***Richard III***

1. i. York triumphant [historically, 1471]; Clarence imprisoned [1478]

ii. Henry VI buried [1471]; Richard and Anne betrothed [1472]

iii. Woodvilles and Yorkists quarrel; Margaret curses both sides; Richard sends murderers

iv. Clarence’s dream and murder [1478]

1. i. Reconciliation scene

ii. Clarence’s children mourn [1478]; King Edward IV dies [1483]

iii. Citizens [historical setting continues to be 1483 until further notice]

iv. Rivers, Grey, and Vaughn imprisoned

1. i. The young princes are witty

ii. Stanley’s dream

iii. Rivers, Grey, and Vaughn killed

iv. Hastings killed

v. Mayor summoned

vi. Scrivener

vii. Richard is persuaded to take the throne

1. i. Elizabeth and Anne mourn

ii. Richard plans to murder the princes; Buckingham splits with him

iii. Princes killed; Buckingham in open rebellion

iv. Margaret rejoices; the Duchess of York curses; Richard woos Princess Elizabeth via her mother; Buckingham’s army disperses, and he is captured

v. Stanley and Queen Elizabeth are on Richmond’s side [1485]

1. i. Buckingham killed [last 1483 event in the play]

ii. Richmond, aka Henry Tudor, later Henry VII, on Bosworth Field the night before battle [1485]

iii. Richard tries to sleep, as does Richmond, with Stanley, in the other camp; ghosts address them both in their dreams; each of them delivers a speech to his army before fighting next day

iv. Battle of Bosworth Field

v. Henry victorious

Chronological, Fictional, and Historical Issues

Shakespeare collapses events of 1471, 1478, and 1483 together in the first three acts; then he interweaves Buckingham’s rebellion in 1483 with events of 1485 in the last two acts. One effect of the play’s chronology is that Richard has no reign depicted whatsoever; he just comes to power and loses it.

Act I is almost entirely fictional. Richard’s soliloquy, his wooing of Anne, and Clarence’s dream and his interaction with his murderers are all unknown to the historical record. So is Margaret’s curse, especially since she was in exile in France at the time. Act II is equally fictional, except for Edward’s attempt to reconcile his wife’s family with his own. Acts III, IV, and V are largely based on historical events.

Historical events that occurred before the play opened keep cropping up in conversations, curses, and dreams:

* the deaths of Richard, Duke of York (and father of Edward IV, Clarence, and Richard III), and of Edmund, Earl of Rutland (yet another son of Richard, Duke of York) in 1460; these deaths are ordered by Queen Margaret, whose sorrows in this play may to some extent be deserved
* the attempt by Warwick and Clarence to seize the crown in 1469 and their joining Margaret and her son in France in 1470, after which they invade England together and restore Henry VI to the throne
* Edward IV invades in 1471, defeats Warwick after reconciling with Clarence, and defeats Margaret and her son in another battle, after which Edward orders the deaths of her son and of Henry VI

Shakespeare did not invent most of the fictional bits in this play, which is based on Thomas More’s biography of Richard III; the biography was not history as we understand it but a moral example of a political danger – in this case, tyranny.

The Supernatural

The pattern of curses coming true and dreams being prophetic is consistent throughout the play, and everyone who dies in the play and was skeptical about curses and dreams becomes convinced of their power by life’s end. However, prayers are inconsistently granted. Think about who is praying and who is acting against what they are asking. Also, think about the role of free will in Christian theology. (Note that the truth of curses, dreams, ghosts, and other supernatural phenomena is a stage convention – think about *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* – but whether it reflects people’s off-stage beliefs is not as clear.)

Language

The sources of humor in this play are verbal wit and irony. Richard’s loss of his command of language in Act IV, apparently because he has been having people killed, is dramatized partly by his losing his temper at a messenger bringing good news and at Catesby, who is waiting for orders. But the most important measure of his decline can be seen by contrasting the way he woos Anne directly and successfully in Act I with the way he woos Princess Elizabeth indirectly and unsuccessfully in Act IV; the former foreshadows his success at winning the throne and the latter foreshadows his losing the throne.

Richard’s Reputation

This play has succeeded in blackening Richard III’s character until recently. Many scholars have labored to improve our opinion of Richard in the past century, and Josephine Tey gathers the evidence for Richard and presents it in her novel, *Daughter of Time.* Going back to original sources, whether chronicles from the 1480s depict Richard favorably or not correlates only with the writers’ politics.