Richard III: Constructing a Master Manipulator

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Abstract

This paper examines the construction of master manipulator traits of the character of Richard, Duke of Gloucester, over the course of two of Shakespeare's plays, through the textual indicators of character, as presented in Rimmon-Kenan's Narrative Fiction. Special focus is put on speech and action. Richard's actions in Henry VI set the stage for him to become a Machiavellian political actor and foreshadow his later villainy. His ambitions in this play are obvious but not fully enacted through direct lies or intricate plotting, whereas in Richard III, he becomes a theatrical mastermind and one of the most brilliant Shakespearean villains.

Keywords: Richard III, Henry VI, Shakespeare, Renaissance drama, textual indicators of character.

1 Introduction

1.1. William Shakespeare's history plays

Discussing literary characters is closely linked to discussing literature in general, and it is difficult to speak about literary figures without referencing some of the characters introduced during the Renaissance period by William Shakespeare. Some of them exist only within literature, while others are based on actual historical individuals.

Shakespeare's history plays, two of which are *Henry VI* and *Richard III* that we will discuss in this paper, primarily explore the English monarchs and political conflicts of medieval England, especially during the Hundred Years' War and the Wars of the Roses, which are described as "a tumultuous time" (Gillum 2014: 1). These two plays present Richard as Duke of Gloucester and later King of England. Taking that into consideration, it is the aim of this paper to examine the evolution of his character through certain textual indicators which are usually not applied to plays, which will be further discussed in the methodological section of the paper.

It is well known that one of the plays at the centre of this paper, *The Tragedy of Richard the Third*, is based largely on Thomas More's *The History of King Richard III* (1557). Shakespeare adopted More's depiction of Richard's villainy. Moore (2013: 7) describes the king in the following terms:

> Richard the third son, of whom we now entreat, was in wit and courage equal with either of them, in body and prowess far under them both, little of stature, ill featured of limbs, crook-backed, his left shoulder much higher than his right, hard favoured of visage, and such as is in states called warly, in other men otherwise, he was malicious, wrathful, envious, and from afore his birth, ever forward.

More's Richard is not only a criminal, but also "an unparalleled actor who perfected the political skill of manipulation, adopting various identities to conceal his true thirst for power

and to undermine the importance of family values and conventional morality" (Kostić 2014b: 1). Particular emphasis is placed on his deformity, both physical and mental.

As Veselin Kostić (1994: 177, my translation) observes,

> Richard III brings forth a new art of characterization and represents the first dramatic character in English literature who was imagined and realized as a complete psychological being, determined not only by self-presentation and the comments of other characters, but also by more refined dramatic means, such as an individualized way of expression, thought and reactions to external events. In this sense, Richard III represents a great improvement over Shakespeare's earlier history plays

which makes it a compelling subject of analysis.

Although based on historical events and figures, Shakespeare's history plays are ultimately works of fiction, prioritizing dramatic effect and compelling narrative over absolute historical accuracy. As Milena Kaličanin (2017: 43, my translation) notes,

> all of Shakespeare's historical plays represent a link between fact and fiction, history and imagination, where the sharp difference between the creative artist and the rational historian, which the famous Renaissance poet Philip Sidney talks about in Defence of Poetry, is actually not lost, and the qualities of the artist and the historian are combined to create a special genre typical of Elizabethan England.

1.2 Richard III as a historical figure

It is important to recognize that Shakespeare's Richard III is based on the actual King Richard III, whose historical persona differs significantly from the character portrayed in the play. As Wolfgang Hermann Clemen (1954: 247) notes, "the relation between the originality of a dramatist and the tradition from which his work derives is an interesting subject." Moreover, according to Caroline Augusta Halsted (1844: v), "the genius of Shakespeare seized upon the history of Richard the Third as a vacant possession, and peopled it with beings who have, indeed, historic names, but whose attributed descriptions and actions are, for the most part, the mere imaginings of the bard."

