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A Guide to
RICHARD II

by William Shakespeare

Alistair McCallum

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Setting the scene

Shakespeare wrote *Richard II* in or around 1595. He had just turned thirty, and was a member – and shareholder – of London's most prestigious acting company, the Lord Chamberlain's Men. His progress in the turbulent, competitive world of London theatre had been spectacular: he had arrived in the capital as a novice actor only about five years earlier, and had quickly made his mark as an actor and, within a year or two, as a playwright.

Richard II was an immediate success, both with audiences and in printed form. A couple of years after the first performances, the play was published as a small paperback book known as a 'quarto': the first print run quickly sold out, and two further quartos were printed the following year.

The play later fell into neglect, however, partly because of its controversial subject matter. *Richard II* portrays a king who was clearly unsuited to the role which he had inherited; to some, it appeared to raise uncomfortable questions about the nature of monarchy. After Shakespeare's death, the play was rarely performed in its original form for over two hundred years. *Richard II* enjoyed a revival in Victorian times, when the emphasis was on medieval pageantry and spectacle, but it was not until well into the 20th century that it came to be regarded as a profound, complex examination of historical events and characters.

Before writing *Richard II*, Shakespeare had already produced a number of powerful, sensational plays that dramatized English history. However, at this stage in his career he was developing rapidly as a playwright, and his work was becoming richer, more wide-ranging and experimental:

"Written in 1595, at a point when Shakespeare was finding his full stride as a poet and dramatist, the play marks a transition from the earlier history plays ... a new note is audible, a more nuanced representation of the political conflicts of the English past ... The language too is suppler and more richly elaborated. Overall, there is a sense of emerging mastery, as there is too in the other plays he completed in that very productive year, A Midsummer Night's Dream *and* Romeo and Juliet.*"*

> Anthony B. Dawson and Paul Yachnin, Introduction to the Oxford Shakespeare edition of *Richard II*, 2011

A troubled reign

The year is 1398, and Richard II has been King of England for over twenty years. Richard had ascended to the throne when he was still a child, on the death of his grandfather King Edward III. Edward’s first-born son, known as the Black Prince, had been next in line to the throne; however, the prince died, after many years of military campaigning in France and Spain, the year before King Edward’s death. When the king died, then, he was succeeded not by his son but by his grandson, the Black Prince’s ten-year-old boy Richard.

In the early years of Richard’s reign, the government of the kingdom was in the hands of several powerful, competing nobles. Three of the old king’s sons, younger brothers of the Black Prince, were still alive, and wielded great power: these three, King Richard’s uncles, were John of Gaunt, the Duke of Gloucester, and the Duke of York.

As Richard grew into adulthood, he became increasingly resentful of the influential nobles and elders around him, and asserted his right to rule single-handedly. He sought to resist the authority not only of the nobility but also of Parliament, preferring instead to surround himself with his personal favourites. He quickly gained a reputation as an unstable, capricious ruler, making arbitrary and sometimes irrational decisions.

Another source of friction was Richard’s lack of interest in prosecuting the long-running war with France, a conflict that would later come to be known as the Hundred Years’ War. Edward III had been a famous warrior, winning numerous victories in his campaign against France. He believed that he was the rightful heir to the French throne, and he and his sons pursued their claim relentlessly in a long series of battles, sieges and raids. Richard, by contrast, was uninterested in his grandfather’s claim, and agreed a truce with France, causing resentment among his more warlike ministers.

Rival claimants

Aged thirty and as yet childless, Richard is keenly aware of the threat posed by King Edward’s other descendants, with their potential claims to the throne. He recently had the Duke of Gloucester, his uncle, arrested: the duke died shortly afterwards, almost certainly murdered on Richard’s orders.

Richard also views another of his uncles, the wealthy and influential John of Gaunt, with suspicion. And while Gaunt appears loyal to the Crown, his son Henry Bolingbroke, young, ambitious, and known to be hostile to his cousin Richard, undoubtedly needs to be watched closely. The fact that Bolingbroke has a son of his own, unlike Richard, makes him even more of a threat.

An audience with the king

King Richard has a strong sense of the importance of the monarch, and is easily offended by any perceived challenge to royal authority. He regards the pomp and pageantry of kingship as an essential aspect of his rule, and is notorious for his extravagant expenditure on clothing, jewellery, art and entertainment for himself, his favourites and his court.

