Richard III

In the opening scenes of Shakespeare’s Richard III, the author depicts Richard as a confident manipulator with an ambitious agenda; as Richard’s plans unravel, however, his power begins to overwhelm him and he becomes disoriented and paranoid. Shakespeare illustrates Richard’s decomposing mental state and crumbling composure through the contrasting syntax and diction of his soliloquies to stress the overarching theme of the effects of power on one’s psychological state.

Shakespeare utilizes the syntax of Richard’s soliloquies to point to Richard’s current disposition. In the opening soliloquy, Richard tells the audience of his plans and says, “And if King Edward be as true and just/ As I subtle, false, and treacherous, / This day should Clarence closely be mewed up/ About a prophecy which says that “G”/ Of Edward’s heirs the murderer shall be (1.1.36-40).” The flowing, intricate sentence structure indicates how calm and confident Richard is, even in speaking about a scheme as serious as killing members of his own family. Conversely, in Richard’s final soliloquy, he wakes frantically from a dream, in which those he has murdered haunt him and curse him. He says,” What do I fear? Myself? There’s none else by. / Richard loves Richard, that is, I am I. / Is there a murderer here? No. Yes, I am. (5.3. 196-198).” Here, his choppy sentences depict Richard as frantic and confused as he comes to terms with what he has done. The contrasting sentence structures in the two soliloquies show the destruction of a cunning and capable man. As a man with dreams of greater glory and power,
Richard is eloquent and composed; after gaining the crown and struggling to keep it, Richard is conflicted and self-conscious.

In addition to juxtaposing syntax, Shakespeare uses contrasting diction to portray Richard’s deteriorating disposition. In the soliloquy of scene one, Richard says, “Have no delight to pass away the time, / Unless to see my shadow in the sun. (1.1. 25-26).” Comparing being king to the sun expresses the glory Richard associates with kingship. In contrast, in the closing soliloquy, Richard repeatedly refers to himself as a murderer and a villain, which demonstrates that he now knows the throne does not hold the glory he originally thought it would (5.3). In addition, Richards says he will “delight” in his treacherous plot to become king, showing his confidence in his plan. By the closing soliloquy, however, he refers to his means of obtaining the kingship, murdering many members of his family, as “hateful deeds (5.3.202).” By calling himself a villain in the closing scene, Richard is developed as the differing diction used in the opening and closing soliloquys highlight Richard’s deterioration and points to the devastating effects that power takes on a man’s mind.

Not only does the psychological deterioration of Richard build on the theme of the effects of power, but it also builds on the reoccurring topic of morality. One could compare the diction used as Richard discusses the guilt he feels in Act 5, Scene 3 to the diction in the dialogue between the murderers as they debate carrying out Richard’s orders. Shakespeare emphasizes Richard’s decaying composure throughout the play with word choice and sentence structure due to the format of the play. His only mode of speaking to the audience is the dialogue of the characters. By juxtaposing Richard’s initial disposition to his final one, Shakespeare stresses the destruction Richard’s actions have had on his mind and he depicts the difference between a man willing to kill for power and a man who actually has.