



The history plays

William Shakespeare
(1592-1599)

The **history plays** written by Shakespeare are generally thought of as a distinct genre: their tone and form are different from his comedies and tragedies. While many of Shakespeare's plays are concerned with similar themes such as kingship, revolution and struggle for power like *Julius Caesar* (→ Text Bank 14-15), *Hamlet* (→ T20, T21, Text Bank 16), *King Lear* or *Macbeth* (→ T25, T26, T27), the history plays share the setting in time – late medieval England – and the theme, the Wars of the Roses, that is, the rise and fall of the House of Lancaster.

Shakespeare's most important history plays can be divided into **two 'series' of four plays**. The first series, written at the beginning of his career, includes *Henry VI Parts One, Two and Three* (1592) and *Richard III* (1593); they deal with the events that happened between 1422 and 1485, leading to the fall of the Lancaster dynasty. The second series, written at the height of Shakespeare's powers, moves back in time focusing on the rise of the Lancastrians (1398 to 1420). This series consists of *Richard II* (1595), *Henry IV Parts One and Two* (1597), and *Henry V* (1599). In 1613 Shakespeare also wrote *Henry VIII*.

The interest Shakespeare showed in the events which had taken place some 100 years earlier was due to the fact that

the battles and murders leading up to the Wars of the Roses represented the most recent, pre-Tudor events that could safely be treated by dramatists without offending a Tudor monarch. Moreover, the historians, on whose writings he based his plays, were much closer in time to those wars.

Shakespeare drew on a number of **different sources** in writing his history plays. His primary source was Raphael Holinshed's *The Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland*, published in 1577. This work offered the chronology of events that Shakespeare reproduced or altered not only for political and philosophical purposes, but also for artistic, structural reasons. The **purposes** of Shakespeare's history plays can be summarised as

- 1 the **nationalistic glorification** of England;
- 2 the use of the **past as a guide to the present**;
- 3 the importance given to the **doctrine of order** (see the chain of being, → 2.3);
- 4 the question of the **divine appointment of kings**;
- 5 the **obedience** due to appointed kings;
- 6 the **sin of rebellion against kings**, which manifests itself in the form of ghosts in plays like *Julius Caesar* and *Richard III*;
- 7 the **cruel characteristics of rebels and rebellion**.

COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING INFORMATION

1 ANSWER the following questions.

- 1 What do the history plays share?
- 2 How can these plays be divided?
- 3 Why was Shakespeare interested in the events linked to the Wars of the Roses?
- 4 What was Shakespeare's primary source?
- 5 How can you summarise the aims of the history plays?



Richard III

William Shakespeare
(1593)

PLOT

The plot is simple: the rise and fall of Richard III.

First Act. Richard, Duke of Gloucester, decides to become king, even though his two nephews are before him in the line of succession. He plots against his brother Clarence, involving him in a quarrel with their brother King Edward IV. Clarence is confined to the Tower of London where he is murdered shortly afterwards. Richard then marries Lady Anne in order to strengthen his cause as she is the widow of Edward Prince of Wales, son of the previous king, Henry VI.

Second Act. King Edward IV dies and his young son, Prince Edward, travels to London to be crowned. Before he arrives, Gloucester, who has been named Lord Protector, weakens his position by imprisoning, then murdering, three noblemen who supported the boy prince.

Third Act. Richard confines the prince and his younger brother in the Tower, and has a powerful nobleman, Lord Hastings, beheaded. Meanwhile, the Duke of Buckingham supports Gloucester and obtains the crown for him.

Fourth Act. The new king Richard III has the two princes assassinated in the Tower and gets Lady Anne secretly put to death. He is now free to marry the York heiress Elizabeth, daughter of Edward IV. Despite his power, Richard does not reward Buckingham, who therefore forsakes Richard and unites his strength with that of Henry Tudor, Earl of Richmond, who has decided to take up arms against the king.