As the play begins, an elaborate ceremony is under way. A serious dispute has arisen between the king’s cousin Bolingbroke and Thomas Mowbray, Duke of Norfolk. King Richard, enthroned amidst the splendour of his court, is to preside over the hearing and pronounce his judgement.

Curtain up

Deadly enemies

An air of formality and solemnity hangs over King Richard's court. Two noblemen have come to petition the king. One has made a grave accusation: the other, the accused, is determined to clear his name.

The king addresses his uncle, the elderly John of Gaunt, who confirms that the accuser is his son Bolingbroke. The dispute does not concern a personal grudge, declares Gaunt. His son's charge against Thomas Mowbray, Duke of Norfolk, is much more serious, even treasonous:

King Richard: … hast thou sounded him
If he appeal the Duke on ancient malice,[1]
Or worthily, as a good subject should,
On some known ground of treachery in him?
Gaunt: As near as I could sift him[2] on that argument,
On some apparent danger seen in him[3]
Aimed at your highness …

[1] *have you asked your son whether he is denouncing Mowbray because of long-standing hostility*
[2] *discover from him by questioning*
[3] *some obvious threat that he saw in Mowbray*

The king calls for the two men to be brought before him. Aware that feelings are running high, he wishes to hear each man present his case, in person, to the other:

King Richard: Then call them to our presence. Face to face,
And frowning brow to brow, ourselves will hear
The accuser and the accused freely speak.
High-stomached[1] are they both and full of ire,
In rage, deaf as the sea, hasty as fire.[2]

[1] *bold, arrogant; the stomach was regarded as the source of anger and courage*
[2] *in their fury, they are oblivious to advice and quick to take offence*

Bolingbroke and Mowbray are ushered in. Both men offer the king extravagant, courteous greetings. Richard points out that, as an accusation of treason has been made, one of them must be insincere:

Bolingbroke: Many years of happy days befall
My gracious sovereign, my most loving liege![1]
Mowbray: Each day still better other's happiness[2]
Until the heavens, envying earth's good hap,[3]
Add an immortal title to your crown![4]
King Richard: We thank you both. Yet one but flatters us,
As well appeareth by the cause you come[5] …

[1] *lord, master; one to whom I owe allegiance*
[2] *may each passing day bring even greater happiness*
[3] *good fortune*
[4] *grant you immortality*
[5] *as is clear from the dispute which brings you here*

Bolingbroke is the first to state his case. Appealing to heaven to witness his words, and declaring his loyalty to the king, he proclaims that Mowbray is a traitor. If the king grants him permission, Bolingbroke asserts, he will fight his opponent in single combat.

Mowbray replies that he intends to remain calm: the dispute will not be resolved with angry, impetuous speeches. Bolingbroke's accusation demands a response, however, and Mowbray utterly refutes the charge of treason. Bolingbroke is a grandson of the late King Edward, and Richard's cousin: nevertheless, Mowbray insists, this does not excuse his false, malicious claims. Mowbray is ready to fight to the death to prove his innocence:

Mowbray: Setting aside his high blood's royalty,
And let him be no kinsman to my liege,[1]
I do defy[2] him, and I spit at him,
Call him a slanderous coward and a villain;
Which to maintain, I would allow him odds
And meet him[3] …

[1] *supposing that he were not related to your majesty*
[2] *challenge*
[3] *to back up my words, I would confront him in combat, even if he were given an advantage*

The atmosphere in court becomes even more tense as, in time-honoured fashion, Bolingbroke throws down his gauntlet to confirm his challenge. Mowbray, accepting the challenge, picks it up. He recalls the day that he was knighted by the king, and vows to uphold his honour, even if it costs him his life:

Mowbray: … by that sword[1] I swear
Which gently laid my knighthood on my shoulder,
I'll answer thee in any fair degree
Or chivalrous design of knightly trial.[2]
And when I mount, alive may I not light[3]
If I be traitor or unjustly fight!

