

RICHARD III

Teachers' Notes

This study guide is aimed at students at both GCSE and A' level; it contains information and activities which would be appropriate for Media Studies, Film, English Literature (the tasks set could provide interesting coursework) and Theatre Studies. It looks at the process of adapting Shakespeare's play text into a feature film for a nineties audience -incorporating narrative, representation and film language.

Synopsis

This film of Shakespeare's most famous villain the conquering hero turned ruthless powermonger, who creates hell in peacetime when he sets his sights on the throne - is set in an imaginary England of the 1930's, embracing all the richness of style and music of the period, as well as the political overtones of rising tyranny in Europe.

Richard III

Dir: Richard Loncraine

Screenplay by Sir Ian McKellen who also stars as Richard III

UK release dates 26 April 1996

Certificate: 15

Running time: 102mins



RICHARD III

The Audience and the Text

Richard Loncraine, the director of the new film *Richard III* has said that he wanted to make a film that he would want to see, as a person who was not 'into' Shakespeare, in fact someone who had been put off by Shakespeare at school. He describes the story of 'Richard III' as a "roller coaster".

"I'm always very excited by the idea that people, young and old, may be discovering Shakespeare for the first time... but it's my duty to make sure that what they are excited by is not just another action movie, not just a political intrigue thriller or a story about sex and family betrayals and a cruel tyrant. After all, these were inventions, not of the cinema, but of Shakespeare, the master storyteller. It was the cinema that adopted so much of the drama, the excitement and the thrills which Shakespeare invented. This project took off because film people got excited about the script. Whether they realised it or not, the person who excited United Artists was Shakespeare. I'm happy to be his agent."

Richard Loncraine

"Mixing words and pictures, the screen has its own language. So, in adapting 'King Richard III' I was translating. Gutting Shakespeare has been going on for 400 years... No original play-script in Shakespeare's handwriting has survived him: he did not expect to have his work preserved for posterity by publication. Modern editions are an amalgam from a variety of sources - the original manuscript, before and after it was amended for performance; what his cast may have remembered having acted, when consulted months or years later by publishers; plus the imaginative accretions of subsequent editors."

Ian McKellen

If we consider that the play has, potentially, a number of different ways of being experienced - in a book, as a theatre production, on video, as a film, as a television programme - who might be the audience or audiences for each type of text? How might each type of text be promoted? Would the different types of text need different sizes of audience for them to be deemed popular? In the case of the play in written form, is there only one edition of the play available? If there are more, then is each different edition aimed at a different audience? What are the needs of the audience? Are they going to experience the text for pleasure, or for study, or for another reason?

So who would be the audience for 'King Richard III'? Or is there more than one audience, considering the different ways in which the play can be experienced and the ways in which the text of the play 'King Richard III' would attract audiences?

Who might be the audience for the new film of 'Richard III'?

RICHARD III

Adapting Shakespeare

Anyone who adapts a literary text into a film obviously faces challenges. These can arise not simply from the text itself but also from the attitudes of the audience and the critics.

Let us start with the text itself. One thing that we need to bear in mind is that the plays were originally intended as scripts for actors and not as texts for readers. You are probably studying the text in a lot of detail. Unlike a poem, which is normally written for close reading, a play text is not written for the same purpose. It always assumes that part of the impact will come from what happens on the stage itself.

What challenges do you think would face someone who is adapting a literary text into a film? In small groups write down as many as you can think of.

TASK

Consider the challenges of making a film of a Shakespearean text, especially problems with the language including difficult words and expressions (people's names etc.) and problems with the setting and context of the play. How do we make it relevant to contemporary society?

Key decisions were made in preparing the text for filming bearing in mind the obvious truths about film:

- You can easily cut from location to location without having to verbally establish it;
- Actions can speak louder than words;
- Cutting some characters' lines will obviously change the balance in favour of others.

When dealing with adaptations of a Shakespeare text, as in the case of 'King Richard III', we are faced with a specific challenge. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries theatre directors have usually adopted an approach to staging the plays which did not exist in Shakespeare's time. They will have sets, often quite lavish, which show the change of scene, period costumes for the actors, special lighting effects. Having sets and backdrops means that between each scene there is a pause whilst the scenery is changed.

