

# Richard III, Shakespeare, and History

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SHAKESPEARE'S *Richard III* has always been popular as a classic portrayal of villainy. Through the Laurence Olivier film version, many audiences have had an opportunity to be horrified at the machinations of the hunchbacked villain and to rejoice when that inhuman tyrant is at last overcome, as he offers his kingdom for a horse, by the valorous Henry Tudor. Since *Richard III* is probably the best known of Shakespeare's English history plays and is also one of his earliest successes, it is a natural choice for inclusion in a Shakespeare course for advanced students.

To read the play without having first witnessed a performance can be a confusing experience. The Wars of the Roses, with their superfluity of Edwards, Richards, and Elizabeths, are at best difficult to follow. Since *Richard III* is filled with allusions to these wars and also filled with minor characters who have little more to do than express disgust at Richard's methods and be executed, the teacher might be tempted to lay it aside in favor of a comedy or tragedy with a shorter cast list. To do so, however, would be to miss an opportunity of offering the students a valuable insight

into the nature of history. In order to appreciate *Richard III*, the class should go beyond Shakespeare's play and search for the facts.

Shakespeare, of course, wrote for a Tudor monarch and used Tudor historians such as Holinshed as sources for his chronicle plays. Holinshed's version is derived from the biography of Richard III written by Sir Thomas More, left unfinished, and from others who wrote under the first Tudor king, Henry VII. This dynasty succeeded Richard's Plantagenet dynasty, and therefore one of the chief motives for writing "history" in this age would be to blacken the name of the king whose throne they had usurped. Shakespeare has preserved this biased version of the facts.

The Richard of Shakespeare's play is, for the most part, a gleeful, inhuman caricature who delights in explaining his villainies to the audience, like Iago or like Vice in the medieval morality plays. In what seems to be only a few weeks, Richard effects the deaths of Henry VI and his son, his own brother the Duke of Clarence, his pathetic wife Anne, his friend Buckingham, his enemies Hastings, Rivers, Vaughan, Grey, and most significantly, his two innocent

nephews, the Princes in the Tower, one of whom should have reigned in his stead. The hunchback with the withered arm who crushes everyone between himself and the throne is an effective dramatic creation but not a realistic human being. Yet, largely because of the popularity of Shakespeare's work, the real Richard III has the reputation of a murderer hideously deformed both in body and in soul.

This view is manifestly unfair. Shakespeare is true to his sources and to the Tudor tradition. He would have wished to glorify Queen Elizabeth's grandfather Henry Tudor, belittling his enemy Richard III. He probably believed that he was presenting a truthful picture of the last Plantagenet's reign. But to accept this version is to overlook the facts of history.

**R**ICHARD'S defenders have existed for centuries and are increasing in number. Their case is briefly as follows: Richard III was always loyal to the previous king, his brother Edward IV. He was rarely at court once Edward was secure on the throne and seemed to have no kingly aspirations. He was not a hunchback, nor did he have a withered arm, though one of his shoulders may have been slightly higher than the other. Edward IV was responsible for the deaths of Henry VI and son. Henry might have died a natural death or been killed at Edward's command; his son certainly died in battle. Richard, far from wishing Clarence's death, spoke out strongly against it. This execution, too, was Edward's idea and probably deserved, for Clarence had been committing various acts of treason for years. Richard had affection for his wife Anne, who died following a long illness, only a year after the death of their only son. Rivers, Vaughan, Grey, and Hastings were probably guilty of plotting against Richard, who had been named Protector at his brother's death. Buckingham was

an open traitor: he raised an armed rebellion a few months after Richard took the throne and was justly executed. The controversy over the Princes in the Tower has continued for nearly five hundred years.

Many theories have been proposed to account for the disappearance of Edward IV's sons. They were set aside by Parliament in response to a charge (possibly true) that they were born of an illegal marriage and therefore could not reign. Their uncle Richard kept them in seclusion in the Tower of London, where they were occasionally seen for several months after his coronation. At last they disappeared completely. The Tudor story, concocted almost twenty years later, is that Sir James Tyrell was sent to London by Richard to murder them. This is Sir Thomas More's version and likewise Shakespeare's. Tyrell allegedly confessed to the crime in 1502 just before being executed for another charge, but no written evidence of such a confession was ever made public.

An alternative is set forth by Josephine Tey in her entertaining mystery *The Daughter of Time*. In this novel a British detective, hospitalized with a broken leg, passes the time by solving this famous historical murder. The book's conclusion, based on convincing argument and much credible evidence, is that the princes did not die during Richard III's reign but were later put to death under Henry Tudor. This is possible. No one can prove whether the boys were alive or dead when Richard fell in battle in 1485. Henry did not directly accuse Richard of their deaths until 1502. However, there is an element in this theory which is hard to explain. If the princes were really alive in the autumn of 1483, why did Richard fail to bring them out in public in order to silence the rumors that they had been murdered, begun about the time of Buckingham's rebellion?

A third possibility, suggested by Paul

Murray Kendall in his 1955 biography of Richard, is that Buckingham was responsible for the princes' deaths. As the second most powerful man in the kingdom, he would have had easy access to the Tower and could have dispatched them in the summer of 1483 while Richard was travelling through his kingdom. It was to Buckingham's advantage to kill them, for he was planning to rebel in favor of Henry Tudor, who could not legally have become king if the princes were alive. It was not to Richard's advantage to kill them, for he was already the crowned monarch and their murder would only bring popular hatred against him.

THE real Henry Tudor, in contrast to Shakespeare's character, was not quite the pure and holy deliverer born to unite the white rose and the red. His claim to the throne was considerably weaker than Richard's. Richard was descended from the second and fourth sons of Edward III; Henry was descended illegitimately from the third son. Though he married Edward IV's daughter Elizabeth to strengthen his claim, it was in reality based on conquest. Modern historians generally consider Henry Tudor a shrewd businessman, given to avarice and likely to execute his enemies. He was as unlike Shakespeare's savior as Richard was unlike the villain.

Does it matter? Of course it does. Students, and adults as well, should read critically with an awareness that historians and men of literature are human beings who write from a personal bias and do not always report facts as they are but rather as they would like them to be.

After looking at both sides of Richard III and Henry VII, students may still be confused by the Wars of the Roses, but at least they will not believe everything they read in history books. One junior, indignant at the way the Tudor historians had distorted the facts for their own

purposes, commented, "It's just like 1984." A study of *Richard III*, Shakespeare's version, versus a study of the real king, can help to prevent the complacent state of mind which leads to the totalitarian horrors of Orwell's *1984* and will encourage students to search for the truth, freed from the propaganda with which it is often surrounded.

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