

Synopsis of *Richard III*

After a long civil war England enjoys a period of peace under King Edward IV and the victorious Yorks. But the king's younger brother Richard, Duke of Gloucester, resents Edward IV's power and the happiness of those around him. Malicious, power-hungry and bitter about his physical deformity, Richard plots to seize the throne by removing any and all impediments between him and the crown.

Richard halts the procession accompanying the casket of the former-king Henry VI. Over Henry's coffin Lady Anne Neville, daughter-in-law of Henry IV and wife of Prince Edward (both of whom Richard has murdered), curses Richard. He manipulates her so successfully that she agrees to be his bride. Richard's next step is to cause the murder of his older brother George, Duke of Clarence—the next in line for the throne. By insinuating Clarence committed treason, Richard has his brother arrested (having already arranged for him to be murdered while imprisoned). Richard is now positioned to serve as regent to King Edward IV's son (also named Edward), the Prince of Wales, until he comes of age. Ailing, Edward IV succumbs to illness; and Richard sends the Prince of Wales and his younger brother to the Tower—to better “protect” them. He then moves against the court noblemen who are loyal to the Princes; Vaughan, Rivers, Hastings and Grey are imprisoned and later executed. Richard also has the boys' maternal relatives—the powerful kinsmen of Edward IV's wife, Queen Elizabeth—arrested and executed.

With Queen Elizabeth and the princes now unprotected, Richard has his political allies, particularly Lord Buckingham, campaign to have Richard crowned king. After a clever planting of insinuations regarding the illegitimacy of Edward IV and his children, Richard ascends to the throne as Richard III. By this time, Richard has alienated even his own mother, who curses him as a bloody tyrant. Recognizing the need to bolster his claim to the crown, Richard sends a murderer to dispose of the princes. Buckingham, until now Richard's staunchest ally, angered at the murders of the two young boys and at Richard's false dealings with him, flees. When rumors begin to circulate about a challenger to the throne who is gathering forces in France, noblemen defect in droves to join him. The challenger is Henry Tudor, Earl of Richmond a descendant of the Lancaster family asserting his own right to the throne.

Richard has his wife, Queen Anne, murdered, so that he can pursue a marriage with young Elizabeth, daughter of former Queen Elizabeth and dead King Edward IV. Though Elizabeth is Richard's niece, the alliance would secure his claim to the throne.



Photo by Carol Rosegg

Wallace Acton as Richard in the Shakespeare Theatre Company's 2002-03 production of *Richard III*.

Queen Elizabeth manages to forestall Richard and secretly arranges an alliance with Richmond.

In one final ruthless act, Richard captures his former ally Buckingham on his way to join with Tudor's armies and has him beheaded. Former allies have all turned against Richard to join forces with Richmond who has landed in England and is marching inland to claim the crown. On the eve of the battle, both men are visited in dreams by the ghosts of all those whom Richard has slaughtered, returning to condemn Richard and to hearten Henry Tudor. Tudor's forces defeat Richard's army at the Battle of Bosworth Field. Henry Tudor slays Richard exclaiming, "The bloody dog is dead" (V.v.ii). Accepting the crown as Henry VII, he marries Elizabeth of York, thus uniting the white rose (the Yorkists) and the red rose (the Lancastrians). This is the founding of the Tudor line of kings and the end of the Wars of the Roses.



Rewriting History

“Richard, the third son, of whom we now entreat, was ... little of stature, ill-featured of limbs, crook-backed, his left shoulder much higher than his right, hard-favoured of visage ...

He was malicious, wrathful, envious and from afore his birth ever forward.”

—Sir Thomas More’s *The History of King Richard the Thirde*, 1543.

Shakespeare wrote several works that dramatize significant events in English history. This type of play, originally called a “chronicle play” and now called a “history play,” was popular in Elizabethan England. Shakespeare intended for these plays to be good theatre—condensing and simplifying events, ignoring chronology and altering characters’ actions and ages to tell a compelling story. In *Richard III*, Shakespeare also intended to write a play to glorify the Tudor dynasty, as Queen Elizabeth’s grandfather was Henry Tudor, Earl of Richmond, the conqueror at the end of the play. By portraying Richard as a hunch-backed villain and Richmond as a valiant rescuer, Shakespeare validated Queen Elizabeth’s reign, and also created a fictionalized picture of history that has remained through the modern day. Looking back at Shakespeare’s historical sources, we can see how history has been written, revised and fictionalized throughout the ages.

Shakespeare’s main source for the historical events in *Richard III* was *The Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland* by Raphael Holinshed. Published in 1587, Holinshed’s *Chronicles* contained maps of England, Scotland and Ireland and the history of each region, recorded from prehistoric legends through the 16th century. Much of Holinshed’s information came from previous historians, including Polydore Vergil. When Henry Tudor was crowned King Henry VII in 1485, he commissioned Polydore Vergil to write a history of the English monarchy. The book, *Anglica Historia*, was meant to reaffirm Henry VII’s claim to the throne. It portrayed Henry Bolingbroke’s usurpation of Richard II’s crown as the source for warring and strife, and claimed that the restoration of peace resulted from Henry Tudor’s rise to power. The history perpetuated other rumors like Richard III’s physical deformity.