In Shakespeare's time, the flow of the play was far more like the flow of a film - as one set of actors left the stage another would appear. Like the film, which has no pauses between scenes, the audience of Shakespeare's time would not have expected any pauses in the action.

RICHARD III

Make a chart with headings as shown below, and write down what you think are the major differences between seeing a film, watching the play in a theatre and reading the text of the play. With each of the different experiences we are “reading”, but how do we read and experience each text? What gives us ideas about how to understand actions and characters?

TEXT	THEATRE PRODUCTION	FILM

RICHARD III

Creating a Drama

When Shakespeare came to write 'King Richard III', the events on which he based his play had happened only one hundred years previously. However in telling the story of Richard, Shakespeare was not interested in retelling history. He was a dramatist, not an historian. His aim was to examine a character, to examine ideas of power and ambition. Richard III's life offered a story through which he could explore these themes and character traits.

In many ways, Shakespeare's approach to the subject of his play is similar to that of filmmaker Oliver Stone, in his films 'JFK' and 'Nixon'. In both of these films, are we watching a documentary, or are we watching one person's view of an historical event, dramatised in order to engage an audience in a gripping story?

'King Richard III' could also be viewed as a sequel - a follow on from the three plays that Shakespeare wrote about King Henry VI. In filmic terms, you could compare this to the 'Star Wars' trilogy. How far could Shakespeare rely on the fact that his audience had 'seen' the previous parts of the story? Richard, as the Duke of Gloucester, appears in 'The Third Part Of King Henry VI'. Would Shakespeare need to keep the portrayal of the character of Richard consistent between the two plays? Or could he alter him as he moved him to the central role in 'King Richard III', allowing him to concentrate on new ideas and themes?

In approaching the story of Richard III, Shakespeare would have had to consider how to turn the story into a compelling drama capable of holding the attention of the audience and through which he could also explore the themes and ideas which interested him.

In the same way, a screenwriter adapting Shakespeare's text for the screen will focus on certain aspects of the play, highlighting some and omitting others, always bearing in mind the audience for whom they are writing.

Creating Characters

Below is a brief outline of the story of Richard III:

During the Civil Wars that had divided England, Richard supported his elder brother Edward's claim to the throne. He remained loyal throughout the reign of the victorious King Edward IV. On Edward's death, his thirteen-year-old son and heir was named King Edward V and Richard was made Lord Protector, in charge of running the country. Yet within two months, the young king, along with his nine-year-old brother, had disappeared. Rumour said that they were kept within the stone walls of the Tower of London - where state prisoners were incarcerated and executed. It was soon believed that the two boys had been put to death in the Tower on the direct orders of their uncle, who then reigned as King Richard III. Two years later Henry Richmond led a rebellion and killed Richard III at the Rattle of Bosworth. Richmond was crowned King Henry VII.

RICHARD III

In this outline, we are given some details about events, but not about characters. There are only five people mentioned but Shakespeare's play has a cast of over fifty characters (excluding armies, and so on). In the main screen credits of the film, twenty nine characters are named. So who might these other characters be and what part do they play in the story? How would Shakespeare develop this story into a drama and what motivation would he give to the characters?

TASK

Reading through the outline again, what do you think needs to be added in order to turn it into a story to interest an audience? As a member of an audience, as a reader of the outline, what questions could you ask about the story? Some initial suggestions are listed below:

- Did Richard order the death of the two princes?
- If Henry Richmond led a rebellion, was he a traitor? Does this therefore make him an evil character in the story?
- Why did Richard remain loyal to King Edward, but then order the death of his sons?
- What other types of characters might be involved in the story?

Having thought about what questions to ask, get into groups and try to answer them.

Shakespeare's play deals with concepts of power and ambition. How will this affect the way in which the story develops? What actions will the characters perform in order to gain power? What motivates the characters?

What you are doing is beginning the process which both Shakespeare and McKellen had to go through - creating a story with raw material - deciding on the motivation of characters, how one event leads to another, thereby creating a detailed structure for the story.

TASK

If you do not have time to write out the whole story then write down the key moments of the story development. You could create a flow chart where each key moment of the plot is placed in a single box.

