

# Shakespeare's presentation of kingship in richard ii essay sample

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Richard II is a play that centres on Kingship; Shakespeare presents vanity and flattery using rich language throughout the play to articulate the hazards a King must avoid to ensure their position as King is maintained. During the play we see the character of Richard presented as vain and tyrannical; as a man who is attempting to escape the responsibilities that Kingship brings such as succession and leadership.

Written almost wholly in verse, Shakespeare contrasts Richard with his successor Bolingbroke to emphasize how care of the kingdom of England and good judgement is inextricably linked with being a successful King. From the onset, Shakespeare presents Richard as vain. In Act I of the first scene Richard's interruption of the duel suggests his egotism. The duel gives Richard the opportunity to make a dramatic and grand public gesture, asserting himself as King. As the brawl develops Richard calls Mowbray and Bolingbroke to "forgive, forget, conclude and be agreed".

Shakespeare's use of verbs in the imperative makes this statement a command. It implies Richard has paid little attention to the reason behind the quarrel, and is instead more interested in people concentrating on his lavish words and public display. The repetition of the "o" sounds and alliteration of the "f's" also brings a certain finality to the speech, perhaps hinting at Richard's self-important and haughty nature which we see resulting in his demise as King.

This narcissistic portrayal of Richard is continued as the duel unfolds.

Shakespeare then further emphasizes Richard's enjoyment of power and pleasure in set piece displays of authority with his statement "Lions make

leopards tame". Richard is referring to himself as the "lion" and again, Shakespeare uses language to reflect Richard's flattery-driven personality whilst perhaps indicating that without firm governing, "leopards" such as Mowbray and Bolingbroke will be able to attack Richard's position of King.

Shakespeare emphasises how ineffective kingship is dominated by flattery and vanity by surrounding the doomed Richard with sycophants who ultimately result in his downfall. Men such as Bushy, Bagot and Greene are all characters that give the king bad advice leading him to lose the crown. Indeed, it is the inadequate guidance that Richard's flatterers give such as to leave England, which enables Bolingbroke to return and subsequently force Richard to abdicate. Shakespeare conveys Richard's foolishness in listening to these men through the comments from the other characters he creates.

Bolingbroke, Gaunt and York all refer throughout the play to Richard's self-deception and craving for flattery. In Act II for example, York remarks that "flattery sounds, / As praises" emphasising that although Richard considers the flattery he receives to be accurate in terms of truth, it is not; and that he is so blinded by sycophancy and self adulation that he cannot realise his weaknesses and inadequacy as King. Bolingbroke also makes the audience aware of Richard's reliance on obsequiousness with his references to "the caterpillars of the Commonwealth".

We interpret the "caterpillars" to be men such as Bushey and Greene and the term "caterpillar" conjures up imagery of greedy, lazy almost parasitic vermin who are both a detriment to Richard and the rest of England.

Bolingbroke then swears he " shall weed and pluck away" these men. This continues the portrayal of Bolingbroke as a hero and develops England as an organic entity, which is a recurrent theme throughout. Finally, when Gaunt states the King is " basely led by flatterers" he indicates his antipathy of Richard's reliance upon flattery.

This speech can be seen to be an implied condemnation of Richard's kingship and is arguably a climax in the tensions between Richard and Gaunt. Undeniably Gaunt expresses his despair at Richard's predisposition to flattery at other points in the play too. " A thousand flatterers sit within thy crown," conveys the extent to which the King surrounds himself with sycophants. The number " thousand" can be seen to imply a powerful, almost army-like force which, as well as hating, Gaunt also fears.

To say that they " sit within thy crown" also reflects their proximity to the King as one associates the word " sit" with a sense of comfortableness and security. With this line Shakespeare suggests the flatterers feel no threat from others surrounding the King such as Gaunt. A certain hopelessness is inherent in Gaunt's situation, as he will never be able to make Richard understand the cost of being surrounded by flatterers before it's too late and they lead to his failure.

Indeed, it is through characters such as Gaunt that Shakespeare is able to encapsulate the weak character of the King as he shows Richard as being governed by his flatterers as opposed to governing them, which is presented as the true role of a King. Richard's choice to distance himself from his family

and make an enemy of his cousin Bolingbroke is a critical error. His aloofness and hostility towards other members of his family jeopardizes the succession.

The succession is presented as an essential element of Kingship as without an heir, Richard could plunge the country into bloody Civil War after his death if those around him disagreed about his successor. This, in conjunction with the divine right of kings is presented as a key element to kingship. According to Richard himself " Not all the rough rude sea/ can wash the balm off from an anointed King. " Whilst this sums up Richard's self-image of being invincible due to his position of King, it also emphasizes the contemporary view of Shakespeare's time that a King is appointed by God and for this reason Kingship is sacred.

The term " anointed" also reflects the sanctity of the Divine Right Of Kings and the word " balm" conjures up imagery of a King being coated in a shield created by divinity, thus emphasizing Richard's prestigious role. According to Gaunt, a King is " God's substitute, his deputy anointed in his sight". As before, Shakespeare chooses the term " anointed" perhaps to symbolise how sacrosanct the role of King is. The length of sentence combined with the rich words such as " God's substitute" sums up the attitude of Shakespeare's time about the tasks of a king and emphasizes the contemporary belief of providence, which dominates the play.

Indeed, Shakespeare illuminates the importance of maintaining the succession using many themes and motifs in the play as well as in the

storyline. Ideas about blood and England's condition at the time of Richard's rule dominate the story. In Act II for example, Northumberland refers to the dead Gaunt as " a royal prince... of noble blood". As before in Richard's speech at the beginning of the play, Shakespeare controls the assonant " o" sounds to draw the audience's attention to the relationship between being " royal" and having " noble blood".