Shakespeare also found inspiration for the character of Richard III in Sir Thomas More’s book *The History of King Richard the Thirde*, published in 1543. Thomas More grew up in the household of John Morton, Bishop of Ely, who was imprisoned by Richard III during his reign. While More’s account is intended to be factual, he exaggerated details about Richard’s

deformity, creating a monstrous picture of a murderer that Shakespeare then solidified into the delicious villain that Richard is thought of today.

Shakespeare’s depiction of Richard was not only aesthetic but also political. When *Richard III* debuted in the early 1590s, Queen Elizabeth was more than 60 years old and had no children, and therefore no heir to the throne. History told Elizabethans that this could cause terrible civil wars, as rival lords made claims to the throne after the death of the monarch. Shakespeare, writing and performing under the favor of the Queen, created a play that kept public opinion in support of continuing the Tudor monarchy. *Richard III* also had a warning for anyone who considered taking the crown from the Tudors after Elizabeth’s death: usurpation is a dangerous, and ultimately deadly, business.

Shakespeare crafted his play and the title character so well it is often mistakenly considered a factual portrayal of people and events. His account of history has led to continual debate around the “villainy” of Richard. Did he order the execution of his brother the Duke of Clarence? Was Richard directly responsible for the deaths of the princes in the Tower of London? How, if at all, was Richard physically deformed? Shakespeare made choices writing his portrayal of Richard and the final years of the Wars of the Roses, penning a character audiences love to hate. Through the creative manipulation of English history, Shakespeare created a “mirror” for Elizabethans to revisit their past in light of its contemporary relevance.



The Rival Richards, or Shakespear [sic] in Danger. Political cartoon of Edmund Kean and Charles Mayne Young, both dressed as Richard III, struggling for Shakespeare, who stands between them, crying “Murder! Murder!” Published in London, 1814.

British Cartoon Collection (Library of Congress)

The Language of *Richard III*

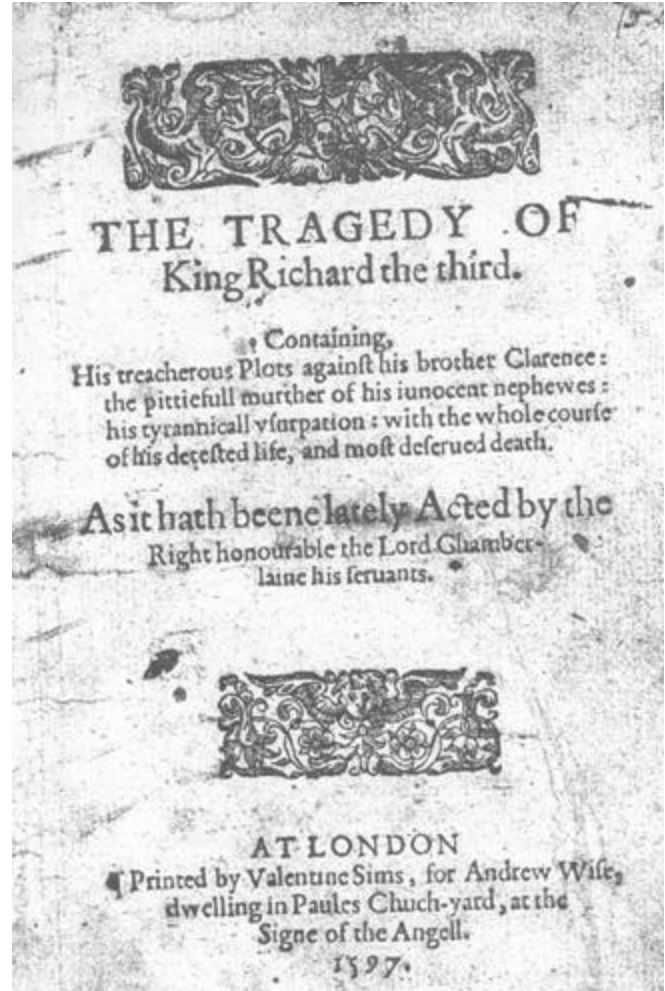
As a student at Stratford Grammar School, young William Shakespeare learned how to read and write through the art of **rhetoric**. An ancient approach to communication dating back to the Greeks, rhetoric was a style of writing that placed the same importance on both *what* was said and *how* it was said, giving equal weight to content and form. In his first three plays, the *Henry VI* trilogy, Shakespeare wrote almost entirely within the strict rules of rhetoric, communicating a clear story of the Wars of the Roses, but without creating any truly original or well-rounded character development. When he wrote *Richard III*, however, Shakespeare began surpassing the rules of rhetoric by filling his writing with imagery that conveyed the individual experiences of each character.

