

Aspects of tragedy: Text overview – *Richard II*

Read our overview which shows how teachers can consider *Richard II* in relation to the genre of Tragedy. We haven't covered every element of this genre. Instead we hope this guide will provide a springboard to help you plan, and to get you and your students thinking about the text in more detail.

Overview

Although categorised most commonly as a history play *Richard II* fruitfully rewards being studied through the lens of tragedy. It is a play whose protagonist is of high degree, whose fate affects many and whose character is fatally flawed. Richard is blind and foolish yet also gains nobility as the play progresses; this makes his fate lamentable and he is capable of inspiring pity and fear in the audience. He is a complex hero, just as Bolingbroke is a complex adversary, and the audience is left to ponder difficult moral issues, not the least of which is whether it is acceptable to depose God's anointed representative on earth if he is in fact a bad king?

Richard as tragic hero

At the start of the play Richard is presented as an inept king. Shakespeare makes it clear that although Richard views himself positively, he is actually weak, foolish and arrogant, mismanaging the realm and abusing his position of power. Richard, who should be the wise and steadfast leader of the country, is "basely led by flatterers" so that England is turned into a "pelting farm" of which he is merely the "landlord". Shakespeare leaves no doubt in the audience's minds that Richard is an ignoble monarch – he is implicated in the death of Gloucester, is callous in his treatment of his uncle Gaunt and illegally seizes the 'plate, coin, revenues, and moveables' on Gaunt's death that rightly belong to Bolingbroke. As much as he delights in the trappings of kingship he fails to assume its responsibilities and, as the Gardeners point out, the country has grown to be "full of weeds" without due governance and control being exercised within it. His failings as a king mean that his country suffers.

Despite his incompetence and irresponsibility, Richard believes he is secure in his position as "God's substitute". He claims that "Not all the water in the rough rude sea/Can wash the balm off from an anointed king", a view echoed by some of the other characters, including York and Carlisle. Yet in this belief he is deluded. Richard's flaws are manifold: he is self-absorbed, self-deceiving and all too willing to be led by flatterers. His flaws lead to his downfall at the hands of

the ambitious Bolingbroke. The dying Gaunt tells Richard that he is “in reputation sick” and that “A thousand flatterers” sit within his crown but Richard will not listen. In the end, Richard pays the ultimate price. He loses his crown to Bolingbroke and then is ignominiously hacked to death.

It is unlikely that the audience feels sympathy for Richard at the start of the play but as his fate unfurls and the poet king reflects on his situation and dwells on his deposition, many may feel he gains self-knowledge and acquires the nobility he lacked when he actually wore the crown. The reference Richard makes to himself as a Christ like figure is often highlighted in performances of the play via costumes and lighting and this gives to the solitary figure of the deposed king a gravitas and spiritual significance so lacking when he is first seen. Some audiences may feel Richard is merely a manipulator; a showman who is good with words, who can dramatise a situation and whose comparison of himself to Christ is arrogant and unjustified. Whatever the ultimate judgement, whether the audience concludes he is moving and majestic or wordy and self-indulgent, Richard emerges as a complex tragic figure and the audience is likely to modify its view of him as the play goes on.

Bolingbroke as tragic adversary

In some ways Bolingbroke is as complex an adversary as Richard is a hero. He can be seen almost as a saviour for England; certainly it seems he will be a better king. He is a man of action, wronged by Richard but also loyal to England and angry at what has been happening to his country. Bolingbroke is brave, adept at politics, more judicious in his use of power and far more of a pragmatist than the fanciful Richard. It is clear he has many positive qualities and via his presentation of the two men Shakespeare begins to explore issues around the proper use of power, something that also occupies him in the history plays that follow Richard II.

The moral judgment within the play is not however solely based on who, practically, is the better king. Having established he is a weak ruler Shakespeare also makes it absolutely clear that Richard is God’s appointed representative on earth. Carlisle states that to usurp him is a crime that is “heinous, black, obscene” and that to do so makes Bolingbroke “a foul traitor”. York also says that any action against the King is “gross rebellion and detested treason”. Carlisle prophesies that “The blood of English shall manure the ground/And future ages groan for this foul act”, a prophecy that seems to be played out in the civil unrest and insurrection seen in *Henry IV Parts 1 and 2*. Bolingbroke himself is deeply troubled by his actions and fearful of their consequences and when *Henry IV Part 1* opens he is preparing to journey to the Holy Land to atone for his sin. The act of his deposition of Richard haunts Henry throughout his reign and even cast a shadow over his son in *Henry V*.

Not only is it a sin to depose the king but Shakespeare also raises the issue of whether it just teaches others a way to the crown, a point borne out in the *Henry IV* plays. If the “mounting Bolingbroke” has no respect for the sanctity of

Kingship then why should others when he himself is monarch? Indeed in the later plays those who help Bolingbroke depose Richard lead the rebellions that threaten Henry IV's throne. In this respect, Henry is perhaps a tragic figure in the making. In Richard II though, the status and good standing of Bolingbroke are inversely proportional to Richard's and by the time Richard is lyrically relinquishing the trappings of Kingship it is with him that the hearts of the audience lie.

Order and disorder

Although there is a movement from order to disorder with some restoration of stability at the end, this tragic aspect is less clearly defined than in *Othello* or *King Lear*. At the beginning of the play, Richard as monarch is in command and he has control over his subjects despite the disquiet raised by his whimsical governance. His unwise decisions and foolish behaviour then allow Bolingbroke to mount an insurrection and bring about disorder in the form of civil war. Finally with Henry's coronation and Richard's death, there is again a semblance of order. However, Shakespeare makes this play interesting in that the pattern is constantly undercut and at almost every point questions are raised, for example as the play nears its close Richard calmly and poetically reflects upon his situation in a measured way while Bolingbroke is drawn into political intrigue and is assaulted by guilt at Exton's murder of Richard which he claims he did at Bolingbroke's request. Thus the restorer of order has blood on his hands and the play ends on a note of puzzlement, pointed up by the ambiguities in Bolingbroke's final speech where he protests his soul is full of woe:

"Though I did wish him dead,
I hate the murderer, love him murdered."

A lesson to be learned

Richard neglects his duty, is swayed by flatterers, loses sight of his priorities and pays a heavy price. Unlike *Othello* or *Macbeth*, both of whom are presented as loyal, brave servants of the state before they succumb to their fatal flaws, Richard is a weak, corrupt figure. While Bolingbroke does exploit Richard's weaknesses (he opportunely returns to England from exile when Richard's vanity takes him to fight an ill-advised war in Ireland), Richard also has flatterers and his own arrogance to lead him astray. Unlike *Iago* or *Claudius*, Bolingbroke has some justification for acting as he does as he is severely wronged by the King who steals his lands and money on Gaunt's death. However, neither Richard nor Bolingbroke is clearly a hero or a victim and so the moral judgement the audience must make is challenging. After Richard returns to England, Shakespeare builds his tragic stature. He is given magnificent speeches as he moves towards self-knowledge, understanding his predicament and his own mortality ('I wasted time, and now doth time waste me'). Shakespeare elevates him through the poetry and through Richard's predictions of what will befall the country if Bolingbroke is crowned:

"The blood of English shall manure the ground,
And future ages groan for this foul act,
Peace shall go sleep with Turks and infidels,
And, in this seat of peace, tumultuous wars
Shall kin with kin, and kind with kind, confound."

In the end, both must face the consequences of their actions and both are capable of inspiring feelings of pity and fear in those who witness their fates.