

*Literature Insights*  
General Editor: Charles Moseley

A GUIDE TO

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE  
RICHARD III

C. W. R. D. MOSELEY

*'No Vice  
ever took  
an audience  
for such a ride ...'*

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*William Shakespeare:  
Richard III*

*C. W. R. D. Moseley*

# A Note on the Author

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Dr Moseley is Fellow and Tutor of Hughes Hall, Cambridge, and Director of Studies in English for that College and for St Edmund's College. He teaches Classical, mediaeval and Renaissance literature in the English Faculty of the University of Cambridge, and is the author of many books and articles, not all in his specialist fields. He has travelled widely in the Arctic, and is a member of the Arctic Club. He has been elected to Fellowship of the Society of Antiquaries of London and of the English Association. He is also a member of the Society for Nautical Research.

He is General Editor of the Literature Insights series, to which his contributions will include studies of *The Tempest*, and Shakespeare's treatment of *Henry IV*, together with a companion to all our Renaissance Drama titles: *English Renaissance Drama: a Very Brief Introduction to Theatre and Theatres in Shakespeare's Time*.

# Contents

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## A Note on the Author

## Introduction

### 1. ‘Jacobethan’ Attitudes

- 1.1 History and Politics
- 1.2 The Model of the World
- 1.3 Free Will and the Fall of Man
- 1.4 Macrocosm and Microcosm
- 1.5. The Failure of the Model

### 2. Theories of Drama

History and Tragedy

### 3. History, Tragedy, and Politics

### 4. The Sources and their use

### 5. The Figure of Richard

- 5.1 Richard and the Morality Vice
- 5.2 Richard and the machiavel

### 6. Richard’s Performance

### 7. Conscience and the King—Some Themes of the Play

- 7.1 Justice, Vengeance, Revenge
- 7.2 Time and the Importance of Margaret

### 8. The Structure of the Play

### 9. Language, Style and Rhetoric

### 10. Afterword

## Appendix: The Text of the Play

## Further Reading

## Conceptual Index

## Hyperlinked Text

## Introduction

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Elizabethans and Jacobean expected plays to amuse and divert them. If they failed to do so their authors and the companies they worked for did not make a living in a very cut-throat market. In the new permanent commercial theatres of the later Elizabethan period, attitudes to drama and expectations of its **conventions**<sup>1</sup> had been formed by centuries of religious and ritual drama—the Mystery and **Morality** plays. And although by definition what we see on the stage is not ‘the real thing’, but a representation through illusion, neither that nor its amusement value prevents theatre being a highly self-conscious and serious intellectual pursuit, recognized as such by audiences and playwrights, actors and critics. The profundity of Shakespeare’s concerns and their analysis in his plays may be unusual in degree, but those concerns are shared by his fellow-dramatists.

This book deals with only one play, but that play is very much part not only of one man’s work with a particular group of actors, but also of a general theatrical culture which was one of the only two mass media of the period, to which everyone more or less went and to which nobody could not have an attitude. (The other was sermon.) I therefore RECOMMEND STRONGLY THAT THIS BOOK BE READ IN CONJUNCTION with my *English Renaissance Drama: a Very Brief Introduction to Theatre and Theatres in Shakespeare’s Time* (hereafter VBI) in this series. What follows is based in some degree on the assumption that it will be.

Those familiar with the background of Elizabethan culture can skip sections 1.1 to 2 and go straight to the discussion of the play, always bearing in mind the close connection in that society between theatre and politics: theatre provided one of the few spaces where the undiscussable could be discussed through a fable and a large number of people at once could in the ritual space of the theatre face the problems of the real world transmuted into fiction. No wonder the authorities were so nervous of the theatres, and keen at the same time to use to their own purposes

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<sup>1</sup> No society, or art can work without conventions: briefly, an area, or areas, of agreement between author and audience where the referents need not be stated. If you do not know the conventions, you are bound to get things seriously wrong.

# 1. ‘Jacobethan’ Attitudes

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## 1.1 History and Politics

*Richard III* is one of very many ‘Jacobethan’<sup>1</sup> plays about (mainly English) history. (Shakespeare himself wrote nine before 1600—a quarter of his whole canon of thirty-seven plays, and several others draw subjects from British or Roman history.) Their past fascinated the Elizabethans, who sought in it guidelines for a future that seemed fraught with danger. The old Queen was without a clear heir, and refused to arrange the succession. Her whole reign had seen constant unrest at home and abroad. Although she managed to keep the loyalty of most of her Catholic subjects—after all, the admiral who defeated the Armada in 1588 was Catholic—the religious question was bubbling away like a pressure cooker, and it seemed it could at any time tear the commonwealth of England apart (especially after Pope Pius V in 1570 encouraged good Catholics to conspire against and assassinate Elizabeth). One had only to look at France and the Low Countries to see the havoc caused by religious strife between Catholic and Protestant; there was no guarantee it could not happen in England. Civil war, dynastic or religious, was really possible when the Queen died, and of course eventually in 1642 it came—though not for the expected reasons. The Elizabethans’ fear of this most terrible of conflicts was reasonable: recent English history included a century of piratical nobles wrangling over the crown, and the wrong done to ‘this noble realm of England’ is the text to which nearly all chronicle or history plays of the period are glosses. The orotund opening sentence of Hall’s *Union of the Noble and Illustre Families of Lancastre and York* (1548), one of Shakespeare’s sources for *Richard III*, expresses the revulsion:

