

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S
RICHARD III

DIRECTED BY GUILLERMO CIENFUEGOS

FEBRUARY 8-MARCH 8, 2026



Dear School Partner,

Welcome to A Noise Within Theatre! We are thrilled to welcome you to the 2025-26 season—a season that we like to call **Songs from the Volcano**—featuring timeless stories bursting with upheaval, transformation, and the embers that push us to grow. In *Richard III*, a self-proclaimed villain murders and manipulates his way to the throne, raising the essential question: *what are the dangers of unchecked power?*

In this study guide, you will find articles, classroom activities, behind-the-scenes interviews, and other exciting materials, all crafted to align with the Common Core and the California VAPA Standards. This study guide can be enjoyed by teachers and students alike, our hope being that teachers and students enjoy it together!

We offer this study guide as a free resource for contextualizing the show and drawing parallels with our modern world, and you can find guides from our past seasons available for download on our website.

We hope this study guide will prepare you to enjoy the show to its fullest potential and to create a lasting memory of a fantastic day at the theatre. We are happy to have you!

Warmly,

A Noise Within Education



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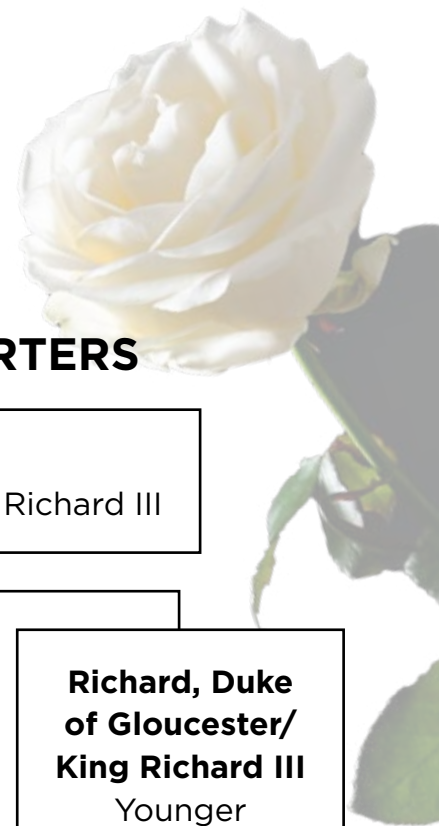
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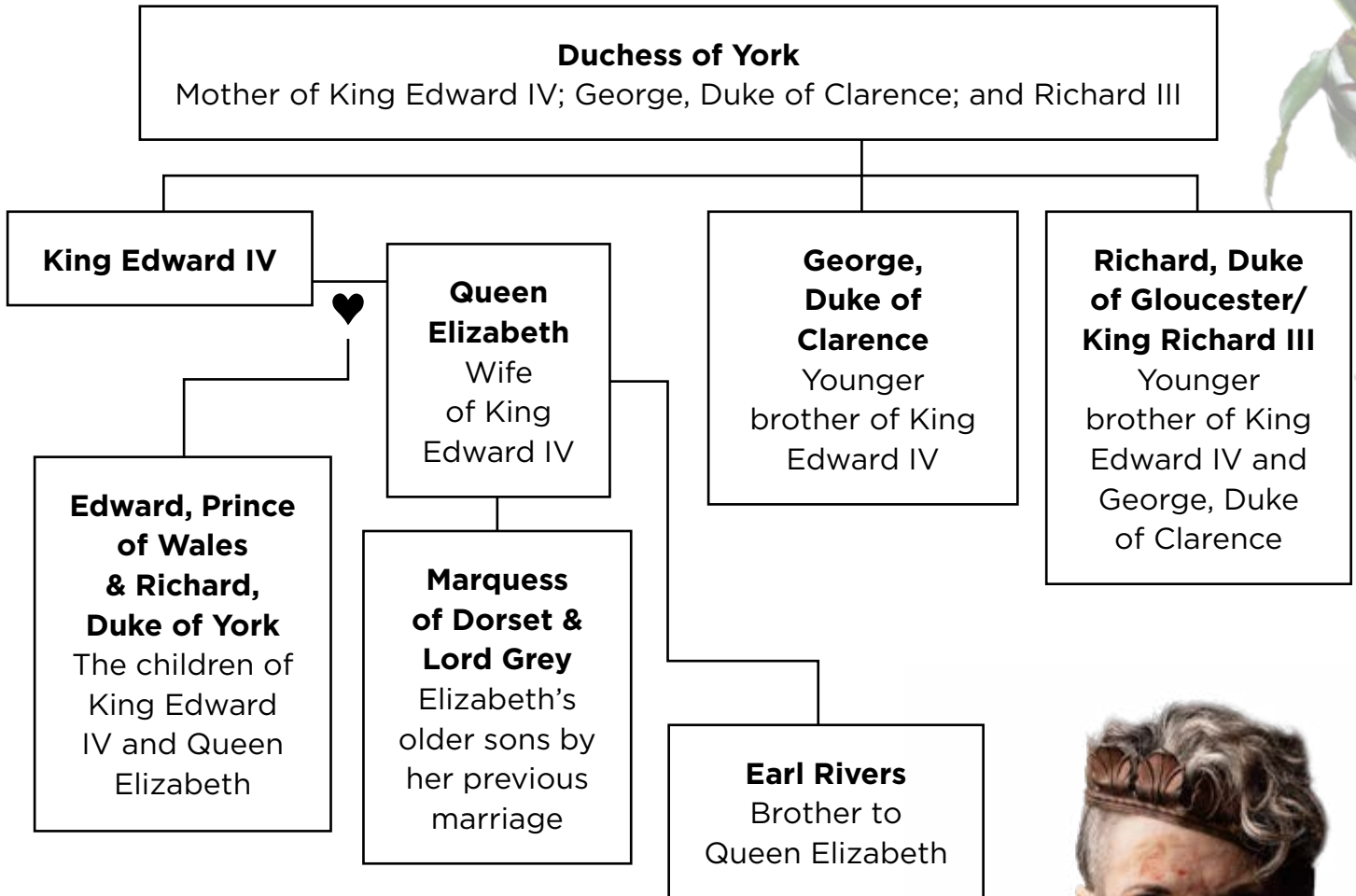
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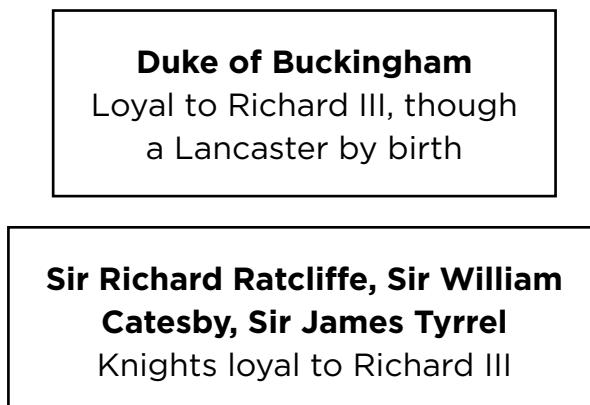
Richard III



THE YORK FAMILY AND THEIR SUPPORTERS



SUPPORTERS OF RICHARD III



Ann Nobel by Daniel Reichert.

