

Richard III



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

Shakespeare's father was a glove-maker, and Shakespeare received no more than a grammar school education. He married Anne Hathaway in 1582, but left his family behind around 1590 and moved to London, where he became an actor and playwright. He was an immediate success: Shakespeare soon became the most popular playwright of the day as well as a part-owner of the Globe Theater. His theater troupe was adopted by King James as the King's Men in 1603. Shakespeare retired as a rich and prominent man to Stratford-upon-Avon in 1613, and died three years later.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Wars of the Roses were a series of English wars fought between 1455 and 1485 among the House of Lancaster and the House of York, two rival lines of the royal House of Plantagenet who both claimed the right to rule England. The war got its name from the two houses' heraldic symbols: York was symbolized by a white rose and Lancaster by a red rose. Henry Tudor, Earl of Richmond and a member of the House of Lancaster, ended the wars by defeating King Richard III (a York). He then married Elizabeth of York, uniting the Yorks and the Lancasters. Henry Tudor founded the Tudor line of Kings and Queens that continued to Elizabeth I, who was Queen when Shakespeare wrote *Richard III*.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Richard III is related to the tetralogy of history plays including *Richard II*, *Henry IV Part 1*, *Henry IV, Part 2* and [Henry V](#) that is sometimes called the Henriad. Those plays track the reigns of King Richard II, King Henry IV, and Henry V, the father of Henry VI, Queen Margaret's husband and Lady Anne's father-in-law, whom Richard murders right before the play *Richard III* opens.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Tragedy of King Richard the Third*
- **When Written:** c. 1592
- **Where Written:** London
- **When Published:** 1597
- **Literary Period:** The Renaissance
- **Genre:** History play
- **Setting:** England
- **Climax:** Richard pretending not to want the crown, then

finally deferring to Buckingham and the Lord Mayor's entreaties to take it.

- **Antagonist:** Richard

EXTRA CREDIT

Not Really a Hunchback. Though Shakespeare chose to portray Richard with a serious hunchback, the historical king had scoliosis, not a hunchback, and would not have appeared as severely deformed as he looks in the play. Sources available at Shakespeare's time described Richard's condition accurately, but the playwright may have chosen to exaggerate Richard's outward deformity in order to emphasize his inner crookedness.

Real Life Omens. The day the historical Lady Anne died was marked by a solar eclipse – a threatening omen that would fit right in among the prophetic dreams and ominous signs of the play *Richard III*. Some at the time thought the eclipse signaled King Richard III's fall from divine grace.



PLOT SUMMARY

It is approximately 1485 in England and Richard of Gloucester is incensed that his brother King Edward has taken the throne after numerous civil wars fought between their family (the House of York) and the House of Lancaster. Richard feels excluded from everyone's peacetime celebrations because he was born unattractive, has a hunchback, and lacks love. Instead of frolicking, he has contrived a plot to make himself king. He's turned King Edward against their brother George of Clarence (next in line for the throne) by leading Edward to believe a prophesy that he'll be murdered by a family member with a 'G' in his name. Yet, when Richard meets Clarence on his way to prison, he pretends to be outraged at Clarence's circumstance and promises to go plead Clarence's case to Edward. On the way Richard meets Lady Anne in mourning for her father-in-law Henry VI and her husband Edward of Westminster, the king and heir to the throne before Richard killed them both. Richard is determined to marry her to advance his rise to the throne and, though Anne understandably detests him, he manages to sweet-talk her into accepting his ring. Alone, Richard gloats at his coup.

Meanwhile, Queen Elizabeth is worried because King Edward is sick and she fears Richard, who hates her and her allies, will take power. At the palace, she and Richard bicker until Queen Margaret, the former Queen who was supposed to be banished, steps out and begins cursing everyone for depriving her of her husband Henry VI, son Edward of Westminster, and

rightful place on the throne. Everyone bands against her. She curses each person present, saving the worst for Richard. She prophesies that Richard will ruin everyone's lives.

Richard secretly arranges Clarence's murder and, when King Edward decides to free Clarence, Richard pretends to be just as sad as everyone else at the mix-up. King Edward dies soon after and his son Edward Prince of Wales is brought to London to be crowned the new king. Meanwhile, Richard and his sidekick Buckingham plot to crown Richard instead. They capture Queen Elizabeth's relatives, Earl Rivers, the Marquis of Dorset, and Lord Grey and plan to execute them. That night, Lord Stanley has a dream foreboding Lord Hastings' beheading by Richard, but fails to convince the trusting Hastings to run away. Sir William Catesby tries to win Hastings over to Richard's plot but he refuses and, indeed, Richard soon finds an excuse to have Hastings beheaded. Richard and Buckingham spread the news of Richard's impending coronation with the help of the Lord Mayor, but receive a stunned lack of enthusiasm from the public. To win favor, Richard and Buckingham stage a scene in which Richard acts humble and religious and repeatedly declines the offer of the crown, accepting it only at Buckingham's insistence.

Richard is officially crowned. He imprisons King Edward's sons and orders Buckingham to kill them. When Buckingham hesitates, Richard turns against him and finds another hit man. Fearing that he himself will be the next to be killed by Richard, Buckingham flees and starts to raise an army against Richard. Richard plans to imprison Anne and marry King Edward's daughter to secure his throne. He intercepts Elizabeth in mourning for her sons and, though she loathes him, Richard eventually manages to convince her to coax her daughter into marrying Richard (or so he thinks).

Reports arrive that the Earl of Richmond, a member of the house of Lancaster, approaches England with troops, aiming to usurp Richard's throne. Richard sends Stanley off to raise troops for him, threatening to behead Stanley's son if he fails to return. Stanley secretly arranges to side with Richmond and notes that Elizabeth is eager to give her daughter's hand to Richmond. A messenger reports that Buckingham's army has scattered and that Buckingham is captured. Before execution, Buckingham repents his sins, feeling his death to be deserved. Richard marches off with troops to fight Richmond.

Richmond proves himself a generous and conscientious leader by treating his army well. The night before the battle between Richard and Richmond, the ghosts of all Richard's victims rise into the night and hurl curses at Richard while giving Richmond their blessing. The next day, Richard is defeated and killed and Richmond takes the crown, resolving to end the Wars of the Roses and establish peace by marrying young Elizabeth, the daughter of King Edward, uniting the houses of York and Lancaster forever.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Richard, Duke of Gloucester, King Richard III – Relentlessly power-hungry, Richard is not afraid to betray, lie, and murder to advance himself towards the throne. He is a smooth talker, a skilled actor, and a fickle friend and all around him come to fear his petty, bloody ways. The play tracks his swift ascent to King of England and equally swift fall at Richmond's hand. He is a York and his heraldic symbol is **the boar**.

Richmond, King Henry VII – A Lancaster and nephew to King Henry VI, Richmond is a kind, steady ruler whose gentle leadership stands in sharp contrast to Richard's. Richmond raises an army against Richard and defeats him, taking the throne of England and marrying King Edward's daughter to unite the houses of York and Lancaster.

Duke of Buckingham – Richard's right-hand man who helps the Duke rise to the throne, thinking he'll be rewarded once Richard is king. Instead, Richard spurns him. Buckingham realizes the error of his ways and tries unsuccessfully to raise an army against Richard, only to be captured and beheaded. He repents his sins before he dies.

Queen Elizabeth – Wife to King Edward and mother to Edward Prince of Wales, the Duke of York, and a daughter (also named Elizabeth) whom Richmond eventually marries, Elizabeth is progressively devastated by Richard's rise as he murders first her allies, Earl Rivers, Lord Grey, and Sir Vaughan, then her young sons, and then tries to marry her daughter.

Queen Margaret – Widow of Henry VI and mother of Edward of Westminster (both murdered by Richard), Margaret is bitter, sharp-tongued, grief-addled, and determined to make the living pay for her lost husband, son, and throne. The curses she casts at the start of the play are successively fulfilled in later subsequent scenes.

Lady Anne, Queen Anne – The widow of Edward of Westminster (the heir to Henry VI's throne before both were killed by Richard), Richard successfully woos the grieving Anne. He speaks to her of love, but in fact wants to use her to legitimate his own claim to the throne. Anne quickly comes to regret the marriage and loathes Richard until her premature death.

MINOR CHARACTERS

King Edward IV – Richard's oldest brother and Elizabeth's husband, Edward is a York. He is sickly and dies early on in the play.

George, Duke of Clarence – The middle brother between King Edward VI and Richard, Clarence stands ahead of Richard in the line of succession to the throne. Richard, while pretending to be Clarence's ally, first turns Edward against him and then

has him murdered.

Duchess of York – Mother of Edward IV, Richard, and Clarence, who comes to despise Richard and eventually disowns him.

Edward, Prince of Wales – Son of Elizabeth and King Edward and rightful heir to the throne, he is young but witty. After Edward VI dies and Richard seizes the throne, Richard continues to see Edward as a rival and therefore tries to portray him as illegitimate and eventually has him murdered.

Duke of York – Son of Elizabeth and King Edward and the younger brother to Edward Prince of Wales, Richard tries to portray him too as illegitimate and eventually has him murdered.

Lord Stanley – Loyal stepfather to Richmond, who feigns loyalty to Richard to protect his son George Stanley but stealthily assists Richmond.

Lord Hastings – Though Hastings' supports and trusts Richard, he will not support his rise to the throne and is thus eventually beheaded by Richard.

Lord Mayor of London – The mayor that Richard and Buckingham try to manipulate into garnering public support for Richard's rise to the throne.

The Three Citizens – London citizens who worry about their state and fear Richard's rise.

Scrivener – A scrivener hired by Catesby to transcribe Hastings' indictment, he fears the manipulative, wrongful rule of Richard.

The Two Murderers – Murderers Richard hires to kill Clarence. One repents and runs away in remorse.

Ghost of King Henry VI – Ghost of King Henry VI who was married to Queen Margaret and murdered by Richard.

Ghost of Edward of Westminster – Ghost of Edward of Westminster who was married to Lady Anne and murdered by Richard.

Sir William Catesby – A loyal member of Richard's circle.

Duke of Norfolk – A loyal member of Richard's circle.

Earl of Surrey – A loyal member of Richard's circle.

Sir Richard Ratcliffe – A loyal member of Richard's circle.

Lord Lovel – A loyal member of Richard's circle.

Earl of Oxford – A loyal member of Richmond's party.

Sir Walter Herbert – A loyal member of Richmond's party.

Sir James Blunt – A loyal member of Richmond's party.

Sir William Brandon – A loyal member of Richmond's party.

Sir James Tyrrell – The assassin Richard hires to kill Edward Prince of Wales and the Duke of York.

Earl Rivers – Elizabeth's brother and loyal ally, eventually

executed by Richard.

Marquis of Dorset – Elizabeth's son from a previous marriage and loyal ally.

Lord Richard Grey – Elizabeth's son from a previous marriage and loyal ally, eventually executed by Richard.

Sir Thomas Vaughan – An ally of Rivers and Grey eventually murdered by Richard.

Sir Robert Brackenbury – Lieutenant of the Tower.

The Sheriff of Wiltshire – A sheriff who escorts Buckingham to his execution.

The Bishop of Ely – A bishop who abandons Richard for Richmond.

The Archbishop of York – An archbishop who conducts Elizabeth and the Duke of York to sanctuary.

Cardinal Bouchier – A cardinal who helps extract the Duke of York from sanctuary.

Sir Christopher Urswick – A messenger between Stanley and Richmond.

Margaret Plantagenet – Clarence's daughter whom Richard marries off to a man of low rank, thereby protecting his throne.

Edward Plantagenet – Clarence's son, whom Richard imprisons.

The Priest – A priest of Hastings' acquaintance.

The Pursuivant – A pursuivant (a man who looks after matters of genealogical importance) of Hastings' acquaintance.

A Page – A page in Richard's court.

The Alderman – An alderman of London.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



POWER

Richard III tracks Richard's bloodthirsty ascent to power. The play is almost all action – it contains less meditation and soliloquy than many of

Shakespeare's plays – and nearly every action is orchestrated by Richard to facilitate his own rise to the crown. The play begins right after King Henry VI's death vacates the throne and ends as soon as Richard is slain by Richmond at the end of Act V, its dramatic shape framing a zoomed-in view of Richard's violent power grab. The peacetime England presided over by King Edward at the start of the play and Richmond at the end is

a world apart and can't coexist with the murderous, terrified atmosphere that Richard thrives in. Indeed, Richard himself admits at the play's start that he has no place in peacetime England: "Why, I, in this weak piping time of peace, have no delight to pass away the time." Indeed, in creating Richard, Shakespeare creates an image of unadulterated greed for personal power, a true Machiavellian leader who lacks all moral and emotional compunction. His own advancement is the only thing he pays attention to and, much to the other characters' chagrin, Richard remains deaf to people's grief and pleas for mercy no matter the circumstances. Unfazed by the fact that he himself is to blame for Lady Anne's mourning (since he killed her husband and father-in-law), Richard woos the grief-stricken lady just to make himself feel powerful. When his own mother, the Duchess of York, tries desperately to articulate her anger to him, he ignores her. Likewise, Richard spurns his loyal friend Buckingham's entirely justified request for the reward Richard himself has promised. He is numb even to the enraged misery of Queen Elizabeth, whose two sons Richard has slain, and has the nerve to ask the devastated mother for her daughter's hand in marriage.

Yet while most of the play's action focuses on Richard's ruthless self-empowerment, it opens with a glimpse into Richard's profound disempowerment, which, though it doesn't excuse any of Richard's brutality, offers psychological insight into his behavior. In Act 1 scene 1, Richard walks into the play with hideous features and a severe hunchback, the result of a premature birth. Alone on stage, all attention is focused on Richard's body whose deformity and weakness Shakespeare probably exaggerated for dramatic effect (the historical Richard suffered from scoliosis but had no hunchback). Those around him frolic and make love in celebration of peacetime, Richard says, but he, "curtailed of this fair proportion, cheated of feature by dissembling nature, deformed, unfinished...so lamely and unfashionable," cannot partake of their joy. "And therefore," he adds, "since I cannot prove a lover...I am determined to prove a villain." Implying that Richard's physical disempowerment is the root cause of his blood-thirst for political empowerment presents Richard's power grab as compensatory, an effort to outweigh the disadvantages he was born with. From this perspective, Richard is still a villain and his violence is still horrifically unjustified, but it is, however perversely, more understandable.



THE THRONE AND THE STATE

The seat of power Richard so ruthlessly seeks is the English throne, whose *rightful* holder, the play suggests, will be worthy because of both blood and character. The blood claim to the throne derives from England's tradition of royal lineage. At the time the play opens, this tradition is embroiled in dispute: Richard's brother King Edward has just taken the throne after the Wars of the Roses, a

drawn-out series of civil wars between two families - the Yorks (Richard's family) and the Lancasters - who both claimed the right to rule England through their bloodline. Even aside from the Lancastrian claim to the throne (frequently articulated by Queen Margaret), Richard does not have a legitimate right to be king at play's start. His brother King Edward has two sons and Richard has another older brother, Clarence, all three of whom stand ahead of Richard in succession. Richard kills them all to claim the throne. Later, he wheedles Queen Elizabeth into giving him her daughter's hand in marriage as an attempt to solidify that claim. By marrying King Edward's daughter, Richard would deactivate any threat she might pose to his seat. Richard's brief rule is cut off by Richmond, a Lancaster, who kills Richard, ends the Wars of the Roses, and becomes King Henry VII, ushering in the Tudor dynasty of which Queen Elizabeth I (ruler during Shakespeare's time) was a representative.

