

## 2016 Study Guide for *Richard II* by William Shakespeare

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### Before seeing/reading the play

1. Research the background and history of the real Richard II. Richard II's grandfather Edward III had five sons who lived to be adults. Why did Edward's grandson become king instead of one of his sons? These and other websites provide useful information:  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard\\_II\\_of\\_England](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard_II_of_England)  
[http://www.englishmonarchs.co.uk/plantagenet\\_8.htm](http://www.englishmonarchs.co.uk/plantagenet_8.htm)  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Order\\_of\\_succession#Primogeniture](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Order_of_succession#Primogeniture)
2. Research the following historical figures who appear or are mentioned in *Richard II*. Henry Bolingbroke; Edward III; Edward, the Black Prince; Henry Percy, Earl of Northumberland; Duke of Aumerle and Anne of Bohemia. These and other websites provide information:  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry\\_IV\\_of\\_England](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry_IV_of_England)  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edward\\_III\\_of\\_England](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edward_III_of_England)  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black\\_Prince](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_Prince)  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry\\_Percy,\\_1st\\_Earl\\_of\\_Northumberland](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry_Percy,_1st_Earl_of_Northumberland)  
<http://www.shakespeareandhistory.com/duke-of-aumerle.php>  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anne\\_of\\_Bohemia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anne_of_Bohemia)
3. Research the English tradition of the divine right of kings. What did it mean to be an "anointed king" in the 1300s? What role did religion play in the power of a king? What were the rights of subjects if they disagreed with the actions of their king or if the king abused his power? This and other web sites provide information:  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Divine\\_right\\_of\\_kings](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Divine_right_of_kings)
4. What was the medieval system of feudalism? What was the relationship between medieval kings and their nobility? This and other websites provide information:  
<http://www.thefinertimes.com/Middle-Ages/feudalism-in-the-middle-ages.html>

5. Richard II became king at the age of 10 when his grandfather, King Edward III, died. What challenges face a nation ruled by a “boy king?” What are the challenges of being one? Who makes decisions on the king’s behalf until he is old enough to make decisions for himself? How might this create problems for the king once he is old enough to make his own decisions? What was Richard’s relationship with his mother? With his uncle Gaunt? His uncle York? His uncle Gloucester? These and other websites provide information:

<http://www.history.ac.uk/richardII/joan.html>

[http://womenshistory.about.com/od/medbritishwomen/p/joan\\_of\\_kent.htm](http://womenshistory.about.com/od/medbritishwomen/p/joan_of_kent.htm)

<http://www.shakespeareandhistory.com/john-of-gaunt.php>

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas\\_of\\_Woodstock,\\_1st\\_Duke\\_of\\_Gloucester](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_of_Woodstock,_1st_Duke_of_Gloucester)

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edmund\\_of\\_Langley,\\_1st\\_Duke\\_of\\_York](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edmund_of_Langley,_1st_Duke_of_York)

6. What qualities make a person a good leader? What qualities make a person an ineffective leader? How can the personal faults of an ineffective leader contaminate the office? How can inequities be redressed when the leader is an elected official? When he is a king? In your opinion, what actions should be taken if the person in power turns out to be an ineffective leader? What are the best means for choosing leaders?

7. Why was this play controversial in Shakespeare’s day? What was the connection between *Richard II* and the rebellion of the Earl of Essex against Queen Elizabeth in 1601? Which scene was not published during the lifetime of Queen Elizabeth? What conditions and historical events would cause this particular scene to be banned? How was Queen Elizabeth related to Richard II and Henry Bolingbroke, who becomes Henry IV? How might her ancestry have affected Shakespeare’s interpretation of the story? These and other websites provide information:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard\\_II\\_\(play\)#Historical\\_context](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard_II_(play)#Historical_context)

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Earl\\_of\\_Essex\\_Rebellion](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Earl_of_Essex_Rebellion)

## Resources

### Books:

*A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous Fourteenth Century* by Barbara Tuchman

*The Last Plantagenets* by Thomas B. Costain

*Shakespeare’s English Kings* by Peter Saccio

**Learn more about Shakespeare's life and times at the following websites:**

<http://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/Library/SLT/index.html>