Richard III continued

THE LANCASTER FAMILY AND THEIR SUPPORTERS

King Henry VI

murdered by Richard III at the
end of *Henry VI, Part 3*
note: not in this play



Queen Margaret

Widow of King Henry VI

Lady Anne

Daughter-in-Law of King Henry VI; Widow of
Edward, Prince of Wales; later wife to Richard III

Lord Stanley

Stepfather to Henry Richmond

Henry Tudor, Earl of Richmond

Richard's enemy, later King Henry VII

Sir Robert Brackenbury

Keeper of the Tower of London



Interesting Fact

In Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, the Queen of Heart's red and white roses were a satirical reference to the Wars of the Roses, the historical backdrop of *Richard III* during which two royal families, the Yorks and the Lancasters, fought over the British throne.

A scene from Alice in Wonderland. Creative Commons.

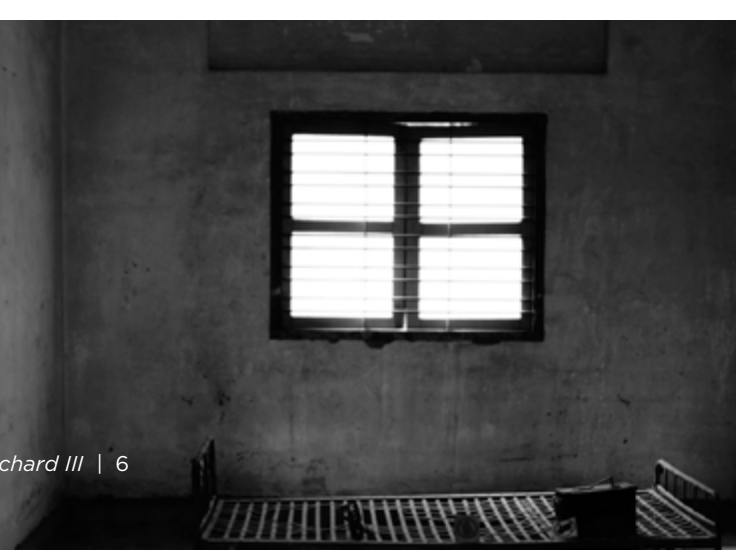
Play Synopsis

ACT 1

Richard, Duke of Gloucester, and his older brothers, George, Duke of Clarence and King Edward IV, are members of the York family, who have recently gained control of the English throne after defeating **the rival Lancaster family.** Richard distinguished himself in battle, but because of his physical defects, he believes that he is unfit for anything but war. He schemes to take over the throne and plots to convince King Edward IV that their brother, George, is a traitor. **Edward imprisons George** in the Tower of London. **Richard woos Lady Anne,** who succumbs to his persuasive charms despite the fact that he murdered her father-in-law, **King Henry VI,** and her husband, **Edward, Prince of Wales.** **Queen Elizabeth, wife to King Edward IV,** fears for herself and her children if the sickly King Edward dies. She does not trust Richard, and she and her relatives begin quarrelling with him. Suddenly the group is surprised by the appearance of **the former Queen, Margaret of Anjou,** widow of King Henry VI, who curses them all. **Richard hires two murderers** to kill the imprisoned George. They go to the Tower, where George pleads for his life, but the killers brutally murder him.

ACT 2

King Edward IV urges his wrangling supporters to make peace with each other. Richard arrives and informs the King that **George has been executed,** the King's pardon having arrived "too late." The ailing King, overcome by this news, is carried off. The elderly **Duchess of York, mother of King Edward IV, George, and Richard,** comforts George's now fatherless children. Queen Elizabeth is grief-stricken when **King Edward IV dies.** Richard tells Elizabeth that he will arrange for **her young son, now King Edward V,** to be brought to London. **Richard schemes with Buckingham** to seize the throne. Queen Elizabeth and the Duchess of York learn that **Richard has arrested Elizabeth's brother and older son.** Elizabeth and her youngest son, the Duke of York, along with the Duchess, **immediately flee to sanctuary.**



Play Synopsis *continued*

ACT 3

Young King Edward V enters London, where he is met by Richard and Buckingham. They order the Cardinal and **Lord Hastings** to persuade Queen Elizabeth to release her youngest son from sanctuary to join his brother. They soon return with the young Duke of York, and Richard tells the boys that they will be safest in the Tower. **Sir William Catesby** summons Lord Hastings to attend a council meeting with Richard and his followers. **Hastings tells Catesby that he will never support Richard as king.** They are joined by **Lord Stanley**, who chooses, reluctantly, to support Richard. **Richard orders the execution of Queen Elizabeth's brother and older son.** The council convenes, and Richard tells Buckingham that he has learned of Hastings's refusal to support him. **Richard demands to know what punishment is fitting for someone who has practiced witchcraft upon him;** he then shows the council his deformed arm and **claims that Queen Elizabeth has caused his disfigurement** through spells. Hastings expresses doubts, and Richard orders him to be executed. **Hastings is led to his death**, while the other councilmen follow Richard. Buckingham and Richard plot to bring **the Lord Mayor of London** and other important citizens to ask Richard to be king. When Buckingham arrives with the crowd, **Richard pretends to be at prayer and shows great unwillingness to be crowned king.** Stirred up by Buckingham, the Lord Mayor and the others beg Richard to agree, and eventually Richard "relents."

