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Richard III

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Symboles

posted Aug 5, 2013, 3:19 PM by alaa hagag [**updated Aug 5, 2013, 3:19 PM**]

The Boar

The boar is Richard's heraldic symbol, and is used several times throughout the play to represent him, most notably in Stanley's dream about Hastings's death. The idea of the boar is also played on in describing Richard's deformity, and Richard is cursed by the duchess as an "abortive, rooting hog" (I.iii.225). The boar was one of the most dangerous animals that people hunted in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, and Shakespeare's audience would have associated it with untamed aggression and uncontrollable violence

Motifs

posted Aug 5, 2013, 3:18 PM by alaa hagag [**updated Aug 5, 2013, 3:18 PM**]

The Supernatural

For a play supposedly based on actual history, *Richard III* involves an extraordinary number of supernatural elements. Some of these elements are Margaret's prophetic curses, Clarence and Stanley's prophetic dreams, the allegations of witchcraft Richard levels at Elizabeth and mistress Shore, the continual association of Richard with devils and demons (for example, he is often called a hellhound), Richard's comparison of himself to the shape-shifting Proteus, the

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Princes' discussion of the ghosts of their dead uncles, and—most significant—the parade of eleven ghosts that visits Richard and Richmond the night before the battle. These supernatural elements serve to create an atmosphere of intense dread and gloom that matches the malice and evil of Richard's inner self, and also serve to heighten the sense that Richard's reign is innately evil, transforming England into a kind of Gothic netherworld.

Dreams

The motif of prophetic dreams is part of the play's larger preoccupation with the supernatural, but the idea of dreams emerges as its own separate motif after Stanley's dream about Hastings's death. Clarence and Stanley both have dreams that not only predict the future, but that are also heavy with important symbolism. For example, Clarence's dream involves Richard causing his drowning at sea. Immediately after it, he is drowned in a cask of wine by murderers hired by Richard. In addition, Stanley's dream involves Hastings being gored by a boar—Richard's heraldic symbol. Immediately after it, Richard orders Hastings's execution.

Theme

posted Aug 5, 2013, 3:16 PM by alaa hagag [**updated Aug 5, 2013, 3:16 PM**]

The Allure of Evil

When Richard claims that his deformity is the cause of his wicked ways, he seems to be manipulating us for sympathy, just as he manipulates the other characters throughout the play. As a result, *Richard III* does not explore the cause of evil in the human mind so much as it explores its operation, depicting the workings of Richard's mind and the methods he uses to manipulate, control, and injure others for his own gain. Central to this aspect of the play is the idea that Richard's victims are complicit in their own destruction. Just as Lady Anne allows herself to be seduced by Richard, even knowing that he will kill her, other characters allow themselves to be taken in by his charisma and overlook his dishonesty and violent behavior. This tendency is echoed in Richard's relationship with the audience for much of the play. Even though the audience is likely to be repulsed by Richard's actions, his gleeful, brilliant, revealing monologues cause most viewers to like him and even hope that he will succeed despite his obvious malice.

The Connection Between Ruler and State

The so-called window scenes in *Richard III*—the conversation of the common people in Act II,

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scene iii; Buckingham's speech to the masses and Richard's acceptance of the crown in Act III; and the scene of the Scrivener in Act III, scene iv—provide a glimpse of how the drama in the royal palace affects the lives of the common people outside its walls. As a history play, *Richard III* is at least somewhat concerned with the consequences of the behavior of those in power, and with ideas of good rulership and governance. It is significant that the common people come to fear and distrust Richard long before most of the nobles in the palace, and that the opposition of the common people to Richard is one of the main forces that enables Richmond to overthrow him. In these ways, *Richard III* explores a theme Shakespeare later revisited in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*—the idea that the moral righteousness of a political ruler has a direct bearing on the health of the state. A state with a good ruler will tend to flourish (as Denmark does under King Hamlet), while a state with a bad ruler will tend to suffer (as Scotland does under Macbeth).

The Power of Language

An interesting secondary theme of *Richard III* is the power of language, or the importance of language in achieving political power. Language may not always be a necessary instrument of power, but for Richard, it is a crucial weapon. His extraordinary skill with words enables him to manipulate, confuse, and control those around him. Richard's skill with language and argument is what enables him to woo Lady Anne, have Clarence thrown in prison, keep the Woodvilles off his track, blame the king for Clarence's death, and achieve Hastings's execution, all at very little risk to himself. Interestingly, language also seems to be the only defense against Richard, as is shown when the princes match his skill at wordplay and thus indicate their ability to see through his schemes. In such cases, Richard simply uses violence as an expedient and has his enemies, including the princes, put to death.

