

Richard II

Richard II, a play written by William Shakespeare, is a good example of a play/drama piece where our attitude changes towards a certain character, in the terms of this essay that character would be Richard although many other characters in this play could have been chosen eg Bolingbroke, Northumberland etc. At the start of the play, Richard is shown to be petulant, childish and vain, and all in all a very bad king. We feel the most dislike for Richard when he seizes John of Gaunt's belongings, right after Gaunt's death. However, when Richard returns from Ireland, we begin to sympathise with him, as he now appears innocent and helpless, with his fantasy bubble popped. Our sympathy for him is almost restored by the time we reach Pomfret Castle dungeon, where Richard is imprisoned, and soon after killed by a server of Bolingbroke by the name of Exton. In this dungeon, Richard is clearly going mad, as well as potentially having an identity crisis.

However, at the beginning of the play, Richard is a detestable character. During the first scene, Richard is dressed regally and most certainly looks like a king. His first job in the play is to act as judge to Bolingbroke's accusations against Mowbray. He is supposed to remain neutral, however, he fails and clearly shows a bias towards Mowbray, even occasionally mocking Bolingbroke, 'How high a pitch his resolution soars'. The scene ends with Richard getting angry with Bolingbroke and Mowbray refusing to obey his commands, and in some productions of the play (this specific example is from the Globe Theatre production) have him throw a tantrum at them during the line 'We were born not to sue, but to command'. This dislike is continued into the final scene in Act 1, showing Richard to be entirely unsympathetic towards Bolingbroke's banishment, and then proceeds to even ask God to kill Gaunt when it is reported to Richard that Gaunt is ill, 'Now put it, God, in the physician's mind to help him to his grave immediately!' It is shown in the next scene the full extent of our dislike for Richard. It starts with Gaunt giving York a speech (which is full of metaphors) about the failings of Richard. When the king enters, Gaunt attempts to talk him out of his destructive ways, but fails. After Gaunt's death, Richard spares only 17 words before claiming Gaunt's things to fund his Irish wars, 'The ripest fruit falls, and so doth he, his time is spent, out pilgrimage must be.' And then has the audacity to move on by saying 'So much for that', after his uncle's death.

Some productions of the play even have Richard sit in Gaunt's chair after his death is reported strengthening our resolve to dislike Richard. This is our, generally, last time seeing Richard before he lands back from Ireland but it certainly gives us a clear reason to hate him before our attitude is supposed to shift.

However, from that point onward our opinion shifts to a more positive attitude towards Richard, especially during Act 4, and the beginning scenes of Act 5. The first point we feel sympathetic for Richard is during Act 3, scene 2 where Richard returns from Ireland. At the start of the scene, we are still likely to dislike Richard, as nothing has been done to redeem him. However, as the scene goes on it is quite obvious his reality bubble is being popped. This is mainly due to the stream of revelations of rebellions and revolts against him. He is even shown to almost self-degrade himself, as in most productions Richard is always shown above everyone else, but here he says (all be it to his friends and followers) 'Let us sit upon the ground', lowering himself to others level. This is uncommon for Richard, as before this scene, additionally to being above everyone, Richard is very self-centred, could this be him opening up to his people? Another line whilst on the beach is during this large speech, where he states 'For within the hollow crown that rounds the mortal temples of a king keeps death's court'. This could show that Richard now realises both that the power of his crown is empty and that the destiny of a king is simply to die 'keeps death's court', this metaphor of death holding a king is continued for more lines, expanding it to show that death can very easily end a 'powerful' king. This could make us more sympathetic towards Richard, as his fantasy bubble of being a powerful king is now most certainly gone, and he knows his fate. Finally, it is clear through Richard's language that he is going through a breakdown, as at the beginning of the play he spoke in long poetic sentences, but near the end of this large speech, he starts only speaking a few words per sentence, driving in a very clear contrast between the past and current Richard.

Act 4 is where we feel quite a large deal of sympathy for Richard. Although there isn't a lot of key moments, the main event for this is triggered by Northumberland. This is because Northumberland pushes for Richard to read off a list full of the crimes he committed as king.

This clearly affects Richard as he states 'Mine eyes are full of tears, I cannot see', showing he is visibly crying in front of the court. However, even with this Northumberland continues to push for Richard to read, and in some productions of the play Northumberland gets progressively more and more aggressive with Richard, and in the production starring David Tennent, the line 'The commons will not then be satisfied' is shouted at Bolingbroke instead of simply being stated. However, although we believe his bubble was popped, he remains quite self-centred and childish during this final scene, even mocking Bolingbroke and playing with the crown when he says 'here cousin, seize the crown, here cousin'. Finally, near the end of the scene, it is clear that Richard may know his execution may be imminent and in an act of self-preservation asks Bolingbroke to 'Then give me leave to go'. However, it is fruitless as he is conveyed to the Tower of London, and then to the Pomfret Castle dungeon. This may make us sympathise with Richard as it shows him as an extremely powerless individual, as well as almost showing him as innocent and young.

Finally, the last scenes we have with Richard consists of him imprisoned alone in the dungeon of Pomfret Castle. Here it is clear Richards being driven mad, or more specifically is going through an identity crisis. This may cause us to sympathise with Richard as now it is clear how far he has fallen, and how pathetic he has become. As Richard sits alone, he may (or may not) begin hearing music being played (although this may simply be in his head). Richard appears to draw a contrast between the life he had led, and the out of tune music, even creating irony as 'keep time: how sour sweet music is' shows he can perceive the out of tune music, but couldn't see the order of his own court. This may create sympathy as it shows that just before his death, he may not be realising what he did through life was both wrong, and for nought. Finally, it is shown that some in England still respect Richard, maybe even as king, as the Groom (when he enters) greets Richard with a 'Hail, Royal Prince', and even calling him king, although Bolingbroke is already officially the king. This creates sympathy as it finally shows that some still love Richard in a world where hatred for him was considered the norm. At the end of the scene, Richard is tragically assassinated by Exton in the name of Bolingbroke, who later reveals this is not something he ordered to happen, which draws sympathy as his death may have been unintentional and unnecessary.