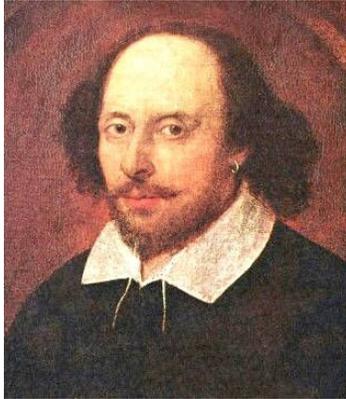


# **RICHARD II**

**by William Shakespeare**



## **THE AUTHOR**

William Shakespeare (1564-1616) was born into the family of a prosperous tradesman in Stratford-upon-Avon, England. While in his mid-teens, he was forced to leave school because his family fell into a period of poverty, so that he had only a rudimentary education. In 1582, he married Anne Hathaway, eight years his senior and already three months pregnant. The marriage produced three children in three years, but in 1585, Shakespeare left Stratford to go to London to seek his fortune in the big city.

In London, he embarked upon a career on the stage, becoming a popular actor by the early fifteen nineties. In 1591, he penned his first play, *Love's Labour's Lost*. His early plays were comedies, and show nothing of the depth that characterized his later works. His plots were borrowed from a variety of sources, both ancient and contemporary. During his career, he wrote 37 plays, three narrative poems, and 154 sonnets.

His writing brought him fame and popularity, but he continued to act as well as write (critics love to speculate about which of the characters in his plays would have been played by the author). He eventually became a shareholder in the Lord Chamberlain's Men (later the King's Men when James I ascended the throne). Most of his plays were performed at local theaters like the Rose, the Globe, and the indoor Blackfriars. When the Globe burned to the ground in 1613 (a cannon misfired during a performance of *Henry VIII*), Shakespeare retired, and died in Stratford three years later on his fifty-second birthday.

*Richard II* was written in 1595, at about the same time as *Romeo and Juliet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The play is both a history play and a tragedy, though scholars have differed greatly in their estimation of the worthiness of character of the protagonist. In any case, the play was written in the context of the latter days of the reign of Elizabeth I, a time when many conspiracies were being hatched against the Tudor monarch. The theme of the peril of the overthrow of a monarch ruling by Divine Right is thus central to the story. Unlike Elizabeth, Richard is a bad ruler and a weak man, more a poet than a leader. Yet Bolingbroke, his successor, though he appears strong and vital, is hamstrung by the illegitimacy of his rise to

power, as can be seen in the two *Henry IV* plays that Shakespeare wrote later. From an historical standpoint, *Richard II* is the first of the eight plays spanning the period of the Wars of the Roses; the overthrow of Richard II initiates the conflict between the houses of Lancaster and York, and the defeat of Richard III at Bosworth Field by the man who is to become Henry VII ends the war and begins the Tudor dynasty, of which Elizabeth was the final ruler.

## MAJOR CHARACTERS

- Richard II - The protagonist, he is a weak and incompetent king who has ruled unjustly and treats his subjects with arrogance and favoritism. He has the soul of a poet, but lacks the wherewithal to rule his kingdom well.
- Henry Bolingbroke, Duke of Hereford - Exiled for six years by Richard for accusing Thomas Mowbray of killing his uncle, the Duke of Gloucester, he returns to seize the throne from his cousin Richard, who was really responsible for Gloucester's death. He takes the throne as King Henry IV, and his ascension initiates the Wars of the Roses.
- John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster - Richard's uncle and Bolingbroke's father, he dies of grief when his son is exiled, and his lands are seized by Richard to pay for a war in Ireland.
- Edmund, Duke of York - Gaunt's brother, thus also Richard's uncle, he is left in England as regent while Richard goes to fight in Ireland, but throws in his lot with Bolingbroke when the latter returns from exile in France.
- Duke of Aumerle - York's son, who engages in a conspiracy against Bolingbroke after he is crowned, but is pardoned despite being denounced by his father when his mother pleads for his life.
- Thomas Mowbray, Duke of Norfolk - Exiled for life by Richard for involvement in the death of Gloucester (despite the fact that he was acting on the king's orders), he died abroad after a sterling military career fighting the Turks.
- Sir John Bushy, Sir William Bagot, Sir Henry Green - Supporters of Richard, they are executed for treason by Bolingbroke.
- Bishop of Carlisle - Supports Richard as God's anointed, but is spared by Bolingbroke at the end of the play because he is a man of honor.
- Sir Pierce of Exton - In an outburst of misguided zeal, he misunderstands a casual remark by Bolingbroke and takes his men to Pomfret Castle and murders the imprisoned Richard.

