

19. Richard III Theme question annotated, Act IV scene ii

Q. In this extract, how is the theme of power and corruption explored?

London: the palace.

Trumpets sound. Enter RICHARD, newly crowned as King, in procession. Attending him, BUCKINGHAM, CATESBY, RATCLIFFE and LOVELL, with a boy PAGE, and others.

RICHARD Stand all apart! Cousin of Buckingham!

BUCKINGHAM My gracious sovereign?

RICHARD Give me thy hand.

RICHARD *ascends to the royal throne, and sits.*

Trumpets sound a fanfare. All kneel to him as King, then stand back from the throne as he speaks with BUCKINGHAM.

Thus high, by thy advice
 And thy assistance, is King Richard seated.
 But shall we wear these glories for a day? –
 Or shall they last, and we rejoice in them?

Richard shows himself a wise politician, apparently rewarding the good service of Buckingham.

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BUCKINGHAM Still live they, and for ever let them last!

RICHARD Ah, Buckingham, now do I play the touch.
 To try if thou be current gold indeed.
 Young Edward lives – think now what I would speak.

BUCKINGHAM Say on, my loving lord.

RICHARD Why, Buckingham – I say I would be King.

BUCKINGHAM Why, so you are, my thrice-renowned lord.

RICHARD Ha! Am I King? 'Tis so – but Edward lives.

BUCKINGHAM True, noble Prince.

RICHARD O bitter consequence!
 That Edward still should live – 'true noble Prince!'
 Cousin, thou wast not wont to be so dull.
 Shall I be plain? I wish the bastards dead!
 And I would have it suddenly performed.
 What say'st thou now? Speak suddenly, be brief.

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BUCKINGHAM Your Grace may do your pleasure.

RICHARD Tut, tut, thou art all ice. Thy kindness freezes.

However, he has an ulterior motive brought about by his paranoia about losing his Kingship to the Young Prince. He has been priming Buckingham with praise before asking him to do the ultimate crime.

It is Richard alone that sees the threat of the Prince so acutely showing that he has all the power and all the corruption. Buckingham cannot guess what Richard is thinking as it is too shocking.

Absolute power corrupts Richard absolutely and isolates him from Buckingham, who will not do his dirty work in this case.

BUCKINGHAM Give me some little breath, some pause, dear lord,
Before I positively speak in this. 25
I will resolve you herein presently.