

## **RICHARD II – THE KING AND THE PLAY**

Richard II (1367-1400), king of England, grandson of Edward III and son of the Black Prince, was born at Bordeaux on Jan. 6, 1367. On the Black Prince's death in 1377, he became king. Though at first too young to rule, Richard in 1381 showed skill in dealing with Wat Tyler's Rebellion and from then onward began to assume power.

He showed extravagance, a difficult temper, and a liking for favorites, especially the unpopular Robert de Vere. Therefore in 1386, his uncle, Thomas of Gloucester, and the Lords Appellant defeated and drove out the king's supporters and installed a noble council to control him.

In 1389 Richard threw off their tutelage and for eight years ruled modestly and well. In 1397 he was strong enough for his revenge; the leaders of the Lords Appellant were seized and tried as traitors, Gloucester was murdered, Richard Arundel was executed and archbishop Thomas Arundel was banished, and in 1398 the excuse of a quarrel was taken to exile Bolingbroke and Norfolk.

Richard ruled with absolute authority until May 1399, when Bolingbroke landed in England. The king was defeated, deposed by Parliament, and confined to Pontefract Castle, where he died on February 14, 1400, probably of starvation. Extravagant, violent and revengeful, yet weak, a patron of literature and a lover of fine buildings, as king, Richard never succeeded in winning the affection of his subjects.

Richard II (c.1595), a play by Shakespeare. It is in many respects the most original of Shakespeare's early chronicle plays. Here he emerges from the influence of Christopher Marlowe. In spite of the resemblance of the theme, the tragic fall of a weak king, to that of Marlowe's Edward II, Shakespeare's play differs from his predecessor's in structure, characterization, and diction.

The action covers a shorter space of time and it's more compact; the lyric flow of the dialogue contrasts strongly with the declamation and occasional direct dramatic expression of Marlowe. Most important of all, Shakespeare's characterization of his hero is a far more subtle study than Marlowe's portrayal of his vacillating monarch.

The character of Richard, self-indulgent, self-pitying, and blind to the actualities of life, is brought out by contrast with that of his opponent, the hard realist, Bolingbroke. In the end Richard's fall is due not so much to outside forces as to a fatal flaw in his character, and in this respect, at least, the play-foreshadows the later and greater tragedies.

Richard II had a special interest for Shakespeare's contemporaries, for Queen Elizabeth fancied that she might be identified in the popular mind with king Richard, and her censors struck out the deposition scene from printed copies of the play. On the eve of the revolt of Essex his supporters bribed Shakespeare's company to revive the play with the deposition scene included. For this act they were called before the Privy Council.

They managed to prove their innocence of ill intent and were, indeed, invited to play at court on the day before Essex's execution.