

Richard II

SYNOPSIS

The Life and Death of King Richard the Second

Henry Bolingbroke, King Richard's cousin, accuses Thomas Mowbray, Duke of Norfolk, of plotting the death of his and Richard's uncle, the Duke of Gloucester. It becomes clear that this is actually an accusation against Richard himself. Bolingbroke and Norfolk are about to fight a duel when Richard stops the fight and exiles both of them, Norfolk for ever, and Bolingbroke for ten years, which he reduces to six for the sake of Bolingbroke's father, John of Gaunt.

Richard appears both frivolous and greedy when Gaunt dies, after accusing Richard of governing badly, because he confiscates all Gaunt's property to pay for the wars in Ireland. Richard's other uncle, the Duke of York, points out that this property belongs to Bolingbroke, and that if he disregards Bolingbroke's rights, his own rights to be king in succession to his father can also be questioned. Richard nevertheless leaves for Ireland, leaving his queen at home and appointing York as regent while he is away.

Bolingbroke returns from exile, claiming that he only wants his legitimate rights, and the Duke of Northumberland joins him with other dissatisfied nobles. York, who feels inadequate to deal with the situation and has divided loyalties, also joins Bolingbroke. When the King returns from Ireland with York's son Aumerle he finds that his Welsh army has gone home, thinking he is dead. He veers between defiance and despair. Bolingbroke, still claiming he only wants his title as Duke of Lancaster, accompanies Richard back to London. The Queen finds out from her gardener, who compares the garden to the state, that Richard will probably be deposed.

In a scene mirroring the start of the play, Aumerle is accused of plotting Gloucester's death. Richard is called and agrees to abdicate and leave the throne to Bolingbroke, who will become Henry IV. In this scene Richard meditates on the subject of kingship and power, and by his words manipulates Henry into allowing him to leave, but throws away his chance by saying Henry can choose where he will go. Henry sends him to prison. Richard is parted from his wife, who is sent home to France. He prophesies that Northumberland will rebel against Henry.

York discovers that Aumerle is involved in a plot to kill Henry and reports it to the King, while his wife, in a scene of comic relief, pleads for Aumerle's life. Henry pardons him, but has the other conspirators arrested.

Richard, in prison, meditates on a prisoner's way of imagining the world. He is visited by a stable-boy who describes Henry's coronation, and then by Exton, who believes Henry would be pleased if Richard was dead. Although Richard defends himself bravely, he is murdered. Exton brings Richard's body to Henry, who repudiates the murder and promises to go on a pilgrimage in repentance. Henry also hears about his son's dissipated lifestyle.

Media:

DVD:

An Age of Kings (BBC TV 1960), dir. Michael Hayes (a fusion of all the history plays from *Richard II* to *Richard III*)

Richard II (BBC TV Shakespeare 1978), dir. David Giles, with Derek Jacobi

Richard II (BBC TV 2012), dir. Rupert Goold (part of mini-series *The Hollow Crown*)

Not commercially available:

Richard II (BBC TV 1970), dir. Richard Cottrell and Toby Robertson, with Ian McKellen

The Wars of the Roses (1990), dir. Michael Bogdanov (a filming of the 1987 English Shakespeare Company stage production, uploaded to YouTube)

Richard II (BBC TV 1997), dir. Michael Bogdanov, with Fiona Shaw

Richard II (Shakespeare's Globe 2003), dir. Sue Judd, with Mark Rylance (extracts on YouTube)

CD Audio:

Richard II (Arkangel Complete Shakespeare)

[Michael Mitchell]