The public perception of Richard is based almost entirely on Shakespeare's character, presented in these two of his historical plays, so it is important to note the historical facts as well. Richard reigned as King of England from the 26th of June 1483 until his death in 1485 and was the last monarch of the Plantagenet dynasty. His defeat and death at the Battle of Bosworth Field is considered to be the end of the Middle Ages in England and, according to some interpretations, marked the end of the Wars of the Roses. Regarding Richard III's reign, Dorte Hasberg Zirak-Schmidt (2018: 21) writes that "to the Elizabethan public, there was no monarch in recent history with such a dark reputation as Richard III: usurpation, tyranny, fratricide, and even incest were among his many alleged crimes, and a legacy of cunning dissimulation and cynical Machiavellianism had clung to him since his early biographers' descriptions of him." The question of deformity is particularly intriguing, especially as a probable cause of his villainous character. In Shakespeare's plays, Richard is portrayed as a hunchback with a withered arm, a depiction believed to have been created to symbolize the corruption of his mind. According to Milena Kostić (2015: 1, my translation), this physical distortion serves as the "embodiment" of his moral deformity. However, the discovery of Richard's remains in 2012 revealed a pronounced curvature of the spine consistent with

idiopathic adolescent-onset scoliosis. Contemporary descriptions that mention "unequal shoulders, the right higher and the left lower" align with the presence of right-sided scoliosis (University of Leicester n.d.). However, there seems to be no evidence supporting the existence of a withered arm.

2 Methodological approach

Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan's narratological theory of characterization has been shown to be effective for the examination of characters in all periods, so it can be effectively applied to our Shakespearean sixteenth century plays. In addition to that, it is a method typically used for the analysis of prose texts, so applying it to a play may bring forward new insights about the way a character, in this case Richard III, was built. To facilitate understanding, the main ideas and the method of character synthesis presented by Rimmon-Kenan (1991: 59–71) in chapter five of *Narrative Fiction* will be summarised here. Rimmon-Kenan stresses that within any narrative, a character is a construct assembled by the reader from various indicators throughout the text. While any textual element may serve as a character indicator, some elements are more closely linked to characterization. These indicators fall largely into two types: direct definition and indirect presentation: "In the first case, the trait is named using an adjective (he is good-hearted), an abstract noun (his goodness knew no bounds), another kind of noun (she was a real bitch), or part of speech (he loves only himself)" (Rimmon-Kenan 1991: 59–60). In the second type, the traits are not explicitly stated but are conveyed through examples, allowing the reader to infer them. Not every naming of a character's qualities constitutes direct definition; such definition counts only when it comes from the text's most authoritative voice (Rimmon-Kenan 1991: 60). In prose fiction, this is typically the narrator. Because dramatic texts lack a conventional narrator, this paper will also explore how direct definition operates within plays.

Indirect presentation occurs when traits are revealed through action rather than directly stated. Both one-time actions and habitual behaviour can imply character traits. Single actions tend to reveal dynamic aspects of a character, often connected to turning points in the plot, whereas habitual actions suggest more stable qualities. Although a one-time action may not reflect consistency, it can reveal something more significant than routine behaviours. Actions may be categorized into acts of commission (what the character does), acts of omission (what the character fails to do even though they should), and contemplated acts (intentions that remain unrealized). A character's speech, be it dialogue or thought, also serves as an indicator, through both content and form. What one character says about another can reflect not only the target but also the speaker. "The form and style of speech are common means of characterization in texts where characters' language is individualized and distinguished from that of the narrator" (Rimmon-Kenan, 1991: 64). Style may suggest geographical origin, social background, or profession, and it may also reveal individual traits. It should be noted that, as per Norman Francis Blake (1983: 48), we should hesitate to interpret the meanings of Shakespeare's words too rigorously because they may have been chosen for quite different reasons: "the stylistic level appropriate to the context and the effect of the sound pattern… Equally he may have been less worried than we are by word-substitution made by actors and editors provided the sound-pattern and rhythm were maintained." Nonetheless, speech inevitably contributes to characterization, particularly when supported by other indicators. As Sébastien Mercier (2019: 206) points out, "speech and stagecraft create a dramatic reality."

Physical appearance also contributes to characterization. One should distinguish between features beyond the character's control (e.g. height) and those partly controlled (e.g. clothing or hairstyle). Sometimes appearance speaks for itself; other times, the narrator explicitly links appearance to a particular trait, turning it into a disguised form of direct definition. The character's surroundings, such as their home, town, or social environment, can also function as metonymic indicators.

This method of characterization will be applied to the figure of Richard III as a character in two of Shakespeare's plays that he is presented in. According to Tamara Kostić Pahnoglu (2024: 15), this approach "is appropriate for characters that don't differ a lot from real persons," and Richard III, despite Shakespeare's modifications, indeed was a historical figure.

