

RICHARD II | FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Shakespeare's language can seem scary, but give it a try! *Go at your own pace, and have fun!*



SHAKESPEARE IN PRISON

DETROIT PUBLIC THEATRE'S
SIGNATURE COMMUNITY PROGRAM

King Richard II has been dethroned by Bolingbroke (a lord) and put in jail, where he sits by himself. As you read this monologue and the translation, think about what kinds of things have brought you solace, and what kinds of things have brought you down. This is a tricky piece—but it's also a piece that is particularly meaningful for many people. We hope it will be meaningful for you, too.

The Shakespeare

KING RICHARD II

I have been studying how I may compare
This prison where I live unto the world;
And for because the world is populous,
And here is not a creature but myself,
I cannot do it; yet I'll hammer it out.
My brain I'll prove the female to my soul,
My soul the father, and these two beget
A generation of still-breeding thoughts;
And these same thoughts people this little world,
In humors like the people of this world:
For no thought is contented. The better sort,
As thoughts of things divine, are intermix'd
With scruples and do set the word itself
Against the word,
As thus: "Come, little ones," and then again,
"It is as hard to come as for a camel
To thread the postern of a small needle's eye."
Thoughts tending to ambition, they do plot
Unlikely wonders: how these vain weak nails
May tear a passage thorough the flinty ribs
Of this hard world, my ragged prison walls;
And for they cannot, die in their own pride.
Thoughts tending to content flatter themselves
That they are not the first of fortune's slaves,
Nor shall not be the last—like seely beggars
Who sitting in the stocks refuge their shame,
That many have and others must sit there;
And in this thought they find a kind of ease,
Bearing their own misfortunes on the back
Of such as have before endur'd the like.
Thus play I in one person many people,
And none contented. Sometimes am I king;
Then treasons make me wish myself a beggar,
And so I am. Then crushing penury
Persuades me I was better when a king;
Then am I king'd again, and by and by
Think that I am unking'd by Bullingbrook,
And straight am nothing. *(The music plays.)* Music do I hear?
Ha, ha, keep time! How sour sweet music is
When time is broke, and no proportion kept!
So is it in the music of men's lives.
And here have I the daintiness of ear
To check time broke in a disordered string;
But for the concord of my state and time
Had not an ear to hear my true time broke,
I wasted time, and now doth time waste me;
For now hath time made me his numb'ring clock:
My thoughts are minutes, and with sighs they jar
Their watches on unto mine eyes, the outward watch,
Whereto my finger, like a dial's point,
Is pointing still, in cleansing them from tears.
Now, sir, the sound that tells what hour it is
Are clamorous groans, which strike upon my heart,
Which is the bell. So sighs, and tears, and groans
Show minutes, times, and hours; but my time
Runs posting on in Bullingbrook's proud joy,
While I stand fooling here, his Jack of the clock.
This music mads me, let it sound no more,
For though it have help mad men to their wits,
In me it seems it will make wise men mad.
Yet blessing on his heart that gives it me!
For 'tis a sign of love; and love to Richard
Is a strange brooch in this all-hating world.

