



Richard III Portrayed in Shakespeare's *Richard III*

**Machiavellian Monster or Misunderstood Monarch?:
Richard III and the Battle for the English Throne**

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“Thy friends suspect for traitors while thou liv’st, and take deep traitors
for thy dearest friends.”

~ William Shakespeare, *Richard III*

William Shakespeare’s image of Richard III as a deformed, Machiavellian tyrant consumed with his own greedy obsession for power has long plagued the truth behind Richard III’s time on the English throne. Most contemporary scholars agree that Shakespeare’s play was largely a work of propaganda meant to discredit King Richard III and promote the Tudor reign. Nevertheless, Shakespeare’s work of fiction does capture some of the spirit of Richard III’s rise to power and the controversy regarding his reign.¹ This research endeavors to separate fact from fiction and to present a well-considered history of Richard III’s

¹ Barbara A. Mowat, Paul Werstein, William Shakespeare, *Richard III* (Folger Shakespeare Library) (New York: Washington Square Press, 2004).

rise to power and his reasons for appropriating the English crown. Richard III certainly had a personal agenda, but he was also motivated to save England and its people from power hungry upstarts who wanted to control both king and kingdom. Though Richard III's actions may have appeared both brutal and tyrannical, they were meant to protect England. Unfortunately for Richard, he was unable to maintain power long enough to fortify his reign.

Perhaps the saying "history is written by the victors," is never more true than when looking at the sources for Richard III's rise to power and his reign in England. Much like Shakespeare's writings, many other sources for Richard's reign are shrouded in controversy about their agenda and their historical accuracy. Many sources were written years or decades after Richard's reign had ended, and some information was skewed in order to endorse the rulers of the time, the Tudors. Understanding these issues is important to any analysis of Richard III and the literature concerning his reign. With this understanding, a deeper picture of Richard's time in power comes into focus and his motives and failures can be better reviewed.

Richard came of age during the War of the Roses, a civil war over the English throne fought between Richard's family of York, and the Lancaster family. Each family's strong claim for the throne only strengthened their resolve. While Richard's father, the Duke of York, maneuvered through Medieval English politics in his attempt to capture

the throne, Richard was observing and learning the basics of an English noble.²

By 1460, the War of the Roses had escalated into a full scale civil war. It was during this year, when Richard was only eight years old, that his father and second eldest brother, Edmund, were killed at the Battle of Wakefield. At the conclusion of the battle, the Duke of York, though realizing he was surrounded and his defeat was eminent, refused to surrender and fought courageously to his death.³ The duke's brave final stand bears an eerie similarity to his youngest son's future death. Perhaps, in some way, Richard's father's courage influenced him by demonstrating the proper actions of a righteous noble.

After his father's death, Richard's eldest brother Edward became the new Duke of York and took up the cause for their family's claim to the English throne. Soon, however, the Yorkists suffered a resounding defeat at the Second Battle of St. Albans and Richard's mother sent Richard and his elder brother, George, to the Netherlands for their safety. The ruler of the Burgundian Netherlands was Phillip the Good, a close trusted friend of the House York. His kingdom was one of great wealth and luxury. It is unknown how Richard's short time in the Netherlands

² David Hipshon, *Richard III* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), 19-38.

³ *Ibid.*, 38-39.

may have affected him but for the first time he was treated like a prince of royal blood and tasted the power that came with such a status.⁴

During Richard's four month sojourn in the Netherlands great changes took place back in England. Richard's eldest brother Edward marched on London and, through a brilliant use of propaganda, had convinced the people that Henry VI no longer deserved to be king. Shortly thereafter Edward was named Edward IV, King of England. However, it would take almost a decade and several major conflicts before Edward IV could reign without fear. When Richard and his brother George returned to England, their family's fortunes had made a dramatic shift. They left England fatherless outcasts and returned princes of royal blood and brothers to the reigning king.⁵

Shortly after his return to England, eight year old Richard was inducted into the Order of the Bath, the second highest rank of knighthood. And on the day of his ninth birthday, Richard was made the Duke of Gloucester, one of the highest and most important titles in England. At age twelve, Richard was sent to live with Richard Neville, the Earl of Warwick, to complete his education by boarding in a noble's household. Richard spent the next four years of his youth learning from Warwick the customs of English nobility. Sources are unclear on what Richard was educated in while under Warwick's tutelage, but it was

⁴ Ibid., 41-45.

