

> Was King Richard III Really Such a Bad Guy?

> O rei Ricardo III era realmente um cara tão mau?

por Alan Peter Fear

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Abstract

The historical figure of King Richard III of England has suffered defamation at the hands of Tudor propagandists and most pointedly from the quill of England's most famous Bard. Consequently, popular memory has us believe that the king was indeed a sociopathic megalomaniac who murdered his own nephews in order to seize power. This paper examines and questions the historiography of Richard III, presents alternative options that absolve the King's ill repute, and proposes that Richard III should be remembered as a heroic warrior King rather than a psychopathic tyrant of the Tudors' and Shakespeare's history.

Keywords: History. Historiography. Richard III. Shakespeare.

Resumo

A figura histórica do rei Richard III da Inglaterra sofreu difamação pelas mãos dos propagandistas Tudor e, principalmente, pela pena do bardo mais famoso da Inglaterra. Consequentemente, a memória popular nos leva a acreditar que o rei era, de fato, um megalomaniaco sociopata que assassinou seus próprios sobrinhos para tomar o poder. Este artigo examina e questiona a historiografia de Richard III, apresenta opções alternativas que absolvem a má reputação do rei, e propõe que Richard III seja lembrado como um rei guerreiro heroico e não como um tirano psicopata da história dos Tudor e de Shakespeare.

Palavras-chave: História. Historiografia. Richard III. Shakespeare.

> Artigo recebido em 15.08.2023 e aceito em 21.01.2024.

1 Shakespeare and History

But I, that am not shaped for sportive tricks,
Nor made to court an amorous looking-glass;
I, that am rudely stamp'd, and want love's majesty
To strut before a wanton ambling nymph;
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;
Why, I, in this weak piping time of peace,
Have no delight to pass away the time,
Unless to spy my shadow in the sun
And descant on mine own deformity:
And therefore, since I cannot prove a lover,
To entertain these fair well-spoken days,
I am determin'd to prove a villain
And hate the idle pleasures of these days.
Plots have I laid, inductions dangerous,
By drunken prophecies, libels and dreams,
To set my brother Clarence and the king
In deadly hate the one against the other:
And if King Edward be as true and just
As I am subtle, false and treacherous,
This day should Clarence closely be mew'd up,
About a prophecy, which says that 'G'
Of Edward's heirs the murderer shall be.
Dive, thoughts, down to my soul: here
Clarence comes.
(SHAKESPEARE, *Richard III*, Scene I Act I)

Many people will recognise this as part of the opening speech by the Duke of Gloucester, who would become King Richard III, from Shakespeare's eponymous play, in which the duke openly declares himself a tyrant, a deformed monster with intentions to plot against his brothers, Edward and Clarence, turning one against the other, and to murder Edward's children, the heirs to the throne. The news of the discovery of a skeleton – which, through DNA technology proved to be the remains of King Richard III of England – under a car park in the city of Leicester, in the north of England, in 2012, has generated much media attention and new speculation as to the true nature of the last Plantagenet king of England¹. Through Shakespeare's work, we remember Richard III as the hunch-backed evil king who kills his own nephews and offers his kingdom for a horse in the final act. History, with a lot of help from the Bard of Stratford, has not treated Richard well, but how can we be sure that the last Plantagenet king was really the

¹ A full documentary of the discovery of the remains of Richard III can be seen online at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8HxeVQhlBNg>.

evil monster we have been led to believe in, who ruled England for two short years in the second half of the 15th century?

