***Richard II***

I.i, ii, iii In the accusations, the widow’s grief, and the trial by combat, we see the consequences of Richard’s ordering his uncle Gloucester to be killed, and we see Richard acting unjustly to avoid facing those consequences.

I.iv-II.i In Richard’s conversation with his advisors and at Gaunt’s castle, we see the consequences of of Richard’s extravagance and financial mismanagement, and we see Richard acting unjustly to avoid facing those consequences.

II.ii, iii, iv-III.i As the Queen learns of Henry’s return, Henry gains followers, and Richard loses followers, we see the consequences of Richard’s previous two acts of injustice; as Henry orders Bushy and Green to be executed, we see Henry acting unjustly in response to Richard’s injustice towards him.

III.ii, iii, iv-IV.i As Richard returns, despairs, and surrenders to Henry, the Queen learns of his surrender, and he abdicates publicly, we see the wrongness of Richard for kingship. We also see the wrongness of usurping the throne, the consequences of which naturally include rebellion. [Note that the challenges in IV.i are closely comparable to those in I.i; these things happen when kings are unjust.]

V.i, ii, iii As the Queen takes leave of her husband, York discovers his son’s treachery, and Henry faces both his own son’s profligacy and the York family’s internal divisions, we see that usurpation has not only the political consequence of rebellion but also the personal consequence of divided families.

V.iv, v, vi As Exton resolves to murder Richard, does so at the cost of two servants’ lives, and brings the corpse to Henry, we come full circle: another king has commanded a royal kinsman’s murder. Henry’s fear of Carlisle’s honesty and his guilt over Exton’s deed remind us of Richard’s responses to Henry and Mowbray at the beginning of the play. But Henry hopes to avoid facing his consequences by open admission of his sin and outward signs of penitence.

Nomenclature

Men get called by their first names, their last names, the distinctive part of their titles, and their birthplaces, as well as by epithets describing them. Thus in the royal family (where the last name is Plantagenet for everyone), we have Richard’s late father referred to as Edward, the Black Prince, or the Prince of Wales and his uncles referred to as John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster; Edmund of Langley, Duke of York; and Thomas of Woodstock, Duke of Gloucester. In Richard’s generation, he is Richard of Bordeaux or King Richard II; his Lancastrian cousin is Henry of Bolingbroke, Earl of Derby, later Duke of Hereford, finally King Henry IV; his Yorkist cousin is Edward, Earl of Rutland, later Duke of Aumerle, and still later Earl of Rutland again. Outside the royal family, we meet or hear about Thomas Mowbray, Earl of Nottingham, later Duke of Norfolk, and the Percy family: Henry, Early of Northumberland; Thomas, Earl of Worcester, his brother; and Henry, Northumberland’s son, called Hotspur.

Discussion Question

Does Shakespeare answer the questions posed by bad kingship: Is it better to have a bad but legitimate king or to have a good but illegitimate king? Is the better basis for kingship hereditary right or individual ability? Is there any right solution once the right to rule has been separated from the capacity to do so?

Historicity

The play is remarkably faithful to the historical record. Major changes are as follows:

* the acceleration of time, so that events of 1398, 1399, and 1400 seem to occur close together
* the maturity of the Queen, who was actually 7 years old when married in 1396 and so still a child when she returns to her native France after Richard’s death
* the omission of several acts of treachery toward Richard; these might have increased our sympathy for him and mitigated our sense that he is his own worst enemy
* the addition of the abdication scene, which is pure invention but brilliantly written