

## Shakespeare Imaginarium: Workshop Information Pack 2 – *Richard III* and ethics: playing evil

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### Aims

In this second workshop we will discuss the success of *Richard III* as an ethical problem. We will explore how the play makes a virtue of evil. Shakespeare urges the spectator, reader and some characters to be simultaneously revolted and seduced by Richard. How do you appreciate evil art? We will consider this conundrum and how it can be explored in the classroom.

### Readings

- Shakespeare, William. *Richard III*.
- Slotkin, Joel Elliot. 'Honeyed Toads: Sinister Aesthetics in Shakespeare's *Richard III*.' *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 7.1 (2007): 5-32. Subscriber access only.

### Focus points

- *Richard III* is good, but Richard III is not
- Playing evil
- Corrupting the youth

### ***Richard III* is good, but Richard III is not**

This first focus point invites the group to discuss what makes *Richard III* a good play—and how the evil of Richard III fits into this.

- What do you think makes *Richard III* a good (i.e. artistically accomplished) play?
  - Think about (for example) character, plot, staging, language, ideas
- Which moments or passages in *Richard III* do you most enjoy? Why?
- Which moments or passages do your students most enjoy? Why?
- How do you or how could you use these enjoyable moments of the play to maximise teaching effectiveness?
- Does it matter what aspect of the play the students enjoy, as long as it gets their interest and engagement?

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### Playing evil

Let's focus now specifically on Richard. Here is an extract from Charles Spencer's review of Jonathan Slinger's notable performance as Richard III in the Royal Shakespeare Company production in 2007 (directed by Michael Boyd):

'I mean it as a compliment when I say that he looks absolutely repellent. Like all good Crookbacks, you shiver at the sight of him. There is a horrid pallor to his flesh, and a vast, livid birthmark on his shaven head. He also has a terrible saliva problem, so he often dribbles and spits as he speaks, sometimes resorting to a large napkin to mop up the excess fluids.

With his strapped leg, slight hunch and deformed left hand, he's a creature to haunt one's nightmares. Our first vision of him, apparently holding a baby in his arms as he leers at the audience, is deeply disconcerting.

Slinger also has a terrifying turn of speed as he scuttles round the stage, and a vitality and sense of mischief that make him perversely attractive. One readily understands how he succeeds in seducing Lady Anne, whose husband he has killed and whose father-in-law she is now burying, for we in the audience have fallen under his perverse and dangerous spell as well. He is simply so much more alive than anyone else. But this is a performance with depth as well as wit and surface dazzle.

I don't think I have ever seen the final scenes, in which Richard is haunted by the ghosts of his victims, more vividly or scarily played. The once magnetic villain suddenly seems to shrink before our eyes as he succumbs to night terrors, a playground bully who lacks all sense of who he is or what he's done. It's a little vision of hell.'

(*The Telegraph*, 25 January 2007)

- Discuss Spencer's appraisal of Slinger's performance:
  - What makes the performance so good according to Spencer?
  - Describe the nature and vocabulary of Spencer's attraction to Slinger's Richard.
- Here, the seductiveness of evil comes to light especially through Slinger's embodied performance. How might you encourage students to consider how the staging of the play influences how we assess Richard's character?
- How might seeing the play change how students understand the virtue and appeal of evil?
- Discuss and compare productions of *Richard III* that you have seen, and how these productions dealt with Richard's villainous appeal.

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---

Now, consider these three quotations from Joel Slotkin's article:

'I will argue here that the play encourages audiences to appreciate Richard because of his evil, not in spite of it, and that this response to a literary representation is not inherently pathological or corrupt. Rather, it is shaped by a "sinister aesthetic" that governs the play's representations of evil and ugliness, and that calls into question the moral and psychological boundaries separating us from evil and self-destructiveness' (p. 6).

'Richard is attractive because he is evil—and even because he is ugly. The play treats its evil and horrible elements as aesthetic objects capable of arousing erotic desire' (p. 7).

'[Anne's] discovery of his capacity for theatrical deception seems to tantalize her, arousing her desire to uncover the mystery of Richard's heart, which is the beginning of her desire for him. For Anne, erotic attraction is generated by the sinister—in this case, by the dark, ironic beauty of Richard's carefully constructed self-presentation as a creature of deceptive malevolence. The power of the scene for the audience lies partly in those same juxtapositions that conquer Anne, the glimpse of malice only perfunctorily veiled with the mask of a lover' (p. 17)

- Slotkin concludes that 'Anne falls undeceived' (p. 20), and so, presumably, does the appreciative audience of the play. Discuss act 1, scene 2 (the seduction of Anne) in light of Slotkin's remarks:
  - Why does Anne fall for Richard?
    - What is his appeal for her?
  - Why do audiences fall for Richard?
    - What is his appeal for them?
  - What is your response to Richard in 1.2?
- Do you think your response to Richard here 'calls into question' the boundaries that separate us from 'evil', as Slotkin argues above? Does the play make you rethink or question your definition or understanding of 'evil'?
- Slotkin argues that Richard's 'capacity for theatrical deception' is tantalising – why might we, like Anne, be seduced by this?

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### Corrupting the youth

This focus point considers the morality of teaching – and learning – *Richard III*. Here are some questions to discuss now among other educators, but also to discuss in class with students.

- What makes fictional evil geniuses attractive?
- Is the same true of actual evil geniuses? Why or why not?
- What is the role of humour in evil's allure?
- What do you think is the value (moral / social / personal benefit) of teaching texts such as *Richard III*?
- What do you think is the value (moral / social / personal benefit) of learning about and exploring such texts as *Richard III*?
- If the play is an exploration of the problematic and complex relations between art, morality and desire—what new learning activities might you create to enable students to explore this matrix? This question is not easy. It could be tackled by brainstorming in small groups.