

Study Guide on William Shakespeare's *Richard II*

“Tell thou the lamentable tale of me, / And send the hearers weeping to their beds” (5.1.44–45¹). What is the *tragedy* of this play? What is Richard’s tragic flaw, and how does it bring about his downfall?

- How is Richard portrayed in the beginning of the play? Consider his characteristics as king, judge, member of his family, center of courtly life, *etc.*
- What is Richard’s trajectory over the course of the play? Does virtue and/or nobility become manifest in the course of the play as he reacts to certain difficulties?
 - Is there a point at which Richard recognizes his own humanity?
 - How does Richard come to grips with his status as non-king? Among other passages, consider the following: “God save the king! Will no man say amen? / Am I both priest and clerk? Well then, amen! / God save the king! although I be not he; / And yet amen, if heaven do think him me” (4.1.172–75).
- Does Richard end well? Do we see signs of repentance? Consider “But, for the concord of my state and time, / Had not an ear to hear my true time broke. / I wasted time, and now doth time waste me” (5.5.47–49). What, if anything, helped Richard to see his life differently?

With whom do you sympathize in *Richard II*? Does this change over the course of the play?

Consider the conflict between Bolingbroke and Mowbray in Act 1, scenes 1 and 3. What is its significance?

- How does Richard rule these men? What is his initial response to the charges (1.1.52 ff.)?
- How does Richard handle the duel? Why does Richard allow the duel to begin, but then end it (1.3)?
- How do Richard’s choices in this matter relate to his actions throughout the play? Does this episode foreshadow any qualities or tendencies in Richard?

Should one oppose, or depose, a rightful king? Compare how different characters answer this question, and what Shakespeare is trying to illustrate through these answers.

¹ Shakespeare, William. *The Tragedy of King Richard II*. Edited by Frances E. Dolan. New York: Penguin Group, 2000. (All act, scene and line numbers refer to this edition.)



- John of Gaunt
 - “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” (1.2.37–41; see also 1.2.4–6).
 - Whom does the Duchess of Gloucester see as responsible for the death of her husband? Does Gaunt agree with this assessment?
 - Why does he refuse vengeance in the quotation above? Is this patience, cowardice, duty, or something else?
- Duke of York
 - “For how art thou a king / But by fair sequence and succession?” (2.1.198–199).
 - What is the nature of York’s defense of the established order (2.3.86–105)?
 - “Thou art a banished man; and here art come, / Before the expiration of thy time, / In braving arms against thy sovereign” (2.3.110–112), and “To find out right with wrong – it may not be; / And you that do abet him in this kind / Cherish rebellion and are rebels all” (2.3.145–147).
 - Why does he finally agree to let them in the castle, declaring himself “neuter” (2.3.159)? Is this a compromise of his principles? Is it a bow to necessity? Does he seem glad to do it?
 - Consider the action in 5.1 and 5.2, including: “If thou do pardon, whosoever pray, / More sins for this forgiveness prosper may. / This festered joint cut off, the rest rest sound; / This let alone will all the rest confound” (5.3.83 ff.). What prompts such vehemence in York, even to the point of seeking the condemnation of his son for treason?
- Carlisle
 - Consider Carlisle’s outburst and denunciation at 4.1.114 ff.
 - How does he interpret the actions of Bolingbroke and all who support him? What does he believe will be the consequences?

Why does Richard offer up the crown (3.3.143 and 4.1.201)? Is he despairing? Is there compulsion at work here? Does Richard have the right to give up the crown (consider, for example, 4.1.247)?

Is it right for Bolingbroke and his supporters to depose Richard?

- Consider Bolingbroke’s defense of his actions. How does he win supporters?
- How do his motivations and intentions change? Consider for example what Bolingbroke says to York (2.3) and his condemnation of the courtiers before their execution (3.1).

Is it true, as Richard claims, that “heaven still guards the right” (3.2.62)? Does the plot of the play disprove his claim that “Not all the water in the rough rude sea / Can wash the balm off from an appointed king” (3.2.54–55)? What finally does “wash the balm off” Richard? (Consider, for example, 4.1.201 ff.)



In John of Gaunt's "sceptered isle" speech, England is called "This other Eden" (2.1.42), and at 3.4.73 ff. the queen alludes to Adam and Eve. Is there any connection between these two references? What, if anything, does the Fall of Man have to do with the action of this play?

Consider Richard's prophecy to Northumberland (5.1.55 ff.). Does it seem accurate? Once the king has been killed, is it true that the way is open to all these evils? What do you think about the state of England at the end of the play?

Suggested use: This study guide includes a few questions and observations about Shakespeare's *Richard II*. Among possible uses, one could consider these comments while reading the work; or one could use them as starting points for a classroom discussion.