## NOTABLE QUOTATIONS

“God’s is the quarrel; for God’s substitute,  
His deputy anointed in His sight,  
Hath caused his death, the which if wrongfully,  
Let heaven revenge, for I may never lift  
An angry arm against His minister.” (John of Gaunt, Iii, 37-41)

“There is no virtue like necessity.” (John of Gaunt, Iiii, 277)

“More are men’s ends marked than their lives before;  
The setting sun, and music at the close,  
At the last taste of sweets is sweetest last,  
Writ in remembrance more than things long past.” (John of Gaunt, Iii, 11-14)

“This royal throne of kings, this scept’red isle,  
This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars,  
This other Eden, demi-paradise,  
This fortress built by Nature for herself  
Against infection and the hand of war,  
This happy breed of men, this little world,  
This precious stone set in the silver sea  
Which serves it in the office of a wall,  
Or as a moat defensive to a house,  
Against the envy of less happier lands,  
This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England,  
This nurse, this teeming womb of royal kings,  
Feared by their breed, and famous by their birth,  
Renowned for their deeds as far from home,  
For Christian service and true chivalry,  
As is the sepulcher in stubborn Jewry  
Of the world’s ransom, blessed Mary’s son,  
This land of such dear souls, this dear dear land -  
Dear for her reputation through the world -  
Is now leased out - I die pronouncing it -  
Like to a tenement or pelting farm.  
England, bound in with the triumphant sea,  
Whose rocky shore beats back the envious siege  
Of wat’ry Neptune, is now bound with shame,  
With inky blots, and rotten parchment bonds.  
That England that was wont to conquer others  
Hath made a shameful conquest of itself.  
Ah! would the scandal vanish with my life,  
How happy then were my ensuing death! (John of Gaunt, Iii, 40-68)

“Tut, tut! Grace me no grace, nor uncle me no uncle.” (Duke of York, IIIii, 86)

“Let’s talk of graves, of worms, of epitaphs,  
Make dust our paper, and with rainy eyes  
Write sorrow on the bosom of the earth.  
Let’s choose executors and talk of wills:  
And yet not so, for what can we bequeath  
Save our deposed bodies to the ground?  
Our lands, our lives, and all are Bolingbroke’s,  
And nothing can we call our own, but death  
And that small model of the barren earth  
Which serves as paste and cover to our bones.  
For God’s sake let us sit upon the ground  
And tell sad stories of the death of kings.” (Richard, IIIii, 145-156)

“But ere the crown he looks for live in peace  
Ten thousand bloody crowns of mothers’ sons  
Shall ill become the flower of England’s face,  
Change the complexion of her maid-pale peace  
To scarlet indignation, and bedew  
Her pastor’s grass with faithful English blood.” (Richard, IIIiii, 94-99)

“I have been studying how I may compare  
This prison where I live unto the world:  
And for because the world is populous,  
And here is not a creature but myself,  
I cannot do it; yet I’ll hammer it out.  
My brain I’ll prove the female to my soul:  
My soul the father: and these two beget  
A generation of still-breeding thoughts,  
And these same thoughts people this little world  
In humours like the people of this world,  
For no thought is contented. The better sort,  
As thoughts of things divine, are intermix’d  
With scruples, and do set the word itself  
Against the word:  
And thus: ‘Come, little ones;’ and then again,  
‘It is as hard to come as for a camel  
To thread the postern of a needle’s eye.’  
Thoughts tending to ambition, they do plot  
Unlikely wonders; how these vain weak nails  
May tear a passage through the flinty ribs  
Of this hard world, my ragged prison walls;  
And, for they cannot, die in their own pride.  
Thoughts tending to content flatter themselves

That they are not the first of fortune's slaves,  
Nor shall not be the last; like silly beggars  
Who sitting in the stocks refuge their shame,  
That many have and others must sit there:  
And in this thought they find a kind of ease,  
Bearing their own misfortune on the back  
Of such as have before endured the like.  
Thus play I in one person many people,  
And none contented: sometimes I am king;  
Then treason makes me wish myself a beggar,  
An so I am: then crushing penury  
Persuades me I was better when a king;  
Then I am king'd again: and by and by  
Think that I am unking'd by Bolingbroke,  
And straight am nothing: but whate'er I be  
Nor I nor any man that but man is  
With nothing shall be pleas'd, till he be eas'd  
With being nothing." (Richard, Vv, 1-41)

## NOTES

**Act I, scene 1** - Henry Bolingbroke and Thomas Mowbray appear in the presence of King Richard II, the former to accuse the latter of treason; each is willing to fight a duel to support the rightness of his cause. Bolingbroke accuses Mowbray of misappropriation of funds, but principally of the murder of the Duke of Gloucester, Bolingbroke's uncle, who had been killed by order of the king. Mowbray explains what happened to the money and denies involvement in Gloucester's death, but is willing to fight the duel. Richard refuses to allow them to fight, but both insist that such accusations cannot go unanswered; they cannot live with the shame of failing to act against their accusers. Richard then gives in and sets a date for the combat to occur in Coventry.

