

Richard II

Richard II, written around 1595, is the first play in Shakespeare's second "history tetralogy," a series of four plays that chronicles the rise of the house of Lancaster to the British throne. (Its sequel plays are *Henry IV, Parts 1 & 2*, and *Henry V*.) *Richard II*, set around the year 1398, traces the fall from power of the last king of the house of Plantagenet, Richard II, and his replacement by the first Lancaster king, Henry IV (Henry Bolingbroke). Richard II, who ascended to the throne as a young man, is a regal and stately figure, but he is wasteful in his spending habits, unwise in his choice of counselors and detached from his country and its common people. He spends too much of his time pursuing the latest Italian fashions, spending money on his close friends, and raising taxes to fund his pet wars in Ireland and elsewhere. When he begins to "rent out" parcels of English land to certain wealthy noblemen in order to raise funds for one of his wars, and seizes the lands and money of a recently deceased and much respected uncle to help fill his coffers, both the commoners and the king's noblemen decide that Richard has gone too far.

Richard has a cousin, named Henry Bolingbroke, who is a great favorite among the English commoners. Early in the play, Richard exiles him from England for six years due to an unresolved dispute over an earlier political murder. The dead uncle whose lands Richard seizes was the father of Bolingbroke; when Bolingbroke learns that Richard has stolen what should have been his inheritance, it is the straw that breaks the camel's back. When Richard unwisely departs to pursue a war in Ireland, Bolingbroke assembles an army and invades the north coast of England in his absence. The commoners, fond of Bolingbroke and angry at Richard's mismanagement of the country, welcome his invasion and join his forces. One by one, Richard's allies in the nobility desert him and defect to Bolingbroke's side as Bolingbroke marches through England. By the time Richard returns from Ireland, he has already lost his grasp on his country.

There is never an actual battle; instead, Bolingbroke peacefully takes Richard prisoner in Wales and brings him back to London, where Bolingbroke is crowned King Henry IV. Richard is imprisoned in the remote castle of Pomfret in the north of England, where he is left to ruminate upon his downfall. There, an assassin, who both is and is not acting upon King Henry's ambivalent wishes for Richard's expedient death, murders the former king. King Henry hypocritically repudiates the murderer and vows to journey to Jerusalem to cleanse himself of his part in Richard's death. As the play concludes, we see that the reign of the new King Henry IV has started off inauspiciously.

Summary

During the reign of Richard II, the two young dukes Henry Bolingbroke and Thomas Mowbray quarrel bitterly, and the king finally summons them into his presence to settle their differences publicly. Although Bolingbroke is the eldest son of John of Gaunt, the duke of Lancaster, and therefore a cousin of the king, Richard is perfectly fair in his interview with the two men and shows neither any favoritism. Bolingbroke accuses Mowbray, the duke of Norfolk, of mismanaging military funds and of helping to plot the murder of the dead duke of Gloucester, another of the king's uncles. Mowbray forcefully denies the charges.

Richard decides that to settle the dispute the men should have a trial by combat at Coventry, and the court adjourns there to witness the tournament. Richard, ever nervous and suspicious, grows uneasy as the contest begins. Suddenly, just after the beginning trumpet sounds, the king forbids that the combat

take place. Instead, he banishes the two men from the country. Bolingbroke is to be exiled for six years and Mowbray for the rest of his life. At the same time, Richard demands that they promise they will never plot against him. Persisting in his accusations, Bolingbroke tries to persuade Mowbray to plead guilty to the charges before he leaves England. Mowbray, refusing to do so, warns Richard against Bolingbroke's cleverness.

Not long after his son is banished, John of Gaunt, duke of Lancaster, becomes ill and sends for Richard to give him advice. Although the duke of York points out to him that giving advice to Richard is too often a waste of time, John of Gaunt feels that perhaps the words of a dying man will be heeded where those of a living one would not. From his deathbed, he criticizes Richard for extravagance and for mishandling the public funds and impoverishing the nation. He warns Richard also that the kingdom will suffer for the monarch's selfishness.