History as an academic subject is a far more complex matter than merely the picking out of facts from the past and reporting chronological events involving kings, queens and famous generals. Historian Edward Hallet Carr, in his book *What is History?* points out that one of the main issues is the question of what exactly constitutes history, and the difficulties the historian has in sorting through infinite masses of information, usually in the form of ancient manuscripts or more recent documents, in order to choose what will become history.² Historiography, then, is the manner in which the historian analyses, interprets and reproduces the documented information. These interpretations can vary greatly over time and amongst geo-political arenas. Even the recollection of events within living memory is not without its problems. Eyewitness accounts, due to stress and manipulative factors, are by nature unreliable. One of the most polemic instances that illustrates this is that of the events of January 30th, 1972, in which British soldiers fired on a peaceful civil rights march through Londonderry in Northern Ireland and killed 13 people, the day became popularly known as Bloody Sunday. The eyewitness accounts vary as to who began the shooting, the peaceful marchers or the soldiers. An initial investigation cleared the soldiers of any blame, this caused such an outcry that a further, more independent inquiry was instigated, which after many years, found the soldiers guilty of firing on innocent civilians. The “history” that prevailed was of the violent actions of the British Army, had the first inquiry been imposed or accepted the history books would have told a different story.

Accordingly, the history that we read today is a complex result of analysis and interpretation of the historian from selections of documents or evidence that does not have any guarantee of authenticity. In this sense, we are ‘allowed’ to see only what the chroniclers have selected for us to see, and furthermore, what historians consider important enough to report; Carr observes,

Our picture has been pre-selected and pre-determined for us, not so much by accident as by people who were consciously or unconsciously imbued with a particular view and thought the facts which supported that view worth preserving.³

In other words, the history that we read today is passed on to us second hand (or third or fourth in some cases), through the selection of a contemporary

² Edward H. Carr, *What is History?*, 2001.

³ *Idem*, p. 12.

chronicler, or official documenter, and the analysis and interpretation of an historian. The chronicler, be he a medieval monk or Renaissance diarist was not insusceptible from manipulative forces of the powers of the age, those being mainly the church or the monarchy. As historian Eric Hobsbawm points out,

History is the raw material for nationalist or ethnic or fundamentalist ideologies, as poppies are the raw material for heroin addiction. The past is an essential element perhaps *the* essential element, in these ideologies. If there is no suitable past, it can always be invented.⁴

The Plantagenet dynasty was supplanted by the Tudors following a series of battles fought over 30 years and later denominated the Wars of the Roses, culminating in the Battle of Bosworth in 1485 in which Richard III was killed and Henry Tudor was crowned Henry VII of England. The Tudors had to consolidate their power and control over an England which was still in shock and unsure of where loyalties should lie. The Tudor chroniclers began to write their own version of events, whether coerced or simply innocently writing about what they heard around court, post-War of the Roses history had a distinct Tudor rose smell about it, proving the old adage that history is indeed written by the victors. One of the first things Henry VII did to establish his power was to literally alter history itself by dating the beginning of his reign to the day before the Battle of Bosworth, thus declaring as traitors the nobles who fought on the side of Richard.⁵

In an author's note explaining her research for her novel *The Sunne in Splendour*, a historical novel following the life of Richard III, novelist Sharon Kay Penman writes, "the normal medieval proclivity for moralizing and partisanship was further complicated by deliberate distortion to serve Tudor political needs"⁶ and furthermore, "I gave greatest weight to those chronicles written during Richard's lifetime or immediately thereafter, relying as little as possible upon purely Tudor sources, for obvious reasons"⁷. In his three-volume series *A History of Britain*, historian Simon Schama agrees with the novelist,

The historians who began to busy their quills with apologies for Henry Tudor and his dynasty were at pains to represent the Wars of the Roses as one long nightmare, from which only the Tudors could release a grateful nation, a country torn from top to bottom, a pitiless field of carnage in which, as in Shakespeare's histories, fathers were capable of killing their own children and vice versa.⁸

⁴ Eric Hobsbawm, *On History*, 1997, p. 5.

⁵ G.J. Meyer, *The Tudors*, 2011.

⁶ Sharon Penman, *The Sunne in Splendour*, 2013, p. 669.

⁷ *Idem*.

⁸ Simon Schama, *A History of Britain: Vol. 1, At the Edge of the World*, 2000, p. 268.

By the third-generation Tudor monarch, Elizabeth I, theatre was a popular diversion for a great part of the nation and what better way to strengthen the hegemony than commission a popular playwright to concoct a sensational story of an evil, child-murdering deformed hunch-back king? And that playwright already had a rich source of materials on which to base his character.

