

Shakespeare's Richard III: An Anomalous Protagonist in an Unusual Play

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ABSTRACT

Shakespeare's *Richard III* is studied in terms of the positivity of language in Richard's speeches (close to 8000 emotionally scored words). Positivity is evaluated with the Dictionary of Affect in Language (Whissell, 2009). A plot line modeled with a polynomial regression is sketched for the entire drama on the basis of positivity. The overall emotion of the play is positive, and essentially comic (in comparison to Shakespeare's oeuvre) but the trajectory of the plot of *Richard III* is tragic. Richard appears as a psychopath in most of the play but becomes more neurotic and conscience-stricken towards the end. The two discussions where Richard is attempting to force a marriage (with Anne, with Queen Elizabeth's daughter) are compared and differentiated.

INTRODUCTION

This article considers the words spoken by the character of Richard III in Shakespeare's play of the same name in order to address some of the questions concerning them both. The variable at the heart of the research is the positivity or negativity of Richard's words. Table 1 includes examples of some positive and negative words spoken by King Richard.

Shakespeare wrote *The Tragedy of King Richard the Third*, one of his more popular plays, early in his career (1592-93). It is one of his longest dramas and its protagonist speaks over 1000 lines of dialogue (Dunton-Downer & Riding, 2004, p. 79). The play has been around, in one form or another, for four centuries, and analysts have posed several questions about it, finding it to be something of an outlier within the Shakespearean oeuvre. They question the reasons for audiences' positive reactions to the play and to its protagonist (e.g., Hearn, 2011; Slotkin, 2007). They also attempt to identify the appropriate psychological diagnosis for the character. Is Shakespeare's Richard a psychopath? Could he be neurotic, or perhaps regressed (Clay, 2013; Freud, 1916; Hearn, 2011)? Classification of this drama as a tragedy (as opposed to a history) has also been debated (Lemon, 2018, p. 40). The play is obviously one of the series that tells the history of the English monarchy, but on its first page, in the First Folio, it bears the title of "tragedy". Most experts have noted the pro-Tudor bias of the work (Leas, 1971; Lemon, 2018; pp. 1-12). This bias seems to mandate a very negative view of Richard, which is inconsistent with audience reactions.

Table 1: Top 20 extremely positive or negative words (Words in either column lie at least two standard deviations distant from the mean for positivity in everyday English) employed repeatedly by Richard III in his speeches, arranged in order from most to least frequent.

Very Positive	Very Negative
Good	Not
Well	Cannot
Myself	Kill
Love	Against
Soul	Doubt
Us	Fear
Fair	Poor
Heart	Farewell
Like	Tears
Mother	Fearful
Friends	Lie
Grace	Angry
Husband	Knows
Sweet	Murder
Marry	Off
Great	Buried
Heaven	Grew
Son	Less
Wife	Nothing
Happy	Stern

Analyses in this research inspect when and how *Richard III* employs positive and negative words in his speeches. The plot of the play is inferred from these usages. In everyday language, the questions addressed by the research are the following:

"What does the plot of this drama look like?" "Why is a character who is a self-described villain – and furthermore not a Tudor progenitor - so popular?" "Is Richard III a tragedy or a history?" and "Is Richard unremittingly and guiltlessly villainous (i.e., is he psychopathic)?"

The plot of *Richard III* is determined by modeling the changes in Richard's language over time with a polynomial regression. The best-fit line for this regression reveals at what points in the play the character's language tends to become more or less positive. Richard's status as a villain is evaluated in terms of the positivity of his words in comparison to everyday English, and in comparison to words spoken by the remaining characters. A villain should employ the more negative words in both comparisons. In order for the play to satisfy the criteria of a tragedy discussed by Aristotle in his *Poetics*, the positivity in the protagonist's speeches should go through several phases. It should rise somewhat, until it reaches a high point (establishment phase), and then change direction and fall (reversal) to the point where the candidate becomes aware of his faults (recognition). Finally, if Shakespeare is presenting Richard to the audience as a psychopath, the character's positivity should

remain relatively constant throughout the play and should not respond to changes going on around him; it should give no evidence of either guilt or concern (Hearns, 2011).