**Act I, scene 2** - At the home of John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster, his sister-in-law, the Duchess of Gloucester and the widow of the slain man, urges Gaunt to take vengeance. Gaunt knows Richard is responsible for his brother's murder, but is reluctant to act against him because, as king, he is the Lord's anointed. The duchess, in despair, returns home to die.

**Act I, scene 3** - Bolingbroke and Mowbray meet at Coventry to fight. Richard proclaims the rightness of Bolingbroke's cause (thus turning against his own henchman), but also encourages Mowbray. Just before the joust is to begin, Richard stops the fight, and decrees banishment for both combatants - Bolingbroke for ten years and Mowbray for life. He also makes them swear that they will never meet in exile to plot against his throne. Mowbray, knowing of Bolingbroke's hatred for the king, warns Richard that he has made a mistake by not allowing matters to be resolved on the field of arms. But Richard, pitying the aged John of Gaunt, reduces the son's sentence of exile to six years. Gaunt then says farewell to his son, encouraging him to view the exile as an opportunity for travel, but Bolingbroke will tolerate no such mind games.

**Act I, scene 4** - Richard, in conversation with Aumerle and Green, notes that Bolingbroke before his exile had courted the public favor as if he sought the crown. As Richard prepares to leave for the war in Ireland, he notes that the expedition will be financed by leasing the crown lands and giving his agents power to tax the rich at whatever rate they can manage to collect. He then hears that John of Gaunt is sick, and wishes him dead so his lands can supply the royal coffers with much-needed funds.

**Act II, scene 1** - The dying John of Gaunt and his brother Edmund of York talk about the pitiful state of England under the incompetent Richard. The king then arrives, and Gaunt goes through a lengthy play on words about his name and his condition, then criticizes the king for his misrule and for the murder of his brother Gloucester. John of Gaunt then exits, and dies shortly thereafter. Richard then confiscates his property to finance the Irish wars. York warns Richard against seizing the property that now rightly belongs to Bolingbroke, but Richard stands by his decision. He then appoints York Lord Governor of the realm while he is away in Ireland. Meanwhile, a group of nobles, angry at the injustice perpetrated by Richard against Bolingbroke, determine to join a rebellion being mounted by Bolingbroke in France to return to England and overthrow Richard.

**Act II, scene 2** - The queen, having returned to Windsor Castle after the departure of her husband for Ireland, mourns Richard's absence but also speaks of an unknown foreboding. Green then arrives to report that Bolingbroke has landed with the rebels at Ravenspurgh, and has been joined by many powerful nobles. York reports that the whole country has risen against Richard, and soon hears that the Duchess of Gloucester has died. Bushy and Green, loyal to the king, decide to go into hiding.

**Act II, scene 3** - Bolingbroke lands with his troops, and is met by the Duke of York, who rebukes him for treason and rebellion. Bolingbroke insists that he has returned for nothing more than to regain his stolen inheritance. York sympathizes with his concerns, and finally agrees to remain neutral in the coming conflict.

**Act II, scene 4** - The Earl of Salisbury and a Welsh captain speak of the portents and evil omens they have seen in the heavens and on earth, and are convinced that Richard is dead, or at least that his reign is doomed.

**Act III, scene 1** - At Bristol, Bolingbroke has captured Bushy and Green and condemns them to death for deceiving the king and taking part in despoiling his property. He then sends a message of entreaty to the queen and moves toward Wales, not realizing that the Welsh army had already disbanded.

**Act III, scene 2** - Richard lands on the coast of Wales. He calls upon the very soil to fight against Bolingbroke, and expresses his assurance that God is on their side. Salisbury arrives and tells Richard that the Welsh have disbanded or joined Bolingbroke just the day before. Richard then reassures himself with his belief that York has soldiers to support their cause. Scroop then arrives to tell him that his noble supporters are dead and that York has gone over to Bolingbroke. Richard realizes that all is lost and begins to bemoan his fate. He tells his followers to discharge his troops, and he heads for Flint Castle to await Bolingbroke.