Yet apart from addressing the complex intricacies of the royal bloodlines, the play also suggests that the rightful ruler of England will be a person of good character and strong ethics. The play frequently compares the state of England to a human body or a natural landscape whose health and fertility depends on the moral rectitude of England's ruler. Richmond combines the figures of body and landscape in describing Richard as, "The wretched, bloody, and usurping boar, that spoil'd your summer fields and fruitful vines, swills your warm blood like wash, and makes his trough in your embowell'd bosoms." Later, he says that England has "scarr'd herself" under Richard's brutal leadership and looks forward to "smooth'd-fac'd peace." Queen Margaret calls Richard "the troubler of the poor world's peace," and compares him to an "elvish-mark'd, abortive, rooting hog" - an unnatural and deformed animal. Queen Elizabeth's retort to Richard implies that Richard is the opposite of nature: "As long as heaven and nature," Richard says, and Elizabeth responds, "as long as hell and Richard." A London citizen likens the precautions people should take against a dangerous ruler to the measures people prepare against bad weather: "When clouds are seen, wise men put on their cloaks." In keeping with the metaphor of the state as a human body or a landscape, the common people are able to feel the onset of illness and blight even as Richard's circle of supporters publicly proclaims England's health. Early on, one of the London citizens note, "By a divine instinct, men's minds mistrust ensuing danger, as by proof, we see the water swell before a boisterous storm." Later the scrivener asks, "Who is so gross that cannot see this palpable device? Yet who so bold but says he sees it not? Bad is the world, and all will come to naught..." And, when Buckingham gladly declares Richard's impending coronation to the public, his announcement is met with the unyielding, stony silence of deep fear. Try as he might, Buckingham can't elicit cheers from a public that knows Richard's reign is not good news.



LANGUAGE

"Why should calamity be full of words?" asks the Duchess of York. Indeed, though *Richard III* contains plenty of bloodshed, its most insidious violence occurs in language. Orchestrating his rise to power with his tongue, Richard can be seen as a kind of director: he describes his plot to gain power to the audience in the first scene, then quickly begins to turn his words into reality. As the play goes on, Richard makes a pattern of this, privately articulating his plots to the audience before he renders them onstage. In so doing, he seems to simultaneously privilege and implicate the audience. By letting playgoers in on information the actors on stage are ignorant of, Richard entices the audience and allows them to share his bird's eye view on the action. Still, this shared vantage point often feels uncomfortable as it positions audience members on equal footing with the cruel, sadistic Richard. The language Richard uses among his fellow characters proves equally two-faced and manipulative. He dissembles, flatters, and feigns love without concern for truth or pity. He hires assassins to do the dirty work of murder and lies prodigiously to distance himself from the deaths. He makes promises he will not fulfill and sugarcoats requests for favors. His tactics work on many, who take Richard at his word and think him a friend: Clarence believes Richard is on his side, even as Richard plots to kill him. Lady Anne is successfully wooed by Richard's sweet-talking, even though Richard has murdered her husband and father. Hastings' trusts Richard's show of gentleness and is eventually beheaded when he fails to perceive the true, ruthless Richard lurking behind the kind language. Even Buckingham, who is wise to Richard's schemes, believes Richard's promise of reward and doesn't realize that he himself is just another of Richard's victims until too late. Queen Elizabeth's wittily furious rejoinders to Richard's coaxing in Act 4 are significant in showing her immune to Richard's tongue – her grief is more powerful than Richard's eloquence. Though Richard believes his words have convinced her to give him her daughter's hand in marriage, Stanley soon reveals that she has in fact offered that hand to Richmond.

The curse language spoken by women in the play counters Richard's manipulative language and channels the powers of destiny, fate, and prophecy through words. Though everyone initially ignores Queen Margaret's curses and calls her crazy, the curses she casts against them end up coming true, and Hastings, Rivers, Grey, and Vaughan all lament the fulfillment of Margaret's curse as they are executed. The Duchess and Queen Elizabeth, too, regret not taking Margaret more seriously after Richard murders the young princes and leaves the women in the devastated state Margaret's curse prophesied. "O thou well skilled in curses, stay awhile," Elizabeth begs Margaret, "And teach me how to curse mine enemies." Richard's downfall, too, fulfills Margaret's curse while

also fulfilling the curse cast on him by his mother the Duchess. Meanwhile, Margaret's own miserable banishment is the result of a curse cast against her by Richard's father for killing his son Rutland. Cousin to curse language is prophetic language, which proves similarly powerful throughout the play. The futures described to Clarence and Stanley by their dreams are realized soon after they dream them. Richard tries to brush off the prophecy he heard from an Irish bard but it comes true anyway: "I should not live long after I saw Richmond," he was told, and he doesn't.



WOMEN

The women in *Richard III* are, on the surface, as disempowered as they usually were in the historical 15th century society that the play depicts. Men preside over the nation and over their wives, as the crown passes from Edward to Richard to Richmond and as Anne follows her husband Richard's orders even when it breaks her heart to do so and King Edward's daughter's wedding is arranged for her by Richmond and Queen Elizabeth.

Yet, while women in the play lack political influence and independence, they wield intense emotional force and speak a vigorous, powerful language. The future-shaping curse language described in the "Language" theme is spoken exclusively by the female characters Queen Margaret, the Duchess, and Queen Elizabeth. Further, the play's female characters form the emotional core of the play. While male characters mostly negotiate political action, the women articulate the emotional tolls those actions take and thus bring the play to life for the audience. "I had an Edward, till a Richard kill'd him; I had a Henry, till a Richard kill'd him; Thou hadst an Edward, till a Richard kill'd him; Thou hadst a Richard, till a Richard kill'd him" explains Queen Margaret to Queen Elizabeth, and her repetitions illuminate the parallels between each woman's grief, not only for Queen Elizabeth but for the Duchess and the play-goers watching. Likewise, nearly every moving lament in the play comes from the mouth of Anne, Queen Margaret, the Duchess, or Queen Elizabeth. By contrast, Richard tries to curtail the force of the women's speeches. Interrupting the Duchess and Queen Elizabeth's furious expressions of grief after the princes' murder, Richard says: "Let not the heavens hear these tell-tale women rail on the Lord's anointed." When the Duchess cries in agony, "O, let me speak!" Richard responds, "Do, then; but I'll not hear." Yet whether or not Richard listens, the women are heard and their words ring powerfully through the air of the play long after they are spoken.



TIME

Richard III compresses fourteen years of British history into a five-act play whose action takes place over about a month. The effect of this compression

is palpable and the drama seems to race by, even though it is, line for line, one of Shakespeare's longest plays. The plot takes place at breakneck speed and the terrifying spectacle of Richard's behavior is made to feel more terrifying because it happens so quickly, his violent scheme tearing onwards, gaining momentum, seemingly unstoppable. Indeed, Richard at first uses this speed to his advantage, successfully wooing Anne while her mind is still grief-addled by the death of her husband and father-in-law and vulnerable to making a regrettable choice. Richard takes similar advantage of time by arranging for Clarence to be killed before King Edward can pardon him, then pretending to everyone in court that the death was the result of Edward's own order too hastily fulfilled. Time likewise serves Richard in the court of opinion: many of the nobles surrounding Richard – including Hastings, Edward Prince of Wales, the Duke of York, and Buckingham – don't realize how malicious Richard is until it's too late for them to escape him.

However, as the play progresses, time no longer works so smoothly in Richard's favor. He seems to lose control of time and frequently asks what hour it is. Before the final battle, a clock strikes ominously, alerting Richard to a disturbing temporal phenomenon: though the time has come for the sun to rise, the sky remains black. This disconnect between mechanical and natural time unsettles Richard and he reads it as a threatening sign. "A black day will it be to somebody," he reflects, and tries to comfort himself by imagining that the sky must be just as black over his opponent's camp and that the omen might thus be for Richmond. Yet Richmond's camp has in fact already spotted dawn and the sky's dark forecast is for Richard, whose death that day brings the hurtling play to a sudden halt.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



THE BOAR

The boar is Richard's heraldic symbol and represents him several times during the play: in Queen Margaret's speech (she calls him an "elvish-marked, abortive, rooting hog"); in Lord Stanley's dream (he sees the boar knocking off Hastings' helmet); and in the Earl of Richmond's speech to his troops (he calls Richard a "foul swine"). However, the boar doesn't just symbolize Richard because it happens to appear on his coat of arms. As an animal commonly associated with violent aggression in Elizabethan England, the boar is also a fitting symbol for Richard's bloody and relentlessly antagonistic spirit.



THE CLOCK

The clock symbolizes time, which feels unpredictable and sped-up throughout the play. It feels that way for a reason: Shakespeare has in fact compressed fourteen years worth of history into the span of a month. At the start of the play, Richard seems to work the sped-up time to his favor, successfully wooing Anne as soon as her husband has died and passing off his murder of Clarence as the too-quick fulfillment of King Edward's own death-order. Yet, as the play goes on, Richard seems to lose control of time and frequently asks what time it is. Before the final battle, a clock strikes, the sun fails to rise at its scheduled time, and Richard fears the resultant black sky bodes ill for his fate on the battlefield. Indeed, he is killed by Richmond, which brings the hurtling play to a sudden halt.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Simon & Schuster edition of *Richard III (Shakespeare Folger Library)* published in 1996.

Act 1, Scene 1 Quotes

☹☹ Now is the winter of our discontent
Made glorious summer by this son of York

Related Characters: Richard, Duke of Gloucester, King Richard III (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 1.1.1-2

Explanation and Analysis

These opening lines of the play are among Shakespeare's most famous. They are spoken as a soliloquy by the play's title character, Richard III. Note that it begins with the very present *now*, and marks the time by mentioning the seasons. The house of York has won the throne in the Wars of the Roses, turning the "winter of our discontent," filled with tragedy, death, and war, into "glorious summer."

The "son of York" Richard refers to is his brother King Edward, who has ascended to the throne. Here Richard III puns on "sun," shining down in greatness and eliminating "all the clouds that loured upon our house." Richard goes on to describe the joyous celebrations taking place in England and the effects of the war's end. These lines are often delivered sarcastically, as Richard goes on to say that he cannot enjoy the festivities and wishes the war were still going on.

Richard wishes for a wintery war instead of the boring, peaceful summer, as he himself cannot enjoy the pleasures of such peace. It is for this reason, outlined below, that he decides to "prove a villain."

☹☹ Why, I, in this weak piping time of peace,
Have no delight to pass away the time,
Unless to spy my shadow in the sun,
And descant on mine own deformity;
And therefore,--since I cannot prove a lover,
To entertain these fair well-spoken days,--
I am determined to prove a villain,
And hate the idle pleasures of these days.
Plots have I laid, inductions dangerous,
By drunken prophecies, libels, and dreams...

Related Characters: Richard, Duke of Gloucester, King Richard III (speaker), King Edward IV

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 1.1.24-33

Explanation and Analysis

Richard has gone on to describe his deformity, greatly exaggerated in the play, which prevents him from enjoying "sporting tricks," "love's majesty," or the benefits of peacetime. He says in this time of peace, he has "no delight to pass away the time," other than spotting his own "shadow in the sun" and make fun of his own deformities. Note that he is from the first speech obsessed with the passage of time, and that he now puns on "sun" the other way, suggesting that he is in his brother's (the son of York's) shadow.

Because he "cannot prove a lover" and cannot take part in the peaceful festivities, Richard decides to "prove a villain." He consciously decides to be evil, and he announces it to the audience in the very first scene of the play--in a way almost implicating them in the scenes that follow, whether they like it or not. His motives are hatred, boredom, frustration, and a hunger for power. As he begins to outline in the last lines of the excerpt, Richard has already laid a plot to set his brothers against each other by telling King Edward of a false prophesy.

Act 1, Scene 2 Quotes

☹☹ Poor key-cold figure of a holy king,
Pale ashes of the house of Lancaster,
Thou bloodless remnant of that royal blood

Related Characters: Lady Anne, Queen Anne (speaker), Richard, Duke of Gloucester, King Richard III

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 1.2.5-7

Explanation and Analysis

This scene begins with the entrance of Lady Anne and a funeral procession bearing King Henry VI's coffin. Henry VI was Lady Anne's father-in-law, as she was married to his son Edward of Westminster; both men were killed by Richard. With the lines quoted here, Lady Anne begins a long monologue in which she mourns her father-in-law and husband and curses the man who killed them (Richard).

She starts by addressing the dead body directly. "Key-cold" essentially means stone cold; the body is as lifeless as a cold key. She next characterizes the dead king as the "pale ashes of the house of Lancaster," which has now fallen out of power with the ascension of the house of York. The Lancaster royal bloodline has been theoretically ended, and thus we see a double meaning in "thou bloodless remnant of that royal blood." The king is literally bloodless since he is dead, and he is also bloodless in the sense that his son has been killed and his bloodline has been stopped. Note also that she calls him a "holy" king; kings and queens at the time were considered to be rulers by "divine right." The play will question this idea, and consider how important *character* is in a ruler--whether blood alone should be the deciding factor of who heads the state.

Act 1, Scene 3 Quotes

☹☹ Cannot a plain man live, and think no harm,
But thus his simple truth must be abus'd
With silken, sly, insinuating Jacks?

Related Characters: Richard, Duke of Gloucester, King Richard III (speaker), Queen Elizabeth

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 1.3.52-43

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, Queen Elizabeth and her brothers are worrying about King Edward's health. Though her brothers try to comfort her, Elizabeth is afraid that if the king dies, Richard will seize power, since he hates her and since her sons are too young to rule. After King Edward announces

that he wants Richard and Queen Elizabeth's brothers to make peace, Richard enters, furious, and complains that he is being slandered to the king.

Here Richard suggests that he is a "plain man" who thinks "no harm." He claims that he has been "abus'd" by "silken, sly, insinuating Jacks." These lines are extremely ironic, since Richard himself has been slandering pretty much everyone else on stage, and he has the most eloquent (and least "plain") tongue around. Richard has been slandering Queen Elizabeth to Clarence, for example, and so everyone blames her for Clarence's imprisonment. Richard is doing what he does throughout the play: using lies and carefully constructed language to manipulate others and gain power, all while seeming innocent.

☛ Can curses pierce the clouds and enter heaven? – Why, then, give way, dull clouds, to my quick curses!

Related Characters: Queen Margaret (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 1.3.203-205

Explanation and Analysis

Old Queen Margaret, wife of King Henry VI and mother of Edward of Westminster, has entered unnoticed. While Richard and Queen Elizabeth bicker, Margaret delivers a series of angry asides under her breath, accusing Elizabeth of stealing her throne and Richard of killing her husband and son. Eventually, Margaret gets tired of waiting and speaks out loud, calling everyone "wrangling pirates." She then directly accuses Elizabeth and says that Richard owes her a husband and a son. Soon everyone gangs up on Margaret.

