

## Dia-noesis: A Journal of Philosophy

Vol 15 (2024)

Leadership: charisma, power, and freedom



### Leadership and power:

Antonis Papaoikonomou

doi: [10.12681/dia.38173](https://doi.org/10.12681/dia.38173)

### To cite this article:

Papaoikonomou, A. (2024). Leadership and power: : the psychopathology of Shakespearean Richard III. *Dia-Noesis: A Journal of Philosophy*, 15, 81–92. <https://doi.org/10.12681/dia.38173>



## Leadership and power: the psychopathology of Shakespearean Richard III

Antonis D. Papaoikonomou,  
*Phd, Lecturer, School of Political Sciences  
Aristotle University of Thessaloniki  
papaoiko@sch.gr*

### **Abstract:**

This study delves into the intricate portrayal of power and leadership in William Shakespeare's "Richard III," focusing on the titular character's psychopathology. Richard III is depicted as a quintessential tyrant, whose quest for power is marked by manipulation, betrayal, and ruthless ambition. The analysis examines how Shakespeare crafts Richard's character through a blend of physical deformity and psychological complexity, suggesting that his tyrannical actions stem from a deep-seated need to compensate for his personal inadequacies and societal rejection.

Shakespeare's Richard embodies the traits of Machiavellian ambition, employing deceit and brutality to usurp the English throne. His manipulative prowess and disdain for moral boundaries highlight the corrupting influence of power and the perilous consequences of unchecked political ambition. The study explores the thematic elements of Richard's character, including his relentless pursuit of dominance, his contempt for legal and social norms, and his pathological delight in causing suffering.

Moreover, the paper discusses the historical and cultural context of Richard's characterization, noting Shakespeare's reliance on contemporary beliefs linking physical deformity with moral and psychological flaws. Richard's turbulent relationship with his mother and the societal scorn he



faces due to his appearance are scrutinized as pivotal factors shaping his despotic rule.

In conclusion, this analysis underscores Richard III's role as a symbol of the dangers posed by leaders whose pursuit of power is intertwined with personal pathology. Through Shakespeare's vivid portrayal, Richard III serves as a cautionary figure, illustrating the destructive potential of a leader driven by unbridled ambition and psychological torment.

**Keywords:** Richard III, Shakespeare, Psychopathology, Tyranny, Leadership, Power

## Introduction

"Richard III" is a historical play written by William Shakespeare around 1592-1594. The play is part of Shakespeare's series of history plays that chronicle the Wars of the Roses and the rise of the Tudor dynasty. The plot revolves around Richard, Duke of Gloucester, who is determined to seize the English throne. Richard is depicted as a cunning and manipulative villain who uses deception, betrayal, and murder to eliminate his rivals and consolidate power. He stops at nothing to achieve his goal, including the manipulation of those around him and the murder of family members (Barroll, 1991. Baldwin & Baldwin, 2000. Berry, 2005).

The play explores themes of power, ambition, and the consequences of unchecked political ambition. It is known for its memorable opening soliloquy in which Richard declares, "*Now is the winter of our discontent*," and for its portrayal of one of Shakespeare's most memorable and infamous characters, Richard III. The play concludes with the Battle of Bosworth Field, where Richard faces his final downfall, leading to the end of the Wars of the Roses and the establishment of the Tudor dynasty with the rise of Henry VII.

The play portrays Richard as a ruthless and ambitious ruler who manipulates and murders his way to the throne of England. Richard III's rise to power is marked by cunning political strategies, deceit, and the elimination of rivals (Bloom, 1999). Some key themes related to power in Richard III:



- **Ambition and Machiavellian Tactics:** Richard III is often seen as a quintessential Machiavellian character, employing manipulation, deception, and even murder to achieve his political ambitions. He skillfully uses propaganda, sowing discord among his enemies, and eliminating those who stand in his way.

- **Political Intrigue:** The play is rich in political intrigue, showcasing the power struggles within the royal court. Richard's ability to navigate through these complexities demonstrates the ruthless nature of political maneuvering during this historical period.