ACT 4

Queen Elizabeth, the Duchess, and Lady Anne (now unhappily married to Richard) attempt to visit the Queen's sons in the Tower, where they remain imprisoned, but the Keeper, Brackenbury, has been ordered not to let them in. Lord Stanley brings them news that **Richard is to be crowned King**, and Lady Anne (now Queen of England) must join him for the coronation. King Richard tells Buckingham that he cannot rest until he knows that his young nephews, the princes in the Tower, are dead. While Buckingham hesitates, Richard receives the news that **some of the English lords have fled to France to join the forces of Henry, Earl of Richmond** (House Lancaster). Richard engages **Sir James Tyrrel** to murder his nephews, and he plots to marry his niece Elizabeth of York to strengthen his position. **Tyrrel reports to Richard that the princes are dead.** Richard learns that more of his supporters, including Buckingham, have deserted him for Henry Richmond. **Queen Elizabeth and the Duchess mourn the deaths of the princes; they are joined again by Queen Margaret**, and together the women grieve their losses. King Richard speaks with Queen Elizabeth, and **he attempts to persuade her to allow him to marry her daughter, Elizabeth of York** (Lady Anne having died). Richard receives news that more of his

Play Synopsis *continued*

supporters have joined with Richmond, who has now raised an army and **is preparing to invade England and seize the crown**. Lord Stanley (Richmond's stepfather) secretly plots against King Richard.

ACT 5

Buckingham is captured by Richard's soldiers and executed. In their separate camps near **Bosworth Field**, Richmond and King Richard prepare for battle the next day. That night, **the ghosts of everyone whom Richard has killed** appear before him; they curse Richard and offer blessings to the sleeping Henry Richmond. Next morning, Richard and Richmond speak to their troops before the battle. King Richard and Henry Richmond fight. **Richard is slain, and his army is defeated**. Henry is crowned **King Henry VII**, becoming the first Tudor king. He marries Elizabeth of York, thereby **uniting the warring houses of Lancaster and York and ending the Wars of the Roses**.

Objective

After investigating the character map and synopsis, check what you remember!

Directions: Test your *Richard III* knowledge - grab a writing utensil and respond to the following questions.

1. During Act 1, who gets imprisoned in the Tower of London? Why does this happen?

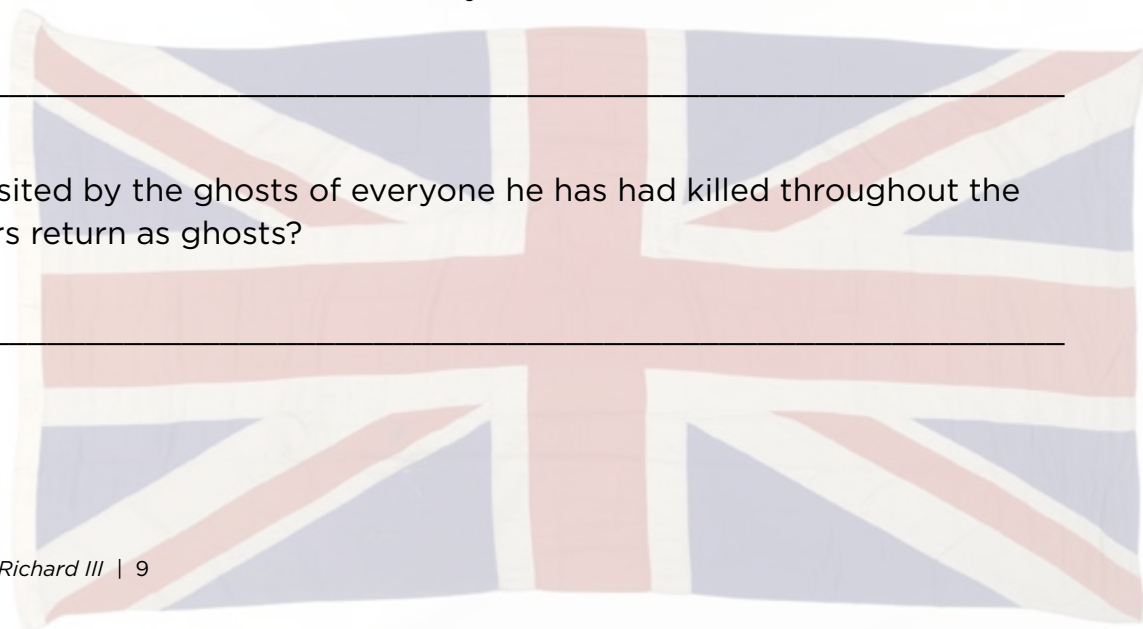
2. Who is the first character to die in *Richard III*? How do they die?

3. Why do Queen Elizabeth, her youngest son, and the Duchess of York flee at the end of Act 2?

4. In Act 3, who allies with Richard III and who speaks out against him?

5. Richard acquires a wife in Act 1, and then he attempts to acquire a new wife in Act 4. Who are these two women, and how do their family trees connect them to Richard?

6. In Act 5, Richard is visited by the ghosts of everyone he has had killed throughout the play. Which characters return as ghosts?



William Shakespeare

William Shakespeare (1564-1616) was an English playwright, poet, and actor who lived and wrote during the Elizabethan (Queen Elizabeth I) and Jacobean (King James I) eras. Born in Stratford-upon-Avon, roughly 100 miles northwest of London, on April 23, 1564, William was the third child of John Shakespeare and Mary Arden, and the only son who survived to adulthood. William received an excellent education at the local grammar school, where he would have studied Latin and the works of classical authors, as well as grammar, rhetoric, and history. In 1582 William married Anne (or Agnes) Hathaway, who was eight years older than he, and with whom he had three children: a daughter, Susannah (1583), and twins, Judith and Hamnet (1585). Hamnet died at the age of eleven, most likely of the plague, which recurred frequently in England throughout Shakespeare's lifetime (often leading to the mandatory closing of London's theaters).



William Shakespeare (painted ca. 1600-1610).
Wikimedia Commons.

The first records of William Shakespeare's presence in London date from 1592. His earliest plays, including the *Henry VI* history plays and such early comedies as *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* and *Love's Labour's Lost*, were performed by the Lord Chamberlain's Men, an acting company in which Shakespeare was an actor and shareholder as well as a playwright. By the mid-1590's, Shakespeare had begun writing his most famous comedies, including *As You Like It*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, and *The Merchant of Venice*, as well as the tragedy *Romeo and Juliet*, which were all major commercial successes. Shakespeare wrote his most powerful tragedies (*Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Macbeth*, and *King Lear*) between 1599 and 1608. In the final years of his playwrighting career, Shakespeare turned to writing the Late Romances (*Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale*, *Pericles*, and *The Tempest*). During these years, Shakespeare also wrote a sonnet sequence; longer narrative poems (the best known is "Venus and Adonis"); and a longer allegorical poem ("The Phoenix and the Turtle"). Throughout his professional career, Shakespeare divided his time between London and Stratford, but he returned to Stratford permanently in 1612 or 1613, a few years before he died, on his 52nd birthday, in 1616.