<http://www.folger.edu/template.cfm?cid=865&CFID=6230886&CFTOKEN=25420173>

<http://www.shakespeare.org.uk/explore-shakespeare.html>

<http://www.bardweb.net/man.html>

### **After seeing/reading the play**

1. Refer to your research about the life of Richard II: how has Shakespeare altered the historical facts, personalities and timelines in his play, *Richard II*? What could be his reasons for these alterations? What is gained? What is lost?
2. What responsibility does Richard feel to his subjects? To God? How does he view the role and responsibility of a king? What does he feel are the rights of a king? How does he use his power? What does Richard expect from his subjects? To whom does he feel accountable for his actions?
3. Trace the progress of Richard's self-image from the beginning of the play to the end, citing specific passages. Trace the progress of other people's image of Richard through the play, citing specific passages.
4. Compare the language of Richard and Bolingbroke. What does the language of these characters reveal about their personalities? What are Richard's strengths and weaknesses? What are Bolingbroke's? What qualities in Richard make him ill fitted for the role of king? How does Shakespeare use language to create contrasting images of these two men?
5. Compare Richard II's downfall to the downfall of modern political leaders: Iraq President Saddam Hussein (overthrown in 2003), US President Richard Nixon (resigned 1974), Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi of Iran (left Iran in 1979), the Dali Lama of Tibet (left Tibet in 1959), Fulgencio Batista of Cuba (overthrown in 1959 by Fidel Castro), Czar Nicholas II of Russia (forced to abdicate in 1917) and Emperor Pu Yi of China (forced to renounce the throne in 1912, then restored in 1917 for six days). In each case, of what offenses were the leaders guilty? What was the system by which

each was removed from office? What was the system by which each was replaced? What laws, if any, were broken in the process? What was the effect on the country? What are the advantages of allowing the overthrown leader to live versus the advantages of executing (assassinating, murdering) him? How did those who were allowed to live spend the rest of their lives?

6. How much power do the women in *Richard II* have? How do they express their power? What limitations were placed on women both in the medieval era and in the Elizabethan era?
7. What curses and prophecies are uttered in *Richard II*? How accurate are they?
8. Read Act II, scene i. What criticisms are leveled at Richard by his uncles John of Gaunt and the Duke of York? To what extent are the criticisms accurate? To what extent do they reflect a typical reaction of the older generation to the younger generation? How does Richard react to Gaunt's criticisms?
9. Trace the steps by which Bolingbroke assumes power. What does he say he wants from Richard? Compare what he says about his ambitions with his actions. How do Bolingbroke's ambitions change? How does he justify his actions? How does he wield his growing power? Which of his actions are legal and which are not?
10. In what respects is Bolingbroke a better leader than Richard? Do these qualities justify Bolingbroke's deposition of Richard? Why?
11. Why does Richard believe he is invincible? Who does he think will fight his battles for him and why? What power does Richard have that Bolingbroke does not? What power does Bolingbroke have that Richard does not?
12. How does Richard violate the customs of primogeniture by seizing Gaunt's lands and revenues? How does Richard's illegal action threaten his crown? Why does this incite other noblemen to join Bolingbroke? What is at stake for Bolingbroke and his followers if they fail to force Richard to give up his crown? How is rebellion against Richard considered both a crime and a sin?

13. Bolingbroke is made king by an act of Parliament rather than an act of God through line of birth. How does this threaten Bolingbroke's crown and the crowns of all kings and queens to follow him?
14. How do your feelings about Richard change from the beginning of the play to the end? How do your feelings about Bolingbroke change? How does Shakespeare use the language to influence your feelings about these two men?
15. Why doesn't Richard fight Bolingbroke? Why does Richard cooperate and give up his crown? How could he have made it more difficult for Bolingbroke to seize power?
16. How does Richard's deposition make his death necessary?
17. What does Bolingbroke lose when he seizes the crown? What happens to him in the course of the play, paying particular attention to the relationship of flattery vs. trust, as well as the instances of civil strife in the country and disobedience and dissatisfaction in his family?
18. How does Shakespeare use the metaphor of a garden in this play? What elements of gardens and gardening does he incorporate?
19. How does Shakespeare use the sun in the play? Find the instances when Richard is described as the sun and explore the many layers of meaning in this image.
20. A mirror is a crucial prop in the play, and the play has a mirror-like structure, with events in the first half (when Richard is king) reflected, with differences, in the second (when Bolingbroke is king). Find instances of these parallel events and notice the similarities and the differences. What can you deduce about changes in the political and social atmosphere from Richard's reign to Bolingbroke's?
21. *Richard II* is written entirely in verse. Why did Shakespeare make this choice? What effect does it have on you as an audience member?

22. In *Richard II* Shakespeare begins a consideration of the nature of kingship and the qualities necessary for a good ruler that he continues in *Henry IV, Parts One and Two*, and *Henry V*. What issues does Shakespeare raise in this play?
23. Read Act III, scene iii, lines 144-177. What does Richard discover in this speech? How has his opinion changed regarding his invincibility? What does he reveal about himself?
24. What does Richard learn about himself through the process of losing everything? Read Act V, scene v. How does Richard's sympathy for himself affect your feelings toward him? In this scene Richard says: "But whate'er I be, nor I nor any man that but man is with nothing shall be pleased till he be eased with being nothing" (Act V, scene v, lines 38-41). What is he saying? Make a case supporting this philosophy. Make a case refuting it.

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