

Studying the Play

Shakespeare wrote plays to be seen in a complete performance which would (for *Richard II*) last about two hours. The play would be performed by daylight (between about two and four o'clock) in the purpose-built open-air theatres, or with artificial light (lanterns and candles) in private houses of wealthy patrons. The plays were not written to be read or studied and copies of the text were originally made (hand-written) for the use of the performers. It is important to bear this in mind when you are required to study the play as a text (with extensive editorial comment) on which you will be examined.

Shakespeare's company was the most successful of its day, and his plays filled the theatres. Many (most?) of the audience in a public performance would lack education and be technically illiterate, but these were people for whom the spoken word was of greater value than is the case today: they would be more attentive, more sensitive to patterns of verse and rhyme, and to imagery (word pictures). Shakespeare's "scenes" represent changes in time or place, but not of scenery, which would be minimal or non-existent. Basic stage furniture would serve a variety of purposes, but stage properties and costume would be more elaborate and suggestive. A range of gestures and movements with conventional connotations of meaning was used, but we are not sure today how these were performed.

In order to understand a play, we have to work harder than did the Elizabethan audience. To see a play entire (in the theatre or on film), without interruption save for the interval, may be needed for us to appreciate Shakespeare's strong sense of narrative drive, and to see how the text is not the work but a (loose) blueprint for performance. On the other hand, study of text and editors' notes may be necessary for us to appreciate some of the attitudes the contemporary audience brought into the theatre. Such notes may explain images and highlight patterns or structures which otherwise we might not "hear", or explain semantic change (changes of meaning) in words or phrases used by the playwright to convey important ideas to his audience. The instant pleasure of experiencing a work of art (say a feature film or soap-opera or first-person novel) which uses conventions and a range of cultural references which we at once understand is unlikely ever to be found by us in watching Shakespeare in performance. What is amazing is that so much is still accessible, and that by adapting the delivery of lines, and giving some visual clues, performers can make the plays work today.

The division of plays into five acts is more apparent to the dramatist (to whom it gives an idea of how the play's narrative structure will appear in performance) than to the audience (though modern audiences often know act and scene numbers). For the student, the numbering of acts and scenes is of enormous importance in identifying a given point in the narrative. When quoting a passage, always give act and scene number, while line numbers are helpful, too.

A Map of the Play

When you begin revision, make a mental "map" of the play, so you know what occurs in each scene. List the scenes down the page. After the scene number, write no more than ten words about what happens. Follow this with a phrase from a notable speech. e.g.:

- I, iii: The tournament – halted; the disputants banished: "...such is the breath of kings." (214)
- II, i: Death of Gaunt – Richard seizes his estates: "This royal throne of kings..." (40)
- IV, i: The deposition scene: "Are you contented to resign the crown?" (199)

These are only suggestions. Choose a speech which is a clue to you.

The Structure of the Play in acts

This is not rigid or mechanical, but there is a fairly simple scheme one can see, whereby Richard's fortunes decline as Bolingbroke gains ascendancy – but the play ends with hints of trouble to come for the new ruler.

You also should be aware of the relationship between public/ceremonial and private/intimate scenes or episodes, and of the connection between the serious, "political" episodes and the comic elements – both of which address the play's central themes of rule and misrule.

Finally, it is worth making a plan of each act, identifying episodes/speeches in which the principal themes are addressed.

None of this is a guarantee of success in the exam. It is essential preparation, to give you the material you need to succeed.

Introductory and General Comment

Act I

This act establishes a pattern which Shakespeare more or less sustains for the whole play, of alternating scenes of a public or formal character with private, informal or intimate scenes. This is important in establishing a sense of the characters we meet as occupying a public role or office and of the private person behind the public face. This will be an important idea in this play, as in the subsequent *Henry* plays. The ceremonial of the opening at Richard's court and the third scene, the aborted tournament at Coventry, alternate with two intimate scenes: in the second scene, we see Gloucester's widow unable to move the patient Gaunt to vengeance, while the last scene of the act shows the cynicism of Richard in private with his flatterers. This marks another contrast: in private, Gaunt speaks with exemplary honour and complete integrity, but Richard's private conversation reveals his public ostentation to be showy and insincere – he emerges as a cynical opportunist, ready to disregard the law to offset his financial imprudence and wishing the valiant Gaunt into an early grave. For the contemporary audience, this last would be the most offensive of his errors: to the Elizabethans, Gaunt, like his grandson, Henry V, is a national hero, of legendary stature – it is almost as if we have seen Richard planning to deface a public monument.

Some things to consider are:

Scene i: A lot of the characters in the play have several names or titles: while this helps speakers avoid repetition, it can confuse the modern audience. Make sure you know who's who. If not, ask!

Bolingbroke's quarrel appears to us to be as much with Richard as with Mowbray. Explain, as far as possible, why his challenge is directed exclusively at the latter. Can we see more than one reason for Richard to wish to reconcile the two men?

Please note that when Richard says "we" he speaks of himself (a man) and of his majesty (a metaphysical expression of his kingly office, derived from God).

Scene ii: Can you explain the nature of Gaunt's refusal of the Duchess's plea? Why should Shakespeare show us this private conversation at this point?