

“All the World's a Stage”: Shakespeare's *Richard III*, A Study in Historical Perspective

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INTRODUCTION

I have taught world history for almost forty years and have acted on Houston stages for over twenty-five of those years. I have always tried to combine my love of theatre and history within the world of my classroom. My students have presented Kabuki drama, plays of their own creation, documentary films with reenactments of historical events. These have been enjoyed and have stimulated further learning for many of those students. I have never attempted any work with Shakespeare, primarily because I have never performed Shakespeare myself, most high school students study several of the plays in their English classes, and let's face it, Shakespeare can be difficult!

My students are required by the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) Objectives to recognize point of view and purpose, to perceive cause and effect relationships, and identify supporting ideas in written text. In addition, the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills Objectives require students to use the process of historical inquiry to research, interpret, and use multiple sources of evidence, as well as trace important legal and political concepts. I would also like to include computer concepts in this list as well.

RATIONALE

When I attended Baylor University to obtain my undergraduate degree, I had a class in the history of Rome. The professor traced the conspiracy against Julius Caesar by reading the appropriate passage from Shakespeare's play and showing how much detail was historical. This greatly impressed me and certainly made it easier to relate history to other disciplines. This has inspired me to combine Shakespeare within the confines of my curriculum.

Most of the students I teach come from varied worlds of experience. Very few have ever experienced Shakespeare on stage. These young people often come from disadvantaged backgrounds and must work as well, leaving little, if any, time to take on difficult projects to which they do not relate. Though our school has several computer labs, most students never log much time on them. It seemed to me that perhaps I could also pull my students into the twenty-first century if I combined computer technology with history and the theatre of Shakespeare.

Originally, I perceived this unit to be much more elaborate, but realized that teaching the history of six billion people for the last 5,000 years on six continents left me with

very little time to do much that was new. Rather than a unit of basic Shakespeare material, I decided that the best way to incorporate Shakespeare into my curriculum was as a special project. I had considered using group dynamics in some way, but many of my students live so far from one another and are only slightly acquainted that this seemed doomed to fail. I also considered using all the historical plays of Shakespeare, but, again, this was just too much material. I finally chose *The Tragedy of Richard III* because 1) I knew something about *The Tragedy of Richard III*, 2) it was available on film in several versions, 3) it told a hair-raising story of ambition, child murder, and divine right, 4) it contained the seeds of a mystery and the use of propaganda, and 5) I knew there were numerous sites on the Internet (in fact, a whole society dedicated to Richard III) which could be accessed.

OVERVIEW OF THE UNIT

The Historical Record

“Dramatic poetry is like history made visible, and is an image of past actions as if they were present.”

--SIR FRANCIS BACON

In the Middle Ages, most people did not read or write, so poetry performed by traveling troupes of actors, and often coupled with songs, became the only way most people discovered the world outside their small hamlets. Of course, the actual truth of the events so described, was often twisted and turned every way possible so that the audiences would be enthusiastic and the actors could make a living.

Antony Sher's *Year of the King: An Actor's Diary and Sketchbook*, recounts the legend that after spending the last few hours playing Richard III in a hunchbacked, crippled position, Richard Burbage turned to the playwright and said: “If you ever do that to me again, mate, I'll kill you.” That is the Richard that will always be the popular concept. Shakespeare's version is the most lasting, but it is not the most factual, and arguably, not the most historical version.

Dr. James A. Moore states in his “Historicity in Shakespeare's *Richard III*”:

Some would say the question should have been declared dead in 1844 when Caroline Halsted showed that the time had long passed when historians, at least knowledgeable historians like her considered Shakespeare's play factually true.

And even though the British Broadcasting Corporation televised a mock trial of Richard, with a great amount of historical research, and found him not guilty in 1984, there is still much debate even today about whether or not the historical record was as full of evil as Shakespeare portrays it. There are obviously many sides to the story, and it also includes a moral problem. We are constantly faced with a veil of propaganda in our

attempts to understand the political scene before us. Like a veil, propaganda blows in the wind and is hard to grasp or to see through. If we regard the reputation of Richard III, how it was treated in history and in creative expression, we must examine the essential question: “What is truth and how does one recognize it?”

