

THE DUBUQUE SHAKESPEARE PROJECT

at the Carnegie Stout Library, Dubuque, IA

Winter 2025

MAKING OF A LEADER

Richard II

Synopsis: A poetic history written entirely in verse, *Richard II* is about the struggle between the legitimate but tyrannical Richard and the competent plainspoken Bolingbroke who is wronged yet unsympathetic. Exquisitely balanced in plot, character and tone, the play raises several troubling questions about the divine right of kings.

Discussion Topics:

- Richard is highly performative with theatrically extravagant gestures, but in many ways opposite of the performative Richard III who invites the audience into his machinations. How does Shakespeare manipulate audience sympathies for Richard through the course of the play using the poet-king's theatricality?
- Bolingbroke is horribly mistreated by the king and has legitimate grievances, yet Shakespeare makes him oddly unsympathetic giving him no soliloquies or speeches in his defense. Bolingbroke is presented as beloved of the people and competent as a soldier and leader, yet the play sees him as chilly and remote. How does this portrayal inform the debate about the divine right of kings and effective leadership?
- Plays about Richard II were quite popular and performed often during Elizabeth's last decade of rule, a pointed rebuke to her reign of flatterers and lack of succession. The deposition scene where Richard voluntarily gives up the crown was not printed during her lifetime and perhaps not performed. How does the play balance the charisma of royal reign against the stolid and opportunistic Bolingbroke?
- *Richard II* is an astonishing poetic achievement with numerous rhyming couplets and breathtaking imagery, especially involving the sun and water and vertical movement. Richard himself is a poet limited in his subject matter to himself, his lyricism becoming more rapturous as his fortunes dwindle. How does this force us to consider the humanity of leaders even as we recognize their failures as leaders?

Folger Text Link: <https://www.folger.edu/explore/shakespeares-works/richard-ii/>

Kanopy Film link: <https://www.kanopy.com/en/product/5332698?vp=dubuque&frontend=kui>

Other resources to consider:

The Hollow Crown, 2012 BBC series, Ep. 1 (Ben Whishaw as Richard II)

Deborah Warner's controversial 1995 National Theatre staging with Fiona Shaw as *Richard II*:

<https://www.kanopy.com/en/product/11259623?vp=dubuque>

Ian McKellan as *Richard II* (1971): <https://youtu.be/Os-t6E-iSeU?si=DTB-ai5BkhUwGd6z>

Edward II. Play by Christopher Marlowe.

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