

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Frederic Will Ph.D.

The Life and Death of King Richard II 1595

Shakespeare

Overview This melancholic, philosophical drama was published in the year after *Romeo and Juliet* and the year before *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. (The play itself is the first of the so-called *Henriad* sequence, and is followed by three plays on Richard's successors: *Henry IV, Part One*; *Henry IV, Part Two*; *Henry V*). (One is stunned by the variety of rich imaginative concepts Shakespeare was able to house and carry to fulfillment, 'more or less at the same time.' Reaching to the broad achievement of Shakespeare, we might want to class this work with the finest of his later works—*Julius Caesar*, *Hamlets*—and yet we can, without too much of a stretch, see the same philosophic poetic strains in the present drama, that we find in the two 'comedies' that book end it. *Romeo and Juliet*, like *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, conjures up the passion and fantasy of human life, as *Richard II*, in reflecting incessantly on the nature of monarchy, immerses us in the split between the corporeal world and the world of the 'spiritual body.'

Characters

King and his entourage

King Richard II.
John of Gaunt, Richard's uncle
Duke of York, Richard's uncle
Duke of Aumerle, York's son
Thomas Mowbray, Duke of Norfolk
Queen: Richard's child wife
Duchess of York
Duchess of Gloucester
Gloucester, Richard's uncle

Rebels

Henry Bolingbroke, later Henry IV
Earl of Northumberland

Richard's Allies

Duke of Surrey
Earl of Salisbury
Bushy—Richard's favorite

Story

Justice. The play opens with a formal and consequence laden judicial scene, in which King Richard II is judging between the cases of two of his nobles, who have brought their mutual hatred before the king. The King's cousin, Henry Bolingbroke (Henry IV to be, in reality and in the two Shakespeare plays to follow this one), accuses Thomas Mowbray of fraud, and of murdering the Duke of Gloucester, uncle of Bolingbroke. (An added dimension, insinuated into the deliberations, is that John of Gaunt, Bolingbroke's father, believes King Richard is himself guilty of the murder—a dark impression that will remain with us later, as we join King Richard at the death bed of John of Gaunt.) Thomas Mowbray furiously denies the charges, and pours scorn on the head of his accuser.

Battle. As spectators, we prepare to witness a battle to the death between the accuser and accused, in the course of which—as was the assumption of late mediaeval judicial practice—the guilty man would be exposed; the loser of the battle was truly the loser of the case. At the point of contest King Richard intervenes, to change the course of the trial. He declares that he will banish both disputants in the trial: Thomas Mowbray for life, and Bolingbroke for ten years. (We wonder at the punishments, which seem arbitrary in length and unexplainedly different as between the two accused. Our eyes are opened a crack into the unpredictable in Richard—one ingredient in the extraordinary interest we will come to feel in this man.)

Rethink. Shortly after imposing the sentences of banishment, King Richard revises his judgment, keeping Mowbray at life, but reducing the sentence of Bolingbroke to six years. This is a decision, we are given to believe, motivated by the pleas of John of Gaunt, father of Bolingbroke, who knows (believes?) he is dying, and cannot endure the thought of not seeing his son again. (Though Richard banter with the old man, whom he views as an adversary, in the end he is unable to withstand the personal pathos of Gaunt.) At this point we are able to anticipate the tragic downfall lying ahead of Richard, for we have seen clearly into his weaknesses: arbitrary judgement; inconsistency in maintaining his position; sentimentality. Plays like *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, and *King Lear* will later prove out Shakespeare's extraordinary sensitivity to the complex and weak in human greatness; Richard will already satisfy us, as a case study in susceptibility and vulnerability.

Consequences. The consequences of Richard's personality are at least indirectly visible for the remainder, the second half, of the play. The events can be reduced to their essentials—though the curve of personal inevitability, in Richard, is remorseless. John of Gaunt dies, having left behind him the images of a great poet, saluting the nobility of his native land--

*This royall Throne of Kings, this sceptred Isle,
This earth of Maiesty, this seate of Mars,
This other Eden, demy paradise,
This Fortresse built by Nature for her selfe,
Against infection, and the hand of warre:
This happy breed of men, this little world,
This precious stone, set in the siluer sea,
Which serues it in the office of a wall,
Or as a Moate defensiuie to a house,
Against the enuy of lesse happier Lands,
This blessed plot, this earth, this Realme, this England...*

In lines which break the very frame of the narrative, to soar onto a level of patriotism deep and daring as Pericles' Funeral Oration to the Athenians. Richard, still working through the bitter relation that had shown up in his relations with Bolingbroke and Gaunt, seizes all the property of John of Gaunt, thereby firing to a new heat the already nasty suspicion, among the nobles, that Richard has been stealing and wasting their money, as well as punishing them for the misdeeds of their ancestors, against many of whom Richard inherited ancient grudges.

Invasion. The incipient rebellion against Richard grows rapidly, Bolingbroke gathering a force of allies and soldiers, with whom—while Richard is at the same time fighting a patriotic war against Ireland—Bolingbroke invades the north of England, sparking the military campaign in the course of which the nobles will overthrow Richard, making Bolingbroke into King Henry IV. The bare bones of the narrative will be covered simply by adding that, after extensive colloquies between Bolingbroke and Richard, in Acts IV and the first half of V, Richard is consigned to Pomfret Prison, where he takes poison and kills himself before he can be put to death.