⁵ Ibid., 46-49.

Warwick who first introduced Richard to northern England. While under Warwick's guidance, Richard developed his great love for northern England and formed strong friendships and alliances with its people. Such northern support proved invaluable in later years. By the time Richard reached the age of sixteen, the relationship between his brother King Edward IV and Warwick had become strained beyond repair.⁶ Therefore Edward IV recalled Richard back to his court thus ending Richard's time of learning under the "Kingmaker."⁷

The strain between Edward IV and the Earl of Warwick began years earlier in 1464 following Edward IV's shocking announcement of his secret marriage to Elizabeth Woodville, a widow of a Lancastrian knight. Prior to Edward IV's pronouncement of his marriage, Warwick had been working to arrange a marriage between Edward IV and a French princess, but following the announcement, a humiliated Warwick found his plans were shattered. Warwick's anger concerning Edward's marriage was more than just injured pride. Warwick felt that Elizabeth did not deserve to be the Queen of England because of her low birth and ties to the Lancastrians. Warwick also feared that Elizabeth and the Woodvilles would interfere with his own power claims and affect his areas of influence. This fear was proved correct when Elizabeth began demanding suitable land grants, titles, and marriages for her many

⁶ Ibid., 54-58.

⁷ Richard Neville, the Earl of Warwick, is also known as the Kingmaker due to his assistance in bringing Edward IV to the throne of England.

siblings and relatives. Five years later, in 1469, the tension culminated in Warwick forming and leading a rebellion against Edward IV.⁸

The effect being tutored and raised by Warwick may help explain Richard's later hatred for the Woodvilles as well as his later appropriation of the throne. Perhaps Warwick convinced Richard that due to the Woodville family's low-birth they should not be allowed to hold such high positions of nobility. Therefore the Woodvilles were simple low-born upstarts who would corrupt and destroy the principles of England. Later during Richard's rise to the English throne, his hatred and systematic near destruction of the Woodville family provides evidence to support this possibility. However, even with Warwick's influence on Richard's attitude towards Edward IV's wife, he always remained extremely loyal to his brother and to the English court. When Warwick initiated a rebellion against Edward IV, Richard chose to side with the King and fought against his former mentor.

During the Warwick Rebellion, Richard had his first taste of combat and command, both of which he performed commendably and demonstrated great aptitude for military matters. It was also during the rebellion that another major development took place. While Richard fought in defense of his brother, he was also gaining new areas of influence. This expansion of power sparked problems between Richard and Stanley family. The Stanleys had grown powerful and wealthy in

⁸ Ibid., 58-60.

the north. But as Richard began expand his own lands and power, the Stanleys resented him for trespassing on their territory and stealing their influence and wealth.⁹ This growing feud between Richard and the Stanley family played a major role in their later betrayal of Richard at the Battle of Bosworth Field.

Throughout the rebellion and the entirety of Edward IV's reign, Richard's loyalty never wavered, even in late 1470, when Edward IV was forced to flee England to save his life. During Edward IV's short exile from England, Henry VI was released from the Tower of London and reassumed his role as King of England. Edward IV spent the next five months biding his time and regrouping his forces to prepare for his return to England. In March of 1471, Edward returned to England and, with the help of Richard, reclaimed the English throne from Henry VI and finally defeated Warwick.¹⁰

Following the rebellion, Richard received the title "Lord of the North." He then stepped into the power void left behind by the defeat of Warwick. As Lord of the North, Richard proved himself to be an extremely efficient and capable administrator. While serving in the north, Richard desired to ensure impartial justice to his people. By using his own strong leadership skills, Richard was able to conclude long-running family feuds between northern nobles. He also served Edward

⁹ Ibid., 70-73, 86-90.

¹⁰ Ibid., 78-84.