Richard pays no attention to his uncle's advice, and after John of Gaunt dies, the king seizes his lands and wealth to back his Irish wars. The aged duke of York, another of Richard's uncles, attempts to dissuade him from his course, pointing out that Bolingbroke has influence among the people. York's fears are soon confirmed. Bolingbroke, hearing that his father's lands have been seized by the king's officers, uses the information as an excuse to terminate his banishment. Gathering together troops and supplies, he lands in the north of England, where he is joined by other dissatisfied lords, including Lord Ross, Lord Willoughby, the earl of Northumberland, and the earl's son, Henry Percy, known as Hotspur.

Richard, heedless of all warnings, has set off for Ireland to pursue his war, leaving his tottering kingdom in the hands of the weak duke of York, who is no match for the wily Bolingbroke. When the exiled traitor reaches Gloucestershire, the duke of York visits him at his camp. Caught between loyalty to Richard and despair over the bankrupt state of the country, York finally yields his troops to Bolingbroke. Richard, returning to England and expecting to find an army of Welshmen under his command, learns that after hearing false reports of his death they have gone over to Bolingbroke. Moreover, the strong men of his court—including the earl of Wiltshire, Bushy, and Green—have all been executed.

Destitute of friends and without an army, Richard takes refuge in Flint Castle. Bolingbroke, using his usurped titles and estates as his excuse, takes Richard prisoner and carries him to London. There Richard breaks down. He shows little interest in anything and spends his time philosophizing on his downfall. When he is brought before Bolingbroke and the cruel and unfeeling earl of Northumberland, Richard is forced to abdicate his throne and sign papers confessing his political crimes. Bolingbroke, assuming royal authority, orders Richard imprisoned in the Tower of London.

During a quarrel among the young dukes of the court, the bishop of Carlisle announces that Mowbray made a name for himself while fighting in the Holy Land and then retired to Venice, where he died. When

Bolingbroke affects grief over the news, the bishop turns on him and denounces him for his part in ousting Richard. Bolingbroke, armed with the legal documents he has collected to prove his rights, prepares to assume the throne as Henry IV. Richard predicts to the earl of Northumberland that Bolingbroke will soon come to distrust his old aide for his part in unseating a king. Soon after that, Richard is sent to the dungeons at Pomfret Castle, and his queen is banished to France.

At the duke of York's palace, the aging duke sorrowfully relates to his duchess the details of the coronation procession of Henry IV. When the duke discovers that his son, the duke of Aumerle, and other loyal followers of Richard are planning to assassinate Henry IV at Oxford, York immediately starts for the palace to warn the new monarch. The duchess, frantic at the thought of her son's danger, advises Aumerle to reach the palace ahead of his father, reveal his treachery to the king, and ask the royal pardon. She herself pleads for her son before the king and wins Aumerle's release.

Having punished the conspirators, Henry IV grows uneasy at the prospect of other treasonable activities, for while Richard lives there is always danger that he might be restored to power. Henry IV suggests casually to his faithful servant Sir Pierce Exton that he murder Richard at Pomfret. Exton's plan to carry out his king's wish is successful. In his dungeon, Richard is provoked to quarrel with his guard, and in the struggle that ensues the guard draws his sword and strikes down his unhappy prisoner. He then places Richard's body in a coffin, carries it to Windsor Castle, and there presents it to Henry IV. Distressed over the news of mounting insurrection in the country, King Henry pretends horror at the murder of Richard and vows to make a pilgrimage to the Holy Land to atone for the death of his fallen cousin.

Characters Description

King Richard II - The King of England when the play begins, Richard is a young man who has not matured much since his adolescence. Stately and poetic, he enjoys the trappings of kingship and has an extraordinary flair for poetic language. However, he is disconnected from his land and its people. He is overthrown by his cousin, Henry Bolingbroke, and eventually assassinated in the remote castle of Pomfret.

King Richard II - The King of England when the play begins, Richard is a young man who has not matured much since his adolescence. Stately and poetic, he enjoys the trappings of kingship and has an extraordinary flair for poetic language. However, he is disconnected from his land and its people. He is overthrown by his cousin, Henry Bolingbroke, and eventually assassinated in the remote castle of Pomfret.

