

Where does the play begin?

The origins of the struggle between King Richard II and Henry Bullingbrook, Duke of Hereford, the man who seized his throne, lie further back in history than the quarrel between Bullingbrook and Thomas Mowbray, Duke of Norfolk, which begins the play. Behind this dispute between the two great lords lies a whole series of political moves and counter-moves in the centuries-long struggle for power between the medieval king and his nobles.

King Richard, at this point in his reign (April 1398), was at the height of his royal powers, perhaps more powerful than any feudal king of England before him. Yet it had not always been so. In 1388, five powerful lords (called the Lords Appellant) had set about removing the King's advisers and taking control of government. There was even some talk of deposing the king, but they could not agree amongst themselves about who should succeed him. Richard had to watch helplessly as his friends and supporters were accused, imprisoned and executed.

But Richard knew how to bide his time. While the Lords Appellant took over the reins of government, Richard quietly set about rebuilding his personal power. To exalt the royal image he created a flamboyantly dazzling court and, more importantly, formed his own private standing army, for the traditional weakness of a feudal king was that he was forced to rely on his nobles to provide him with armed men.

Richard waited for eight years. Then, in 1397, he made his move. The three leading Lords Appellant were arrested. One was banished, one executed and one died in prison in suspicious circumstances. Parliament, understandably nervous, granted Richard powers greater than any English king had ever wielded before.

What is interesting to remember as the play begins is that the leader of the Lords Appellant, the one who was arrested by Richard and who died so mysteriously in prison, was Richard's own uncle, the Duke of Gloucester.

More interesting is the fact that the other two remaining Lords

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Appellant who had taken part in Richard's humiliation in 1388 were Bullingbrook and Mowbray, now appearing before the king for judgement.

More interesting still is the fact that some historical sources claim that, shortly before he was arrested, Gloucester was plotting, together with Bullingbrook and Mowbray, another political coup. They planned to imprison Richard and his uncles, York and Lancaster, then put to death the rest of the King's Council. Mowbray, it is claimed, revealed this plot to Richard, who arrested Gloucester and had him sent to Calais.

What were Richard's intentions at the point where the play begins? Was he still out for revenge on the remaining two Lords Appellant who had so humiliated him? Or was Mowbray now a trusted supporter? If the king wished to be rid of Bullingbrook, he could not forget that Bullingbrook was not just a royal prince and cousin, but the son of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster. Gaunt was the most powerful noble in England, chief counsellor and uncle to the king, almost as powerful as the king himself.

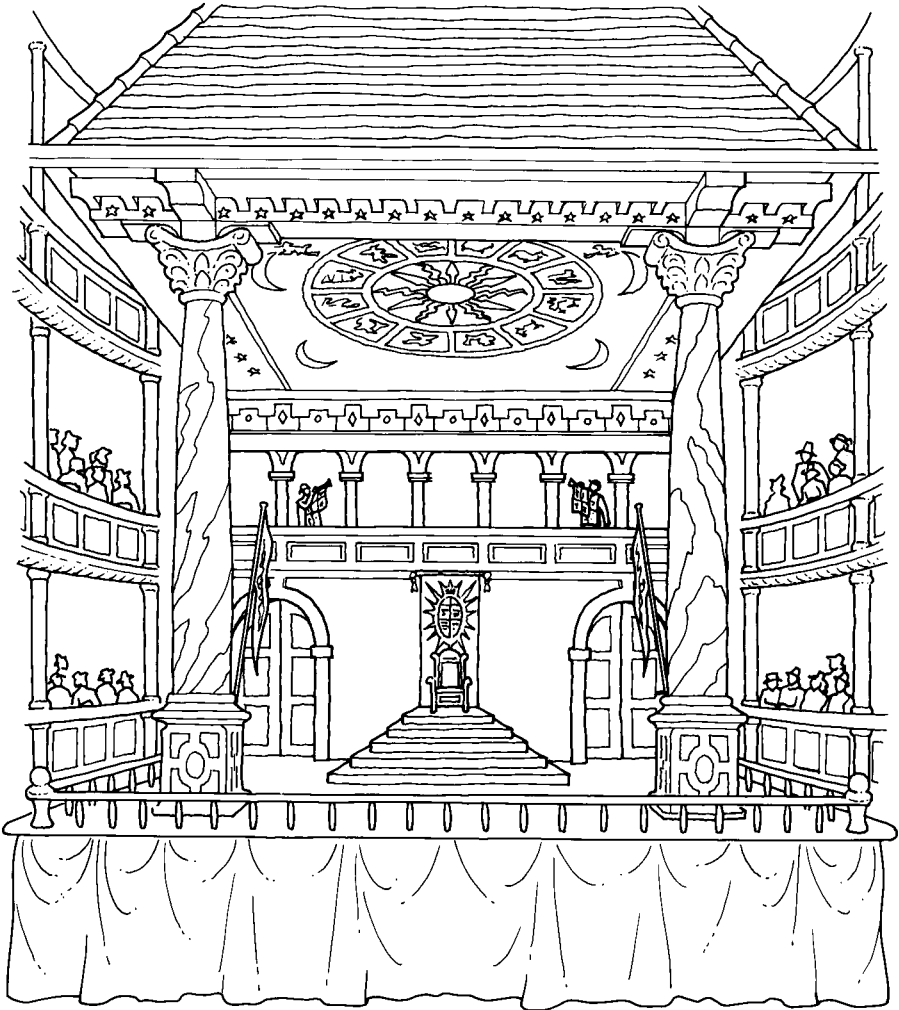
What might have been the thoughts of Bullingbrook and Mowbray as they entered for their trial? Their quarrel had apparently started when Bullingbrook accused Mowbray of treasonable talk, alleging in Parliament that Mowbray had confided to him his fears that Richard was now plotting to destroy the two of them as he had the other Lords Appellant.

