

## History in Shakespeare's *King Richard III*: The Murder of King Edward IV's Sons

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### Abstract

Who killed Edward V and his brother Richard the Duke of York? In Shakespeare's time there was no question but that Richard III had the two Princes murdered. Shakespeare's portrayal of Richard's plotting and murder of the Princes is different, however, from the historical accounts he read. A comparison of the play with these accounts and a discussion of the reasons for the discrepancies will be the focus of this paper.

### Introduction

When William Shakespeare's history play *King Richard III* was officially published in 1597, the real Richard III had been dead for over a hundred years. In those intervening years many histories had been written about Richard's reign, his usurpation of the crown of England from his brother King Edward IV's son King Edward V, and his culpability in the murders of Edward V and his younger brother Richard, the Duke of York. All modern scholars agree, however, that the only historical sources Shakespeare used were the histories written by Edward Hall and Raphael Holinshed. Some controversy does arise as to which one was the primary source but most guess that Hall was primary, Holinshed ancillary.<sup>1)</sup> This paper will attempt to

compare and contrast the sequence of events leading to the murder of the Princes as found in the historical record available to Shakespeare with that found in Shakespeare's play *King Richard III*. The concern is not with historical accuracy versus Shakespearian drama. It will behoove the reader to take note that written history in late 16th century England was different from what we, late 20th century readers, would call history. As is often found in fiction, fact was less important than moral truth, and historical detail was tailored to emphasize a general principle.<sup>2)</sup> Whether Richard actually had the two Princes murdered or not is still a question for debate even today.<sup>3)</sup> This paper seeks to show how Shakespeare took the historical record he read and enhanced it dramatically into his play *King Richard III*.

Before beginning, however, some background is needed. Richard III was the youngest son of Richard Plantagenet, 3rd Duke of York, and was named the Duke of Gloucester in 1461. He fought alongside his brother, the soon to be Edward IV, under the Yorkist banner during the War of the Roses. When Edward died in 1483 Richard officially became Protector of Edward's eldest teenage son Edward V and was to run the administration of the kingdom until Edward V reached his majority.

Richard, however, ran into trouble with Edward V's mother the queen, Elizabeth Wydeville. She, and her Wydeville party at court, were wary of Richard's kingly intentions and sought to end Edward V's minority under Richard as quickly as possible. Feeling his life threatened, Richard quashed the influence of the Wydeville party at court by having Parliament declare him king. Richard had made up a story that the marriage of Edward IV and Elizabeth Wydeville had been invalid because Edward had contracted earlier to marry another woman.<sup>4)</sup> Richard then had Edward V and his brother Richard, whom he now referred to as bastards, confined in the Tower of London. Richard of Gloucester was officially crowned Richard III king of England and France on June 26, 1483.

It is after his coronation that Richard carries out his plan to murder the Princes. Neither Hall, Holinshed nor Shakespeare leaves any doubt as to who they believe had the Princes murdered. All explicitly implicate Richard. What divides the fictional and historical accounts is the sequence of events leading up to the murder.

I

In Shakespeare's play the plotting and murder of the Princes occur in Act IV scenes ii and iii. Scene ii opens with the newly

crowned Richard asking his most loyal ally the Duke of Buckingham straight out if he will murder the Princes for him. Buckingham had gone over to Richard's side after the death of Edward IV because of his hatred for the Wydevilles. Buckingham felt they had conspired against him at the court of Edward IV and he blamed the Wydevilles for his failure to rise to any high position. But the Duke does not hate Edward V. He believes him to be the true king so Buckingham equivocates before giving Richard a very un reassuring answer:

Give me some little breath, some pause,  
dear lord,  
Before I positively speak in this;  
I will resolve you herein presently  
(IV, ii, 24-26)

Buckingham then exits leaving Richard to ponder their relationship as he searches for someone else.

Richard asks a page if he has anyone to recommend. The page proposes one James Tyrrel, who is a member of Richard's party and is looking to rise quickly to a higher rank within the group. He is perfect for Richard. He is willing to do anything if it brings him favor in Richard's eyes. Richard summons Tyrrel from his palet and broaches his request bluntly: "Dar'st thou resolve to kill a friend of mine?" (IV, ii, 69) Tyrrel gives an even better answer: "Please you; but I had rather kill two enemies." (IV, ii, 70) Richard couldn't be happier. He sends Tyrrel to the Tower of London where the Princes are being kept and tells him to murder the two with the promise that upon success he will be rewarded accordingly.

Meanwhile, Buckingham returns to see Richard. He attempts to answer Richard's earlier murderous request but is cut off. Richard already has Tyrrel and by now he

believes Buckingham too circumspect in his support. Richard tries to ignore Buckingham, instead concerning himself with the defection of another supporter to the opposition camp of the Earl of Richmond, a rival to the crown of England.<sup>5)</sup>

Buckingham abruptly changes the subject and asks for the Earldom of Hereford. Hereford would give Buckingham a claim to the throne of England through the Lancastrian line of Henry VI. Richard knows this, as did Edward IV and the Wydeville family. That was one of the reasons Buckingham came over to Richard's side. He thought by helping Richard crush the Wydevilles Richard would reward him with Hereford. He never expected Richard to murder Edward V and usurp the crown for himself. Richard again ignores him but this time Buckingham pushes for an answer until Richard finally replies: "I am not in the giving vein today." (IV, ii, 116) Buckingham is left on the stage by himself at the end of scene ii wondering why he ever supported Richard at all and makes for his home at Brecknock to decide what he will do next.

