

Choose from a play a key scene in which a troubled character reaches a crisis point.

Show how the scene reveals a crisis point and discuss how it adds to your understanding of the character and/or theme in the play as a whole.

“Lets talk of graves, of worms, of epitaphs”

In Act 3 Sc. 2 of William Shakespeare’s Richard II the troubled character of King Richard reaches a **crisis point** as his nation deserts him and he begins to realise that Bolingbroke has usurped his royal rule. The Scene is important for a number of reasons, but it chiefly adds to our understanding of Richard; how he believes himself to be infallible and answerable only to god; how he loves the ceremony of kingship more than that actual rule; and how he is completely self involved. It also shows this crisis in his character through some of the most famous and exquisite language to be found anywhere in Shakespeare.

At this point in the play Richard has returned from Ireland and receives a succession of bad news which shatter his confidence. To begin with we are introduced to the supremely confident Richard as he asks the land and animals of England to rise up and defend him from his enemies: “Yield stinging nettles to mine enemies... guard it, I pray thee, with a lurking adder.” This shows us a side of Richard we know well, he believes he has been anointed by God to rule over England and can do no wrong. More than that, he believes all his wants and desires are divine, so all of nature will rise up to protect him. This clearly adds to what we know of Richard previously. *He thought only of his uncle Gaunt’s death as a financial boom to himself. He believed a little quip and word play could settle the arguing Mowbray and Bolingbroke in Sc.1,* and he now thinks, although he must have heard of the rebellion, that the very plants of England will come to his aid. Richard is clearly a character struggling to distinguish between fantasy and reality as he notes: ‘not all the water in the rough rude sea can wash the balm off rom an anointed king’.

Next we see how Richard turns to constructing elaborate and sophisticated metaphors and poetry, rather than face up to harsh realities of governing. He describes himself as the sun that has returned to England and as it cast down it’s rays all the ‘thieves and murderers’ will retreat in to their ‘guilt holes’. As though at the simple sight of him Bolingbroke will give in. Here Shakespeare still has Richard speaking in complete lines consisting of complex sentences and polysyllabic words to highlight Richard’s love of verbosity.

As Richard begins to hear more news of the rebellion he starts to swing between fantastical hope and despair, shocked by the desertion of his Welsh army, only then to state: 'Is the king's name not worth twenty thousand names?' This could be the first hint of the insanity or fantasy that takes over Richard towards the end of the play, *when captive in the dungeon of Pomfret Castle he complains of music he thinks he can hear, depending on the production we are to assume this music is real, but maybe inside Richard's head*. Indeed this is the first time Richard might be considering who he is without the crown - a question he is unable to answer.

Next Richard receives more bad news from Scroop, as to how all the nation has joined with Bolingbroke. Here we see the vengeful and angry side of Richard, as he rages against Bushy and Green, who he is quick to label 'Judas's and 'Snakes in my heart-blood warmed.' As an audience we clearly see the dramatic irony here – Bushy and Green were executed in the previous scene, Richard's temper is in full flight though. *This builds on the impression we had of him in Sc.1 when, unable to make Bolingbroke and Mowbray relent he through a petulant tantrum crying out 'We were not born to sue, but to command!' Or his threat to John of Gaunt to 'run thy head from thy unreverent shoulders.'* Because Richard is a childish man he is prone to these harsh fits of anger.

When Scroop reveals that both Richard's flatterers are dead we see another side to the King. He moves from being full of fantasy or hot rage to one of reflection and deep sorrow. However this is the same Richard. The **crisis** has come and he is beginning to realise he will lose his crown, but he still cannot think beyond how events impact on him, before he constructed great 60 word extended metaphors to highlight his power, now he does the same to chronicle his sorrow. In one of the most powerful and famous speeches Richard gives glimpses of humility as says: 'For God sake let us sit on the ground and tell sad stories of the death of kings.' In most productions Richard is one of the tallest actors (such as the RSC / David Tennant version) so to see him brought low and physically sitting on the sand is a dramatic moment. In the Mark Rylance production they incorporate some humour at this moment. Richard, clearly unsure what to do looks around at the other actors almost as if they might begin the story telling. Rylance then furthers this by pulling a shocked face at the line 'some poisoned by their wives', however Shakespeare reminds us that Richard is still in control as he is able to construct a powerful image of the crown as a castle where Death reigns and the 'antic sits' and although the king is given a chance to play at 'monarchizing' at any moment 'a little pin bores through the castle wall and farewell king'.

This, the thought of who he is without the crown, is too much for Richard and he reaches his most emotional point, when even his language deserts him, he fully breaks down, spouting monosyllabic phrases of grief: “feel want, taste grief, need friends’ this is in complete contrast to who Richard was earlier with his great speeches, or who he will be again *(his ability with words will return in Act 4 when he memorably compares himself and Bolingbroke to buckets in a well, or in his final scene when he states how he “My brain I’ll prove female to my soul” and he can populate his dungeon with his thoughts)*. Here, however we see a true **crisis** and for perhaps the only time in the play Richard admits he is the same as other men.

Although the others try to rally Richard, he is still dejected and concludes the scene by reversing his earlier metaphor (perhaps showing his lyrical ability returning) as he states “Richard’s night to Bolingbroke’s fair day” showing he has come to realise the nettles and vipers of England will not come to his rescue and that Bolingbroke is now the centre of the action.

In conclusion Act 3 Sc.2 proves a **crisis** point for the character of Richard. He comes to realise he may not be protected by god, and despite his wonder with language he may not be cut out as an effective ruler. Shakespeare manages to do this with extraordinary skill, takes us from the start of the scene, when the audience have contempt for Richard to a state of great pity for the fallen king, after he receives the news of the rebellion. It is significant throughout this that Richards character does not really change – if anything the altered circumstances reveal more about his fundamental character trait; reflective egotism. However as he muses on death we can relate to him and due to the beauty of Shakespeare’s language we enwrapped as he ‘tells sad stories of the death of kings.’