[1] *King Richard's sword*
[2] *I'll face you in any honourable contest, or any challenge within the traditions of chivalry*
[3] *when I have mounted my horse to fight you, I will not dismount alive*

The accusations fly

The king now asks Henry Bolingbroke to state the nature of his accusation against Mowbray. First, Bolingbroke replies, his rival has squandered a large sum of money supplied to him by the king: the gold was destined for the king's soldiers, but Mowbray had instead wasted it satisfying his own extravagant desires. Secondly, claims Bolingbroke, Mowbray has been the source of countless plots against the king for many years. Finally, he states that Mowbray was complicit in the recent murder of the Duke of Gloucester, Richard's uncle.

The king turns to Mowbray and asks him to answer the charges, assuring him that Bolingbroke's royal blood will not influence his judgement. Mowbray rejects the accusation of greed: although he kept a small proportion of the gold that Richard supplied, this was to repay a debt owed to him by the monarch.

As for the killing of Gloucester, Mowbray acknowledges that the duke was in his custody when he was killed: he confesses his negligence, but denies responsibility for the duke's death. He says no more, aware that there is a widespread belief that Richard himself ordered Gloucester's murder.

Mowbray goes on to admit that he was once hostile towards Bolingbroke's father, John of Gaunt, and even planned to kill him; all that is in the past, however, and the two men are now on peaceable terms. Bolingbroke's accusation of conspiring against the king is utterly false, insists Mowbray, and he in turn throws down his gauntlet.

The two men are now committed to settling the argument by single combat: all that remains is for the king to name the day of their encounter. Richard, however, disapproves of this drastic solution to their dispute. He commands them to make peace with one another:

King Richard: Wrath-kindled gentlemen, be ruled by me:
Let's purge this choler without letting blood.[1]
This we prescribe, though no physician;
Deep malice makes too deep incision.
Forget, forgive, conclude[2] and be agreed …

[1] *eliminate these feelings of bitterness and anger without bloodshed*
[2] *reach an agreement, be reconciled*

John of Gaunt asks his son to throw down his opponent's gauntlet, as a sign that the challenge has been withdrawn, and the king tells Mowbray to do the same.

> *"The opening scene is visually splendid: a king in all the panoply of rule, under the picture of the ordered heavens and among his ordered Court ... But the matter under judgement is effectively the involvement of Richard in political assassination – murder. When the king himself is guilty, what can the subject do? Richard recognises the explosiveness of the issue, and tries to evade it by refusing judgement."*
>
> C. W. R. D. Moseley, *Shakespeare's History Plays,* Richard II *to* Henry V*: The Making of a King*, 1988

The two rivals, however, refuse to change their minds. This is a matter of honour, Mowbray tells the king. He kneels before the monarch, but rejects his order:

Mowbray: Myself I throw, dread sovereign, at thy foot.
My life thou shalt command, but not my shame[1] …
King Richard: Rage must be withstood.
Give me his gage.[2] Lions make leopards tame.[3]
Mowbray: Yea, but not change his spots. Take but my shame,
And I resign my gage[4] …
Mine honour is my life; both grow in one.
Take honour from me, and my life is done.

[1] *you have the power to take my life, but not to destroy my reputation*
[2] *Bolingbroke's gauntlet*
[3] *the lion was a symbol of royalty; Mowbray's coat of arms featured the same animal, but in a posture known as a 'lion leopardé'*
[4] *if you could take away the shame that would result from turning down the challenge, I would hand over the gauntlet*

The king turns to his cousin Bolingbroke and, in the same way, orders him to give up Mowbray's gauntlet. Like his opponent, however, Bolingbroke refuses to obey: his honour would be forever tainted if Mowbray were allowed to go unpunished.

Richard, realising that he can do nothing to stem the hostility between the two noblemen, reluctantly agrees to let them settle their dispute by mortal combat. Unable to prevent a violent encounter, all he can do is decree the time and place at which the chivalric contest is to take place:

King Richard: We were not born to sue,[1] but to command;
Which since we cannot do to make you friends,
Be ready as your lives shall answer it
At Coventry upon Saint Lambert's Day.
There shall your swords and lances arbitrate
The swelling difference of your settled hate.[2]

[1] *beg, plead*
[2] *your weapons will resolve the antagonism between you, which is growing due your anger and pride*

A widow grieves

The recent murder of the Duke of Gloucester has added to the distrust and resentment surrounding King Richard and his court. As one of King Edward's sons, the duke may have been regarded as a threat by Richard; and although the truth is not clear, it seems that he was put to death by Mowbray on Richard's orders.