2 Background: The Wars of the Roses

As an example of my point of one of the problems with history mentioned above, I am compelled to resort here to “picking out facts from the past and reporting chronological events involving kings, queens and famous generals” – to quote myself – in order to give a background into the world in which Richard grew up and played a major part. As I am not an historian, I have neither the experience nor resources to study and analyse contemporary documents and thus, my sources are not original manuscripts, but rather up to date publications of historians who have written their own interpretations and versions from yet other sources, I am merely *précising* and paraphrasing what has already been detailed many times over many years. In this sense, I am presenting here another version of well-known and recorded historical events.

Richard was born in the late middle age period in England at a troubled time when a conflict was brewing which would break out into a series of bloody battles countrywide over a period of more than thirty years. This struggle, which became known as the Wars of the Roses, has its origins in the discontent amongst wealthy landowners and noblemen in a period following the Hundred Years War with France. A wide-ranging restlessness was stirring over high taxes, brought about by the war and petty disputes between noble families who were able to raise their own private armies from the hundreds of unemployed soldiers returning from France; the prevailing medieval malady, plague, returned with its usual devastating effects in the 1460s and 70s and added to the general misery. On top of this countrywide desolation, the young king, Henry VI, already weak and ineffectual, suffered from bouts of mental illness which rendered him incapable of governing. The families involved in this conflict divided into two opposing factions, the House of York and the House of Lancaster, both having members who believed had the strongest claim to the throne through the line of descent from Edward III who had enjoyed a long and powerful reign between 1327 and 1377. When York’s claimant, Richard, Duke of York (the father of the Richard

with whom we are concerned), led an open rebellion against Henry VI in 1455, the king once again suffered a mental breakdown, and Richard became Lord Protector of the land. However, Henry made a full recovery and the Duke's protectorate was revoked by parliament. The conflict continued for several more years with defeats and victories on both sides. Richard was killed in battle in 1460 and his eldest son Edward inherited the title of Duke of York. When Edward defeated the Lancastrians in 1461, he marched on to London and was crowned as King Edward IV. Henry was still at large but was finally captured and imprisoned in the Tower of London in 1466. It did not end there. Edward's brother Clarence and Edward's former advisor and friend, the Earl of Warwick, in an act of treason, rebelled against the new king, thus aiding the House of Lancaster, the rebellion was successful, and Henry was restored to the throne in 1471. Edward fled to France accompanied by his youngest brother Richard. Still there was no end. Henry enjoyed his second round as king for a period of less than six months; Edward managed to raise an army in France, once again invaded and once again defeated Henry. Henry's son, the prince and heir, also named Edward, was killed in one of the final battles and Henry died in captivity in May, more than likely ordered killed by his captors. Edward was king again, the old king was dead, and everybody should have lived happily ever after. However, that was not the case.

3 Richard Duke of Gloucester

Richard was the youngest of the four sons of Richard Duke of York. He was born in 1452 and grew up in the climate of the Wars of the Roses. At the Battle of Wakefield in 1460, his father was killed and an older brother, Edmund, was captured and almost immediately executed at just 17 years of age. At this time Richard was only 8 years old, his brother Edward, who by then had become king, granted him the title of Duke of Gloucester and he was placed in the household of the Earl of Warwick in the north of England to be educated as a nobleman, a common practice amongst the aristocracy of the Middle Ages. When Warwick and Clarence rebelled, Richard accompanied Edward to France. At 18 years of age, on his return from France, Richard commanded part of the Yorkist army in two battles and was successful in defeating the Lancastrians. In 1472 he married Anne Neville, the Earl of Warwick's daughter and the widow of the young prince Edward, both of whom had been killed in battles in which Richard had fought on the opposing side. In 1476 their child, whom they also called Edward, was born.

Following Richard's success in battle, the king granted his younger brother more responsibility and a command over the north of England, to control and monitor further Lancastrian unrest and to defend the English – Scottish border from Scottish incursions.

