

Richard II

INTRODUCTION

THE subject-matter of *Richard II* seemed inflammatorily topical to Shakespeare's contemporaries. Richard, who had notoriously indulged his favourites, had been compelled to yield his throne to Henry Bolingbroke, Earl of Hereford: like Richard, the ageing Queen Elizabeth had no obvious successor, and she too encouraged favourites—such as the Earl of Essex—who might aspire to the throne. When Shakespeare's play first appeared in print (in 1597), and in the two succeeding editions printed during Elizabeth's life, the episode (4.1.145–308) showing Richard yielding the crown was omitted; and in 1601, on the day before Essex led his ill-fated rebellion against Elizabeth, his fellow conspirators commissioned a special performance in the hope of arousing popular support, even though the play was said to be 'long out of use'—surprisingly, since it was probably written no earlier than 1595.

But Shakespeare introduced no obvious topicality into his dramatization of Richard's reign, for which he read widely while using Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles* (1577, revised and enlarged in 1587) as his main source of information. In choosing to write about Richard II (1367–1400) he was returning to the beginning of the story whose ending he had staged in *Richard III*; for Bolingbroke's usurpation of the throne to which Richard's hereditary right was indisputable had set in train the series of events finally expiated only in the union of the houses of York and Lancaster celebrated in the last speech of *Richard III*. Like *Richard III*, this is a tragical history, focusing on a single character; but Richard II is a far more introverted and morally ambiguous figure than Richard III. In this play, written entirely in verse, Shakespeare forgoes stylistic variety in favour of an intense, plangent lyricism.

Our early impressions of Richard are unsympathetic. Having banished Mowbray and Bolingbroke, he behaves callously to Bolingbroke's father, John of Gaunt, a stern upholder of the old order to whose warning against his irresponsible behaviour he pays no attention, and upon Gaunt's

death confiscates his property with no regard for Bolingbroke's rights. During Richard's absence on an Irish campaign, Bolingbroke returns to England and gains support in his efforts to claim his inheritance. Gradually, as the balance of power shifts, Richard makes deeper claims on the audience's sympathy. When he confronts Bolingbroke at Flint Castle (3.1) he eloquently laments his imminent deposition even though Bolingbroke insists that he comes only to claim what is his; soon afterwards (4.1.98± ±103) the Duke of York announces Richard's abdication. The transference of power is effected in a scene of lyrical expansiveness, and Richard becomes a pitiable figure as he is led to imprisonment in Pomfret (Pontefract) Castle while his former queen is banished to France. Richard's self-exploration reaches its climax in his soliloquy spoken shortly before his murder at the hands of Piers Exton; at the end of the play, Henry, anxious and guilt-laden, denies responsibility for the murder and plans an expiatory pilgrimage to the Holy Land.