The duke's widow, the Duchess of Gloucester, is seeking revenge for her husband's murder. However, John of Gaunt, the duke's brother, believes that retribution must come from heaven. He accepts that Gloucester's death was a terrible crime, but hints that the man responsible is himself the source of justice in the kingdom, and is above punishment:

Gaunt: … since correction lieth in those hands
Which made the fault that we cannot correct,[1]
Put we our quarrel to the will of heaven,[2]
Who, when they see the hours ripe[3] on earth,
Will rain hot vengeance on offenders' heads.

[1] *since the right to punish the murderer lies with the very man who committed the crime*
[2] *let us allow heaven to deal with our grievance*
[3] *the time is right*

This early scene in the play is the only one in which the Duchess of Gloucester, widow of the murdered duke, is present. Her appearance is brief but significant:

"... both her sorrow and her anger derive from the fundamental fact of her husband's murder. It is an act both familial and political, effected, as everyone knows, by the king (however indirectly) and it colours everything that happens in the play. The duchess appears only once, but her presence, like a qualm of conscience, hovers over the action."

Anthony B. Dawson and Paul Yachnin, Introduction to the Oxford Shakespeare edition of *Richard II*, 2011

The duchess is dismayed at her brother-in-law's attitude. She reminds him of his royal blood: he, like her husband, was a son of King Edward III, and while some of the king's sons have died natural deaths, the murder of Gloucester was a sinful, unnatural act. She compares it to the hewing of a bough from a great tree while still in its prime:

Duchess: Edward's seven sons, whereof thyself art one,
Were as seven vials of his sacred blood,
Or seven fair branches springing from one root.
Some of those seven are dried by nature's course,
Some of those branches by the Destinies cut;
But Thomas, my dear lord, my life, my Gloucester,
One vial full of Edward's sacred blood,
One flourishing branch of his most royal root,
Is cracked, and all the precious liquor spilt,
Is hacked down, and his summer leaves all faded
By Envy's hand and Murder's bloody axe.

If Gaunt fails to avenge his brother's death, she argues, he will dishonour the memory of his father, the king. Furthermore, his own life will be in danger if the murderer believes he can act with impunity:

Duchess: Call it not patience, Gaunt; it is despair.
In suff'ring[1] thus thy brother to be slaughtered,
Thou show'st the naked pathway to thy life,[2]
Teaching stern Murder how to butcher thee.
That which in mean[3] men we entitle patience
Is pale cold cowardice in noble breasts.

[1] *allowing, tolerating*
[2] *you reveal that your own life is unprotected*
[3] *humble, lowly*

Gaunt remains resolute. The king – who, he now acknowledges, was responsible for Gloucester's death – represents God's authority in the realm. It would be sacrilege, therefore, to commit violence against him. Only God can judge the king's actions:

Gaunt: God's is the quarrel,[1] for God's substitute,[2]
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] *the matter is for God to consider*
[2] *the king*

Realising that she cannot change Gaunt's mind, the duchess, still tormented with grief and anger, takes her leave. She prays that Mowbray will be killed in his forthcoming combat with Bolingbroke.

As she is leaving, she remembers the Duke of York, another of her husband's brothers. She wonders whether York should visit her, but immediately thinks better of it. Without her husband Gloucester, she is bereft, and her home is no place for visitors:

Duchess: Alack, and what shall good old York there see
But empty lodgings[1] and unfurnished walls,
Unpeopled offices,[2] untrodden stones?
And what hear there for welcome but my groans?

[1] *living quarters*
[2] *absent staff; work left undone*

Sensing that her own life is coming to an end, the duchess bids a sad farewell to Gaunt:

Duchess: Desolate, desolate, will I hence and die!
The last leave of thee takes my weeping eye.

Confrontation

The appointed day has arrived. In Coventry, the field of combat has been prepared: the two rivals, Bolingbroke and Mowbray, are armed and ready to fight. The king, surrounded by his entourage of lords and attendants, is seated on a platform overlooking the jousting ground.