Written early in Shakespeare's career (around 1592-3), *Richard III* is written almost entirely in regular **verse**, without the **prose** and broken verse seen in his later plays. Unlike the earlier *Henry VI Parts 1, 2 and 3*, the characters in *Richard III* often speak directly to the audience and use language that conveys their individual experiences, showing Shakespeare's growth as a writer. At the beginning of the play, Richard communicates through traditional rhetoric. Shakespeare uses the repetition of the same words at the beginning of each line to logically set up for the audience Richard's bitter description of the world that he despises:

Now are our brows bound with victorious wreaths;
Our bruised arms hung up for monuments;
Our stern alarums changed to merry meetings,
Our dreadful marches to delightful measures.

l.i.4-8

Shakespeare also uses clear **antitheses**, or opposites, to show the difference between the time of war and the time of peace (i.e. "dreadful marches" and "delightful measures"). A few verse lines later, however, Richard focuses on himself, and his language shifts, pushing beyond the structure and formality of traditional rhetoric, communicating a clear self-hatred through the negative physical images of himself.



Title page of *Richard III* from the First Quarto, 1597.

I, that am curtail'd of this fair proportion,
Cheated of feature by dissembling nature,
Deformed, unfinish'd, sent before my time
Into this breathing world, scarce half made up,
And that so lamely and unfashionable
That dogs bark at me as I halt by them
l.i.18-23

This also sets up the animal imagery that will continue through the play. Richard gives us the

Rhetoric—the art of language composition; the study of writing or speaking
Verse—text written with a meter or rhythm
Prose—text, speech or writing without meter or rhythm
Antithesis—words or phrases with opposite meaning balanced against each other

image of dogs barking at his deformed body as he limps by; throughout the play, language referring to Richard is rich with images of grotesque beasts. In act 1, scene 2, Lady Anne refers to Richard as a “hedgehog,” and in act 1 scene 3 Queen Margaret calls him a “poisonous bunchback’d toad” and goes on to call him an “elvish-mark’d, abortive, rooting hog.” In fact, several characters refer to Richard as “the boar” because his coat of arms was a white boar with golden tusks. The continual reference to beasts is intended to illuminate Richard’s true nature.

Richard’s foul deeds eventually unleash nightmares that return to haunt him, cursing him with self-doubt and fear. In a nightmare the evening before his final battle, ghosts of those Richard has killed come back to haunt him. Immediately following the dream, Richard awakes and expresses his newfound self-doubt in the most broken and unconventional language of the play. Still partially relying on a rhetorical device by repeating the same word at the end of several lines, Shakespeare drives Richard toward a powerful realization by repeating “myself”:



Portrait of Richard Mansfield as Richard III, 1855.



Laurence Olivier as Richard and Ralph Richardson as Buckingham in Olivier's 1955 film, *Richard III*.

The Ronald Grant Archive.

Library of Congress

What do I fear? Myself? There's none else by.
 Richard loves Richard, that is, I am I.
 Is there a murderer here? No. Yes, I am.
 Then fly. What, from myself? Great reason why—
 Lest I revenge. What, myself upon myself?
 Alack, I love myself. Wherefore? For any good
 That I myself have done unto myself?
 O, no! Alas, I rather hate myself
 For hateful deeds committed by myself!
 V.iii.182-190

The short, broken sentences in this passage convey the twists and turns of Richard’s mind as he struggles with his own guilt. With his famous last line, “A horse, a horse! My kingdom for a horse!” Richard almost echoes the first line of his dream the night before, “Give me another horse!” providing audiences insight that he’s both haunted and changed by his dream. By the end of the battle, and the play, Richard’s self-doubt and loathing lead to his defeat and death.

In *Richard III*, Shakespeare plays with the rules of rhetoric to create his first fully realized characters, utilizing the most compelling imagery thus far in his career.



Shakespeare's Villains



Ian McKellan as Richard III in the 1995 film directed by Richard Loncraine.

Aquarius Library/United Artists

And therefore, since I cannot prove a lover
To entertain these fair well-spoken days,
I am determined to prove a villain
And hate the idle pleasures of these days.
—*Richard III*, I.i.28-31

Medieval Mystery Plays; developed in 15th-century England, these plays used allegorical characters and simple plots to teach audiences a specific moral lesson. Characters such as Knowledge, Strength and Good Deeds would share the stage with the Devil, Death and Vice. Often, the two groups would battle for possession of a man's soul. The symbolic characters were not meant to be people; rather they were physical representations of different virtues and sins. The characters and plot were constructed very simply so that the lesson of the play would be clear to the audience. Evil characters would have comic scenes to entertain the audience as well.

Shakespeare would certainly have seen morality plays in some form as he was growing up, and they would have an influence on his later work. The character of Vice in particular is evoked in some of Shakespeare's villains, especially those like Richard III, who scheme to bring about the downfall of others without remorse. Richard III was the earliest of Shakespeare's vice characters, who include Aaron the Moor in *Titus Andronicus* (1593), Iago in *Othello* (1604), Claudius in *Hamlet* (1601) and the Macbeths in *Macbeth* (1605). In creating these characters, however, Shakespeare moves far beyond the one-dimensional Vice character of the Medieval Mystery Plays, and even beyond the less sophisticated villain characters of his contemporaries. Shakespeare creates villains who are horrifically evil, but at the same time charmingly fascinating and even sympathetically human—the kind of characters that actors love to play and audiences love to watch.

