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King Richard II (Arden Shakespeare: Third Series)



Synopsis

This richly annotated edition takes a fresh look at the first part of Shakespeare's second tetralogy of history plays, showing how it relates to the other plays in the sequence. Forker places the play in its political context, discussing its relation to competing theories of monarchy, how it faced censorship because of possible comparisons between Richard II and Elizabeth I, and how Bolingbroke's rebellion could be compared to the Essex rising of the time. This edition also reconsiders Shakespeare's use of sources, asking why he chose to emphasize one approach over another. Forker also looks at the play's rich afterlife, and the many interpretations that actors and directors have taken. Finally, the edition looks closely at the aesthetic relationship between language, character, structure, and political import. A textual analysis of the play's eight early editions, a doubling chart for casting, and genealogical tables are included as appendices. The Arden Shakespeare has developed a reputation as the pre-eminent critical edition of Shakespeare for its exceptional scholarship, reflected in the thoroughness of each volume. An introduction comprehensively contextualizes the play, chronicling the history and culture that surrounded and influenced Shakespeare at the time of its writing and performance, and closely surveying critical approaches to the work. Detailed appendices address problems like dating and casting, and analyze the differing Quarto and Folio sources. A full commentary by one or more of the play's foremost contemporary scholars illuminates the text, glossing unfamiliar terms and drawing from an abundance of research and expertise to explain allusions and significant background information. Highly informative and accessible, Arden offers the fullest experience of Shakespeare available to a reader.

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Customer Reviews

This play is the first of four histories involving the rise of Harry Bolingbroke into King Henry IV (parts I & II) and then his son, Prince Hal, into Henry V. These four plays are always popular with audiences and have many virtues, although they are quite different in affect and theatrical means. This play is full of poetry and carefully composed verse. The two Henry IV plays are blessed the Falstaff's glorious prose and Henry V has its own interesting dualities in Prince Hal finally becoming the King - are his comments sincere or full of irony or is he blind to the irony of his own making? But those are other plays. As this play begins, the York line is in power as Richard II who came to power as a child. Henry Bolingbroke is the son of the Duke of Lancaster (John of Gaunt) and is also the Duke of Hereford as the Earl of Derby. Richard shows through his actions and weak decisions (both weak in strength and weak in acumen) that his hold on the throne is open to challenge. When Bolingbroke decides to make the challenge is open to debate, but he picks a fight with Mowbray and both end up banished instead. This causes a tremendous rift with the Duke of Lancaster and when he dies, Richard decides to seize Lancaster's possessions in Ireland instead of letting them pass to Bolingbroke. Since Bolingbroke is now the new Duke of Lancaster he decides he is no longer the banished Duke of Hereford and returns to England. A number of rumors and challenges lead to Bolingbroke taking power and when Richard returns from Ireland his loss of his kingdom is accomplished without his realizing it. The rest of the play is the fall of Richard and the rise of Henry IV with the attendant strain on the loyalties of the peers.

RICHARD II is one of Shakespeare's English histories. He earlier had written the three parts of "Henry VI" as well as "Richard III". With RICHARD II he backtracks in time to the late fourteenth century and the last king who ruled by direct hereditary right in succession from William the Conqueror. The play is written entirely in verse, with occasional rhyming. It is a very lyrical play. It also is very serious; there are no comedic characters or any comedic moments (unusual for Shakespeare). There is much ceremony and pageantry, and quite a bit of chivalry, including obsequious flattery as well as righteous indignation culminating in the throwing down of gauges. The principal subject is kingship -- its nature, its inherent responsibilities, and its succession. One of the issues Shakespeare explores is whether kingship -- or queenship, inasmuch as Elizabeth I was nearing the end of her reign when the play was written in 1595 -- is religious and hieratic in nature, or, instead, is a political office, to be captured, maintained, and passed on by skillful realpolitik. One of the lessons of the play is: how uneasy is he who wears the crown. As the title for this review, I have taken two lines from one of the many wonderful philosophizing monologues of King Richard. It continues thus: How some have been deposed, some slain in war, Some haunted by the ghosts they have deposed, Some poisoned by their wives, some sleeping killed, All murdered. For within the hollow crown That rounds the mortal temples of a king Keeps Death his court * * *. Here is a streamlined summary of the play: It opens with Richard II as king. There is much discontent with his reign, both among the nobility and the commons.

One hopes that with the recent release of "The Hollow Crown" that there will be renewed interest in this play, the first of his second (and finest) tetralogy. Shakespeare was at the height of his powers when writing this and its sequel, Henry IV, Part I. His command of language was never greater. Richard, like Henry VI, is a poet playing at being king. He knows little of statecraft and less about himself (always dangerous in Shakespeare as in life). He surrounds himself with obsequious flatterers as our modern celebrities do. At the play's beginning he indulges in pageantry for pageantry's sake - having already decided the fates of Mowbray and Bolingbroke, he nonetheless allows them to think their fates are in their hands to be decided by a jousting match. Mowbray presents a danger as he intrigued with Richard to kill Woodstock, one of the king's many uncles. Bolingbroke presents a danger because he knows of Richard's treachery in killing his uncle. Richard is portrayed as a fop with little to commend himself until Bolingbroke lands in England to reclaim his property illegally seized by the king. Richard then becomes a type of Christ, surrounded by enemies who once swore him eternal allegiance. The two scenes in which Richard and Bolingbroke come face to face are charged with tension and some of the finest verse Shakespeare ever composed.

Richard's last soliloquy is one of the greatest the bard ever wrote. The other reviewer whose review lacks any substance (it is a mere boorish, superficial carp by someone who on the one hand awards the play four stars while claiming the play is garbage but failing to provide any reasons for the charge other than that old puerile standby "It's boring") will, it is hoped, be ignored by most readers.

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