3 The evolution of Richard III through the textual indicators of character in Henry VI and Richard III

3.1 The timeline

Chronologically, the events of *Henry VI* come before those of *Richard III*. In *Henry VI*, Richard becomes Duke of Gloucester, while in *Richard III* the plot follows his rise from Duke to King of England. As Richard gains more power and acquires a higher position, his Machiavellian tendences become more prominent. However, while he is presented as a master manipulator in *Richard III*, there is evidence of him being cunning, selfish, and calculated even in *Henry VI*. Thus, the aim of this paper is to examine whether the textual indicators of character presented by Rimmon-Kenan showcase the evolution of his character, or more precisely, of his villainy, and in what way.

3.2 The beginning of the manipulation in Henry VI part 3

It is obvious that Richard is manipulative in *Henry VI part 3*, but his manipulations are fewer, cruder, and less sustained than in *Richard III*. He is still more of an apprentice villain than the mastermind he becomes later. According to Michael Alan Hicks (1986: 2), it is before his ascension to the throne, as Duke of Gloucester, that Richard "formed habits, patterns of conduct, attitudes and political policies that were unlikely to be changed by his promotion." Therefore, his behaviour in *Henry VI* sets the stage for him becoming the villain that he is recognised as in *Richard III*.

Most of the information the readers get in *Henry VI* could be considered direct definition, because Richard does not begin to express his villainy by outwardly lying to others very often yet. It should be noted that as plays, these texts offer no direct definition in the typical sense, as there is no narrator. Therefore, the moments when Richard is alone on stage and sharing his thought with the audience could be considered as a form of direct definition. It is interesting to note that, as per Lisa Hopkins (2024: 2), "we must not assume that we are being given direct access to a character's thoughts" during soliloquies, due to the fact that the character is performing, in the sense that they are speaking those words aloud. However, for the purposes of this paper, it can be assumed that the characters are being truthful with the audience. In fact, in *Richard III*, Richard even, as Siobhán Keenan (2017: 28) notes, "invites the audience to be complicit in his plans."

In Henry VI, there are mostly scenes which could be thought of as direct definition and indirect presentation through the means of action, which show Richard's manipulative tendencies and intentions. One of the most important and crucial scenes is his soliloquy in Act 3 Scene 2. This monologue reveals many important traits of Richard's character and foreshadows his behaviour in *Richard III*. When Richard says, "And yet I know not how to get the crown, For many lives stand between me and home" (3.2.174-175), he is clearly stating his ambition and his plan to find a way to ascend to the throne, which he eventually succeeds in *Richard III*. The most famous part of this monologue, "Why, I can smile, and murder whiles I smile, And cry 'Content' to that which grieves my heart, And wet my cheeks with artificial tears…" (3.2.184-186), is the most obvious representation of Richard's manipulative nature and his mastery of emotional deception. What he already intents to do, and expands upon later, is controlling how others perceive him, regardless of his true intentions. Another notable part of the soliloquy is "And frame my face to all occasions" (3.2.187), where he expresses social adaptability, i.e. the ability to become what others need him to be and gain their trust, in order to use it for his own personal gain. Finally, Richard states, "I'll make my heaven to dream upon the crown" (3.2.170), which is a full declaration of his ambition. According to Lenna Magnusson (2013: 32), "giving utterance to wishes and desires is fundamental to the language of *Richard III.*"

In Act 2 Scene 1, Richard says "I cannot joy, until I be resolved Where our right valiant father is become." (2.1.9-10), thus presenting himself as the committed brother and son, an image that later allows him to operate without suspicion. He reinforces his position within the winning faction and plants seeds of loyalty to Edward, not out of genuine allegiance, but to advance his own influence. Act 3 Scene 3 is an excellent example of omission, an action that a character fails to complete even though they should have done it. This is the scene where Edward is wooing Lady Grey, and it is precisely Richad's silence and restraint that show his true intentions. Warwick is not present in the scene, and Richard is one of the witnesses. Even though the marriage will clearly anger Warwick and fracture alliances, Richard does not stop Edward. He seems to be allowing political damage to occur because it serves his long-term goals. In this scene, he is perceptive and shows that he knows how to use a situation that he finds himself in for his own gain. Finally, Act 5 Scene 6, where he kills king Henry, shows both Richard's ruthlessness and his ambition. While he stabs the king, he says "Down, down to hell; and say I sent thee thither - I that have neither pity, love nor fear" (5.6.68-69), showing cold-blooded intent, as well as the fact that he sees murder simply as a tool for achieving his political aims. This scene can be considered an example of Richard acting on his previously stated intention to make the pursuit of the crown his dream. After the murder of king Henry, there is, according to Alvin B. Kernan (1954: 433), "no true peace since Richard, now Duke of Gloucester and Richard III to be, is already intriguing against his brothers."

