

*Richard III* Background (according to sparknotes.com)

*Richard III* belongs to the genre of Shakespeare's plays known as the histories, which deal with events in England's historical past after the Norman Conquest, in 1066. Although it is often viewed as a sequel to three of Shakespeare's earlier history plays—*1 Henry VI*, *2 Henry VI*, and *3 Henry VI*—*Richard III* is usually read and performed on its own. The play chronicles the bloody deeds and atrocities perpetrated by its central figure—the murderous and tyrannical King Richard III. Richard invites an eerie fascination, and generations of readers have found themselves seduced by his brilliance with words and his persuasive emotional manipulations even as they are repelled by his evil.

But Richard is difficult to understand psychologically because, while he is clearly power-hungry and sadistic, the deep-rooted motivations for his malevolent hatred are hard to pinpoint. Some critics feel that Richard is not really a fully developed character in the way that Shakespeare's later characters, such as Macbeth or Hamlet, are. Such critics argue that Richard does not possess a complex human psychology but instead recalls a stock character from early medieval drama. Like the "Vice" character of medieval morality pageants, who simply represented the evil in man, Richard does not justify his villainy—he is simply bad. Indeed, Richard, with self-conscious theatricality, compares himself to this standard character when he says, "Thus like the formal Vice, Iniquity, / I moralize two meanings in one word" (III.i.82–83). We should note that the mere fact that he reflects upon his similarity to the Vice figure suggests that there is more to him than this mere resemblance. Watching Richard's character, Shakespeare's audiences also would have thought of the "Machiavel," the archetype of the scandalously amoral, power-hungry ruler that had been made famous by the Renaissance Italian writer Niccolò Machiavelli in *The Prince* (first published in 1532).

When the action of *Richard III* begins, Edward IV and his brothers have overthrown the Lancastrians, but Edward is growing older and is often sick. His malicious and slightly deformed younger brother, Richard, is power-hungry and is plotting to get his hands on the throne. However, a great many people stand between him and the kingship. For example, even when King Edward himself dies, he will leave behind two sons who are in line for the throne: the young Prince Edward, the crown prince, and his brother, the young duke of York. Fortunately for Richard's purposes, they are still children, and they meet their final fate as the unfortunate "princes in the Tower." The mother of the princes is Queen Elizabeth, of the Woodeville family, and she has powerful and intelligent kinsmen who will try to protect her and her children, thus making the queen's kin yet another threat to Richard. The royal couple also has a daughter, young Elizabeth, who will later become an important pawn in royal marriage negotiations.