

Context: William Shakespeare, *Richard III* (ca. 1590) – “I cannot prove a lover...”

Before reading

1. Do a websearch on “The War of the Roses”: What was it about, who fought against whom? Take notes and exchange your results with a partner.
2. In a websearch, collect information about the historical figure of King Richard III. Take notes and exchange your results with a partner.

Material

The situation: At the very beginning of the history play, before the plot actually starts, Richard introduces himself by a commentary on the post-war times that have just begun. With the Yorkist's victory over their Lancastrian rivals for the English Crown, peace seems to be within reach after almost a hundred years at war. Ambitious Richard is the youngest brother of three and wants to be king in place of his elder brother Edward. However, he is only number four in the line of succession: Before him, there are Edward's two sons, and his second brother. In the course of the play, Richard eliminates one contestant¹ for power after the next and manipulates other politicians by pretending to be full of kindness, until he achieves his aim and is crowned king of England. The play ends with the Battle of Bosworth, with an alliance of Richard's enemies, which defeats him. Richard is succeeded by the young Earl of Richmond, who will be crowned as Henry VII, thus ending the 100 year's war (a.k.a. “The Wars of the Roses”) in England and beginning the Tudor dynasty which includes King Henry VIII and his daughter, Elisabeth I. The passage below is from the soliloquy which starts the play.

[...] I, that am not shaped for sportive tricks,
Nor made to court² an amorous looking-glass;
I, that am rudely³ stamp'd⁴, and want⁵ love's majesty
To strut⁶ before a wanton ambling⁷ nymph:
5 I, that am curtail'd⁸ of this fair proportion,
Cheated⁹ of features by dissembling¹⁰ Nature,
Deform'd, unfinish'd, sent before my time¹¹
Into this breathing world scarce half made up¹² –
And that so lamely and unfashionable
10 That dogs bark at me, as I halt by them –
Why, I,¹³ in this weak piping time of peace,
Have no delight¹⁴ to pass away the time,
Unless to spy my shadow in the sun,
And descant¹⁵ on mine own deformity.

¹ contestant = rival

² court = woo, attract

³ rudely = *grob*

⁴ stamp'd = *gestempelt*

⁵ want = *[here:]* lack

⁶ strut = walk stiffly

⁷ amble = walk easily

⁸ curtail'd = cut, reduced

⁹ cheated of = betrayed of, deceived

¹⁰ dissembling = dishonest, deceitful

¹¹ sent before my time = *Richard beschreibt sich hier als Frühgeburt*

¹² scarce half made up = hardly even finished

¹³ Why, I = *[here:]* well, I

¹⁴ delight = fun

¹⁵ descant = *[here:]* sing with a shrill voice

And therefore, since I cannot prove¹⁶ a lover,
To entertain these fair well-spoken days,
I am determined¹⁷ to prove a villain,
And hate the idle¹⁸ pleasures of these days.

The History of King Richard III, Act 1.1.14-31

From: *The Arden Shakespeare: Complete Works*, eds. Richard Proudfoot / Ann Thompson / David Scott Kastan. London: Thomson Learning 2000, p. 703. 136 words

Tasks

Comprehension

3. Make a grid with words / phrases in which Richard refers to his outward appearance, and another one with words by which he describes his own character and attitude

Analysis

4. Use the grid (task 1) and structure Richard's soliloquy. Interpret its function and think beyond the dramatic plot, considering also the theatrical situation.
5. *Write an analysis of the language in this passage and interpret Richard's character, based on the style, imagery and tone he uses.

Evaluation

6. *Compose an essay which compares his self-description, quoted above, with the way Anne treats Richard when he woos for her, in the passage quoted in the textbook (*Context*, pp. 79-80). Consider the theatrical context in both scenes, and discuss Richard's remarks on his own ugliness in relation to what he says about Anne's beauty.