The Wars of the Roses was a long, 200 year civil war based on the struggle for the English crown by the members of two different branches of the Plantagenets who had ruled for over 200 years. The wars began with a quarrel between Richard II and his cousin, who becomes Henry IV after the murder of Richard II. A short period of peace in England and France was established after the ascension of Henry V, but at his death, the wars resumed. Henry VI, head of the Lancastrian branch of the family, was challenged by the Yorkist branch. Finally, after years at war, the Yorkist Edward IV came to the throne. At his death, his brother became Richard III.

Meanwhile, in France, the Lancastrian cause was supported by Henry Tudor. He invaded England and defeated Richard at Bosworth Field, thus ending Plantagenet rule. This event is often seen in Britain as the beginning of the Renaissance in England.

The reign of Richard III is the end of a period of English history extending from the late fourteenth century to the end of the fifteenth century, which is also nearing the end of the Middle Ages. Thus, the Plantagenets would be replaced by the Tudors, whose line continues today with Elizabeth II and the Windsor family. These kings and queens would have much to do with the shape of the American Constitution and the history of the United States. The shaping of the American Constitution, historically, is a long-term essential study in my classroom.

In her paper “A Study in Historiographical Controversy,” Beth Marie Kosir states:

History, prior to the beginning of the eighteenth century, was not the objective, neutral, and scientific study that we in the twentieth century like to believe it is. History was often used and studied to teach moral lesson. Consequently, to make history more palatable or to make a stronger moral statement, bits of fiction were often sprinkled into the descriptions of actual events in an effort to insure that all those who partook of that history, either in written or oral form, had no doubt as to the moral of the story.

Shakespeare wrote about many of these kings, but *The Tragedy of Richard III* is one of his earliest plays. During this long period, the “actors” were moved by historians, dramatists, and novelists with each forming the plot to suit his own purposes. “The Reinvention of Richard III,” by Sharon D. Michalove mentions this:

The refashioning of a public image in a contemporary as well as in a historical context is a venerable phenomenon. . . Ronald Reagan refashioned himself from a television cowboy and a sometime companion to a chimpanzee into a political

force potent enough to claim the presidency of the United States...Richard III carefully created the persona-that-would-be-king from that of a loyal younger brother very much in the shadow of a powerful older sibling. Henry Tudor's humanist *proteges* recreated the former king in a malignant form--a presentation that took root in popular culture in...Shakespeare.

Richard Oberdorfer's very useful paper, "Pursuing the White Boar: Approaches to Teaching Richard III," makes the point:

Generations of Americans learned about the character of Abraham Lincoln, Davy Crockett, and Wyatt Earp not from classroom texts but from movies and television--because they saw vivid, living figures with understandable motivations. When the dramatic presentation at the time has genuine literary merit, it will earn repeated performances and leave a lasting and widespread impression. In fact, it may become almost impossible to separate the character in the play from the genuine historical personality...*The Tragedy of Richard III* is an outstanding example of this effect.

Richard, with all his deformities and as portrayed by Shakespeare, represents the evil, corrupt state of the English monarchy during the Wars of the Roses. Of course, the Tudor monarchs would be just as bad in their own way, but it would not have done for Shakespeare, whose monarch was Elizabeth Tudor I, to write of her ancestors that way, so he made them, the heroes, and their enemies, the villains. In writing Richard as the villain of the piece, Shakespeare is simply following the tradition of the Tudor historians who had come before him. The Tudors had only a slight claim to the throne through the marriage of Owen Tudor to Henry V's widow. One way to "save face" was to celebrate Henry Tudor, VII as the deliverer of England from the demon, Richard. The worse he was, the better Henry VII would be seen to be. This rewriting of history is called the Tudor myth.

Elizabeth I was constantly facing challenges to her right to *be* queen, so any question of royal legitimacy was dangerous. Thus, each writer would create different ways to make Richard III, a villain. We may never know who the real Richard was, but trying to solve the mystery is always more enlightening than knowing the end of the story. Thus, the research into Richards' life and his times may be a useful journey for all students.

