

William Shakespeare's King Richard the Second

PLOT

King Richard II has mismanaged the affairs of England. While in Ireland, fighting a war, Richard's banished cousin, Henry Bolingbroke rallies the noblemen and the common folk against Richard. Richard surrenders to Henry and hands the crown over to him. Henry begins his rule as king, amidst suspicions of treason. Richard is assassinated in prison, marking the beginning of the War of the Roses.

THEMES AND ISSUES

Treason
Loyalty
Divine Monarchy
Political Murder
Government Property – renting land, taxing citizens
Inheritance – familial and royal
Honour
Identity

LANGUAGE AND STRUCTURE

Chivalry – throwing down the “gage,” the duel
Highly stylized – poetic, verse
Metaphor – England compared to a garden, king to the sun
Foreshadow – the curse of Gaunt, Richard's physical descent
Ceremonial – language of the king VS language of the people
Ineffectiveness – Richard commands but cannot control Henry and Thomas
Circular – trials in acts one and four
Intertextuality – Christ's betrayal, fall of Phaeton

EXTENDED RESOURCES

Play: King Richard the Second by William Shakespeare
Film: Farrell's Richard II 2001, Warner's Richard II 1997, Woodman's Richard II 1982, Giles' King Richard the Second 1978, Cottrell's The Tragedy of King Richard II 1970, Hayes' An Age of Kings 1960
Music: Henry Purcell (“The History of King Richard II”. Purcell: Songs and Arias, 2001), Peter Erskine (“Suite: Music from Shakespeare's King Richard II”. Transition, 1986)
Current Affairs: Zimbabwe's opposition government, war in Iraq, South Africa, Rwanda
Teacher Resources: <http://www.unibas.ch/shine/linkshistrichard2wf.html>

STUDENT ACTIVITIES

1. Use the library and the Internet as resources to prepare a timeline to document the key events leading to King Richard II's defeat. W/I/A/U
2. Use your research skills to gather as many facts as you can about the Essex Rebellion. Then work in small groups to prepare a debate on the wisdom of having actors perform Richard II just prior to the Rebellion. RSL/IG/N/F
3. After the Essex Rebellion, Queen Elizabeth I stated, "I am Richard II. Know ye not that?" Discuss the ways in which Elizabeth I was both like Richard II and unlike him. SL/GorC/N/U
4. Write and perform a TV news broadcast highlighting the main developments of the play. Record the broadcast. WR/G/A/F
5. Create a map of Britain that details and charts where the main action of the play takes place. W/IorG/A/U
6. Imagine you are a campaign manager for either Richard or Bolingbroke, write and deliver a speech that gives reasons why your boss should be or is the true king. WS/I/A/F
7. Discuss the extent to which Richard's abdication of the throne makes him responsible for the War of the Roses. SL/G/N/U
8. Create a web that shows how different characters and events relate or contribute to one of the main themes of Richard II. RW/IorG/A/U
9. Shakespeare uses description of varying heights (i.e. Richard descending the throne, Henry kneeling before York) to denote status and power. If you were staging the play, in what other ways might you represent the ongoing power struggle in Richard II? S/C/N/U
10. In III.iv. the gardener compares England to a garden. Extend this metaphor to include all the major characters of Richard II and the plants that might represent them. RW/I/A/F
11. How does Richard's comparison of himself to Christ in III.ii. and IV.i. contribute to our understanding of Richard as the king? S/C/N/U
12. I.i. and IV.i. both depict a trial of traitors. Based on the respective actions of Richard and Henry as judge, write an essay that gives reasons as to which man you think was the better leader of England. RW/I/A/F
13. The crown becomes a very important symbol in Richard II. Design or find an image of a crown that best represents (through shape, metal, style, etc...) what you think Richard's crown symbolizes. Give justification for your choices. V/IorG/A/F
14. After viewing historical and theatrical images of Richard II discuss how the visual representation of Richard contributes to varied interpretations of Richard as king. VS/C/N/U
15. In the garden, the queen wants to play a game. Considering that Richard was ten when he became king and Isabel was only seven when she married Richard, discuss the inferences of Richard and Isabel "playing" king and queen. What are the implications of child responsibility both historically and today? S/C/N/U
16. In II.iv., the Welsh army abandons Richard because they assume he is dead. Speculate on how the Captain may have come to this conclusion and then write a serial tabloid article for the headline NO TIDINGS FROM THE KING: Prophets Whisper Fearful Change. W/C/N/U
17. In V.v., Richard refers to "sour sweet music." Choose a current piece of music that would contribute to Richard's attempt at describing his prison experience. Justify your choice. L/I/A/ForU
18. Divide up John of Gaunt's curse on Richard so that everyone has an equal number of lines and then read it aloud. Discuss how the curse gives a synopsis of the play. RS/C/N/U
19. Discuss how Richard being compared to the sun relates to the ideology that the kings of England were divinely appointed. SL/G/N/U
20. Write a letter of resignation to Richard from one of the noblemen, detailing reasons for deserting Richard and joining Bolingbroke's army. What response would you expect in the reply? W/I/A/F

R = reading, W = writing, S = speaking, L = listening, V = viewing
I = individual, G = small groups, C = whole class
A = assessed, N = not assessed
F = formal, U = informal