

Shakespeare, 1989
RICHARD II, SYNOPSIS

ACT 1. King Richard II hears out two noblemen (Henry Bolingbroke, Duke of Hereford and Thomas Mowbray, Duke of Norfolk) charge each other with treason against the King. Along with one of his two uncles (John of Gaunt, Henry's father), Richard tries to reconcile the two men, asking them to "forget and forgive." Neither man agrees. Richard sets their day of trial, a medieval trial by combat, by which the victor will be shown to have God on his side, since God is the ultimate judge. The Duchess of Gloucester (the wife of Richard's third uncle), tries to persuade Gaunt to revenge the death of her husband. Gaunt refuses, but in his answer, he clearly pins the responsibility on Richard. On the day of the "trial," Richard stops the combat when it's just about to begin and exiles both Bolingbroke and Mowbray, the former for ten years (which he soon reduces to six), and the latter for life.

ACT 2. Richard and his close supporters banter about events surrounding Bolingbroke's departure, when he is informed that Gaunt is very sick. The dying Gaunt laments the condition of England, for which he holds Richard responsible, and chastises him; soon after, he dies. Richard seizes all of Gaunt's wealth to spend on his campaign to suppress uprisings in Ireland. The Duke of York (another of Richard's uncles, father of his cousin Aumerle) protests that Richard is making a terrible error, but Richard shunts him aside, though he also makes York Governor of England while he is away. His queen has some vague forebodings of ill, and these are realized in the news that Bolingbroke has returned, cutting short his term of exile, to claim his title and his property as rightfully his after his father's death. He is joined by Northumberland and a number of other powerful noblemen. When he meets York, his uncle, York rebukes him for disobeying the King, but he has no powerful army with which to enforce his stance; moreover, he sympathizes with Bolingbroke's position. In the end he "goes along" with Bolingbroke. And since there's no news from Ireland, Richard's royal forces disperse.

ACT 3. Bolingbroke executes Bushy and Green, two of Richard's favorites. Richard, delayed by violent seas, finally returns from Ireland, and learns from one message after another that all his soldiers and supporters have deserted him, gone home, or joined Bolingbroke. In the second scene of this Act, he moves between despair and hope, finally giving up all hope of standing against Bolingbroke. He disperses most of his remaining soldiers, meets Bolingbroke at Flint Castle, and concedes to Bolingbroke's demands, including his "invitation" to go to London. The Queen learns of Richard's situation by overhearing a pair of gardeners speak of it.

ACT 4. Bolingbroke raises the question of who killed the Duke of Gloucester, which leads to a whole series of accusations and counteraccusations among his nobles; but at the center of the accusations is Aumerle, his cousin. When York brings in the message that Richard is willing to resign his crown to Henry, Bolingbroke declares his intention to assume the throne. The Bishop of Carlisle protests, asserting Richard's "divine right" as king and Bolingbroke as only his subject; he is immediately arrested. Richard is brought to turn over his kingship to Henry publicly. Richard does this, but refuses to read a list of the accusations against him, urged by Northumberland. He is then sent to prison by Henry.

ACT 5. Richard and his queen say goodbye to one another; the Queen must leave for France, and Richard must be imprisoned at Pomfret Castle. Aumerle and some others begin a plot to overthrow Henry and restore Richard to the throne; but his father, York, discovers the plan. Aumerle pleads to Henry (before his father can get to him) for forgiveness, and with the help of his mother, gains it. Henry has the other conspirators executed, except the Bishop of Carlisle, whom, in the last scene of the play he forgives. Richard, in Pomfret Castle, is visited by one of his former grooms (men in charge of his horses) who is still sympathetic to him. He is then killed by Pierce Exton, who assumes that Henry, now King, wanted him killed. When Exton presents the body of Richard to the new King, Henry denounces Exton's act and begins to mourn Richard's death, promising that he will make a trip to Jerusalem "to wash the blood" off his hands.

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