

SHAKESPEARIENCE!

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CHARACTER / ACT BREAKDOWN

Richard the Third

KEY CHARACTERS:

Edward IV...*King of England*

George, Duke of Clarence...*brother of King Edward*

Richard, Duke of Gloucester...*brother of Edward, later King Richard III*

Elizabeth, Queen of England...*wife of Edward IV*

Duke of Buckingham...*allied with Richard*

Edward...*Prince of Wales, son of Henry and Margaret*

Lady Anne...*widow of Edward, Prince of Wales, later wife of Richard*

Margaret...*widow of Henry VI, former Queen of England*

Earl of Richmond...*later, King Henry VII*

*Previously, Edward IV usurped the throne from Henry VI. Richard was already plotting against his brother's life.

The real Richard III was nothing like Shakespeare's version; King Henry VII (the grandfather of Queen Elizabeth) defeated Richard at Bosworth Field...William was reflecting the attitudes of the time.

ACT I:

Richard is very discontent with his brother Edward, who is now King Edward IV. Lacking beauty and grace, Richard is out of place in peacetime, and feels that he has no recourse but villainy and thus plots against his brothers.

Edward thinks that his brother, George, Duke of Clarence, plots against him, so he confines Clarence to the Tower of London. Richard promises to help Clarence, but in truth, Richard planted the false story about Clarence and turned his brothers against each other.

Henry VI is not buried yet, but Richard sets his eyes on Henry's widowed daughter-in-law, Anne. Richard plans to marry Anne to further his shady political aspirations...marrying her ties him to the House of Lancaster, which might appease some of his family's traditional enemies.

The king is sick and his loyal followers fret over his welfare...rumors abound of who loves or hates him. Richard puts on a good face and claims good will toward his brother and everyone. The queen, in particular, is Richard's enemy. Richard publicly blames the queen for setting Edward against Clarence...she knows nothing about the accusation because Richard made it all up. She denies everything, but Richard succeeds in sowing discontent among the English lords, half mistrusting the other half. The Duke of Buckingham comes down squarely on Richard's side and will be a solid ally.

Margaret, the widow of Henry VI, detests Richard and his friends. She also prophesies doom for Richard, Buckingham, and the other lords who follow Richard.

Richard doesn't trust that Edward will follow through on the imprisonment of their brother Clarence, so he hires two murderers to finish the deed.

ACT II:

Although very ill, the king tries to patch up the differences caused by Richard when the court learns of Clarence's death. The news is more than he can bear and Edward dies, leaving the queen distraught.

The heir to the throne is Edward's son, also named Edward, but he is still a child. Richard moves quickly and imprisons some of Edward's loyal lords. The queen sees that she and her children are in danger and runs to sanctuary, taking her youngest child with her.

ACT III:

Richard has custody of the young Prince Edward, although he is too young and naïve to fully understand his position. For his "protection" Richard invites little Edward to sleep in the Tower of London.

Richard executes his prisoners: the lords who were loyal to Edward. And they were too few in number for Richard's satisfaction, so he extends his reach to others who might stand in his way. Richard is Protector of England until young Edward comes of age, and as protector he wields power as though he were already king.

Richard's next step is to declare Edward's children bastards. He points out that Edward reneged on his original promise to marry Lady Bona of France, before he married Lady Grey. Even prior to that, he was engaged to someone else. These arguments are weak and convince no one except his hired help. Buckingham, in a staged show, publicly denies the legitimacy of Edward's children and offers the crown to Richard, who, in a false show of modesty, declines. Buckingham insists, and Richard relents.

ACT IV:

The queen and the Duchess of York (Edward IV and Richard's mother) learn that Richard will proclaim himself King of England. Further, they are denied access to the young prince and his brother, who are now prisoners in the tower. The duchess sees that Richard will bring only misery for himself and for England. The only way she can see to stop him is to seek help from the Earl of Richmond.

Richard needs to firm up his hold on the throne. As long as Prince Edward lives, some people will believe that Edward has a greater claim to the throne than Richard. So, Richard asks his friend Buckingham to take care of the problem...until this moment, Buckingham has done whatever Richard requested, but now he hesitates. Furious, Richard turns to a common murderer and asks him to do the deed. Richard doesn't forgive Buckingham. When Buckingham asks Richard for the title and lands that Richard had promised him, he is denied.

To further consolidate his power, Richard proposes to marry his niece, the daughter of the late King Edward. He's already dealt with his first wife, Anne...though Shakespeare doesn't explain exactly how, one can assume that given his track record, he simply had her killed. The queen resists, but Richard wears her down and she pretends to give in. In truth, she's already promised her daughter to the Earl of Richmond.

Richmond has raised an army and is crossing the English Channel to attack Richard. And Buckingham has joined him. Many are rising against the newly crowned King Richard. But then Buckingham's army was dispersed by floodwaters, and Richmond's ships are scattered. Richard and his remaining allies prepare to defend his throne.

ACT V:

Richmond manages to land his army at Bosworth Field, and Richard's army is there waiting. Richard's army is several times the size of Richmond's, he is thus very confident. During the night however, the ghost of Henry VI visits both sides, vilifying Richard and inspiring Richmond. Richard is also disturbed by ghosts of those he murdered.

The battle turns against Richard, he is unhorsed and therefore on foot, and finally killed by Richmond who wins the battle. Richmond will marry Elizabeth, the daughter of Edward IV and ascend the throne as King Henry VII. The Earl of Richmond (Henry Tudor) is the grandson of the Duke of Somerset, which is his claim to the throne.

This is the end of the Wars of the Roses. Now is the rise of the House of Tudor. King Henry VII's reign will be peaceful, and his son and granddaughter will reign as two of the greatest monarchs England will ever know.