The argument. In the last two acts of the play, as Richard vainly tries to hold back the rebellious opposition, which is sweeping away his lands and followers, there is much conversation, of Richard with his closest followers, and between Bolingbroke and Richard; from these passionate glimpses, of world

history in the making, we peer deeply into (Shakespeare's understanding of) late mediaeval British culture.

Macchiavelli. As we get to know Bolingbroke, we see that he is of the new political breed of his time, clever in the ways of political know how and trickery, subtle and diplomatic but one hundred percent self-interested—without those compromising human values and weaknesses we earlier saw associated with Richard. (Cultural history reminds us that Macchiavelli's *Prince*, published in English in 1585, was proving a riveting read for the new savvy courtier-politicians of Elizabeth I's closing reign. Shakespeare will not have hesitated to think many of the Italian's shrewd political perspectives into the mind of Bolingbroke.)

Richard. Richard disputes policy for a while, with the allies and nobles still loyal to him, holed up in a remote north country castle; their military position soon seems to them to have become hopeless, and Richard decides to yield everything to Bolingbroke. It is in the course of arguing with himself, agonizingly, that Richard lays out before us both the perils, emptinesses, and nothingness of the crown, and the mystical mediaeval sense that the crown, once conferred, transfigures the king's very kingliness into something divine. The complex and vacillating royal figure, who was on display for changeability, at the outset of the play, is still, at the end of the play, probing questions of change and stability in meaning.

Themes

Divine right of kings. In his extensive colloquies (Act IV) Richard muses deeply over the plausibility of the higher than secular presence of the King. It was the thought of Richard's time, and the issue that absorbed him, that God, through the Catholic Church, was himself the ultimate anointer of the Christian King. From this state of affairs flowed the great and unimpugnable power of the King, and Richard was deeply interested in the relevance of this issue to his own case.

Realpolitik. Bolingbroke introduces, into the mediaeval culture world with which the play opens, the new atmosphere of 'modern' political realism, of the sort which Machiavelli expounds in *The Prince*. The prince, by this perspective, is above all a servant of himself and his court, not of God, and the prince keeps in mind, at all times, the moves he can make that will disadvantage his opposition, and advance his self-interest. All of this, of course, he hides under a cloak of benevolence.

Succession. In the background of the play we see the concerns of the England of the day, with the issue of royal succession. Not only does the play deal with the concrete issue of succession, but it involves itself deeply with the issues of the nature of governance and governing.

Personality. The personality of Richard is, arguably, the point of deepest fascination in the present play. A true king, fascinated with the meaning of crowns and power, but a hyper complex modern, poor at making his mind up, Richard is almost a figure of our time. His vacillation reminds us of *Hamlet*, but also of moderns like Kafka's Joseph K, who is existentially adrift, or like Camus' Stranger, who simply acts his way through life, without directive intention.

Character Analysis

Richard II

Richard II comes before us ready and anxious to clear up a bitter legal, and eventually life and death, fight between two of his nobles. Richard appears decisive and determined. However he soon weakens his judgmental role by reducing the punishment he has imposed, and giving in to the sentimental pleas for leniency, which the father of Bolingbroke overwhelms him with. In his later tortured reflections, on the nature of kingship, we realize that he entertains conflicted attitudes toward the lofty role of regent. We will also by this time have realized this: that Richard envies the popularity, the man on the street attractiveness, of Bolingbroke, and is perhaps capable of a complete personal overhaul.

Parallel. We have mentioned Kafka's Joseph K and Camus' Stranger, images of the existentially displaced person of our time. We could have gone back to the Greeks, as so often. Oedipus is frantic to determine the nature of rulership. It is only when he has discovered his own limitations, that he realizes how hollow kingship can be. Priam, in the *Iliad*, is king of the Trojans, and yet he can do nothing but beg when it comes to recovering the corpse of his son. Dido, in Virgil's *Aeneid*, has had ample difficulty, seeking for a stable royal mindset; once her lover foe, Aeneas, has left her, she is as abandoned as is Richard, and sees no solution except poison.

Illustrative moments

Presiding. At the outset of the play, Richard presides like a true royal figure, over the trial to be between Bolingbroke and Mowbray. We little suspect that the judgement Richard will render will be revoked, by him, shortly after.

Rescinding. Not long after proclaiming his sentences of banishment, over Mowbray and Bolingbroke, the king rescinds those sentences, reducing the sentences of Bolingbroke. It is the first intimation of the weakness of Richard.

Critical. Richard speaks harshly to Bolingbroke's father, Gaunt, as the old man lies on what he believes will be his death bed. Can it be that Richard is thereby criticizing himself, for having yielded earlier to Gaunt's pleading for a reduction in his son's sentence?

Patriotic. Upon return from his Irish campaign, Richard kisses the soil of England, out of joy for returning safely. Not much later a new King would see him dead, and deride him.

Meditates. In Pomfret Prison, in the period before poisoning himself, Richard reflects constantly on his character as a king, and on the weakness of mankind in general.

Discussion Questions

Do you see a course of growing weakness in Richard, as he struggles to deal with his life challenges? Is he a coward, or simply an introvert, like Hamlet?

Does Bolingbroke come off as a man of the people, and if so does this seem to be part of his rapid success, in overthrowing Richard?

How does Richard react to the abandonment of him by his former forces? Does he feel betrayed? How does he deal with betrayal?