METHOD

The text for the play was downloaded from Project Gutenberg (file number pg1103). This was the unabridged version of the play provided to Project Gutenberg by the World Library. A computer program written by the author tagged all words in the play as belonging to Richard or to other speakers. All words were then scored according to their positivity within the same program. This was accomplished by comparing every word in the play to the Dictionary of Affect in Language (Whissell, 2009) which provides ratings for some 8700 words. Dictionary ratings of pleasantness represented positivity (The scale employed in this study (and other recent studies) is a linear transformation of the original rating scale, selected because it allowed for the easier perception of differences among groups.) The scale employed in this study (and other recent studies) is a linear transformation of the original rating scale, selected because it allowed for the easier perception of differences among groups. Volunteers provided these ratings when the Dictionary was first established; they looked at words without context and provided ratings for them. In this research, pleasant words were considered more positive in nature and unpleasant ones more negative. Examples of extremely positive and extremely negative words employed repeatedly by Richard are provided in Table 1; 82% of all the words spoken by Richard were matched by the Dictionary and received values for positivity/negativity.

There are two limitations associated with this manner of scoring for positivity. The first is that the Dictionary was established more than 400 years after the play had been written. Some words do change in perceived positivity over time. However, with thousands of words scored, a few words with changed values would have only a minor effect on the overall positivity score. As well, the Dictionary has been successfully applied to Shakespeare's works in the past (e.g. Whissell, 2007). The second limitation involves the manner in which the Dictionary was established. Words were rated without context, and words are capable of carrying multiple meanings that depend on context. For example, the word "lie" in Table 1 could refer to "lie" as in "telling a lie" or "lie" as in "going to lie down for a rest". The emotions involved are not identical. The statistical reply to this issue is that scores for each word represent an average of the positivity of its multiple meanings. Both the limitations outlined here reduce the accuracy of the instrument employed to some degree, but it remains useful.

RESULTS

"What does the plot of this drama look like?"

A full entry eleven-term polynomial regression modeled the plot of the play. The criterion was the positivity of individual words. The predictors were time, represented by the standardized order of Richard's speech within the play (1-297) and its powers, ranging from the second to the eleventh (Standardized (β) weights for the predictors were -.03, .50*, .31, -2.04*, 2.26*, -.82*, -.84*, and .63* for the first, second, third, fourth, sixth, seventh, tenth, and eleventh powers of speech number. * $p < .05$. Three predictors were excluded because of collinearity.) Prediction was significant but weak ($R^2_{7729} = .06$, $p < .001$). This suggests that words tended to scatter both above and below the predicted plot in terms of positivity, but also that there was a distinct pattern or flow of positivity

through the play. The plot depicted in Fig. 1 represents the backbone of the play in terms of positivity.