In constructing their versions of 'Richard III', Shakespeare and McKellen's own concerns came into play. Shakespeare re-presents the story of Richard and McKellen re-presents that which Shakespeare wrote. Each adapts the material at their disposal in ways which interest them.

RICHARD III

RICHARD III FOR A MODERN AUDIENCE

Finding the Right Period

'As so often happens with a classic play, we talked about it in the near present tense and imagined it taking place yesterday rather than yesteryear. This, I suppose, was what Shakespeare intended. The historical events which he used and adapted for his plays were staged as drama not as a history lesson.'

McKellen

In preparing to adapt 'King Richard III' for the screen, McKellen had to make a number of decisions as to how he would film the play - where he would set it, both in the sense of place and also time. Not wishing to go down the "characters in tights" road, he decided to set it in the 1930's. In this he differs from the previous filmed version made in 1955 by Sir Laurence Olivier. This version was set in period dress and locations

"The historical events of the play had occurred just a couple of generations before the first audience saw them dramatised. A comparable period for us would be the 1930's, close enough for no one to think we were identifying the plot of the play with actual events, any more than Shakespeare was writing about the real King Richard. He was creating history which never happened. Our production was properly in the realm of "what might have been". Also the thirties were appropriately a decade of tyranny throughout Europe, the most recent time when a dictatorship like Richard III's might have overtaken the United Kingdom, as it had done Germany, Italy, Spain and the empire of the Soviet Union.

Audiences across the world took the point and revealed a paradox: the more specific a production, the more general its relevance. Although our story was obviously an English one, audiences took the message personally wherever we toured - in Hamburg Richard's blackshirt troops seemed like a commentary on the Third Reich..."

McKellen

In what sense is McKellen following the sense of Shakespeare's play? Think back to the work that you have already completed. Shakespeare was not presenting an historical document. He was examining a type of character. Does the drama that Shakespeare wrote have to be presented in "olde days" costume? What in the text itself demands this?

"The crucial advantage of a modern setting is clarity of storytelling. It is impossibly confusing to try and distinguish between a multitude of characters who are all done up in floppy hats and wrinkled tights. Richard III has a long, complex cast list, but it is not a pageant. It analyses a sophisticated group of powerful and would-be powerful players. The political detail of the story cannot clearly unfold unless each of these characters can be readily identified by profession and by social status. The audience needs to be able to recognise who is royalty, aristocrat, commoner and who is politician, civil servant, military. By their clothes, you shall know them. If this were true of the play it would be equally valid for the film."

McKellen

RICHARD III

In this final comment, McKellen talks about making the play clear for the audience. This raises the question of for whom the play itself was written. For whom did Shakespeare write the words - was it for the audience, or was it for the actor, who had to understand and interpret the words? whom they are writing.



Finding the Right Locations

Loncraine wanted a unique look for the film and he and his team made every effort to seek out authentic buildings of the period, filming at more than forty locations.

"We've created a completely fictitious world. We're saying it's some time, some place, immediately before the last war. We didn't go to a stately home and say 'All right. This will do.' Our palace is St. Pancras Station, a London railway station which, with the help of computer technology we set on the banks of the Thames. Our royal country retreat, the Brighton Pavilion, in reality located in the heart of the town, becomes a beach front property. Our battle takes place in the burnt out shell of a 1920's power station. We cover an enormous canvas, from the decadent to the austere, so there is a feast for the eye."

Loncraine

RICHARD III

Loncraine and production designer, Tony Burrough, at first looked at various stately homes, but decided against going for a safe option. In creating their own, fictitious world, they were looking for what Loncraine called “eccentric places”. So King Edward’s palace was filmed at a Victorian hotel attached to St.Pancras Station in London. The University of London’s Senate House became Richard’s headquarters - an interesting choice as during the Second World War the building was used by the Ministry of Information. For the scene of the rally, the underground area of Earl’s Court Exhibition Centre was used as the behind the scenes area of the arena.

For the culminating battle - the Battle of Bosworth - the dusty wastelands around Battersea Power Station in London, long abandoned but a listed building, provide the backdrop for the confrontation of Richmond and Richard.

