

Shakespeare Project of Chicago Introduction to *Richard III*, January 2020

Good evening everyone and thank you all so much for joining us. Today I'll talk a little bit about the history of Shakespeare's play and its place in his canon, then I'll discuss the history *in* the play and what's happened in the Wars of the Roses up to now. Finally, I'll point out a couple of things for you to watch and listen for in today's performance.

Shakespeare's *Richard III* was probably completed and performed between 1592 and 1594.

While it's sometimes difficult to date Shakespeare's canonical chronology, most scholars agree that *Richard III* was written and performed after Shakespeare wrote his first historical trilogy: *Henry VI, parts 1, 2, and 3*. Shakespeare's Henry VI plays were popular among London audiences so it's easy to see why Shakespeare would then turn to Richard III as his subject. Today, movie studios create sequels to continually capitalize on the popularity of a franchise; Shakespeare and his colleagues often did the same.

The Henry VI trilogy follows England's Wars of the Roses, wherein two rival branches of the House of Plantagenet—the Lancasters and the Yorks—fought for control over England's throne. These took place through many sporadic episodes between 1455 and 1487.

While Shakespeare condenses and rearranges time in his re-tellings of English history, the events of *Richard III* take place in the late 15th century—roughly between 1471, after the Battle of Tewksbury (which end the events of *Henry VI, part 3*) and 1485, the Battle of Bosworth Field, which ends this play.

So many of the arguments in this play focus or lean on the events that happened in the *Henry VI* trilogy. So, for those of you who haven't spent the last several weeks re-reading those plays, I'll briefly review the pertinent events by character.

In your program you'll find a kind of family plot we've put together to help you understand the warring factions of *Richard III*. You'll see three families: the Yorks, the Lancasters, and the Woodvilles.

We'll start with the Yorks – the family of King Edward IV and later King Richard III.

George, Duke of Clarence is the middle brother to King Edward IV and Richard III. In *Richard III*, Clarence falls victim to the machinations of his younger brother Richard when King Edward becomes convinced that George means to turn traitor. But King Edward had reason to believe this might be the case.

In *Henry VI, pt. 3*, Edward's brother George, Duke of Clarence, joins the Lancastrian fight against his own family. When Edward, with his loyal brother Richard, captures Henry VI, Clarence

changes sides again to fight for the Yorkist cause. It's not difficult, then, to see how King Edward IV would so readily believe his brother George conspires against him early in this play.

Then there's King Edward IV, the eldest of the brothers. at the end of *Henry VI, pt. 3*, Edward and his wife, Lady Elizabeth Grey, are established as King and Queen. Together, they welcome their baby prince, Edward, into the world.

Along with Lady Elizabeth Grey, you'll meet a good number of the Woodvilles – an off-shoot of the Yorks through her marriage to King Edward IV. However, you'll see very quickly that, though the Yorks and the Woodvilles are related by marriage, there is a lot of bad blood that King Edward IV tries to mend in his final moments on stage in *Richard III*.

The main player in the Woodville family is Queen Elizabeth, wife to King Edward IV, and mother to two young sons: Prince Edward and Richard, Duke of York.

Elizabeth's growing political influence, along with the fact that she is the mother to two legitimate royal heirs at the start of the play, make her an excellent target for King Richard's ire.

So, we've talked about the Yorks and the Woodvilles, let's talk about the Lancastrians, the family of the late Henry VI. In *Richard III* we meet three surviving members of the Lancastrian House:

Firstly, Lady Anne Neville, widow to Prince Edward, and daughter-in-law to Henry VI. The first moment we see her in this play she'll be accompanying the body of King Henry VI, slain by Richard.

You'll also meet Queen Margaret. In *Richard III*, Queen Margaret is the grieving widow to King Henry VI and mother to the slain Prince Edward. Before this, however, Margaret proved herself a fierce warrior and cunning, manipulative stateswoman.