William Shakespeare *continued*

Most of Shakespeare's plays were performed in the Globe Theatre, an outdoor theater on the South Bank of the Thames river that accommodated approximately 3,000 audience members (including "Groundlings," who stood in the large open yard in front of the stage, and wealthier people who paid to sit in the three gallery levels). Plays were performed most afternoons during the summer months. In the 1990's, a new theatre was built very close to the site of the original Globe theatre that carefully recreated the earlier structure. Renamed Shakespeare's Globe, the theatre today is a thriving venue that hosts plays, conferences, exhibits, and family events year-round for over 1.25 million visitors from around the world each year.

At the time of Shakespeare's death, fewer than half of his plays had been published (and some of those that had been were pirated and inaccurate). Although *Richard III* had been published in earlier editions, Shakespeare's later tragedy *Macbeth* had not. Without the First Folio, we might never have known that Shakespeare's interest in portraying the perils of ambition and the lust for power persisted throughout his creative life. Perhaps Shakespeare hoped with these and other plays to convince all citizens to remain perpetually vigilant in guarding against and standing up to tyrannical leaders—who never really go away.



Elizabethan Timeline



1558

Queen Elizabeth I ascends the English throne.

1564

Shakespeare is born in Stratford-Upon-Avon, England.

1582

Shakespeare marries Anne Hathaway.

1587

Shakespeare arrives in London to pursue theatre.

1599

The Lord Chamberlain's Men build the Globe Theatre.

1594-96

Shakespeare writes *Romeo and Juliet*.

1594

Shakespeare joins the Lord Chamberlain's Men as actor, writer, and part owner.

1592-93

Shakespeare writes *Richard III*.

1603

Queen Elizabeth I dies. King James I ascends the throne.

1613

During a performance of *Henry VIII*, a major fire breaks out and burns down the Globe Theatre.

1614

The Globe Theatre is rebuilt.

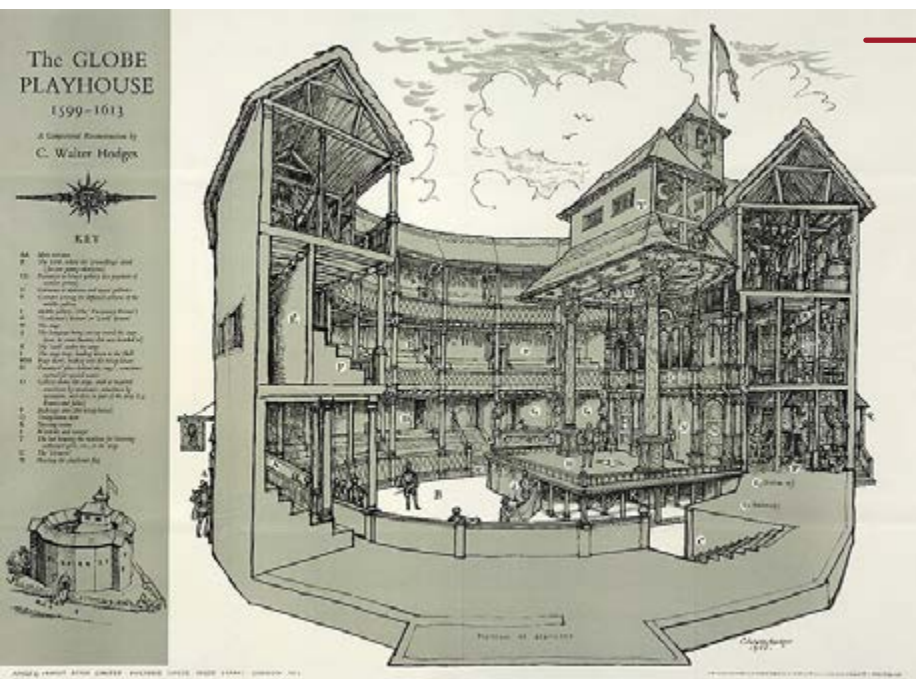
1616

William Shakespeare dies at the age of 52.



1997

The Globe Theatre is reconstructed one street away from its original location.



Reconstruction of the Globe Theatre by C. Walter Hodges. Folger Shakespeare Library

Shakespeare's Canon

ACTIVITY

Objective

Investigate the plays in Shakespeare's canon.

Step 1: What is a canon?

A **canon** is a collection of books, poems, plays, or other pieces of writing—usually organized by a tradition, culture, or time period. Sometimes—even writers themselves are known for their own literary canon!

William Shakespeare is one of the most influential and prolific writers in Western literature—and so we can refer to his body of works as Shakespeare's canon!

Shakespeare wrote 38 plays, 154 sonnets, and several narrative poems. There are some mysteries around a few of them and other pieces he may have written or co-written.

Step 2: The Plays

Take a look at Shakespeare's plays in the order in which we think they might have been written.

Circle the plays
that you've seen
or heard of!

The Two Gentlemen of Verona (1587-1591)

The Merchant of Venice (1596-97)

All's Well That Ends Well (1603-1606)

The Taming of the Shrew (1592)

Henry IV Part 1 (1596-97)

Timon of Athens (estimated 1604-1606)

Henry VI Part II (1591-92)

The Merry Wives of Windsor (1597-1601)

King Lear (1605-06)

Henry VI Part I (1591-92)

Henry IV Part II (1597-98)

Macbeth (1606)

Henry VI Part III (1591-92)

Much Ado About Nothing (1598)

Antony and Cleopatra (1606)

Titus Andronicus (1591-92)

Henry V (1599)

Coriolanus (1608)

Richard III (1592 or 1594)

Julius Caesar (1599)

Pericles (1608)

The Comedy of Errors (1594)

As You Like It (1599)

Cymbeline (1610)

Love's Labour's Lost (1595-96)

Hamlet (1600)

The Winter's Tale (1611)

A Midsummer Night's Dream (1595)

Twelfth Night (1601)

The Tempest (1611)

Romeo and Juliet (1595)

Troilus and Cressida (1601-02)

Henry VIII (1613)

Richard II (1595)

Othello (1604)

The Two Noble Kinsmen (1613-1614)

King John (1596)

Measure for Measure (1604)

Shakespeare’s Canon *continued*

Step 3: Research the Canon

Can you research Shakespeare’s plays and organize them into the following genres?

