

Richard III

INTRODUCTION

THE narrative sequence, *Richard III* follows directly after *Richard Duke of York*, and that play's closing scenes, in which Richard of Gloucester expresses his ambitions for the crown, suggest that Shakespeare had a sequel in mind. But he seems to have gone back to tell the beginning of the story of Henry VI's reign before covering the events from Henry VI's death (in 1471) to the Battle of Bosworth (1485). We have no record of the first performance of *Richard III* (probably in late 1592 or early 1593, outside London); it was printed in 1597, with five reprints before its inclusion in the 1623 Folio.

The principal source of information about Richard III available to Shakespeare was Sir Thomas More's *History of King Richard III* as incorporated in chronicle histories by Edward Hall (1542) and Raphael Holinshed (1577, revised in 1587), both of which Shakespeare seems to have used. His artistic influences include the tragedies of the Roman dramatist Seneca (who was born about 4 bc and died in ad 65), with their ghosts, their rhetorical style, their prominent choruses, and their indirect, highly formal presentation of violent events. (Except for the stabbing of Clarence (1.4) there is no on-stage violence in *Richard III* until the final battle scenes.)

In this play, Shakespeare demonstrates a more complete artistic control of his historical material than in its predecessors: Richard himself is a more dominating central figure than is to be found in any of the earlier plays, historical events are freely manipulated in the interests of an overriding design, and the play's language is more highly patterned and rhetorically unified. That part of the play which shows Richard's bloody progress to the throne is based on the events of some twelve years; the remainder covers the two years of his reign. Shakespeare omits some important events, but invents Richard's wooing of Lady Anne over her father-in-law's coffin, and causes Queen Margaret, who had returned to France in 1476 and who died before Richard became king, to remain in

England as a choric figure of grief and retribution. The characterization of Richard as a self-delighting ironist builds upon More. The episodes in which the older women of the play—the Duchess of York, Queen Elizabeth, and Queen Margaret—bemoan their losses, and the climactic procession of ghosts before the final confrontation of Richard with the idealized figure of Richmond, the future Henry VII, help to make *Richard III* the culmination of a tetralogy as well as a masterly poetic drama in its own right. The final speech, in which Richmond, heir to the house of Lancaster and grandfather of Queen Elizabeth I, proclaims the union of 'the white rose and the red' in his marriage to Elizabeth of York, provides a patriotic climax which must have been immensely stirring to the play's early audiences.

Colley Cibber's adaptation (1700) of *Richard III*, incorporating the death of Henry VI, shortening and adapting the play, and making the central role (played by Cibber) even more dominant than it had originally been, held the stage with great success until the late nineteenth century. Since then, Shakespeare's text has been restored (though usually abbreviated—next to *Hamlet*, this is Shakespeare's longest play), and the role of Richard has continued to present a rewarding challenge to leading actors.