The full title of Shakespeare's play is *The Tragedy of Richard III*. Traditionally, a tragedy is defined as the story of a noble hero brought to ruin by a tragic flaw. The protagonist of *Richard III*, however, is through-and-through a villain. Richard has no noble qualities to make him a hero by any standard, and his ruin is well-deserved. But despite his wickedness, Richard has continued to delight and enthrall audiences for four centuries. Even in *Richard III*, one of Shakespeare's earliest plays, he is able to create a full-bodied villain, thoroughly evil but also thoroughly human.

Writing a play with a villain as the main character was not Shakespeare's innovation. The device was common on the Elizabethan stage and had been made popular by one of Shakespeare's contemporaries, Christopher Marlowe, in his plays *The Jew of Malta* (1589), about a Jewish merchant bent on revenge, and *Tamburlaine* (1587), which follows the victories of a merciless conqueror. Shakespeare could hardly ignore a trend that was popular on the stage at the time. The history of villainous characters can also be traced back to

Richard is a great example of this kind of character. He begins the play by directly addressing the audience to declare his wicked intentions. "Plots I have laid," he says, sharing his secret schemes. In this way, Richard invites the audience to watch with morbid fascination as everything falls out as he has planned. Richard never lies to the audience, and therefore they feel as though they are "in on"

his secrets and plans. In addition, Richard is capable of showing many different faces. He is undoubtedly charming—in the first few scenes the audience watches him plot Clarence’s death, and then immediately change faces and assure his brother that he will release him from prison. Then the audience watches him woo and win Lady Anne, despite the fact that he has murdered her father and husband. He then instantly rejoices in the fact that he will dispose of her shortly. Richard directly addresses the audience, sharing his joys and anger. The audience may be horrified by Richard’s actions, but they delight in watching him manipulate those around him.

Shakespeare creates Richard with a degree of humanity. Because he cannot “prove a lover” and enjoy the time of peace due to his deformity, Richard decides that he will “prove a villain” and seek power for himself. In this way, Shakespeare gives Richard a motivation for his villainy. Unlike the typical Medieval Vice characters, Richard is a believable character, not a personification of evil. Richard may be the ultimate arch-villain. He is also a credible, three-dimensional human being who, because of his deformity, lashes out at the world.

In his later plays, Shakespeare continued to create charming and deeply human villains. These characters often address the audience directly, like Richard, sharing and delighting in their sins. Aaron the Moor, in *Titus Andronicus*, is another who plots the downfall of every major character in the play. While Aaron never states a motive for his villainy, besides the delight he gets from causing woe, he exhibits moments of humanity when he must protect his illegitimate infant from murder, showing a fierce family love. In *Othello*, Shakespeare creates what many consider his greatest villain, Iago. Iago cleverly orchestrates the destruction of those who trust him the most, Othello and Desdemona. Stating his motivation only as jealousy (he was passed over for a promotion and suspects that his wife has been unfaithful with Othello), Iago achieves his dastardly ambitions not through direct violence, but through deception, relishing his ability to manipulate those around him.

In some of his later plays, Shakespeare’s villains begin to show another human quality—remorse. In *Hamlet*, Claudius regrets his crime halfway through the play and prays for forgiveness for the murder of King Hamlet. In *Macbeth*, the main characters do not plot from the beginning

to overthrow the king and commit murder; Macbeth and Lady Macbeth merely become victims of fate and their own ambition. While Lady Macbeth seems to be the stronger vice character at the beginning of the play, urging Macbeth to murder the king when he hesitates to do so, even she cannot endure the burden of guilt and goes mad by the end of the play. Shakespeare’s later villains are less evil than misguided, showing a deeper complexity of character and tendency toward self-reflection that Shakespeare developed later in his writing.

As Shakespeare’s first villain, Richard III continues to delight and horrify audiences with his machinations. Actors love to play the role, as Richard is always changing, improvising and using his charm to get ahead. It is no wonder that *Richard III* is still one of Shakespeare’s most popular plays. **S**



James Newcomb as Richard and Suzanne Irving as Elizabeth in the Oregon Shakespeare Festival’s 2005 production of *Richard III*.

Photo by David Cooper.

Question & Answer: The Wars of the Roses



What were the Wars of the Roses?

The Wars of the Roses were a series of civil wars fought over control of the crown in England from 1455 to 1487 C.E. between the Houses of Lancaster and York, two branches of the royal Plantagenet family. Both families were descended from sons of King Edward III—John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster, and Edmund, Duke of York. The houses both claimed their right to the throne based on their direct descendency from these two sons; on both sides, the desire for power and disputes over the proper order of succession led to outbreaks of violence as rulers were usurped and killed. Historians named the conflicts the “Wars of the Roses” because, during the wars, the Yorkists used a white rose as their badge and the Lancastrians used a red rose. At the end of the war, the victorious Tudor family created an emblem of a single rose with both red and white petals, symbolizing the union of the two houses and a new time of peace. In *Richard III*, Shakespeare dramatizes the very end of the series of wars and the triumph of Henry Tudor.