- **Usurpation of the Throne:** Richard's ultimate goal is to seize the throne of England. He eliminates rivals, including family members, to secure his position. The play explores the consequences of a leader who attains power through illegitimate means and the impact on the stability of the kingdom.

- **Manipulation and Deception:** Richard III is known for his skill in manipulating those around him. He uses his wit and charisma to deceive allies and enemies alike. The play serves as a cautionary tale about the dangers of trusting a leader who lacks moral principles.

- **The Corrupting Nature of Power:** Richard's ascent to power is accompanied by a moral decline. As he becomes more powerful, his actions become more heinous, and he loses touch with any sense of morality. This theme reflects a broader exploration of the corrupting influence of power on individuals.

- **The Role of Fate and Destiny:** The play also explores the idea of fate and destiny, suggesting that Richard's actions are driven by a predetermined path. However, it raises questions about free will and personal responsibility, as Richard actively pursues his ambitions rather than passively accepting his fate.



### **Richard III and power**

In studying Richard III and power, it's essential to consider both the historical context and Shakespeare's artistic interpretation. The play offers insights into the complexities of political power, morality, and the consequences of unchecked ambition (Greenblatt, 1999).

Shakespeare's Richard III portrays in an unprecedented way the characteristics of the tyrant: his boundless self-indulgence, his remorseless violation of laws, his deep pleasure when he causes pain, his pathological desire for power. It is obvious that he suffers from unbridled self-admiration and unimaginable arrogance (Bloom, 1999). He is characterized by an incomprehensible belief in superiority and really thinks he can do whatever he wants without the slightest restriction (Hammond, 1981). He demands absolute submission from his subjects and at the same time is characterized by absolute ingratitude. Simply put, fellow man has no meaning for him, because concepts like charity and dignity he considers to mean nothing.

Along with the above behavior, Richard disgusts the concept of the law and derives satisfaction from nullifying and violating it. Thinking in his capriciously amoral and Manichean way, the world consists of either winners or losers. For him, those who deserve his attention are the winners, to the extent that he can exploit them for his own benefit; on the other hand, the losers deserve only his contempt.

In his case, the question is not wealth. What fascinates and excites him at the same time is the manipulation of people and the exercise of his dominance. He sadistically enjoys seeing his fellow humans suffer. He creates around him a circle of people with similar aspirations even though they are unable to reach his level. They know that this particular man is indeed dangerous, but for their own benefit they help him to conquer supreme power and eventually become king.

The tyrant treats women the same way. They are a means of asserting his rule over people. He knows that they disgust him, yet this fact does not hinder his pursuits or create the slightest guilt. He feels that his time is limited and since in the



end the only emotion he evokes is disgust, he is exhausted and loses power. In the end, what remains is only debris (Kiernan, 1993).

It is known that for the presentation of Richard III, Shakespeare relied on the one-sided and subjective description of Thomas More. However, the sources of his mentally disturbed behavior come from Shakespeare's own perception of the ugliness with which he was born. "*The midwife wondered, and the women cried/ O Jesus bless us, he is born with teeth!*" (The Third part of King Henry the Sixth VI 5.6.74–75).

The reference to Richard's teeth when he was still an infant is typical. It is a property with strong symbolic dimensions "*They say my uncle grew so fast,*" his little nephew York prattles, "*That he could gnaw a crust at two hours old*" (The Life and Death of Richard the Third 2.4.27–28). His mother makes constant references to her difficult delivery and to Richard's deformed body. The scheme he uses is this "*anguish, pain, and agony*" (The Life and Death of Richard the Third [Quarto] 4.4.156). "*Thy mother felt more than a mother's pain,*" the unfortunate Henry VI reminds his captor Richard, "*And yet brought forth less than a mother's hope/ To wit, an undigested and deformed lump*" (The Third part of King Henry the Sixth. 5.7.49–51). When the captive king goes on to bring up those teeth "*Teeth thou had in thy head when thou wast born/ To signify thou cam'st to bite the world*"—Richard has had enough. Shouting "*I'll hear no more!*" he stabs his royal prisoner to death (5.7.53–57).