IV as commander of English troops during a war with Scotland. This war ended with a decisive English victory and secured the always volatile England-Scotland border. Today, though many scholars continue to debate Richard and his actions as King of England, most agree that Richard was the model of northern Dukes. Richard's effectiveness as an administrator allowed Edward IV to reign without worry of northern English's affairs.¹¹

When Edward IV died in 1483, his twelve year old son was named King Edward V of England. Evidence suggests that at his death, Edward IV wished that Richard, the Duke of Gloucester and Lord of the North, be charged with the duty of Lord Protector. However, without Richard's approval, the Woodville family immediately took charge of Edward V and arranged an escort to take the young king to London for his coronation. Edward V's escorts were to be Anthony, the Earl Rivers, Edward V's uncle on his mother's side, and Richard Grey, Edward V's half-brother from his mother's first marriage.¹²

According to *The Croyland Chronicle* and Polydore Vergil, William, Lord of Hastings, informed Richard about the proposed movement of Edward V and advised him to intercept the entourage. Hastings feared the Woodvilles would rush the crowning of young

¹¹ Ibid., 90-96, 103-109, 114-118.

¹² Nicholas Pronay and John Cox, *The Croyland Chronicle Continuations, 1459-1486* (The Richard III and Yorkist History Trust, Alan Sutton Publishing, 1986), <http://www.r3.org/bookcase/croyland/index.html> (accessed March 08, 2012), Part VII – 5.

Edward V and dismiss Richard as Lord Protector. Without Richard as Lord Protector, the Woodvilles would be free to use Edward V as their own puppet king and through him control England.¹³ Richard agreed with Hastings and soon made plans with Henry Stafford the Duke of Buckingham to meet Edward V's entourage and remove Edward V from the influence of the Woodville family.

The Chronicle states that Richard and Buckingham intercepted the entourage at Stony Stratford and Richard, as Lord Protector, ordered the arrest of Rivers, Grey, and Thomas Vaughan, an elderly knight and chamberlain to Edward V. Richard then commanded that all the newly taken prisoners be imprisoned in northern England. Following the arrests, Richard secured the young king and with Buckingham continued on to London.¹⁴ When news reached the late Edward IV's wife, Queen Elizabeth, of Richard's taking of Edward V and the simultaneous arrests of her brother, son, and supports. Elizabeth fled the palaces along with her other children and sought sanctuary in Westminster.¹⁵

Upon their arrival in London, Richard and Edward V were given a regal welcome, and according to *The Croyland Chronicle*, Richard immediately compelled all lords and elites to swear oaths of fealty to the

¹³ Ibid., Part VII – 5.

¹⁴ Ibid., Part VII – 6.

¹⁵ Henry Ellis, *Three Books of Polydore Vergil's English History, Comprising the Reigns of Henry VI., Edward IV., and Richard III. From An Early Translation, Preserved Among the MSS. Of the Old Royal Library In the British Museum* (London: Camden Society, 1844), 175-176.

new king. The Chronicle then states that Richard, along with a council of other English nobles, decided the safest place for the young king was within the royal apartments of the Tower of London. Richard was subsequently affirmed as Lord Protector and given the title Protector of the Kingdom. Richard now had full powers to “order and forbid” any matter as if he were king himself.¹⁶ Richard then sent for Edward V’s younger brother to be brought from sanctuary with his mother on the grounds that he needed to be present at Edward V’s coronation. Once the young prince arrived, Richard had both Edward V and his younger brother housed within the Tower of London.¹⁷

Meanwhile, Lord Hastings was elated with how events were unfolding. The Chronicle quotes Hastings saying that England had transferred “the government of the kingdom from two of the queen’s blood to two more powerful persons of the king’s.”¹⁸ Ultimately however conflict between Hastings and Richard emerged, or even though Hastings despised Elizabeth and the Woodvilles, Hastings still strongly supported Edward V as king of England. Hastings wished for Edward V not to be manipulated and controlled by his mother and her family. Vergil states that Richard began to consider Hastings as a problem due to his earnestness to crown Edward V king.¹⁹ Thus, during a council

¹⁶ Pronay and Cox, Part VII – 6.

¹⁷ Ellis, 178-179.

¹⁸ Pronay and Cox, Part VII – 7-8.