Furious with everyone on stage, the old queen then launches into an eloquent tirade against the house of York. In the quote she asks a rhetorical question: can curses really make their way into heaven? In that case, she instructs the "dull clouds" to separate and make way for her "quick curses." Indeed, what follows is extremely quick, in the sense that it conveys her fierce intelligence, and her predictive powers. The curse language that she begins with this quote is future-shaping or predictive, as the curses she makes ultimately come true.

☛ Thou elvish-marked, abortive, rooting hog,
Thou that wast sealed in thy nativity
The slave of nature and the son of hell.

Related Characters: Queen Margaret (speaker), Richard, Duke of Gloucester, King Richard III

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 1.3.239-241

Explanation and Analysis

In Margaret's stream of prophetic curses, Richard is saved for last. She curses him to be tortured by his conscience, to mistake his friends for traitors and traitors for friends, and to be kept sleepless by nightmares of hell. She then begins a long list of horrible epithets. We can note that the list is strengthened by Anaphora--the repetition of a single word (or words) at the beginning of consecutive lines. In this case, the repeated word is "thou." Margaret continues for six lines and seems to have more material before being interrupted by Richard saying "Margaret." Note that she responds masterfully with only "Richard!"

The quoted expert gives the first half of her six-line list of epithets against Richard. She calls him an "abortive, rooting hog" and a "slave of nature" and "son of hell." Note that even without precisely understanding the meaning of these lines one can perceive the sting of Margaret's language. Her reference to a "rooting hog" is a clever play on Richard's heraldic symbol, the Boar. She twists the supposedly noble Boar into a disgusting, aggressive Hog, outlining Richard's true personality.

But everyone on stage has already been cursed by Margaret, and so they are blinded to her accurate assessment of Richard's character. Though Margaret seems to know her predictions will come true, the others discount them. After her exit, Richard pretends to forgive her and spares her life (since she technically has been banished on punishment of death). By doing so, Richard further discounts Margaret's slew of curses and impresses everyone with his gentleness.

☛ And thus I clothe my naked villainy
With odd old ends stol'n forth of Holy Writ;
And seem a saint when most I play the devil.

Related Characters: Richard, Duke of Gloucester, King Richard III (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 1.3.356-358

Explanation and Analysis

Richard offers this soliloquy after everyone has left the stage, and before two murderers enter; Richard will send the murderers to kill Clarence. In the soliloquy, Richard excitedly outlines the plan he has put into action: he has cast doubt on Clarence, but placed the blame on this doubt and Clarence's imprisonment on Elizabeth and her circle. What's more, he has recited scripture in order to appear religious and innocent, compounding the forgiving image he built after Margaret's curses.

This excerpt concludes the soliloquy and explains what Richard has done with his plan, specifically with the invocation of the Bible. He has done so in order to "clothe" his "naked villainy," which is apparent to the audience from the beginning of the play, but carefully obscured to the characters within it. To cover himself, Richard uses bits and pieces of the Bible to "seem a saint" but acknowledging "I play the devil." This line echoes his opening claim to "prove a villain," extending the claim with the meta-theatrical notion that he is 'playing' a character, in this case a devil. The devil himself is known to use scriptures for his own purposes, which is exactly what Richard has done.

Note also the interesting sonic features of the line "With odd old ends stol'n forth of Holy Writ." Metrically, it breaks from the typical pattern of 5 iambs, giving five consecutive stressed syllables in "odd old ends stol'n forth." The line is also drawn out by use of assonance, and the repeated use of 'o' sounds in *odd*, *old*, *stol'n*, *forth*, *of*, and *Holy* draws out the line in delivery. The line then is followed by five classical iambs, a typical line of Shakespeare's verse.

Act 2, Scene 1 Quotes

☛☛ But he, poor man, by your first order died,
And that a winged Mercury did bear:
Some tardy cripple bore the countermand,
That came too lag to see him buried.

Related Characters: Richard, Duke of Gloucester, King Richard III (speaker), George, Duke of Clarence, King Edward IV

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 2.1.90-93

Explanation and Analysis

Though he is physically ill, King Edward uses his powers to heal the relationships of his subjects in an attempt to keep the peace. He is seemingly successful, and determines that if Richard swears like everyone else, the peace will be kept. Richard then enters, and after being commanded, he swears to keep peace and declares that he has no enemies in England. With peace supposedly made, Queen Elizabeth asks the King to pardon Clarence. At this point Richard interjects that Clarence has been killed, to which Edward protests that the order to kill Clarence was reversed.

The lines quoted give Richard's response to Edward's protest. Richard explains that Clarence (called ironically a "poor man," since Richard was the one who ordered the murder) was killed by the first order, which was carried by a "wingéd Mercury"--the classical messenger of the gods. Contrasted to the speed of the first order, the second ("the countermand") was delivered by "some tardy cripple" (like Richard himself). Richard claims the reversal on the killing order came too late to save Clarence. The truth, of course, is that Richard sent the murderers himself, and here he manipulates ideas of time and speed in order to again make himself seem innocent, and to make Clarence's death seem like an accident.

Act 2, Scene 4 Quotes

☛☛ Ay me, I see the ruin of my house!
The tiger now hath seiz'd the gentle hind;
Insulting tyranny begins to jet
Upon the innocent and aweless throne.
Welcome, destruction, blood, and massacre!
I see, as in a map, the end of all.

Related Characters: Queen Elizabeth (speaker), Richard, Duke of Gloucester, King Richard III

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 2.4.54-59

Explanation and Analysis

Edward is dead, and his son, Prince Edward of Wales, is in line to be crowned king. But Richard and his sidekick Buckingham plot to have Richard crowned; they imprison and plan to kill Queen Elizabeth's relatives Rivers, Dorset, and Grey. In this scene Elizabeth's younger son, Duke of York, has recounted a strange interaction with Richard, and Elizabeth sees through Richard's manipulation of her son. A messenger then enters and informs Elizabeth of her

relatives' imprisonment.

To this news Queen Elizabeth responds with the lamentation excerpted in the quote. She claims to see the "ruin of her house," since by imprisoning or killing everyone, Richard has disempowered her family. She refers to him as a "tiger" that has pounced on his opportunity, characterizing him as tyranny ascending to the throne that should be pure ("innocent"). She dramatically welcomes "destruction, blood, and massacre," saying that she sees the end of everything like she's viewing a map. This language is powerful and dramatic, but Elizabeth is essentially correct--she sees what will happen, but can do nothing to stop it.

Act 3, Scene 1 Quotes

☝☝ You are too senseless-obstinate, my lord,
Too ceremonious and traditional.
Weigh it but with the grossness of this age,
You break not sanctuary in seizing him.
The benefit thereof is always granted
To those whose dealings have deserv'd the place
And those who have the wit to claim the place.
The Prince hath neither claim'd it nor deserv'd it,
And therefore, in mine opinion, cannot have it.
Then, taking him from thence that is not there,
You break no privilege nor charter there.

Related Characters: Duke of Buckingham (speaker), Cardinal Bouchier, Duke of York

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 3.1.45-55

Explanation and Analysis

After learning that her family was captured, Queen Elizabeth and her younger son Duke of York took sanctuary, meaning that they are hiding in a church, where they are supposed to be safe regardless of who is in power. In this scene, Edward, Prince of Wales and new uncrowned king, is greeted by Richard, Buckingham, and a Cardinal. Soon Hastings enters and reports the news that the king's mother and brother cannot greet the king since they have taken sanctuary, which is sacred.

But Buckingham instructs the cardinal to retrieve the Duke of York. When the Cardinal refuses, Buckingham uses a careful, twisted argument to justify doing so: seizing the Duke of York is not breaking sanctuary, since the benefits of sanctuary are only granted to those who have specifically requested it. Since the Prince hasn't requested sanctuary,

instead being taken by his mother, Buckingham argues that technically he doesn't deserve protection. Thus the "obstinate" Cardinal is convinced (or forced) by a loophole into breaking sanctuary and fetching the young Prince. Here, we see Richard's power overstepping usual boundaries: he exerts his will over the young King and over what is usually allowed by the Church.

Act 3, Scene 2 Quotes

☝☝ Indeed, I am no mourner for that news,
Because they have been still my adversaries;
But that I'll give my voice on Richard's side
To bar my master's heirs in true descent,
God knows I will not do it to the death.

Related Characters: Lord Hastings (speaker), Richard, Duke of Gloucester, King Richard III, Edward, Prince of Wales

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 3.2.53-57

Explanation and Analysis

Lord Hastings has been warned by Lord Stanley of a dream in which Richard kills Hastings; Stanley has fled and with a message urges Hastings to do the same. But Hastings believes that everything is fine, and that Catesby is a good friend who can be trusted. Soon Catesby enters and begins to suggest to Hastings that Richard be crowned King. Hastings doesn't approve, even when Catesby delivers the "good news" that Richard is killing Hastings' enemies and hopes for support.

It is to this news that Hastings responds with the lines in the quote. He says that the news is indeed good (he's "no mourner for that news") because it does concern his enemies. However, Hastings says that the suggestion that he will support Richard and prevent the King's true heirs from taking power is preposterous. He "will not do it to the death." Here, Hastings stays true to the rules of bloodlines, the state, and honor, continuing to serve the King even after Edward's death and hoping to prevent Richard's usurpation. His language here is also slightly prophetic, as he will soon be killed for his refusal to endorse Richard.

Act 3, Scene 5 Quotes

☝☝ Tut, I can counterfeit the deep tragedian;
Speak and look back, and pry on every side,
Tremble and start at wagging of a straw,
Intending deep suspicion. Ghastly looks
Are at my service, like enforced smiles;
And both are ready in their offices
At any time to grace my stratagem.

Related Characters: Duke of Buckingham (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 3.5.6-12

Explanation and Analysis

This scene clearly exhibits the theatrical nature of Richard's manipulation and schemes. The scene begins with Richard instructing Buckingham on how to convincingly pretend that he's sad, much like a director giving notes to an actor. As Richard's co-conspirator, Buckingham is comfortable in the role: he claims that he "can counterfeit the deep tragedian," explicitly calling himself an actor (a tragedian is an actor in a tragedy--which is exactly what the actor who is playing Buckingham already is, giving an added layer of meta-theatricality).

Buckingham (and the actor playing Buckingham) knows all the tricks of the trade: "Ghastly looks / Are at [his] service," just like fake smiles. This acting, he says, is a crucial tool ready to be employed in any moment for the benefit of their strategy. Richard and Buckingham proceed to act in front of the mayor to win public approval, and now we see that this manipulation and acting is calculated, practiced, and coached by the master manipulator/director Richard.

☝☝ What! think you we are Turks or Infidels?
Or that we would, against the form of law,
Proceed thus rashly in the villain's death
But that the extreme peril of the case,
The peace of England and our person's safety,
Enforc'd us to this execution?

Related Characters: Richard, Duke of Gloucester, King Richard III (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 3.5.42-47

Explanation and Analysis

These lines come from the performance in which Buckingham and Richard convince the Mayor (and through him the common people) that Hastings was a traitor who deserved death. Such a performance is key to maintain public image and ease Richard's pathway to the throne. Buckingham and Richard first claim that Hastings was a traitor, and that he plotted their deaths. When the mayor questions them, Richard responds with this quote.

He invokes both his status as Christian and Englishman, asking rhetorically, "think you we are Turks or Infidels?" He implies that since they are English Christians, they would never execute someone without a good reason (invoking a sense of racial superiority that is ironically undercut as soon as it leaves Richard's mouth--for Richard himself proves that Christian Europeans are as bloodthirsty as anyone else). He continues by saying that they wouldn't go against the law or kill Hastings so quickly unless the case was so extreme as they described. Richard fashions the killing as necessary for the peace of England and to save their own lives. Thus framed as moral and essential, the execution appears justified to the Mayor. Very quickly, the Mayor determines that Hastings deserved his death; the deceptive theatre of Richard and Buckingham is convincing. Note that again, language is Richard's weapon and method of obtaining power. He commits atrocities of violence, but it is through language that he is able to translate that violence into power, false innocence, and the crown.

Act 3, Scene 6 Quotes

☝☝ Who is so gross
That cannot see this palpable device?
Yet who's so bold but says he sees it not?
Bad is the world; and all will come to nought,
When such ill dealing must be seen in thought.

Related Characters: Scrivener (speaker), Richard, Duke of Gloucester, King Richard III, Lord Hastings, Sir William Catesby

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 3.6.10-14

Explanation and Analysis

These lines are spoken in a soliloquy by a Scrivener (basically a notetaker or transcriber) who enters the stage alone in this brief scene. With him, he carries the indictment of Hastings, which took him eleven hours to write. However, Hastings has been executed before his sentencing could even be read, indicating to the Scrivener (and the public)

that the execution was extralegal and suspicious.

The Scrivener asks rhetorically who is so stupid or lacking in perception ("gross") that they cannot see what is clearly going on (the "palpable device" of Richard's deception). At the same time, the Scrivener comments on the frustrating dilemma by asking who is brave enough to speak out loud what everyone internally knows to be the truth about Richard—everyone knows, but because they are afraid, they pretend they don't. The Scrivener concludes that the world is bad and will come to nothing when people must think about such an evil as Richard. Note that the rhyming couplet of *nought* and *thought* end the scene with emphasis.

Act 3, Scene 7 Quotes

☞ No, so God help me, they spake not a word;
But, like dumb statues or breathing stones,
Star'd each on other, and look'd deadly pale.
Which when I saw, I reprehended them,
And ask'd the mayor what meant this willful silence.

Related Characters: Duke of Buckingham (speaker), Richard, Duke of Gloucester, King Richard III, Edward, Prince of Wales, Duke of York

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 3.7.24-28

Explanation and Analysis

Buckingham is reporting to Richard on the results of the rumors they spread and on the citizens' reaction to Richard's rise to power. The people were silent, so Buckingham tried rousing them, asking them to cry out "God save Richard, England's royal king!" But, as he explains in the quote, they were still silent and "spake not a word." Buckingham describes the people as "dumb statues or breathing stones," staring at each other and looking pale.

This response is deemed a "willful silence," meaning that there is an intention and clear message given by the lack of words. The silence of the citizens speaks loudly: they are scared to voice their opinions directly, but they resist Richard as a king. Their hesitancy to support him shows that their wishes can affect those in power, and the limitations of language. At a certain point, the manipulative rhetorical powers of Richard and his followers become insufficient to convince the common people that he is not corrupt. Likewise, the citizens are unable to articulate their discomfort or true opinions, instead being forced to communicate through their silent speech and resistance.

Act 4, Scene 1 Quotes

☞ My woman's heart
Grossly grew captive to his honey words
And proved the subject of my own soul's curse,
Which ever since hath kept my eyes from rest

Related Characters: Lady Anne, Queen Anne (speaker), Richard, Duke of Gloucester, King Richard III

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 4.1.83-86

Explanation and Analysis

Queen Elizabeth, the Duchess, Dorset, Anne, and Margaret Plantagenet are all at the Tower in hopes of visiting the young princes. However, they are stopped by Brackenbury, who says that Richard (whom he calls king) has forbidden visits. Immediately following Brackenbury's exit, Stanley enters and informs the women that indeed, Richard will be crowned king, and that Anne's presence is required so that she can be crowned his queen.