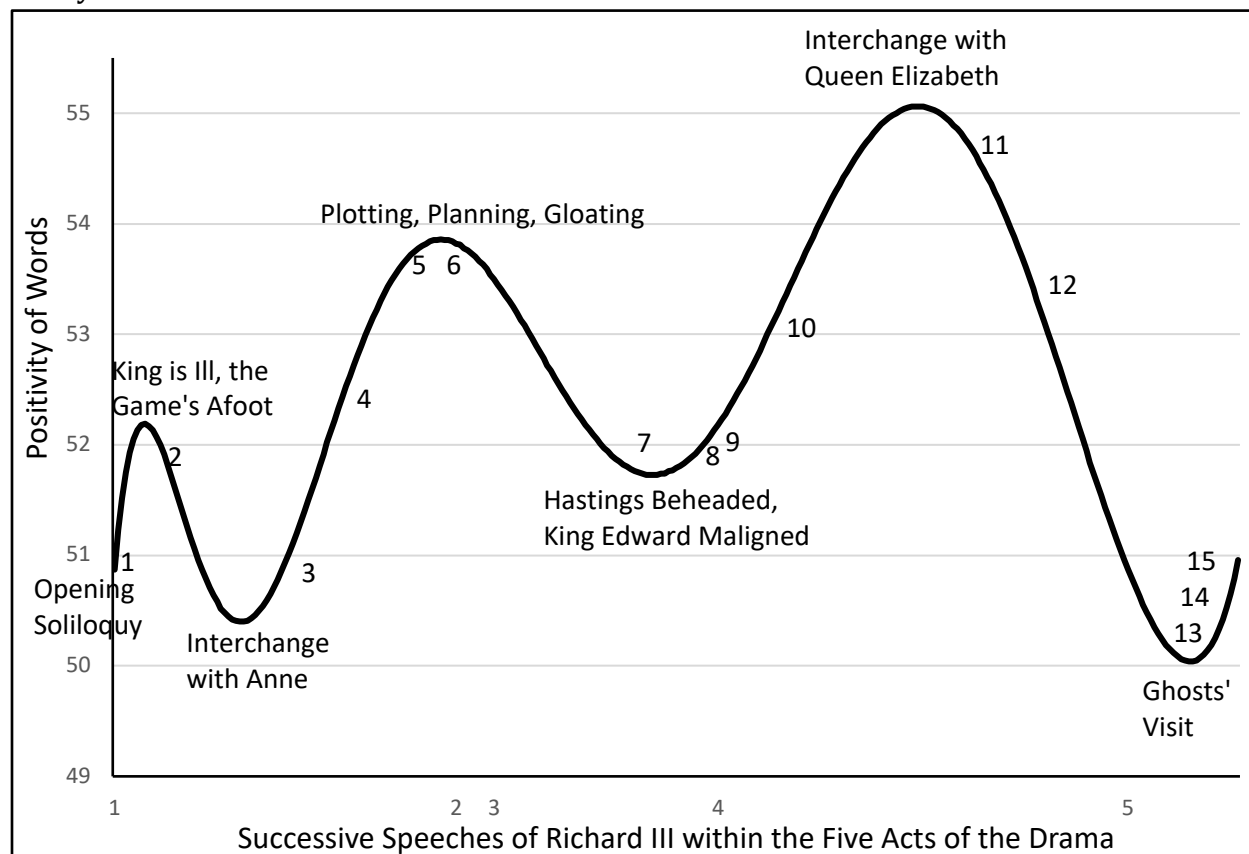


Figure 1 The rise and fall of positivity in the words spoken by Gloucester/King Richard III across the five acts of the drama

1. Modeled (criterion: word positivity; predictors: speech number and powers of this variable) by a significant polynomial regression.
2. The beginning of each Act is noted on the horizontal axis in Arabic numerals.
3. Events aligning with each peak and trough are briefly described at these locations.
4. Numbers located close to the line indicate the location of the character's longer speeches (100 or more words), which are described further here:

Richard's Longer Speeches (and their Positivity)

1. Act 1, Scene 1: Introductory soliloquy. "Now is the winter of our discontent...." (50.4)
2. Act 1, Scene 1: Richard begins planning. "He cannot live, I hope, and must not die..." (52.4)
3. Act 1, Scene 2: Richard persuades Anne. "I would they were, that I might die at once..." (50.0)
4. Act 1, Scene 2: Richard dwells on his success with Anne. "Was ever woman in this humour woo'd?" (54.5)
5. Act 1, Scene 3: Soliloquy. Richard lays plans against the Queen's allies. "I do the wrong, and first began to brawl..." (51.4)
6. Act 2, Scene 1: Richard avows his humility and love. "A blessed labour my most sovereign lord." (57.1)

7. Act 3, Scene 5: Richard orders Buckingham to spread rumours about King Edward. "Go after, after, cousin Buckingham..." (50.7)
8. Act 3, Scene 7: Richard responds to persuasion that he takes the crown. "I cannot tell if to depart in silence..." (54.1)
9. Act 3, Scene 7: Richard accepts the crown. "Will you enforce me to a world of cares?" (49.9)
10. Act 4, Scene 2: Richard orders Catesby to spread rumours about Anne's ill health. "Come hither, Catesby. Rumour it abroad..." (48.9)
11. Act 4, Scene 4: Richards coaxes Queen Elizabeth to let him marry his cousin. "Look, what is done cannot now be amended." (54.7)
12. Act 4, Scene 4: Richard continues to coax. "As I intend to prosper and repent..." (55.3)
13. Act 5, Scene 3: Richard awakes from the ghosts' visit trembling. "Give me another horse. Bind up my wounds." (52.4)
14. Act 5, Scene 3: Richard prepares for the battle of Bosworth. "Come, bustle, bustle; caparison my horse..." (49.4)
15. Act 5, Scene 3: Richard directs the battle. "Jockey of Norfolk, be not so bold..." (47.4)

