

Richard's character



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In his opening soliloquy, the true nature of Richard's character is revealed, his villainy being divulged in the devious plans that he has plotted in order to usurp the throne. An array of puns, metaphors, and antitheses are used with ironic flair to convey the undertones in his monologue, granting the audience valuable insight to the play. The language that is used masterfully conveys the sarcasm in Richards's words, this being seen in the antithesis of 'winter' and 'summer' in the first two lines.

The contrasting metaphors in these lines are seemingly used as a tool to relay the contrary meanings in his words, suggesting that what he speaks is not what he thinks. This hence serves as a hint to the fact that he is not entirely happy about the victory of the 'son of York'- a pun for the house of York, as it was followed by the crowning of his brother. Also, it is evident that Richard is not agreeable to changes in his life, this being exemplified in another antithesis seen in " stern alarums changed to merry meetings" (1. 1. 7).

In fact, he explicitly speaks of this unhappiness in the line where he states that in " this weak piping time of peace", he has " no delight to pass way the time" (1. 1. 24-25). As such, it is clear that Richard is one who is innately evil; he is never satisfied in peaceful times, with chaos seemingly the only thing would truly allow him to feel alive. Furthermore, the covert bitterness that he feels is subtly made known with the suggestive and deliberate comparison of wartime activities and the present ones; " And now, instead of mounting barbed steeds.... e capers nimbly in a lady's chamber" (1. 1. 10-12).

With this, he implies that the glorious tasks that he has accomplished in war have been reduced to frivolity in peacetime; spending his time in the company of women. In the subsequent lines, Richard proceeds on to an extensive elaboration on the ugliness of his physique; the deformities that separate him from society. The assonance in 'cheated of feature' emphasizes and reminds the audience of the extent of his ugliness, perhaps, also suggestive of his 'moral deformities'.

Once again, the bitterness is evident in his tone as he claims that nature is unfair towards him - hence preventing him from 'proving a lover'. He then goes on to proclaim that he is thus "determined to prove a villain" (1. 1. 30), as though the fact that nature has created him as such was reason enough, and the sole motivations for his evil ways. Here, it would seem that Richard is attempting to find justification for his wrongdoings, and that the evil in his nature is merely a by-product of the 'unfairness' of his physical appearance.

Apart from the soliloquy, it would be difficult for the audience to grasp Richard's character as he scarcely exhibits such honesty throughout the play. As such, the fact that the soliloquy is used as a dramatic device in Richard's opening speech is extremely important; it gives the audience an accurate insight to his true character. Finally, Richard launches into the evil plans that he has made in order to acquire the throne, conveying them with little feeling or guilt. This is stark proof of his ruthlessness, also serving as a foreshadow to the further evil that he was to commit with the progression of the plot.

It is interesting to note that Shakespeare chooses to put Richard's self-depreciating lines before his plans. This is perhaps, done so to allow the audience to feel some pity for him before they are enlightened to his evil, and also understand the motivations behind all his wrongdoing. In the conveyance of his plans, Richard shows brutal honesty in his admittance of his evil nature and compares himself to his brother, King Edward. Once again, the use of antithesis is seen in the comparison of his brother's 'true and just' nature to his own 'false and treacherous' one.

Here, Richard shamelessly reveals to the audience his plans to exploit the good character of his own brother, a further affirmation of his evil nature. Richard's use of language in the soliloquy presents him as a witty and charismatic individual to the audience. In spite of his evil nature and deformed physique, Richard appeals to the audience by speaking directly to them in all but brutal honesty with regards to himself. His interesting choice of formal and figurative elements of language also makes him a dramatic and intriguing character, allowing the audience to appreciate the side of him which is not seen in other parts of the play.

In Laurence Olivier and Al Pacino's performance of the opening soliloquy, the audience is exposed to very different interpretations of Richard's character. While Olivier begins his monologue facing the audience, Pacino does his with his back constantly faced to the camera, with only one side of his face revealed. The choice of Pacino's body positioning creates a sinister impression - perhaps, a reflection of Richard's dark nature.

On the other hand, the fact that Olivier chooses to allow a full frontal view of his face depicts the straightforwardness of Richard's character, an aspect that is overtly presented in his soliloquy. Also, while Olivier's intonation throughout his monologue is almost delivered in a sing-song manner, Pacino alternates between quiet utterances and whispers. This contrasting intonation puts forth another difference in the actors' interpretation of Richard; while Olivier is spirited and confident, Pacino's presentation is more subdued and seemingly, defeated.

This sense of defeat is also apparent in the manner in which Pacino lets himself fall back against the wall behind him as he speaks of his physical appearance, a subtle indication to the resignation that he feels. However, it is important to note that there is one similarity in the way that both actors deliver their lines; the conveyance of a sense of bitterness which is especially apparent in the lines of self-analysis. While Olivier relays this with the rising of his voice, Pacino does so in a much more subtle manner; with the down turning of his lips.

The differences in the actors' portrayal of Richard can also be observed in the different aspects of mise-en-scene. One such difference can be seen in the costumes; Olivier's Richard is garbed in richly coloured and stylised clothes, the emphasis being evidently put on his kingly status. On the other hand, Pacino does not dress the like; opting to instead don costumes that make him appear plain and quite common. As such, it is evident that Pacino is attempting to instil a sense of realism to the interpretation of Richard - perhaps, the fact that apart from the riches and status, he is just an ordinary man.

In addition, the types of lighting used in both scenes also create a very different atmosphere; while Olivier makes use of artificial lighting to simulate daytime, Pacino does the opposite, using low-key lighting which shrouds his surroundings in darkness and shadows. The result of using low-key lighting has a pronounced effect on the audiences' view of Pacino in the play - as his face is almost always hidden in the shadows, a sense of mystery is created around his character.

Interestingly, the contrast of the greenery visible through the windows to the dark interior walls in Pacino's scene reflects a covert facet of Richard's inner world; he is caged by the demons within himself, living in a darkness that separates him from everyone else. The manner in which the audience interprets both scenes is also affected by the editing of the shots. In comparison to Olivier's six shots in seven minutes, Pacino does eighty-nine in the same time span, with the speed of the cuts creating a sense of spontaneity that is often seen in theatre performances. Method acting and Pacino's looking for Richard, pg. 7).

Also, the fast sequences can be seen as a reflection of Richard's mind; it moves at great speeds as he is constantly plotting against his brothers and thinking of ways to usurp the throne. The constant switching of scenes between Pacino's soliloquy and the various commentaries also creates a sense of suspense for the audience, compelling them to wait in anticipation and at the same time, allowing a better understanding of Richard's character.

More importantly, the fast rhythm of Pacino's play keeps the audiences on their toes, creating a sense of constant change that is ever present in the chaotic world that Richard thrives in. Hence, it is apparent that the Richard that Olivier and Pacino attempts to present are vastly different. The aspects of mise-en-scene and the fashion in which they act and deliver their lines serve to further illustrate this fact. While Olivier's play is highly dramatized with 'fake medievalism', Pacino chooses to put forth a much more realistic version, creating a Richard that is much more relevant and comprehensible to the contemporary audience.