**Act III, scene 3** - Bolingbroke arrives at Flint Castle and offers to parley with Richard. He vows to submit to the king's authority if only he will rescind his banishment and restore his lands, but threatens bloodshed if he refuses. Richard calls Bolingbroke a traitor, and warns him that he will never know aught but bloodshed should he continue in his rebellious course of action. Richard then agrees to Bolingbroke's conditions, but despises himself for doing so. He then submits to Bolingbroke and they set out for London.

**Act III, scene 4** - The queen converses with one of her ladies, and hears two gardeners making an analogy between their garden and the kingdom. They say that Richard has been deposed. The queen then determines to meet him in London.

**Act IV, scene 1** - Bolingbroke and his followers arrive in London and go to meet Parliament. At Westminster, several nobles accuse Aumerle of involvement in the death of Gloucester, though he denies it. Different nobles take sides in the dispute, but Bolingbroke refuses to allow them to defend their honor until Mowbray has been restored to his lands and position. He then hears that Mowbray has died in Venice, and tells the nobles that they may fight their appointed battles at a later date. York then arrives to tell Bolingbroke that Richard is willing to abdicate the throne and acknowledge him as King Henry IV. Carlisle warns against such usurpation, prophesying with much biblical imagery that it will lead to civil war, and is promptly placed under arrest for treason. Richard arrives in the chamber and abdicates the throne to Bolingbroke. The new king insists that Richard confess the crimes committed by him and his followers, but Richard compares himself to Christ and his persecutors to Judas and Pilate and refuses to read the charges against him. Richard begs leave to go from the new king's presence, but Bolingbroke orders him conveyed to the Tower of London. After Bolingbroke exits to prepare for his coronation, Aumerle and Carlisle speak of hatching a plot against him.

**Act V, scene 1** - The queen meets Richard on the way to the Tower and bids him farewell. Northumberland arrives and says Richard is to be taken to Pomfret rather than the Tower, and that the queen must flee to France. Richard warns that Northumberland will suffer greatly for having aided Bolingbroke in his usurpation.

**Act V, scene 2** - York describes to his wife the entrance of Bolingbroke into London, the cheers of the crowds, and the abuse they heaped on Richard. Their son Aumerle then arrives; he has been pardoned by the new king on the basis of his father's promise of loyalty. But York discovers that his son has joined the plot against Henry IV and intends to murder the new king. York is furious at this treachery and leaves immediately to find the king and warn him. The duchess urges Aumerle to ride as fast as he can to the king to beg his forgiveness before York arrives to denounce him.

**Act V, scene 3** - Henry IV is at Windsor Castle, and the scene begins with him complaining of the prodigal behavior of his son, the young Prince Hal. Aumerle arrives and wishes to speak with the king alone. He kneels and begs forgiveness, but then York arrives and warns him of his son's treachery and begs the king to put the traitor to death. The duchess then arrives and begs for her son's life. Bolingbroke agrees to pardon him, but insists that the rest of the conspirators must die.

**Act V, scene 4** - Sir Pierce Exton and another man, having heard the king complain of the plot against him and taking his words to require the death of Richard, leave for Pomfret to do the deed.

**Act V, scene 5** - Richard, in prison at Pomfret Castle, muses on his condition and his lost kingdom. Soon Exton and his band of murderers arrive. He kills Richard, but not before the former king dispatches two of his attackers.

**Act V, scene 6** - At Windsor Castle, nobles arrive to report the execution of a number of the conspirators against the king, but also tell him that rebellion is growing rapidly. Harry Percy reports that the Abbot of Westminster, one of the conspirators, has died, and brings with him the Bishop of Carlisle for sentencing. Bolingbroke pardons Carlisle because he is an honorable man. Exton then enters with the body of Richard in a coffin. Bolingbroke tells him that he never desired Richard's death, and condemns Exton to exile for the murder. The new king then announces that he will make a pilgrimage to the Holy Land as penance for his role in the death of Richard.

## ESSAY QUESTIONS

Discuss the following in a five-paragraph essay:

1. In William Shakespeare's *Richard II*, the protagonist views himself as a Christ figure, and often uses biblical imagery to describe his plight. To what extent is this use of imagery legitimate? Is Richard really a Christ figure? Relate your answer to the concept of the Divine Right of Kings as found in the play.
2. William Shakespeare's *Richard II* was written at a time when conspiracies against Queen Elizabeth were shaking the stability of England. Shakespeare was a firm believer in the Divine Right of Kings. How does this belief play a role in the plot of the play? Do you think the play successfully argues against rebellion against God-constituted authority? Why or why not?
3. In William Shakespeare's *Richard II*, who do you think made a better king, Richard or Bolingbroke? Why do you think so? Defend your conclusion with specifics from the play.
4. In William Shakespeare's *Richard II*, Shakespeare argues that removing even a bad king is wrong and is bound to lead to greater trouble. Do you agree with him? Why or why not? Support your conclusion with details from the play and from Scripture.
5. Many critics have argued that Act V, scene 3 of William Shakespeare's *Richard II* is such a bad scene that Shakespeare could not have written it. Do you think it is a bad scene? Why or why not? Be sure to support your conclusion with details from the scene.
6. Some critics have categorized William Shakespeare's *Richard II* as a history play, while others prefer to regard it as a tragedy. In your opinion, does Richard II qualify as a tragic hero? Why or why not? Support your conclusion with specifics from the play.

