When Shakespeare moved to London in the late 1580s the public theatre had only been in existence for about fifteen years. The first purpose-built theatre (so-called after the Greek word, *theatron*, meaning ‘viewing place’) was erected in 1576 and was an almost instant success. The ‘Theatre’ was established by James Burbage, whose son Richard would become one of Shakespeare’s most prominent and successful actors. It began showing a range of performances which were largely developed from a religious tradition of plays, where stories from the Bible were re-enacted for the moral and spiritual edification of the audience. Beyond church plays, the private performances for the aristocracy or the young lawyers at the Inns of court there was little in the way of Elizabethan ‘entertainment’. When Shakespeare arrived in the capital, however, he started work as an actor and quickly understood the huge potential of a developing industry. Although ‘newness’ was always something that appealed to audiences, originality, as we know it, was not and there was no conception of copyright or plagiarism. Quite the contrary in many ways, since most Elizabethans were educated through a process of familiarity – the more times you heard or saw a story the more you understood its significance. But the theatre was doing something different, of course: it was not simply re-presenting biblical stories it was developing its own unique form of entertainment in which the familiar and the new came together in a spectacular environment of anticipation and excitement.

When Shakespeare joined the successful company of actors called Lord Pembroke’s Men (later the Lord Chamberlain’s Men) he started writing to an already very popular tradition – the history play. It was of great appeal to the public since it provided an electric mix of chronicle history and moral commentary, telling familiar stories of the past with a theatrical relish that could exaggerate the villains and celebrate the heroes. In fact, history plays were central to the development of the stage hero, so that when Richard III, famous for his bloody and murderous journey to kingship, is finally vanquished, we, like the Elizabethans, celebrate that victory as good over evil. In this way the history play became a powerful place to explore questions of the past but also the present, such as what makes a good king, and what are the priorities of governance – warfare, economic stability, imperial expansion, religious security? In many ways, of course, these are the same questions we still ask of our politicians today.

When Shakespeare began to write his history plays in the 1590s (numbering 10 in all, including Henry VIII, or All is True which he wrote much later in 1613) he did his research and he recounted the history that his audience knew. Largely consulting two main sources, Raphael Holinshed’s *Chronicles On England, Scotland and Ireland* (1577) and Edward Hall’s *The Union of the Two Noble and Illustre Families* *of Lancaster and York* (1548), Shakespeare dramatized the struggles for power and precedent that had dominated English history over the period known as the Wars of the Roses (14th-15th centuries). Yet great drama is about more than re-telling a story: it is about making that story affect you and confront questions about who you are and what you feel. Great stories are about surprises, too, not necessarily in action – although Shakespeare would surprise us with sudden changes, too, as when he wrote *King Lear*. Taking his main plot from an earlier play, called King Leir, Shakespeare not only introduces a sub-plot from another Elizabethan text, Sidney’s prose romance, *Arcadia*, but he changes the ending. In the earlier, anonymous play, the terrible events that follow the division of King Leir’s kingdom are put right by his favourite daughter, Cordella, her return from France and subsequent support of her father. In Shakespeare’s rendition of the story – one of the profoundest tragedies in the English language – Cordelia and her father die: there is no relief in this play, no justice, no happy ending, just an apocalyptic vision of a broken country. But not all of Shakespeare’s twists are so obvious: in *Richard III*, for example, that most notorious of kings who had his young nephews brutally murdered in their beds, Shakespeare develops something different. Most people who had gone to see the play in the mid 1590s would have known what to expect: they would have anticipated seeing a hunchback man murder his way to monarchy. What they would not have expected, however, was to like him.

Shakespeare takes many of the most lurid details of Richard’s prodigious birth – that he was born with teeth and feet first, for example --- from Holinshed but instead of having others describe Richard in horrified terms, he has the character himself reflect on his own ‘deformity’:

But I that am not shaped for sportive tricks

Nor made to court an amorous looking glass,

I than am rudely-stamped and want love’s majesty

To strut before a wanton ambling nymph,

I that am curtailed of this fair proportion,

Cheated of feature by dissembling nature,

Deformed, unfinished, sent before my time

Into this breathing world scare half made up --

And so lamely that dogs bark at me as I halt by them (1.1.14-22)

The play opens with this speech and it is a bold move on Shakespeare’s part. Instead of forming our opinions based on hearsay, reported speech and rumour, Shakespeare has his most famous villain king come on stage and talk directly to us about who he is and why he is like that. This ‘deformed, unfinished’ man takes centre stage and confides in us, the audience: he tells us that he can never live a normal life, nobody loves him and that he has been preconditioned by nature to suffer and so he has no choice, he tells us, but to be a monster: ‘And therefore since I cannot prove a lover / To entertain these fair well-spoken days, / I am determined to prove a villain’ (1.1.28-30). Whether we are comfortable with it or not we are affected by Richard’s honesty, by his intimacy and by our complicity in his admission. It’s not that we pity Richard, he is never pathetic, but we do understand him and that position of understanding is something akin to empathy, which Shakespeare was a master of.

Shakespeare’s greatest drama endures precisely because he asks us to put ourselves in other people’s positions. All theatre is about empathy and all enduring theatre is about the extent to which such empathy makes us question who we are and what we would have done in certain situations. We do not approve of Richard’s homicidal behaviour nor do we celebrate it but there is a part of everyone who is on his side. This is Shakespeare’s great gift. Whatever stories Shakespeare takes on and however many times they may have been told he always surprises us because he makes us rethink our expectations and our prejudices, even within the context of our own moral traditions. At the end of *Henry VI* part 3, which relates events leading up to *Richard III*, Shakespeare has Richard, at this point the Duke of Gloucester, admit:

Then since the heavens have shaped my body so,

Let hell make crooked my mind to answer it.

I had no father, I am like no father;

I have no brother, I am like no brother;

And this word, “love”, which greybeards call divine,

Be resident in other men like one another

And not in me – I am myself alone (5.6.78-84)

We know that Richard does, of course, have a father and he also as a brother: but what this speech tells us is something much more: he is isolated and therefore feels incapable of either love or kinship. ‘I am myself alone’ is one of the greatest revelations of villainy precisely because Richard denies any social responsibility or the bonds of community. But because he speaks so directly, eloquently and painfully he is not, in fact, alone. Whether we want to be or not we are with Richard, and it is entirely thanks to Shakespeare that we are.