

MORE PLAYS OFF THE PAGE: *RICHARD II*

The goal of this course, as of all the "Off The Page" courses, is to make a text come alive as a piece of theatre. After all, Shakespeare was a working playwright (and actor) at a time when theatre had to hold its own as entertainment alongside bear baitings and thrilling public executions. He wrote for the Public, not for the Literati; he had, as the English so delightfully put it, to "put bums on seats" or he would have been out of a job. He was the most popular playwright of his time, apparently appealing to a wide audience from the "groundlings" to the Queen.

History plays were very popular in Shakespeare's time. In the mid 1590's, when this play was written, *RII* was already his 5th chronicle. But we do not read this play only for historical accuracy; we are even more interested in how Shakespeare portrays Richard. His father, The Black Prince, eldest son of Edward III, predeceased him so Richard inherited from his grandfather at the age of 10! There was no question that he was the rightful king, God's anointed, but he was pretty much in the hands of his two uncles Lancaster and York as a child. The play, however, takes place in the last year of Richard's life: 1399, when he was murdered while imprisoned in Pomfret castle.

Shakespeare appears to be very interested in what kind of a person Richard was; clearly rightful king, but was he suited for the job? Is Richard more actor than manager; you'll note (please, in your texts) many references to acting and stages and theatre. Is he more poet than minister; indeed this is the only one of Shakespeare's plays written entirely in verse. Should we have sympathy for him? Does Shakespeare have sympathy for him? If so, how do we know? Does he become more human when he is finally alone probably for the first time in his life?

We'll want to pay great attention to the LANGUAGE of this play; since there's very little actual action, W.S. has given us much imagery. I will send a list of "themes and motifs" to follow on the assignment sheet. Remember, W.S.'s audience came to "hear" not to "see" a play. Since we are no longer able to get up and move around as on a stage, the language is everything. We will assign roles at least a week before that part of the play is due. Keeping those roles for an entire act, will allow for chance to engage with that character; people will volunteer for roles.

I suggest that you "score" your lines; mark out "measures" according to breathing and thought. Mark for emphasis important words and phrases.

TEXT: *Richard II*. Folger Shakespeare Library. Dec. 6, 2016. ISBN 5011 46 289. Mowat and Werstein, eds.

Leader: Barbara Herzberg has an extensive theater background, has taught English and drama, and directed plays for many years. She has been a course leader for Evergreen since its inception.

Wednesdays: 1:30 to 3:30 p.m., 8-10 weeks: Beginning February 24

Maximum: 16