Speeches can be compared to one another employing the value of two standard errors (4): any two speeches differing by 4 or more points, for example speech 1 and speech 12, can be considered significantly different ($p < .05$), those differing by less than this amount, for example speech 1 and speech 2, can not ($p > .05$).

It is evident from Fig. 1 that the positivity of Richard's words rose and fell across time, and that it did so in a way that makes sense in terms of the events that were taking place within the play. Positivity was relatively low in the famous opening speech, it rose somewhat to the point where Richard took account of his brother's (the king's) ill health and set some specific plans in motion (Act 1, Scene 1). Positivity then fell to a low during Richard's brisk interchange with Anne, whom he was strong-arming into marrying him (Act 1, Scene 2), and rose to the beginning of Act 1, Scene 3, where Richard gloated about plans accomplished and set further plans in motion. Positivity then fell somewhat to the point where Richard confirmed Hasting's death and instructed his henchmen to malign King Edward by spreading rumours (Act 3, Scene 5). For the first half of Act 4, Richard's language became steadily more and more positive. Richard gained the crown. Both Anne and the princes were dispatched, and Richard's star was clearly on the rise. Richard's discussion with Queen Elizabeth (and his attempt to marry her daughter, his niece), begins at the high point of the play in terms of positivity in Richard's language (Act 4, Scene 4). After his discussion with Queen Elizabeth, Richard receives news of forces approaching from abroad to challenge his crown. Positivity then sinks until the visit of the accusing ghosts the night before the battle of Bosworth and Richard's unnerved reaction to their appearance (Act 5, Scene 3): it rises marginally for the actual battle, where Richard rallies his forces. The character of Richard III has 15 speeches containing at least 100 words. All of these are in verse. They are located along the plot line, and described in Table 2.

"Why is a character who is a self-described villain so popular?"

The mean positivity score for everyday English, established by the study of hundreds of thousands of words from novels, newspaper articles, television programs, essays, and so on (Whissell, 1998, 2009), is 50. The mean positivity for words spoken by Richard III in the play was 52.31. This value was significantly higher than the average for everyday English ($t_{7729} = 8.74$, $p < .001$, two-tailed), so Richard's language was somewhat positive in tone. Furthermore, when the mean for Richard's

language was compared to that for the remainder of the play (51.87), there was no significant difference between means ($t_{25198} = -1.403$, $p > .16$, two-tailed). Richard's language was not more negative than that of the remaining characters: all characters in this murder-laden drama spoke words that were somewhat positive. As can be seen in Fig. 1, Richard's language was most negative in the opening of the play, when he argued with Anne, and when he had his ghostly vision on the eve of Bosworth. It was most positive at the height of his success. The very impressive opening soliloquy was, as expected, relatively negative in tone but this did not characterize the whole of Richard's dialogue. The entire curve for the plot of *Richard III* presented in Fig. 1 lies above the everyday English mean of 50, emphasizing the paucity of negative language in the drama.

The positivity of words spoken by characters in *Richard III* is by no means typical of Shakespeare's history plays. In fact, using means and standard errors of the mean from data provided by Whissell (2007), it was possible to establish that *Richard III* was significantly more positive (more than two standard errors higher, $p < .05$) than each of the remaining history plays – all of the *Henrys*, *Richard II* and *King John*. *Richard III* was also more positive than all the individual tragedies except for the outlier in that category *Titus Andronicus*. It was even more positive than the average comedy, although it was most similar to several of them in terms of its positivity. *Richard III* was closest in positivity to (i.e., not significantly different from) *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and *As You Like it*. Interestingly, the plays to which *Richard III* was similar were mostly (*As You Like It* was the exception) written between 1593 and 1596.