6 assignments

Can do: 1, 2, 5

Must-do: 3, 4, 6

* = higher level of complexity

Minimum 5 assignments

¹⁶ prove = [here:] *sich erweisen*

¹⁷ to be determined = to intend; to be fixed on an aim

¹⁸ idle = lazy, unproductive

Solutions

Textbook: *Context*, pp. 79-81

Fokus Literaturvermittlung: pp. 214-218

Task 1/2: for example, use websites such as

Wars of the Roses: "Wars of the Roses", *Wikipedia*, URL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wars_of_the_Roses;

"Wars of the Roses: English History" *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*. URL: <https://www.britannica.com/event/Wars-of-the-Roses>

Ben Johnson, "The Wars of the Roses", *Historic UK*, URL: <https://www.historic-uk.com/HistoryUK/HistoryofEngland/The-Wars-of-the-Roses/> (Timeline of important events)

"Quick reference: 1455-85", *Oxford Reference*, URL: <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100428879>

Richard III: "Richard III of England", *Wikipedia*, URL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard_III_of_England;

Michael Hicks: "Richard III, King of England" *Encyclopedia Britannica Online* URL: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Richard-III-king-of-England>

Waseem Ahmed, "Shakespeare's Richard III – Myth or Reality?" *Shakespeare Birthday Trust* URL: <https://www.shakespeare.org.uk/explore-shakespeare/blogs/shakespeares-richard-iii-myth-or-reality/>

"Richard III: Your Guide to the last Yorkist King of England", *BBC History Extra* (The official website for BBC History Magazine and BBC History Revealed). URL: <https://www.historyextra.com/period/medieval/myths-facts-richard-iii-murder-princes-tower-shakespeare-york-leicester-car-park/>

Both tasks may be done in group work and end in a gallery walk, or – in case of individual preparation – the results may be exchanged by milling around.

Task 3:

Grid

Outward appearance	Character & attitudes
not shaped for sportive tricks (l.1)	have no delight to pass away the time (l.12)
rudely stamp'd, and want love's majesty (l.3)	descant on mine own deformity (l.14)
deform'd, unfinish'd (l.7)	I cannot prove a lover (l.15)
scarce half made up (l.8)	determined to prove a villain (l.17)
lamely and unfashionable (l.9)	hate the idle pleasures (l.18)

Task 4

Structure and function of the passage

As the grid shows, Richard's first focus is on his outward appearance (ll.1-10), before he turns to reflect on his attitudes (ll.11-18). However, the second part may again be divided: Lines 11-14 list the effects of physical shortcomings on his character, whilst the final part is introduced by the words "And therefore" (l. 15), so that the more general conclusion Richard draws is based on the earlier observations: because of his physical defects, he hates not only himself, but the whole world, and acts like a villain. Richard builds his argument in a linear way, beginning with descriptions which lead him to a rational conclusion: Since his body is in bad shape, his mind is so accordingly.

Richard describes himself in this way in order to argue that what he does is not his own fault, but fate's. The soliloquy is a self-defence which clears him from any guilt: Since he was born with his deficient

body, he has been hated by people ("ambling nymphs", l. 4) and even animals ("dogs bark at me", l. 10) in his environment, and for this reason he has turned into the evil guy he is now.

This self-reflection is also, from the structural viewpoint, a self-introduction to the spectator. He clearly outlines his evil nature and, since the spectators "know" him, they will assess various situations in the play in a different way from that of the other characters, for example, the wooing scene quoted in the textbook.

Task 5

Language analysis

This soliloquy is written in an expressive style, by which Richard thinks about himself, describing himself with a number of metaphorical phrases and hyperbolic expressions. The first 14 lines comprise an accumulation of self-descriptions in one long sentence, each new beginning introduced by the personal pronoun "I" (ll. 1, 3, 5, 11). The length of the sentence points to the fact that this is a construction with many parallel clauses without any connectors (asyndetic coordination), and condenses the information about Richard himself to a few major points.