Why should Bullingbrook have done this? Was it hatred of Mowbray or loyalty to the king? Was he indirectly attacking the king through one of his supporters, or was he trying to save his own skin by betraying Mowbray? Mowbray had naturally denied the charge and the whole affair was referred to the Court of Chivalry. Both men were put under arrest. Bullingbrook was released on bail under the charge of his father but Mowbray was detained in Windsor Castle. The two men must have feared for their lives.

Given King Richard's seemingly secure political position at the point where the play begins, his downfall is remarkably sudden. In April 1398 he was supremely powerful. In September 1399 he was forced to resign the throne in favour of Bullingbrook. By February 1400 he was dead.

How could it have happened so quickly? The play gives a fascinating view of an event that still shook the Elizabethan world almost 200 years later.

As the play begins



A reconstruction of an Elizabethan stage.

This is what an Elizabethan audience might have seen as they settled to watch the opening of the play. The trumpeters in the gallery would play a 'flourish' to indicate that a royal personage was about to appear in a state procession.

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Royal pageants and processions were a familiar sight to the Elizabethans. Many would have seen Elizabeth herself in royal progress. The actors would be magnificently dressed (quite literally so, for many of them purchased expensive costumes second-hand from the aristocracy for this very purpose). The stage itself, with its marble-painted pillars, impressive entrances and brightly coloured 'heavens' would very effectively suggest a royal court.

How would an Elizabethan audience have viewed Richard – as royal martyr or incompetent failure? What would they expect of Gaunt, the most powerful man in England after the king, or of his son, Bullingbrook, the future King Henry IV? It is not easy to be sure just how much historical knowledge an Elizabethan audience would have had. Some no doubt would merely enjoy the opening scene as a quarrel between two powerful men. Others would perhaps have had a very sophisticated awareness of the political manoeuvrings that lay behind the words.

And words there are in plenty in this very public and formal opening scene. It is not easy to decide exactly what is being thought and what people's true intentions are. You will have to study hard the silences that lie behind the words.

Get to know the opening scene (individually)

Before you look closely at Act 1 Scene 1, quickly read it through. Don't expect to understand everything at once. Try to get a sense of the kind of play you are reading and something of its special qualities. Certain kinds of understanding will only come when you actually speak and listen to the lines, or when you 'mentally put the play on the stage'.

Concentrate your attention in this read-through on the four speaking characters: King Richard, John of Gaunt, Henry Bullingbrook and Thomas Mowbray. Think about what they do, the way they speak and what they seem to think of each other.

Remember that you are in the Court of Chivalry, a special court of law formed to resolve disputes between men of high rank, and that around you are the most powerful men in the land, eager to witness the outcome of this trial.