"Is Richard III a tragedy or a history?"

Some aspects of the plot in Fig. 1 support the claim of a tragic trajectory for *Richard III*. There is a rise in positivity (establishment), though it is not perfect and includes some diversions (e.g. the lower positivity during the interchange with Anne, and after Hastings is beheaded). After a peak in positivity (at the beginning of the interchange with Queen Elizabeth), there is a downturn supporting the presence of a reversal. Before this point, Richard was "winning" and all his plots were succeeding. After it, he encounters challenges and eventually he "loses". Recognition, for Richard, occurs considerably later than the reversal: after a confrontation with the ghosts of his victims in his sleep, he awakes in confusion and considerable terror. His language at this point is negative, and the words he employs indicate a crisis of conscience ("My conscience hath a thousand several tongues, and every tongue brings in a several tale, and every tale condemns me for a villain," Act 5, Scene 5). Although the *trajectory* of positivity in the play might support its classification as a tragedy, the overall positivity of its language (discussed above) does not. It points, instead, to comedy!

The Dictionary of Affect provides scores for a second scoring scale for words (in addition to positivity): this scale reflects the activity or activation in words. For example, although both "game" and "sleep" might be positive words, "game" is an active word while "sleep" is not. Words rated low on activation (e.g., "wait") have passive connotations, while those rated high (e.g., "attack") have arousing ones. Data from Whissell (2007) indicate that *Richard III* had a higher score for activation than any other Shakespearean play (50.65). Words spoken by Richard did not differ in activation from the remainder of the play. So, not only were Richard's words positive in tone, they were also active: this combination (positivity and activation) suggests that the language of the play is cheerful or upbeat (i.e., potentially comedic). High activation is a characteristic of Shakespearean tragedies while high positivity is not (Whissell, 2007).

“Is Richard a psychopath?”

It is difficult to diagnose the psychological disorder characteristic of a real person lost in the mists of time and even more difficult to diagnose the disorder of a fictional character who exists only on a few pages of text. Nevertheless, those fascinated by Shakespeare's Richard III have attempted to diagnose him. Because of his rather obvious villainy, several interpreters have suggested that the Richard of the play is a psychopath. One of Sigmund Freud's conclusions was that Richard was neurotic, and a slave of the pleasure principle (1916), while Hearn (2011) suggests that Richard was anxious, and regressed to the Lacanian mirror stage. A definition of psychopathy (Hearn, 2011, p. 5) centers on a character's tendency to manipulate others (both coaxing and forcing them) without experiencing any guilt. As noted by Hearn, Richard gives ample evidence of such tendencies in the first part of the play (from Act 1, Scene 1 to Act 4, Scene 4) where he alternatively wrenches or wheedles what he wants from people and glories in triumphing over them. However, after this point, and especially on the eve of the battle of Bosworth, the character of Richard displays negativity that is appropriate to a person under threat.

Hearn concludes (p. 5) that Richard's guilty reaction of remorse in response to the ghosts disqualifies him as a potential psychopath. Psychopaths are often labelled as “guiltless,” and Richard definitely seems to be expressing guilt, as indicated both by his actual words and by their negative tone. The other aspect of Richard's personality (his “neurosis” or “anxiety”) would be supported by the presence of negatively toned language that is also relatively high in activation. Such language is, for example, characteristic of Richard's last long speech (number 15 in Fig. 1) which has a positivity score of 47 and an activation score of 51. In conclusion, there is some evidence of psychopathy in Richard's behavior and the positivity of his language in the first parts of the play, and some evidence for anxiety or neurosis in the later parts, especially those involving the ghostly visits and Richard's reaction to them.

