



## Richard III- A Machiavellian

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### Abstract

*Richard III is undoubtedly the most villainous character in Shakespeare. He dominates the play, and all other characters are subordinate to him. Always in the center of the stage, he is the cynosure of all eyes. He is ambitious, and to fulfill his ambitious designs he is always ready to go to any length. His career is a series of horrors and crimes. That is the impression we carry about him but an astute critic like one can understand Richard's rich intellect, his resources, his wit, he buoyant spirits, his vast knowledge and insight into characters, the poetry of his part, his lofty genius, his vast capacity, and accomplishment, all of which have been hidden by his crimes, haunting us all the while. The paper probes to identify the Machiavellian spirit of Richard III of Shakespeare.*

**Keywords:** Richard III, Machiavellian, Treachery, Downfall

One cannot simply dismiss Richard as a tyrant and murderer. He is like an ordinary man, loves his father, and this love is the sole token of humanity in the whole course of his chequered career. Though not quite as versatile as other kings, he is certainly a complex character and cannot be reduced to a mere type.

Coleridge has pointed out the superiority of Richards's intellect as "possessed a power that they had not". William Hazlitt notices the grandeur of Richard's personality, and does not denigrate him as a black devil "haughty, violent and subtle, bold and treacherous" by his "talents and his crimes". George Bernard Shaw, finds in Richard a great wit, despite his murders and crimes who "dies unrepentant and game to the last."

Richard's character has to be studied in the light of his soliloquies and actions. Unlike Iago, he does reveal himself in his soliloquies. In Act III, scene II of the third part of Henry VI he expresses unblushingly his inordinate lust for power. In this respect, he compares favourably with Macbeth.

Richard, therefore, shares the vice of the lust for power with quite a few Shakespearian characters but Richard and Macbeth cannot be equated. Macbeth is ambitious, but when the witches prophesy that he would be the Thane of Glamis and Cawdor, and the "greatest", "his seated heart knocks at the ribs" That is a clear indication that the human heart is still throbbing. In Act III, scene II of Richard III, Richard says:



*Why, I can smile, and murder while I smile,  
And cry content to that which grieves my heart,  
And wet my cheeks with artificial tears,  
And frame my face to all occasions...  
I can add colours to the chameleon,  
Change shapes with proteus for advantages,  
And set the murderous Machiavel to school.  
Can I do this, and cannot get a crown? (R III)*

Richard calls himself a 'chameleon' a 'proteus', a person capable of outshining Machiavelli in diabolical acts. He feels that he is an outcast, one unwanted by everybody. In this respect, he compares favourably with Edmund, who was socially handicapped. A bastard with a social stigma, Edmund felt that his ambition was thwarted because of his illegitimacy. Richard is physically handicapped, and is derided by all. Even Nature felt shocked as his birth. His mother says:

*The owl shriek'd at thy birth, an evil sign;  
The wight-crow cried, aboding luckless time;  
Dogs houl'd and hideous tempests shook down trees!  
The raven rook'd her on the chinney's top,  
And chattering pies in dismal discord sung.  
Thy mother felt more than a mother's pain,  
And yet brought forth less than a mother's hope;  
To will, an indigestd' formed lump,  
Not like the fruit of such a goodly tree. (R III)*

The members of the royal court unhesitatingly discuss his misshapen form and deformity. Richard, therefore, has completely banished love and all the sentiments from his heart. His youth has been spent in a cold, bleak and joyless atmosphere. During the wars of the Roses, he is very much in demand. He plays a heroic role in vindicating the Plantagenets but as soon as peace is restored, he is once again relegated to the background and social limbo. Richard is not loved by anybody, and he does not love anybody either. Free from all noble passions, he is, however, equally free from the evil passions like envy, jealousy and hatred. He is unscrupulous and does not repent even after the most devilish crimes. Whatever may be the



attempts of some critics to vindicate Richard, there is no denying the fact that he is devoid of conscience. The murders of his nephews never prick him. In Act V he loses his usual vivacity in the face of his impending disaster.

