

ENGLISH: LIST 1

Richard understands the weaknesses of others better than his own.

Throughout the course of the Machiavellian machinations within Shakespeare's *Richard III*, the protagonist, Richard of Gloucester, repeatedly demonstrates that his skills lie in his mastery over others, rather than over himself. From the onset of the play, it is clear that Richard is not willing to see himself as fallible in his determined villainy; in contrast, however, Richard is able to easily manipulate the feelings of those around him, gaining his power by playing upon their weaknesses. Moreover, Richard exhibits a potent ability to assess the state of his the society around him, building his Kingdom upon upon a constant pressure of fear and terror. In spite of these strengths however, Richard is nevertheless seen as becoming overconfident in his assessment of others as the play progresses; paradoxically, the fall of his Kingdom also allows Richard a better glimpse at his own soul, meaning that come the play's denouement, Richard has become more introspective than he is willing to utilise others. Ignoring these changes, however, *Richard III* is clearly constructed by Shakespeare as a play depicting the rise of a perceptive dissembler, a man who attains power by preying on others, in the meantime ignoring his own perils.

Right from the beginning, it is clear to the audience that Richard is a man unwilling to grant his persona the possibility of complexity. This is best established within the play's opening soliloquy: in his declaration of deciding to "prove a villain", Richard is alerting to the audience – and himself – that he will attempt to take up the part of a one-dimensional figure, in the process ignoring the human repercussions which may arise in the process. A similar notion is also purported within Richard's indicating disgust at happiness within the soliloquy, with the lines "I am determined to...hate...idle pleasures" and "Deformed, unfinished, sent before my time" reflecting a man whose very persona is built upon defilement, and an inhuman desire to subvert men's pleasures. Thus, Shakespeare is constructing Richard to be a figure whose decisions confine his very ability to appreciate his own humanity, with the determination to partake in evil masking from Richard his own human failings for much of the play's action.

Furthermore, across the entirety of *Richard III*, Shakespeare makes it clear that Richard possesses the faculties of mind to perceive weakness in others. This is perhaps best exemplified within Richard's treatment of Clarence: in his recognition of Clarence's naivety, Richard dissembles, using his "subtle, false and treacherous acting" to ensure that Clarence thinks Richard "loves [him] and holds [him] dear". The scene of Lady Anne's wooing similarly indicates that Richard is able to understand the faults of others, with his "dissembling looks" being employed to prey on Anne's emotional frailty, a mood Richard himself acknowledges within the exclamation "was ever woman in this humour wooed?". Richard's ability to perceive character faults is also depicted within his relationship with Buckingham, who is essentially taken in by Richard's offer for "The Earldom of Hereford"; this clearly illuminates on Shakespeare's part that Richard is playing towards Buckingham's ambitions.

Hence, Richard is evidently a man whose understanding of others' weaknesses is intrinsic to his character; within the vile web Richard spins, the audience recognises a figure clearly wary of those around him.

Moreover, it is possible to see in Richard's takeover of England a clear recognition on his part of not only individuals' faults, but also society's. At one level, this can be clearly understood within Richard's defamation of others for his own security, with the spreading of the "bastardy of Edward's children" clearly revealing Richard's understanding of the ease in which society may fall to propaganda. More significantly, however, Richard exhibits an ability to assess the ease in which society may fall to hysteria and fear; indeed, Shakespeare illuminates this fact within Richard's usage of his "sapling" arm as a weapon, with the supernatural imagery of his supposed "curse" in this instance playing upon either fears of the unearthly, or fears of Richard's own villainy. Richard's

perception of society's fears is also unveiled within the words of the scrivener, whose uttering "Who...cannot see this palpable device...yet who so bold but says he sees it not?" exemplifying the oppression of society, as a result of Richard's proliferation of hysteria. Richard is then not merely a personal manipulator, but also a global one, a figure who Shakespeare depicts as able to control civilisation itself within *Richard III*.

Of course, as the play's events draw on longer, Shakespeare also unveils to the audience that Richard is not omnipotent in his understanding of those around him. Following his taking of the English throne, the error in Richard's judgement is perhaps most obvious within his changed manner, with phrases such as "Shall I be plain? I wish the bastards dead" reflecting a Richard who no longer feels the need to act and dissemble. This is a misperception of those around Richard, however, as indicated of the reaction of Richard's followers: most notably, Buckingham is shocked, expressing a desire to have "some little breath, some pause", revealing to the audience that Richard has completely misinterpreted the form in which others will react to his untempered, genuine displays of villainy. Richard's increasing inability to understand the weakness of others is also manifested within his discussion with Elizabeth. Within this scene, Richard exhibits that he believes the tactics which wooed Anne will work on Elizabeth, particularly within "Say I did all of this for love of her", which is obviously an echo of Richard's reasoning that Anne's beauty was the cause of murder. Richard's overconfidence here, however, blinds him from understanding that Elizabeth will not be taken by his rhetoric, and indeed, when Elizabeth later promises to "espouse [Princess] Elizabeth" to Richmond, the audience is made to recognise Richard's failings in this instance. The understanding then is that as the events of *Richard III* transgress, Richard's ability to read others begins to fail him, indicating that although his powers of perception are potent, they are not infallible. Interestingly, as the action of *Richard III* draws to a close, it is also possible to realise that Richard's abilities to understand himself eventually grow stronger. Although he ignores his humanity for the most part, Richard's final soliloquy relates to the audience that Richard may in fact know more of himself than he has previously imagined. Noticeably, the final soliloquy contains the line "I rather hate myself/For hateful deeds committed by myself", indicating to the audience that Richard has finally acknowledged his weakness of guilt – his conscience.

Shakespeare's usage of the language of court within "Murder, stern murder in the dir'st degree" achieves a similar purpose, and on-stage, the audience is confronted by a villain keen to witness his own guilty despair. Of course, it is also worth considering that Richard later labels conscience "a word that cowards use", perhaps suggesting he is still ignoring his own human fallibility; nevertheless, the singularity of the soliloquy would suggest that it is a true manifestation of Richard's mind, and hence, it is possible to see within *Richard III* some potential for a self-understanding within the seemingly inhuman Duke of Gloucester.

These minor concerns aside, however, it is clear that throughout the course of *Richard III*, the figure Shakespeare constructs of Richard is one concerned more with understanding others than with understanding itself. In spite of his conscience emerging and his powers failing as the play progresses, the Richard the audience sees is, for the most part, an inhuman villain, admitting no personal faults and instead preying upon the weaknesses of those around him. Moreover, as indicated by the variety in his actions, this Richard is a man of keen and capable insight, a villain capable of great success in the understanding of his fellow humanity. Thus, more than merely a historical tragedy, Shakespeare's *Richard III* is a play depicting an unearthly creature with powers supernatural, centralising a malevolent King who he comprehends and ensnares the universe around him with ruthless efficiency.