“We drew on elements we liked about the look of the thirties as they really were and used them as keys. The costumes, for example, were very specific to 1936. Costume designer Shuna Harwood, first scoured the vintage clothing stores of London and Paris for 1930’s originals. We’re using thirties furniture, thirties architecture - the Shellmex Building, the art deco terminal at Shoreham Airport. Richard of Gloucester’s car is a 1936 Bentley. The style of the picture, however is heightened reality. By that I mean we haven’t been slavish to period detail. We haven’t been frightened to use something which might not be accurate, but looks perfect in the context. That’s the great thing about movies. You can cheat.”

Burrough

TASK

Skim through the play text for five minutes – what directions for sets and locations have been specified? Think about the locations which have been used in the film. What differences are there, how does the choice of location affect our view of the story?

Suggest two modern-day locations in which you could film ‘King Richard III’, which could give the same ideas about the themes of the play. These may be places well known to you or famous locations. If possible, give an outline of the set either in words or pictures, including directions for colour. You must then give reasons for your choices. What do your choices say about the mood of the film which you are trying to create? Your reasons must include choice of character and setting.

RICHARD III

The Opening Sequence

"I was initially reluctant to pre-empt Shakespeare's opening words with some of my own. Shouldn't the film start with pictures rather than words? Shouldn't we actually see Richard killing King Henry VI and his son, the Prince of Wales?"

McKellen

In film language, the opening sequence of a film is important as it introduces characters, locations and the type of film we are going to be viewing.

Think back to the opening sequence of the film - what genre is the film? How do we know? You may like to consider the following areas:

- Costume
- Sound - music and sound effects
- Lighting
- Use of camera - whose eyes are the camera?
- Graphics - intertitles and credits
- Characters' initial actions, body language and facial expressions
- Editing

Why have McKellen and Loncraine chosen this opening for the film? Who do you think is the intended audience?

Is it what you expected to see in a Shakespeare film? You have already said what genre you think the film fits into. But let us think a moment about the 'Shakespeare' genre in film. Have you seen films such as Mel Gibson's 'Hamlet' or Kenneth Branagh's 'Henry V' or 'Much Ado About Nothing'? How do these films differ from McKellen's 'Richard III'?



RICHARD III

Adapting a Scene

For the next task you will need to have in front of you a copy of Act I Scene III of the play. You are going to look at the first 160 lines and try to think how you would present these lines either on stage or in a film. You will need to think who is talking to whom and how they might be positioned within a frame which is either the frame of a film or else a stage setting.

Let's start at the beginning of the scene. Where is the action taking place? What clues are we given from the play text? Where do you think the action could be taking place? Why should all of these people be getting together? There must be a reason for all of them to appear in the same place. What is it?

Having decided why these people are together now decide who is talking to whom. Look at the first six lines. Three characters speak. Who is talking to whom? Why do you think this?

Carry on this way until you get to line 17. Lord Grey states that Lords Buckingham and Derby have come into the scene. Why should he say this? Who is he talking to - the other characters, or is he partly addressing the audience, and if so, why?

As you continue to examine the scene, try to think about what each character might be doing while they talk. Would they just stand there without moving? Who might they move towards or away from? How might the people they stand near tell us something about their relationship with both them and with those that they avoid? How does what is said by characters help us understand the power relationships within this group?

The Opening Soliloquy

The choices made by the filmmakers and actors faced with the challenge of tackling the soliloquies may help illuminate various possibilities in the text, as well as the issues involved in presenting Shakespeare's plays and characters in their various forms - text, play and film.

How do filmmakers, involved in a medium which is primarily visual, go about making decisions of what to cut, what to cut and replace in visual terms, what to keep and illustrate, and what has to be said alone?

TASK

On the following pages, compare the two versions of the opening soliloquy - Shakespeare's text (Act I Scene I lines 1-41) and the screenplay by McKellen (below). What changes has McKellen made to the original? Make a list of the differences. Why do you think he made these changes or cuts?

RICHARD III

Extract from the screenplay of 'Richard III' by Ian McKellen and Richard Loncraine

INT. BALLROOM - THE PALACE - NIGHT

RICHARD moves slowly through the throng.

Everyone watches delightedly as the little PRINCE JAMES dances on his mother's toes.

CLARENCE is taking snaps.

The QUEEN suddenly spots her brother EARL RIVERS and sweeping the young prince up in her arms, she rushes to greet him.