Scene iii opens with Tyrrel triumphantly telling the audience he has killed the Princes. He hired two men named Dighton and Forrest who suffocated the two boys in their beds. Richard's only concern is to make sure that Tyrrel has seen for himself that the Princes are dead and that they have been buried. Dead they are but as for their burial Tyrrel can only say the chaplain of the Tower did bury them yet he, Tyrrel, does not know where. Richard promises to meet him again after supper when they will talk about what reward he deserves for work well done.

## II

And so ends Shakespeare's telling of the murder of the Princes. Hall and Holinshed,

while clearly implicating Richard in the murder of the Princes, paint a different story as to how it was carried out. Two aspects differ greatly from Shakespeare's version. The first concerns the Duke of Buckingham. Neither Hall nor Holinshed says that Buckingham was asked by Richard point blank to murder the Princes. It is also not clear whether Buckingham even knew beforehand that Richard planned to have them murdered. The timing of Buckingham's suit for the Earldom of Hereford, before or after Richard's coronation, is also unclear. The second difference also involves Richard's first attempt to kill the Princes. The historical record has a completely different story from the one in Shakespeare's play.

Tyrrel's role is almost identical in the dramatic and historical accounts. There are only two slight differences in Hall and Holinshed. According to them, when Tyrrel returned to Richard with the news that the Princes were dead, Hall and Holinshed report that some people said Tyrrel was knighted on the spot. In the play that decision is put off until after supper and we never find out. Then when Tyrrell tells Richard where he had had the Princes buried Hall and Holinshed both agree that Richard had the burial place changed. That change was then carried out by the Tower priest.<sup>6)</sup>

Shakespeare does not even bother to tell the story of Richard's failed first attempt to kill the Princes. The attempt happened only a day before Tyrrel was given the job. Richard called upon a man named John Green, of whom very little is known, to go to the Tower and give a letter to Sir Robert Brackenbury, the constable of the Tower. The letter demanded that Brackenbury kill the two Princes. Brackenbury refused, Green went back to Richard with the bad news and Richard subsequently found Tyrrel.<sup>7)</sup>

Shakespeare may have left this story out to enhance the drama between the Duke of Buckingham and Richard. In the play Richard tries twice to find someone who will kill the Princes for him. However, the first person is Buckingham not Brackenbury. Also in the play Buckingham goes to Brecknok only after refusing to murder the Princes and having been refused the Earldom of Hereford.

Hall and Holinshed, however, relate a very fuzzy account of Buckingham leaving Richard at Gloucester while Richard is touring England after his coronation. Some people say Buckingham parted with Richard for Brecknok in good spirits. Others claimed Buckingham was visibly agitated. The historian can only guess as to the reasons for these disparate stories. No known record exists by which Shakespeare could have known what actually happened between the two at Gloucester. No one can know if Richard

confronted Buckingham with the task of murdering a king he believed to be the true ruler of England.

Shakespeare takes away the guesswork. The confrontation at the beginning of scene ii provides clear reasons why Buckingham later will go over to the Earl of Richmond and support his effort to overthrow Richard. In contrast to this, the historical account is only clear about Buckingham's failed suit for Hereford. And in that account there is some question over when he asks for Hereford, either before or after the coronation of Richard.<sup>8)</sup>

Shakespeare substitutes Buckingham for Green and Brackenbury. Richard asks Buckingham, his most loyal courtier, to carry out the murder that will make his lord the undisputed ruler of England. When Buckingham refuses, Richard realizes his loyalty is not as unconditional as he had thought. It is an important *dramatic* moment.

#### References

- 1) Hall, Edward (1965) *Hall's Chronicle Containing The History Of England, During The Reign Of Henry The Fourth, And The Succeeding Monarchs, To The End Of The Reign Of Henry The Eighth*, AMS Press Inc., New York.
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- 3) Holinshed, Raphael (1976) *Holinshed's Chronicles Of England, Scotland, And Ireland, Volume Three*, AMS Press Inc., New York.
- 4) Weir, Alison (1992) *The Princes In The Tower*, Ballantine Book, New York.

#### Notes

- 1) Hammond, Anthony "Introduction," pp. 79—80.
- 2) *Ibid.* p. 76.
- 3) For an in depth resource to the United States Supreme Court's not guilty verdict in the Richard III murder trial see the *Yorkist History Server* at [Http://www. r3. org/](http://www.r3.org/).
- 4) Weir, p. 124.
- 5) The Earl of Richmond became head of the house of Lancaster after the death of Henry VI. Richmond would later defeat Richard III in 1485 at the battle of Bosworth Field. Richard was killed and Richmond subsequently became Henry VII, King of England. The next year he married Edward IV's eldest daughter Elizabeth, thus uniting the houses of Lancaster and York, ending the War of the

Roses.

- 6 ) Hall, pp. 377—379 & Holinshed, pp. 401—402.
- 7 ) Hall, p. 377 & Holinshed, p. 401.
- 8 ) Hall, pp. 382 & 387 & Holinshed, p. 403.