¹⁹ Ellis, 179-181.

meeting in the Tower of London, by order of Richard, Hastings was arrested and immediately beheaded. Richard also had Thomas, the archbishop of York, and John, the bishop of Ely arrested and sent to Wales as prisoners. Following the execution of Hastings and the arrest of Thomas and John, Richard had removed the three strongest supporters of Edward V.²⁰ Richard's shocking and rapid execution of Hastings has long been held as an example of his cold hearted brutality and tyranny. However, looking ahead to Richard's later actions it becomes clear why he had to remove Hastings as a threat. Richard understood Hastings's loyalty would never sway from Edward V, and Hastings would stand against Richard as he did what he thought was in the best interests of England.

Prior to the execution of Hastings, Richard's intentions were unclear and shadowed. However following the execution, Richard began to make his own vie for the throne. *The Croyland Chronicle* states that following the beheading of Hastings, Richard announced to the people of London and the English Parliament that Edward V and his younger brother were bastards. Richard's evidence for this claim appears to be that Edward IV had been in a contracted marriage with the Lady Eleanor Boteler prior to his marriage to Queen Elizabeth. Therefore any children Edward IV and Elizabeth had were illegitimate and had no claim to the English throne. Relying on such evidence Richard demanded that the

²⁰ Pronay and Cox, Part VII – 7.

only surviving, certain, and uncorrupted son of the Duke of York was Richard himself. Therefore it was Richard's birthright to be King of England. England's parliament agreed with Richard's evidence and ruled Edward V and his young brother illegitimate.²¹

The change in Richard's behavior is not clarified in sources. Some sources portray Richard as a model duke and loyal subject of Edward IV, but upon his arrival in London changes to a power hungry monster. Perhaps a better explanation for his change is the influence of his time with Warwick. As earlier stated, Richard agreed with Warwick that the Woodvilles were of low-birth and did not deserve to sit on the English throne, even if they were his own nephews. Richard feared that when Edward V reached the age to rule England himself, he would take the side of his mother and her family. Effectively, such actions would grant complete rule of England to the upstart Woodvilles. Should this happen, Richard and his northern supporters would be marginalized at English court. Looking at the events this way, Richard's appropriation of the throne was the only choice he had to protect himself, his people, and, at least in his mind, England. Moreover, by declaring Edward V and his brother illegitimate, Richard had removed any chance that the Woodville family had of gaining more power and control of the English throne.

Soon after declaring Edward V a bastard and not fit to be King of England, Richard and Buckingham summoned "fearful and unheard-

²¹ Pronay and Cox, P art VII – 7.

of numbers” of armed soldiers down from the north, Wales, and all their other lands and used this army to assume control of the English government along with the title of king.²² The people of the north supported Richard in his taking of the throne. Many northerners even began flocking southwards in support of Richard. However, Richard’s actions were less popular among the people of the south who long supported Edward IV and the Woodvilles. These multitudes of northern people moving southward witnessed the next action of Richard to eliminate Woodville presence even further. For after claiming the English throne, Richard had the previously arrested Antony, Earl of Rivers, Richard Grey, and Thomas Vaughan beheaded as traitors in the presence of his northern people.²³ This second set of executions further supports that Richard was trying to eliminate the Woodvilles and their supporters and, by doing so, erase a threat to England.

The Croyland Chronicle goes on to say that Richard summoned the archbishop of Canterbury to Westminster, and on the sixth of July, Richard was crowned King Richard III of England.²⁴ After being crowned, Richard III quickly moved north and to York where, in the presence of his beloved northern people, he repeated his coronation. Also while in York, Richard III’s wife Anne, daughter of Warwick and also greatly loved in the north, was crowned Queen Anne. Lastly Richard III

²² Ibid., Part VII – 7.

²³ Ibid., Part VII – 7.

²⁴ From this point forward Richard will be referred to as Richard III.

was presented his ten year old son, Edward, whom he promoted to Prince of Wales.²⁵

While Richard III was in the north celebrating his coronation as king, others in the south were creating schemes to remove Edward V and his brother from captivity in the Tower of London and place Edward V back on the throne. *The Croyland Chronicle* states, however, that at this time rumors existed about the death of the young princes but there was no evidence to support the rumors.²⁶ This is contradictory to what Vergil says in his writings. Vergil states directly that Richard III wrote orders to murder the two princes in order to remove the final threat to his reign.²⁷ Which account is true is unknown. However, after going through so much trouble to have the princes ruled illegitimate, Richard had little to gain by killing his nephews. What is known is that as time progressed the princes were seen less frequently until they were not seen at all. However, there are numerous possible explanations to the prince's declining public appearances. Even today the "Princes in the Tower" remains a hotly debated topic but the truth of their plight is unknown.²⁸

The plotters against Richard continued to grow in momentum and popularity. The opposition to change only needed a strong leader to erupt into full rebellion. Henry, Duke of Buckingham became this

²⁵ Ibid., Part VIII – 1.