SIR WILLIAM CATESBY, the monarch's permanent private secretary, leans over KING EDWARD's chair and they look toward CLARENCE, whose photography is interrupted by an urgent, private request from LIEUTENANT SIR ROBERT BRACKENBURY, in Chief Constable's uniform. TWO MILITARY STRONOMEN, looking uncomfortable in civilian evening dress, are in attendance.

As CLARENCE is politely led away, he looks toward his brother KING EDWARD, who asthmatically coughs and turns his attention back to the jovial RIVERS, who is now seated with the royal party. Apart from CATESBY and the royal brothers, KING EDWARD and RICHARD, everyone seems to have missed the whole episode.

RICHARD watches his brother CLARENCE being led out. Then he skirts round the dancers, to have a word with the BAND LEADER. The music ends with a flourish and the Royals settle in their seats. The whole company turns toward RICHARD, as he clears his throat and scratches the mesh of the singer's microphone.

RICHARD
Now is the winter of our discontent
Made glorious summer by this sun of York!

RICHARD toasts the smiling, new King. KING EDWARD regally acknowledges the laughter and applause of his family, friends and national leaders from politics and commerce.

RICHARD
(continuing)
And all the clouds that loured upon our house
In the deep bosom of the ocean buried.
Now are our brows bound with victorious wreaths;
Our bruised arms hung up for monuments;
Our stern alarums changed to merry meetings,
Our dreadful marches to delightful measures.

APPLAUSE as RICHARD smiles. The popular war-leader is working well in these civilian surroundings.

HASTINGS smiles, satisfied; the ARCHBISHOP looks benignly content

The appreciative audience misses RICHARD'S irony, with the exception of BUCKINGHAM, who listens intently and quizzically, puffing on his Havana and sipping his Napoleon 5-star.

RICHARD
(continuing)
Grim-visaged war has smoothed his wrinkled front:
And now, instead of mounting barbed steeds,
To fight the souls of fearful adversaries
He...

RICHARD III

INT. WASHROOM - THE PALACE - NIGHT

RICHARD flings open the door of the stately lavatory and makes for the WC cubicle, past the ornate, carved mirrors above the deep washstands, with their gold taps and luxurious selection of towels, brushes, soaps and lotions. In the distance, the DANCE BAND plays 'A Delightful Measure.'

RICHARD
(continuing)
... capers nimbly in a lady's chamber,
To the lascivious pleasing of a lute.
But I, that am not shaped for sportive tricks.
Nor made to court an amorous looking-glass,
I, that am rudely stamped –
Deformed, unfinished, sent before my time
Into this breathing world, scarce half made up,
And that so lamely and unfashionable
That dogs bark by me, as I halt by them:

RICHARD pulls the chain and emerges to wash his hand.

RICHARD
(continuing)
Why, I, in this weak piping time of peace,
Have no delight to pass away the time,
Unless to spy my shadow in the sun,
And descant on my own deformity.

RICHARD looks in the mirror at his blasted, sagging, left profile, the Brylcreemed hair smooth over his alopeciaed dome, He dries his right hand.

RICHARD
(continuing; his lips scarcely move as he
addresses both himself and the CAMERA
through the mirror)
Why, I can smile; and murder while I smile;
And whet my cheeks with artificial tears
And frame my face to all occasions!
And, therefore, since I cannot prove a lover,
I am determined to prove a villain
And hate the idle pleasures of these days.
Plots I have laid...

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Take a look at the two filmed versions, Olivier's and McKellen's, of the "Now is the winter of our discontent" soliloquy. It is worth noting that a key difference between them is that in the McKellen version, the speech is divided into two - the first section is a public speech, the second a soliloquy. Why do you think that it was presented in this way? As the speech comes at the very beginning of the play, it obviously sets the scene, giving us an introduction to Richard himself. But what does it tell us?

RICHARD III

TASK

In the chart below you should consider the ways in which these two filmed versions of 'King Richard III' present the opening soliloquy. How are the characters presented to us? What is the setting and how does this affect the way that we understand what is happening? What do the costumes tell us about the characters? Is there a particular style to the way that the film is shot? What ideas or themes are given to us in the opening? What different elements of the play or character have come to light? How does the director and the actor involve us the audience in what is happening and what is being said? What image is given of Richard?