Contemporary accounts describe Richard as being small in stature but make no mention of any deformity, such as created by Shakespeare.⁹ However, later Tudor descriptions mention that Richard had one shoulder higher than the other, although there are conflicting accounts as to which shoulder, proving that any deformity was not so pronounced as to make it strikingly memorable. Interestingly enough, when his remains were found in 2012 it was discovered that the spinal column of the skeleton showed a distinct curve, or scoliosis, which would possibly have made one shoulder appear higher than the other.

4 A Sudden Change of Fortunes

After having been restored to the throne, Richard's elder brother enjoyed a relatively peaceful reign for a further 12 years; the Lancastrians had been defeated, Henry and his heir were dead and the only other possible contender for the throne, Henry Tudor, had been weakened and was in exile in Brittany.

In early 1483 Edward IV fell ill and died on the 9th of April. Edward had two sons, the eldest, also named Edward, at twelve years old was now the, as yet, uncrowned King Edward V of England. Before he died Edward IV was able to recognise that his son was far too young to completely fulfil his duties as king and so named his brother, Richard Duke of Gloucester, as Lord Protector to the boy king. What happened after the death of Edward IV was to baffle historians for the centuries that followed until this day. Many interpretations have been offered as to the Duke of Gloucester's motives for his actions. The Tudors and Shakespeare have given us their versions: the evil, scheming Duke, plotting to kill everyone who hinders his ambition to become king. Meanwhile, at the beginning of the 20th century, led by an organization founded as *The Fellowship of the White Boar* (Richard III's emblem) and now known as The Richard III Society¹⁰ - and since the discovery of the king's remains – efforts have been made to understand better

⁹ Carolyn Hammond, *Richard III: His Appearance*, on *The Richard III Society*. Webpage at: <http://www.richardiii.net/>. Accessed 20 June 2023.

¹⁰ Full details of The Richard III Society can be found online at: www.richardiii.net/.

the events of the time and to offer an alternative point of view that places Richard in a kinder light.

So What happened then after the king died? Upon receiving news of his brother's death, Richard moved south to intercept the young king and his escort who were on their way to London for the coronation. Richard placed the king's escort under arrest on suspicion of a conspiracy to assassinate him, Richard, and to control the young king for the benefit of the Lancastrians. Richard himself escorted Edward to the Tower of London, to prepare for his coronation, where he was later joined by his nine-year-old brother (confusingly also named Richard) in June. Lord William Hastings, a staunch ally and personal friend of Richard's brother the late king, had been warned that he was in danger because of his alliance with king Edward IV and Richard, and he had advised Richard to detain the prince's escort. However, later in the Tower of London at a council meeting to discuss the coronation and the future of the king, Richard suddenly accused Hastings of treason and had him taken outside and executed immediately without trial on June 13th, 1483.

On the 22nd of June, Richard declared that his brother's marriage had been invalid because of a pre-contract marriage with another woman; this meant that the young Edward could not become king because of illegitimacy. Four days later Richard was acclaimed as King Richard III of England. The two young boys in the Tower were never seen again.

5 The Tudors vs Richard III

It is difficult to ascertain the true reasons for Richard's actions and from this sequence of events it is easy to believe the accusations of infanticide and to accept that Shakespeare was, after all, accurate in his portrayal. Nonetheless, as we have seen, history is not so black and white and is open to as many interpretations as there are versions.

First of all, let's look at Richard's physical image that was created by the Tudors, having one shoulder higher than the other, and expanded upon by Shakespeare, to make us believe in a crooked, deformed, evil man. The contemporary accounts of Richard give no indication that he was deformed in any way. However, as the king suffered from scoliosis there may have been some slight asymmetry to his frame making one shoulder higher than the other,

perhaps the chroniclers of the time were too polite or scared to mention this or it was unnoticeable. The Tudor chroniclers were not so polite; Henry VIII's councillor Sir Thomas More described Richard as having a crooked back and the left shoulder 'much higher' than the right.¹¹ The Italian historian and diplomat in England, Polydore Vergil mentions Richard as having a deformed body and a deceitful countenance.¹² By the time we get to Shakespeare Richard is,

... not shap'd for sportive tricks and want love's majesty To strut before a wanton ambling nymph; I, that am curtail'd of this fair proportion, Cheated of feature by dissembling nature, Deform'd, 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 ¹³.

