

Great Books Discussion Questions – *Richard III*

Background

Shakespeare used the *Chronicles*, written by Raphael Holinshed as his primary source for *Richard III*. Holinshed, in turn, relied on earlier histories written by Sir Thomas More (*The History of King Richard III*), and Polydore Vergil (*Anglica Historia*) as sources for his work. These three books, along with Shakespeare's play, are not completely factual when relating the histories of Henry VI, Edward IV, and Richard III. Listed below are some of the inaccuracies presented regarding the history of these three kings.

The following bullet points are from *The Last Plantagenets*, by Thomas B. Costain, and *The Lives of the Kings and Queens of England*, edited by Antonia Fraser.

- The Duke of Clarence betrayed his brother, Edward IV, and fought with the Earl of Warwick on the side of Henry VI. As a result of his treachery, the Duke of Clarence was declared a traitor and was ordered to be executed by Edward IV. The execution was carried out by Edward IV, not the Duke of Gloucester (Richard III). Richard III pleaded to the Edward to spare Clarence's life.
- Henry VI died in the Tower of London after failing to win back his crown from Edward IV. Most likely, Henry was killed by Edward IV, not the Duke of Gloucester.
- The Duke of Gloucester and Anne Neville (Scene II, where Anne mourns the death of her husband, Edward, son of Henry VI) grew up together and were friends. Edward was killed in battle (possibly by Gloucester), and Anne later married the Duke of Gloucester, her childhood friend.
- Anne Neville (later Queen Anne) died of consumption (likely cancer), as did her sister Isabel Neville (wife of the Duke of Clarence). She was not poisoned by Richard II.
- The Duke of Gloucester was on good terms with his mother, the Duchess of York, and took care of her when Edward IV died.
- Elizabeth Woodville, wife to Edward IV, was a member of a common family which rose to prominence through her marriage to Edward. Edward was her second husband (her first husband died), and her sons managed to be made nobles, along with many other members of her family. The Woodvilles were not well-liked and were seen as greedy and covetous.
- Edward IV was inclined to sloth and was a notorious womanizer. As a result of Edward's foibles, the Duke of Gloucester visited his brother's court two (2) times during Edward's reign. For the most part, Gloucester remained in the North, fighting the Scots and the Lancastrians.
- It is unclear whether Richard III had the two princes murdered in the Tower. An alternate theory holds that Henry VII had the princes murdered because their claim to the throne was stronger than his.
- Tyrell, the alleged murderer of the twins, was made a member of Henry VII's court, and was given several preferments during the reign of Henry.
- The Duke of Gloucester was not hunchbacked, nor was his arm malformed. Once shoulder rose higher than the other. He was known as a skilled swordsman, a feat which would be next to impossible were he hunchbacked and possessed of a withered arm.

- Henry VII was the first of the Tudors to hold the throne. Elizabeth I was a member of the Tudor dynasty.

Questions:

1. Why does Shakespeare portray Richard as being misshapen and deformed? Edward IV was tall, blond and handsome. Richard was shorter and dark-haired. Is Shakespeare's portrait of Richard intended to show that Richard's bearing was not regal? Should looks enter into a discussion of whether a person is suited to rule?
2. Shakespeare has Richard kill Clarence and Edward, son of Henry VI. He also has Gloucester poison his wife Anne, plot against Edward IV, and attempt to marry Elizabeth his niece. What reasons does Shakespeare have for portraying Richard in this manner?
3. The marriage of Elizabeth of York with Henry VII (of Lancaster) puts an end to the War of the Roses, since these warring factions are now joined in marriage. Does Shakespeare see this union as a good result? Does he view Henry VII favorably since the war has come to a close?
4. Did Shakespeare follow his sources literally? How much of the play do you believe was well-intentioned propaganda to support the Tudors?
5. Why does Shakespeare present Clarence as a well-meaning, but clueless, nobleman? How much of the portrayal of Clarence is based on fact, and how much of the portrayal meant to establish Clarence as good, and Richard as evil?
6. The War of the Roses produced several disputed kingships. Shakespeare and his contemporaries were disturbed that the "natural order of things" was upset by these frequent changes in their ruler. Does Shakespeare attempt to portray Richard as being unnatural? If so, how?
7. Do you think that Shakespeare blames Richard for prolonging the War of the Roses, and upsetting "the natural order of things"? Why or why not?
8. Has Richard been unfairly accused of being a bad king and a bad man?