The most famous of Richard III's defenders was Horace Walpole. Titled *Historical Doubts on the Life and Reign of King Richard the Third* and published in 1768, it contains the following list of the charges against Richard as:

- 1st. His murder of Edward Prince of Wales, son of Henry the Sixth
- 2nd. His murder of Henry the Sixth
- 3rd. The murder of his brother George duke of Clarence
- 4th. The execution of Rivers, Gray, and Vaughan

- 5th. The execution of Lord Hastings
- 6th. The murder of Edward the Fifth and his brother
- 7th. The murder of his own queen

Walpole then proceeds to discuss and disprove each one. In order to use it in the classroom, I think some translation would be needed. The language is, in my opinion, more difficult than Shakespeare for most regular students.

Richard III is the last of the four plays, which dramatize the events of the last of the Plantagenet kings of England. They were only a century past and English audiences would have looked at these events as Americans view the Civil War and its events. But Shakespeare was not a documentarian, such as Ken Burns; he seems to be more like Oliver Stone and his view of the assassination of an American president in *J.F.K.* Shakespeare's audiences were certainly fascinated with Richard III and Shakespeare gives them a rip-roaring melodrama about a "pure, self-professed villain of monstrous proportions" to fulfill that fascination.

A.L. Rowse says in his biography of Shakespeare, that this play is "Shakespeare's grand tribute to Marlowe," but "unlike Marlowe's heroes, Richard is many-sided, mock-humble as well as audacious, plausible and adroit--he can get away with anything up to the last nemesis upon him" and "with a kind of gaiety in villainy that sweeps the action forward and has always swept the theatre with it."

The story of Richard III offers so many ways to fit it into a study of the Middle Ages and a comparison with modern times. There is first the question of Richard's psyche, his treatment of the women in his life, his alleged murder of the two princes who stood in his way of gaining the crown, and a general study of the culture of the medieval world. I find the possible maligning of his character to be the most fascinating, but would not rule out studies into these other areas if the subject presented itself through one of my student's interests.

The Play

Synopsis

Act I begins with an introduction to English political affairs of the time and the character of Richard. We see him as he sees himself, as a deformed creature that plots to kill the brother of the king, Clarence, who is also his brother.

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
(I.i.30-31)

When Richard finds out that Edward IV, the king is ill, he believes himself to be in a good position to become king himself. He also expresses his desire to marry Lady Anne, even though he has killed her husband and her father-in-law. Richard blames these deaths on Edward and tries to use words of love to convince her to marry him. Lady Anne accepts much to Richard's surprise. Edward's queen, Elizabeth is afraid for her son, if Edward dies. Queen Margaret, Henry VI's wife, warns all who will listen about Richard, but no one will listen. Clarence is frightened by nightmares and then is killed by two murderers.

Act II shows us Richard as he lies to his dying brother that he is committed to the peace that Edward has created, and then tells Edward that his brother Clarence is now dead. All are saddened and in grief when the king dies. Richard's ally, Buckingham, plots with him to separate the prince from the Queen's family. The citizens discuss these dangerous times and are afraid. When the Queen's allies are imprisoned by Richard and Buckingham, Elizabeth places herself and her son in sanctuary.

The Tiger now hath seized the gentle hind;
Insulting tyranny begins to jut
Upon the innocent and aweless throne.
Welcome destruction, blood, and massacre!
I see, as in a map, the end of all.

(II.iv.50-54)

Act III, with seven scenes, details the murders of several of Richard's enemies, such as Lords Hastings, Rivers, Grey, and ends with a manufactured crowd calling for Richard to accept the crown and be king. After several refusals and after he is told that the son of Edward will never rule if Richard doesn't, he accepts and is proclaimed king.

Your brother's son shall never reign our king,
But we will plant some other in the throne
To the disgrace and downfall of your house

(III.vii.214-217)

Act IV indicates a growing paranoia in Richard. He demands that Buckingham consent to the killing of the two princes, his nephews, one of which is the legitimate heir to the throne. Buckingham hesitates and he is rejected by Richard. Tyrrel, an assassin, agrees to murder the princes and does so. Richard arranges to have Lady Anne removed so that he can now marry Edward's daughter. Margaret prophesies Richard's death. Elizabeth agrees to allow him to marry her daughter. Then Richard learns that Richmond is about to attack. He says, "But I am in / So far in blood that sin will pluck on sin" (IV.ii.62-63).