In Medieval England, what were the rules of succession?

In England, kings were selected based on a political and religious concept called the Divine Right of Kings. Divine Right was based on the premise that the monarch was anointed, or chosen to rule, by God. There were strict rules of succession that ensured that only members of the king’s royal bloodline could become the next monarch, so that the country would continue to be ruled by God-given authority. When a king died, the crown passed to his eldest son. If his eldest son died and had no children, the crown passed to the king’s next oldest son, and so on through the sons. If the king had no children, the crown would go to his oldest brother. If the oldest brother died and had no children, the crown passed to the king’s next oldest brother, and so on. The order of succession stretched far beyond siblings and children to guarantee an undisputed heir to the throne, even if the king’s entire immediate family died before him. According to Divine Right, any attempt to remove a proper monarch from the throne was an act against God.

If there were such strict rules about succession of kings, why were there disputes over the crown?

In 15th-century England, the king held almost all the political power of the country. However, the political structure was not an absolute monarchy. In 1215 C.E., a document called the Magna Carta limited the powers of the king and led to the creation of Parliament, the English legislative body. The king was required to consult with Parliament before making important decisions—mostly raising taxes—which guaranteed nobles and landowners a say in lawmaking. In addition, the king required the support of these nobles to maintain his rule over the country. At this time, England operated under feudalism, a political/economic system in which land-owning nobles allowed farmers to live and work on their property in exchange for their pledge of loyalty in times of armed conflict. If the king made unpopular decisions or was viewed as incompetent by his wealthier subjects, the nobles were able to call up armies and threaten him with an uprising. During the Wars of the Roses, disputes surrounding the proper order of succession led to years of rebellion, as nobles raised armies and vied for power when dissatisfied with kingly rule. When a conqueror took the crown, he took steps to ensure that he was viewed as the proper king according to Divine Right—which often involved killing anyone else who had a claim to the throne.

How did the dispute over succession begin in the Wars of the Roses?

The conflict began with the death of King Edward III in 1377 CE. Edward III outlived his eldest son—also named Edward and called the Black Prince—who, according to Divine Right, should have succeeded Edward III. The Black Prince had a son, Richard, who was the next in line for the crown. However, Richard was only 10 years old; and Edward III had two other living sons, the Dukes of Lancaster and York, who both believed that they would make better candidates than their nephew, the young Richard. Upon King Edward III’s death, his privy council (his advisory group of wealthy, powerful lords) decided that the boy should be crowned King Richard II and his uncles should act as regents, or primary advisors, until the boy came of age. The Dukes of York and Lancaster accepted the decision, but used their power to maintain regent status well into Richard II’s adulthood. In his 30s, King Richard II finally began ruling England on his own, but he proved an ineffective ruler and failed to appease the frequently feuding English lords. Eventually even Richard II’s own privy council thought he was a bad king. The negative opinions of the king led the houses of Lancaster and York to consider asserting their right to the throne.

The Duke of Lancaster’s eldest son, Henry Bolingbroke, claimed that he had more of a right to be king than Richard II as a descendent of the eldest surviving son of Edward III. In 1399, with the support of friends and noblemen angry with Richard’s rule, Bolingbroke demanded that Richard II renounce the throne and crowned himself King Henry IV. Finally, he threw Richard II into jail, where the former king died with no heirs. England was now under Lancastrian rule, but with a monarch many felt had violated Divine Right. (Shakespeare dramatizes these events in the play *Richard II*.)

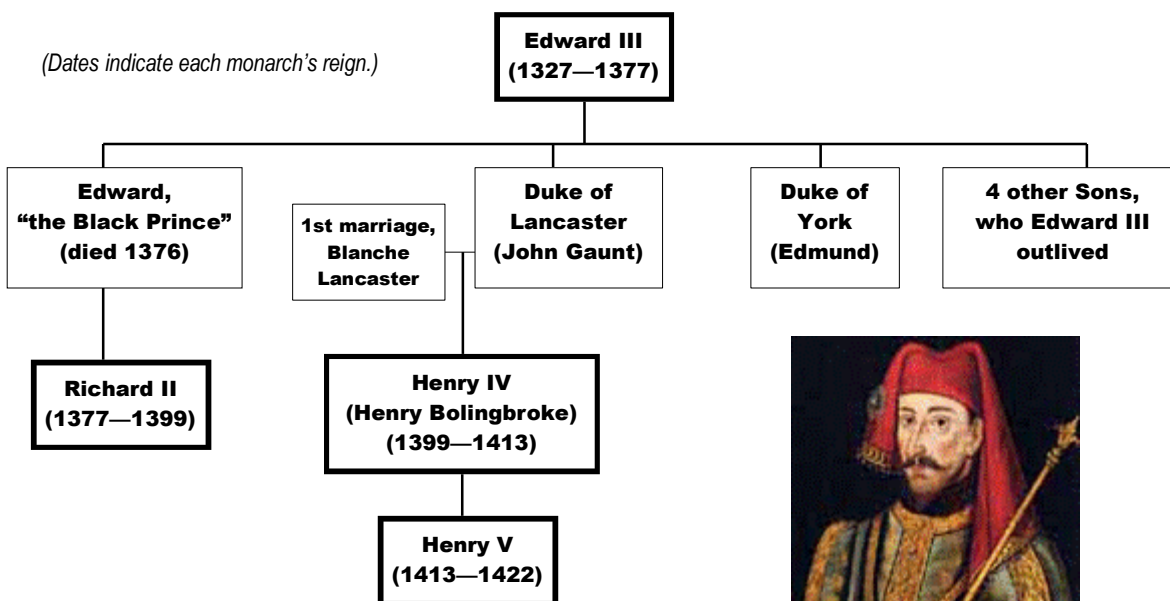
How long did the Lancaster family rule England?