Fifth Act. Richmond invades England and succeeds in defeating and killing the usurping king. He is recognised as King Henry VII, and, by marrying Elizabeth of York, reconciles the rival families of York and Lancaster.

DATE AND SOURCES

Richard III was certainly written before 1597, the date of its first printing, which was probably a so-called 'reported text', a text reconstructed from memory by one or more actors. Modern scholars accept 1593 as the probable date for the first performance.

There are **many possible sources** for Shakespeare's material in writing *Richard III*. They are: Sir Thomas More's *The History of King Richard the Third* (1513), Richard Grafton's *A Chronicle at Large* (1569) and Holinshed's *Chronicles* (1577). Moreover the character of Richard is modelled on the Vice of the morality plays and on the Senecan criminal hero.

THE PROTAGONIST

The key to the play's plot is its main character, for each minor action is built round **the central figure of Richard of Gloucester** himself. His soliloquies, his asides, his detailed orders to subordinates, his threats and warnings to his enemies are rich in announcements of future acts and plans.

Richard, who defines his own nature in the opening soliloquy, sums up and gathers the savagery which prevails everywhere around him. His coronation represents a turning point after which Richard is seen as the victim of his own choices: the horrors he has caused follow him in his new state and link him irrevocably to the consequences of his past actions. His position shifts from that of the outsider immersed in the contemplation of his control of the world around him, to that of a man who acts in the dark to keep up his courage, to hide even from himself the sense of emptiness, which begins to haunt him. However, he acts bravely in his despair till his death, just like Macbeth facing Macduff at the end of the tragedy.

It has often been remarked that all the characters in the play are linked to **a pattern of guilt and expiation**, of crime and punishment. They all live in a frightful and disordered world, and believe in private vengeance, which relieves them of a feeling of responsibility for the wrongs suffered by others.

THEMES

Richard III is supposed to demonstrate the beneficent workings of Divine Providence in giving England the glorious Tudor King Henry VII (→ 2.1).

According to Shakespeare, **rhetoric** and its relationship with the dramatic irony of the action and situations is the maker of history: people who can make an effective speech are the winners. Richard uses rhetoric to delineate his own character and dominate the others. Two microcosms ('irony' on the one hand and the particular 'rhetoric forms' on the other) work together to form the macrocosm which is the play. **Irony** is particularly suitable, since it has an evident ideological, political value in persuading, convincing and dominating through language.

This play can still be seen as a **Senecan tragedy**, just like *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*, because of the presence of **curses**, **prophecies** and **warnings**, mostly uttered by Margaret, Henry VI's widow. She represents the past: she recalls the curses and the crimes of the past, looks through the present difficulties and foretells the future. Therefore her function is to show that the faculty of prophecy grows out of an awareness of the past and a clear perception of the present.

**COMPETENCE:** READING AND UNDERSTANDING INFORMATION**1 ANSWER** the following questions.

- 1 What kind of play is *Richard III*?
- 2 What are the main events?
- 3 What are the main sources of this play?
- 4 Who is the main character?
- 5 What kind of man is he?
- 6 What are all the other characters of the play linked to?
- 7 What dynasty does the play celebrate?
- 8 What are the most important themes?

**Richard's discontent¹**

The Wars of the Roses are over, the Lancastrians have been defeated and Edward IV is on the throne. Richard, Duke of Gloucester, prefers war and considers the king and the court lustful. In the following opening scene the protagonist enters first and is essentially alone.

William Shakespeare
Richard III
(1593)

Act I, Scene 1

[Enter RICHARD, Duke of Gloucester, solus.]

RICHARD Now is the winter of our discontent

Made glorious summer by this sun of York;

And all the clouds that lour'd² upon our House³

In the deep bosom of the ocean buried⁴.

5 Now are our brows bound⁵ with victorious wreaths⁶

Our bruised arms⁷ hung up⁸ for monuments,

Our stern alarums⁹ chang'd to merry meetings,

Our dreadful marches to delightful measures¹⁰.