The trumpets sound a fanfare, and the ceremonial encounter begins. As decreed by the rules of chivalry, the king's marshal demands that each man state his case. In accordance with the solemnity of the occasion, the language is formal and ritualistic:

Lord Marshal: In God's name and the King's, say who thou art
And why thou com'st thus knightly clad in arms,[1]
Against what man thou com'st, and what thy quarrel.
Speak truly, on thy knighthood and thy oath,
And so defend thee heaven and thy valour.[2]

[1] *wearing armour*
[2] *may God and your courage defend you*

Mowbray, as defendant, is the first to speak. The oath he took when he was knighted requires his loyalty to God and the king, he declares: and he is compelled to defend himself against the accusations of Bolingbroke, who has called his loyalty into question. By defeating his rival, he will prove both his own honour and the treachery of his accuser.

Bolingbroke now addresses the marshal, asking permission to say farewell to his friends, including his cousin Richard. After all, today will be the last day on earth for one of the two rivals:

Bolingbroke: Lord Marshal, let me kiss my sovereign's hand
And bow my knee before his majesty.
For Mowbray and myself are like two men
That vow a long and weary pilgrimage;
Then let us take a ceremonious leave
And loving farewell of our several[1] friends.

[1] *various*

The king descends from his raised platform and embraces his cousin. He is careful, however, not to shown any signs of favouritism:

King Richard: We will descend and fold him in our arms.
Cousin of Hereford,[1] as[2] thy cause is right,
So be thy fortune in this royal fight.
Farewell, my blood,[3] which if today thou shed,
Lament we may, but not revenge thee dead.

[1] *Bolingbroke, who was also the Duke of Hereford*
[2] *if, as long as*
[3] *blood relation; cousin*

Bolingbroke turns to his father, John of Gaunt, and asks for his thoughts and prayers in the forthcoming bout, promising fervently to maintain his family's honour. Mowbray, by contrast, is relaxed and confident as he says a simple farewell. The king is impressed by his calm demeanour:

Mowbray: Most mighty liege, and my companion peers,[1]
Take from my mouth the wish of happy years.
As gentle and as jocund as to jest[2]
Go I to fight. Truth hath a quiet breast.
King Richard: Farewell, my lord. Securely[3] I espy
Virtue with valour couched[4] in thine eye.

[1] *fellow noblemen*
[2] *as untroubled and cheerful as if I were about to take part in a game*
[3] *clearly, surely*
[4] *lodged, present*

With great ceremony, the king's marshal now presents to each man the lance with which he is to attack his opponent. The two knights send forward their heralds to proclaim their grievances once more to the assembled onlookers. Then, with a blare of trumpets, the two combatants are ordered to attack.

Exile

Just as the two rivals are preparing to strike, the king intervenes dramatically. He throws his baton, symbol of his authority, down into the field of combat, between the two advancing knights. The contest is brought to a standstill. Richard orders the men to put down their weapons, withdraw from the field, and await his decision. He gathers his advisers together, and takes them aside to confer in secrecy.

Returning to the scene, the king declares that the two knights will be punished for threatening, in their anger and pride, to disturb the peace of the realm with violence and bloodshed. He gives his verdict:

King Richard: For that[1] our kingdom's earth should not be soiled
With that dear blood which it hath fostered;
And for our eyes do hate the dire aspect
Of civil[2] wounds ploughed up with neighbours' sword …
Therefore, we banish you our territories.

[1] *because*
[2] *inflicted by fellow citizens*

Bolingbroke is not to set foot in England for ten years, while Mowbray must never again return to his homeland.

... our kingdom's earth ...

There are over 70 references to the physical land of England in *Richard II*, far more than in any other play by Shakespeare.

"The symbolism of Richard II *is dominated by the related words 'earth', 'land', and 'ground'. In no other play of Shakespeare is the complex of ideas represented by these words so tirelessly dwelt upon ... to Richard, ownership of the land is the most tangible and positive symbol of his rightful kingship."*

Richard D. Altick, *Symphonic Imagery in* Richard II, 1947

Both men are devastated at their unexpected punishment, but they do not dispute the monarch's decision. Mowbray realises, with dismay, that he will be estranged from his native tongue as well as his country, and forced to live in silence and ignorance. He is too old to learn a new language now, he reflects:

Mowbray: The language I have learnt these forty years,
My native English, now I must forgo,
And now my tongue's use is to me no more
Than an unstringed viol or a harp …
… dull unfeeling barren ignorance
Is made my jailer to attend on me.
I am too old to fawn upon a nurse,[1]
Too far in years to be a pupil now.
What is thy sentence then but speechless death,
Which robs my tongue from breathing native breath?