In the final play of the *Henry VI* trilogy, Queen Margaret comes into her own as a warrior queen. Margaret vows to take down the Yorks who aim to take the crown from her son, Prince Edward. Margaret bids one of her generals to kill York's twelve-year-old son Rutland, and finally captures, humiliates, and kills York—father to the future Richard III.

The Yorks finally defeat the Lancasters at the Battle of Tewkesbury near the end of *Henry VI, pt. 3*. Margaret looks on as her only son, Prince Edward, is slain, then becomes a widow when Richard kills King Henry VI in London.

Finally, you'll meet Henry Tudor, Earl of Richmond who is the last surviving male Lancastrian claimant to the English throne. After the carnage of the Wars of the Roses, Richmond is the Lancastrians' final hope.

I know you must be thinking “wait, you’ve missed someone.” So, here’s what we know (and don’t know) about the historical King Richard III.

Today’s play opens with Richard, Duke of Gloucester, who later becomes the eponymous Richard III.

Shakespeare’s depiction of Richard is based not on historical accounts but largely on Sir Thomas More’s *History of Richard III*, written between 1513 and 1518. More’s account was not based on his own experiences, but rather sources based on the Tudor version of events.

Many scholars believe that, because of Shakespeare’s biased source (based on biased sources), the villainy—and even the *deformity*—of King Richard has been overblown historically. That is, *except* for the missing princes.

In Shakespeare’s play, the final barrier between Richard and a secured English throne are Edward IV’s two sons, Edward and Richard. Even when Richard becomes King, he feels insecure and states frankly, “I wish the bastards dead.” While, in Shakespeare’s telling Richard eventually succeeds in having the two boys murdered, in reality, we don’t know what happened to these two young princes. Once Richard III became king, the two boys were never seen again. Within a month of Richard’s coronation, rumors began to circulate that they were dead. Eventually, two small skeletons were found in the Tower of London—two skeletons which could easily have belonged to the young Princes of Richard’s eldest brother.

Similar to Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, the murder of innocent children becomes the height of the titular character’s infamy. It is in this moment that Richard’s fortune begins to turn.

At the end of *Richard III*, Richmond defeats Richard. He becomes Henry VII and marries Elizabeth of York, daughter of Edward IV and Elizabeth Grey. And with that, the houses of York and Lancaster unite, and the Wars of the Roses resolves. The newly crowned Queen Elizabeth and Henry VII, the first of the Tudor line, will be the future parents of the Tudor Rose himself, King Henry VIII...and future grandfather to Queen Elizabeth I, who ruled England when Shakespeare wrote this play.

So, we can come to see why Shakespeare might be inclined to perpetuate this depiction of Richard III as purely evil while the granddaughter to his successor sits on the English throne.

Before we I leave you today, I’d like to draw your attention to just a few things to keep an eye (and an ear) out for during today’s performance. In this interpretation of *Richard III*, we’ve tried to really highlight and clarify the family relationships throughout the play. What’s particularly striking to me is the *fluidity* of those relationships.

Through marriage, death, and more marriage enemies become kin. Watch especially for the final confrontation scene between King Richard and Lady Elizabeth Grey, wherein Richard makes an indecent proposal that would change their relationship drastically.

You'll also witness the limitations of familial love, in the final scene between Richard and his mother, the Duchess of York wherein we see that a mother's love isn't always unconditional.

We see these limitations to familial loyalty again in the final moments of the play when Richard is visited by the ghosts of those he murdered. You'll notice they are almost all members of his own family.

The last thing I'll encourage you to watch for in this performance is the role of women. This is a story heavily focused on themes of war, deception, and domination. And yet, throughout the play, the women and their various, great losses take center stage. Watch for these scenes when women share (and compare) their griefs.

In an era when women—even wealthy royal women—were made extremely vulnerable by the death of their male protectors, it's clear these women's suffering are more than just collateral damage – they show us the toll that tyrannical ambition and a disregard for human life have on the lives of people caught up in the carnage.

In moments like these, when our own leaders bring us to the brink of armed conflict, perhaps this is a lesson that bears repeating.

And now, it is our great pleasure to present *RICHARD III*.