

## STUDY GUIDE FOR *Richard III*

© Stephen F. Evans, 2005

The following summary is based on David Bevington's edition of the play.

### **Date**

*The Tragedy of King Richard the Third* (c. 1592-94)

Shakespeare almost singlehandedly invented the genre of the history play. During the decade of the 1590s he authored eight plays chronicling medieval English history from the reign of Richard II (deposed 1399) through Richard III, defeated by the Earl of Richmond (later, Henry VII) at the Battle of Bosworth Field (1485).

### **Historical Background**

Questions of historical "accuracy" are almost irrelevant when one studies these plays; more to the point is understanding why Shakespeare selects, omits, changes, and shapes English history to meet his artistic concerns.

That said, it still is necessary to understand basic information about the emergence of the Tudor dynasty: Henry VII, Henry VIII, Elizabeth I. In writing his two tetralogies during Elizabeth's reign, Shakespeare was to some extent concerned with providing an overarching storyline that justified the Tudor monarchy in positive terms. Hence, the historical events of the civil wars leading to Henry VII's kingship are represented in distinctly political, symbolic, and religious ways in order to establish what has come to be called the "Tudor Myth"—that is, the "official story" (propaganda, some would say) that explains the dynasty. According to the Tudor Myth, Richard III is the "scourge of God" sent to punish the English for their crime of civil disobedience; in effect, he "cleans house," but in doing so is destroyed and replaced by the proper, God-fearing line of the Tudors.

After his spectacular conquests in France (the Hundred Years' War), and glorious, but all too brief reign, Henry V dies, leaving as king his infant son, Henry VI. Because Henry VI is a minor he is placed under the dual protectorship of two branches of England's royal family, the houses of Lancaster (red rose) and York (white rose), both of which descend from sons of Edward III. The power struggle between the factions erupts in civil war, known as the Wars of the Roses. Civil war, according to Renaissance English notions of kingship, is one of the most heinous of crimes—against God (from Whose grace all depends), the commonwealth, the king (God's representative on earth), and individual persons.

*Richard III* begins some time after the Battle of Tewkesbury (1471), where the Yorkists

defeated and killed Henry VI and his son, Prince Edward. At the start of the play Edward IV, the first of two Yorkist kings, is on the throne but declining in health and powers. (Edward IV is the eldest of three brothers, the others in succession to the throne being the Duke of Clarence and Richard, Duke of Gloucester.) Richard's overweening ambition drives him to seek the throne for himself—but King Edward, his two male heirs, Richard's brother Clarence, and other figures stand in his way. Soon after Richard becomes king, the Earl of Richmond (Henry Tudor) takes refuge in France, begins building an army, and bides his time before attempting to gain the throne.

In *Richard III* speeches of high-born characters generally are in **poetry**, those of low-born or “ordinary” characters in **prose**. This is usual in a Shakespeare play, and you must treat these passages accordingly when you quote them in papers.

### “Senecan” Elements

- Language establishing an atmosphere of evil, conspiracy, intrigue, violence, fear, and helplessness of good people in the face of evil. Theme of *revenge*.
- Allusions and references to supernatural forces, magicians, conjurors, and so forth; these suggest that innocent people have little influence over their lives and that the world is controlled by some demonic force. *Ghosts*.

### Richard's Character

His evil has been called “sinuous,” almost serpent-like, and he belongs to a select group of Shakespeare's villains (Iago in *Othello*, Edmund in *King Lear*) who symbolically represent pure evil in their ambitions. We marvel at his methods, designs, plans, and their execution. Aspects of his dramatic character derive from the medieval **Vice**, the **Senecan tyrant**, and the **Machiavel**. The Vice character (e.g., Marlowe's Barabas, Shakespeare's Iago, Aaron the Moor, Don John), originated in the medieval Morality Play tradition, and was most popular in plays staged between 1550-80. *Characteristics*: use of an alias; strange appearance; use of asides; discussion of plans with the audience; disguise; long avoidance, but ultimate suffering of punishment; moral commentary; importance of name, and reluctance concerning it; self-explanation in soliloquy. *Satirical functions*: attack on women (misogyny); various signs of depravity such as boasting and conceit; enjoyment of power; immoral sexuality; false emotion (“crocodile tears”). *Familiar modes of expression*: impertinence; logic-chopping (equivocation); use of oaths and proverbs; and the self-betraying slip of the tongue.

