

Characters trying to escape their own past or the theme of memory in richard iii

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‘ A play so preoccupied with memory and the past’ Paul Prescott (‘ Richard III’ a guide to the text and its theatrical life 2006)

How far and in what ways is this true of Act One?

In Act One it would be true to state that Richard III is ‘ a play so preoccupied with memory and the past’. From the beginning of the play, various characters make references to their pasts that some have tried to escape. Additionally, numerous contrasts are made between the characters’ past, present and future. This focus on memory a theme of guilt for previous undertaken actions and this creates a concentration on the theme of religion.

It must be said the ‘ memory and the past’ are true within the play to a somewhat large extent in Act 1, Scene 1 during Richard’s soliloquy. The dramatic opening to the soliloquy in scene 1 establishes that The family of York’s (‘ our’) ‘ discontent’ has come to an end. Shakespeare further establishes this by contrasting winter to a new ‘ glorious summer’ where ‘ clouds that loured upon’ the ‘ house’ of York have been ‘ buried’ in the ‘ deep bosom of the ocean’. This use of weather imagery implies the change from war to peace. Continually, Richard describes the actions that have been taken during this change. ‘ Our Bruised arms hung up for monuments’ and ‘ our stern alarums changed to merry meetings’. The repetition of the personal pronoun ‘ our’ could perhaps suggest a feeling of unity and collectivity between the family of York regardless of wartime or peacetime. Furthermore, the Richard reminds the audience of alternatives, which was the role of a Machiavellian villain.

It must also be stated that 'memory and the past' are true within the play to a great extent due to Anne's description of Richard's actions. She says that Richard 'hast made happy earth thy hell' and has 'filled it with cursing cries'. This implies that Richard's murderous and villainous ways have caused grief for Anne and her family due to her husband's death. The alliteration of the letter 'h' in 'hast', 'happy' and 'hell' emphasises her spite for Richard. Furthermore, Anne asks for her fellow gentleman to 'see, dead Henry's wounds. Open their congealed mouths and bleed'. This suggests that even Henry's dead body is disturbed by Richard's presence and therefore Richard is somewhat devil-like. Furthermore, it references a belief during the Plantagenet era that when a murderer would come near to the corpse of whom they had killed, the body would spurt with blood.

Additionally, at the end of scene 2, the play concentrates on 'memory and the past', when Richard exclaims 'Ha!' and consequently asks the audience if Anne hath ... forget already that brave prince...whom I stabbed in my angry mood'. The word 'Ha!' breaks the rhythm of the monologue. The use of sarcasm of throughout the whole extract suggests Richard to be humoured by Anne's idiocy in they manner in which her 'humour' was 'wooded'. Furthermore, the phrase 'angry mood' suggests that it was unnecessary to kill Henry, but it was done in rage, as Richard feels he is extremely powerful. This establishes Richard to be a vice figure. In this case, Richard get 'he wants' through the 'shameless push' of his 'sharp though warped intelligence' (CWRD Moseley).

In correspondence to Prescott's statement that Richard III is a 'play preoccupied with the past', Clarence shows signs of guilt and deceit in the past, in Scene 4. Clarence talks of his dream in which he dreams of hell in which he sees a 'sour ferryman', where he sees his father in law 'Warwick' who calls Clarence 'false' and accuses him of 'perjury'. The ferryman in the dream could be a euphemism for the 'grim reaper' who is an embodiment of death possibly foreshadowing Clarence's death. Furthermore, it could also be a reference to 'Charon' who ferried souls across the river Styx to Hades in Greek mythology. Clarence's father in law accuses Clarence of 'perjury', as Clarence abandoned his in laws for his who he swore on oath to fight for, in return for fighting with his brother. This form of deceit is significant to Paul Prescott's statement, as it shows the actions Clarence partook in the past coming back to haunt him in the future. Ultimately before his death, he asks for absolution and asks him to 'spare' his children and wife. This lack of hope for Clarence's survival creates a sense of sympathy for his character.

However, it must be said that 'memories and past' are perhaps not as important as other themes within the play. For example, it could be argued that the future, plays a considerably greater role in the play than the past. For example, Anne uses curses against Richard the 3rd in scene 2. She commands Richard to 'Avaunt', and curses his 'heart that had the heart to do it'. She also wishes for any of his children to be 'abortive'. The word 'avaunt' implies Richard to be monster-like as it is a word in used to banish supernatural beings. Furthermore, the curses she uses implies that she has

no physical power against him due to lower status as a female but she uses curses to torture him.

In conclusion, Richard III, is a play preoccupied with memory and the past in Act one to a significant degree. Each character seems to have committed crimes and other vices in the past, that seem to constitute towards their troubles later in the play. Anne uses prophecies and curses against Richard in vengeance for the murder of her husband, however it makes her more culpable in the future. Nonetheless, these curses and prophecies are less obvious in terms of their foreshadowing of later events in the play and are therefore not as effective as the theme of memory.