of his frequent foolish and selfish decisions insinuate that his downfall is well deserved. Nevertheless, I believe that the burden of kingship is heavy for Richard. He does his best in a situation that some may argue he was thrust into and even then, his greatness of character shines through. Hence, he is ‘ultimately magnificent’.