John of Gaunt Duke of Lancaster - Called either "Gaunt" or "Lancaster." An important nobleman, John of Gaunt is Richard's uncle and the father of Richard's banished cousin Bolingbroke, who eventually usurps the throne. Gaunt is very old when this play begins, and he dies in Act II, scene i, after his son's banishment--but not before delivering a withering curse on Richard.

Edmund of Langley Duke of York - Called "York." Richard's uncle, and a brother of John of Gaunt and of the late Thomas of Gloucester. He is made Lord Governor of England by King Richard while he is away at war, but is eventually convinced by Bolingbroke to defect and join his rebel army. A traditionalist who is loyally devoted to the crown, he is deeply upset by any kind of treason against the crown.

The Duke of Aumerle - Also called "Rutland" late in the play, since he is the Earl of Rutland. He is the son of Edmund, Duke of York, and thus a cousin to both King Richard II and Henry Bolingbroke. He remains loyal to Richard throughout the war and, after Richard's deposition, is involved in a failed scheme against the life of the newly crowned King Henry IV.

Thomas Mowbray Duke of Norfolk - Mowbray, sometimes called "Norfolk," is a nobleman whom Henry Bolingbroke accuses, early in the play, of treason against the state and of complicity in the earlier death of Thomas, Duke of Gloucester (the uncle of the current King). Mowbray is banished at the same time as Bolingbroke and dies in exile.

Bushy, Bagot, and Green (also called Greene) - Richard's friends and loyal backers in the court. Bushy and Greene are trapped by Bolingbroke and executed in Act II, scene ii; Bagot, also captured, turns informer in Act IV, scene i and apparently survives the play. (These three names are sometimes mentioned alongside that of the mysterious Earl of Wiltshire, a character whom Shakespeare apparently meant to be another of Richard's friends but failed to write into any actual scenes.)

Henry Percy Earl of Northumberland; Lord Ross; and Lord Willoughby - Noblemen who join Bolingbroke's rebel army early to fight against King Richard. Northumberland (occasionally called "Percy") is the father of young Harry Percy (also called "Percy").

Duchess of York - The wife of the Duke of York and mother of the Duke of Aumerle. She goes before King Henry to plead for her son's life.

Duchess of Gloucester - The aged widow of the late Thomas of Gloucester, and the sister-in-law of John of Gaunt and the Duke of York. She resides in a house at Plashy. We learn of her death in Act II, scene ii.

Queen Isabel - King Richard's wife. She was born into the French royal family and flees to France when Richard is deposed.

Thomas Percy, Earl of Worcester - Called "Worcester." He does not appear in the play, but is a powerful figure to whom other characters frequently refer. The Lord Steward of the king's household, he is also the brother of Henry Percy, Earl of Northumberland, and thus the uncle of young Harry Percy. When Northumberland is declared a traitor for having joined Bolingbroke's army, Worcester also resigns his stewardship and defects to Bolingbroke, taking the servants of the king's house with him.

Lord Berkeley - The ruler of Berkeley Castle in Gloucestershire, where York's army meets Bolingbroke's army in Act II, scene iii. He is loyal to King Richard.

Lord Salisbury - A lord loyal to King Richard. After trying unsuccessfully to manage Richard's troops in Wales, he joins Richard in Wales after Richard returns from Ireland. He is later beheaded for his part in the conspiracy against the life of the newly crowned King Henry IV.

Bishop of Carlisle - A clergyman loyal to Richard. He speaks out against Bolingbroke's usurpation of the throne in Act IV, scene i, for which he is arrested. He is later indicted in the conspiracy against King Henry's life, but the King pardons him and sends him away from the court.

Sir Stephen Scroope - A nobleman loyal to Richard. He brings Richard the bad news of Bolingbroke's invasion when Richard returns from Ireland.

Abbot of Westminster - A clergyman loyal to Richard. He is beheaded for his participation in the conspiracy against King Henry's life.

Sir Piers Exton - A nobleman who assassinates the former King Richard in Pomfret Castle in Act V, scene v, believing he is acting under King Henry's orders

Lord Fitzwater - A minor lord who throws down a gage sometime during Act IV, scene i, and also throws his weight around in Act V, scene vi.