The Birth of the Tudor Dynasty

Richard III dramatizes a key turning point in English history: the end of the Wars of the Roses and the rise to power of the Tudor dynasty in the figure of Henry VII. The Tudors continued to rule England in Shakespeare's day—Queen Elizabeth I, who sat on the throne when *Richard III* was written, was a Tudor. As a playwright in sixteenth-century England, Shakespeare had to court the favor of those in power, who literally could make or break his career. As a result, Shakespeare's portrayal of Richard III as a vile, hateful villain is in part designed to set up a glorious ascension for Henry VII at the end of the play. Henry overthrew Richard, after all, and the worse Richard seems, the better Henry will seem for defeating him; moreover, the better Henry seems, the more likely the Tudors are to approve of Shakespeare's play. Had Shakespeare portrayed Richard as a hero, then Henry might have seemed villainous for usurping his throne, and Shakespeare might have fallen from favor with Queen Elizabeth. Of course, these political considerations are by no means the main focus of the play—Shakespeare's exploration of the psychology of evil stands on its own and transcends mere propaganda. Still, it is important to realize that the history Shakespeare recounts in his story was still very much alive when he

wrote it, and that the considerations of his own time strongly affected his portrayal of the past.

Major Characters

posted Aug 5, 2013, 3:15 PM by alaa hagag [**updated Aug 5, 2013, 3:15 PM**]

Richard III

Richard is in every way the dominant character of the play that bears his name, to the extent that he is both the protagonist of the story and its major villain. *Richard III* is an intense exploration of the psychology of evil, and that exploration is centered on Richard's mind. Critics sometimes compare Richard to the medieval character, Vice, who was a flat and one-sided embodiment of evil. However, especially in the later scenes of the play, Richard proves to be highly self-reflective and complicated—making his heinous acts all the more chilling.

Perhaps more than in any other play by Shakespeare, the audience of *Richard III* experiences a complex, ambiguous, and highly changeable relationship with the main character. Richard is clearly a villain—he declares outright in his very first speech that he intends to stop at nothing to achieve his nefarious designs. But despite his open allegiance to evil, he is such a charismatic and fascinating figure that, for much of the play, we are likely to sympathize with him, or at least to be impressed with him. In this way, our relationship with Richard mimics the other characters' relationships with him, conveying a powerful sense of the force of his personality. Even characters such as Lady Anne, who have an explicit knowledge of his wickedness, allow themselves to be seduced by his brilliant wordplay, his skillful argumentation, and his relentless pursuit of his selfish desires.

Richard's long, fascinating monologues, in which he outlines his plans and gleefully confesses all his evil thoughts, are central to the audience's experience of Richard. Shakespeare uses these monologues brilliantly to control the audience's impression of Richard, enabling this manipulative protagonist to work his charms on the audience. In Act I, scene i, for example, Richard dolefully claims that his malice toward others stems from the fact that he is unloved, and that he is unloved because of his physical deformity. This claim, which casts the other characters of the play as villains for punishing Richard for his appearance, makes it easy to sympathize with Richard during the first scenes of the play.

It quickly becomes apparent, however, that Richard simply uses his deformity as a tool to gain the sympathy of others—including us. Richard's evil is a much more innate part of his character than simple bitterness about his ugly body. But he uses this speech to win our trust, and he

repeats this ploy throughout his struggle to be crowned king. After he is crowned king and Richmond begins his uprising, Richard's monologues end. Once Richard stops exerting his charisma on the audience, his real nature becomes much more apparent, and by the end of the play he can be seen for the monster that he is.

The Princes

The most famous crime of the historical Richard III, and the deed for which he was most demonized in the century following his death, is his murder of the two young princes in the Tower of London. For centuries after the death of Edward IV, the fate of the princes was a mystery—all that was known was that they had disappeared. It was speculated that Richard had them killed, it was speculated that they had spent their entire lives as prisoners in the tower, and it was speculated that they had escaped and lived abroad. The English author Sir Thomas More wrote that they were killed and buried at the foot of a staircase in the White Tower. Many years later, in 1674, workers in the Tower of London discovered two tiny skeletons hidden in a chest buried beneath a staircase of the tower. The skeletons date from approximately the late fifteenth century, and serve as the best evidence that the young sons of Edward IV were in fact murdered in the tower. There is still no conclusive proof that it was Richard who had them murdered—some scholars even think it could have been Richmond. Still, thanks to popular legend, Shakespeare's play, and the biography of Richard that More wrote a few years before the play, Richard has gone down in history as the most likely culprit.

