

PLOT SUMMARY OF

RICHARD III

The progress of Richard, Duke of Gloucester, to the English throne went on for twelve years. It began in 1471 with his killing of Edward, Prince of Wales, on the battlefield, the murder of King Henry VI in the Tower of London, and the rule of Richard's elder brother Edward IV until 1483 when at last he became King Richard III from 1483 to 1485. Shakespeare's story compresses those years into what seems a few months.

Richard III is set against the background of the long civil war known as the Wars of the Roses, between the royal families of York (of which he is a member) and of Lancaster (overthrown at the defeat and death of Henry VI). Richard, a physically deformed, ambitious villain, aspires to become king and plots from the start to murder anyone, including his own York kin who stand in his way. He seduces Lady Anne, widow of Henry VI's son, Edward, marries her, and later kills her when she has served her purpose. He executes his own brother Clarence in the Tower, shifts the blame on to the sickly Edward IV to hasten his death, and becomes Lord Protector of England.

Queen Margaret, widow of Henry VI, curses him and warns the court of his evil plotting, but he proceeds to kill the noblemen loyal to Edward IV's heirs – the kinsmen of Edward's wife, Queen Elizabeth – and hires murderers to dispose of the young princes he has imprisoned in the Tower. With the aid of Lord Buckingham – also later executed – Richard is crowned King of England. Richard now seeks to marry his own niece, young Elizabeth, daughter of Queen Elizabeth and Edward IV, to secure his power base.

Henry Tudor, Earl of Richmond, a descendant of the Lancasters, is meanwhile gathering forces of opposition to counter Richard. On the night before the final battle, the ghosts of all those murdered by Richard appear in a dream, promising defeat for him and victory to Richmond. Richard is slain at the Battle of Bosworth. Richmond is crowned as King Henry VII, marries Princess Elizabeth, and thereby unites the red rose of Lancaster with the white rose of York – and so begins the era of the Tudor dynasty in which Shakespeare himself lived.