List of characters

The Royal Family

KING RICHARD THE SECOND
 QUEEN ISABEL King Richard's wife
 JOHN OF GAUNT Duke of Lancaster (King Richard's uncle)
 HENRY BULLINGBROOK Duke of Hereford; John of Gaunt's son;
 afterwards King Henry IV
 DUKE OF YORK Edmund of Langley (King Richard's uncle)
 DUCHESS OF YORK
 DUKE OF AUMERLE Earl of Rutland, the Duke of York's son
 DUCHESS OF GLOUCESTER widow of Thomas of Woodstock,
 Duke of Gloucester (King Richard's uncle)

Supporters of the King

THOMAS MOWBRAY Duke of Norfolk
 SIR WILLIAM BAGOT king's minister and councillor
 SIR JOHN BUSHY Speaker of the House of Commons
 SIR HENRY GREEN councillor to the king
 BISHOP OF CARLISLE
 ABBOT OF WESTMINSTER
 SIR STEPHEN SCROOPE

Supporters of Bullingbrook

EARL OF NORTHUMBERLAND Henry Percy	LORD ROSS LORD WILLOUGHBY
HARRY PERCY (HOTSPUR) The Earl of Northumberland's son	SIR PIERS OF EXTON

The Court

EARL OF SALISBURY
 LORD BERKELEY
 LORD FITZWATER
 DUKE OF SURREY
 LORD MARSHAL
 LADIES attending Queen Isabel

The People

CAPTAIN of the Welsh Army
 GARDENER
 TWO GARDENER'S MEN
 KEEPER of the prison at Pomfret
 SERVINGMAN
 GROOM to King Richard

Attendant nobles, two heralds, soldiers, servants, murderers.

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King Richard prepares to preside as judge over the quarrel between Henry Bullingbrook, Duke of Hereford, and Thomas Mowbray, Duke of Norfolk.

1 How do they speak to each other? (in groups of four)

Remember where you are in this opening scene and the kind of people who are around you. Take a character each and read this page out loud at least twice. If you can find space, try to stand several feet apart as you read. Talk about the way these men speak to each other and decide how impressive the king seems to be.

2 What does the king expect? (in pairs)

Take it in turns to read aloud lines 18–19 several times. As you listen to your partner, try to picture in your mind's eye what you hear. Then quickly write down or describe these images. Decide what Richard appears to think of the two men, Bullingbrook and Mowbray.

3 Royal king – powerful barons (in groups of six to eight)

Set out your stage area more or less as in the picture on page 3 and work out (or block) what you think are the basic stage moves for lines 1–29. Look for the 'internal stage directions' (the clues in the lines themselves – line 15 for example). The historical Richard demanded great shows of respect from his nobles with bowing, kneeling and kissing of hands, so make use of such pieces of stage business. Play it two ways:

- the barons show genuine fear and respect for Richard
- the barons are apparently respectful but under the surface are resentful, even insolent.

Which way seems more appropriate?

oath and band oath and bond
 (Gaunt was required to guarantee on oath that his son would appear to make good his accusations against Mowbray)
late appeal recent accusation

appeal the Duke accuses the duke
high stomached try walking around the room as if you were literally 'high stomached' and you will get the meaning!
ire anger

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ACT I SCENE I The Throne Room

Enter KING RICHARD, JOHN OF GAUNT,
 with other nobles and attendants

RICHARD Old John of Gaunt, time-honoured Lancaster,
 Hast thou according to thy oath and band
 Brought hither Henry Herford, thy bold son,
 Here to make good the boisterous late appeal,
 Which then our leisure would not let us hear, 5
 Against the Duke of Norfolk, Thomas Mowbray?

GAUNT I have, my liege.

RICHARD Tell me moreover hast thou sounded him
 If he appeal the Duke on ancient malice,
 Or worthily as a good subject should 10
 On some known ground of treachery in him?

GAUNT As near as I could sift him on that argument,
 On some apparent danger seen in him
 Aimed at your highness, no inveterate malice.

RICHARD Then call them to our presence. Face to face 15
 And frowning brow to brow ourselves will hear
 The accuser and the accused freely speak.
 High stomached are they both and full of ire,
 In rage deaf as the sea, hasty as fire.

Enter BULLINGBROOK and MOWBRAY.

BULLINGBROOK Many years of happy days befall 20
 My gracious sovereign, my most loving liege.

MOWBRAY Each day still better other's happiness,
 Until the heavens, envying earth's good hap,
 Add an immortal title to your crown.

RICHARD We thank you both. Yet one but flatters us, 25
 As well appeareth by the cause you come,
 Namely to appeal each other of high treason.

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Bullingbrook and Mowbray, accuser and accused, face each other.

1 Making an impression (in pairs)

In drama there is always a space around the speech and a specific purpose and target for the words. Stand up to do this activity (or do it sitting down if there is no room). Choose objects around you (chairs, tables, books) to represent the major characters present. Read the two speeches slowly and precisely, one of you as Bullingbrook, one as Mowbray. Point, gesture or move *clearly and deliberately* wherever you can. For example, lines 34–5:

‘Come I [*point to yourself*] appellant to this princely presence’ [*turn and point to King Richard*].