Grim-visag'd War¹¹ hath smooth'd his wrinkled front¹²:

10 And now, instead of mounting barbed steeds¹³

To fright the souls of fearful adversaries¹⁴,

He capers nimbly¹⁵ in a lady's chamber,

To the lascivious pleasing of the lute¹⁶.

But I, that am not shap'd for sportive tricks¹⁷,

15 Nor made to court an amorous looking-glass;

I, that am rudely stamp'd¹⁸, and want¹⁹ love's majesty

To strut²⁰ before a wanton ambling nymph²¹:

I, that am curtail'd of this fair proportion²²,

Cheated of feature by dissembling Nature²³,

20 Deform'd, unfinish'd, sent before my time

Into this breathing world scarce half made up²⁴ –

And that so lamely²⁵ and unfashionable

That dogs bark at me, as I halt²⁶ by them –

Why, I, in this weak piping time of peace²⁷,

25 Have no delight to pass away the time,

Unless to spy my shadow in the sun,

And descant on²⁸ mine own deformity.

And therefore, since I cannot prove a lover

To entertain these fair well-spoken days,

30 I am determined to prove a villain²⁹,

And hate the idle pleasures³⁰ of these days.

Plots³¹ have I laid, inductions dangerous³²,

By drunken prophecies³³, libels³⁴, and dreams,

To set my brother Clarence and the King

- 1 **discontent.** Affanno.
- 2 **lour'd.** Incombevano.
- 3 **upon our House.** Sulla nostra casa (la casa di York).
- 4 **In the ... buried.** Sepolte nel profondo seno dell'oceano.
- 5 **brows bound.** Fronti cinte.
- 6 **wreaths.** Corone.
- 7 **bruised arms.** Armi segnate (da colpi nemici).
- 8 **hung up.** Sono appese.
- 9 **stern alarums.** Austeri allarmi.
- 10 **delightful measures.** Piacevoli danze, movimenti.
- 11 **Grim-visag'd War.** La guerra dal viso arcigno.
- 12 **hath ... front.** Ha spianato la sua fronte rugosa.
- 13 **instead ... steeds.** Invece di montare in sella a destrieri bardati (per la guerra).
- 14 **fearful adversaries.** Terribili avversari.
- 15 **capers nimbly.** Saltella leggero.
- 16 **To the ... lute.** Secondando le note lascive di un liuto.
- 17 **sportive tricks.** Dilettoni svaghi.
- 18 **rudely stamp'd.** Fatto in modo grossolano.
- 19 **want.** Privo di.
- 20 **To strut.** Per pavoneggiarmi.
- 21 **wanton ambling nymph.** Fanciulla capricciosa che incede lentamente.
- 22 **am ... proportion.** Sono privato di questa armonica simmetria.
- 23 **Cheated ... Nature.** Defraudato del bell'aspetto dalla natura ipocrita.
- 24 **half made up.** Messo insieme per metà.
- 25 **lamely.** Zoppicante.
- 26 **halt.** Mi fermo.
- 27 **weak ... of peace.** Periodo debole, ma sereno del tempo di pace.
- 28 **descant on.** Ricerare.
- 29 **villain.** Canaglia, cattivo.
- 30 **idle pleasures.** Piaceri oziosi.
- 31 **Plots.** Complotti.
- 32 **inductions dangerous.** Pericolose premeditazioni.
- 33 **drunken prophecies.** Profezie da ubriaco.
- 34 **libels.** Calunnie.



35 In deadly hate, the one against the other:
And if King Edward be as true and just
As I am subtle³⁵, false, and treacherous³⁶,
This day should Clarence **closely** be mew'd up³⁷
About a prophecy, which says that 'G'³⁸
40 Of Edward's heirs the murderer shall be –
Dive³⁹, thoughts, down to my soul: here Clarence comes.

35 **subtle**. Astuto.

36 **treacherous**. Traditore.