He is hunchbacked, bent over with the deformity, and has a withered arm. In theatre, some portrayals of the king even have him on crutches; a superficial image search on internet reveals the extent of the deformities that Richard III has suffered at the hands of actors. Of course, a physical deformity does not automatically mean malicious character, but it was a popular medieval belief that this was so, and Shakespeare exploited this to the full. In literature Victor Hugo's Quasimodo is another example of this medieval conviction. Neither were other art forms immune to the Tudor's slight bending of the truth, X-ray technology has revealed that a portrait of Richard III was altered in the time of Henry VIII, to show Richard with uneven shoulders and sterner, nastier looking face.¹⁴ It was convenient for the Tudors that Richard's emblem was a wild boar, an ugly hunch-backed creature that would physically symbolise the man himself.

Was Richard really physically deformed? Aside from the lack of any mention of deformity from contemporary accounts, we know that Richard was a skilled battle commander and horseman. He was able to fight from the saddle in a melee in the thick of battle, this would mean using one arm to hack and thrust with a sword and the other to control his horse; this would indicate that he was unhampered by any physical deformity. The scoliosis he suffered may have given him some pain or discomfort and it is possible that his shoulders were uneven, however, to be able to skilfully control a horse and use a weapon in the confusion of battle it is doubtful that Richard would have been as physically deformed as

¹¹ Carolyn Hammond, *Richard III: His Appearance*, on *The Richard III Society*. Webpage at: <http://www.richardiii.net/>. Accessed 20 June 2023.

¹² *Idem*.

¹³ William Shakespeare, *Richard III*, 2001, p. 28.

¹⁴ Alastair Smart, *Richard III Visions of a Villain?* On *The Telegraph* online at: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/art-features/9809671/Richard-III-Visions-of-a-villain.html>. Accessed 21 June 2023.

the Tudor chroniclers described, and impossible that he would have been as Shakespeare portrayed.

The Tudors and Shakespeare are also responsible for the accusations of several crimes perpetrated by Richard; “[...] for I did kill King Henry” and “[...] ’twas I that stabb’d young Edward”,¹⁵ these are Shakespeare’s words in the mouth of Richard declaring his evil deeds to his future wife the Lady Anne Neville, widow of the Earl of Warwick.

Henry VI’s son, the 17-year-old Prince Edward, was fighting at the Battle of Tewkesbury in May 1471; he was captured after the Yorkist victory and immediately executed alongside the other Lancastrian leaders. Polydore Vergil and another contemporary historian, Raphael Holinshed, named Richard as the main culprit in striking the first blow to Edward with a dagger.¹⁶ Yet again, sources from the time of the battle make no mention of Richard as the murderer of the young prince; they state only that the prince was taken and slain on the field.¹⁷ Historical records show that Richard, himself only 18 years old at the time, was present at the battle; the fact that no contemporary account mentions him as the hand that killed the prince could of course mean a cover up – just as the Tudor reports could mean a frame up – and, if he did strike the fatal blow, it would more than likely have been on the orders of his brother the king. Though any killing is of course inexcusable and unjustifiable, Richard’s crime here, if he indeed was the guilty party, was carrying out orders in a battle and not the cold-blooded murder that the Tudors would have us believe.

At the time of the battle, Henry was being held captive in the Tower of London, he died on the night of 21st May, supposedly from a seizure upon hearing of his son’s death. It is more likely that he was executed, but once again, improbable that Richard was directly responsible for his death. After his victory at the Battle of Tewkesbury, Edward IV had to consolidate his hold on the throne and eliminate any possible opposition, if Henry were kept alive in the Tower, he would be a rallying point for any further Lancastrian rebellion. In all likelihood it was Edward who ordered the execution of Henry, and this probably carried out by the Tower guards or paid mercenaries.¹⁸ It is doubtful that, as the Tudors and Shakespeare have suggested, Richard, at the age of 18, was already planning and

¹⁵ William Shakespeare, *Richard III*, 2001, p. 48.