The Comedies	The Tragedies	The Histories

Shakespeare's Canon *continued*

Can you use your internet research skills to find the answers to these questions?

How does a Shakespearean comedy typically end? _____

How does a Shakespearean tragedy typically end? _____

Which three plays are sometimes referred to as the 'Problem Plays' and why?

Which of Shakespeare's plays is the longest? _____

Rumor has it that Queen Elizabeth I requested Shakespeare to write which play? Why?

Which play did Shakespeare write for King James I? What clues in the story suggest that?

The First Folio was published in 1623 seven years after Shakespeare's death; which plays were not printed in that folio?

Themes & Motifs in *Richard III*



The Wars of the Roses

From 1455-1485, two branches of England's royal Plantagenet family—the Yorks (white rose) and the Lancasters (red rose)—fought for control of the throne in a series of bloody battles. The wars ended in 1485 when Henry Tudor (House Lancaster) defeated Richard III (House York) and married Elizabeth of York, uniting the two families and founding the Tudor dynasty.

Leadership

Richard III, like all of Shakespeare's history plays, explores the qualities that make a good leader. True kingship requires a delicate balance between strength and compassion, as well as the ability to inspire others and to maintain loyalty. In Shakespeare, true kingship always reveals itself in virtuous conduct and not merely in the acts of exerting power and influence.

Power & Tyranny

Shakespeare's history plays also invite us to contemplate the nature of power and how monarchs use it. Kings can be too weak (such as Henry VI), too ambitious (Richard III), or too nationalistic (Henry V and Edward III). Of particular interest to Shakespeare was the question of where the tipping point occurs when strong leadership becomes tyranny.

Desire for Revenge

Many characters in *Richard III*, both male and female, are strongly motivated by a desire for vengeance. In fact, Margaret of Anjou, the former Queen of England, is one of the most vengeful characters, and certainly the most vengeful woman, in all of Shakespeare. The desire for revenge is a common theme in many of Shakespeare's plays, and it always results in the ultimate destruction of the character seeking revenge, whether virtuous (like Hamlet) or flawed (like Titus Andronicus).

Themes & Motifs in *Richard III* continued

Manipulation

Richard III's skill at manipulating those around him is extraordinary. Whether through persuasive charm, as with Lady Anne; inviting others to be complicit in his plots, as with Buckingham; or through sheer intimidation, as with the lords whom he bullies into supporting him, Richard's success at coercing others into following him is unsurpassed by any other character in the history plays. Furthermore, Richard's skill at manipulation contributes significantly to why this play feels so timeless, because the methods that unscrupulous leaders employ to rally support and maintain loyalty have changed very little over the centuries. In addition, Richard's glee at his own ability to control others is contagious, and as audience members, we find ourselves enjoying these moments along with Richard—until we suddenly realize the depths of his villainy, and it becomes impossible to enjoy the joke anymore.

Female Solidarity

Throughout *Richard III*, an understandably strong bond exists between the Duchess of York and her daughter-in-law, Queen Elizabeth, that centers around their mutual grief. More surprising is the strong affection and compassion that the Duchess and Queen Elizabeth both feel for Lady Anne. Far from blaming her for marrying Richard III, they pity her deeply, and they clearly view her plight as not being her fault. Most surprising of all is the understanding that the Duchess and Queen Elizabeth appear to reach with the vengeful Margaret of Anjou (in Act 4, scene 4). Given that the historical Margaret had died three years before this conversation takes place (as Shakespeare must have been aware), it is striking that the playwright chose to have Margaret present for this moving scene of female solidarity in the face of grief and loss. Shakespeare seems to suggest that in a world where women had little power, and where even that small amount of influence is inevitably taken away from them, their shared experience of mourning and powerlessness eventually overrides their differences.

