

RICHARD III

SYNOPSIS

EPISODE I

A DISPUTE

Act I, Scene 1

King Richard presides over a dispute between his cousin, Henry Bolingbroke, and Thomas, Duke of Mowbray. Bolingbroke accuses Mowbray of murdering the king's uncle Gloucester, a crime of which Richard II himself is widely suspected. Unable to resolve the conflict between the two men, Richard agrees to allow them to settle their animosity in a trial by combat.

A CALL FOR JUSTICE

Act I, Scene 2

The widowed Duchess of Gloucester complains to her brother-in-law, John of Gaunt, about the murder of her husband. She implores him to seek justice, but Gaunt's hands are tied because King Richard is, in fact, the agent of Gloucester's death. He advises the duchess to seek redress from God.

BANISHMENT

Act I, Scene 3

The day of the trial by combat between Bolingbroke and Mowbray arrives, and both men are intent on proving the justice of their cause. But just as the combat begins, King Richard throws down his warder and stops the fight. Richard has decided that both men will be banished rather than fight. Bolingbroke is first banished for 10 years, but seeing his uncle Gaunt so troubled, the king reduces the term of his exile to six years. Mowbray is banished for life.

A PROPHECY

Act I, Scene 4

At court King Richard and his friends gossip and laugh at Bolingbroke taking his leave of England. Richard expresses contempt at the way Bolingbroke flatters and seeks the favor of the common people, as though he was their king. Richard and his court then turn their attention to the wars in Ireland, where Richard vows to go in person with revenue he's earned from leasing out parcels of England. Their plans are interrupted with news of John of Gaunt's sudden illness.

Act 2, Scene 1, (part one)

A dying John of Gaunt laments with his brother, the Duke of York, about Richard's reliance on flatterers who have corrupted his court. Gaunt regrets that Richard's misrule has transformed "this sceptered isle" of England into a leased and diminished version of itself. The king, the queen and their retinue arrive to visit the dying man.

EPISODE 2

UNLAWFUL SEIZURE

Act 2, Scene 1, (part two)

When Richard arrives, Gaunt takes advantage of his deathbed to rail at Richard's mismanagement of England and dies shortly thereafter. Richard seizes Gaunt's estate to finance his Irish wars, despite a warning from the Duke of York that in stealing Bolingbroke's inheritance, Richard endangers his own position.

After Richard takes his leave, the various noblemen who accompanied Gaunt conspire to restore Bolingbroke's estate and position.

A HOUSE DIVIDED

Act 2, Scene 2

While Richard is away in Ireland, the Queen learns that Bolingbroke has returned from exile and that many lords and noblemen have fled to support him. The Duke of York, in charge while Richard is away, is torn between helping his nephew Bolingbroke regain his right and helping his nephew the king maintain his rule.

Act 2, Scene 3

Bolingbroke returns to England and starts to gather a group of armed supporters. With Northumberland and others, he visits his uncle York, who asks him why he has returned from exile while the king is absent. Bolingbroke says that he has returned to claim his inheritance. That is all.

Act 2, Scene 4

In Wales, the Earl of Salisbury awaits the return of Richard and fears that he'll be too late to secure the safety of his kingdom from his cousin.

Act 3, Scene 1

In Bristol, Bolingbroke establishes his own rival court and orders two of Richard's friends and allies, Bushy and Green, to be executed for various mischiefs and misleading the king.

A KING'S RETURN

Act 3, Scene 2

Richard lands in Wales, back from his war in Ireland, and learns about Bolingbroke's return and the defection of many of his lords to his cousin's cause. Richard's misery is complete when he learns that his friends have been executed and that the Duke of York, his uncle and regent, has surrendered his power to Bolingbroke.

EPISODE 3

"I COME BUT FOR MINE OWN"

Act 3, Scene 3

Bolingbroke and his growing army arrive in Wales and confront King Richard, who despite being outnumbered by his cousin's forces, maintains his air of power because he is the rightfully anointed king of England. Richard accuses Bolingbroke of fomenting insurrection and civil war, and Bolingbroke assures his cousin that he only comes to claim his inheritance.

Act 3, Scene 4

The Queen learns that Bolingbroke has taken Richard into his power, and that the king has been brought to London to be deposed and Bolingbroke declared king of England.

A KING “UNKINGED”

Act 4, Scene 1

While Bolingbroke is not yet king, he has assumed the power of kingship and presides over a “trial” of Richard’s friends and flatterers on the matter of the death of the Duke of Gloucester, the issue that began the conflict of the play. Richard appears and dramatically deposes himself, divesting himself of the honors and symbols of his rule. He declares Bolingbroke the new king of England, Henry IV.

EPISODE 4

A FAMILY PLOT

Act 5, Scene 1

Richard and his Queen are separated. She must go to a cloister, and Richard to be imprisoned at Pomfret castle.

Act 5, Scene 2

The Duke of York discovers a plot against Bolingbroke, now Henry IV, in which his son, Aumerle, is implicated. He vows to tell the king, and his wife and son attempt to stop him.

Act 5, Scene 3

The new King Henry asks after his own unruly and wild son, but is soon interrupted by Aumerle, seeking the king’s pardon in the conspiracy against Henry. The Duke and Duchess of York also arrive as well and each pleads for their own form of justice. Surrendering to the duchess’ pleas, Henry pardons Aumerle and orders the capture of the other conspirators.

Act 5, Scene 4

Exton, a courtier, having heard the new King Henry wish aloud to be rid of Richard, decides to do him a favor by killing him.

ISOLATION, MEDITATION, AND MURDER

Act 5, Scene 5

Richard sits alone in prison and looks within. He has nothing to do but ruminate on his defeat at the hands of his cousin. Exton arrives and tries to poison the former king, but when he refuses to eat the food and beats his jailer, Exton enters and kills Richard.

Act 5, Scene 6

At court Henry learns that the conspirators against him have been executed but the threat of civil war looms. Exton arrives with Richard’s body in a coffin, for whose murder he is immediately exiled. Henry, “full of woe,” vows to atone for this deed by making a pilgrimage to the Holy Land.

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