In Act V Buckingham is captured and executed. Lord Stanley, whose son Richard has imprisoned and threatened to kill because he does not trust Stanley, agrees to aid

Richmond while he appears to fight for Richard. It is believed that Richard's nobles will not be loyal to him. Richard is thrown from his horse, then fights with Richmond until Richard is killed. Stanley finds the crown of England and places it on Richmond's head. Richmond pledges to unite the feuding families and heal the wounds of England.

There is no creature loves me;
And if I die, no soul will pity me.
Nay wherefore should they, since that I myself
Find in myself no pity to myself?
(V.iii.201-204)

A horse! A horse! My kingdom for a horse!
(V.iv.13)

The Mock Trials

There are a number of websites that describe the various mock trials that have taken place over the years regarding the guilt or innocence of Richard III. In 1984, in a replica of the Old Bailey, he was tried in front of a retired Lord Chancellor of England. Then in 1996 and in 1997, two trials were held in the United States before justices of the Supreme Court. All three trials acquitted Richard, which doesn't, of course mean, innocent. These last two trials are described in some detail on the Internet from the Ricardian Society.

In 1996, the Honorable William H. Rehnquist, Chief Justice of the United States visited the Indiana University School of Law. The trial was a part of his four-day visit. The trial was argued by students and graduates of the law school. The defense attempted to cast doubt on the prosecution's evidence of contemporary writers, the accounts of Thomas More and William Shakespeare, the known character of Richard III, and the bones, which were unearthed in the Tower of London. The defense noted that there was "500 years of pretrial publicity" and compared using Shakespeare's play as any kind of proof was "a little like relying on Oliver Stone's movie to prove the Kennedy assassination. "At least Stone was there," stated the defense.

Joining Chief Justice Rehnquist in determining the verdict were Professor Susan Hoffman Williams, a member of the law school's faculty, and the Honorable Randall T. Shepard, Chief Justice of the state of Indiana. While Professor Williams agreed with Chief Justice Rehnquist that the prosecution did not meet, arguably a "heavier contemporary law" of "beyond a reasonable doubt," Chief Justice Shepard stated that "the defense has had 500 years to find evidence, actual evidence, as opposed to speculation, that somebody other than Richard III was responsible for these deaths and by and large there isn't any. His conclusion was that Richard was "guilty, guilty, guilty."

In 1997, another trial took place in Washington, D.C. in which Chief Justice William H. Rehnquist was joined by Associate Justices Ruth Bader Ginsberg and Stephen G.

Breyer. The 3-0 decision ruled that the prosecution did not prove that “it was more likely than not” that the princes in the Tower had been murdered or ordered murdered by Richard III.

THE PROJECT

The Internet

There are many sites which analyze Shakespeare and his histories, as well as many devoted specifically to Richard III. The Richardian Society, both British and American branches, have copious amounts of information available to all who may want it. Our school library has very little in the way of historical reference to Richard III or, other than the plays, *any* Shakespeare. There are many sites that are useable in a study of both the historical Richard III and the play, *The Tragedy of Richard III*.

However, I would first have to make sure all of my students were able to use the search engines properly in order to find those sites. I would want to make sure that they were not going to get frustrated when the first search wasn't successful, and that they were encouraged to search more sites by using more search engines. There are also some wonderful tutorials from Yahoo and other sites. Some of them are “Learn the Net: How Search Engines Work,” “Finding Information on the Internet: A TUTORIAL,” “Search Engine Guide: Find All Search Engines,” and “A Helpful Guide to Search Engines.”

Because I have purchased and set up a computer and overhead projector, I can show my students how to do this on the screen at the front of my room. I would first want to show them how to use the browsers, Netscape and Internet Explorer. A more experienced student could also handle this activity. We would then explore the various search engines and look at several sites of interest. I have three computers connected to the Internet in my classroom and hope to have another by next year. I would prepare study sheets to accompany the assignment to research several sites. The students would fill in both site addresses and content. Besides the computers in my room, the students could also use the library, or we might reserve time in one of the computer labs. My computers are Macintoshes, but the labs are PCs, as are the ones in the library. We might first do these as groups and then as individuals. The students would then demonstrate their expertise, by finding these sites on my classroom computer set up, thus showing everyone numerous ways to search the Internet.