Here, she laments her situation, frustratedly recalling how Richard wooed her with his "honey words." Richard's language is a powerful tool, and Anne, too, is eloquent in her cries, but she becomes the victim of her own prophetic curse-speech. During her grief and Richard's courtship, she cursed him to make the woman he married miserable. Now that she has married him, subdued by those honey words, she has fulfilled her own prophecy and is herself extremely miserable and restless, unable to sleep.

Act 4, Scene 2 Quotes

☞ I must be married to my brother's daughter,
Or else my kingdom stands on brittle glass.
Murder her brothers, and then marry her!
Uncertain way of gain! But I am in
So far in blood that sin will pluck on sin:
Tear-falling pity dwells not in this eye.

Related Characters: Richard, Duke of Gloucester, King Richard III (speaker), King Edward IV, Edward, Prince of Wales, Duke of York

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 4.2.63-68

Explanation and Analysis

Richard is now King, but he fears that he might lose his

power to Edward Prince of Wales. Richard tells Buckingham to kill the young princes, and when Buckingham hesitates, Richard becomes irate and ultimately decides to hire someone else and drop Buckingham. Killing the young princes isn't the only precaution Richard will take to preserve his power--he also instructs Catesby to spread rumors that Anne is sick. He will then lock away Anne to hide her health so that he can marry someone else to solidify his position as king.

Richard's plan is to marry King Edward's (his brother's) daughter Elizabeth. He believes such a marriage is the only way to save the fragility of his power, which he suggests stands on "brittle glass." The disgusting irony of such a plan is not lost on Richard. Elizabeth is the sister of the Prince of Wales, and thus Richard plans to "Murder her brothers, and then marry her!" He calls the plan an "uncertain way of gain," suggesting for a moment that he feels some discomfort or remorse, but Richard soon clarifies that he is remorseless--his uncertainty seemingly only regards the feasibility of such a plan working out smoothly. But by now he is "so far in blood that sin will pluck on sin." He is literally and figuratively drenched in blood and sins, so much so that he is immune to pity, remorse, or tears.

Compare this line to murderous Macbeth, who also gains the throne through murder: "I am in blood / Stepped in so far" (3.4.167-168).

Act 4, Scene 4 Quotes

☹☹ Ah, my poor princes! ah, my tender babes!
My unblown flowers, new-appearing sweets!
If yet your gentle souls fly in the air
And be not fix'd in doom perpetual,
Hover about me with your airy wings
And hear your mother's lamentation!

Related Characters: Queen Elizabeth (speaker), Edward, Prince of Wales, Duke of York

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 4.4.10-15

Explanation and Analysis

This scene begins with Queen Margaret alone on stage delivering a soliloquy in which she explains that she has been "slyly" lurking in the Palace, secretly watching the downfalls of her enemies. She pauses and hides, however, when Queen Elizabeth and the Duchess enter the stage.

The pair is distraught over the deaths of the Prince of Wales and the Duke of York.

Elizabeth begins with this monologue, crying out to her dead sons, whom she calls her "tender babes" and her "unblown flowers." In this powerful speech, she invites the "gentle souls" of her children to "hover about her" and hear their "mother's lamentation," that is, unless they are "fix'd in doom perpetual." We see in Elizabeth the pain of losing her children and her desire to speak to them even in their deaths; she cries out to them, wanting them to know that she grieves for them. At the same time, we see the uncertainty that death brings; she doesn't know if they are doomed to hell or exist as "airy" angel-like spirits who can hear and be near her.

Watching a mother lose her children is extremely painful, though not for Margaret, who comments (below) that Elizabeth and the Duchess deserve their grief for their crimes against her. Margaret will ultimately tell Elizabeth that the power behind curses is bitter grief.

☹☹ I had an Edward, till a Richard kill'd him;
I had a Harry, till a Richard kill'd him:
Thou hadst an Edward, till a Richard kill'd him;
Thou hadst a Richard, till a Richard kill'd him.

Related Characters: Queen Margaret (speaker), Richard, Duke of Gloucester, King Richard III, Ghost of Edward of Westminster, Ghost of King Henry VI, King Edward IV, Queen Elizabeth

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 4.4.42-45

Explanation and Analysis

Queen Elizabeth and the Duchess continue to lament the deaths of the Prince of Wales and Duke of York, while Queen Margaret offers asides suggesting that she has suffered worse and that the other women are deserving of their grief. When Elizabeth and the Duchess sit down, Queen Margaret reveals herself and asks them to privilege her grief over their own since she had been grieving for longer than they have. She then compares the woes of each side, suggesting they can see their own losses as mirrors of her own.

With beautiful parallel phrasing she shows how the losses and grief are related. Margaret had an Edward, "till a Richard kill'd him." She had "a Harry, till a Richard kill'd him."

The Edward she speaks of first is her son Edward of Westminster, and the Harry is King Henry IV, her husband. Both men have been murdered by Richard III. Likewise, Elizabeth "hadst an Edward, till a Richard kill'd him," and had a "Richard" as well, "till a Richard kill'd him." The Edward Margaret mentions second is King Edward, Elizabeth's husband, and the lost Richard is the Duke of York, Elizabeth's son. The parallel phrasing and similar names and relationships of the deceased are linked masterfully by the same words which end each of the lines in the quote. Richard III killed everyone mentioned. These lines illuminate the gruesome extent of Richard's murders, and help turn Elizabeth and the Duchess more fully against Richard.

☛ Forbear to sleep the nights, and fast the days;
Compare dead happiness with living woe;
Think that thy babes were fairer than they were,
And he that slew them fouler than he is:
Bettering thy loss makes the bad causer worse:
Revolving this will teach thee how to curse.

Related Characters: Queen Margaret (speaker), Queen Elizabeth, Richard, Duke of Gloucester, King Richard III

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 4.4.121-126

Explanation and Analysis

Margaret, the Duchess, and Elizabeth have been angrily bickering, trading insults and blaming each other for their losses. Queen Margaret reminds the other women of her curse, now fulfilled, and begins to exit, when Elizabeth begs her to teach her how to curse: "O, thou well skilled in curses, stay awhile / And teach me how to curse my enemies." The lines in the quote are Margaret's response, a recipe for powerful curses.

She instructs Elizabeth to stay awake at night and fast (not eat) during the days. Next, she says to compare the happiness that is now dead with the woe that she now experiences. Remember your lost children as perfect and better than they ever really were, and imagine the one who killed your children to be even worse than he is; such thinking will make the loss seem more terrible ("better") and make the killer seem more evil ("worse"). Understanding these instructions and constantly thinking about your revenge will give Elizabeth the power ("teach thee how") to curse.

Here we see that the curse-language and power attributed to women in the play is fueled by loss and woe. Elizabeth calls out in response to this instruction, "My words are dull. O, quicken them with thine!" But rather than giving further instruction or giving Elizabeth secret words, she simply responds that "Thy woes will make them sharp and pierce like mine." It is woe that hones the women's words and woe that embodies their words with the ability to curse others.

☛ Bear her my true love's kiss; and so, farewell.
[Exit QUEEN ELIZABETH]
Relenting fool, and shallow, changing woman!

Related Characters: Richard, Duke of Gloucester, King Richard III (speaker), Queen Elizabeth

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 4.4.453-454

Explanation and Analysis

This exchange comes after a long conversation between Richard and Elizabeth. Richard has already been cursed by his mother, the Duchess, who has exited. In his dialogue with Elizabeth, he tries to convince her to help him to marry her daughter. Richard believes that such a marriage will secure his seat on the throne (as discussed above in 4.3). But Elizabeth is appalled, saying that she'll do anything she can to protect her daughter from the man who murdered her sons, suggesting to Richard that she knows of his evil deeds.

After a long argument with many shifting tactics, Richard appears to convince Elizabeth to talk to her daughter and write back with her answer. Richard, believing himself victorious, tells Elizabeth to bring her daughter Richard's "true love's kiss," and bids the Queen farewell. The moment the Queen leaves the stage, Richard calls her a "relenting fool, and shallow, changing woman!" behind her back. This line plays on the stereotype that women are fickle and untrustworthy, constantly changing their minds. Richard knows that Elizabeth would be a fool to get tricked again and change her mind (relent), but in this case Elizabeth is actually fooling Richard, pretending to agree to support him when in reality she will not.

Act 5, Scene 2 Quotes

☝☝ The wretched, bloody, and usurping boar,
That spoil'd your summer fields and fruitful vines,
Swills your warm blood like wash, and makes his trough
In your embowelled bosoms—this foul swine
Is now even in the centre of this isle

Related Characters: Richmond, King Henry VII (speaker), Richard, Duke of Gloucester, King Richard III

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 5.2.7-12

Explanation and Analysis

We have learned that Elizabeth lied to Richard and has in fact promised her daughter's hand in marriage to Richmond. Before being executed, Buckingham has cried out that he wishes he had repented during Edward's reign, and that Margaret's curses have come true. In this scene, we see Richmond with his troops, indicating that battle is eminent and Richard's hold on his throne is growing weaker and weaker.

In the quote, Richmond addresses his troops, whom he says have been "bruised" by Richard's "tyranny." He informs them that he has good news, information provided Lord Stanley. It is this information that Richmond delivers in the excerpted lines. He calls Richard a "wretched, bloody, and usurping boar," indicating that he is evil, violent, and that his claim to the throne is illegitimate. The boar has "spoil'd" the "summer fields and fruitful vines" of the people, and he "swills" their "warm blood like wash." His reign is terrible and is hurting the people, enraging them. In Richmond's language the boar (which should be noble, as the sign of Richard's herald) is transformed into a disgusting beast that feeds on the disembowelled "trough" of his victims. Richard is then characterized as a "foul swine." All of these insults and characterizations are to the service of Richmond's simple announcement: Richard is nearby ("at the centre of this isle").

Act 5, Scene 3 Quotes

☝☝ What do I fear? Myself? There's none else by.
Richard loves Richard; that is, I am I.
Is there a murderer here? No—yes, I am.
Then fly. What, from myself? Great reason why—
Lest I revenge. What, myself upon myself!
Alack, I love myself. Wherefore? For any good
That I myself have done unto myself?
O, no! Alas, I rather hate myself
For hateful deed committed by myself!
I am a villain; yet I lie, I am not.
Fool, of thyself speak well. Fool, do not flatter.

Related Characters: Richard, Duke of Gloucester, King Richard III (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 5.3.194-204

Explanation and Analysis

Richard and Richmond's armies have camped for the night, preparing for battle the next day. Between the two camps, the ghosts of King Henry VI, Clarence, Rivers, Grey, Vaughan, Hastings, Edward Prince of Wales, the Duke of York, Anne, and Buckingham rise in succession. Each ghost speaks to both commander, cursing Richard and wishing Richmond well; the ghosts call for Richard's death. After this haunting, Richard wakes from a nightmare. Startled, he delivers a shaking soliloquy in which he debates with himself, going back and forth between self-love and self-loathing.

Here, he begins by asking what he is so afraid of. Is it himself? Since there is no one else around (he is in denial of or only subconsciously aware of the ghosts), but at the same time since "Richard loves Richard" and is himself ("I am I"), he thinks he has no reason to be afraid. He asks if there is some murderer there, and his first answer is no, since there is no one there threatening him. But he quickly changes to "yes, I am" since he himself is a murderer. We see his guilt constantly resurfacing only to be repressed again. We can compare him to Milton's Satan in *Paradise Lost*, who can fly from hell "no more than from himself." Richard cannot flee from himself, or get revenge upon himself, but he is tortured by merely being himself and enduring his guilt.

Thus he undulates between "I love myself," and "I hate myself." He calls himself a villain and says he is not. He instructs himself to speak well of himself, but then says not to flatter himself. Wracked by guilt, blood, and power, Richard has become fractured—his very language, the tool

of his power, now falling apart--and he now appears alienated and powerless. His downfall is almost complete, and towards the end of his speech, Richard even realizes that no one will pity him since he has no pity for himself.

☛ The sun will not be seen to-day;
The sky doth frown and lour upon our army.
I would these dewy tears were from the ground.
Not shine to-day! Why, what is that to me
More than to Richmond? For the selfsame heaven
That frowns on me looks sadly upon him.

Related Characters: Richard, Duke of Gloucester, King Richard III (speaker), Richmond, King Henry VII

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 5.3.299-304

Explanation and Analysis

At Richard's camp, everyone is preparing for battle; Richard notices the black sky, a bad omen, and wonders why the sun "disdains to time." As always, Richard is obsessed with the time, and now is out of sync with the clock, the sun, and nature. Richard determines that "the sun will not be seen to-day," and comments that "the sky doth frown and lour upon our army." The dew on the ground also disturbs Richard.

However, Richard here uses language to deceive himself. He knows the lack of sunshine to be a bad omen, but hopes this omen is for Richmond instead of himself. He asks why it should be for him any more than Richmond, since the same heavens frown on both of them. This clever interpretation of the sky and the bad omen it carries may be enough to momentarily maintain appearances and Richard's confidence, but ultimately, it proves futile, as Richard and

his camp will be defeated by Richmond's forces.

Act 5, Scene 5 Quotes

☛ And then, as we have ta'en the sacrament,
We will unite the white rose and the red:
Smile heaven upon this fair conjunction,
That long have frown'd upon their enmity!
What traitor hears me, and says not amen?
England hath long been mad, and scarr'd herself

Related Characters: Richmond, King Henry VII (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 5.5

Explanation and Analysis

The chaotic battle has been fought and lost; the crazed Richard has fulfilled his prophetic nightmare and uttered the famous line, "A horse! A horse! My kingdom for a horse!" Richmond has killed Richard, and entered with the crown. In his final speech, he pardons all of the traitorous soldiers who fought for Richard. We see Richmond is a very different kind of ruler than Richard, truly seeking to bring peace and prosperity to England.

Richmond says that he will "unite the white rose and the red," meaning that, by marrying Queen Elizabeth's daughter (whom Richard planned to marry), he will unite the houses of Lancaster and York. He cries out for heaven to smile upon this union, and for England to cease being "mad, and scarr'd." Richmond goes on to proclaim that England will know peace, saying that he will end the injustices and the countless years of civil war that have plagued the country.

And so begins the Tudor dynasty, which provided the lineage of Elizabeth I, the Queen of England who ruled when *Richard III* was first written and performed. Thus, as in many of Shakespeare's "histories," the story at least partly ends up glorifying and justifying the current monarch.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

ACT 1, SCENE 1

Richard of Gloucester enters alone and sets the scene, opening with one of Shakespeare's most famous lines: "Now is the winter of our discontent." Though it's technically summer, it is winter from Richard's perspective because he is unhappy. His family, the House of York, has emerged victorious from the Wars of the Roses and all around him people are celebrating and enjoying peacetime. Richard paints an image of "grim-visag'd war" turned into a lover, chasing women, not enemies. Yet the sour-tempered, hunchback Richard, "not shap'd for sportive tricks, nor made to court and amorous looking glass," feels he cannot take part in the frolicking. Angry, he feels cheated by "dissembling nature" which caused him to be born premature, "deform'd," and unattractive.