Little by little, everyone realizes that Richard has serious psychological problems, a fact that he himself admits. Various explanations were proposed by his contemporaries for these problems. Others mentioned the deformity of his body (he suffered from kyphosis), others his deformed face. In their opinion, nothing was accidental. Everything for them was divine signs, messages from the universe that meant divine intervention, an event that indirectly indicated the state of his soul (Cheetham & Fraser, 1972). The acceptance of a rather satanic mission is also admitted by Richard himself "*Then, since the heavens have shaped my body so,*" he says, "*let hell*



*make crooked my mind to answer it*" (5.6.78–79). Feeling in himself none of the ordinary human emotions—"I have", he says, "*neither pity, love, nor fear*" (5.6.68)—he actively wills his mind to match the stigmatized crookedness of his body.

From the above it appears that Shakespeare accepts the perception of his time that physical deformity corresponds to a mental deformity. In other words, it all comes from a divine intervention that wants to mark the crooked (something analogous to the mark of Cain after killing his brother in the Old Testament) (Hammond, 1981). Beyond accepting this notion, Shakespeare believes that the reverse is also true: beyond Richard's treatment of society, it is society's very reaction to his ugliness that prompts his incredible actions. There are clear hints that his mother's blunt admission that she never loved or cared for him, the abuse and bullying he suffered during his childhood, events that indicated to him that he is a monster at heart (Cheetham & Fraser, 1972). As a monster he will develop defenses, some of which are inhumanly directed against his fellow humans. An example of such a defense mechanism is his behavior towards his brother Edward, as the latter flirts with a beautiful woman. "*Love forswore me in my mother's womb*," he broods, and to make sure that this abandonment would be permanent, the goddess connived with Nature

*To shrink mine arm up like a withered shrub,  
To make an envious mountain on my back,  
Where sits deformity to mock my body;  
To shape my legs of an unequal size,  
To disproportion me in every part.*

(The Third part of King Henry the Sixth. 3.2.153–60).

So, it's a given for him that he won't be able to have conquests because no woman is going to be attracted to his misshapen body. Whatever pleasure he could seize from life thus could not possibly come from making his "*heaven in a lady's lap*" (3.2.148). But there is a way for him to compensate for this lack: he will zealously devote himself to maligning those who possess gifts that he does not have.



Despite his physical defects which deprive him of a normal life, Richard does not cease to be the youngest son of the Duke of York and brother of King Edward IV. This fact ensures him a high position in the social hierarchy. Despite the world's ridicule of him, his power will be unlimited because of his high birth. It is understandable that the special characteristics of Richard are intertwined with the typical characteristics of an autocratic ruler: arrogance, brutality and a sense of inherent impunity (Baldwin & Baldwin, 2000). His orders must be carried out immediately. His arrogance and complete insensitivity do not pale even in the face of death, as for example at the funeral of the king he himself killed and demanded that the coffin be buried in the ground when he passed by at that moment. When they at first refuse, he showers insults upon them— "*villains*," "*unmannered dog*," "*beggar*"— and threatens to kill them (The Life and Death of Richard the Third 1.2.36–42). The result shows both his out-of-bounds dynamism and the definition of his aristocracy: the companions finally obey him in fear.