Despite the controversy surrounding King Henry IV's rise to power, he ruled for 14 years and his son succeeded him without dispute. King Henry V was a competent and powerful leader, and his wars to reclaim the French lands once held by Edward III made him popular with his subjects. (Shakespeare dramatizes Henry V's adolescence, rise to power and reign in the plays *Henry IV, Parts 1 and 2* and *Henry V*.) Unfortunately, Henry V's untimely death in 1422 again raised questions about succession when his infant son was crowned King Henry VI. Older relatives acted as regents until Henry VI came of age. During his reign, Henry VI lost all French lands gained by his father and struggled with mental illness. He was made even more unpopular by a poor attempt to make peace with France by marrying the French king's daughter, Margaret of Anjou. Already viewed as a weak king, Henry VI suffered a mental breakdown in 1453, rendering him incapable of ruling the country. The powerful and popular Richard, Duke of York (grandson of the first Duke of York), was named Protector of the Realm and ruled in Henry's stead. Clearly a stronger ruler, the Duke of York also felt he had a valid claim to the throne because of his direct descent from Edward III's son. He began to assert his authority in minor clashes with powerful supporters of Henry VI. When Henry recovered in 1455 and took back control of the crown, Queen Margaret built up an alliance against Richard, Duke of York, to attempt to diminish his influence.



Henry V

The first battle of the Wars of the Roses broke out in 1455 when the thwarted Richard, Duke of York, raised a small army and marched on London, meeting Henry VI's forces at St. Albans. Richard battled bitterly with the king's army, commanded by Margaret. The battle was a Yorkist victory, regaining some influence for Richard, and the Yorkists and Lancastrians compromised to maintain the peace for four years. However, disputes over who would be heir to the throne continued—Henry VI had a young son, but many powerful nobles believed Richard, Duke of York, should be the successor. The dispute broke out into violence again in 1459, and Richard was killed in the Battle of Wakefield in 1460. Nevertheless, Richard's eldest son, Edward of York, prevailed at the Battle of Towton and was crowned King Edward IV in 1461. Edward banished Margaret and her son to France and imprisoned the former king Henry. (These events are dramatized in Shakespeare's *Henry VI, Parts 1, 2 and 3*.)



Henry IV

How long were the Yorks in power? Did the Lancaster family get the crown back?

No, the crown stayed with the Yorks until the wars' end. King Edward IV fought some rebellions against his claim on the English throne, were successful. Edward IV had controversially married the widowed commoner Elizabeth Woodville and, at her request, granted her large extended family titles and favors. The King's younger brother Richard, Duke of Gloucester, and many other nobles resented this. In 1483, King Edward IV died from natural causes, and Richard was appointed regent for Edward IV's 13-year-old son, against the wishes of the Queen's relatives. With this position of power, Richard punished the Woodvilles by delaying Prince Edward's coronation. Word broke out that Edward IV had married Elizabeth Woodville while betrothed to another woman, voiding their marriage and making their son illegitimate. Just crowned King Edward V, the English no longer considered the boy of royal blood. At the request of several nobles, including the Duke of Buckingham, Richard was crowned King Richard III.

Full of turmoil and unhappiness, Richard III's two-year reign concluded the York's hold on the throne. Henry Tudor, the Earl of Richmond, a noble distantly descended from the House of Lancaster, raised a rebellion and took the crown in 1485 after defeating Richard III at the Battle of Bosworth Field. Richmond solidified his claim to the throne by marrying young Elizabeth, King Edward IV's daughter, and uniting the Houses of York and Lancaster. (These events are depicted in *Richard III*.)