The Plan

The Richardian Society has prepared a “Back to Basics” series, which could provide a good basis for the various topics to be used as projects. Among the topics considered are: the murder of the princes, the execution of Lord Hastings, the murders of Edward of Lancaster and Henry VI, the murder of George of Clarence, the illegitimacy of Richard's

children, the assumption of the throne, the Woodvilles, the Beauforts, Richard's appearance.

I do feel that the class should study the play, but I would also like to let them learn to academically “surf” the Internet. In addition, the films of *Richard III* are highly regarded and would be most interesting to the student population that I teach.

Therefore, I would want to first divide the class into five groups, let them each read an act, and outline the events. They would read it out loud in these groups, then access a resource for the unfamiliar terms (books or Internet), and finally, create the outline. I estimate this to take several class periods or possibly several weeks. These outlines would then be typed and distributed to all the groups for discussion, or presented in a class session, and to create a definitive outline for themselves.

I might show the class small portions of the extant films. Certainly, I should like to show them Laurence Olivier's film of *Richard III*, and Ian McKellen's *Richard III*. I would not suggest using Al Pacino's *Looking for Richard* because there are just too many possibly offensive words used. In addition, as an actor, I was in a play, “Inspecting Carol,” in which a character badly performs Richard's soliloquy, which begins “Now is the winter of our discontent.” As I have an archival copy of this performance, this is an opportunity to see a comic and cultural reference to Richard. There are many discussion opportunities with these films, but, if teachers have never seen them, I would suggest previewing them to avoid any problems.

Because there is great disagreement in history of Richard's crime and whether it actually occurred, we might read Josephine Tey's *The Daughter of Time*. This novel fictionally examines the mystery of Richard's crime and whether or not he was maligned by historians and Shakespeare. This will introduce them to Sir Thomas More's history, which many historians believe Shakespeare used as a major source. The full text of More's history of Richard is available on the Internet. There are over thirty novels based on Richard and his crimes. Some students might be able to search these out and provide different views on the story.

With two such diversified pictures of Richard, we might then study the factual historical record as we know it today. There are no books available to us on Richard III alone. Therefore the only obvious place to go for reference is the Internet. In all cases, the students would have to cite references and show the accuracy of the information with more than one reference.

Many experts with greater knowledge than I have created lessons based on this play. Some which have been around for some years include the popular “Oh, Tey, Can You See?” by Ruth Anne Vineyard. It is specifically for a world history class, not an English class. Another plan which is more geared to an English class, but contains some very penetrating questions and quotes to ponder, is “A Teacher's Guide to the Edition of

Richard III” by Jeanne M. McGlinn and James E. McGlinn. It is on the web in its entirety at www.penquinputnam.com.

It is also possible to find all of Sir Thomas More's history of Richard III and Horace Walpole's “Historic Doubts on the Life and Reign of King Richard the Third” on the Internet from the Richardian Society. It is very difficult to find “To Prove a Villain” by Taylor Littleton and Robert Rea, but worth getting a copy for you, the teacher. (I ordered a used copy from www.alibris.com and found them to be very easy to deal with.) It includes all of the above and Josephine Tey's book. The Tey book is still in print as far as I know and would probably have to be ordered in a classroom set. These are just a few of the sources that might be used in the classroom.

The Two Richards

Having learned how to use the Internet to find the real Richard, the students might create a project based on the mystery of the “two Richards.” They may work together or separately. A list of suggested projects might be a debate, a newspaper, a model, a poster display, a film, or one of many other works. Useful sites on the Internet might be “Anglo-Saxon Kings and the Norman Conquest,” “Dictionary of Shakespeare,” “Folger Library Teaching Shakespeare,” “Furness: Holinshed's Chronicles (1577),” “Monarchs of Britain on Britannia,” and, of course, “Richard III Society.”

The Moral Question

I would like to also assign some Internet searches into propaganda, publicity, advertising, and all the other types of “veils” we Americans are subjected to in print, film, and television. Another possibility for studying the question of morality might be to compare this historical record of Richard and how he may have been treated with the historical record and treatment of President Clinton. Much of this research could be used in the projects, which would be the culminating activity.

