



[Richard III](#), by William Shakespeare

In A Nutshell

Richard III is one of Shakespeare's most frequently performed and best-loved history plays, and it has been so ever since it was first performed (probably around 1592). The most memorable things about Richard are that he's smart, suave, and unapologetic about his villainy. He's absolutely evil and tons of fun to watch; you always know that something massively terrible is about to happen, but you can't help yourself from being shocked and grotesquely interested.

Richard III was important in Shakespeare's day because of its historical context. *Richard III* picks up immediately where Shakespeare's three-part *Henry VI* leaves off, and it's the final part (chronologically) of the history series about the War of the Roses, which led into the Tudor era of England. Shakespeare's audience would be watching this the way we might watch a film about John F. Kennedy or Ronald Reagan – it's an important part of their historical tradition and national identity.

Though we may not have the deep connection to the content of the play that your average Elizabethan did, we can relate to the machinations of power, as the play is basically a parallel to *The Godfather*: great men, great power, great treachery = great drama. Much like *The Godfather*, the play is long, but it's well worth the time, and getting to know the back-story only makes each act more satisfying.

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Big Picture Study Questions

- 1 Richard is definitely the master villain of the play, but he is constantly condemned by others who are guilty of all sorts of crimes themselves, including betrayal, cruelty, and moral frailty. Are these people any better than Richard?
- 2 *Richard III* holds up the importance of having power because it rightfully belongs to you, or because you deserve it. Remember this play is being written while England is expanding its colonial empire and conquering other lands. What criteria are used (in the time, and within the play) to decide who "deserves" power?
- 3 What role do women have in the play? How does their power differ, in degree and kind, from the power of the men? Does Shakespeare portray the women of *Richard III* as unfairly shrewish?

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