Is Richard evil because of his physical deformity, or is he misshapen from birth because he is inherently evil? Whatever the case, he seems to justify much about his motives based on his physical

deformity. The play has no subplot, proceeding fairly straightforwardly. Richard announces to *us* (audience, readers) his intentions, taking us into his evil confidence, and also, through ironic statements, to other characters the plans that he has for them.

## **ACT 1**

### **Scene 1**

Begins with Richard, Duke of Gloucester, in his famous soliloquy (speech delivered by a character alone, without his knowledge of being overheard by other characters, but sometimes, as here, addressed obliquely to the audience). Richard loves the sound of his own voice. At first he seems almost bored that, after the wars, things have become tame, too predictable: “this weak piping time of peace.” At line 14 he turns attention to himself, commenting on his physicality and its meaning for him, then proceeds to reveal that he has set plots in motion, specifically by arranging for his brother, the Duke of Clarence, to lose favor with the king. Edward IV he describes as under the influence of spells, sorcery, and superstition; Richard will make good use of that. Clarence enters, en route to the Tower, and Richard duplicitously says that he will pray for him (situational irony: “I will deliver you, or else lie for you” [115]), before he tells us his real motives, admitting that he killed both Henry VI and Prince Edward. His short-term plan: to woo and marry Edward’s widow, Lady Anne.

### **Scene 2**

Immediately Richard sets in motion his plan, as the hearse of Henry VI is borne in, attended by the late king’s daughter-in-law. This famous scene is shocking in demonstrating Richard’s *bravura*, verbal gymnastics, and calculated evil, wooing before our eyes the grieving widow of a man whom he has killed by claiming that he committed the murders out of love for her. Richard appeals to Anne’s vanity, and she falls for it; when he offers her his sword and puts his life in her hands she takes that as proof of his true feelings. Note the bantering dialogue throughout the scene in terms of angel, saint/devil, heaven/hell. Note also Richard’s pragmatism and lying once Anne has exited. Note further the hatred with which Anne speaks of Richard; she knows the truth, but succumbs to his rhetorical powers (along with her own vanity). Study Richard’s last speech, beginning at line 230. Richard is astonished to think that he may actually exude some measure of physical attractiveness—and this points to another major point: his seeking of the crown has a distinctly sexual valence.

### **Scene 3**

Here enter the Queen, Elizabeth (wife of Edward IV), her two sons from her first marriage (she has two

sons, the young princes, by the king); the scene builds to quite a crowd. Elizabeth is concerned about the princes' future, worries about Richard, and speaks openly and viciously to him about her feelings ("your interior hatred" [65]). She knows well that Richard has demeaned her for a long time, belittling her aristocratic, but not royal, heritage, as well as the fact of her previous marriage and children: "Small joy have I in being England's queen" (110). She threatens to tell the king about Richard's abuse of her and her family; old Queen Margaret, widow of Henry VI (Lancaster) enters and comments on Richard's and Elizabeth's quarreling in asides, calling him a "murderous villain" (134). Richard claims that he has given much of himself, and done a great deal else, to put his brother, Edward IV (York), on the throne. Like Anne before, for Elizabeth and Margaret Richard is nothing short of a devil from hell. At 147 Elizabeth's brother Earl Rivers, utters a portentous line, suggesting that he and his faction would follow Richard were he king. Beginning at 188 Queen Margaret's curses (on Richard, the Yorkists, and those who stood by while they took over) are marvelous and very Senecan in style and language (note use of *apostrophe*). The scene ends after her exit, with Richard giving the warrant to his murderers to kill his brother, the Duke of Clarence. (Right before, he has admitted setting him up for the slaughter.)