37 **mew'd up**. Confinato, imprigionato.

38 G. Si riferisce a uno dei nomi di Clarence, George, ma è anche l'iniziale di Gloucester, il nome di Richard prima di diventare re.

39 Dive. Sprofondare.

LITERARY COMPETENCE

VOCABULARY

1 READ the text and match the highlighted words with their Italian translation.

- | | |
|----------------------|--------------------|
| 1 attentamente | 4 abbaiano |
| 2 terribili | 5 spaventare |
| 3 corteggiare | 6 specchio |

COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING A TEXT

2 READ lines 1-13 again and answer the following questions.

- What historical event does Richard refer to in lines 1-4?
- What characterises the present?
- How does the past contrast with the present?
- What has 'Grim-visag'd War' succeeded in doing?
- What has war ended up with?
- What should the warriors do instead of giving the impression of lascivious behaviour?

3 READ lines 14-27 again and complete the statements below.

- Richard is not made for (line 14) and (line 15).
- He is excluded by (line 16).
- He lacks of proper (line 18).
- He pictures himself as an outsider since he is (line 20), (line 21), and (line 22).
- He is by (line 23) as he passes.
- He does not like and prefers war (line 24).
- He spies his deformed in the (line 26).

4 READ the rest of the text again. Note down the following information:

- | | |
|--|---|
| 1 why Richard is unhappy with the present situation; | 5 what he has decided to do against Clarence; |
| 2 what he has laid; | 6 what a prophecy has revealed to Richard; |
| 3 who his plans are directed against; | 7 who enters the scene at the end. |
| 4 which adjectives Richard uses to describe himself; | |

COMPETENCE: ANALYSING AND INTERPRETING A TEXT

5 SAY which of the following purposes Richard's soliloquy serves. Tick as appropriate.

- ☐ It introduces Richard's personality.
- ☐ It serves as an exposition and as an opening to the whole play.
- ☐ It reviews the situation and discloses the hero's future aim.
- ☐ It voices the protagonist's doubts.

**6 FOCUS** on lines 1-13, which hint at Richard's personality.

- 1 What do they reveal about him?
- 2 Which technique is employed?

7 CONCENTRATE on the metaphors in lines 1-4. They refer to two areas of meaning: the past and the present of Richard's country.

- 1 Indicate the metaphors describing the past and rephrase each of them in your own words.
- 2 Circle the words and phrases referring to Richard's present situation.
- 3 The word 'sun' is thick with meaning here. Explain how it works completing the following statements.
 - A First of all the sun, as celestial object, literally brings , in the way that the Duke of York has metaphorically brought by defeating
 - B Next, 'sun' is a homonym for 'son', that is, a pun. IV was, in fact, a of the previous Duke of York.
 - C Then, Edward assumed the device of a as his emblem.
 - D Finally the sun, as principal star, corresponds in the social hierarchy to the , as the most important member of the body

8 POINT out the devices employed to convey Richard's state of mind.

- 1 Underline the series of visual images Richard uses to describe himself in lines 17, 23 and 26.
- 2 Circle the antithesis between Richard and the present political situation of his country in lines 18-22, 29 and 31.
- 3 Explain how Richard becomes the personification of the traditional Vice exploited by the Moralities in lines 30-37.
- 4 What impression(s) do you get of Richard's mood? Tick as appropriate.

<input type="checkbox"/> He is a complex and moody man.	<input type="checkbox"/> He is elusive.
<input type="checkbox"/> He is scornfully aware of his deformity.	<input type="checkbox"/> He feels contempt and repudiation for the present court.

9 IDENTIFY the three personal pronouns used throughout the soliloquy and state their function. What separates the last pronoun from the previous two in lines 14-15?**10 POINT** out the themes the passage deals with.

➤ COMPETENCE: ESTABLISHING LINKS WITH THE LITERARY CONTEXT OF THE AGE

11 COMPARE this soliloquy with Faustus's monologue (→ T10) in Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*.