If he "cannot prove a lover," Richard thinks, he is "determined to prove a villain, and hate the idle pleasures of these days." He has already laid "plots, inductions dangerous," "drunken prophecies, libels, and dreams" to set his brothers, Clarence and King Edward, against one another and expects Clarence to be killed because of a prophecy (spread around by Richard) that Edward will be murdered by an heir associated with the letter 'G'.

Clarence enters guarded by the Tower's lieutenant Brackenbury in armed escort to the Tower (the king's prison). He explains to Richard that he is under arrest because his given name is George and Edward has been convinced by a prophecy that he will be murdered by a 'G.' Richard explains that Edward's domineering wife, Queen Elizabeth, must be behind this, as she recently convinced her husband to imprison Lord Hastings, who was just finally released that day. Hastings won his freedom by appealing to the queen. Clarence and Richard agree it's crucial to position themselves in the good graces of the queen and of the king's mistress, Mistress Shore.

Richard is one unhappy guy. He's unable to enjoy the pleasures of summer and feels alienated from the happy people celebrating a long-awaited peacetime after the drawn-out Wars of the Roses. Though a big reason Richard may be excluded from other people's celebrations is his sour temper and desire for power, Richard focuses on other reasons: he has a hunchback and was born with unattractive features. These handicaps, he feels, make him powerless to hold his own in romantic courtship or other peacetime pursuits.



Because he feels excluded from romance and peacetime pleasures, Richard decides to ruin those experiences for everyone else. He will empower himself by contriving a plot, he confides to the audience—setting himself up as a kind of "director" of the plot and the audience as his confidante—and has made up lies and supernatural omens to manipulate his brothers into hating each other.



Richard's plot is already being put into action. Richard's manipulative way with words – casting blame on others, pretending to be sympathetic, making up fake reasons for situations he himself has caused – is all in evidence here. Clarence is convinced by Richard and doesn't suspect Richard is actually the reason he's under arrest. More specifically, here Richard is tricking his rival (Clarence) into complacency while also setting up the Queen (another rival) to be blamed for Clarence's death.



Brackenbury interrupts, saying that King Edward has forbidden anyone to speak privately with Clarence. Richard replies that there's nothing private about their talk and welcomes Brackenbury into it – "we speak no treason," he says, he and Clarence are just complimenting King Richard, Queen Elizabeth, and their relatives. Brackenbury apologizes. Richard promises Clarence he will do everything possible to free him. But as soon as Clarence and Brackenbury exit, Richard confides that he will send "simple, plain" Clarence to his death.

Hastings enters and Richard congratulates him on his freedom. Hastings is dismayed to hear that Clarence is imprisoned. He tells Richard that the king is in bed "sickly, weak, and melancholy" and Richard pretends to be upset. Hastings exits and Richard notes to himself that Hastings should die, too, after Clarence. He recounts his plan to stoke King Edward's hatred of Clarence, wait for Edward to die of sickness, and then marry Lady Anne, whose father (King Henry VI) and husband (Edward of Westminster) Richard himself killed. He'll marry her not out of love but "for another secret close intent." Richard then chides himself for thinking so far into the future while Clarence and Edward are still alive, and exits.

ACT 1, SCENE 2

Lady Anne enters in mourning alongside the funerary procession bearing King Henry VI's coffin. Anne, distraught, furiously curses Richard for killing Henry VI, her father-in-law, and Edward of Westminster, her husband. She hopes that any of Richard's future children will be aborted and any future wife of his will be "made more miserable" by his death than she is now.

Richard enters and calls a halt to the procession, incensing Anne. She berates Richard, calling him "foul devil" and asking God and earth to kill him. Richard praises Anne's beauty, tries to reason with her gently, and claims that he didn't kill her husband, his brother King Edward did. Anne continues to curse and spite him, calling him a liar. Richard changes tacks. He claims that, in fact, it was Anne's beauty that caused Henry and Edward's deaths because he, hopelessly in love with her, killed her husband in order to marry her. Anne spits at him but Richard insists he is in love with her and Anne eventually comes around, hesitantly taking his ring. He pleases Anne by promising he will properly inter Henry VI's noble body himself. Anne exits. Richard sends the funerary procession off without him.

Richard is lying to Brackenbury – he has just been bad-mouthing Queen Elizabeth to Clarence and calling her manipulative. Of course, it is Richard himself who's doing the manipulating here. Yet even after hearing his brother lie outright, Clarence seems to trust Richard's promises to help. As soon as Clarence is out of earshot, Richard tells the audience just how hollow those promises are.



Again, Richard proves what a good liar he is by pretending to be sympathetic to Hastings' face, then changing his tune as soon as Hastings leaves. Richard's plot thickens. It now involves three deaths and a marriage. Like a good director, Richard keeps both the big and the small picture in view: he has a grand vision (which he is keeping secret from everyone but the audience for now) but is also mindful of the order in which a plot's individual events occur and reminds himself to approach his plot step-by-step.



Lady Anne is understandably devastated by the double loss of husband and father-in-law. But even in her grief-stricken state, she's able to articulate her anger and misery into an eloquent and moving attack on Richard.



Anne is as articulate as Richard but she lacks his manipulative tactics. Anne speaks eloquently and honestly, but Richard is willing to twist his eloquence to suit whatever "truth" is most convenient – thus, he blames a murder he committed on Edward to make himself look better and, when this doesn't work, he admits he committed the murder, but pretends the act was motivated by love for Anne. Richard gets the upper hand over Anne by dishonest means.



Alone on stage, Richard gleefully marvels at his success with Anne. "Was ever woman in this humour woo'd? Was ever woman in this humour won? I'll have her; but I will not keep her long" he gloats. "I do mistake my person all this while," he reflects [for] "she finds, although I cannot, myself to be a marvelous proper man." He plans to buy new clothes. "I am crept in favour with myself," he muses, then sets off to see Henry VI into his grave before returning to "my love."

Richard's boasting once Anne is gone shows just how disingenuous his claims about being lovesick was – it's all just a power game to him. Yet, Richard is also here lying to himself – Anne may have relented and taken the ring but she certainly did not express admiration for Richard or call him anything close to a 'marvelous proper man.'



ACT 1, SCENE 3

Queen Elizabeth, Elizabeth's brother Earl Rivers, and Lord Grey worriedly discuss King Edward's health at the Palace. Rivers and Grey try to comfort Elizabeth but she fears that, should Edward die, Richard—"a man that loves not me, nor none of you"—will seize power because her sons, the heirs to Edward's throne, are still too young to rule.

Queen Elizabeth's fears concern the rules of succession to the throne – though her sons are first in line after King Edward, Richard (who's technically behind her sons and his brother Clarence) might be able to wield his own power by manipulating her sons who are still too young to rule alone.



The Duke of Buckingham and Lord Stanley enter, having just visited King Edward. They report that the king wants to make peace between Richard and Queen Elizabeth's brothers. Richard enters complaining that Elizabeth and her friends have slandered him to the king. He is, he claims, a plain, peace-loving, honest man, slandered by "silken, sly, insinuating Jacks." Elizabeth denies slandering him and claims that Richard is just jealous of her and her friends. Richard, pretending to be disgusted, accuses her of imprisoning Clarence. Elizabeth vehemently denies the accusation. They argue.

It's evident that Richard and Queen Elizabeth don't get along. Richard tries to get the members of the royal court to side with him against her by claiming to be an honest man attacked by Queen Elizabeth and her friends' slander. Richard is, of course, lying. In fact, he's been the one slandering Queen Elizabeth to Clarence and, now, to everyone in court by blaming her for Clarence's arrest.



Queen Margaret, the wife of King Henry VI and mother of Edward of Westminster, enters unnoticed. She berates everyone under her breath, accusing Elizabeth of stealing the throne that belongs to her, and accusing Richard of killing her husband (Henry VI) and son (Edward of Westminster). Meanwhile, Richard accuses Elizabeth and her friends of originally siding with the House of Lancaster, then switching over to side with the House of York later. Rivers protests that he and Elizabeth weren't traitors, they were just loyal to whomever was England's king at the time, like good citizens.

Margaret's bitterness is tied up with the struggles for the throne that played out in the Wars of the Roses. During the wars, Richard (a York) killed her husband and son (Lancasters) to consolidate power for the House of York. As a Lancaster, she resents seeing a York (Edward) wear the crown. But Richard's argument with Rivers shows how complicated house allegiances are: it's unclear whether one's ultimate loyalty should be to one's house or to the current king.



Queen Margaret's accusations grow louder and Richard notices her. He asks why she is in England since she was banished on pain of death. Margaret says she prefers death to banishment. They owe her, she claims, a husband, a son, a kingdom, and happiness. Richard reminds her that she has been forever cursed by his father for killing his baby brother Rutland and that her misery is God's will. Everyone teams up to criticize Margaret, calling her crazy.

Aside from suffering the pain of lost loved ones, Margaret is the victim of some powerful words: she's been officially banished and the penalty for disobeying the terms of that order is death. Furthermore, Richard's father cursed her with a curse that Richard suggests God himself stands behind.



Queen Margaret starts hurling curses. She curses Elizabeth to "outlive [her] glory," her children, her husband, and her throne, as Margaret has. She curses Rivers, Dorset, and Hastings to die before they reach the age her son was when he was killed. She curses Richard to be "be-gnaw[ed] by "the worm of conscience," to mistake his friends for traitors and vice versa, and to be unable to sleep without nightmares. She calls him an "elvish-marked, abortive, rooting **hog**," calls Elizabeth a fool for taking Richard's side against Margaret, and says the queen will one day wish Margaret were there to help her curse him. She warns everybody against Richard saying that they will look back on this day "and say, poor Margaret was a prophetess!" She exits. Richard claims to forgive Margaret and everyone is impressed by his gentleness.

Sir William Catesby enters with a message from King Edward, who calls Elizabeth, Rivers and the other lords to his bedside. All exit but Richard, who recounts with satisfaction the success of his plot: he has tricked Clarence, Stanley, Hastings, and Buckingham into thinking Elizabeth and her friends are to blame for Clarence's imprisonment. Furthermore, he has convinced them of his own moral rectitude by quoting the Bible and pretending to show Christian forgiveness towards her and her company.

Two murderers enter to report to Richard. Richard sends them off to kill Clarence, but warns them to do it quickly because Clarence is articulate and he doesn't want them swayed by his pleas. The first murderer assures Richard that "talkers are no good doers" and that they won't engage in discussion. Richard approves.

ACT 1, SCENE 4

In the Tower, Clarence tremblingly recounts a nightmare he's just had to Brackenbury. Clarence dreamt that he and Richard were reminiscing about the Wars of the Roses while walking along the hatches of a ship crossing the Channel to France. Richard stumbled and hit Clarence, who fell overboard and slowly drowned, seeing the wretched wealth of shipwrecks and skeletons on the seafloor. Dead, he crossed the River Styx and met his father-in-law (a Lancaster supporter) and Edward Prince of Wales, who reprimanded him for treachery. Fiends surrounded him and their howling woke him from the nightmare. Clarence laments that his sins were committed for King Edward, yet Edward has imprisoned him. He begs God to spare his wife and children from any punishments he might face for those sins. He sleeps. Brackenbury reflects on the ephemerality of glory.

Margaret's curses are articulated in powerful, biting language, but it remains to be seen whether they'll actually end up affecting the characters' reality. Margaret's insult to Richard twists his heraldic symbol – the boar – from something noble into something grotesque and crude (and more fitting for Richard's true character). At this point, Richard thinks little of the power of Margaret's curses, and uses his response to those curses in order to cast a good impression of himself, pretending that he is so merciful and kind that he can forgive even an outburst as nasty as Margaret's.



Richard describes further developments of his plot to the audience: through lying and verbally manipulating those around him, he has shifted blame that should rest on his shoulders onto Queen Elizabeth's. He has also polished his own public image by quoting the Bible and parroting Christian values that he does not actually believe in.



As a savvy manipulator of language, Richard is well aware of the power of words and wants to make sure Clarence's own eloquence doesn't get in the way of his plot.



Clarence may not be able to see through Richard's lies in waking life, but his dreaming self seems to know the truth. Indeed, Richard is trying to knock Clarence out of the picture, just as he does in the dream. Clarence's dreamed conversations in the land of the dead illustrate his guilt and frustration surrounding the English throne. He feels bad for betraying his father-in-law by supporting the House of York, but also feels frustrated that his loyalty towards the House of York and his brother Edward is not being duly rewarded. Brackenbury's thoughts, meanwhile, focus on how any quest—or even success—in gaining power will never last. It is a meditation on time and, in a sense, the entire sequence of the Wars of the Roses.



The two murderers enter and present Brackenbury a paper saying they are to take over his guard. Brackenbury goes off to report the switch to King Edward. The murderers bicker about how to go about killing Clarence. The second murderer worries he'll be damned for killing Clarence and no longer wants to murder. The first murderer reminds him of the payment they'll receive for killing and the second murderer is swayed, dismissing conscience as something that "beggars any man that keeps it."

Clarence wakes and asks the two murderers if they are here to kill him. When they say yes, he tries to reason with them, telling them he's innocent and that they'll be damned for killing him by Christ, the King of kings whose will overrides King Edward's. When the murderers call him a traitor, Clarence protests that he switched sides in the Wars of the Roses entirely for his brother's sake and thus Edward can't order him murdered for that. When Clarence tells the murderers that Richard will reward them for sparing his life, they reveal that Richard himself has ordered the death, which Clarence can't believe. "Relent, and save your souls," he cries. The first murderer stabs Clarence dead. The second murderer, distraught, wishes they had spared Clarence and tells the first murderer to take the full payment for the deed since he himself repents. He exits. The first murderer calls the second a coward and exits to hide the body.

ACT 2, SCENE 1

Back at the Palace, King Edward announces to Queen Elizabeth, Dorset, Rivers, Hastings, Buckingham, Grey, and others that, though he is near death, he feels much more at peace knowing that he has orchestrated peace between his friends on earth. He calls on Rivers and Hastings to shake hands and swear love, which they do. He calls on the others to echo them, which they do too. Edward notes that they now only need Richard to swear to keep peace.

Richard enters and, at King Edward's prompt, duly swears to keep friendly peace and claims he has no enemies in all of England. Queen Elizabeth asks the King to forgive Clarence and, when Richard interjects that Clarence is dead, everyone is shocked. Edward protests that the original death order was reversed, but Richard says he was killed by the first order. Stanley enters asking Edward to do him a favor and pardon his servant, who has just killed a man. Edward agrees but, deeply distraught, laments that no one spoke up earlier to plead Clarence's pardon. He remembers all Clarence has done for him and chastises those around him for failing to remind Edward of Clarence's goodness when he was angry. Edward fears God's vengeance. He exits along with Elizabeth, Hastings, Rivers, Dorset, and Grey.

Though the first murderer seems to have no trouble being the straightforward "doer" he promised Richard he'd be, the second murderer is much more of a talker. He thinks ahead to the consequences of his actions and debates with his conscience. Still, he thinks life would be easier if he didn't have a conscience.