The use of the first-person pronoun at, or close to, the beginning of each line may be considered, at least in the first three instances, an anaphora: The repetitive use of "I" not only structures the passage, but it also emphasises Richard's own narcissism, although it should not be understood as self-love, which he denies: He does not like to look into a mirror, as others do, who "court" their own looks in a "looking glass" (l.2). Instead, he points out the effects of his "deformed, unfinish'd" (l. 7) body in the social world, because he points out his separation from beautiful women (referred to, figuratively, as "ambling nymphs", l.4) and their erotic temptations ("wanton", l.4), as well as from the world of beasts who react violently upon his presence. Richard refers to dogs as *pars pro toto* for all species: Even they "bark at me, as I halt by them" (l. 10). At the end of the passage, Richard uses the antithesis of "lover" and "villain" in a parallelism: "prove a lover [...] prove a villain" (ll.15-18).

Some of the metaphors Richard uses indicate that he puts the blame for his evil character to "dissembling Nature" (l.6), a personification of the universe which also "rudely stamp'd" l. 3), i.e. marked him painfully, and which has "cheated" (l. 6) Richard by denying him characteristics that usually make a human being attractive. When Richard alludes to his early birth which made him look unfinished ("scarce half made up", l. 8), he refers again to an impersonal, non-human agent that "sent [him] before [his] time" (l. 7).

Richard points out that he does not like the "weak piping time of peace" (l. 11) nor the "idle pleasures of these days" (l. 18), because he only feels like watching ("spy[ing]", l. 14) his own shadow – the dark opposite of the mirror image mentioned in l. 2. This implies that Richard needs his evil nature because without causing trouble, he feels depressed.

The tone of the passage, though it seems to be a bitter revelation about his own self, seems light enough: Since he sees his evil character as given by nature, he does not have any guilty conscience. He is committed to his character and lets the spectators know about this.

Task 6:

Comparison: Richard's soliloquy and his courtship for Anne (Context, pp. 79-80)

In both passages the reader or spectator learns about Richard, in the soliloquy he reflects upon himself, whilst in the wooing scene shows Anne's point of view. While in the first passage, he seems to be alone with no-one else listening, the second is in public, because not only the two speakers are present on stage, but also soldiers.

In his soliloquy, Richards points out that he is detested, because of his deformity, both among women ("wanton ambling nymphs", above, l. 4) and animals ("dogs bark at me", l. 10). In the second, Anne swears at him, calling him the names of two animals: "hedgehog" and "toad" (*Context*, ll. 3, 55). Still, Anne's hatred has its reason less in Richard's bodily deformity, although it may be intensified by it: Her main reason to abuse Richard and to spit at him (*Context*, l. 51) is that Richard is the murderer of her husband ("be damned for that wicked deed!", *Context*, l. 4), and that he gets away with it, although he

admits the crime even twice ("I grant ye", *Context*, l. 2, cf. ll. 75-76). Thus, the mourning for her husband is disturbed, and in fact perverted, by Richard in his attempt to court her in that very situation.

It is remarkable that Richard, in both scenes, does not deny his evil character. Whilst in the soliloqui, he puts the blame on "Nature", for forming him in this deficient way, he makes Anne responsible for his murder in the courtship scene: "Your beauty was the cause of that effect; / Your beauty, which did haunt me in my sleep / To undertake the death of all the world / So I might live one hour in your sweet bosom." (*Context*, ll. 24-28; cf. again ll. 75-76) Here, Richard describes her beauty like that of an "ambling nymph" and declares that he would be willing to take measures out of all proportion to win Anne for himself – which she denies him, thus 'proving' the line in his soliloquy. Despite his ability to turn Anne's beauty against herself, he addresses her in polite terms: "gentle Lady Anne" (*Context*, l. 17), "fair creature" (l. 35), "sweet lady" (l. 57). Thus, his charges against her are even more weighty, due to the discrepancy between his formal politeness and the severe implications of his explanations for his crime. At the same time, he assimilates her nature to his own: If she had not been so beautiful, he would have had no reason to kill, and by this train of thought, her beauty appears morally just as evil as he is in his ugliness.