²⁶ Ibid., Part VIII – 1-2.

²⁷ Ellis, 188-189.

²⁸ "The Princes in the Tower" is the label commonly applied to any issue regarding Richard III and the Princes.

leader. Little is known about the reasons Buckingham decided to give up his support of Richard III and instead join a rebellion against him. Some modern scholars have proposed that Buckingham's break from Richard III was sparked by the murder of the "Princes in the Tower." The theory suggests that the ever loyal Buckingham had the princes murdered in order to assist Richard III and avoid any possible chances of Edward V returning to the throne. These scholars point to the fact that prior to Buckingham's joining of the rebellion; the goal of the rebels was to reinstate Edward V. However, when Buckingham joins, he immediately disregards plans for Edward V and instead put hopes on Henry Tudor. Scholars argue that Buckingham's actions are evidence that he was aware the princes were dead and there was no hope of returning Edward V to the throne. Though some scholars also argue that it was Richard who murdered the princes and this drove Buckingham to rebel. These theories do provide reasons for the break between Buckingham and Richard III.²⁹ Though the rebellion had existed prior to Buckingham joining, it is known as the Buckingham Rebellion because of his status and leadership. Buckingham had hoped to gain the support of the exiled Henry Tudor, Earl of Richmond, one of the last Lancastrians with claim

²⁹ Beth Marie Kosir, *Richard III: A Study in Historiographical Controversy* (Richard III Society, American Branch), <http://www.r3.org/bookcase/shaksper/kosir.html> (accessed April 18, 2012).

to the English throne. Buckingham schemed to wed the oldest daughter of Edward IV to Henry and take possession of the English crown.³⁰

Richard III's spies rapidly discovered the plots against him and Richard III began to raise an army to quell the Buckingham Rebellion. The rebellion, containing some forty percent of southern England, was a humiliating failure.³¹ Many southern rebels began actions prematurely and were unable to gather together in force. These rebels were easily quelled by the Duke of Norfolk. Buckingham had raised his forces in mid-Wales and due to a large series of storms was unable to march his troops forward. These same storms prevented Henry Tudor from landing his forces.³² Finally, Buckingham's starving troops began to desert the cause and, according to *The Croyland Chronicle*, Buckingham disguised himself and attempted to sneak away. He was later captured in the cottage of a poor man and taken before Richard III, who promptly had Buckingham executed. With the rebellion defeated, Richard III disbanded his forces, which were primarily northern, and returned to London. When Henry Tudor learned of the death of Buckingham, he fled again but this time went to France where he was welcomed with open arms.³³

³⁰ Pronay and Cox, Part VIII – 2.

³¹ Hipshon, 148.

³² Ibid., 147-157.

³³ Pronay and Cox, Part VIII – 4.

Within a few months of suppressing the Buckingham Rebellion, Richard III called a special council of nobility with the premise of swearing oaths of fealty to his young son Edward. Unfortunately, the oaths were in vain, because a short time later Edward was struck with an illness and died in April of 1484. *The Croyland Chronicle* writes that “his father and mother in a state almost bordering on madness, by reason of their sudden grief.”³⁴ This statement does not match with later writer’s depictions of Richard III as cold hearted and unfeeling. Edward was Richard III’s only son and following his death, Richard III struggled to find an heir for his throne.

The Croyland Chronicle states that Richard III’s spies knew Henry Tudor was gathering strength and support in France for a second invasion of England. Plans were also still in the works to arrange a marriage between Henry Tudor and Edward IV’s oldest daughter, Elizabeth. The chronicle writes that Richard III’s spies stated that Henry Tudor would, without question, invade England during the following summer of 1485. Richard III was less prepared for this invasion than he had been for the Buckingham Rebellion the year before. Richard III was running low on coinage as well as southern support.³⁵ When Richard III’s older brother Edward IV had usurped the English throne from Henry VI, Edward IV’s center of power and influence was in the south

³⁴ Ibid., Part VIII – 5.