As Richard feared, Clarence proves himself a persuasive speaker. His argument, though, appeals to the murderers' consciences and thus only the second murderer (who was already wrestling with questions about the potential consequences of murder before Clarence woke up) is ultimately persuaded. The first murderer kills Clarence as planned and is not tormented by the doubt and self-questioning plaguing his partner. He considers such struggles of conscience cowardly. Even though the murderers tell Clarence it's Richard who has masterminded his death, Clarence can't shake his faith in Richard's promises. He believes Richard's deceptions even to the end.



Edward is using his kingly power to the general benefit of his people by trying to heal damaged relationships between his subjects. He may not be physically healthy, but he is serving the health of the state and proving himself a king who deserves to sit on the throne because of both his blood and his character.



For Richard, words can be thrown around regardless of their truth and he will say (or swear) anything as long as it serves his plot. His promise to Edward is utterly hollow but it helps bolster the image he's trying to spread of himself as a peace-loving, gentle guy. Richard uses time to his advantage by pretending that Clarence's death was just the too-hasty fulfillment of Edward's own order. Edward wishes those around him had taken the time to articulate Clarence's innocence to him – their words might have saved his life.



Richard notes to Buckingham how pale "the guilty kindred" of Queen Elizabeth looked upon hearing Clarence was killed. "O, they did urge it still unto the king!" he cries, "God will revenge it." They exit.

Richard is a shrewd director, making sure to manipulate every character in his favor – here he directs Buckingham's opinion of Queen Elizabeth.



ACT 2, SCENE 2

In another room in the Palace, the Duchess of York (mother of King Edward, Richard, and Clarence) weeps beside Margaret Plantagenet and Edward Plantagenet (Clarence's children). When they ask her to explain, she says their father is dead but that it is "lost sorrow to wail one that's lost" and that her tears are for King Edward, sick but alive. Edward and Margaret Plantagenet blame King Edward for their father's death, based on what Richard has lovingly told them. The Duchess laments "that deceit should steal such gentle shape" and tells them Richard killed Clarence.

Though Clarence's young children take Richard at his loving word, the Duchess knows better – she sees through Richard's façade of kindness to his cruel, dishonest interior. The Duchess' claim that it's no use mourning the dead shows how hardened she's become from witnessing so much violence and tragedy in her life, a topic she'll expound on later in the play.



Queen Elizabeth enters distraught with Rivers and Dorset, and reports that King Edward is dead. The Duchess is devastated. Margaret Plantagenet and Edward Plantagenet at first question how they can partake of her grief after she neglected to cry for Clarence but the women and children soon start to mourn together, echoing each other's laments.

Queen Elizabeth's and the Duchess' laments here prove extremely moving. As they elicit empathy even from Clarence's reluctant children, so the women's words touch audience members, inspiring pity and sympathy (and jarring the audience from its status up until now of being complicit and almost cheering on Richard the anti-hero's efforts).



Dorset and Rivers interrupt the women to urge Queen Elizabeth to have her son, young Edward Prince of Wales, crowned immediately. Richard, Buckingham, Stanley, Hastings, and Sir Ratcliffe enter and discuss how young Edward should travel to the Palace from his home in Ludlow. Richard asks the Duchess and Elizabeth to go help negotiate the transport and everyone exits except Buckingham and Richard.

Dorset and Rivers, like every other male character in the play, are more concerned with politics and practicalities than with emotion. Still, they're right to urge haste: crowning the young prince quickly will secure his power and shorten the period in which the throne is kingless – a dangerous condition for the state, especially when power-hungry Richard's around.



Buckingham refers to some prior private conference between the two of them, telling Richard they must be present in the party chaperoning young Edward Prince of Wales trip so that they can be sure to keep the prince distant from the queen's friends. Richard praises Buckingham's loyalty.

As usual, Richard's plot aims to grab power by sneaky means. Here, he will feign allegiance to the young prince while actually trying to subvert him. Richard's words of praise encourage Buckingham to keep working for Richard.



ACT 2, SCENE 3

On a London street, three citizens discuss King Edward's death. Two are optimistic about young Edward Prince of Wales future reign, pointing to the example of King Henry VI crowned at nine months old. Yet the third protests that baby Henry had "virtuous uncles" to protect his grace whereas young Edward's maternal and fraternal uncles are factious and include the dangerous Richard and haughty relatives of Elizabeth. "...were they to be rul'd, and not to rule," the citizen speculates, "This sickly land might solace as before." They exit.

The first of the play's scenes featuring common people's opinions on courtly power struggles. The citizens' conversation shows that the general population knows what a dangerous, evil character Richard is, and that they consider him a poisonous influence on the health of the state. Calling the land "sickly" refers to the oft-used metaphor of political state as human body. The citizens here seem to believe that neither Elizabeth's inner circle nor Richard is fit to rule, and that only if all of them were ruled by someone else would the state be "healthy."



ACT 2, SCENE 4

In a room at the Palace, the Archbishop of York, Queen Elizabeth, the Duchess, and the young Duke of York (young Edward Prince of Wales' younger brother) discuss the impending arrival of the prince. The young Duke of York hopes he has not grown faster than his older brother because Richard, his uncle, told him nice flowers grow slow and weeds grow fast. The Duchess says that that can't be true as Richard himself grew slowly. She dismisses the young Duke of York when he makes a joke about Richard.

The conversation the Duke of York recounts shows Richard using words to lower the boy's esteem, another of Richard's manipulative tactics. Again, the Duchess is able to see the truth behind Richard lies, perhaps because she is a woman and perhaps because she is a special woman—his mother. Richard's words imply that a person's worth and goodness are directly related to their external appearance - which to him is likely a good joke, as he is claiming this even as he is tricking everyone to think he is good when he has such a deformed body (and is in fact crooked morally as well).



A messenger enters and announces that Rivers, Grey, and Sir Thomas Vaughan have been imprisoned by Richard and Buckingham. He doesn't know for what offense. Elizabeth laments "the ruin of my house" and the Duchess cries out that she'd rather die than continue to see more battling over the throne, of which she's already seen so much in her lifetime. Elizabeth seeks sanctuary (protection in a church) with the Duke of York, and the Archbishop of York offers to conduct them. All exit.

Queen Elizabeth is upset because, by imprisoning her brother, her son, and her ally, Richard is disempowering her family. She hurries to protect herself and her son by seeking sanctuary, a practice of the time by which people could seek protection from all secular powers in a church.



ACT 3, SCENE 1

On a street in London, Edward Prince of Wales, Richard, Buckingham, and Cardinal Bouchier (the Archbishop of Canterbury) enter and Richard welcomes the prince to London. Edward wishes that more of his uncles were there to meet him, and dismisses Richard's claim that his other uncles are dangerous. The Lord Mayor of London enters and welcomes Edward. Hastings enters and reports that Queen Elizabeth and the Duke of York have taken sanctuary and thus can't come to meet the prince. Buckingham orders the Cardinal to go retrieve the Duke of York, insisting that the boy didn't request sanctuary, his mother did, and that the prohibition against extracting someone from sanctuary thus doesn't really apply to him. He tells the Cardinal to forcibly seize the boy from his mother if necessary, despite the Cardinal's protestations to respect the sacred right to sanctuary. Hastings accompanies the Cardinal and they exit.

Richard suggests that Edward Prince of Wales reside in the Tower (presumably so that Richard can more easily lock his nephew up and snatch the prince's power for himself). Edward is unenthused about Richard's offer, but reflects on his admiration for Julius Caesar, who reportedly built the Tower. In an aside, Richard alludes to young Edward's imminent death.

The young Duke of York enters with Hastings and the Cardinal. The young Duke taunts Richard, beating him at his own game by trying to get Richard to call the fast-growing Edward Prince of Wales an "idle weed" (as Richard once scared the young Duke by saying that anyone who grew fast was just a weed). Richard stiffly refuses to insult the prince. The young Duke then tries to get Richard to give him his dagger for a present, but Richard won't. The young Duke advises the Prince not to sleep in the Tower because it's haunted by Clarence's "angry ghost." Edward Prince of Wales asserts, "I fear no uncles dead." "Nor none that live, I hope," adds Richard. The Prince says he hopes not and exits to the Tower with the Duke, Hastings, the Cardinal and attendants.

Prince Edward does not know that Richard has imprisoned his uncles, but knows that Richard isn't telling the truth when he calls them dangerous. Buckingham twists words to manipulate Cardinal Bouchier into extracting the Duke of York from sanctuary. Sanctuary was considered sacred and its protection is supposed to be respected by everyone (especially members of the Church!) Yet Buckingham's argument pretends to find a loophole in that protection by claiming the protection is only sacred for those who have explicitly asked for it (the Duke of York was brought into sanctuary by his mother and so he didn't ask for it himself – still, he should be protected by it).



Richard's wish to put Edward up in the Tower and his threatening aside imply that Richard plans to murder the young prince shortly. Edward may prove to have more in common with Julius Caesar than he realizes: Caesar was murdered by men who pretended to be his friend.



The Duke of York's eloquence and wit make Richard uncomfortable as the boy twists Richard's words back against him. Edward Prince of Wales attempts to empower himself, asserting strength and courage by claiming he's not afraid to stay in the Tower. Yet his show of strength backfires: by agreeing to stay in the Tower, Edward is walking right into Richard's power-hungry hands and is thus empowering his uncle, not himself.



Alone, Richard, Buckingham, and Catesby confer about their secret plan to make Richard King of England. They discuss whether Hastings and Stanley can be involved and, though Catesby doubts Hastings will support them (his love for the deceased King Edward makes him love Edward Prince of Wales), Buckingham tells Catesby to go anyway and feel Hastings out on the matter the following day. Buckingham says they'll hold "divided councils" tomorrow (two councils instead of one) – the first one will discuss the Prince's coronation and the second will presumably discuss how to crown Richard instead. Richard further tells Catesby to inform Hastings that Queen Elizabeth's captive relatives (Hastings' enemies) will be killed the next day at Pomfret Castle. Catesby exits. Richard tells Buckingham that, if Hastings refuses to support their plot, they'll just "chop off his head." He also promises to reward Buckingham's loyalty with the earldom of Hereford and other valuable goods. The two exit.

Richard's plot grows more intricate and more brutal. He plans to consolidate his own power by diffusing the power of Edward Prince of Wales – by breaking what should be one council on the coronation into two separate councils, Richard gives himself and his supporters an opportunity to undercut Edward's supporters. His directions regarding Hastings instruct Catesby to test out Hastings' allegiances in conversation and to try and lure him over to Richard's side by informing Hastings that Richard is getting rid of Hastings' enemies (and therefore, Richard suggests, deserves Hastings' support). The blasé tone Richard uses to describe executing Hastings' shows how heartless and unafraid of bloodshed he is.



ACT 3, SCENE 2

At Lord Hastings' house, a messenger knocks at 4 a.m. with an urgent message from Lord Stanley recounting a dream in which "the boar" [Richard's heraldic symbol] knocked off Stanley's helmet and decapitated him. That dream, combined with the ominous rumor he's heard that one of tomorrow's two councils will yield threatening results, have convinced Stanley to escape northwards, away from potential danger. He urges Hastings to come with him. Hastings pooh-poohs Stanley's fears and tells the messenger to tell Stanley not to believe nightmares, to abandon his escape plan, and to meet Hastings at the Tower where "the boar will use us kindly." The councils will be safe, Hastings insists, for he and Stanley will attend one and "my good friend Catesby" the other. The messenger exits to deliver Hastings' message.

Stanley's dream speaks in symbols, implying that Richard is a deadly threat by showing his heraldic symbol (the boar) killing Stanley. Trusting the dream as a legitimate warning, Stanley wants to take measures to respond to that warning in waking life. Hastings, though, insists that dreams can't affect waking life, that they have no prophetic power and should be ignored. He thinks Richard is kind and doesn't see any threat. Previous scenes have showed that Catesby, the friend Hastings thinks he can trust, is involved in Richard's scheme. Hastings' trust is misplaced.



Catesby then enters and floats the idea of Richard taking the throne to Hastings. Hastings is appalled. Catesby says Richard hopes for Hastings support and sends along the "good news" that Hastings' enemies will be killed today at Pomfret Castle. Hastings is glad to hear the news but still firmly opposes Richard's plot to take the crown. In an aside, Catesby alludes to Hastings' imminent death. Stanley enters, still worried about the divided councils. Hastings, cheerful, assures him "I know our state secure."

Richard intended for Hastings to interpret the news of the Pomfret executions as a reason to support Richard's rise to the throne, but Hastings doesn't. He's glad that his enemies will be killed, but remains loyal to Prince Edward—loyal to the normal order of secession to the throne. Though Hastings doesn't realize it, the words he has exchanged with Catesby have already sealed his fate: he will soon be killed, as Catesby says in his aside.



A Pursuivant (a low-ranking heraldic officer), whom Hastings met back when he was imprisoned, enters just as Stanley and Catesby exit. Hastings brags that those who once imprisoned him will now be killed and "I in better state than e'er." He gives the Pursuivant money for a drink. A Priest enters and Hastings discusses a past favor. Buckingham enters and jokes that Hastings doesn't need a priest like those who are about to be killed at Pomfret Castle do. Buckingham and Hastings go off to the Tower for dinner. In an aside, Buckingham suggests that, unbeknownst to him, Hastings will be killed there.

Hastings boasting shows how confident he feels about his situation: he doesn't perceive any impending threat to his person, even though the audience knows (from Catesby's and Buckingham's asides) that Hastings will soon be murdered for refusing to support Richard's rise to the throne.



ACT 3, SCENE 3

At Pomfret Castle, Ratcliffe (one of Richard's minions) enters with a Guard conducting Rivers, Grey, and Vaughan to execution. Rivers tells Ratcliffe he is about to watch three innocent, loyal men die. Rivers laments "the guilty closure" of Pomfret Castle in which King Richard II was murdered. Grey notes that Queen Margaret's curse on them has come true. Rivers responds by hoping that God will fulfill her curse on Richard, Buckingham, and Hastings, but hopes that his own shed blood will exempt his sister Queen Elizabeth and her sons from any misfortune. They exit to be executed.

Richard has arranged for Rivers, Grey, and Vaughan to be executed simply to clear his own rise to power – they have committed no crime. Pomfret castle where they are about to be executed has witnessed another murder in a previous power struggle for the throne: King Richard II was killed there too, but the man who became Henry IV (the grandfather of the Henry VI whom Richard killed just before the action of this play). All three of the men regret not taking Margaret's curses and prophecies more seriously, that such curses do seem to have a power that they had earlier mocked or disregarded.



ACT 3, SCENE 4

In a room at the Tower, Buckingham, Stanley, Hastings, the Bishop of Ely, Ratcliffe, Lord Lovel (another of Richard's minions) and others sit around a table while Officers of the Council stand attendant. The men are gathered to discuss the coronation date for Edward Prince of Wales, and decide on the next day, though they agree to wait for Richard (the lord protector to the Prince) to approve. Buckingham says he doesn't know what Richard's feelings will be as he is not as close to Richard as Hastings is. Hastings offers to endorse the date on Richard's behalf, as he assumes Richard will approve it. Just then, Richard enters.

