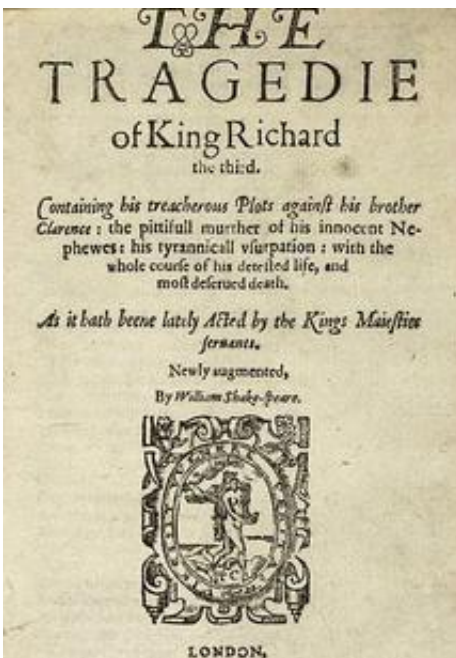


# Source of Shakespeare's inaccurate Richard III portrayal explored

February 8 2013

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Title page from an early edition of Shakespeare's Richard III

(Phys.org)—While Shakespeare's mastery of language and stagecraft is universally recognised, the historical accuracy of many of his plays is open to question and the recent discovery of Richard III's remains has reminded us of this.

A new book edited by Oxford University academics has gone further than ever before in explaining why this is by studying The Chronicles of

England, Scotland and Ireland published in the later C16 under the name of Raphael Holinshed. These ground-breaking chronicles gave rise to more Renaissance plays than any other source, including Shakespeare's histories, King Lear, Macbeth, and Cymbeline.

Dr Ian Archer of Oxford University's Faculty of History said: 'Our research has found that such inaccuracies are caused by the complexity of Holinshed's Chronicles, which stems from multiple [authorship](#), religious tensions among the contributors, and fraught circumstances when it was published. The authors and revisers came from diverse backgrounds and they used an extraordinary variety of conflicting sources.'

Richard III, whose reign has been made supremely timely by the dramatic discovery of his skeleton under the Leicester car park, is a very good example of how Holinshed's Chronicles shaped Shakespeare's engagement with history, according to Dr Paulina Kewes of Oxford University's Faculty of English Language and Literature.

'Shakespeare's Richard is a physically misshapen, tyrannical usurper whose defeat at Bosworth is portrayed as providential,' she said. 'But scholars today dismiss this as the product of Tudor propaganda. This traditional view comes from accounts of [Richard III](#) by earlier writers such as Sir Thomas More, Edward Hall and Richard Grafton which were collected and reproduced in the Chronicles and reinforced with judgemental commentaries and notes in the margins by the Chronicles' editor Abraham Fleming.

'While Holinshed strengthened the myth of the evil King Richard, it did get one thing right: the chronicle reports that 'his body...naked and dyspoiled to the skin...all besprinckled with mire & bloude' was paraded around the streets of Leicester before being interred at the Greyfriars Church – exactly where it was found last September!'

Dr Kewes added: 'Shakespeare actually paints Richard in an even darker light than the Chronicles, showing the king directly responsible for the killing of the princes in the Tower. And he gives the audience to understand that the royal corpse is left rotting on the battlefield.'

Modern scholars have typically been obsessed with the use that [Shakespeare](#) made of Holinshed, the authors said. Even those interested in sixteenth-century historical writings have routinely dismissed the book as a baggy collection of materials, lacking coherent form and analytical insight. This new volume gives the lie to Holinshed's detractors, and demonstrates the innovative qualities of the work and its literary and historical merits. Above all, it shows how distinctive it was for one book to chronicle the history of the nations of the British archipelago.

Dr Felicity Heal of the Faculty of History said: 'Our study has provided a new window on to the Elizabethan world and its historical and literary culture.'

The Oxford Handbook of Holinshed's Chronicles brings together leading specialists in a variety of fields - literature, history, religion, classical studies and bibliography - in order fully to evaluate the multi-faceted book.

It is co-edited by Dr Paulina Kewes of the English Faculty at Oxford University and Drs Ian W. Archer and Felicity Heal of the History Faculty, and published by Oxford University Press. The Handbook is accompanied by a parallel-text online edition of Holinshed's Chronicles freely accessible to the public [here](#).

Provided by Oxford University

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