Richard's comment " let's purge without blood" also suggests his keenness to prevent some sort of conflict between him and Bolingbroke. This could be interpreted as showing his pacifistic side as demonstrated in the scene of the duel or that he is worried about his own blood, as his death will endanger the succession. It is through this type of language that Shakespeare emphasises the responsibility of a King to ensure the succession and the country's well being. In addition to succession, Richard II reflects the importance of looking after your realm whilst King.

Shakespeare presents England as being in a poor state whilst Richard reigns, with the Bishop of Carlisle foreseeing " disorder, horror, fear and mutiny"- all words which describe disaster. However it seems due to Richard's preoccupation with vanity, he has ignored the importance of good and effective governance. Richard himself realises this towards the end of the play and water is another pattern of language Shakespeare draws on to illustrate this. In Act III scene 3 we see Richard consciously relinquish the crown.

The flamboyancy of his language continues as before in the play as he abdicates, “ Mine eyes are full of tears”, but his comment that the “ salt water blinds them not so much/But they can see a sort of traitors here” suggests a realisation that his downfall can be attributed to those around him as much as himself and can be interpreted as showing a change in Richard’s character as he is faced with a kingdom in turmoil. By describing his tears as containing “ salt”, Shakespeare leaves the actual interpretation of the word ambivalent.

One might associate the salt with bitterness either reflecting his enemies’ resentment towards him, which led to his downfall with men such as Bolingbroke or his own bitterness. Yet the “ salt” also can be seen to suggest corrosion and the deterioration Richard’s incompetence caused to England, something he has just begun to realise. Shakespeare then develops the water motif into what can be seen as, a metaphor of Richard. He talks of being “ a mockery king of snow” who has “ before the sun of Bolingbroke... melted away in water-drops”.

This self-description as a “ King of Snow” perhaps hints at Richard’s previous self-alienation from family and friends whilst evoking images of Richard as being a cold, unfeeling character. On the other hand, the fact Richard refers to himself as only a King of “ Snow” possibly can be seen to emphasise, consciously or not, that Richard never had genuine control of England at all and that his power never truly existed in any other form stronger than the fragile substance of snow and this is what made his renunciation inescapable.

The subsequent reference to Bolingbroke melting this “ Snow King” into “ water-drops” can then be interpreted as a direct reference to Bolingbrook’s seizure of Richard’s crown which literally, like heat from the sun does to snow, dissolved his power. This self-conscious speech from Richard gives us a sense of his despair at losing the kingship but also his relief. Shakespeare’s linking of Bolingbroke to the sun can also be seen as Richard considering his cousin to in some ways, be a saviour who has removed him of the responsibility of Kingship, which we have seen him to grapple with unsuccessfully.

As we see a change in Richard’s personality, other motifs in the play also alter. The significance of blood from bloodlines to the spilling of blood and damage done to England changes for example changes; “ Thy fierce hand hath with the King’s blood stained the King’s own land” powerfully relates to us how Richard has exploited his role as King and damaged England rather than nurturing it which is the true task of a King. To describe the hand as “ staining” the land with “ blood” creates a very powerful image of Richard damaging his Kingdom.

By referring to his hands as the tools that created such destruction, Shakespeare strengthens the amount of responsibility the audience feels Richard has for the strife the country finds itself in. Also to a modern audience at least, the idiom “ to have blood on one’s hands” adds to the impact of Richard’s words. Bolingbroke’s allegory of Richard’s flatterers as caterpillars is expanded later on in the play as Shakespeare presents the country metaphorically as a garden.



The gardeners speak with pitiful regret of the country's condition and emphasize Richard's folly in not looking after his Kingdom. ' He had not trimmed and dressed his land as we this garden'-here the Gardener presents England as out of control and poorly tended to, emphasising how determination and fortitude which are both strengths associated with a gardener are an important layer to Kingship. The gardener's references to "noisome weeds" also convey the parasitic nature of Richard's flatterers and that as Bolingbroke vows to do, they should be "plucked" and "rooted" away.

The gardener then goes on to describe these weeds as "without profit suck/ the soil's fertility from wholesome flowers". The imagery of Richard's sycophants preventing flowers of England from flourishing has several connotations; firstly that it is Richard who has inhibited England's emotional well-being. Secondly it can be seen as a symbolic reference to the sparring Houses of Lancaster and York who fought for the Crown after Richard's abdication. However, the Garden scene also gives a sense of sympathy for Richard.

He states that although he "suffered this disordered spring/Hath now himself met with the fall of leaf". This perhaps suggests that as a man Richard does deserve some pity when we consider he had no choice in becoming King and that it is only his role as King that has made him inept and destructive. By the end of Richard II the audience has come to realise the intricacies of Kingship. The tone at the end of the play, when Bolingbrook

sentences Richard to death is one of grief. Bolingbroke has assumed the cares of Kingship of which had led to Richard's self-destruction.

However, during the play we only get a glimpse of Bolingbroke as King and as an audience realise that he has not had time to make mistakes such as those made by Richard. We can instead only see more of Bolingbroke's character in the rest of the series of historical plays, such as Henry IV. It is in Richard II however, that Shakespeare's rich language articulates the many different concepts of Kingship and how Richard failed them. We see how the King is divinely appointed to rule, but that his kingship is an obligation to his country, not an opportunity for egotism; and the Crown can be forfeited if the King fails to rule well.

On the other hand, Richard was born to be King; it is a role for which in the play we see him to be ill suited, but is something in which he has no choice. Through his character we realise the many restrictions of Kingship, its burdens and possible consequences. Ultimately Richard cannot escape the trappings of Kingship unless he forfeits his own life. We then see that the only way to escape the afflictions of kingship is death and Richard conforms to this completely, giving up his life in order to give up his Kingship.