#### **Scene 4**

The Tower of London. Poor Clarence relates troublesome dreams (often occurring in Seneca) to the Keeper. Lines 21-33 are beautiful in their imagery (even though they are about death) and typical of Shakespeare's *lyricism*. Lines 45-63 simmer with Senecan influence: mythological allusions to Hades, the river Styx, the ferryman Charon, ghosts, and the Furies. These allusions are ominous and portentous of a world that has been sundered from God during the Wars of the Roses. Lines 66-74: Clarence, who married and has children by the daughter of the Earl of Warwick (Lancaster), shows remorse in first supporting their cause, and then shifting loyalty to his own brother, Edward IV (York). In doing so, Clarence is complicit in the deaths of Henry VI and his son, Prince Edward (Lancaster). At least he is human enough to feel and know guilt and remorse, though for him it is too late. Lines 76-83: Brackenbury enters and delivers a brief Senecan passage on the theme of "heavy is the crown" found elsewhere in Shakespeare (e.g., *Richard II*, *1-2 Henry IV*).

Now enter the two murderers, and things really start to heat up. Why are they nameless? In their mindless, amoral lack of conscience they are similar to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in *Hamlet*; compare their attitudes toward money and loyalty to Machiavelli's remarks on mercenaries (troops whose loyalty is first to the prince who pays them best, second to themselves—a version of the first point). After they get rid of Brackenbury with Richard's order, they enter into a lengthy dialogue first with themselves, while Clarence sleeps, and then, after he wakes, with their victim himself. We might consider their remarks on the pragmatics of their job (to murder in cold blood, for pay) versus teachings of religion (Old and New

Testaments) along with Machiavelli's beliefs along these lines. These men are no princes, however, but amoral thugs. The second murderer is haunted from the first by conscience, but lets that go by when number 1 points out the monetary reward for the murder; note well the prose lines beginning at 137, when number 2 rationalizes that "conscience is for cowards." What are these guys, though? Clarence begs eloquently for his life, invoking the bible and even pointing out that both Lancaster and York are responsible for the civil war—a *collective guilt*. He admits his own part in the wars. Important: the style of dialogue between the first murderer and Clarence is called *stichomythia*—short, witty lines of banter depending upon clever wordplay. Example: lines 264-65. (Most often this kind of dialogue is given to men and women in Shakespeare's plays.)

The murderers' revelation to Clarence that it is his own brother who has ordered his death is chilling, psychologically sadistic, and typical of the Senecan style, as is the form of the actual murder itself—definitely cruel and inhuman punishment. The second murderer repents his participation in the cowardly crime and gives his share of the reward to his cohort, who realizes that they have committed a dastardly deed. After he receives money, he says he will flee for his life. Note: Except for the Bosworth Field scene, all violence in *Richard III* takes place offstage.

## **ACT 2**

### **Scene 1**

Huge grouping of characters surrounding the dying Edward IV, whose purpose here is to reconcile the warring factions, literally forcing them to make amends for the collective civil disobedience of Lancaster and York. Richard enters bouncily and, hypocritically, as usual, utters the required courtesies to Queen Margaret (whom he loathes) *before* dropping a bombshell: that the beloved Duke of Clarence is dead (80). He uses this sad fact now to reopen wounds, blaming Margaret for flouting Clarence's death to his face, and also the king himself for not saving Clarence's life in time (!). Richard tells his confidant, Buckingham, that he will avenge Clarence's death on Margaret and her kin. (Buckingham doesn't know that Richard caused his brother's murder.)

### **Scene 2**

This scene between the old Duchess of York (mother of Edward IV, Clarence, and Gloucester) and the late Clarence's children is filled with pathos. The duchess, under their insistent questioning, finally admits that their father is dead. The young boy reveals that his uncle Gloucester blames their father's death on the king and Queen Margaret. Richard's mother knows better, of course. Margaret enters, disheveled, and announces the death of King Edward, more bad news, and the scene devolves into a tedious spate of mourning talk. Rivers, the queen's brother, advises her to see that young Prince Edward is crowned

immediately: “Drown desperate sorrow in dead Edward’s grave / And plant your joys in living Edward’s throne” (99-100). Again, Richard enters, along with Buckingham and others, to offer his (false) condolences. Lines 9-11: Richard’s sarcastic comment on his mother’s view of him: “the butt end of a mother’s blessing.” Richard, Buckingham, and Rivers urge bringing young Edward from Ludlow (Ireland) to London quickly and with a small retinue in order to prevent trouble from the fickle populace (Machiavelli)—this advice under the guise of good *policy* (also from Machiavelli). At the end of the scene Buckingham and Richard confer, with Buckingham conniving to part the prince from members of his mother’s family.