[1] *teacher of a young child who is still learning to speak*

The king orders both men to swear, on his sword, that they will not meet and conspire against him while in exile. They obey, and Bolingbroke then addresses his opponent, urging him to confess his treachery. Mowbray replies that is he, Bolingbroke, who poses a threat to the king:

Bolingbroke: … now our flesh is banished from this land.
Confess thy treasons ere[1] thou fly the realm.
Since thou hast far to go, bear not along
The clogging burden of a guilty soul.
Mowbray: No, Bolingbroke. If ever I were traitor,
My name be blotted from the book of life,
And I from heaven banished as from hence![2]
But what thou art, God, thou and I do know;
And all too soon, I fear, the king shall rue.[3]

[1] *before*
[2] *may I be banished from heaven just as I have been banished from this country*
[3] *the king will learn your true nature, to his cost*

Mowbray departs to prepare for his lifelong exile. The king now turns to John of Gaunt: noticing that his elderly counsellor is on the verge of tears, Richard announces that the banishment of his son Bolingbroke will be for six years, not ten.

This comes as little consolation to Gaunt, who feels that his life is already drawing to a close. Even with this shortened sentence, he holds no hope of seeing his son again:

Gaunt: I thank my liege that in regard of me[1]
He shortens four years of my son's exile.
But little vantage shall I reap thereby,
For ere the six years that he hath to spend
Can change their moons and bring their times about,[2]
My oil-dried lamp and time-bewasted light
Shall be extinct[3] with age and endless night.

[1] *for my benefit*
[2] *before those six years can travel through their seasonal cycles*
[3] *like a lamp running out of oil, my life's flame, used up by time, will be extinguished*

The king tries to reassure his uncle that he has many years of life ahead of him. When Gaunt refuses to take comfort from his words, the king is displeased, pointing out that Gaunt himself has just taken part in the discussion over the fate of the two rivals. Gaunt claims that, fearful of being seen as biased towards his own son, he had argued for an exceptionally strict punishment, hoping that the king and his other counsellors would contradict him.

Richard responds impatiently: the decision has been made, and Bolingbroke must leave England for six years. With his entourage gathered around him, the king sweeps away.

An unhappy departure

The Duke of Aumerle, another grandson of King Edward and cousin to both Bolingbroke and Richard, briefly remains behind. He urges Bolingbroke to keep in contact with him despite his banishment:

Aumerle: Cousin, farewell. What presence must not know,[1]
From where you do remain let paper[2] show.

[1] *what I cannot learn from you in person*
[2] *letters*

The king's marshal, who was to preside over the planned combat, now volunteers to accompany Bolingbroke, staying by his side until he reaches his port of departure. The young man, immersed in his feelings of grief, does not answer.

Putting aside his own anguish, Gaunt tries to persuade his son to see his banishment in a different light. He should imagine it as a decision he has taken himself, for his own reasons:

Gaunt: Think not the king did banish thee,
But thou the king[1] …
Go, say I sent thee forth to purchase honour,
And not the king exiled thee; or suppose
Devouring pestilence[2] hangs in our air,
And thou art flying to a fresher clime.
Look what thy soul holds dear, imagine it
To lie that way thou goest, not whence thou cam'st.[3]

[1] *you chose to banish the king*
[2] *deadly plague*
[3] *imagine that whatever you value most dearly lies ahead of you, not behind you*

... suppose
Devouring pestilence hangs in our air ...

There are frequent references to plague, infection and sickness in *Richard II*. When the play was first produced, the London theatres had only recently re-opened following a two-year closure: this was the result of a severe outbreak of the plague which had caused over 15,000 deaths in the city. However, the plague was not a new problem, nor was it restricted to the capital:

"Plague was a frequent and devastating occurrence in England throughout Shakespeare's lifetime. Those who contracted it could suffer from fevers, delirium, and painful plague sores, with a survival rate of just 50%. In 1564, the year Shakespeare was born, plague claimed over 200 people in Stratford-upon-Avon, including four children on his very street."