	OLIVIER	McKELLEN
CONTEXT • representation of political / social atmosphere		
DESIGN • the 'look' of the set		
LIGHTING		
COSTUMES / PERIOD		
RICHARD • representation • type of character		
POV SHOTS • through whose eyes do we 'see' the action?		
ACTING STYLE • characterisation • delivery		
THEMES • what ideas are introduced / underlined in visual terms? • how was this done?		

RICHARD III

The Character of Richard

When Shakespeare's plays are grouped together, 'King Richard III' often presents a paradox. Whilst in one sense it is a 'history' play, its title calls it a tragedy. Shakespeare's tragic heroes usually combine a high degree of passion with a fatal flaw in their character. They carry within them the seeds of their own downfall which we witness. They arouse pity and terror in the audience. If Shakespeare calls his play a tragedy, what elements of the tragic hero do you think Richard contains? Is he punishing the world for seeing him in a certain way? Are we sympathetic to him because of his sense of humour and charm? Do we ever identify with him or even like him?

Richard is often presented on stage as being evil incarnate, but McKellen followed a different route, believing that Shakespeare wanted to make Richard a rounded character, not simply an evil stereotype.

Richard's psychology is not simple, and, through showing us his motivation and his reactions, both playwright and director shed light on the human condition. The traditional, cruel and old-fashioned view was that his deformity was the outward manifestation of inner evil. McKellen states that, on the contrary, studying the play revealed to him that Richard's wickedness is an outcome of other people's reaction to his physique, and that in the film he wanted to explore Richard's humanity rather than reducing him to an emblem of wickedness.

Spend some time looking through the text of the play and jotting down the other characters' comments on Richard's physical appearance. Make a list. What kind of picture do you get? How does the film confirm Richard's appearance through his physical presence, other people's comments and the lighting and camera technique?



RICHARD III

The Soliloquies

In Shakespeare's plays the soliloquy serves to mediate directly between a character and the audience, delivering extremely intimate information in the way a narrator might about a character in a novel. How does McKellen achieve this in the film? How do we know how Richard feels?

We have already looked at the opening soliloquy - what do you remember about the camera work, the setting and the lighting? What did they contribute to our attitude to and information about Richard?

As the speech comes at the very beginning of the play, it obviously sets the scene and gives us an introduction to Richard himself. What does it tell us about him and about the world he moves in?

With a copy of the speech from the screenplay in front of you (see above), mark the information that the speech gives you and the lines or words that give us information about Richard's character.

"All of Shakespeare's troubled heroes reveal their inner selves in their confidential soliloquies... These are true confessions to the audience. Richard may lie to all the other characters but within his solo speeches he always tells the truth. I never doubted that in the film he would have to break through the fourth wall of the screen and talk directly to the camera, as to a confidant. If this unsettled the audience, so much the better. They should not be comfortable hearing his vile secrets and being treated as accomplices. They would also better appreciate the brilliance of his ability to fool, deceive and seduce his hapless victims."

McKellen

Think back to the various other moments in the film when Richard addresses us - the soliloquies - and lets us know his innermost thoughts. Often he is telling us that he is going to fool and manipulate the people around him. How then do we feel when we see him doing this? Do we feel that he is an evil character or do we feel admiration for the way that he can trick people into believing what he says. Morally, how does this place us in relation to Richard? Do we think he is a completely evil character or do we feel an admiration for him as he so effortlessly gets exactly what he wants, from Lady Anne to the crown of England? Are there things to admire in Richard?

Rather late in the day Richard reveals a troubled conscience in his final alarming soliloquy:

"I attempted to make this guilt more credible in the screenplay helped by cinematic close-up - other instances - by hinting at Richard's inner moral turmoil each time a victim dies."

McKellen

If he is a tragic hero then should we feel more positive towards him at the end of the play? Do we? Do we admire him as he returns to the role of warrior instead of politician? Look at the words from the final soliloquy (King Richard III, Act V Scene III, Lines 178-207).

Are we persuaded that Richard has repented his acts? Has Richard become a tragic hero, rising above a simplistic reading of being merely an "evil man" into someone more complex, more rounded?

At the end of the film, do we feel any sympathy with Richard or are we glad when he meets his end?