It is clear that Richard's behavior is the result of his wounded self-esteem and his attempt to boost his wounded ego. The violent exercise of power on his part compensates for his deformity. He finally feels a pleasure that he can now control people and that he is now to be reckoned with. Richard, through Shakespeare's incomparable pen, turns into a symbol of people who compensate for their physical deformity and by extension their psychopathology in a political act of arrogance and abusive activity (Kiernan, 1993). The mixture is explosive: such political people are the greatest threat because they mix their personal problems with the political action that concerns their subjects. As Shakespeare's play depicts him, Richard is chillingly clear about the links that bind together his physical deformity, his psychological disposition, and his overarching political goal:

*since this earth affords no joy to me  
but to command, to check, to o'erbear such  
as are of better person [i.e., appearance] than myself,  
I'll make my heaven to dream upon the crown.*



(3.2.165–68)

His personality is now established: he knows what he wants and what he lacks in order to feel pleasure. The foundation of this pleasure is absolute authority and power. The one that allows him to control everyone and everything. He declares, “*account this world but hell/ Until my misshaped trunk that bears this head/ Be round impaled with a glorious crown*” (3.2.169–71).

His attitude towards his insatiable desire for power is the definition of an upstart. He does not hesitate to turn against the younger sons of his brother, Edward, but also against his elder brother, George, who, should they both die, is the next in line. He sees nothing but the crown

*I do but dream on sovereignty  
Like one that stands upon a promontory  
And spies a far-off shore where he would tread,  
Wishing his foot were equal with his eye,  
And chides the sea that sunders him from thence,  
Saying he'll lade it dry to have his way*

(The Third part of King Henry the Sixth. 3.2.134–39)

He is truly pathetic. The combination of these two qualities – absolute power due to some vague hereditary rights on the one hand, and a disturbed and morbid personality on the other – proves to be the most destructive and dangerous. After all, he admits it himself: he confesses that he looks like someone “lost in a thorny wood,” who as he tries to find a clearing, the thorns tear his legs (Hammond, 1981).

Apart from all his physical defects, however, he also has some “gifts” unfortunately for those around him. It’s a cheat meter. The way in which Shakespeare presents Richard is truly impressive: «*Why, I can smile and murder whiles I smile,*” he says, congratulating himself, and cry “*Content!*” *to that which grieves my heart, and wet my cheeks with artificial tears, and frame my face to all occasions*”. (3.2.182–85)

A profound connoisseur of the human psyche, Shakespeare sees an important relationship between the desire for power



and the damage created during the early stages of human life. In other words, damage done to a person's self-esteem during early childhood has far-reaching consequences later in life. The greatest harm of all, according to Shakespeare, is the lack of motherly love. All of the anger that is evident throughout the play from Richard is a result of his anger towards his mother.

An important but rather unknown feature of Richard III is that it emphasizes the king's relationship with his mother, perhaps because the play focuses on the individual rather than the historical events that led the country to a civil war. Examples of father-child relationships are found in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* with Aegeus, in the two plays of Henry IV, in *Much Ado Nothing* with Leonato, in *Othello* with Brabantio, in *King Lear* with Lear and Gloucester and in *The Tempest* with Prospero. In Richard III, Shakespeare focuses on the tyrant himself - on his psychological disorder, which highlights the problematic relationship between mother and child.

The above fact can be seen in the very words of the Duchess of York, Richard's mother, who right from the start characterizes him as a monster. He suspects him of the death of his brother George and warns the orphaned children of the latter to be careful and not to believe anything that Richard says: "*Think you my uncle did dissemble, grandam?*" says one of the children. "*Ay, boy,*" she curtly replies. She expresses some combination of two contradictory sentiments, disgrace and disavowal. "*He is my son, ay, and therein my shame,*" she acknowledges, and then immediately abjures any responsibility: "*Yet from my dugs he drew not this deceit*" (*The Life and Death of Richard the Third*. 2.2.18, 29-30)

The climax of her shame comes with the news of Edward's death: "*I for comfort have but one false glass [i.e. mirror],*" she says with bitterness, "*That grieves me when I see my shame in him*" (2.2.53-54). His mother's cold treatment of Richard seems to grow over the course of the play, culminating in her exhortation to the other women who suffered from his behavior - Margaret, the widow of Edward VI, Elizabeth, the widow of her son Edward and Anne the wife of Richard - to vent their wrath: "*In the breath of bitter words,*" she tells them,