The Translation

KING RICHARD II

I have been thinking about how I might compare this prison I live in to the world. But because the world is full of people and I'm the only one here, I cannot do it. Yet I'll work it out. My brain and my soul will produce enough thoughts to fill this little world. But just like people in the outside world, they'll be dissatisfied. My better kind of thoughts, like thinking of divine things, are mixed with doubts and compare passages from the Bible, like "Come, little ones" and "It is as hard for a rich man to enter heaven as for a camel to pass through a needle's eye." My wishful thoughts plot unlikely miracles, like digging through the walls of my cell by hand, and these thoughts die because they will never come true. My positive thoughts tell themselves that they aren't the first to be a slave to bad luck, and they won't be the last. Those thoughts are like beggars in the stocks who take comfort in the fact that others have already sat there and more will sit there. So I host many people inside my own head, and none are satisfied. In my mind, sometimes I'm king, and then some treason makes me wish I was a beggar, and so then I am a beggar. Then terrible poverty persuades me that I was better off as king, so then I am king again. And then I remember that I have been dethroned by Bolingbroke, and suddenly I'm nothing. But whatever I am, just like all men, I'll never be happy until I am dead and nothing at all. Do I hear music? *(Music plays.)* Ha! Keep time. How awful music is when the musicians don't keep time and ruin the song. It's the same thing in men's lives. And here I can criticize the poor time kept by someone playing an out-of-tune instrument, when I couldn't even hear my own time breaking in the music of my work and life. I wasted time then, and now time destroys me. Time has made me his clock: my thoughts have become minutes that turn the clock hands in my eyes, and my finger is the dial that wipes away my tears. Now, sir, my groans are like the chimes that announce the hours, and my heart is the bell that gets struck. And so my sighs, tears, and groans signify minutes and hours. Meanwhile, my time speeds on while Bolingbroke has his joy, and I'm left here playing the role of a clock for him. This music makes me crazy. Let it stop. It might make madmen sane, but for me, it makes this wise man mad. Yet bless the heart that plays it for me! It's a sign of love, and I don't get much of that in this hateful world.

How do you feel about about what Richard says in this piece? Where does your imagination take you as you go through it? Did you find it uplifting, or was it pretty dark? If it seems dark to you, can you find some light there, too?

A common response to this piece from people who've been incarcerated is, "I can't explain it better than Shakespeare."

Give it a whirl anyway. What does Richard's speech mean to you? If you were to boil what he's saying down to one or two sentences, how would you do it?





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You can respond to these in any way you choose:

Write

ACT IT OUT

Talk about it

Draw

THINK ABOUT IT

... up to you!

Richard says that, left alone with his thoughts, he has “played many people,” meaning that he takes on lots of different roles in his mind.

When you’re alone with your thoughts, does your imagination help you “play many people?” What sort of roles do you take on when your mind wanders?

Well... Richard says he plays “many” people. Actually, he mostly talks about going back and forth between thinking he’s the king and thinking he’s a beggar. But he’s not actually either of those things: he was the king until Bolingbroke overthrew him, but it’s not like he magically transformed into a beggar. He’s an ex-king who’s in jail... but when he remembers he was “unking’d by Bolingbroke,” he feels like he’s “nothing.”

Pretend you can interrupt him right there, burst onto the stage, and give him a pep talk. What would you tell him to make sure he knows he’s *not* “nothing?”

In his solitude, Richard imagines his thoughts as different kinds of people. There’s a shmancy (but handy!) word for imagining that something is a person when it’s not actually a person: **personification**.

- What are the types of thoughts Richard says he’s having? When he’s personifying those thoughts, what do they look like?
- Take one of Richard’s personified thoughts and draw it or describe it. What does it look like to you?
- Richard’s mind is racing, but he gets some comfort out of imagining his thoughts as ridiculous, dissatisfied people running around the room. What gives you comfort when your mind is racing?
- If your thoughts were people running around your room, what would they look like?

Near the end of the monologue, Richard talks a lot about time. He says he wasted it—and now it’s wasting him. He listens to someone playing music (*terribly!*) and wonders how he can criticise them for not “keeping time.” And he goes on this long kick where he imagines time turning him into a clock, with his finger as the minute hand and everything.

Think about Richard turning into a clock—a clock that’s keeping his time. What does that look like? (Draw it, write it out, freestyle about it, whatever!)

Try reading the piece aloud. If you read it quickly, you’ll probably find yourself getting tongue-tied. So... take your time! Relax into the language, remember to breathe on punctuation, and let Richard’s thoughts and feelings reveal themselves to you through the clues Shakespeare has given us.

You may notice that the language “floats”—it’s calm and meditative. What does that tell you about Richard’s state of mind as he thinks over what it’s like to be incarcerated? If you try to “play it angry,” it probably won’t work. But he’s not a robot. What is he feeling? What does he do to keep himself from going to (or staying in) a dark place?