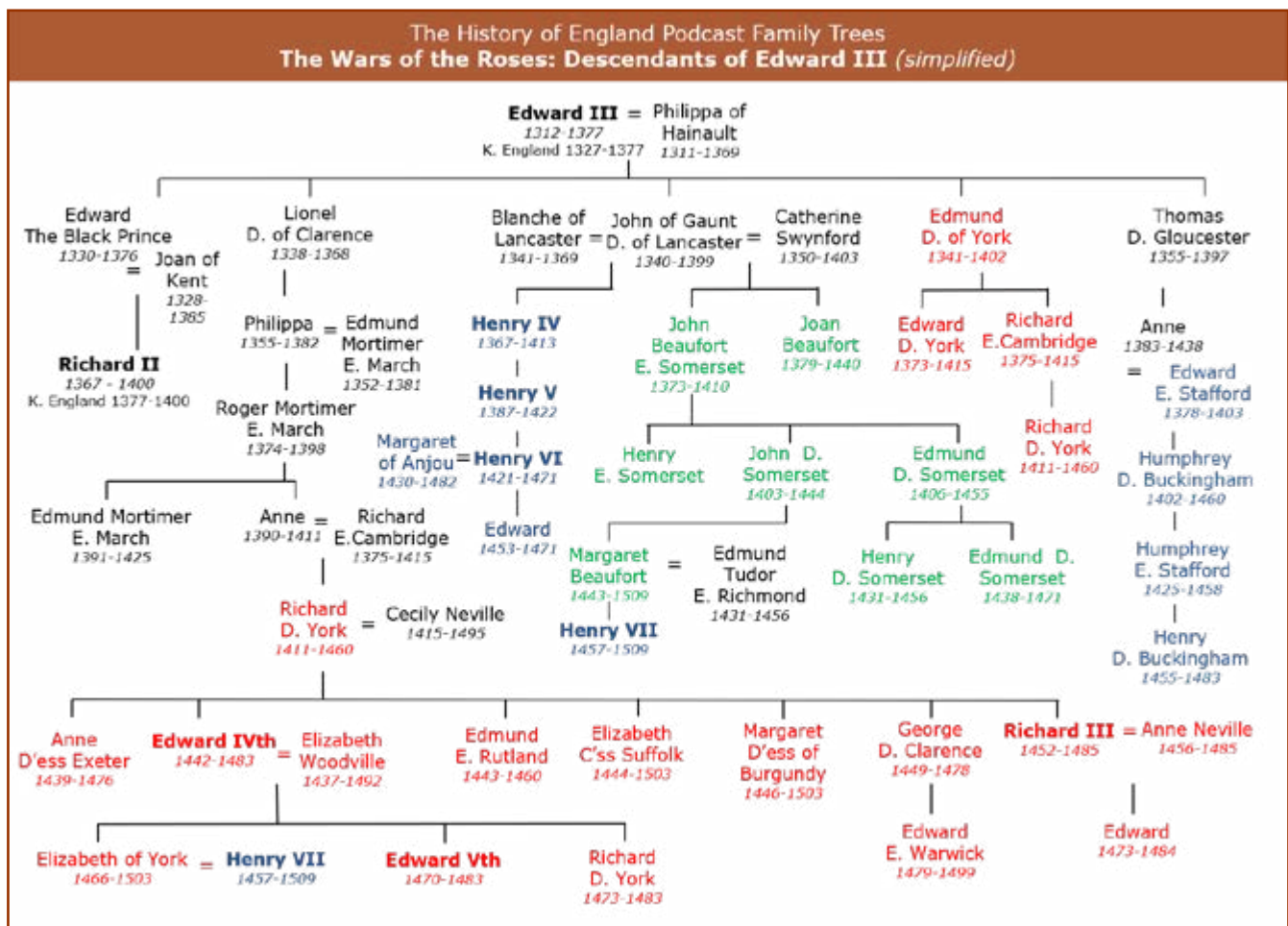


Cecily Neville, Duchess of York.
Creative Commons.

Genealogical Tree of *Richard III*

William Shakespeare began his career writing **history plays**, and although today we may sometimes find his history plays challenging to read and to watch, Shakespeare's Elizabethan audiences clearly found them both enthralling and entertaining.

Shakespeare wrote eleven history plays; the majority of them describe events in British history that spanned a little over one hundred years (roughly 1380 to 1485). In the same way we enjoy 'biopics' and 'docudramas' today - such as *Oppenheimer*, *Elvis*, and even live shows such as *Hamilton* - Shakespeare based his history plays off of real people and real historical events, though exaggerating certain elements for dramatic effect.



The History of England Podcast. www.thehistoryofengland.co.uk



Can you spy characters from Shakespeare's *Richard III* in the above family tree that outlines the real-life family members involved in the Wars of the Roses?

Objective

Dive deeper into the characters of *Richard III* using creative group activities.

***Richard III* Character Exploration**

Exercise 1: *Richard III* Character Maps

Divide students into small groups. Assign each group a major character from the following list: RICHARD III, KING EDWARD IV, QUEEN ELIZABETH, DUCHESS OF YORK, EARL OF RICHMOND. Using writing utensils and a large sticky note or poster board, students should design a Character Map that contains the following elements:

- A picture (hand-drawn or printed) of your character
- Delineation of York-affiliation or Lancaster-affiliation
- Years of life time
- Three to four evocative quotes spoken by your character in *Richard III*
- Three to four historical facts about your character
- Three to four adjectives to describe your character

Exercise 2: The Great Political Debate

Divide students into small groups. Assign each group as York (pro-Richard III) or Lancaster (anti-Richard III). King Edward IV has just died, the throne is currently vacant, and Richard III is making moves to take it.

Using writing utensils and a large sticky note or poster board, students should design a political poster promoting their opinion on who should be crowned king next. Posters should contain:

- A political slogan or catchphrase
- Images and graphics with metaphorical meaning
- Quotes from the play to support your stance
- Persuasive language on why Richard III should or should not be crowned

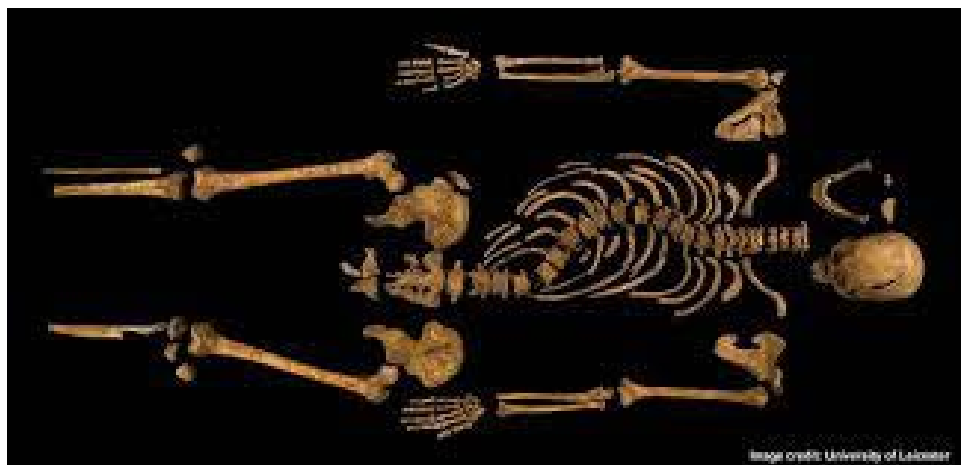
***Richard III* and the Judgment of History**

When Richard III's skeleton was discovered in 2012—over five hundred years after he was killed in battle—underneath a parking lot in Leicester, England (see photo on the right), the spine showed evidence of moderate scoliosis (curvature of the spine), but this relatively minor abnormality was very different from the pronounced “hunchback” and “withered” arm that historians described and that characterize Shakespeare's Richard III. Throughout Shakespeare's *Henry VI, Pt. 3* and *Richard III* (the two final plays in the First Tetralogy), several characters, including Richard's own mother and even Richard himself, describe him as monstrously deformed, using insulting language that seems highly exaggerated, even impossible (such as having been born with a full set of teeth). Given that Richard III had been dead for over one hundred years when Shakespeare wrote his play, what were Shakespeare's sources for these improbable descriptions of Richard's appearance, and why did Shakespeare repeat them in his plays?

Shakespeare relied primarily on two sources for his history plays: Edward Hall's *The Union of the Two Noble and Illustrious Families of Lancaster and York* (1548), and Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland* (1587). For *Richard III*, Shakespeare also turned to Thomas More's *The History of Richard III* (ca. 1515). These three historians shared a similar agenda: to flatter the Tudor monarchs, who ruled



Archaeologists working in a trench in the playground of the former Alderman Newton's School, on the site of the Greyfriars Church, in September 2012. Creative Commons.



Richard III's complete skeleton, showing the curve of the spine. University of Leicester.