7. In William Shakespeare's *Richard II*, contrast the personalities of Richard and Bolingbroke, especially with regard to their imaginative capacities. How is the plot affected by the fact that Richard is poetic and imaginative and Bolingbroke is a hard-headed pragmatist who doesn't have a poetic bone in his body? that Richard is a man of words while Bolingbroke is a man of action?
8. In William Shakespeare's *Richard II*, what characteristics make the protagonist a bad king? How do these traits lead to his downfall? Be sure to support your argument with details from the play.
9. Discuss the role of prophecy in William Shakespeare's *Richard II*. How do the prophecies in the play advance the plot? How do they serve as foreshadowings of future events? How do they reveal the characters of figures in the play? To what extent do the prophecies come to pass?
10. Discuss the image of the garden as it appears in William Shakespeare's *Richard II*. In picturing the country as a garden and its ruler as a gardener, when does Shakespeare convey about the character of Richard's reign and the consequences of his misrule? Support your argument with specifics from the play.
11. To what extent does William Shakespeare's *Richard II* illustrate the truth, "Be sure your sin will find you out"? How is Richard the victim of events in which he was involved before the play starts and in the early scenes of the play? How will Bolingbroke be victimized by his own sins as his reign develops? To what extent does Shakespeare here enunciate a biblical principle?
12. When the ancient Greeks analyzed tragedy, they spoke of a tragic flaw in the character of the protagonist that brought him down to destruction. The term they used to describe this tragic flaw, *hamartia*, is one of the words the Bible uses for *sin* (cf. Romans 3:23). To what extent is the protagonist of William Shakespeare's *Richard II* brought down by a flaw in his character, and to what extent is he destroyed by the consequences of sin in his life? Discuss the extent of Richard's accountability for his own destruction.
13. In the latter portion of William Shakespeare's *Richard II*, Richard seems all too ready to wallow in his misery. To what extent does he seem to *enjoy* victimhood? Is he truly happier on the throne or in prison? Support your conclusion with details from the play.
14. Choose a character from William Shakespeare's *Richard II* that you would consider to be Machiavellian. Why does this character fit such an appellation? Be sure to use specifics, both from the play and from *The Prince*.
15. In many situations in William Shakespeare's *Richard II*, those in power have the option of exercising judgment or granting pardon. Choose three of these incidents and assess the wisdom of the decision made by the ruler. Be sure to support, both from the play and from Scripture, why the ruler's choice was a wise or foolish one.

16. Choose one of the two major figures in William Shakespeare's *Richard II*, either Richard or Bolingbroke, and discuss how the character changes from the beginning of the play to the end. What accounts for these changes in character? How does Shakespeare use these changes to advance the plot of the play?
17. When Bolingbroke returns from exile in William Shakespeare's *Richard II*, he insists that he wants no more than the reversal of the decree of exile and the restoration of his family property, confiscated by Richard after the death of John of Gaunt. Ultimately, he takes far more than this when he replaces Richard on the throne. Do you believe that Bolingbroke had no designs on the throne when he returned, or was his intention all along to make himself king? Support your answer with specifics from the play.
18. In William Shakespeare's *Richard II*, the protagonist is a man who loves to perform. As the play progresses, identify incidents where he is clearly playing a part and places where he is being himself. Is he ever really himself, or does he always seem to be an actor on a stage? What does this tell the audience about his character? about his fitness to be king?
19. Some have argued that, when revolution occurs, the new king soon puts on the robes of the one he has deposed. Discuss the truth of this statement in the context of William Shakespeare's *Richard II*. By the end of the play, to what extent has Bolingbroke become like the king he has deposed? In what ways does he remain distinct from Richard? What causes these similarities and differences?
20. To what extent is England the true subject of William Shakespeare's *Richard II*? Discuss whether the real issue in the play is the health of the monarchy or the health of the country. Are the two inextricably related, or can one prosper while the other suffers? Support your conclusion with specifics from the play.