

ENGLISH ADVANCED: *KING RICHARD III/LOOKING FOR RICHARD*

Although texts appear to deal with similar subject matter, it is context that powerfully affects form and values. To what extent does this view accord with your comparative study of the prescribed texts?

Shakespeare's 1593 play *Richard III* and Al Pacino's 1996 docudrama *Looking for Richard* both explore the story of the historical figure Richard III. Although the texts appear to deal with similar subject matter as they primarily concern the same story, the context of each piece powerfully affects form and values. The context within which each piece is produced exerts power over the representation of ideas of the human condition such as the nature of acting and issues of morality, such that each text generates insights relevant to its context.

Both *Richard III* and *Looking for Richard* are highly self-reflexive texts. Attention is drawn to the fictional nature of each piece in a conscious examination of theatricality. While each text deals with the nature of acting, the contexts within which they were produced cause each composer to generate alternative insights. Shakespeare explores the nature of acting as concealing of the truth through the characterisation of Richard. Richard is a Machiavellian villain, typical of Elizabethan times, with no remorse or obvious motivation for his evil actions. The allure of Richard as a character results from his clever manipulation of language and rhetoric. This particular dexterity was valued by Elizabethan audiences. Stichomythia is frequently employed with Richard rephrasing the responses of others to confuse their understanding of situations, such as the early scene during which he woos Lady Anne:

“ANNE: You are the cause and most accurs'd effect.
RICHARD: Your beauty was the cause of that effect.”

Richard's manipulation of language allows him to win over Lady Anne in an unbelievably perverse manner: over the body of her deceased father-in-law to be, murdered by Richard himself. Richard's clever use of rhetoric is coupled with soliloquies through which he reveals his true intentions:

“I am determined to prove a villain.”

The juxtaposition of these revealing soliloquies with scenes in which Richard uses his words to manipulate others highlights his “acting” and implies that acting is imbued by a sense of deception. The representation of acting as such is influenced by the context and purpose of the piece as propaganda of the Tudor myth. It serves to portray Richard as cunning and evil, keeping with the popular view of the time. In contrast, Pacino's *Looking for Richard* explores theatricality and acting as integral in nature and reflective of the truth. This view is the result of the context in which the film was produced. Being made by an actor, *Looking for Richard* affirms the positive nature of acting as is in the best interests of the composer, Pacino. Chiaroscuro lighting is used to visually communicate the dual nature of actors as able to represent events or situations in multiple fashions. Coupled with the form of the film as cinema verite, however, it is suggested that the purpose of acting is to reveal, not conceal, fundamental truths of the human condition. Vox populi interviews support this concept by making the film appear less constructed and more as an examination of different perspectives. “Behind the scenes” interviews also support this concept:

“...to communicate a Shakespeare that is about how we feel today. That's the effort we're gonna give it.”

These interviews with the composer are informal and colloquial, further implying that this is his actual intention. It is therefore implied that acting is integral and truthful in nature. While each text deals with the issue of acting and performance, their individual contexts powerfully influence form and values to generate alternative viewpoints.

Concepts of morality underline both *Richard III* and *Looking for Richard*. According to their contexts, however, each text varies in form and values. Shakespeare's play is reminiscent of morality plays typical of the Elizabethan era. Typically these plays teach some form of moral lesson by the conclusion. *Richard III* is an exploration of power and how the pursuit of authority can lead to moral corruption. Bestial imagery is employed to further emphasise this moral lesson by exaggerating the dire consequences which befall Richard. Richard is repeatedly referred to as a boar, such as in Richmond's statement:

"The wretched, bloody and usurping boar
That spoils your summer fields and fruitful vines
Swills your blood like warm wash."

This vivid imagery dehumanises Richard and emphasises the didactic nature of the piece; with power comes the potential for corruption. The form and values of the play as such in the exploration of morality are a result of a conservative Elizabethan society highly concerned with concepts of right and wrong. Pacino's film also appears to deal with the concept of morality. Pacino, playing Richard, is costumed in all black. Menacing string music plays in the background of scenes during which he plots. These stylistic devices create a clear, yet superficial division between concepts of right and wrong. Little effort to explore these ideas in further depth is made. Pacino instead uses morality as an idea in its entirety as an example of the values Shakespeare's texts can bring to a modern audience. This view is expressed in a vox pop interview:

"Shakespeare helped us?"
"He did more than help us. He instructed us."

As per the context and intention of this film, morality is used as a device through which the purpose and value of Shakespeare's works is demonstrated. Each text appears to explore concepts of morality but differ in form and values according to their context.

Context exerts considerable influence over the representation of values and use of form in texts. While *Richard III* and *Looking for Richard* both concern the same story and appear to explore the same ideas, significantly different insights are generated by each composer due to their differences in context.