³⁵ Ibid., Part VIII – 5.

and in London. This kept Edward IV's support close to the center of government as well as close when Edward IV needed them. Richard III's strong center of influence and support was in the north. This meant it would take time and gold to call for troops when needed and also meant he had less support in and around London.³⁶

By 1485, Richard III would be dealt another painful blow. Richard III's wife, Queen Anne, fell extremely ill and after almost a month died in March. After some time, Richard III called a council to discuss a possible marriage between himself and his niece Elizabeth. Richard III was adamantly told that should he continue on the path to marriage with Elizabeth the people of the north would rebel against him. Queen Anne had been the daughter of Warwick and greatly loved in northern England. To replace her with the southern Elizabeth would not be tolerated. Lastly, many who were present in the council feared what Elizabeth would do as queen to avenge the death of her half-brother Richard Grey and her uncle, Earl of Rivers. Richard III followed the advice of his council and gave up any quest for a union with Elizabeth.³⁷

On the first of August 1485, Henry Tudor and his troops landed on English soil. *The Croyland Chronicle* writes that Richard III "rejoiced, or at least seemed to rejoice."³⁸ Richard III believed the time had come for him to vanquish his enemies and by doing so benefit "his

³⁶ Hipshon, 49-53.

³⁷ Pronay and Cox, Part VIII - 6-7.

³⁸ Ibid., Part IX – 1.

subjects with the blessings of uninterrupted tranquility.”³⁹ Richard III called up a large force of troops from mostly southern nobles and rode out to meet Henry Tudor. On August 22 1485, the forces of Richard III and Henry Tudor met at the Battle of Bosworth Field. *The_Croyland Chronicle* states that it was “a battle of the greatest severity,” and according to Polydore Vergil, Richard III had Henry greatly outnumbered.⁴⁰

As the battle began Henry sent his troops directly at the king. The Earl of Oxford and the Duke of Norfolk drew their forces together to hold Henry. During this time the Earl of Northumberland, with a large and well equipped body of troops, held back and did not engage the battle at all.⁴¹ As the battle raged, Richard III saw that Henry Tudor was only protected by a small number of troops and made the decision to take a small vanguard of cavalry with him and charge Henry directly. Vergil states that this charge was effective enough to cut down Henry’s standard bearer. But Henry was able to move troops and surround Richard and his vanguard. Vergil then writes that Lord Stanley arrived at the battlefield having promised his help to Richard III. Stanley, however, held back his forces and observed the raging battle. It was not until Henry was “almost out of hope for victory,” that Stanley charged his 3,000 men into battle against Richard III and in the aid of Henry. Mirroring his father

³⁹ Ibid., Part IX – 1.

⁴⁰ Ellis, 221-224.

⁴¹ Pronay and Cox, Part IX – 3.

the Duke of York's bravery, Richard III courageously fought to the death on the battlefield.⁴² Following the death of Richard III, his forces broke and fled the battlefield.⁴³

Richard III was the last English king to die on the battlefield. Even today no other English monarch has chosen the name Richard due to the controversy surrounding Richard III. After the Battle of Bosworth Field, Henry Tudor was crowned King Henry VII and followed thru with plans to marry Edward IV's daughter Elizabeth. This union united the houses of York and Lancaster, effectively ending the War of the Roses. Richard III was the final King of England from the York family and with his death the Tudor reign of England began.⁴⁴

History will never know what England could have been had Richard III won the Battle of Bosworth Field. With his short two-year reign, Richard III was unable to obtain the victories and time needed in order to gain time to solidify his reign. Since his defeat, inaccurate history and propaganda have transformed a complicated monarch into a tyrannical monster. Further research into Richard III's time in power must be completed in order to shine more light on Richard's agenda and to find more support for Richard's appropriation of the English crown. This research will be directed at the other available sources surrounding Richard III, and perhaps new breakthroughs will be uncovered. For after

⁴² Ellis, 224.

⁴³ Pronay and Cox, Part IX – 3.

⁴⁴ Hipshon, 244-248.

more than five hundred years, the time has come to rewrite history and recognize Richard III as the brave and misunderstood English monarch he was.