*I have not that alacrity of spirit,  
Not cheer of mind, that I was wont to have. (R III)*

Richard is determined to take revenge on the society, from which he has not received a fair deal. He feels utterly alone in this wide world:

*Then since the heavens shaped my body so,  
Let hell make crooked my mind to answer it.  
I have no brother, I am like no brother:  
And this word 'love' which grey-beards call divine,  
Be resident in men like one another  
And not in me: I am myself clone. (R III)*

There is that sense of desolation which haunts him when he is alone, and when he is in the midst of a crowd. He can never forget that he has been “cheated of feature by dissembling Nature.” He does not love; in fact, he cannot love. Yet he woos Lady Anne, whose husband and father-in-law he has relentlessly murdered. Richard never hesitates in committing crimes. Buckingham asks what is to be done about Hastings and Richard replies:

“Chop off his head, man; somewhat we will do”. His choice is ever between villainy and honesty; it is only between different modes of villainy. There is no plausible explanation of Richard’s villainy. Richard remains least affected by the horrors of death. Tyrrel speaks to him? About the news of the prince’s murder and Richard replies in a lackadaisical and happy-go-lucky manner tells, “thou shalt tell the process of their death”

Richard is a hypocrite, and does not let other enter the dark recesses of his mind. It has been suggested that the citizens, uneducated as they are can easily see through his game but they are not important factors. Queen Margaret with her keen intellect and Queen Anne have also felt his pulse. He can as a rule, keep his thoughts to himself and pretend to be good even to those, whose death he has encompassed. A man with a keen intellect he is extremely quick in his action. He has his reasons to believe that Hastings may not prove loyal. He at once thinks of killing him, and does not delay in executing his plan. Long loyal and devoted, Buckingham shows vacillation in falling in line with his wishes. At once Richard undertakes



the plan to execute him. He is also utterly indifferent to any ethical consideration. He maintains the saintly appearance before Clarence and Hastings, who are his victims. With the two bishops on either side, he stands on the balcony and when pressed to receive the crown and behaves like a recluse. He thus, succeeds in befooling everybody.

In Act I he takes the audience into his confidence and tells them the secret of how he has planned to outwit his opponents:

*But then I sigh, and with a piece of scripture,  
Tell them that God bids us to good for evil:  
And thus I clothe my naked villainy  
With odd old ends, stolen out a holy writ  
And seem a saint, when most I play the Devil... (R III)*

Nemesis is now round the corner. He can no more deceive people. Richard feels that he has lost “that alacrity of spirit”. This defeat is a prelude to worse defeats. In his speech with Catesby we find Richard a fallen man. He has lost his nimble intelligence, the clean jump into action, the self-mastery and single mindedness. On the eve of the Battle of Bosworth, the ghosts of Richard’s victims visit him in a nightmare and curse him for his nefarious crimes. He cries out:

*My conscience hath a thousand several tongues,  
And every tongue brings in a several tale,  
And every tale condemns me for a villain....  
Methought the souls of all that I had murder'd  
Come to my tent, and everyone did threat  
Tomorrow's vengeance on the head of Richard. (R III)*

The ghosts come in sleep from the unconscious depths of his being. He suffers no effective remorse. It shows that his will and intellect are no longer alert. Queen Margaret’s curse come true but Richard dies, not whimpering like a craven soul, but as a hero, “A horse! a horse ! my kingdom for a horse.” Richard dies, but leaves an impression of a colourful and engaging personality.



## Conclusion

Shakespeare's *Richard III* was fundamentally a Machiavellian play and Richard III of course a sort of prince as Machiavelli enunciated. He achieved his aims by deceit and slaughter. Machiavelli, himself, would not have approved of everything that Richard did. Richard had the courage of a lion but he also had the cunning of a fox and was decisive in his actions, his motivation for his personal ambition. He succeeded in becoming king but he did not win the support of the nobles or compatriots and so were his actions of interest. There is no sign that Richard had any enduring political strategy once he became king. On divergent view, he undermined a delicate peace and plunged his country back into civil war. As a result, he met his own downfall and caused the fall of the House of York. Thus, he suits to the Machiavellian order.

## Abbreviation

Richard III- R III

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