¹⁶ Wendy Moorhen, *A Brief Biography and Introduction to Richard's Reputation*, on *The Richard III Society*. Webpage at: <http://www.richardiii.net/>. Accessed 21 June 2023.

¹⁷ Michael Hicks, *The Wars of the Roses 1455-1487*, 2003, p. 103.

¹⁸ *Idem*.

conspiring to gain the crown by assassinating anyone who would seek to ruin his plan.

Edward's younger brother George, the Duke of Clarence, is Shakespeare's Richard's next victim. Again, the first hint of Richard's supposed involvement in the death of Clarence comes from Tudor chronicler Thomas More who admitted it was only a rumour¹⁹, but the rumour began to take hold. Using the Tudor historians as his main source, Shakespeare has Richard plant the idea in his brother Edward's mind that Clarence was plotting against him, consequently, Edward arrests Clarence and imprisons him in the Tower, where later Richard, and not Edward, orders his death at the hands of two ruffians who do the deed by stabbing him and drowning him in a barrel of wine. In reality, or at least in historical records, Clarence and Edward had been at odds in the past; Clarence sided with Warwick in an open rebellion against the king in 1471, for which the king forgave his younger brother. Even so, Clarence continued to antagonise his brother, the king, and withdrew from the court, refusing to eat with Edward, an almost open accusation of an attempt at poisoning. From then it was Elizabeth Woodville, the king's wife, who reported Clarence's actions to the king.²⁰ It was in Elizabeth's interests that no one should stand in the way of her son the heir, for he would be king when Edward IV died. From her point of view, the king's younger brothers, George, Duke of Clarence and Richard, Duke of Gloucester, were the biggest threats. It was not necessary for Elizabeth to start malicious rumours about Clarence though, it appears he was already digging his own grave. Amongst other accusations Clarence was charged with usurping the king's authority through several acts: arresting a servant and having her executed; publicly declaring that one of his own household was unjustly executed by the king; and, a treasonable act in itself, proclaiming that the king was illegitimate and therefore could not be the ruling monarch.²¹ In February 1478 Clarence was found guilty of treason and executed privately within the confines of the Tower of London, shortly after this rumours began that he was drowned in a barrel of wine.

Elizabeth Woodville was a major player in this real-life Game of Thrones. Her first husband was Lancastrian supporter Sir John Grey who was killed fighting against Edward IV in 1461. When she was denied her inheritance by Grey's family she appealed to the king. Edward was attracted to her beauty, and

¹⁹ Wendy Moorhen, *A Brief Biography and Introduction to Richard's Reputation*, on *The Richard III Society*. Webpage at: <http://www.richardiii.net/>. Accessed 21 June 2023.

²⁰ John Wagner, *The Encyclopedia of the Wars of the Roses*, 2001, p. 254.

²¹ *Idem*.

they married in secret in 1464.²² Not only did this match bring no political or economic benefits for the crown – she had lost all her estates after all – but it also brought a large family (5 brothers, 7 sisters and two children from her marriage to Grey) onto whom the king felt obliged to endow estates and titles. This effectively is a strong and influential family, the Woodvilles, barging in on the Plantagenets which, understandably, antagonised the king's close counsellors and family, the Earl of Warwick, George Duke of Clarence and Richard. The upshot of this, as we have seen, was that Warwick, with the aid of Clarence, rebelled and forced Edward into exile; Richard remained faithful to the king and accompanied him to France.