***Richard III* and the Judgment of History**

continued

England from the time that Henry VII defeated Richard III and ascended to the throne in 1485, to the death of Queen Elizabeth I in 1603. When Henry VII proclaimed himself king (his last name, Tudor, was that of his Welsh father), he knew that his claim to the English throne was not as strong as Richard III's. While Henry and Richard both descended from the Plantagenet kings, whose rule began in 1154, Henry was descended indirectly through an offshoot of the Lancaster branch, whereas Richard was the direct descendant of the Plantagenets through the York line.

Shakespeare's Elizabethan audience believed in the Divine Right of Kings, which held that the monarch was ordained by God to rule the land. Even if a king proved to be weak or tyrannical, his subjects were not justified in rebelling against him, because to do so was to reject the divine order. A wise and benevolent king ruled when the people had been loyal, virtuous subjects; conversely, a wicked ruler was visited upon the people as punishment for some misdeed, and they must endure his rule with patience. In 1399, King Richard II was deposed for corruption and killed soon after on the orders of his cousin, Henry IV, who usurped the throne. The Elizabethans believed that Richard II's murder was the "original sin" that led to a perpetual cycle of bloody civil wars that continued until Henry VII ended the bloodshed when he became king and married Elizabeth of York, thereby uniting the warring houses. The villainous Richard III, whose supposed outward deformities the Elizabethans would have understood as representing his inner evil, is presented by the Tudor historians as the culmination of the evil that was set in motion by the murder of the earlier King Richard.

When Shakespeare wrote his history plays, Queen Elizabeth I, the last of the Tudor monarchs, was on the throne. She began her reign six years before Shakespeare was born,

Richard III and the Earl of Richmond during the Battle of Bosworth. Creative Commons.



***Richard III* and the Judgment of History**

continued

so the playwright had never known another ruler. Shakespeare was an extraordinarily gifted playwright, but he was also an extremely savvy businessman, and it's no accident that the First Tetralogy of history plays are among his earliest works. Shakespeare not only knew that history plays were always popular with a London audience; he also knew that with an aging, childless monarch on the throne, this was no time to be questioning the Tudors' right to rule. Although Elizabeth had named James VI of Scotland to succeed her as James I of England, there were no guarantees of a peaceful transfer of power, and the English people feared being plunged into yet another cycle of endless civil wars when the Queen died—which, incidentally, would not have been good for the theaters either, or for the patronage system that supported them. Emphasizing the legitimacy of the Tudor line would strengthen the legitimacy of James I as Elizabeth's designated heir, so Shakespeare had every incentive to depict Richard III as the monster that historians had created, and from whom the suffering English were delivered at last by Henry VII, the first Tudor king and the grandfather of Elizabeth I.

We speak today of the influence of “fake news” and “biased reporting,” and these are indeed serious concerns. As the historical accounts of Richard III demonstrate, however, these are not new problems created by technology (though technology certainly makes them worse). Historians have always had an agenda when presenting historical “facts,” and the Tudor historians—none of whom had ever seen Richard III in person—were no exceptions. Shakespeare's *Richard III* serves as a cautionary tale about the dangers of blindly following powerful tyrants; but when we step back and question the accuracy of the play's portrayal of Richard himself, we see that the play also serves as a reminder not to believe everything we read, or think we know, about another person, whether they're a monarch or just one of our fellow citizens.

Interesting Fact

Richard III was the last English monarch to die in battle. He was only 33 at the time of his death. Richard's burial site wasn't discovered until over 500 years later, in 2013. His grave was found under a parking lot in Leicester, England. His bones were interred in Leicester Cathedral in 2015.

A stained glass window in St. James's Church commemorating the Battle of Bosworth fought nearby, featuring Richard III (left) and Henry VII (right). Creative Commons.



Are Shakespeare's History Plays Still Relevant?

Shakespeare's eleven history plays—the First and Second Tetralogies, plus *King John*, *Edward III*, and *Henry VIII*—were written between 1589 and 1613 and were all commercial successes. The many editions and reprintings of the Tetralogy plays, as well as diary entries and contemporary accounts by sixteenth-century playgoers, attest to their remarkable popularity. For a twenty-first century audience, however, the history plays can be challenging for a number of reasons: they describe events that occurred many hundreds of years ago; they feature a huge cast of characters; the names of the kings and queens are repeated with dizzying frequency (wait, Richard II *and* Richard III? Another Edward? Who are all these Henrys?); and it's hard to keep track of the multiple battles, every one of which Shakespeare suggests was of enormous significance. Even Shakespeare himself seems to have gotten confused: he mixes up characters, conflates battles, and gets some locations wrong. It doesn't help that he also disregards chronology when it suits his dramatic purpose (for example, giving Margaret of Anjou two powerful scenes in *Richard III*, even though she had actually left England by the time the first scene takes place, and she had been dead for years at the time of the second scene). If even Shakespeare couldn't always keep his story straight, it's a daunting prospect for a modern theatregoer to try to follow along.

When we look more closely at Shakespeare's history plays, however, we quickly come to see that the playwright's concerns in these plays are actually every bit as relevant as today's breaking news; indeed, the questions that the plays ask about the nature of power may strike today's audiences as all too timely. The Elizabethans were deeply interested in questions about what qualities make for a good, effective ruler. King Henry VI, for example, was kind and benevolent, but these admirable personal qualities made



Are Shakespeare's History Plays Still Relevant? *continued*

him a weak, ineffective ruler. His father, Henry V, was an extraordinarily efficient warrior, but if he had not died young would he have proved too aggressive to rule his country wisely? An even more complicated question that the history plays explore concerns the point at which a strong ruler becomes a tyrannical one. For the Elizabethans, these questions weren't merely academic; many citizens remembered the rebellions, wars, and religious persecutions that tore the country apart in the years before Elizabeth came to the throne in 1558, and they feared a return to such civil unrest if the Queen died without an heir. Shakespeare's representation of the delicate balance that always exists between power and tyranny, between the personal and the political, made these dramas deeply compelling for sixteenth-century playgoers, and they do so for twenty-first century ones as well.

The great achievement of Shakespeare's history plays is that they render powerful individuals from the distant past profoundly human and therefore highly relatable, and the fascination that these characters exert results from Shakespeare's ability to convey their humanity, whether they're kings, queens, aristocrats, or commoners. Even the villains, such as Richard III and Margaret of Anjou, are fully three-dimensional and therefore utterly believable. Shakespeare's history plays continue to enthrall audiences today because in many respects, human nature has not changed, and societies continue to grapple with these same ideas in the twenty-first century, especially such concepts as what it means to lead and the choices that every engaged citizen is required to make about whether to follow a given leader or to resist. The characters in Shakespeare's history plays often ask themselves, as we do today, what it means to lead a truly moral life, and their struggles to answer this question reflect our own.