Holly Kelsey, *Pestilence and Playwright*, 2016

Bolingbroke is unmoved. It would be absurd to pretend that his banishment is not painful, he retorts. Wherever his journey takes him, he will never forget his true home:

Bolingbroke: O, who can hold a fire in his hand
By thinking on the frosty Caucasus?[1]
Or cloy the hungry edge of appetite
By bare[2] imagination of a feast?
… Sweet soil, adieu –
My mother and my nurse that bears me yet![3]
Where'er I wander, boast of this I can,
Though banished, yet a true-born Englishman.

[1] *the notoriously cold mountainous area between Europe and Asia*
[2] *nothing more than*
[3] *the land that nurtured me, on which I am still standing*

Behind the scenes

I, iv

Aumerle is reporting to Richard on Bolingbroke's departure. In contrast to Aumerle's apparently courteous farewell, it now becomes clear that he is scornful of his banished cousin. Any sadness he displayed at Bolingbroke's parting, he assures Richard, was counterfeit.

Richard, who distrusts Bolingbroke and his ambitions, is concerned that he may try to stir up trouble on his return from exile. Being reunited with his friends and relations will not be his priority:

King Richard: … 'tis doubt,[1]
When time shall call him home from banishment,
Whether our kinsman come to see his friends.

[1] *doubtful, unlikely*

It emerges that Richard and his favoured courtiers have secretly observed Bolingbroke's farewell journey into exile. The king is appalled at his cousin's blatant attempts to ingratiate himself with the common people of England:

King Richard: … What reverence he did throw away on slaves,
Wooing poor craftsmen with the craft of smiles
And patient underbearing of his fortune,[1]
As ’twere to banish their affects with him.[2]

[1] *by deceitfully smiling and displaying patient endurance of his fate*
[2] *as if he wished to carry their affections with him into exile*

With his gracious manner towards all the citizens he passes, Bolingbroke seems to be acting as if he were next in line to the throne:

King Richard: Off goes his bonnet to an oyster-wench.
A brace of draymen[1] bid God speed him well,
And had the tribute of his supple knee[2]
With ‘Thanks, my countrymen, my loving friends’,
As were our England in reversion his,
And he our subjects’ next degree in hope.[3]

[1] *a pair of cart drivers*
[2] *were rewarded with a ready bow*
[3] *as if he were the rightful heir to my kingdom, representing people’s hopes as successor to the throne*

One of the king’s courtiers, Green, raises a different subject. With Bolingbroke gone, the king must turn his attention to Ireland: a rebellion has been growing there, and it must be suppressed as soon as possible.

Richard decides that he will travel to Ireland himself to take charge of the military campaign. He mentions the pressing problem of raising funds. Maintaining a large royal household has proved expensive, and he intends to make up the shortfall in two ways, both of which are likely to prove unpopular. The first is to ‘farm’ the country, which involves selling leases for large areas of land; the leaseholders are then free to extract whatever taxes they can from local people. The second is the use of ‘charters’, enabling the king’s agents to demand large sums of money – officially loans – from named wealthy individuals.

Worse, while Richard is away, his deputies will be left with blank charters, and will be authorised to name whoever they choose on the documents:

King Richard: We will ourself in person to this war,
And, for our coffers[1] with too great a court
And liberal largesse[2] are grown somewhat light,
We are enforced to farm our royal realm …
If that come short,
Our substitutes at home shall have blank charters
Whereto, when they shall know what men are rich,
They shall subscribe them[3] for large sums of gold …

[1] *treasury, resources*
[2] *lavish generosity*
[3] *enter their names*

Bushy, another of Richard's favourites, now hurries in with momentous news:

Bushy: Old John of Gaunt is grievous sick, my lord,
Suddenly taken, and hath sent post-haste[1]
To entreat your majesty to visit him.

[1] *has sent an urgent message*

Richard's mind turns immediately to his uncle's fortune. Gaunt's son Bolingbroke is now in exile; as soon as Gaunt dies, Richard plans to seize his wealth for his own purposes rather than allow it to pass to Bolingbroke. He fervently hopes that Gaunt's death will come sooner rather than later:

King Richard: Now put it, God, in the physician's mind
To help him to his grave immediately!
The lining of his coffers[1] shall make coats
To deck[2] our soldiers for these Irish wars.
Come, gentlemen, let's all go visit him.
Pray God we may make haste and come too late!