### **Scene 3**

A quick look at the reactions of typical Londoners. Note their fears: “’twill prove a giddy world” (6); “look to see a troublous world” (10); “Woe to that land that’s governed by a child!” (12). Compare Richard’s comment to the audience at the end of 1.1: “God take King Edward to his mercy, / And leave the world for me to bustle in!” (152-53). The dialogue between the three Londoners is filled with proverbial commonplaces, and the scene ends with the remark that they must “leave it all to God” (46).

### **Scene 4**

Begins with an exchange between the second young prince (York) and his grandmother, the Duchess, on the difference between flowers and weeds (metaphors for good and bad people). Again, the Duchess knows her son all too well and makes a sardonic rejoinder (16-20). A messenger enters to reveal that Richard and Buckingham have imprisoned Rivers (the Queen’s brother), Lord Grey (one of her two sons by her first husband), and Vaughan at Pomfret castle. Queen Elizabeth is frightened for their safety and, on advice of the Archbishop of York, determines to take sanctuary at Westminster Abbey.

## **ACT 3**

### **Scene 1**

Newly arrived in London, Prince Edward hears advice from his uncle Richard on not trusting outward appearances: “Nor more an you distinguish of a man / Than of his outward show” (9-10). Hastings, the Lord Chamberlain, bursts in to announce to the prince that his mother and brother have taken sanctuary. Buckingham is furious and orders Hastings to “from her jealous arms pluck him perforce” (36). At first the Cardinal cannot condone the grave sin of violating sanctuary; Buckingham replies that “Oft have I heard of sanctuary men, / But sanctuary children never till now” (55-56). Richard, now Lord Protector, determines that the crown prince shall lodge in the Tower until his coronation. Young Edward cannot, of course, make the ironic connection between his own plight and the fate of Julius Caesar (reputed to have

built the original tower). Note Richard's asides, especially when he actually compares himself to the Vice figure of the medieval stage: "Thus, like the formal Vice, Iniquity, / I moralize two meanings in one word" (82-83). The prince's younger brother, York, arrives from sanctuary; he is precocious (and annoying), and banters dangerously with Richard, who comments in an aside to Hastings: "So cunning and so young is wonderful" (135)—wonderful meaning *amazing*.

Both princes leave for the Tower, and Richard and Buckingham continue to contrive Richard's rise to the throne. Richard asks his co-conspirator to determine how loyal Hastings and Stanley are to the crown prince, and also to order them to the Tower for a council the next day concerning the new king's coronation. Ominously, we learn that there will be *two* councils on that subject. At line 193, for example, Richard already speaks of himself using the royal *we*, and for the first time baldly states his goal: "And look when I am king" (194). Richard insists that Hastings assent to his bid for the crown "with all kindness" (198).

## **Scene 2**

A messenger from Stanley rouses Hastings at 4:00 a.m. with news of his master's symbolic dream involving a *boar* (on Richard's royal crest), two councils (one bad, one good), and their need to flee. Hastings thinks that Stanley should calm himself, and then Richard's henchman Catesby enters, remarking that "It is a reeling world, indeed, my lord" (38). As usual with Richard's victims, Hastings utters ironic statements like "I'll have this crown of mine cut from my shoulders / Before I'll see the crown so foul misplaced" (43-44). (The irony is *situational*, since audience members and readers know more about what is going on than any character in the play except Richard.) Hastings lets Catesby know that he is loyal to the crown prince even as he learns from Stanley that three of his enemies—Rivers, Vaughan, and Grey—have been hanged. Typical of the Machiavel's victim, Hastings cannot see the irony in his comment, "This day those enemies are put to death, / And I in better state than e'er I was" (103-04).

## **Scene 3**

Rivers, Grey, and Vaughan embrace before their executions. Grey points out that Queen Margaret's curses (1.3) are beginning to come true. Give her prophecies a second look.