Discussion Questions

Before the Show

1. What are the qualities of a **'good' leader**? Conversely, what constitutes a 'bad' leader?
2. Can someone be **born evil**, or do they become evil over the course of their life? If the latter, what factors cause someone to become evil over time?

After the Show

3. What does this play suggest about the concept of **unchecked power**? Was justice truly served at the end of the play?
4. Were there moments when you struggled to understand the Shakespearean verse? If yes, what **other elements of the play** helped you **understand the story**? You might discuss design elements such as sound, lights, or costume, or you may expand on physical and emotional choices made by the actors.
5. Many characters throughout the play are aware that Richard is dangerous, but few speak or act out against him. Why do these characters **stay silent** and go along with his vicious choices?
6. How do **Queen Elizabeth, Queen Margaret**, and the **Duchess of York** relate to each other despite their personal and political differences? What power do the women gain when they work together?
7. How does **Richard III's deformity** impact your perception of him? Why do you think Shakespeare made the choice to dramatize this element of Richard?

Ann Nobel by
Daniel Reichert.



Bonus Material

Want to go deeper? ANW's Resident Dramaturg, Miranda Johnson-Haddad, has some suggestions:

Films & Documentaries:

- The film versions of *Richard III* that I recommend are the Laurence Olivier (1955); the Ian McKellen (1995); *The Hollow Crown* trilogy, Season 2 (2016), in which Benedict Cumberbatch plays Richard III; and the Royal Shakespeare Company (2022), in which disabled actor Arthur Hughes plays Richard. Content Alert: The Ian McKellen version is very bloody and has some sexual situations; here's the trailer: https://youtu.be/HFCKoRcJfsQ?si=FZS3_K9LY1VpQxAd
- The 2022 film "The Lost King," starring Sally Hawkins, is based on the 2013 book *The King's Grave: The Search for Richard III*, by Phillippa Langley, who led a successful search for the remains of Richard III, which were eventually discovered underneath a parking lot in Leicester, England. For more on the film and the controversy surrounding it, as well as a useful summary of the Wars of the Roses and Richard III's place in them, see: <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/the-lost-king-dramatizes-the-search-for-richard-iiis-remains-the-monarchs-life-was-even-more-sensational-180981856/>

Books:

- For a clear, concise, and enjoyable (yes, really!) explanation of the medieval kings, queens, and battles that feature in Shakespeare's history plays, see Peter Saccio, ***Shakespeare's English Kings*** (2nd edition, OUP, 1999).
- ***The Daughter of Time***, by Josephine Tey, is a 1951 British detective novel in which an investigator who is laid up with an injury passes the time by attempting to prove that Richard III did not actually order his two young nephews to be murdered. Very readable and fun, and it doesn't feel too dated.
- Marjorie Garber's ***Shakespeare After All*** (2005) offers insightful discussions of Shakespeare's plays by a well-known Harvard professor. Several of Dr. Garber's engaging lectures can also be viewed on YouTube. The chapter in Garber's ***Shakespeare's Ghost Writers*** (2nd edition, 2010) on Richard III, "Descanting on Deformity: Richard III and the Shape of History," provides a fascinating discussion of Richard's supposed disability.
- For historical background on Shakespeare and his plays, see ***The Bedford Companion to Shakespeare***, edited by Russ McDonald (second edition, 2001).

Bonus Material *continued*

Online Resources:

- For The Richard III Society, which seeks to present research into Richard's life and times that allow for a more accurate and sympathetic portrayal, see their website: <https://richardiii.net/> The Society was very supportive of Phillippa Langley's efforts to find Richard's grave (see Films & Documentaries).
- Harvard professor Jeffrey R. Wilson has written extensively about Richard III and disability; see: <https://wilson.fas.harvard.edu/articles>
- For 3 minutes of sheer silliness, see the "Sweet King Richard III Song" from *Measly Middle Ages* on YouTube: https://youtu.be/XL2se6BzIHk?si=NGJ-loxZSf74P_wh

Fun Extras:

- A Los Angeles theatre company, The Porters of Hellsgate, presented Shakespeare's little-known and seldom performed play *Edward III* at the 2025 Hollywood Fringe Festival. I participated in a webinar that the Porters held to inform audience members about the play, and much of the information I provided concerns not only *Edward III* but Shakespeare's history plays generally. See: https://www.youtube.com/live/2LVCl_-maeA?si=6HDFYOBm7al7karg
- Finally, my personal favorite among the scholarly articles that I have written is entitled "Harry Potter and the Shakespearean Allusion," in which I discuss the elements of two Shakespeare plays—*Titus Andronicus* and *Richard III*—that J.K. Rowling evokes in *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. See *Reimagining Shakespeare for Children and Young Adults*, edited by Naomi J. Miller (Routledge: 2003). Let me know if you would like to read it, and I'll email you a copy (mirandadramaqueen@gmail.com).

**The real Richard III,
King of England**



ABOUT

A Noise Within

A Noise Within produces classic theatre as an essential means to enrich our community by embracing universal human experiences, expanding personal awareness, and challenging individual perspectives. Our company of resident and guest artists immerses student and general audiences in timeless, epic stories in an intimate setting.

Our most successful art asks our community to question beliefs, focus on relationships, and develop self-awareness. Southern California audiences of all ages and backgrounds build community together while engaging with this most visceral and primal of storytelling techniques. ANW's production of classic theatre includes all plays we believe will be part of our cultural legacy. We interpret these stories through the work of a professional resident company—a group of artists whose work is critical to their community—based on the belief that trust among artists and between artists and audience can only be built through an honest and continuing dialogue.

In its 30-year history, A Noise Within has garnered over 500 awards and commendations, including the Los Angeles Drama Critics Circle revered Polly Warfield Award for Excellence and the coveted Margaret Hartford Award for Sustained Excellence.

More than 45,000 individuals attend productions at A Noise Within annually. In addition, the theatre draws over 18,000 student participants to its Education Program. Students benefit from in-classroom workshops, conservatory training, subsidized tickets to matinee and evening performances, post-performance discussions with artists, and free standards-based study guides.



aNoiseWithin
Classic Theatre, Modern Magic

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