[1] *the contents of his treasure-chests*
[2] *clothe, adorn*

A vision of England

John of Gaunt, now approaching death, is in the company of his brother, the Duke of York. Gaunt is desperate to talk to the king before he dies, and to offer him some crucial words of guidance. York urges him to remain calm; the king, notoriously, refuses to listen to advice. Attempting to advise Richard will only lead to frustration and further anxiety:

Gaunt: Will the king come that[1] I may breathe my last
In wholesome counsel to his unstaid[2] youth?
York: Vex not yourself, nor strive not with your breath,[3]
For all in vain comes counsel to his ear.

[1] *so that*
[2] *uncontrolled, unrestrained*
[3] *don't exhaust yourself by trying to persuade him*

Undeterred, Gaunt repeats his intention to be heard by the king. Now that his life is ending, he believes, his words will carry more weight. Even Richard may take notice, despite his stubborn nature:

Gaunt: O, but they say the tongues of dying men
Enforce attention like deep harmony.[1]
Where words are scarce, they are seldom spent in vain,
For they breathe truth that breathe their words in pain.
… Though Richard my life's counsel would not hear,[2]
My death's sad tale may yet undeaf his ear.

[1] *like stirring, harmonious music*
[2] *would never listen to my advice during my lifetime*

York insists that the only people who have any influence with the king are those who flatter him, or who talk of nothing but fashion or the latest gossip.

Gaunt, approaching death, feels that in his delirium he can see Richard's faults more clearly than ever. The king's recklessness and irresponsibility will bring about his downfall, he predicts:

Gaunt: Methinks I am a prophet new inspired,
And thus, expiring,[1] do foretell of him.
His rash fierce blaze of riot[2] cannot last,
For violent fires soon burn out themselves …

[1] *dying*
[2] *wasteful, dissolute behaviour*

In his mind's eye, Gaunt pictures the kingdom as an idyllic realm, defended by the surrounding sea, ruled over by a succession of brave and noble monarchs:

Gaunt: This royal throne of kings, this sceptred isle,
This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars,[1]
This other Eden, demi-paradise,
This fortress built by Nature for herself
Against infection and the hand of war,

... This fortress built by Nature for herself
Against infection and the hand of war ...

Seven years before the first performances of *Richard II*, England had faced the serious threat of invasion, and the possible overthrow of Queen Elizabeth, by the forces of King Philip II of Spain. The defeat of the Spanish navy, and the complete failure of the planned invasion, prompted a surge of national pride which was undoubtedly still fresh in English memories. Gaunt's speech reflects this pride, as well as hinting at invasion of another kind:

"Shakespeare's audience would have been mindful that stormy seas had helped save the nation from the Spanish Armada in 1588, and that each new wave of bubonic plague, the most recent in 1593-4, landed on England's shore only when ship-borne disease managed to breach the watery barrier of the English Channel."

Anthony B. Dawson and Paul Yachnin, notes to the Oxford Shakespeare edition of *Richard II*, 2011

This happy[2] breed of men, this little world,
This precious stone set in the silver sea,
Which serves it in the office of a wall
Or as a moat defensive to a house
Against the envy[3] of less happier lands,
This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England …

[1] *home of fearless warrior kings*
[2] *fortunate*
[3] *malice, hostility*

This long, glorious tradition has been utterly destroyed, laments Gaunt, by Richard's extravagance and greed. His policy of dividing up the country and farming out tracts of land to grasping leaseholders has brought shame on the nation:

Gaunt: This land of such dear souls, this dear dear land,
Dear for her reputation through the world,
Is now leased out – I die pronouncing it –
Like to a tenement or pelting farm.[1]
England, bound in with the triumphant sea,
Whose rocky shore beats back the envious siege
Of watery Neptune, is now bound in with shame,
With inky blots and rotten parchment bonds.[2]
That England that was wont to conquer others[3]
Hath made a shameful conquest of itself.

[1] *like a property rented out to tenants, or an insignificant farm*
[2] *is now shamefully confined by corrupt legal agreements*
[3] *accustomed to triumphing over other nations*

If only he could persuade the king to change his mind, says Gaunt, he would die a happy man.

At this point there is a flourish of trumpets, and the king himself arrives. His wife is with him, and his entourage includes his cousin Aumerle and his three favourites, Bushy, Green and Bagot.