## **Scene 4**

The Tower. In council to determine young Edward's coronation date, Buckingham, as Richard earlier, comments that outward appearances don't always accurately reveal the person's inner self ("faces" and "hearts" [10]). Richard enters and gets rid of the Bishop of Ely by sending him home for strawberries (Ely Place was famed for its strawberries—also in *Henry V*) so that he can connive with Buckingham. Ely

returns, and Hastings comments on Buckingham's outward-inward correspondence theory (48-53). Richard and Buckingham return and suddenly the scene turns shocking and stunning as Richard accuses Hastings—in language peppered with references to “devilish plots” (60), “damned witchcraft” (61), and more—of treason. Richard seems almost schizophrenic here, demanding “Off with his head! Now, by Saint Paul I swear, / I will not dine until I see the same” (76-77). Hastings laments England's fate with heavy doses of fear of the supernatural; at line 96 ff. he uses the “wheel of fortune” image for a person's life, and notes, with regret and remorse, the accuracy of Queen Margaret's prophecies.

### **Scene 5**

Again, the Tower. Note the unusually detailed opening scene direction: “*Richard . . . and Buckingham in rotten armor, marvelous ill-favored.*” Why? Buckingham tells Richard that he can use his wide range of actor's skills to enhance his stratagems. Lovell and Ratcliffe enter with Hastings' head (what a prop!); Richard shows false emotion, saying that he was duped by Hastings' outward show of virtue masking *treason*. Richard fools the Lord Mayor of London into believing that Hastings' execution was for the good of the country, then asks Buckingham to ride to the Guildhall and cast aspersions not only on the *legitimacy* of the young princes, but also on their father, the late King Edward IV. In the meantime he will assemble various religious authorities who will back his bid for the throne. The princes will be removed from sight.

### **Scene 6**

Brief scene of 14 lines in which the Scrivener reveals that Hastings continued to live even as the report of his execution was being drafted!

### **Scene 7**

Richard asks Buckingham about the mood of the people. Buckingham reports that he has fully slandered King Edward's reputation, alleging the bastardy of the princes and their father, while at the same time arguing Richard's claim to the throne. The people responded with *silence*. Buckingham urges Richard to adopt a (false) religious guise when the Lord Mayor arrives. Buckingham tells the Lord Mayor that Richard is no Edward (71-80). The hypocrisy with which Buckingham stages Richard's performance as a “Christian prince” (96) is both astonishing and marvelously humorous. Buckingham argues strenuously that Richard has been remiss for not taking his rightful throne, and Richard finally demures to his entreaties, saying that he is unworthy of the throne and extending the elaborate ritual of his being “drafted” into kingship. A tour de force of hypocrisy.

## **ACT 4**

### **Scene 1**

The Tower. The grieving women enter, showing a kind of solidarity in their fear, even though there is much enmity between them. Brackenbury announces to Queen Elizabeth that on Richard's orders (he is Lord Protector) no one is allowed to see the princes. Very shortly, Lord Stanley enters and announces that Anne is to go to Westminster, "There to be crownèd Richard's royal queen" (32), shocking news to all assembled. Immediately, Queen Elizabeth urges her son from her first marriage, Dorset, to flee to Richmond's protection in France: "hie thee from this slaughterhouse" (43). After the import of the news sinks in, Richard's mother, the Duchess of Gloucester, laments in Senecan tones the fact that she bore him into this world: "O my accursèd womb, the bed of death! / A cockatrice hast thou hatched to the world, / Whose unavoyded eye is murderous" (53-55). Anne puts an unusual spin on the topos of the "heavy is the head that wears the crown" idea: "O, would to God that the inclusive verge / Of golden metal that must round my brow / Were red-hot steel, to sear me to the brains!" (58-60). At line 65 Anne herself curses Richard and the complicity of her own actions.

### **Scene 2**

The court. Richard, Buckingham, and Richard's henchmen enter. Slyly, Richard implies to Buckingham the notion that he needs to be rid of the royal princes, and he wants Buckingham (as he wanted Hastings earlier) to acquiesce immediately, without having to think over the implications of the heinous suggestion: "Speak suddenly; be brief" (20). Buckingham stalls, not quite believing what he has heard from Richard, who comments "Tut, tut, thou art all ice; thy kindness freezes" (22). (*Kindness*, meaning "humanity" in this period, is highly ironic in the context.) Buckingham doesn't know it, but his delay in answering Richard's request will prove fatal; once Richard suspects that he cannot control someone, he casts that person aside as useless to him. After Buckingham exits, Richard tells Catesby to spread the rumor that Anne "is sick and like to die" (57); this comment works on more than one level, since it is literally true! The reason: Richard will marry his own niece (Elizabeth of York, his brother Edward IV's daughter), in order to cement his ties to the throne. James Tyrrel, who, along with the murderers of Clarence, is a perfect example of Machiavelli's mercenary, accepts Richard's plan for ridding himself of the princes, whom he considers "two deep enemies, / Foes to my rest and my sweet sleep's disturbers" (72-73). Buckingham reenters, but now finds himself completely erased from Richard's notice; toward the end of the scene he becomes nothing more than a pest to Richard, who refuses to make good his earlier promises.

