

Richard III: The real king of history, or marvellous theatrical villain?

Professor Michael Dobson

Poor Richard III; how little reason that son of York had to like this area of his kingdom. Killed in the Midlands in 1485, and now dug up in the Midlands in 2013, and in the meantime posthumously defamed by the Midlands' greatest writer, William Shakespeare. Which should we remember when those bones from the car-park in Leicester are reburied? The real king of history, or the marvellous theatrical villain of Shakespeare's play?

Given how charismatically awful Shakespeare made his deformed anti-hero, it is sad to have to admit how comparatively nice the real Richard III really was. Whatever Shakespeare's play may say, Richard was not born with teeth, and he did not have an especially crooked back. He did not murder Henry VI, and, unlike his brother Clarence (who was executed after a fair trial for treason rather than privately murdered on Richard's orders), Richard was unwaveringly loyal to their elder brother Edward IV, for whom he recaptured Berwick-upon-Tweed from the Scots.

It gets worse. The real Richard and his real Lady Anne, whom despite the play he did not poison, were happily married for over twelve years. They even had a beloved son, Edward, never mentioned in Shakespeare, whose death from tuberculosis at the age of 10 probably hastened Anne's own death from the same cause in early 1485. Rather than promptly seeking to take his niece Elizabeth of York as a second wife, as in the play, Richard wept throughout Anne's funeral. His grief was only ended when, six months later, he himself died at the age of 32, killed at Bosworth Field by the French army who had invaded under Henry Tudor, Earl of Richmond, thereafter King Henry VII.

By then Richard III's two-year reign had already established him as a fairly unmonstrous ruler. He had founded a Council of the North to ensure that those beyond Watford were represented in government; he had declared English rather than French to be the official language of the law, and he had set up what became the Court of Requests to defend those who could not afford lawyers. If the Earl of Derby's defection on the battlefield had not handed the kingdom to Henry Tudor – who nonetheless married Richard's niece afterwards so as to shore up his own less secure claim to the throne – Richard III might be remembered for bringing the Wars of the Roses to their end and ushering in an era of stable government.

But if that had happened, though, we would be without Shakespeare's great play, which in any case isn't quite as slanderous as the above may suggest. It is true, for instance, that Richard was only crowned after executing first the family of Edward IV's widow and then his former minister Hastings. It is true, too, that he had Edward's two under-aged sons Edward and Richard declared illegitimate, and then taken to the Tower of London, from which they never returned. It is also true, however, that if the young Edward had grown to maturity and assumed the throne, the records of previous medieval protectorships suggest that he would probably have had his uncle executed when he did.

So we are left with a comparatively well-meaning politician, albeit with blood on his hands; and with Shakespeare's hunchbacked, lying, ruthlessly ambitious tyrant, who only discovers that he has a conscience in his nightmares before the battle of Bosworth Field. I think our region owes it to the real king who died here and to the brilliant playwright who was born and died here – a man who knew that wicked uncles are a lot more dramatic than compromised leaders -- to be sure we remember both.

*Professor Michael Dobson, University of Birmingham
Director of the Shakespeare Institute, Stratford-upon-Avon*