What mischief hath insurged in realms by intestine division, what depopulation hath ensued in countries by civil dissension, what detestable murder hath been committed in cities by separate factions, and what calamity hath ensued in famous regions by domestic discord and unnatural controversy,

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<sup>1</sup> By this ugly word I mean the years between, say, 1585 and 1615: Elizabeth died in 1603 to be succeeded by James of Scotland.

Rome hath felt, Italy can testify. France can bear witness, Beaume [Bohemia] can tell, Scotland can write, Denmark can show, and especially this noble realm of England can apparently declare and make demonstration.

Nowadays history's social and political importance of is easily forgotten, when the subject seems, for most, to have been reduced from the high philosophic search for humane understanding to gossip about grandparents, but George Orwell's *1984* expresses chillingly an idea which every generation until our own would have understood: 'Who controls the past controls the present; who controls the present controls the future.' The seriousness with which totalitarian regimes, whether fictional or as regrettably real as Hitler's Germany or Soviet Russia, take the past reminds us of its importance in forming social and moral values and acting as a yardstick for the present. The Jacobethans were not merely curious, or wanting a romp through their more successful heroes' glamorous exploits; they sought to understand and evaluate the present, and history plays reached more people more often than any other form of historical discussion. The phenomenon of these plays' existence is a historical and cultural fact of major consequence.

No attempt to understand the nature and morality of human societies can avoid assuming some theory of the nature of man and the world he lives in. The Greeks and Romans saw history as a series of cycles, where ultimately all returned to its beginning and started again; the Jews, followed by the Christians, introduced the idea that history was linear, where God Himself intervenes, which would one day come to an emphatic end when the meaning of all would be made plain, as the last paragraph of a novel fits the last piece of stone into the arch. (The Marxists happily took over the idea of history as a progress to a goal, but ditched the spiritual and theological aspects that gave that goal infinitely extensible meaning.) It is, of course, the Christian understanding of human life on earth we have to assume for the reading of Renaissance literature of any kind, and Christian thought heavily influences the model of the universe, which accounted for all the known scientific facts at that time, that had developed over many centuries. This point is very important, for many people attempt what is impossible: to understand the literature, art and politics of the Renaissance—or any other period—with only the sketchiest knowledge of a) what Christians believe and b) the Bible. For the Bible is, with the remains of Classical literature, the basis of Western culture and values, constantly fertilizing the minds of succeeding generations, providing values that really do affect men's behaviour. Any student expecting to be taken seriously, therefore, should get themselves a Bible and read it. We also do our fathers great disservice if we do not bother to find out what

understanding of the nature of Man in Christianity it was for which and by which they lived, died—and killed.

## 1.2 The Model of the World

The world model can be summed up in the word ‘Degree’—an order or rank in which everything in the universe, from the highest seraph to the lowliest element, had a specific place, a specific job which only it could do for the glory of God. Virtue, basically, consisted in doing that job, working with the grain of the universe, singing in harmony with it. The idea, current for several centuries and still leaving fossils in our language and thought, is most powerfully expressed in 1.iii of *Troilus and Cressida*:

The heavens themselves, the planets, and this centre,  
 Observe degree, priority, and place,  
 Insisture, course, proportion, season, form,  
 Office, and custom, in all line of order.  
 And therefore is the glorious planet Sol  
 In noble eminence enthroned and sphered  
 Amidst the other, whose med'cinable eye  
 Corrects the ill aspects of planets evil.  
 And posts like the commandment of a king,  
 Sans check, to good and bad. But when the planed  
 Is evil mixture to disorder wander,  
 What plagues and what portents, what mutiny,  
 What raging of the sea, shaking of earth,  
 Commotion in the winds, frights, changes, horrors,  
 Divert and crack, rend and deracinate  
 The unity and married calm of states  
 Quite from their future! O, when degree is snaked,  
 Which is the ladder to all high designs,  
 The enterprise is sick. How could communities,  
 Degrees in schools, and brotherhoods in cities,  
 Peaceful commerce from dividable shores,  
 The primogeniture and due of birth,  
 Prerogative of age, crowns, sceptres, laurels,  
 But by degree stand in authentic place?  
 Take but degree away, untune that string,

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