‘Now Thomas Mowbray [*point to partner*] do I [*point to yourself*] turn [*do so*] to thee’ [*point to partner*].

Talk about the impression you think these two men are trying to make on those around them.

2 Is this the language of a Court of Law? (in groups of three to six)

If the Court of Chivalry could not resolve a dispute the inevitable consequence was for it to go to Trial by Combat.

Two of you slowly read this exchange, while the rest tap on the desk/table whenever a word or phrase strikes them powerfully (one or two words per line at most – perhaps none at all for some lines). Do it again, but this time the rest echo or repeat the words to create a more powerful effect. What kinds of words have you highlighted and what do they tell you of the feelings of these two men?

appellant making a formal accusation (Richard might well recall that here are the remaining two Lords Appellant who had so humiliated him in 1388)

miscreant literally ‘unbeliever’ (hence a general term of abuse)

aggravate the note emphasise the disgrace

right drawn justly drawn

arbitrate decide

post ride swiftly

Act 1 Scene 1

Cousin of Herford, what dost thou object
 Against the Duke of Norfolk, Thomas Mowbray?
 BULLINGBROOK First, heaven be the record to my speech. 30
 In the devotion of a subject's love,
 Tendering the precious safety of my prince,
 And free from other misbegotten hate,
 Come I appelland to this princely presence.
 Now Thomas Mowbray do I turn to thee, 35
 And mark my greeting well; for what I speak
 My body shall make good upon this earth,
 Or my divine soul answer it in heaven.
 Thou art a traitor and a miscreant,
 Too good to be so, and too bad to live. 40
 Since the more fair and crystal is the sky,
 The uglier seem the clouds that in it fly.
 Once more, the more to aggravate the note,
 With a foul traitor's name stuff I thy throat,
 And wish (so please my sovereign) ere I move, 45
 What my tongue speaks my right drawn sword may prove.

MOWBRAY Let not my cold words here accuse my zeal.
 'Tis not the trial of a woman's war,
 The bitter clamour of two eager tongues,
 Can arbitrate this cause betwixt us twain. 50
 The blood is hot that must be cooled for this.
 Yet can I not of such tame patience boast
 As to be hushed, and naught at all to say.
 First, the fair reverence of your highness curbs me
 From giving reins and spurs to my free speech, 55
 Which else would post until it had returned
 These terms of treason doubled down his throat.
 Setting aside his high blood's royalty,
 And let him be no kinsman to my liege,
 I do defy him, and I spit at him, 60
 Call him a slanderous coward and a villain,
 Which to maintain I would allow him odds
 And meet him were I tied to run afoot
 Even to the frozen ridges of the Alps,
 Or any other ground inhabitable 65
 Where ever Englishman durst set his foot.
 Meantime, let this defend my loyalty:
 By all my hopes most falsely doth he lie.

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Bullingbrook challenges Mowbray to Trial by Combat and is promptly accepted. Richard demands of Bullingbrook the reasons for his challenge.

1 What accusations does Bullingbrook make? (in groups of threes)

Read lines 87–108 taking a sentence each. Listen to the crimes that Bullingbrook accuses Mowbray of committing. Make a list of them and decide which alleged crimes are the most serious or most likely to have been committed by Mowbray. It may help you to know that Mowbray was about thirty-two years old at this time. He was Governor of Calais where Gloucester mysteriously died.

2 ‘Streams of blood’ (in small groups)

Look at lines 98–106 and think about the biblical story of Cain and Abel (Genesis 4 v.3–12). Why might some of those watching this trial think that Bullingbrook is after bigger fish than Mowbray?

Look back over the play so far and find any other lines that refer to ‘blood’. In what different senses is it used? Be alert to this word – you will hear it many more times!

3 Stage picture

The pattern or grouping that is set up in this opening scene is symbolically very important. You will find it echoed in many ways in later scenes, so get your own conception of it clear.

Read lines 69–83 and draw a sketch of how you think the characters should be placed on stage at the moment indicated by line 78. Use the illustration of an Elizabethan stage on page 3, or design your own stage set if you wish. Include all the major characters plus other figures (trumpeters, attendants, nobles, bishops).

gage glove
makes thee to except prompts you
 to set aside
inherit us make us think
look what whatever

nobles coins
lendings advances on pay
lewd employments improper use
suggest prompted or incited