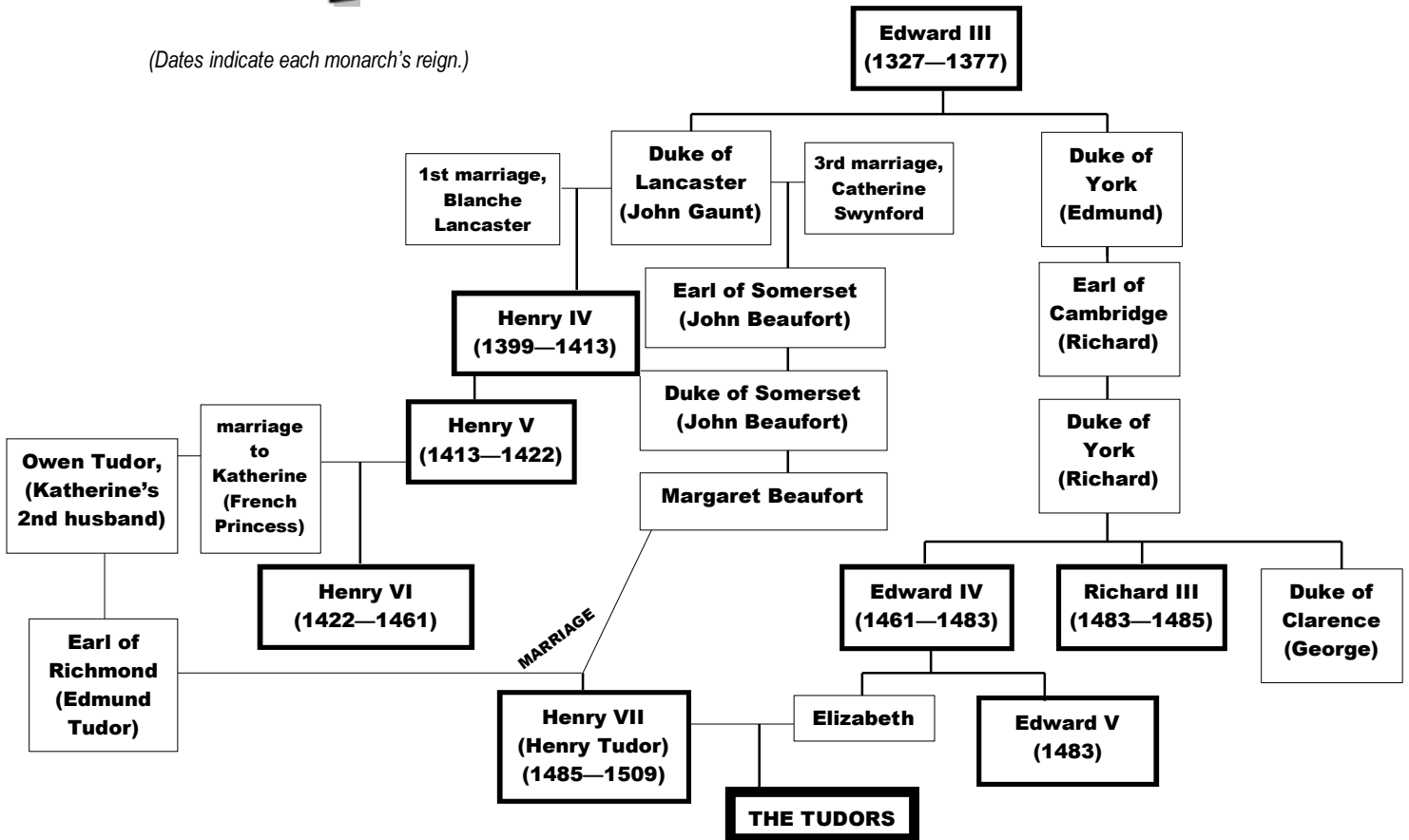
Henry VII
Henry VII

So who won the war?

The Tudor family ended up holding the crown for five generations. Henry Tudor, Earl of Richmond, was crowned King Henry VII and ruled from 1485-1509. His successors were Henry VIII (r.1509-1547), Edward VI (r.1547-1553), Mary I (r.1553-1558) and Elizabeth I (r.1558-1603), who ruled during Shakespeare's time.



(Dates indicate each monarch's reign.)



Fate, Deformity...

and the Supernatural

In Shakespeare's time, many people believed that fate was determined not by a person's actions and decisions, but by a number of outside forces, both natural and supernatural. The concept of free will was not widely accepted when Shakespeare wrote his plays; most Elizabethans believed in predestination, the idea that God has pre-planned every event that will happen for all time. Shakespeare's characters often encounter a fate that is a result of the influence of external forces—the alignment of the planets, social status or even personal appearance. An Elizabethan audience would have understood that Richard's physical appearance and the many instances of supernatural intervention in the play contributed to his demise. There was a delicate balance between Christian beliefs and pagan superstitions in the 16th century. While the agents of Richard's fate include curses and ghosts, which modern audiences might associate with witchcraft and black magic, Elizabethans may have seen these as instruments of heaven or a higher power, revenging wrongs committed by the House of York during the Wars of the Roses.

In 16th century public opinion, there was no separation between body and soul; any defect in one affected the other. A proverb at the time referenced hair color as an indicator of one's personality: "Red wise, brown trusty, pale envious, black lusty." A physical deformity informed Elizabethans of one's entire personality; deformity on the outside signified decay on the inside. An imperfection from birth, such as a hunchback, indicated a permanent and major defect of the soul. Robert Cecil, Earl of Salisbury and a powerful politician during Queen Elizabeth's reign, was born a hunchback. His "deformity" prompted public criticism and ridicule. Controversy surrounding his possible involvement in the Gunpowder Plot of 1605 led some of Cecil's enemies to claim that his corruption was a result of his deformity. Elizabethans would likely have thought the same of Shakespeare's Richard III as they did of Robert Cecil.