The Evaluation

The final grade for this project would incorporate the Internet searches, the outline of the play, and a project or an essay, depending on the strength of the class' academic abilities.

LESSON PLANS

This will be an all-semester study to be incorporated into our study of the Middle Ages. I envision this as a growing and constantly expanding study for there are so many other ways to use this idea.

LESSON PLAN ONE: Accessing the Internet

Objectives

The student will:

- transfer information from one medium to another using computer software as appropriate.

Materials

Each student will have a list of topics (depending on what I find for them to locate) to research on the Internet and a copy of the "Introduction to Search Engines" from the Kansas City Public Library. Each student will have a worksheet to fill in for the evaluation activity.

Procedure

1. Either the teacher or an already experienced student will demonstrate the various search engines on the overhead, which is connected to the Internet. Various means of searching for the same topic will be explored.
2. Each student will then go to the computers and search for at least three sites on three separate topics on his or her list. Students may improve their grades by finding more sites and listing them on the worksheet.

Evaluation

Each student will turn in a worksheet which will be graded on completion and variety of sites found. In other words, I have to be able to find them!!

LESSON PLAN TWO: Reading the Play

Objectives

The student will:

- determine the meaning of words in a variety of written texts.
- identify supporting ideas in a variety of written texts.
- recognize facts and details.
- arrange events in sequential order.

Materials

Each student in each group will have a copy of the act which he/she will read. An unabridged dictionary and access to the Internet will be available for each student to

access in the course of the reading of the act. An outline of information to be filled in will be provided for each group.

Procedure

1. Each group will be randomly chosen by the computer grade program used in our district.
2. Each group will select a manager, who will fill in the outline and be responsible for turning it in every day at the end of the period.
3. The group will read through the act, dividing the parts among themselves. (Since most of my students are in the eleventh grade, they have already had some study of Shakespeare's plays and have read one with the aid of their English teachers.) They will be instructed to stop when they wish to discuss what is happening in the scene, look up unfamiliar words, and make notes concerning anything they wish to discuss with the class. The outline should also include quotes that illustrate some of the thoughts expressed and events covered. (Encourage them to relate any of their insights to their own experiences and write them down as well.)
4. The group will prepare an overhead presentation of its notes and present to the class so that all others may take notes for further study and research.
5. The outline will be turned in at the end of the presentation.
6. Each student will turn in his or her notes from the presentations given by other groups.
7. I will lead a class discussion at a later class period, allowing the students to add to their notes.

Some of the questions which might be asked:

- Act I: Why does Richard seem to believe that he is justified in being a villain?
Why does Anne change her feelings toward Richard?
What is the political situation in Edward's court?
- Act II: What is the role of the women and children?
Why do the citizens discuss the political situation?
- Act III: List those who Richard orders to be killed in Act III.
- Act IV: What does Richard feel is lacking when he does become king?
How does Margaret feel justice can be obtained?
- Act V: By the end of the play, is Richard admirable in any way, or is he presented as a totally evil person? Explain your reasoning.

This will probably take two to three class periods.

Evaluation

Evaluation will be based on:

- Participation (as observed by the teacher)- 25%
- Outline- 25%
- Presentation- 25%
- Notes- 25%

LESSON PLAN THREE: The Essay

Objectives

The student will:

- support a point of view on a social studies issue or event.
- use standard grammar, spelling, sentence structure, and punctuation.

Materials

Each student will supply his own paper and pen.

Procedure

Having completed a number of activities, both in reading and research on the Internet, the student will be assigned a two-to three-page paper covering a similar topic to the ones listed below. The student may also choose another topic of his choice based on his research and reading.

1. Whether Richard III is guilty or innocent, what do you think of Shakespeare's idea of his Richard's morality as a king and leader of his people?
2. As Richard's defense lawyer, how would *you* defend him?
3. How does Richard's treatment of the women in this play show his character?
4. How is this play representative of the medieval monarchy?

Evaluation

Each essay will be graded as to the objectives stated.

- Support of a point of view- 35%
- Clarity of point of view- 35%
- Grammatical construction- 30%

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