Though everyone claims to agree on a coronation date, they must wait for Richard (who, as lord protector of the young prince, is the designated decision-maker for Edward Prince of Wales while Edward is still too young to rule England on his own) to give the final OK. Buckingham is, of course, lying when he says that Hastings knows Richard better than he does – Hastings' notion of Richard as a kind, peace-loving guy is totally mistaken, and Buckingham knows that Richard is actually about to have Hastings executed.



Richard sends the Bishop of Ely off to get strawberries for everyone, then takes Buckingham aside and recounts Catesby's report of Hastings' resistance to Richard's coronation. Richard and Buckingham exit. Ely returns. Hastings observes that Richard looked cheerful and that you can always tell how Richard is feeling based on his appearance – he never hides anything.

Hastings continues to be a deeply mistaken reader of Richard's character – Richard, masterminding liar, faker, and dissembler, is nothing like the transparent, honest man that Hastings' thinks he is.



Richard and Buckingham return and Richard asks everyone what should be done to those who "conspire my death with devilish plots of damned witchcraft." Hastings pipes up that such conspirators should be killed. Richard extends a withered arm as evidence of witchcraft worked against him by Queen Elizabeth and Mistress Shore. When Hastings' hesitates to agree the women are guilty, Richard orders Hastings to be decapitated. All exit except for Hastings, Lovel, and Ratcliffe.

Ever the calculating director, Richard lays a trap for Hastings in language – by making a ridiculous accusation, Richard tricks Hastings' into expressing doubt, then uses that doubt to accuse Hastings of disloyalty towards him. Richard thus swiftly disposes of Hastings.



In despair, Hastings regrets neglecting the signs given by Stanley's nightmare and his own horse's strange unwillingness to approach the Tower that day. He cries out that Queen Margaret's curse on him has been fulfilled. Ratcliffe and Lovel shush Hastings and hurry him along. "O bloody Richard!—miserable England!" Hastings cries, "I prophesy the fearfull'st time to thee..." All exit.

Too late, Hastings realizes how mistaken he was to ignore the warnings uttered by Stanley's dream and Margaret's curses. His exclamation links the misery of the state in the face of Richard's cruelty.



ACT 3, SCENE 5

At the walls of the Tower, Richard coaches Buckingham in acting distraught. Buckingham assures him "ghastly looks are at my service, like enforced smiles." Catesby enters with the Lord Mayor followed by Ratcliffe and Lovel with Hastings' head. Richard affects despair that his beloved Hastings turned out to be a villain. Buckingham backs Richard up. The two convince the Mayor that Hastings deserved death, that it's too bad the Mayor couldn't hear "the traitor speak" before he was beheaded, and that the Mayor must spread word of Hastings' treachery and rightful execution to his citizens so that no one mourns his death. The mayor exits.

Here Richard's directorial role is more explicit than ever – he openly treats Buckingham as an actor and coaches him on how to act convincingly. As Richard's trusty sidekick, Buckingham is as comfortable faking emotions as Richard is. They put on a show of grief in front of the mayor in order to manipulate the mayor into getting the general population on Richard's side. Richard wants to make sure the power of the common people stands behind him, not Hastings.



Richard sends Buckingham after the Lord Mayor to spread rumors amongst the citizenry that young Edward Prince of Wales and the Duke of York are illegitimate, that the late King Edward was a relentless lecher, and that the late King was himself also illegitimate, unrelated to his and Clarence's father. Buckingham exits and Richard sends Lovel and Catesby off too. Alone, Richard says he's going to hide Clarence's children, Edward Plantagenet and Margaret Plantagenet, and isolate Edward Prince of Wales and the Duke of York so no one can access them.

Not trusting the mayor alone to win public support for Richard, Richard plans a slander campaign to influence the public in his favor by spreading lies about his brother Edward. If King Edward and his sons really were illegitimate, they would have no real right to rule England. Richard hopes to convince everyone that that's indeed the case, allowing him not just to take the throne but for the public to think that his doing so is perfectly legitimate.



ACT 3, SCENE 6

On a London street, a Scrivener enters with the written indictment of Hastings that is set to be read to the public that day. He began transcribing it after Catesby sent it over last night before and, mid-transcription, Hastings was executed. "Who is so gross that cannot see this palpable device!" the scrivener cries, "Yet who so bold but says he sees it not! Bad is the world; and all will come to naught, when such ill dealing must be seen in thought."

If Hastings' execution were actually above board, his indictment should have been finished and read aloud before his execution. Like the citizens earlier, the scrivener's comments indicate that the general public is wise to Richard's crookedness (unlike the nobles). Still, though everyone may know that Hastings did not deserve to die, no one is brave enough to articulate that thought aloud, fearing Richard's punishment.



ACT 3, SCENE 7

At Baynard's Castle in London, Buckingham reports to Richard that the citizens reacted to the rumors Buckingham spread with complete silence, and that they remained mute "like dumb statues or breathing stones" even when Buckingham called on them to cry "'God save Richard, England's royal king!'" Buckingham then made the Mayor recount his message for him but rather than delivering the message as his own, the Mayor introduced it as what "the duke" said. The people stayed silent except for a few of Buckingham's supporters in the far back who cried approval. Buckingham thanked the crowd for "this general applause and cheerful shout" indicating their support for Richard.

The citizens' silence speaks volumes – though they are too scared of what might happen to them if they articulate resistance to Richard, their refusal to cheer for Richard expresses that resistance as audibly as booing would. It doesn't matter whose mouth the news of Richard's rise comes from – Buckingham's or the mayor's – the public will not celebrate it. The mayor's careful choice of words distances him from the message Buckingham makes him announce and implies he, too, inwardly, resists Richard. This is an example of the commoners wishes rising up to effect those in power, and these are the first rumblings of resistance to Richard's rise and a signal that he can lie his way to power, but perhaps not lie his way to keeping it.



In light of the public's reaction, Richard and Buckingham contrive to make it seem to the public that Richard does not want to be king and only accepts the crown at others' urging. As the Lord Mayor, Aldermen, and Citizens enter looking for Richard, he departs, leaving Buckingham to greet them. Buckingham pretends he, too, has come to visit Richard.

Determined to empower himself with the public's support, Richard changes tacks (as he does whenever he's not winning an argument). Instead of proclaiming his triumphant rise to the throne, he will instead pretend to be a modest, humble man lacking all personal hunger for power.



While Buckingham talks with the Lord Mayor and others, Catesby enters with a message for Buckingham from Richard stating that Buckingham should visit on another day because Richard is currently deep in holy prayer. Buckingham sends Catesby off to press Richard to meet with them. Buckingham observes to the visitors that Richard is holy and virtuous, not lazy and hedonistic like King Edward was. Catesby returns reporting that Richard is still hesitant to meet them. Buckingham insists.

Ever the director, Richard has staged a mini-play within the play: he and Buckingham will proceed to act out a (false) version of reality in which Richard is a god-fearing, self-effacing man whereas King Edward (and, by extension, his son and contender for Richard's throne, Edward Prince of Wales) was sinful and self-indulgent.



Richard enters in a gallery above, flanked by two Bishops. Catesby returns. Buckingham points out to the other visitors how religious Richard is. He then entreats Richard to take the throne, "your due of birth" which will otherwise be given "to the corruption of a blemish'd stock." He paints England as a sick body that only Richard can heal. Richard defers, claiming to be too modest and unworthy to take the throne and that, besides, there is Edward Prince of Wales to take it. Buckingham protests that the Prince is illegitimate and that, though Richard is kind to him, the people will never stand for him to rule. The Mayor and Catesby join Buckingham's entreaty. Richard finally relents, though he insists "God doth know, and you may partly see, how far I am from the desire of this." All cheer a blessing, set the coronation date for tomorrow, and exit.

The climax of the mini-play is also the climax of the play: Richard claims the crown while lying spectacularly. He, the godless, bloody murderer, affects the persona of a saintly man of virtue whose spiritual elevation is echoed by his physical elevation in the gallery. He, who ruthlessly chases power, pretends to want nothing to do with the throne and to accept it, grudgingly, as a favor to the public. The mayor and his party, the audience for Richard's play, seem, by their cheered blessing, to be convinced by Richard's performance.



ACT 4, SCENE 1

At the Tower, Queen Elizabeth enters on one side with the Duchess and Dorset while Anne, now Richard's wife, and Margaret Plantagenet enter on the other side. All are on their way to see Edward Prince of Wales and the Duke of York, but they are stopped by Brackenbury, who says "the king...I mean the lord protector" Richard has forbidden them to visit. The women protest in indignation but Brackenbury will not relent. He exits.

Brackenbury's slip of the tongue shows just how quickly Richard's plot is playing out – one minute he was the lord protector, but the next minute he'll be king. Richard has ordered the princes' seclusion in order to prepare to make that transition unimpeded by Edward Prince of Wales.



Stanley enters and summons Anne to Westminster to be crowned Richard's queen. Elizabeth wails in grief at the news of Richard becoming king. Anne, too, is distraught and goes unwillingly, recounting that Richard snared her into marrying him with "honey words." The curse she laid on Richard's future marriage thus ended up falling on her own head. Elizabeth pities Anne. The Duchess plans to die, as the grave is the only place to find peace. All exit.

Indeed, Brackenbury was right to call Richard king – he will be shortly. As Richard's wife, Anne is forced to obey his commands. But she movingly expresses how much she loathes obeying him. Yet though she is eloquent, Anne is also a victim of language: she fell prey to Richard's lies and ended up suffering her own curse.



ACT 4, SCENE 2

At the Palace, Richard is now King and is surrounded by Buckingham, Catesby, Ratcliffe, Lovel, a Page, and others. Richard, pleased to be king but worried that his power might be usurped by Edward Prince of Wales, tells Buckingham to have the young prince and his little brother killed. Buckingham hesitates, infuriating Richard, but exits to think over the matter, promising to return shortly. Richard asks the Page if he knows any man who will kill for money and the Page recommends Sir James Tyrrel, whom Richard asks the Page to fetch. Richard resolves to spurn Buckingham from now on.

Richard has finally gotten the power he wanted – the English throne – but he's dissatisfied because he feels his power will not be secure until all threats to it are eliminated. Ferociously power-hungry, Richard thinks nothing of murdering two children (the young princes). When Buckingham expresses some humane reservations about such a murder, Richard immediately turns against him. He drops Buckingham in a flash.



Stanley enters and reports that Dorset has run off to the Earl of Richmond (a Lancaster). Richard tells Catesby to spread a rumor that Anne is deathly ill and to find some man of low rank to marry Margaret Plantagenet. Richard will lock Anne up (so no one can see the real state of her health). Catesby exits, and Richard declares that he must murder King Edward's sons and marry his daughter, Elizabeth, to secure his kingdom by eliminating any threat she might pose to his seat. "Uncertain way of gain!," Richard admits, "But I am in so far in blood that sin will luck on sin."

The Page enters with Tyrrel, who gladly agrees to kill at Richard's bidding. Richard sends Tyrrel off to kill the princes. Buckingham enters ready to share his decision about the princes, but Richard dismisses the matter before he can speak and focuses on the news about Dorset and Richmond. Buckingham asks to claim the earl of Hereford and valuables that Richard promised him as reward for his loyal service. Richard ignores him and continues musing on Richmond, despite Buckingham's repeated requests. Richard recollects that King Henry VI prophesied that Richmond would be king, but thinks the prophecy must have mistakenly excluded the fact that Richard would kill Richmond. Then he recalls meeting an Irish bard who once told him "I should not live long after I saw Richmond."

Richard finally acknowledges Buckingham by asking him for **the time**, saying that "like a Jack, thou keep'st the stroke betwixt thy begging and my meditation." He informs Buckingham that he's not in a giving mood today and exits. Buckingham, dumbfounded by Richard's fickleness and disloyalty, decides to run away before he is beheaded as Hastings was.

ACT 4, SCENE 3

At another room in the Palace, Tyrrel enters having just overseen the murder of Edward Prince of Wales and the Duke of York, which he calls "the most arch deed of piteous massacre that ever yet this land was guilty of." His hit men were reluctant to murder such innocent children, but went through with it. Richard enters and is pleased to hear the princes have been killed. He promises to reward Tyrrel, who exits. Richard confides that he has imprisoned Edward Plantagenet, married off Margaret Plantagenet in a low marriage, killed King Edward's sons, and that Anne has died. Now he aims to beat Richmond to marrying King Edward's daughter.

Furiously determined to protect his throne, Richard decides to discard Anne by locking her up and spreading rumors that she is ill, then marrying King Edward's daughter. By doing so, he'll extinguish any threat the daughter of the former king—and his own brother—could pose to his throne by bearing a child someone could one day claim, through its direct line to Edward, was the legitimate ruler of England. Still, even Richard admits that his plot is getting out of control.



Richard's muttered reflections are in part a strategic use of language to deflect Buckingham's pleas. Yet these reflections also convey crucial information: Richard is disturbed by the news about Richmond as it reminds him of an old prophesy that said he would be killed by Richmond, though Richard is pompous enough to assume the prophesier must have made a mistake. Buckingham is clearly having a crisis of faith in the wake of Richard's request that he murder the princes – he wants to make sure that Richard's promises of reward were actually true.



Richard's lightning-fast betrayal of his long-loyal friend shows just how fickle and selfish Richard is, unwilling to respect even the man who's done most for him. In this way, Richard can lie himself into power but cannot maintain the relationships that allow him to actually rule or remain on the throne.



Even the grizzliest assassins are appalled by Richard's tactics, but Richard remains unfazed by the blood on his hands, focused only on consolidating his power. By locking up and marrying off Clarence's children, Richard has deactivated any threat they might pose to him. Now all of his brothers' children (his contenders for the crown) are eliminated. Anne's death is, mysteriously, unexplained – it's unclear whether she died or whether Richard killed her. Both options seem plausible.



Ratcliffe enters and reports that the Bishop of Ely has fled to Richmond and that Buckingham, who also fled, is gathering Welsh forces to fight Richard. Richard pooh-poohs Buckingham, though he fears the threat of Ely. Declaring there's no time to lose, he orders Ratcliffe to start assembling men for battle. They exit.

Even as Richard manically consolidates his power, that power is quickly eroding – the Bishop of Ely and Buckingham were both loyal to Richard in the past but they have now turned against him as they, who were insiders, can more easily see that he wasn't just lying to his enemies—he was lying to his supposed "friends", too!



ACT 4, SCENE 4

At the Palace, Queen Margaret enters alone, saying that she's been hiding in the Palace all along, watching "the waning of mine enemies" before she heads off to France. She steps back into hiding when Queen Elizabeth and the Duchess enter. The two of them are crazed with grief at the murder of Edward Prince of Wales and the Duke of York. Meanwhile, in unheard asides, Margaret describes the women's losses as fair since they match her own. Margaret then comes forward, asking them to privilege her grief as it is older than theirs. She compares theirs to her own: "I had an Edward, till a Richard kill'd him...Thou hadst an Edward, till a Richard kill'd him" etc. The Duchess and Margaret bicker, blaming one another for their losses. Margaret reminds Elizabeth of her curse on her, now fulfilled. Elizabeth begs Margaret to teach her how to curse. Margaret tells Elizabeth to focus bitterly and single-mindedly on her losses (as Margaret does) to learn to curse. Margaret exits. Elizabeth and the Duchess resolve to curse Richard.