3.3 The culmination of manipulation

Richard's manipulative abilities reach their highest point in *Richard III*. His deceptive nature is stated more clearly in this play, as even Richard himself, in the famous opening soliloquy, reveals to the audience that he is "determined to prove a villain" (1.1.30). As Richard familiarises the audience with his plans in the soliloquy, it seems as if he is almost manipulating them as well, due to the fact that the audience starts rooting for the villain and that, as Keenan (2017: 28) notes, Richard "invites the audience to be complicit in his plans." "Regarding

‘villain’, for example, it is strange that the villain of the story is not only the protagonist but also the unquestionable monopolist of the reader’s sympathy” (Calvillo 2017: 142, my translation). The opening soliloquy is an excellent example of direct definition as an indicator of character, as Richard takes on the role of the narrator and reveals his villainous nature.

In addition to that, the wooing of Lady Anne in Act 1 Scene 2 exemplifies Richard’s manipulative actions. He meets Lady Anne as she follows the coffin of King Henry VI, whom Richard had murdered along with her husband, Prince Edward. At the beginning of the scene she hates him, but by the end of it she is willing to marry him, which shows the extent of Richard’s manipulation. He essentially blames Lady Anne for his murdering the king and prince, saying “Your beauty was the cause of that effect, Your beauty, that did haunt me in my sleep” (1.2.130-131). He stages a performance of remorse and fakes humility, telling her “Lo, here I lend thee this sharp-pointed sword, Which if thou please to hide in this true breast And let the soul forth that adoreth thee, I lay it naked to the deadly stroke” (1.2.191-194). This might be considered emotional coercion, as Richard knows that she will not opt to kill him. Once Anne leaves, he enjoys a private moment of triumph because he managed to convince her to marry him. In that moment he speaks to the audience: “Was ever woman in this humour wooed? Was ever woman in this humour won?” (1.2.247-248). In that way Richard confirms that everything he did was calculated.

Richard’s manipulation is most clearly revealed through his habitual use of lies, which function as indirect presentation both through speech and repeated action. From the opening of the play, he openly deceives others, claiming loyalty to the king and insisting “we speak no treason,” while simultaneously plotting against those closest to him (1.1.94). His promise to Clarence that he will “deliver you or else lie for you” is particularly revealing, as he is already planning Clarence’s death (1.1.118). Richard repeatedly disguises his deceit behind claims of honesty, presenting himself as a “plain man” incapable of flattery or deception, even as he manipulates nearly every character around him (1.3.52). As Kostić (2014a: 5) notes, Richard “portrays his outward show of morality as a well-rehearsed act necessary in order to attain his political goals.” This pattern continues throughout the play, from his feigned humility before his mother and the court, to his betrayal of Buckingham and his calculated guidance of the young prince toward imprisonment in the Tower. His public grief over Hastings’ execution and his repeated refusals of the crown further illustrate how Richard uses false emotion and staged reluctance to shape others’ perceptions. Taken together, these examples show that lying is not incidental but central to Richard’s character, establishing manipulation as his primary means of gaining and maintaining power.

Richard’s lies not only show his habitual deceit but also highlight his skill in acting, which is central to his success as a manipulator. His deception works because he convinces others he is sincere, loyal, or humble when it suits him. Clarence’s inability to suspect Richard of plotting his death illustrates this perfectly; as Tamara Karanović (2021: 30) notes, it is “the best evidence of the success of Richard’s hypocrisy and manipulation.” Speech is a key part of this strategy. As María Macias-Borrego (2025: 1) points out, “speech acts—encompassing not just spoken words, but also the surrounding context—are crucial for understanding Richard’s ability to deceive, manipulate, and persuade.” These carefully crafted words show what Anne Sophie Refskou (2021: 122) calls Richard’s “rhetorical dexterity,” allowing him to shape how others see him and maintain control through language rather than force.

