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Richard II

William Shakespeare · *c. 1595 · original English text*

A poet-king who believes his crown is sacred learns what happens when he wastes time, seizes a banished cousin's inheritance, and comes down from the walls of Flint like Phaëthon. Shakespeare's history is a fall in formal verse: deposition, a hollow crown, and a murder at Pomfret.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

If a king is the Lord's anointed, what remains of him when he is unkinged—and who is to blame for a fall he also performed?

"For God's sake let us sit upon the ground And tell sad stories of the death of kings—"

King Richard · Act III, the hollow-crown speech

Richard is royal and also reckless: he farmed the realm, seized Gaunt's goods, and left Bolingbroke a just grievance as well as an ambition. The gardeners, the looking-glass, and the descent into the base court all show a man who can name his tragedy more eloquently than he can rule. Bolingbroke takes the crown with a politician's hands; the murder is done for him, not by a clean sentence. 'I wasted time, and now doth time waste me' is Richard's own verdict. The play asks whether sacred kingship can survive a king who will not be a steward.

KEY CHARACTERS

King Richard II
A ceremonial king of high speech and poor stewardship, who learns his title by losing it.

Henry Bolingbroke (later Henry IV)
The banished cousin who returns for his inheritance and takes a kingdom.

John of Gaunt
Richard's dying uncle, whose love of the sceptered isle is a charge against the king.

Edmund, Duke of York
A man torn between anointed right and the facts of power.

Queen Isabel
Richard's wife, whose garden scene and farewell give the fall a human register.

A HOLLOW CROWN

> *"For God's sake let us sit upon the ground And tell sad stories of the death of kings—"*
> **King Richard** · Act III

> *"I wasted time, and now doth time waste me;"*
> **King Richard** · Act V

Grades 10–12
Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01
Lists, Banishment, and a Dying Gaunt
ACTS I–II

Richard turns a blood feud into exile, then, when John of Gaunt dies, seizes the banished Bolingbroke's inheritance to fund Ireland.

- The lists at Coventry are a public rite Richard interrupts at will.
- Gaunt's 'this sceptered isle' is love of England spoken as a rebuke.
- York's agony is the first split in loyalty the usurpation will widen.

> *"This royal throne of kings, this sceptered isle,"*
> **John of Gaunt** · Act II, Scene I

02
Return, and a Descent
ACT III

Bolingbroke returns, claiming his rights and gathering force. Richard, back from Ireland, salutes the dear earth and then comes down from the castle walls.

- 'Down, down I come, like glist'ring Phaëthon' is a fall performed in metaphor before it is done in law.
- The hollow crown keeps Death as a jester at court.
- Bushy, Green, and the favorites pay first.

03
Westminster Hall
ACT IV

Richard is brought to surrender the crown. He calls for a glass, names himself unkinged, and is sent toward death.

- The deposition scene is ceremony turned inside out.
- 'God save King Henry, unkinged Richard says' is blessing and bitterness together.
- Carlisle's warning of a coming blood is the play's prophecy.

04
Aumerle, and a Household Test
ACT V, EARLY

A plot against the new king is discovered in York's house. A mother's plea and a father's loyalty meet before Henry IV.

- The new reign already requires mercy and severity.
- Domestic farce sits beside the high tragedy on purpose.
- Henry's handling of Aumerle measures the politician against the poet-king.

05
Pomfret
ACT V, THE CLOSE

Richard, alone, finds that time now wastes him. Exton's murderers come. Henry, receiving the coffin, must live with a blood he did not quite command.

- The prison speech is a mind still making figures when the crown is gone.
- The killing is a service Henry will not thank.
- The play leaves the new king uneasy—the head that will wear the next crown already.

> *"I wasted time, and now doth time waste me;"*
> **King Richard** · Act V, at Pomfret

Sacred Kingship | Stewardship | Time | Words and Rule | Deposition

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 10–12

1. The hosted text is the original English of Project Gutenberg #1512, in five acts with scene headings. Typography in this text includes "sceptered isle," "glist'ring Phaëthon," and "unkinged Richard" (not "unking'd").
2. The ground-sitting line is exact: "For God's sake let us sit upon the ground / And tell sad stories of the death of kings—" (let us, not let's; a dash after kings).
3. Also exact: "I wasted time, and now doth time waste me;"
4. The play includes a deposition and a murder in prison. It is a study in rule and vanity, not only a pageant of the crown.
5. This play belongs with Henry IV and Henry V already mapped on the site: Richard's fall is the door into the Henriad.

Quotations are verbatim from the original English text, Project Gutenberg #1512, the public-domain text hosted at classicslaunch.org/works/richard-ii/. Citations give book and chapter (or canto and line) so every line can be checked.