*“let’s smother /My damnèd son” (4.4.133–34).* Her absolute contempt is manifested the moment he appears in front of her: *“Thou toad, thou toad.”* She even wishes she had smothered him inside her womb:

*Thou cam’st on earth to make the earth my hell.  
A grievous burden was thy birth to me;  
Tetchy and wayward was thy infancy;  
Thy school days frightful, desperate, wild, and furious;  
Thy prime of manhood daring, bold, and venturous;  
Thy age confirmed proud, subtle, sly, and bloody.*  
(4.4.167–72)

Her curse ends with his death wish: *“Bloody thou art; bloody will be thy end.”* Her treatment of Richard contrasts with the affection she felt for her other children – Edward and George. Richard, for his part, is deaf. All his behavior is a result of this rejection. The tyrant is already created and is a result of the experiences he had as a child. Now in reaction to rejection, Richard builds one of the characteristic abilities of the tyrant: he can penetrate the minds of the people around him, whether they want it or not. He compensates for the rejection by being able to impose his presence on whoever he wants without guilt.

## Conclusion

Examining Richard, we see a relentless and merciless man. The only thing that he is interested in is power, constantly practicing its abuse. He has no misgivings or regrets about what he does. He doesn’t hesitate for a moment. He doesn’t care about the others. All he offers to his subordinates are exchanges and fees to carry out his orders. For this and in the end, one after the other, they abandon him by changing camps. They don’t love him or believe in him. Richard usurps the crown and power, reaps everyone on the way of. But in the end, as in all of Shakespeare’s historical dramas, a legitimate heir has escaped and returns to restore order and justice.



(Cheetham & Fraser, 1972. Bloom, 1999). The chain of murders and the river of blood never stopped. Every new leader he would throw the previous one until it was his turn. Until they hate him too his subordinates. Richard climbed the ladder of power and reached the crown. At every step he committed another crime. On the highest step he found the abyss waiting for him, ready to swallow him. The leader who promised the world to his subordinates of him, shortly before his death he no longer has anything. Nothing has the same value anymore to promised. In his greatest despair he promises even more, because only this has to offer the world, promises (Baldwin & Baldwin, 2000).

The impressive thing is that in this case he promises absolutely nothing. Something that he does not have, his kingdom which he has already lost. For an exchange up to then insignificant, a horse, now becoming important in saving his life.

*Slave! I have set my life upon a caste,  
And I will stand the hazard of the die,  
I think there be six Richmonds in the field;  
Five have I slain instead of him.  
A horse, a horse! My kingdom for a horse!*

(Richard III, 5.4)

Looking at Richard, we see a pseudo-transformational leader in terms of personal characteristics, which operates on its continuous spectrum of transformational leadership by exercising transactional leadership, through reward under heresy and administration by exception. He is, therefore, a leader with a moral deficit and value code that does not care about others or the common good. He is self-centered and driven exclusively by the thirst for power.



## References

- Baldwin, P., & Baldwin, T. (Eds.). (2000). *Cambridge school Shakespeare: King Richard III* (pp. 1–2). Cambridge University Press.
- Barroll, L. (1991). *Politics, Plague, and Shakespeare's Theater: The Stuart Years*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Berry, R. (2005). *Changing Styles in Shakespeare*. London: Routledge.
- Bloom, H. (1999). *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*. New York: Riverhead Books.
- Cheetham, A., & Fraser, A. (1972). *The life and times of Richard III* (pp. 175–176). Weidenfeld & Nicolson.
- Greenblatt, S. (1999). *Tyrant: Shakespeare on politics*. W.W. Norton & Company.
- Hammond, A. (1981). *The Arden Shakespeare: King Richard III*. Routledge.
- Kiernan, V. (1993). *Shakespeare: Poet and citizen*. Verso.
- The Life and Death of Richard the Third.  
<https://shakespeare.mit.edu/richardiii/index.html>
- The Third part of King Henry the Sixth.  
<https://shakespeare.mit.edu/3henryvi/index.html>