When Edward IV died, Elizabeth ordered her brother the Earl Rivers and her son from her first marriage, Richard Grey, to escort the young Edward, who was at that time in the west of England, to the Tower of London to prepare for the coronation. Elizabeth's failure to advise Richard of his brother's death and her appointing her brother and son as Edward's escort and protector – even though Edward IV had named Richard as Lord Protector – aroused suspicion that the Woodville family were moving in to control the young king and to take power. Warned of this danger by Lord Hastings, Richard rushed to intercept the royal party as they headed towards London, taking with him a larger armed force, also at the advice of Hastings. When Richard caught up with the party, he immediately arrested Rivers and Grey and later had them executed. Richard himself then escorted the uncrowned boy-king to the Tower. The Tower – actually a fortress compound consisting of several towers, walls, courtyards, apartments and rooms – as well as being a prison, was used to accommodate royalty and to prepare for such events as a coronation; in other words, being in the Tower did not necessarily mean being imprisoned.

In Shakespeare's *Richard III*, Richard and Elizabeth argue bitterly while Edward lies dying, Richard accuses her of influencing the king to have Clarence imprisoned – which may well have been the case – and of her and her followers disturbing Edward with 'lewd complaints' to hasten to him to his death. In the same scene Richard loudly protests that he is being accused of evil deeds by all in the court. In this way his character is reinforced as the scheming tyrant, as, in the play, he did carry out those deeds and by his actions we see how he is able to manipulate the members of the court.

²² *Idem*.

Another rumour started by Tudor propagandists and taken up by Shakespeare was that soon after marrying Anne Neville, Richard tired of her and poisoned her so that he could then marry his niece Elizabeth of York, daughter of Edward IV. Contemporary chronicles mention that doctors had advised Richard to avoid his wife's bed suggesting that she was suffering from a wasting disease such as tuberculosis and there is no suggestion of belief of poisoning or any mention of the rumour.²³

The most damning of the accusations are the sudden execution of Hastings and of course the disappearance of the two young boys in the Tower, murdered, in Shakespeare, at the orders of Richard. We will never know what really happened to the two young boys or if Richard were indeed responsible for their deaths, popular belief is that he was, and all indications point to that, even so, there is no concrete evidence that can condemn Richard once and for all. Alternative explanations have been put forward, and suspects named. Henry Stafford, Duke of Buckingham comes second on the list of suspects after Richard. Buckingham, being descended from Edward III also had a strong claim to the throne and would need to eliminate any possible threat, the boys in the Tower and Richard being the greatest obstacles in his way.²⁴ Stafford rose in rebellion against Richard in October 1483; the rebellion was crushed and Stafford was executed. As Stafford was a supporter of Henry Tudor when he rebelled, any evidence of his involvement in the killing of the boys would have been suppressed by the Tudor propagandists. Henry Tudor himself is also a suspect, once having gained the throne as Henry VII the boys, as the remaining Plantagenet heirs, would be a major obstacle for the Tudor dynasty, it would be easy to get rid of the boys and point the finger at Richard.

After Richard had Edward V escorted to the Tower, everything seemed fine, a date was set for the coronation and the monarch's council issued documents in the king's name. Richard was acting as a perfect Lord Protector. All this was to change on the 10th of June when Richard wrote to his allies in the northern city of York, where he had been governing before the death of Edward IV, asking for reinforcements against the Queen's family and supporters.²⁵ The reason why he asked for a backup force indicates that in all probability he caught wind of an imminent *coup d'état* and he was taking measures to protect himself

²³ *Idem.*

²⁴ *Idem.*

²⁵ Helen Maurer, *The Controversies: The Princes in the Tower*, on *The Richard III Society*. Webpage at: <http://www.richardiii.net/>. Accessed 25 June 2023.

from the Woodvilles and possibly to protect the young king from their influence. If the Woodvilles were plotting, then Richard's very life was in danger. From now on things became tense and confusing, especially when, at the fateful council meeting on the 13th of June, Richard ordered Hastings' immediate execution.