In the Elizabethan view, Richard's deformity would have explained not only his moral corruption but also his ambitiousness and desire for revenge. In his essay *Of Deformity*, Francis Bacon writes: "Deformed persons are commonly even with nature; for as nature hath done ill by them, so do they by nature; being for the most part (as the Scripture saith) void of natural affection; and so they have their revenge of nature." As Richard says himself in his opening speech, he is "determined to prove a villain" because his physical appearance does not match the celebratory, peaceful time of Edward's victory. The motivation for his evil deeds throughout the play may have been obvious to Shakespeare's audience: he wanted to exact revenge for his physical deformity. Richard's deformity might also have been viewed as an act of divine retribution for wrongs perpetrated by Richard's ancestors.

The historical King Richard III was not actually misshapen to the extent that actors and literature have portrayed him. There is great controversy around the nature of his "deformity"—some say he was born prematurely, resulting in a sickly childhood and persistent weakness, while others claim he spent two years in his mother's womb and was born with hair and teeth. As for his hunchback, the closest evidence found are two conflicting accounts: one that his left shoulder was

higher than his right, and another stating exactly the opposite. Regardless, it is generally held that the deformity was probably not noticeable—most definitely not the huge hump and withered arm he is depicted with now. The rumors that spread of a much bigger deformity in the king began long before Shakespeare's portrait. Shortly after Richard's death, the Tudors began describing him as a monster. Their motive was to pin on Richard the deaths of the princes in the Tower, and they



Political cartoon depicting Edmund Kean, dressed as Richard III, holding the Drury Lane Theatre on his shoulders with the caption, *The Theatrical Atlas*. Published in London, 1814. British Cartoon Collection (Library of Congress.)

believed that an image of Richard as a horrifying, misshapen hunchback would make the crime seem much more plausible. Eventually the rumors were accepted as truth, and Richard gained the physical appearance and reputation that is reflected in Shakespeare's play.

Another significant aspect of Shakespeare's *Richard III* is the supernatural, appearing in the forms of prophecies, dreams and ghosts. Elizabethans believed strongly in what we now term "paranormal" phenomena; astrology, omens and spells were a part of daily life. People often consulted the alignment of the stars and planets before making important decisions. Villagers who practiced "witchcraft" or "wizardry"—wise women and men who can be thought of as Elizabethan holistic healers—were called upon to cure physical ailments with potions and tricks. Their use of "magic" was revered and feared; as often as witches were consulted, they also were blamed when something went wrong in villages. Witch-hunts were common in the 16th Century, and many innocent people were executed for witchcraft in Shakespeare's time.

The character of Margaret in *Richard III* has some distinctive witch-like qualities. At the end of the play, the curses she pronounced in act 1, scene 3 are fulfilled. She is a self-proclaimed prophetess—eccentric, lonely and old. All of these qualities were associated with witches of the 16th century. Margaret is, however, lacking an important component of witchhood: alliance with the devil. She rather invokes God's power in her curses: "I'll not believe but they ascend the sky / And there awake God's gentle-sleeping peace" (I.iii.287-88). Margaret's curses are another instrument of divine retribution: she is seeking revenge for her own injuries, and through her a much larger justice is exacted. Elizabethans paid

much attention to omens and signs, including those in dreams. Hastings disregards Stanley's dream of a murderous boar (representing Richard) and dies as a result. The only characters that act as a result of supernatural warnings are Stanley and his nephew Richmond—two of the characters alive at the play's end. Stanley is not the only character in *Richard III* who predicts the future through dreams; Clarence and Richard both have dreams that foreshadow their deaths. Clarence's nightmare is full of warnings of Richard's intent to murder him and hints at his own drowning. Although an Elizabethan audience would have immediately recognized the intervention of some supernatural power in his dream, Clarence is ignorant of its ramifications. Richard's dream likewise forebodes his end. As a string of wronged ghosts curse Richard and encourage Richmond in Richard's sleep the night before the battle, Shakespeare's audience could easily have predicted the outcome of the conflict. Elizabethan ghosts were omnipotent—seeing far into the future—and they always appeared with a distinct purpose, usually involving righting a wrong done to them in life. Although these ghosts do not bring about Richard's death and Richmond's triumph, they foretell it, and, in discouraging and scaring Richard (and encouraging Richmond), help their cause. Like Margaret's curses, these spirits have a divine, not demonic, quality; the ghost of Buckingham wishes that "God and good angels fight on Richmond's side."


By the end of the play, with an heir of the house of Lancaster on the throne, divine retribution would have been carried out in the eyes of the Elizabethans. Order is restored, and all have met their predetermined fate. 



Photo by Joan Marcus.

Lynnda Ferguson as Lady Anne and Stacey Keach as Richard III in the Shakespeare Theatre Company's 1990-91 production of *Richard III*.