### **Scene 3**

The court. Tyrrel enters and reports his foul deed of smothering the princes. Richard enters and hears

the “good” news, asking, in his sadistic fashion, that Tyrrel return for dessert and describe how he performed the killings. Ratcliffe enters and reports that Buckingham, Morton, and others have fled to Richmond, who has landed with his forces in Wales.

#### **Scene 4**

Near the court. Queen Margaret (widow of Henry VI and mother of the slain Prince Edward, Anne’s first husband), the Duchess of York (mother of Edward IV, Clarence, Richard), and Queen Elizabeth (widow of Edward IV, mother of the princes) bewail their various griefs like the tolling of bells—stylistically in the fashion of Greek tragedy. Plenty of blame abounds. Queen Margaret, famous already for her curses, says that “I am hungry for revenge” (61), calls the tragic recent circumstances “this frantic play” (68), and prays she will live long enough to say “The dog is dead!” (78). Richard and his train enter, en route to battle with Richmond, and his mother, beginning at line 137, begins her cursing of him, eventually siding with Richmond. The rest of this long scene involves Richard convincing Queen Elizabeth that he must marry her daughter (parallel to his wooing of Lady Anne); as in the earlier scene, after her exit Richard calls her “Relenting fool, and shallow, changing woman!” (431). Ratcliffe and Catesby enter with news of Richmond’s gathering forces and the defections of important men to him. Richard suspects that Stanley may not be loyal, and takes his son George as a hostage to ensure his father’s behavior in battle.

#### **Scene 5**

In this brief scene, Stanley sends word to Richmond not to misconstrue his behavior; he longs to be with Richmond, but Richard has him under control with George Stanley as his pawn.

### **ACT 5**

#### **Scene 1**

The plains near Salisbury. Significantly, the day is All Soul’s Day (2 November). Richard’s men have captured Buckingham, who just earlier defected to Richmond, and they are leading him to his execution.

#### **Scene 2**

The camp near Tamworth. Richmond and his nobles discuss how their insurrection against the king (Richard III) is motivated by the need to rid England of “this foul swine” (10). Notice the growing use in the play of the word *conscience*. It is first used in the murderer’s dialogue in 1.4, where it is equated with *cowardice* (137), then reappears in act 4 with Buckingham’s reticence to kill the princes and in Tyrrel’s account of the killings (4.3.0 ff.).

### **Scenes 3-5**

Bosworth Field. The staging of this scene is very important, deriving from the medieval dramatic tradition of the pageant wagons (which you should know about). The scene is written to provide the audience with a “double view” of kingship. That is, in the use of two locations on the stage, the tents of Richard III and Richmond, Shakespeare can oscillate the characters’ speeches on the ideas of good and bad kingship. Further, the double staging with tents representing York (Richard III) and Lancaster (Richmond) visually emphasizes the split or *division* of England brought on by the Wars of the Roses. Increasingly in the play Richard III has been referred to, figuratively, as a “devil” sent from hell; likewise, in this scene Richmond, who will become King Henry VII, is seen as God’s instrument sent to cleanse England of the evil of civil disobedience. He will repair the division by marrying Elizabeth of York (daughter of Edward IV), thus re-unifying a torn and bloodied country.

So much of this and later scenes anticipate *Henry V*: Richmond’s unselfish prayer for his troops on the eve of battle, for example; his rousing speech of encouragement to them earlier; and his gracious and thankful speech in victory. Note that throughout the play Richard III has viewed people as disposable, only good for what they can do for him; Richmond, however, genuinely loves his troops, and his instructions in his victory speech are evidence that he will be a wise and just ruler—both *loved* and *feared* (in Machiavelli’s terms). To adopt Virginia Woolf’s humorous device in *Orlando*, “the Tudor Age has begun.”