Richard’s manipulation is further revealed through his selective use of abusive language in the function of speech as an indicator of character. In Act 1, Scene 3, he refers to Queen Margaret as a “thou hateful, withered hag” and a “foul, wrinkled witch” (1.3.225-1.3.168),

while in Act 4, Scene 4 he calls Queen Elizabeth as a "relenting fool and shallow, changing woman" (4.4.454). He treats his nephews similarly in Act 4, Scene 2 by calling them "bastards" and wishing them dead (4.2.20), and in Act 1, Scene 3 he curses the court with "a plague upon you all!" (1.3.60). It seems that these moments of verbal aggression occur when Richard is speaking in situations where his hostility carries no political cost. In contrast, when he requires the trust of others, Richard adopts a façade of politeness and humility. This contrast demonstrates that his civility is not natural but performative, revealing language itself as a tool of manipulation through which Richard conceals his intentions and controls how others perceive him.

David Daiches (1969: 250) observes that Richard's "psychology is far from simple," a complexity that becomes especially visible in the dream sequence of Act 5, Scene 3. Throughout the play, Richard secures power by manipulating others through language, performance, and emotional deception. Since the dream originates in Richard's own mind, the speech of the ghosts can be understood as expressing Richard's suppressed recognition of the consequences of his manipulative actions. Their repeated wishes that he "despair and die" and their desire to "sit heavy on [his] soul tomorrow" articulate a judgment that Richard has successfully concealed from others (5.3.135-124). The ghosts of the princes, in particular, accuse him of causing his own "ruin, shame, and death," suggesting an internal acknowledgment that his rise has been built on calculated deception and betrayal. This awareness surfaces more explicitly in Richard's waking soliloquy later in the same scene. His cry, "O coward conscience, how dost thou afflict me!", followed by confusion shown by saying "I love myself… I rather hate myself… I am a villain. Yet I lie; I am not", reveals a mind struggling to maintain the self-image that has enabled his manipulation of others (5.3.191, 199-203). As Kostić (2014a: 6) notes, the broken and opposing phrases "reflect Richard's shattered confidence". The significance of this speech lies in showing that Richard recognizes the falseness of the persona he has constructed. The psychological breakdown therefore exposes not only guilt, but an implicit awareness that his power has depended on sustained manipulation; an awareness that ultimately undermines his ability to continue deceiving either others or himself.

4 Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to examine which textual indicators of character, according to Rimmon-Kenan's narratology theory, are used by Shakespeare to exemplify the evolution of the character of Richard as a master manipulator in his plays *Henry VI part 3* and *Richard III*.

As we have shown above, the direct definition is present in both plays, as the presence of a narrator did not prove crucial for the inclusion of this type of indicator in a text. It is exemplified mostly through Richard's soliloquies and the information he gives the audience about himself. As for indirect presentation, a very important indicator of Richard's manipulative character are his actions. His actions stay consistently manipulative, although the extent of the manipulation increases. Speech is an important indicator of character as well, taking into consideration both the way Richard addresses other people, and what they have to say about him. External appearance is relevant only if we consider his physical deformity as motivation for his actions, while the environment is mostly not relevant in this case.

In conclusion, there are textual indicators of character, mostly direct definition and indirect presentation through action, in *Henry VI* that point out Richard's manipulative

tendencies and lay the groundwork for his evolution as a villain. When he does interact manipulatively in this play, it tends to be opportunistic, taking advantage of others' conflicts rather than constructing elaborate traps. However, there is a wider variety of textual indicators in *Richard III* which indicate the same traits to a deeper extent. What can be concluded from that fact is that the presence of those indicators confirms that the traits of his character are consistent, as well as that his character did evolve, as exemplified by the larger number of indicators in the play which follows the later period of his life.

Applying Rimmon-Kenan's narratological framework shows that Richard's manipulation is not limited to a few moments of obvious villainy but is built into the structure of the plays through repeated and increasingly complex character indicators. The movement from more opportunistic manipulation in *Henry VI, Part 3* to deliberate and self-aware deception in *Richard III* does not represent a change in Richard's basic character, but rather a strengthening of traits that are already present. As the plays progress, Richard relies more heavily on soliloquies, carefully chosen language, and deliberate self-presentation, suggesting that manipulation becomes not just a political strategy, but the main way through which he understands power and himself. Tracing these indicators across both plays therefore shows that Richard's development as a master manipulator is gradual, consistent, and clearly supported by the text.

Finally, after tracing the character of Richard III across these two plays, the findings demonstrate, through a methodological lens not typically applied to plays, that character continuity is present. His evolution is never a departure from his true self. Applying Rimmon-Kenan's textual indicators allows us to see how Shakespeare constructs a consistently recognizable, yet dynamically developing persona.

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