

AQA AS Level English Literature

Activities and Exam Practice

Richard III

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(Sample pages)



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3 Richard: king and character

The character of Richard, probably Shakespeare's greatest villain, utterly dominates this play. He has more lines than any other character (about 30 per cent of the total text). In a theatrical production he is on stage far more than anyone else. Even when he is not, we wonder what he is doing, and what he is planning.

Richard engages in a variety of roles to disguise his true character and motives. The actor playing him has to act further parts within the character, making the role one of the great theatrical challenges. Richard plays the concerned brother (to Clarence), loving suitor (to Anne) and kind uncle (to young Edward). He and Buckingham delightedly plot how to act before the Lord Mayor in Act 3, scene 5. He feigns a reluctance to accept the crown at the end of Act 3. But

underlying all these different roles, Shakespeare portrays Richard as essentially and irredeemably evil, the 'devil's black intelligencer'.

Richard III was of course a real historical character. What are facts about him? The now generally accepted truth about Richard is that although he was tough and ruthless, he was not the monster Tudor historians portrayed him to be. Nor is there any proof he was a hunchback.

Richard: the fact file

Events in his life before the play

- 1452** Born in Fotheringay Castle, Northamptonshire, in the Midlands, the youngest son of Richard, Duke of York.
- 1461** Created Duke of Gloucester by his brother, Edward IV.
- 1470** Goes with Edward into exile. He is popular among Yorkshire nobles.
- 1471** He and Edward return to England. Richard plays a key and bloody role in the fighting that restores Edward to the throne, killing Margaret's only son.
- 1471** Richard is rewarded with part of the Neville family inheritance. He exercises vice-regal powers in northern England.
- 1482** He recaptures the border town of Berwick-upon-Tweed from the Scots. He is a brave and skilled general.

Historical events in his life in the period covered by the play

When Edward IV died (1483) he was succeeded by his underage son Edward V. Richard acted first as the young king's protector, but within three months he had overthrown the Woodvilles (relations of Edward IV's queen), seen to the execution of Lord Hastings, and had himself proclaimed and crowned King.

Young Edward (V) and his brother Richard were probably murdered in the Tower on Richard's orders (though not all historians agree). Richard failed to win broad-based support for his right to rule. His rival Richmond, Henry Tudor (last candidate from the House of Lancaster with a claim on the throne, and later Henry VII), returned to England from exile in France and confronted Richard at the battle at Bosworth Field. Richard died fighting bravely against heavy odds.

Discussion

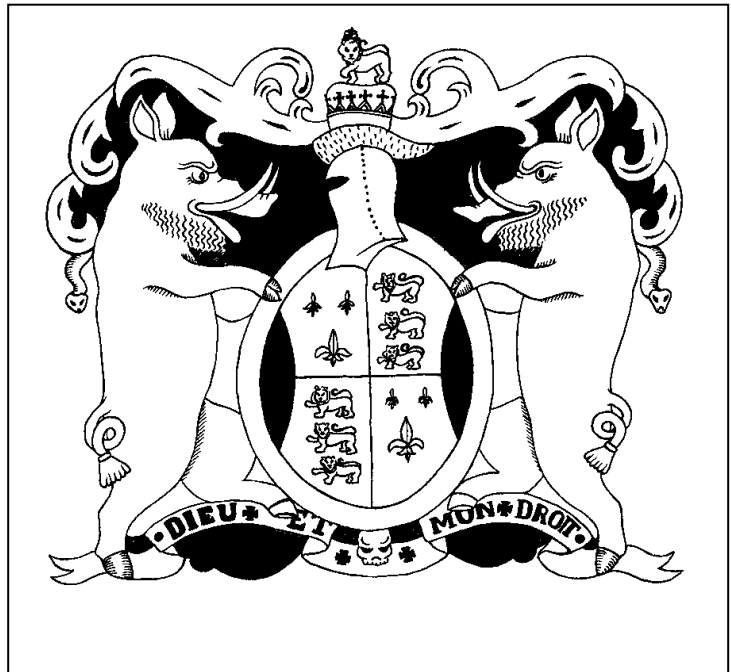
- 1 What qualities do you think were needed to be a 'good' king in England in the late 1400s? Try to agree on a list. Keep this list handy as you read the play and use it as a checklist to assess Richard's royal qualities. Note down evidence from the story.
- 2 When you've finished reading the play, look over the list and your notes – is he an evil monster or merely doing what you agreed a king needed to do to hold on to power?
- 3 Why did Shakespeare make his Richard such a monster?

Richard: the monster of Tudor myth

In Shakespeare's time Richard was generally perceived to have been a vicious, bloody and evil king. The play brilliantly expands upon this view, making him, physically and mentally, the horrifying epitome of evil. He is regarded by his enemies as less than human, lacking any good qualities humans may naturally possess. He is compared to the devil. Time and again, Richard shares with the audience his glee at doing evil, creating in them the thrill of watching a villain plan his next move.

As we have said, during much of Shakespeare's life England was ruled Elizabeth I, a direct descendent of Henry Tudor. Henry's claims to the throne are not really explored in this play, because in fact they were really quite weak. It was essential for the Tudors to show that he had to fight Richard and seize the crown because Richard was such a vile king. They had to legitimise the founding of their dynasty.

Under Henry VII and his son Henry VIII, historians were ordered to create the image of Richard as monster to remind people of what the Tudors had saved the country from. History was not necessarily a matter of fact and truth, but of interpretation and opinion. It was



Richard is often compared to the savage and aggressive boar. Perhaps Shakespeare was inspired to do this by remembering that two boars supported the shield on Richard's coat of arms.

thought acceptable to colour the truth of events. Under Elizabeth this process continued. Raphael Holinshed continued the 'Richard as monster' story in his history *Chronicles of England*, which was one of the main sources Shakespeare used when writing the play. Elizabeth must have been pleased with the monster Shakespeare created. But such is Shakespeare's genius as a writer that the play is much more than another piece of propaganda for the Tudors – it is a brilliant study in evil.

Richard the gangster?

Many theatre and film directors devise new settings for Shakespeare plays to retell the stories in fresh ways and to show that these 400-year-old plays still contain relevant truths about life and human beings. *Romeo and Juliet*, about the doomed love between a boy and girl from opposing feuding noble families in Verona (Italy), became the stage and film musical *West Side Story* about the doomed love between a young couple from opposing racial groups and street gangs in 1950s New York. The main events of Shakespeare's story of Italian nobles were perfectly reset into the world of New York dance halls and diners. The film *Romeo + Juliet* does

the same thing, relocating the story among warring families in modern-day California's Venice Beach.

Reviewing a television gangster drama in the summer of 2004, a *Guardian* newspaper theatre critic drew parallels between modern organised crime fiction and Shakespeare's history plays:

Scenes ... from Shakespeare's history plays are a reminder that those plays are about warlords whose habitual violence was the basis for order. Modern British gangland is not that far removed from fifteenth-century aristocratic politics.

Activity

How could you reset *Richard III* in a modern British crime-based setting? You have to keep the main characters and key events.

- 1 Who would Richard be?
- 2 What would be the 'crown' he fights for?
- 3 How would you deal with the court, the nobles who support him and those who oppose him?
- 4 What are the key events in the story that you have to keep in your new version?
Brainstorm some ideas and make notes.

Planning how to reset the story of a play in this way will help you understand Shakespeare's structure for the story design (the plot).