The women's drawn-out, wrenching expressions of grief form the emotional heart of the play – even as Margaret expresses hostility towards the others, her extreme bitterness is itself expressive and registers the immensity of her sorrow. Indeed, in trying to belittle Elizabeth and the Duchess' grief, Margaret's sentences inspire empathy by drawing parallels amongst the women's lives: just as the others have lost loved ones, so has Margaret. Now, Elizabeth and the Duchess regret having scoffed at Margaret's curse and prophesy and Elizabeth begs Margaret to teach her to harness the power of curse language. She sees it as her sole way of harming Richard. Curses, Margaret reveals, are fueled by the bitterness of grief.



Richard enters and the Duchess venomously berates him, saying she wishes she'd never borne him. Richard refuses to listen to her unless she speaks calmly. The Duchess tells him to listen because she'll never speak to him again: she then curses him with her "most grievous curse" which she says will assist Richard's enemies and lead him to death in battle. She exits.

Richard may choose to ignore his mother's words, but his chilly attitude is no match for the hot intensity of her rage.



Elizabeth dittoes the Duchess' curse and starts to leave but Richard stops her and says he wants her daughter. Elizabeth hotly declares she will do anything possible to protect her daughter from the man that brutally murdered her sons. "You speak as if I had slain my cousins," Richard responds, which he says is false and that in actuality he wants only the best for Elizabeth and her kin. Because he desires young Elizabeth to be his queen, he wants Elizabeth to advise him how best to woo her daughter. Elizabeth is appalled so Richard changes tacks, telling Elizabeth to act reasonably: her sons are dead for good and, if he did a regrettable thing in killing them, he can make it up to her by marrying her daughter and giving Elizabeth grandchildren. Elizabeth is still horrified. Richard tells Elizabeth to tell her daughter that England's peace will be won by their marriage, that he as King commands it, that she will be a mighty queen, that he will love her forever and defer to her, but none of these arguments convince Elizabeth.

Elizabeth rebuts all Richard's attempts to coax her into taking his side, calling him an evil liar, a godless murderer, and a dishonorable disgrace to his ancestors and to the English throne, which he has no right to. But after a very long argument, Elizabeth finally starts to show signs of breaking. She agrees to go confer with her daughter and says she'll write Richard with her verdict. Richard kisses her goodbye. As soon as she exits, he calls her "relenting fool, and shallow, changing woman!"

Ratcliffe and Catesby enter and report that a navy thought to be lead by Richmond is approaching from the west where he is welcomed by Richard's half-hearted soldiers (they don't like Richard and would rather Richmond take power) and will be helped ashore by Buckingham. Richard sends Ratcliffe and Catesby off. Stanley enters and confirms the navy belongs to Richmond, who aims to claim the throne from Richard. Furious, Richard criticizes Stanley for treacherously failing to rouse troops for Richard's side. Stanley promises to go assemble forces but Richard, fearing Stanley will run off to join Richmond, orders Stanley to leave his son George Stanley behind as assurance. Stanley exits.

Three Messengers enter in succession to report that different families around England are raising armies against Richard and that Buckingham's army has been scattered by flooding. Another Messenger enters and reports that Lovel and Dorset are raising armies against Richard. Catesby enters and reports that Buckingham has been captured but that Richmond has landed at Salisbury. Richard orders Buckingham to be brought to Salisbury and sets off for Salisbury himself.

Richard, incapable of empathy and fixated single-mindedly on his own pursuit of power even in the face of Elizabeth's profound grief, doesn't hesitate to try and manipulate her with his words. As usual, Richard has no qualms about lying and is quick to reinvent his version of 'the truth' each time his argument meets resistance. This scene recollects Richard's exchange with the mourning Anne at play's start. Like Anne, Elizabeth proves an articulate match for Richard's eloquence, but Elizabeth holds her own against Richard longer than Anne did and their argument draws out to great length.



In the end, Elizabeth seems to fall victim to Richard's verbal manipulation, just as Anne did. As soon as she consents to plead his case to her daughter and leaves, Richard gloats at his victory, sneering at what he misogynistically considers Elizabeth's female weakness. Yet future events will indicate that Elizabeth may have actually bested Richard here; by giving in, she may have tricked Richard into thinking she would support him when in fact she would not.



The erosion of Richard's power continues as Buckingham's opposition against him gains strength and his own soldiers prove unwilling to defend his cause. Richard frantically tries to preserve his position on the throne, demanding Stanley raise troops to match Richmond's. Knowing that Richmond is Stanley's son-in-law and fearing Stanley might defect to Richmond's side, Richard tries to secure his loyalty the only way he knows how: by making more death threats. But it is interesting that as Richard's power is threatened, his tactics for keeping power shift from lies and trickery to more blatant language.



As quickly as Richard rose to power, he now as quickly watches his power wane. But now, time is not on Richard's side and forces are being raised against him before he can ready an army of his own. Buckingham's capture marks a victory for Richard, but Richard's throne is still far from safe.



ACT 4, SCENE 5

In a room of Lord Stanley's house, Stanley asks Sir Christopher Urswick to tell Richmond that, though he wholeheartedly supports Richmond, he cannot yet send aid because Richard has his son, George Stanley, and will behead him if he finds out about Stanley's betrayal. Stanley also tells Urswick that Elizabeth has gladly agreed to give Richmond her daughter's hand in marriage. Urswick lists the many nobles that have taken Richmond's side. They exit.

As Richard feared, Stanley is loyal to Richmond, not Richard, though Stanley is forced to conceal that loyalty to protect his son (note also the distinction here: Richard would never protect anyone, even his own children probably, had he had any). The news that Elizabeth will give her daughter's hand to Richmond shows that she was not a victim of Richard's speech after all and was only pretending to be won over by him. Richard's powers of persuasion, so all-powerful earlier in the play, have lost their potency now.



ACT 5, SCENE 1

At Salisbury, the Sheriff and a Guard lead a repentant Buckingham to execution. His request to speak with Richard is denied. He calls on the souls of Richard's other victims to get revenge on him by laughing at his execution. The day is All-Souls' Day and Buckingham declares it is fitting, considering all of the souls of Richard's victims. Buckingham wishes he had repented for his sins during King Edward's reign when he wronged the princes and Elizabeth's relatives and when he placed so much faith in the false Richard. Queen Margaret's curse, he reflects, has come true. He goes willingly to death, feeling his own wrongs are fairly punished by execution.

Though, as Richard's right-hand man, Buckingham committed brutal crimes and sins, he expresses repentance as he faces death, and regrets not having turned penitent sooner. He, too, like Hastings', Rivers, Gray, Vaughan, Elizabeth, and the Duchess, regrets having taken Margaret's curses so lightly now that her curse against him has come true.



ACT 5, SCENE 2

On a plain near Tamworth, Richmond marches with the Earl of Oxford, Sir James Blunt, Sir Walter Herbert, and his troops. He announces that Richard has been located near Leicester, a town only one day's march away. He urges everyone to march on in order to attain peace by killing Richard, the "foul **swine**" who "swills your warm blood like wash, and makes his trough in your embowell'd bosoms." Everyone heartily agrees that Richard will be defeated. They march onwards.

Richmond's troops are quickly approaching Richard and Richard's throne is thus growing less stable by the minute. Richmond's grotesque description transforms Richard's heraldic symbol, the boar, into a disgusting beast. Richmond makes use of the metaphor of state-as-human-body – here the evil ruler (Richard) ravages the bodies of his subjects.



ACT 5, SCENE 3

On Bosworth Field outside Leicester, Richard feels optimistic about the next day's battle and orders his troops, the Duke of Norfolk, Earl of Surrey, and others, to pitch their tents for the night. Richard declares that "the king's name is a tower of strength" which their opponents lack and want.

Richard, who has won so much power by manipulating language, seems to assume that a word alone – the title 'king' – will be powerful enough to defeat his enemies. Yet Richard never respected the word in his rise to power.



Meanwhile on the other side of the field, Richmond, Sir William Brandon, Oxford, and others pitch their tents. Richmond announces he will distribute power on the battlefield tomorrow between several of his lords. He gives Sir James Blunt a secret note to give Stanley, and retires with the others to strategize the next day's battle.

At Richard's tent, Richard, Norfolk, Ratcliffe, and Catesby gather. Richard asks **the time** (six in the evening). He asks after his own armor and horse and is told they're both in order. He tells Ratcliffe to summon Stanley's promised forces and threaten George Stanley's death should they not arrive. He asks for a clock and declares himself cheerless. He retires to his tent. Ratcliffe and Catesby exit.

Back at Richmond's tent, Stanley is warmly welcomed and assures Richmond that he will do all he can for him on the battlefield tomorrow, though he must do so subtly as George Stanley will be killed if Richard detects him fighting for Richmond. All exit with Stanley. Richmond prays to God that his forces be protected and victorious on the field. He sleeps.

Between the two camps, the ghosts of King Henry VI, Clarence, Rivers, Grey, Vaughan, Hastings, Edward Prince of Wales, the Duke of York, Anne, and Buckingham rise in succession. Each ghost speaks to Richard and then to Richmond. Each calls on Richard to remember him and to think on the ghosts with shame and guilt. Each calls for Richard's death the next day. To Richmond, each ghost gives a kind blessing and prays for his imminent victory. The ghosts vanish.

Starting from sleep, Richard cries for "another horse" and for someone to tend his wounds. He realizes it was all a dream but remains rattled, vacillating between self-love and self-loathing. The latter starts to win out and he fears that, should he die, no one will pity him for he cannot even pity himself. Ratcliffe enters and announces it's time to get ready for battle. Richard declares that "shadows" (ghosts) have scared him more than thousands of Richmond's soldiers could. Richard and Ratcliffe exit.

At the other camp, Richmond wakes and reports to his lords the "fairest-boding dreams" in which the souls of all Richard's victims cheered him on. It is four in the morning, and **time** to get going. Before they all set forth, Richmond delivers an inspiring speech to his troops, assuring them that God, goodness, saints, and wronged souls are all on their side. He says even Richard's soldiers would rather have Richmond's side win. They set off for battle.

As a leader, Richmond is Richard's opposite: Richmond distributes power among those around him (rather than attempting to consolidate all of it in his own greedy hand, as Richard does).



In contrast to Richmond (who has been divvying his power among his lords and making speeches to rally his troops), Richard is focused entirely on himself: he is concerned only with his own horse and armor and doesn't even ask how his troops or lords are doing.



Again, Richmond shows himself to be a kind and compassionate leader: warm towards Stanley and generous towards his troops, whose wellbeing he prays for. He wishes not just for victory but that his men are protected.



Each of the ghosts speak aloud the formerly implicit contrast the play has drawn between Richard and Richmond: where Richard is violent, cruel, and undeserving of the throne, Richmond is gentle, kind, and worthy.



Though he tries to ignore the message of his dream, the ghosts' language proves too powerful for Richard to dismiss and leaves him deeply disturbed. Sick with self-loathing, Richard seems even more disempowered than he did when he first stepped on stage a bitter, outcast hunchback.



Where Richard was disempowered by the ghosts' words, Richmond is empowered by them and feels his supporters swell to include God and the saints themselves. He reads his dreams as a good omen. For Richmond's camp, the day has begun.



At Richard's camp, Richard, Ratcliffe, attendants, and soldiers are gathered. **A clock** strikes and Richard asks whether anyone has seen the sun. No one has, and Richard wonders if the sun "disdains to shine" as it should have been up an hour ago. The black sky is ominous, but he consoles himself by thinking that "the selfsame heaven that frowns on me looks sadly upon [Richmond]."

Norfolk enters and tells Richard to charge the field. Richard quickly announces his battle plan to his men. Norfolk shows Richard a note left on Norfolk's tent foreboding Richard's defeat. They agree it must be from Richmond's camp. Richard delivers a speech to his troops, calling on them to let "strong arms be our conscience, swords our law" and hurling insults at Richmond's side. A Messenger enters and announces that Stanley refuses to come to Richard's aid. Richard orders George Stanley beheaded, which Norfolk advises him to put off until after the day's battle as Richmond's troops are fast approaching. They charge onto the field.

ACT 5, SCENE 4

At another part of the field, Norfolk enters with his forces and Catesby calls to him for help. He says that Richard's horse has been killed but that Richard fights madly on by foot, determined to kill Richmond. Richard enters shouting, "my kingdom for a horse!" Catesby tries to assist Richard, who seethes that he has killed five Richmonds so far but not the right Richmond. Richard runs off. Norfolk and Catesby exit.

ACT 5, SCENE 5

At another part of the field, Richard and Richmond enter, fighting each other, Richmond then kills Richard, and Richmond exits as Richard's body is removed from the stage. Richmond then reenters along with Stanley, who is bearing the crown. Richmond declares that Richard is dead. Stanley praises Richmond, who immediately asks if George Stanley still lives. Stanley confirms he does, and recounts the names of the dead. Richmond closes the play with a speech pardoning all repentant soldiers who fought for Richard and announcing he will peacefully unite the white rose and the red rose (the Houses of York and Lancaster) by marrying Queen Elizabeth's daughter. He declares "smooth'd-fac'd peace" for England from now on and prays to God for no more "civil wounds."

Time is playing tricks on Richard's camp – where Richmond's camp seemed to sail into the day without a hitch, Richard is perturbed by a lingering darkness, out of sync with the scheduled sunrise. He knows the black sky is a bad omen, but hopes the omen bodes ill for Richmond, not himself. Of course, he is now using language to deceive himself.



Where Richmond prepared his lords' field positions a day ahead of time and delivered a stately pre-fight speech to his troops, Richard is rushed and disorganized before battle, having prepared nothing ahead of time but his own horse and armor. While Richmond's speech used praise to motivate his troops by boosting their spirits, Richard tries to spur his troops on by insulting Richmond (when it's likely no one hates Richmond as much as Richard does) and by encouraging them to dehumanize themselves by abandoning their consciences.



The words Richard screamed as he woke from his nightmare ("another horse") turn out to have been prophetic. Horseless, senseless with rage, unable to find Richmond, Richard is profoundly disempowered on the field.



Richmond proves himself an entirely different and much more worthy ruler of England than Richard ever was – Richmond expresses compassion for his subjects (asking after Stanley's son and pardoning any of Richard's repentant soldiers) and wishes, above all, for a peaceful and healthy state. His marriage to King Edward's daughter will marry the Houses of York and Lancaster, soothing the ills and injustices of war with love and partnership, and establishing the stable Tudor dynasty that will result in the eventual rise to the throne of Elizabeth I, who ruled when Shakespeare wrote Richard III.





HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Ross, Margaret. "Richard III." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 17 Nov 2013. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Ross, Margaret. "Richard III." LitCharts LLC, November 17, 2013. Retrieved April 21, 2020. <https://www.litcharts.com/lit/richard-iii>.

To cite any of the quotes from *Richard III* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Shakespeare, William. *Richard III*. Simon & Schuster. 1996.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Shakespeare, William. *Richard III*. New York: Simon & Schuster. 1996.