Because the story of the princes in the tower was so well known, it was crucial to *Richard III* that Shakespeare make the princes memorable and engaging figures despite their youth and their relatively small roles in the story. As a result, Shakespeare creates princes who are highly intelligent—they are among the only characters in the play to see through Richard's scheme entirely. They are courageous, standing up fearlessly to the powerful Richard. They are charismatic, outdoing Richard in games of wordplay. However, they are utterly, pitifully helpless because they are so young. Though Elizabeth remarks that her younger son is a "parlous boy," meaning sharp or mischievous, the princes are never a threat to Richard, and they are unable to defend themselves against him (II.iv.35). Yet Shakespeare creates the sense that, had the princes lived, they would have grown up to become more than a match for their wicked uncle.

Margaret

Though she plays a very minor role in the play's plot, mostly prowling around the castle cursing to herself, Margaret is nevertheless one of the most important and memorable characters in *Richard III*. The impotent, overpowering rage that she directs at Richard and his family stands for the helpless, righteous anger of all Richard's victims. The curses she levels at the royals in Act I, which are among the most startling and memorable in all of Shakespeare, foreshadow and essentially determine future events of the play. Her lesson to Elizabeth and the duchess about

how to curse paints a striking picture of the psychology of victimization and the use of language as a means of alleviating anguish.

As the wife of the dead and vanquished King Henry VI, Margaret also represents the plight of women under the patriarchal power structure of Renaissance England. Without a husband to grant her status and security, she is reduced to depending on the charity of her family's murderers to survive—a dire situation that she later wishes on Elizabeth. Margaret is a one-dimensional character, representing rage and pain, but she is vital to the play for the sheer focus of torment she brings to the world surrounding Richard's irresistible evil.

characters

posted Aug 5, 2013, 3:13 PM by alaa hagag [**updated Aug 5, 2013, 3:13 PM**]

Richard

Also called the duke of Gloucester, and eventually crowned King Richard III. Deformed in body and twisted in mind, Richard is both the central character and the villain of the play. He is evil, corrupt, sadistic, and manipulative, and he will stop at nothing to become king. His intelligence, political brilliance, and dazzling use of language keep the audience fascinated—and his subjects and rivals under his thumb.

Buckingham

Richard's right-hand man in his schemes to gain power. The duke of Buckingham is almost as amoral and ambitious as Richard himself.

King Edward IV

The older brother of Richard and Clarence, and the king of England at the start of the play. Edward was deeply involved in the Yorkists' brutal overthrow of the Lancaster regime, but as king he is devoted to achieving a reconciliation among the various political factions of his reign. He is unaware that Richard attempts to thwart him at every turn.

Clarence

The gentle, trusting brother born between Edward and Richard in the York family. Richard has Clarence murdered in order to get him out of the way. Clarence leaves two children, a son and a daughter.

Queen Elizabeth

The wife of King Edward IV and the mother of the two young princes (the heirs to the throne) and their older sister, young Elizabeth. After Edward's death, Queen Elizabeth (also called Lady Gray) is at Richard's mercy. Richard rightly views her as an enemy because she opposes his rise to power, and because she is intelligent and fairly strong-willed. Elizabeth is part of the Woodeville family; her kinsmen—Dorset, Rivers, and Gray—are her allies in the court.

Dorset, Rivers, and Gray

The kinsmen and allies of Elizabeth, and members of the Woodeville and Gray families. Rivers is Elizabeth's brother, while Gray and Dorset are her sons from her first marriage. Richard eventually executes Rivers and Gray, but Dorset flees and survives.

Anne

The young widow of Prince Edward, who was the son of the former king, Henry VI. Lady Anne hates Richard for the death of her husband, but for reasons of politics—and for sadistic pleasure—Richard persuades Anne to marry him.

Duchess of York

Widowed mother of Richard, Clarence, and King Edward IV. The duchess of York is Elizabeth's mother-in-law, and she is very protective of Elizabeth and her children, who are the duchess's grandchildren. She is angry with, and eventually curses, Richard for his heinous actions.

Margaret

Widow of the dead King Henry VI, and mother of the slain Prince Edward. In medieval times, when kings were deposed, their children were often killed to remove any threat from the royal line of descent—but their wives were left alive because they were considered harmless. Margaret was the wife of the king before Edward, the Lancastrian Henry VI, who was subsequently deposed and murdered (along with their children) by the family of King Edward IV and Richard. She is embittered and hates both Richard and the people he is trying to get rid of, all of whom were complicit in the destruction of the Lancasters.

