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Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative
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The Tangled Web of Richard III: Shakespeare and the Art of Biography

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Richard III is one of William Shakespeare's more interesting anti-heroes. He is funny and clever, a master puppeteer. He woos his future wife over the bleeding corpse of her former father-in-law. He plays verbal hopscotch with his mother and sister-in-law. He even manages to convince great men to kill children. While not an accurate history, this is what most modern audiences think of when we try to visualize the last York king: the hunchback monster who stole the English crown.

The purpose of this unit is to explore the Shakespearean history Richard III as an example of biography, one that seeks to subvert the truth in an effort to please an absolute monarch. This unit, designed for 10th grade English class, will focus on College Board's SOAPSTone strategy—subject, occasion, audience, purpose, subject, and tone—in understanding the relationship between Richard III, Elizabeth I, and Shakespeare. Students will use both the historical and biographical approaches to literary criticism in examining the play. Finally, students will research fictional versus factual Richard III using the recent discovery of the remains as well as historical records.

(Developed for English II Teaching Academy, grade 10; recommended for High School English, grades 10-12)

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