The difference between Richard's interchange with Anne and that with Queen Elizabeth

Measures of the positivity of Richard's language can help resolve additional issues that arise in interpreting the various scenes of *Richard III*. In Act 1, Richard has a very interesting exchange of words with Anne, and in Act 4, he has what looks like a parallel exchange with Queen Elizabeth. These two interactions may not be as similar as they seem at first sight (as noted by Lemon, 2018, p. 116). Although Richard has wronged both women, and caused the deaths of those whom they love, and even though he is trying to convince each woman to approve of a marriage that will benefit him at their expense, the situations are actually quite different. As outlined in Table 3, the exchange with Anne takes place at a low point for positivity, early in the play and the exchange with Queen Elizabeth at a high point for positivity, considerably later, when Richard is already king.

Table 2: Differences between Richard's interaction with Anne (whom he marries and later murders) and Queen Elizabeth (whose daughter he is attempting to marry).

	With Anne	With Queen Elizabeth
Richard's Goal	To marry Anne herself	To marry the Queen's daughter, his niece
Starting Point of the interaction	Starts at a low point for positivity	Starts at the highest point for positivity in the play
Overall Tone	More Negative	More Positive
Implications of Language	Coercive	Coaxing
Affect of the Interchange on the Recipient of Richard's Blandishments	Anne agrees to marry Richard and she does so	Elizabeth seems to agree with Richard (some analysts suggest otherwise)
Eventual Outcome	Success (Richard marries Anne; later he dispatches her)	Failure (Richard's challenger, Richmond eventually marries his niece)
Positivity of Richard's Language <u>after</u> the Interchange	Increases	Decreases
What Richard faces after the Interchange	More successful planning, the receipt of the crown	A challenge for the throne, battle, death.

The two exchanges bracket Richard's rise to power: they represent the end of the beginning, and the beginning of the end of his plans respectively, and they are different in several other ways. For example, Richard's language, being high in positivity in the exchange with Elizabeth, seems to lend itself more to coaxing than forcing (Lemon, 2018, p. 116 uses the word "cajole" to describe Richard's effort). The opposite is true for his exchange with Anne, where his language is quite forceful. Most notably, Anne succumbs to Richard's blandishments, while many have argued that Elizabeth departs without having succumbed – in other words that she never planned to let her daughter marry Richard (Lemon, 2018, p. 116).

DISCUSSION

Why are audiences so fond of Richard III (both the play and the character)? In part because of the overall positivity of the play, and the positivity of Richard's own words. *Richard III* is more positive in tone than all the other history plays, and resembles the comedies most closely in this respect. As well, Shakespeare's language is witty rather than despairing, even at some of the most fraught moments. The exchanges between the royal women in Act 4, Scene 4 ("I had an Edward, till a Richard killed him...") provide an example of this. Shakespeare is treating the topic of multiple political murders with humorous word play. The play and its protagonist employ active rather than passive language, making the tone of the play cheerful and lively rather than depressing and gloomy.

In spite of its upbeat tone and its greater similarity to comedies rather than tragedies or histories in this respect, the play *Richard III* has aspects of a tragedy embedded within it. The stages of tragedy as defined by Aristotle on the basis of changes in fortune or positivity (establishment, reversal, and recognition) are present in Fig. 1. The evidence suggests that in spite of its comic tone, the play has a tragic pattern or trajectory. In a similar indecisive manner, Richard's "diagnosis" as a psychopath is both supported (early portions of the play) and contested (later portions) by the positivity and negativity of his language. When he is not being heartless and remorselessly cheerful in the execution of his evil deeds, Richard is being neurotic and using more negative and active words. Shakespeare was probably keenly aware of the necessity of rewarding villainy with repentance

followed by death (as was the standard for morality plays). This might have led him to produce the earlier, “witty and unconcerned”, Richard as well as the later, “cringing in the face of his just desserts” Richard. Shakespeare wrote Richard III early in his career, before he had settled into what we now recognize as his style in each of the categories of drama: it is not surprising that, in this play, he employed tactics that differed from those employed in later efforts.

What, in the end, is Shakespeare’s Richard III? Is it a tragedy with a strangely inappropriate positive tone? Is it a comedy in disguise with an incongruous outcome (the hero’s death)? Or is it a distorted history play in which the author expends too much effort in making the “villain” look interesting? The answer to these questions is “All of the above, some of the time.” Richard III is an outlier. It is an unusual play with an anomalous protagonist, yet it does not fail to enchant.

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