The princes

The two young sons of King Edward IV and his wife, Elizabeth, their names are actually Prince Edward and the young duke of York, but they are often referred to collectively. Agents of Richard murder these boys—Richard's nephews—in the Tower of London. Young Prince Edward, the rightful heir to the throne, should not be confused with the elder Edward, prince of Wales (the first husband of Lady Anne, and the son of the former king, Henry VI.), who was killed before the play begins.

Young Elizabeth

The former Queen Elizabeth's daughter. Young Elizabeth enjoys the fate of many Renaissance noblewomen. She becomes a pawn in political power-brokering, and is promised in marriage at the end of the play to Richmond, the Lancastrian rebel leader, in order to unite the warring houses of York and Lancaster.

Ratcliffe, Catesby

Two of Richard's flunkies among the nobility.

Tyrrell

A murderer whom Richard hires to kill his young cousins, the princes in the Tower of London.

Richmond

A member of a branch of the Lancaster royal family. Richmond gathers a force of rebels to challenge Richard for the throne. He is meant to represent goodness, justice, and fairness—all the things Richard does not. Richmond is portrayed in such a glowing light in part because he founded the Tudor dynasty, which still ruled England in Shakespeare's day.

Hastings

A lord who maintains his integrity, remaining loyal to the family of King Edward IV. Hastings winds up dead for making the mistake of trusting Richard.

Stanley

The stepfather of Richmond. Lord Stanley, earl of Derby, secretly helps Richmond, although he cannot escape Richard's watchful gaze.

Lord Mayor of London

A gullible and suggestible fellow whom Richard and Buckingham use as a pawn in their ploy to make Richard king.

Vaughan

A friend of Elizabeth, Dorset, Rivers, and Gray who is executed by Richard along with Rivers and Grey.

Summary

posted Aug 5, 2013, 3:08 PM by alaa hagag [**updated Aug 5, 2013, 3:08 PM**]

After a long civil war between the royal family of York and the royal family of Lancaster,

England enjoys a period of peace under King Edward IV and the victorious Yorks. But Edward's younger brother, Richard, resents Edward's power and the happiness of those around him. Malicious, power-hungry, and bitter about his physical deformity, Richard begins to aspire secretly to the throne—and decides to kill anyone he has to in order to become king.

Using his intelligence and his skills of deception and political manipulation, Richard begins his campaign for the throne. He manipulates a noblewoman, Lady Anne, into marrying him—even though she knows that he murdered her first husband. He has his own older brother, Clarence, executed, and shifts the burden of guilt onto his sick older brother King Edward in order to accelerate Edward's illness and death. After King Edward dies, Richard becomes lord protector of England—the figure in charge until the elder of Edward's two sons grows up.

Next Richard kills the court noblemen who are loyal to the princes, most notably Lord Hastings, the lord chamberlain of England. He then has the boys' relatives on their mother's side—the powerful kinsmen of Edward's wife, Queen Elizabeth—arrested and executed. With Elizabeth and the princes now unprotected, Richard has his political allies, particularly his right-hand man, Lord Buckingham, campaign to have Richard crowned king. Richard then imprisons the young princes in the Tower and, in his bloodiest move yet, sends hired murderers to kill both children.

By this time, Richard's reign of terror has caused the common people of England to fear and loathe him, and he has alienated nearly all the noblemen of the court—even the power-hungry Buckingham. When rumors begin to circulate about a challenger to the throne who is gathering forces in France, noblemen defect in droves to join his forces. The challenger is the earl of Richmond, a descendant of a secondary arm of the Lancaster family, and England is ready to welcome him.

Richard, in the meantime, tries to consolidate his power. He has his wife, Queen Anne, murdered, so that he can marry young Elizabeth, the daughter of the former Queen Elizabeth and the dead King Edward. Though young Elizabeth is his niece, the alliance would secure his claim to the throne. Nevertheless, Richard has begun to lose control of events, and Queen Elizabeth manages to forestall him. Meanwhile, she secretly promises to marry young Elizabeth to Richmond.

Richmond finally invades England. The night before the battle that will decide everything, Richard has a terrible dream in which the ghosts of all the people he has murdered appear and curse him, telling him that he will die the next day. In the battle on the following morning, Richard is killed, and Richmond is crowned King Henry VII. Promising a new era of peace for

England, the new king is betrothed to young Elizabeth in order to unite the warring houses of Lancaster and York.

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