We can only speculate as to the motives for Richard's abrupt action. Hastings was the loyal ally and friend to Edward IV, and his loyalty carried over to the young king. Hastings would strongly support the coronation of Edward IV by any means, his execution indicates that Richard was eliminating that support. It is also possible that Richard had heard inside information that Hastings had switched allegiances to the Woodvilles and would support their *coup* in order to protect the young Edward.²⁶ The immediate conclusion would be that Richard had suddenly become cruelly ambitious and wanted the crown for himself but were there more complex issues to justify his actions rather than ruthless greed?

Richard's apologia was the illegitimacy of Edward IV's sons, thus excluding them from succession. Richard had heard that Edward's marriage to Elizabeth was invalid because he was already in a "pre-contract" marriage with Lady Eleanor Talbot, daughter of the Earl of Shrewsbury, and that he had married Elizabeth in secret without posting banns. A document, *Titulus Regis* – Royal Title – drawn up and incorporated into an Act of Parliament, declared Edward's sons as illegitimate, accused Elizabeth and her mother of witchcraft and of bewitching Edward IV into marriage, and requested that Richard, as the only true rightful heir, assume the throne. *Titulus Regis* also hinted at the illegitimacy of Edward IV himself, the rumour that had been circulating and that Clarence had voiced.²⁷

While *Titulus Regis* may well have been fabricated by Richard and his supporters to secure his claim to the throne, church law deemed it and its contents genuine, and he was crowned Richard III on July 6th, 1483 with full support of the church and the Londoners, an important factor for the monarchy of the time. The execution of Hastings and the disappearance of the two boys alienated Richard from many of his supporters and these, disillusioned by what had become of the duke, changed sides to the Lancastrians who began to build up forces, and the events, which would eventually lead to Richard's defeat and execution at the Battle of Bosworth, were set in motion.

²⁶ Wendy Moorhen, *A Brief Biography and Introduction to Richard's Reputation*, on *The Richard III Society*. Webpage at: <http://www.richardiii.net/>. Accessed 23 June 2023.

²⁷ John Wagner, *The Encyclopedia of the Wars of the Roses*, 2001.

6 Was King Richard III Really Such a Bad Guy?

Stripping away the Tudor versions of events and the Richard III created by Shakespeare, we can possibly understand that Richard was driven not by greed and a hunger for power, but rather by a pragmatic sense of survival and preservation. Preservation not only for his own life but for the true royal line of the Plantagenets. If the rumours about the illegitimacy of Edward IV had any substance, or that his pre-contract marriage to the Lady Talbot were genuine, his sons would, in the eyes of the church, be illegitimate and therefore excluded from succession. This would be a powerful weapon to use against the Plantagenet dynasty. Had Edward V been crowned, and Richard eliminated from the scene, the Woodville family would exercise control over the young king, possibly even using the illegitimacy factor to exclude him and put their own candidate forward for the crown. By executing Hastings, eliminating the Woodville threat and placing Edward IV's sons in custody – whether with an intention to kill them or not – Richard was ensuring the survival of the Plantagenet line.

So Was King Richard III then really such a bad guy? We all enjoy a good Shakespeare play; Shakespeare's Richard III is a wonderful villain for us to love to hate; the Tudor's Darth Vader to be booed and hissed at when he makes his entrances. In this sense Richard III is a good character to remember, but as only that, a fictional character created for entertainment. However, the historical figure of Richard III should be disassociated from Shakespeare's portrayal and remembered as the last of the great heroic warrior kings – Richard III was the last English king to die on the battlefield – and the last of the Plantagenet line, who fought and died bravely trying to preserve that line.

The Tudors tried their best to create an alternative history in which they are the heroes who dragged Britain from the dark ages into the bright lights of the Renaissance. Richard III became a victim of Tudor propaganda, vilified further by the pen of one of the greatest playwrights of the time. Had there not been a peaceful solution at the end of Elizabeth I's reign, had there been rival factions contesting for the crown and a violent civil war, what would history have written about Henry VIII, Mary and Elizabeth I? Henry alone has enough baggage to be cast as an arch villain. Mary, anyway, without the need of a huge propaganda effort, became Bloody. Elizabeth the Virgin Queen? What would a Catholic monarchy's historians have written about Elizabeth?

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